“To what extent does the news media influence our understanding of knife crime in the UK?”

Exploring news media engagement and public perceptions of knife crime in the UK

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Candidate – [Redacted]
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Abstract

This purpose of the research is to explore whether or not we are influenced by the news media in how we think of “knife crime”. By adopting a mixed methods approach, with a content analysis and online questionnaire, trends in the reporting of knife crime over the course of a year were identified and information about news media engagement in relation to knife crime was also obtained. The content analysis demonstrated that reports on knife crime tended to be regionally specific and are often linked to London. Additionally, articles that refer to “knife crime” are also likely mention the terms “youth” or “teenager”, which implies that knife crime is associated with young people. Results from the questionnaire demonstrate that people are likely to engage with news media via the internet or social media rather than television and newspapers. Interestingly, 46% of people stated that news media was not their main source of information about knife crime, despite the news media having such a heavy focus on the issue. Furthermore, over 80% of respondents agreed that “knife crime occurs frequently in larger urban cities” and that “knife crime is a problem amongst youths”. Yet research by Squires (2009), which looked into A&E records; as well as the results from my content analysis do not support these findings (Squires found that victims were more likely to be aged over 18 and the content analysis showed that knife crime can also occur frequently outside of large and urban cities). Arguably, the results from the questionnaire prove that some of the things that we think about knife crime are no more than common misconceptions that have been fuelled by the ways in which the news media choose to report on the issue, especially by overrepresenting young people as victims and perpetrators.
**Introduction**

According to *The Guardian*’s Gary Younge “knife crime” is a construct that is dependent on a certain type of crime, committed by a certain type of person under certain circumstances. It is not enough to say that knife crime is a crime committed with a knife, because in reality this is not the case. Younge’s (2017) extended article *Beyond the blade: the truth about knife crime in Britain*, details the differences between crimes committed with knives and “knife crime” as we have come to know it as members of the public. To demonstrate this issue, Younge points out that in the early months of 2017 nine young people died as a result of knife attacks in Britain but “The only stories in which the term ‘knife crime’ was used in national press, were related to...the only two black men...the only two Londoners” (Younge, 2017).

As a young person from London myself, this issue of “knife crime” has been circulating around me for at least the past twelve years of my life. Some of my close friends have been victims, and it is not a foreign concept. However, I have been analysing the news media’s portrayal of the issue for quite some time and often witness key similarities and discourses with regards to age, gender, race, location of victims and perpetrators when the term “knife crime” is used. For example, victims are usually young and male, from cities such as London and Birmingham and are from BAME backgrounds.

This project aims to answer my research question: “*To what extent does the media influence our understanding of knife crime in the UK?*” It seeks to assess whether or not the news media has any bearing on the way we perceive knife crime as a problem. Are we concerned by it? Is it an issue? Who is it a problem amongst? On the literature side of things, it was difficult to find scholarship on knife crime and news media, so this...
is an under-researched area. Literature obtained is relevant but a bit outdated, by a
decade or so, and this project is on a topic that is current.

The research includes a content analysis and an online survey. The content analysis
looks at UK news publications and identifies trends and patterns in the reporting of
“knife crime” over the course of a year, whilst also identifying the publishers that
frequently report on the topic. An online survey asked a number of questions about
news media engagement and knife crime to see if the public’s perceptions about knife
crime has been influenced by news media and to what extent.

**Literature Review**

There are various pieces of literature that have informed my research. From the
literature analysed, there seems to be a general consensus that the media shapes the
ways in which people perceive and understand crime.

**The influence of the media on perceptions of crime**

Lawson and Heaton (2010) argue that having access to statistics on crime figures and
fluctuating crime rates over time are responsible for a negative social response about
crime. Lawson and Heaton contend that access to statistics and data on crime figures
“can instil a fear of crime that is greater than the actual risk of crime”, (Lawson and
Heaton, 2010, p.31). Similarly, the researchers also argue that the media can play a
primary role in the ways in which people recognise crime:

> Some sociologists have attributed a central role to the media in the formation
of society’s perception of crime…there is consistent bias in the reporting of
crime, especially by the newspapers.

Lawson and Heaton, 2010, p.117
This demonstrates that access to information about crime can shape the ways in which we perceive crime and how we come to think of it as something that we should be fearful or concerned about. Chiricos et al (2000) conducted research on “the relationship between fear of crime and the consumption of televised news” (Chiricos et al, 2000, p.756). The researchers used a random sample of participants who were interviewed in a structured way. The researchers found that there was a link between televised news consumption and the fear of crime on both a national and local scale:

The frequency of both local and national news consumption is significantly related to fear of crime, independent of the influence of other predictors, including crime rates and victim experience.

Chiricos et al, 2000, p.777

Similarly, Pfeiffer et al (2005) refer to a German survey that was carried out by the KFN (survey of crime and sentencing) in 2003. The researchers found that televised news reporting had an impact on the ways in which audiences perceived crime and thus encouraged members of the public to favour harsher sentences for violent crimes. Pfeiffer et al state:

…the findings must be taken as a clear indication that media reporting has influenced the widespread mistaken perception that crime is rising, and that these perceptions of rising crime are closely associated with preferences for stiffer sentences.

Pfeiffer et al, 2005, p.275

The findings from the German study are significant as they demonstrate just how effective the media can be in the terms of influence and perception, even if the perceptions are the result of misleading information, a point highlighted by Pfeiffer et al also:
...we have preliminary evidence that the great majority of people, under the influence of sensationalist reporting by the media, perceive an increase in crime that is simply not there in reality.


Similarly, Dowler (2003) analysed public attitudes towards crime using a sample from the National Opinion Survey on Crime and Justice in the United States. This survey focused on a lot of key issues surrounding criminal justice, but also focused on the ‘fear/worry of crime’ as a category. Using the results of the survey, Dowler (2003) found that audiences that viewed ‘crime shows’ on a ‘regular’ basis were “more likely to be fearful of crime”. However, Dowler also found that newspapers and the number of hours spent watching television as a medium of crime news had no direct impact on the public’s fear of crime (Dowler, 2003, p.116). In addition, Dowler’s analysis of the survey highlighted that fear of crime is not exclusive to media portrayals alone:

Respondents who claim that there are a high number of problems in their neighborhood are more likely to fear crime. This is not surprising, as respondents may feel unsafe in an area that they believe is conducive to crime.

Dowler, 2003, p.117

Dowler’s findings suggest that that the ways in which the media impact on people’s perception of crime is dependent on various factors associated with the audience such as the location. Ericson (1991) argues that there are many ‘assumptions’ associated about the mass media reporting of crime and the ‘effects’ that these reports may have on audiences. Ericson refers to a variety of research carried out in the 1980s mentioning, for example, the work of Graber (1984) and states:

The ‘effects’ research tradition assumes that the mass media, and especially television, are the main source of people’s understanding of crime and legal control. However, research indicates that people learn about crime and legal control from a wide variety of other sources…

Ericson, 1991, pp. 219-220
Like Dowler, Ericson gives detail of the differences between national and local media, showing how people respond differently to crimes that are further away or closer to them regionally. Furthermore, Ericson states that there is an assumption that people accepting ‘misinformation’ about crime from the mass media because existing research on the ‘effects’ focuses on national and widespread crime but fails to focus on local media and crime:

…the reception and use of local news indicate that people are not as dependent on the news media as their main source of knowledge about important issues and events closer to home…

Ericson, 1991, pp.220

The above statement by Ericson is significant as it demonstrates that people’s knowledge of crime is not exclusive to the media only, especially when a crime has taken place locally. This shows that people’s perceptions of crime can be reliant on other factors such as locality, word of mouth and other channels of communication – rather than just channels of mass media such as televised, radio or print versions of news. Callanan and Rosenberger (2015) reviewed the results of a survey carried out years earlier in which respondents were asked “approximately 100 questions” in relation to different aspects of crime including the fear of crime and engagement with the media via telephone interviewing (Callanan and Rosenberger, 2015, p.6). After analysing the results of the survey, the researchers found that televised local news reporting had an influence over people’s perceptions of crime. (Callanan and Rosenberger, 2015, p.10).

Correspondingly, Farrall and Gadd (2004) conducted an analysis of survey data collected by a large marketing organisation in order to understand the “frequency and intensity” of the fear of crime (Farrall and Gadd, 2004, p.128). Unlike other studies, the
study by Farrall and Gadd did not focus on the media influences on the fear of crime. Instead, the questions administered in the survey were centred on the fear of crime in general and personal experiences. Farrall and Gadd argued that the results of the survey data indicate that the fear of crime was relatively low:

…when an attempt was made to assess the intensity of fear and the frequency of fear, we found evidence to suggest that less than one in ten people frequently experienced high levels of fear.

Farrall and Gadd, 2004, p.131

There has been a lot of research on media effects and the perception of crime. Most researchers who have been interested in this issue have opted to conduct survey’s or analyse surveys as a way of understanding the relationship between media and the fear of crime. However, as part of my research design includes content analysis, it is important to look into the frequency of crime reports amongst news media. For example, research by Dailey and Wenger (2016) looked into the ways in which newspapers report crime because “newspapers remain an important source for news about crime” (Dailey and Wenger, 2016, p.1700). Additionally, the researchers argued that analysing the ways in which newspapers report crime is an important subject due to the “perceived influence of crime reporting on the public’s sense of security” (Dailey and Wenger, 2016, p.1701). The research method adopted by Dailey and Wenger was a content analysis in which the pair chose six newspapers to analyse over the course of a month. Despite the study focusing on a relatively short period of a month, the researchers found that there was an average of “78 crime-related stories” and that the crime stories mentioned were very much focused on “violent crime” (Dailey and Wenger, 2016, p.1712).

The media and influence on the perceptions of ‘knife crime’ in the UK
News publishers cannot cover every story as they have to filter through stories and inform the public about particular events regionally, locally and nationally which may be a difficult task. “Knife crime” has been a huge topic of discussion in the media and policy over the past few years; yet, there is evidence that demonstrates that the media may not be truly representative of the issue in reality. For example, Squires (2009) emphasises that statistics on knife crime do not always correlate with the “public perceptions that knife crime is rising” due to gaps in available data and possibly the non-reporting of knife attacks (Squires, 2009, p.133). Additionally, Squires discovered that data drawn from hospital Accident & Emergency departments does not correlate with the popular perception that knife crime is a ‘youth’ and ‘ethnic minority’ phenomenon as portrayed by the media:

...major trends involve victims aged over 18...a significant proportion of the media coverage, especially regarding violence in London, has tended to focus upon black victims or perpetrators, the national hospital A&E figures...show higher and still rising numbers of knife injuries being reported by white people and those aged over 18.

Squires, 2009. p.136

This statement by Squires demonstrates the extent to which the media can mislead the public on certain issues. In this case knife crime is not in fact an issue that mostly effects young people under the age of 18 that are of a single ethnicity/race (as the media frequently points out). Such distortions may have a negative impact on audiences that engage with the media as their source of information.

Additionally, research by Eades et al (2007) emphasises the lack of clarity surrounding what is meant by the term “knife crime”, with politicians and the media referring to the issue frequently in an ambiguous way:

‘Knife crime’ has become an expression commonly used by politicians and the media, but it is not always entirely clear what it actually is or what they actually
mean when they use the term...Much of the media reporting and political comment has been misleading, in part due to the paucity of reliable information on the problem and in part due to the failure to present known facts accurately.

Eades et al, 2007, p.9

This statement by Eades et al is significant as it stresses the ambiguity surrounding the issue of knife crime politically and throughout the media - Eades et al also accuse the media and politicians of publishing “sensationalist statements” in regards to knife crime which could have a negative impact on public perceptions of knife crime - by increasing the fear of knife crime due to insufficient information and “facts” about knife crime (Eades et al, 2007, p.9).

**Methodology**

Justification for chosen research methods

As a researcher, careful consideration was taken when deciding which research method(s) would be suitable to answer my research question. My research was broken down into two parts, and therefore consisted of two different research methods: (a) a relatively small content analysis and (b) a larger online survey with a variety of closed and easily quantifiable questions based on news media engagement and knife crime.

The content analysis:

Being interested in the news media, a quick and simple way to gather large amounts of data was through the use of content analysis. For my research I was able to access Nexis UK, a database that held all of the UK news publications over the time period that I was interested in which meant that the data was readily available, easy and free to access. According to Krippendorff (2009) “Content analysis is a research technique
for making replicable and valid inferences from texts”, (Krippendorff, 2009, p.18). Additionally, content analysis is a “scientific tool”, that “provides new insights” and “increases a researcher’s understanding of particular phenomena” (Krippendorff, 2009, p.18). Krippendorff’s definition of content analysis emphasises how valuable the method can be when attempting to understand phenomena or key issues such as knife crime, making it a good fit for my research question.

Likewise, content analysis was a good choice due to practical reasons, as it is an “unobtrusive” method according to Bryman (2012, p.304) and didn’t require any engagement with human subjects which made obtaining the data simple.

The survey (online):

My survey was created online using Google Forms and perspective respondents were sent a direct link to the survey. The survey consisted of 13 main questions with some questions requiring answers from a multiple-choice grid. Overall the survey was estimated to have taken between 3-5 minutes to complete and all questions were close-ended, in order to make my analysis process less complicated and to save time for respondents. When deciding on what method to use, the advantages listed by Bryman (2012) were useful such as being “cheap” and “quick” to administer, “absence of interviewer effects”, “convenience for respondents” and “no interviewer variability” (Bryman, 2012, pp.233-234).

Google Forms was a free and easy online resource to use in order to create the survey in a quick way once my questions were generated and having access to the survey online meant that participants were able to answer the survey in their own time without my presence as a researcher.

Sample:
Initially, the direct link to the survey was sent to my contacts via WhatsApp messenger and social media such as Facebook and Twitter. However, on Twitter, the link was shared over a hundred times by different followers leading to a total of 386 respondents over a 7-day period. After being live for 7 days, the link to the survey via Google Forms was closed so that no more people could respond to the survey.

Ethical considerations:

As a researcher, great care and consideration was taken to ensure that this research project was not in any breach of the ethical guidelines outlined by both Aston University and the British Sociological Association. Bryman (2012, pp.135-155) also provided a guideline of the four main ethical principles which I took into consideration for my research:

Consent and deception: participants were required to consent to their answers being used for academic purposes and the purpose of my research was made clear before participants could proceed on with the questionnaire as the research was overt.

Confidentiality and anonymity: participants were informed before they could proceed that all data would be used for academic purposes. In addition, anonymity will be maintained as none of the questions require answers that would make respondents personally identifiable.

Harm to participants: I did not anticipate any harm to participants as I was extremely thoughtful when creating the questions for the online survey. I do understand that knife crime could be a sensitive topic for some people so I tried not to include questions that were 'triggering' or personal for this reason.
Analysis

Content analysis:

Nexis UK was used to search for key terms such as “knife crime” along with specific dates, once the data was collected it was put into Microsoft Excel in order to generate line graphs to visually depict patterns and trends of the ways in which UK news publishers report on knife crime.

The survey (online):

Google Forms created a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet of the responses to the survey which were downloaded, the responses from the spreadsheet were then copied into SPSS, transformed and recoded into different variables. In SPSS, variables were analysed and frequency tables were created to reveal percentages and frequencies etc. Additionally, some variables were put into crosstabs in order to look at the correlation between two different variables. The data provided through SPSS frequency tables enabled me to create a variety of bar, pie and column graphs using Microsoft Excel as a way of visually presenting the data.

Research Findings and Discussion

Results from the content analysis

As a researcher, it was important to analyse some of the sources of news media. With news media publications and articles now being available online and via social media accounts, it was necessary to look into the frequency and mentioning of “knife crime” over the course of a year, from September 2016 to September 2017. The content analysis focused on headlines mentioning the phrase “knife crime” over the course of
a year as well as the number of articles mentioning the phrase “knife crime” three or more times throughout an article. Influenced by the work of Dailey and Wenger (2016), a variety of news headlines and article content was analysed using Nexis UK.

Content analysis of UK News Publications (Newspapers and online news articles)

Over the course of a year from September 2016 to September 2017 there were a total of 638 UK news articles that contained the phrase “knife crime” in a headline (Figure 1a). This is in comparison to a total of 1,012 UK news articles containing the phrase “knife crime” three or more times in a single article over the same time period (Figure 2a). Whilst this content analysis is relatively brief, it does demonstrate that the news media does report on knife crime quite often. Additionally, Figure 3a shows that whilst articles do not always mention “knife crime” in a headline, they are likely to refer to the issue a number of times throughout an article which may influence the ways in which readers perceive the problem; if the same phrase is repeated a number of times, we may think of the issue as being bigger than it is in reality.

The second part of the content analysis looked at the publishers of news articles about knife crime among UK Publications which were narrowed down to the ten most frequent news publishers. Interestingly, 3/10 sources were London based news publishers, 4/10 were online based news publications and 6/10 were regionally specific (Figure 4a). This data shows that news media reports on knife crime come from a number of UK publishers, however, London based publishers focus on knife crime far more than other regional news publishers. Likewise, 8/10 of the UK publications mention the phrase “knife crime” in articles three or more times in comparison to headlines with the exception of birminghammail.co.uk and mirror.co.uk. However, as this content analysis is not contextual, it is difficult to pinpoint what the exact reason is for these differences, the most significant finding is that there are a
number of articles and headlines mentioning the term “knife crime” in reference to knife attacks.

**Figure 1a**: Line graph showing the number of publications containing the phrase “knife crime” in a headline

**Figure 2a**: Line graph showing the number of publications containing the phrase “knife crime” three or more times in a single article
Figure 3a: Line graph showing the number of publications containing the phrase “knife crime” in a headline and three or more times in a single article

Graph 4a: Line graph showing publications that have mentioned the phrase “knife crime” in a headline and three or more times in a single article most frequently
The third and final part of the content analysis looked at the number of UK news publications mentioning the terms “knife crime” and “youth” or “teenager”, this was a significant test as Squires (2009) emphasised the misconception about victims of knife crime being youths when in reality a majority of those admitted to hospital for stab wounds are aged 18 or over (Squires, 2009, p.136). The data below (Figure 5a) shows that a substantial number of articles refer to “knife crime” and young people within the same text, for example, between July and August 2017, 334 articles mentioned these terms which may fuel the public’s perception of knife crime being a problem amongst youths.

Figure 5a: Line graph showing news publications that have mentioned the terms “knife crime” and “youth” or “teenager” in a single article
Results from the online survey

General and demographical findings

As this research is centred upon *knife crime* and *news media* it was essential to ask the question “*Do you keep up to date with the news?*” to which 94% (363) of respondents answered “*Yes*” (Figure 1) and 258 (67%) of respondents answered that they engage with the news “*More than once a day*” compared to 7 (2%) people answering that they “*Never*” engage with the news (Figure 2). The survey also generated a diverse range of responses from across the UK which is shown through the answers to the demographic questions on region, age, gender and neighbourhood. For example, for the question “*Which region do you live in?*” the highest response rate came from the London region, accounting for 30% (115) of respondents, followed by the South East compared to the lowest response rates coming from Scotland and Northern Ireland (Figure 3). Additionally, results show that there are respondents from all given age categories aged 18 years and over (Figure 4) and 39% (150) of people claimed to live in an urban neighbourhood in comparison to Suburban and Rural neighbourhoods (Figure 5). Out of the 386 respondents, 46% (179) were female and 53% (205) were male, with 1% (2) stating that they “prefer not to say” (Figure’s 6 & 7).
Figure 1: pie chart showing percentage of respondents that keep up to date with the news

- **Yes**: 94%
- **No**: 6%

**How often do you engage with the news?**

- Never: 7
- Less than once a week: 5
- Once a week: 9
- 2 - 3 times a week: 26
- Most days: 38
- Once a day: 43
- More than once a day: 258
Figure 3: pie chart showing the regional information of respondents by percentage

Figure 4: pie chart showing the age group of respondents by percentages

Figure 5: pie chart showing the type of neighbourhood that participants live in
Figure 6: Column bar chart showing the gender of respondents by numbers

What is your gender?

- Male: 205
- Female: 179
- Prefer not to say: 2

How would you describe the neighbourhood that you live in?

- Urban: 39%
- Suburban: 48%
- Rural: 13%
Findings in relation to news media and engagement

The ways in which people engage with media can be significant to our understanding of the role, (if any) in which the media plays in our understanding of knife crime. As a researcher, it was important to look into the various sources of media platforms and analyse how often people engage with them as a source as of news. Participants were required to answer the question “Which of the following do you use as a source of news and how often?” and were given the options “Television”, “Radio”, “Print (newspapers)”, “Internet” and “Social media i.e. Facebook, Twitter”. Responses to this question produced results that do not necessarily correspond to existing literature on news media consumption and crime. For example, existing literature focuses on television and newspapers such as the work of Lawson and Heaton (2010) and
Chirico et al, (2000) but the results of this survey demonstrate that the respondents were more likely to engage with the internet and social media as a source of news “more than once a day” compared to other sources of news such as radio and especially newspapers (Figure 8). Analysis of the results for this question demonstrate that whilst the internet and social media are very useful resources to obtain news, television and radio are still used by some respondents but are not as popular, with newspapers being used less frequently or “less than once a week”.

Figure 8: Column bar chart demonstrating the different sources of news media and how often respondents engage with them.

In addition to questions based on the different channels of news media mentioned above, it was also of interest to find out whether or not the news was the main source of information about crime locally, nationally or both. Studies carried out by Ericson
(1991), Chiricos et al (2000), Dowler (2003), and Callanan and Rosenberger (2015) all highlight the significance of neighbourhood and locality in regards fear of crime and/or news consumption. Interestingly, the results for the question “Is the news your main source of information about both national crime and regional crime?” demonstrate that only a relatively small proportion of respondents use the news as a source of only local and national crime news in contrast to 57% (218) of respondents stating that the news is their main source of information about both regional and local crime and 30% (114) of respondents stated that news is not their main source of information about crime (Figure 9).

Similarly, respondents were asked the question “Is news your main source of information about knife crime?” to which 46% (177) of people answered “No” (Figure 10). The results demonstrated in both Figures 9 and 10 are significant to the initial research question “Does the news media influence our understanding of knife crime in the UK” as it demonstrates that knowledge of crime and in this instance knife crime is not exclusive to the public keeping up with news media. These results, to some extent correlate with Dowler (2003), which found that perceptions of crime were not largely the result of televised news and newspaper engagement, but rather, other factors such as crimes that may occur locally and be recognised by the local public but not the media. In addition, it may also be possible that some of the respondents know about crime due to their occupation, for example, police officers and those that work in hospitals, but the survey does not go into enough detail to obtain this information so we will not know why almost half of respondents have answered in this way.
Figure 9: Column bar chart showing whether or not news is the main source of information about regional crime and national crime

Figure 10: Bar chart showing the percentage of people that answered “yes” or “no” to the question “Is the news your main source of information about knife crime?”
Additionally, as research by Pfeiffer et al (2005); Lawson and Heaton (2010) and Dailey and Wenger (2016) highlight the “bias” of news reporting in regards to crime and a heavy focus on “violent crime”, it was important to ask respondents how often they “see or hear about “knife crime” in the news?” to which 60% (230) of people answered “once a week” (Figure 11). Similarly, Figure 12 also portrays the answers to this question but is also cross-referenced with the self-described neighbourhood of participants. This is significant as it demonstrates how news media about knife crime is distributed across different areas. For example, only 49 (13%) of the participants were from a “rural” neighbourhood but 30 of them responded that they see or hear about knife crime “once a week” which is a large proportion of participants in this area, signifying that news reports on knife crime are frequently seen or heard by the public, regardless of neighbourhood. Furthermore, Figure 13 shows the same results in reference to region which shows a clear correlation between seeing and/or hearing about knife crime in the news at least once a week, as a majority of respondents from each region claimed to have seen or heard about knife crime in the news at least once a week with the exception of Yorkshire. This demonstrates that there is a lot of news media attention and focus on knife crime nationally. Likewise, the results from the content analysis (particularly Figure 3a) demonstrate that news media in print and online has covered stories on knife crime over 600 times from 2016 to 2017 so it is not unusual that a majority of the public have said that they see or hear about knife crime once a week in news media.
Figure 11: Column bar chart showing how often respondents “see or hear about “knife crime” in the news

How often do you see or hear about "knife crime" in the news?

Figure 12: Clustered bar chart showing how often people see or hear about “knife crime” in the news by neighbourhood

How often do you see or hear about "knife crime" in the news?

Once a week  Every two weeks  once a month  once every three months  once every six months  once a year  less than once a year

Less than once a year  Once a year  Once every six months  Once every three months  Once a month  Every two weeks  Once a week

Rural  Suburban  Urban
Figure 13: Column bar graph showing how often people see or hear about “knife crime” in the news in relation to the geographical region of respondents

Findings in relation to opinion and understanding of knife crime
As a researcher, it was important to gauge an understanding of the public’s current perceptions of knife crime as a result of media engagement by tapping into some of the most common misconceptions about knife crime here in the UK and generating statements about knife crime in regards to locality and the news media, influenced by the work of Squires (2009). Squires argues that media coverage of the issue does not reflect the reality of the issue as hospital reports portray far more victims of knife crime than the media ever does, as the media focuses on certain discourses when discussing knife crime. Respondents of this survey were asked “In your opinion, how effective is the news when reporting knife crime?” to which 171 (44%) people answered “Not very effective” in contrast to 24 (6%) people saying “very effective”
(Figure 14). The answers to this question highlight the public’s attitude about the news reports of knife crime, the graph displayed in Figure 14 is also referenced across the age groups of the respondents and demonstrates that a majority of respondents across all age groups feel that the news is not very effective when reporting on knife crime.

**Figure 14: column bar graph showing the answers to the question “In your opinion, how effective is the news when reporting knife crime?” in relation to the age group of participants**

To gain a sense of how the public view knife crime and news media portrayals, participants were asked a series of questions with the lead question “Thinking about your engagement with news and reports on knife crime, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements”:

“Knife crime is a national problem”

For this statement a majority of respondents either “agreed strongly” or “agreed” with a combined total of 81% (313) of people agreeing with the statement to some extent, demonstrating that knife crime is perceived as a social problem (Figure 15). In addition, those from London and the South East agreed with the statement strongly,
which is not surprising as those from London and the South East are the largest regional demographic category of respondents in contrast to other regions such as the South West and West Midlands where the differences between those agreeing with the statement strongly and just agreeing were close in number (Figure 16).

**Figure 15:** column bar graph showing the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement “*Knife crime is a national problem*”

![Bar graph showing responses to knife crime being a national problem](image1)

**Figure 16:** column bar graph showing the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement “*knife crime is a national problem*” in relation to the geographical location of respondents

![Bar graph showing responses by region](image2)
“Knife crime is a problem in my local area”

50% (193) of the respondents agreed with this statement to some extent with 24% (93) disagreeing with the statement (Figure 17). Regionally, respondents from London, the West Midlands and South East appear to agree with the statement the most (Figure 18). This statement is significant because in comparison to the previous question on knife crime being a national problem, we can see that in terms of it being a “local problem” less people agree, yet the public think of the issue as a national problem. This finding is interesting and could indicate a number of things: (a) As the content analysis shows, London based news publishers report on knife crime more frequently than other UK news publishers which may be the reason why people in London agree with the statement more (Figure 4a); (b) London and the South East may have more knife crime than other regions in actuality; (c) respondents live in areas where knife crime is a problem as the question indicates.

Figure 17: column bar graph showing the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement “knife crime is a problem in my local area”

![Figure 17: column bar graph showing the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement “knife crime is a problem in my local area”](image)

Figure 18: column bar graph showing the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement “knife crime is a problem in my local area” in relation to the geographical location of respondents

![Figure 18: column bar graph showing the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement “knife crime is a problem in my local area” in relation to the geographical location of respondents](image)
“Knife crime is a problem amongst youths”

A combined total of 86% (332) of respondents agree with this statement to some extent either simply agreeing or strongly agreeing. (Figure 19).Whilst knife crime does affect young people, it is not exclusive to young people as highlighted by Squires (2009) who argues that most of those admitted to hospital for stab wounds are aged over 18, however, media reports of knife crime tend to focus on youths as both victims and perpetrators. Additionally, a majority of respondents across all age groups agreed with this statement, signifying the influence of the media on the public’s perception of knife crime being connected to youths (Figure 20). Likewise, the content analysis (Figure 5a) demonstrates how knife crime is often mentioned in association with youths and
teenagers which is likely to have influenced the public’s perception of the issue as being exclusive to young people.

“Knife crime occurs frequently in larger and urban cities”

For this question, a combined total of 83% (320) of people agreed to some extent and 11% (43) of people answered “Neither agree nor disagree”. Knife crime occurs throughout the UK as a whole but what the content analysis (Figure 5a) shows us is that news publishers from UK cities such as London, Birmingham and Nottingham issue reports on knife crime a lot more than any other areas which may be the reason why the public perceive knife crime to be occurring frequently in larger and urban cities. However, Gloucestershire is also listed in the content analysis as having higher rates of news reporting on knife crime than a larger and urban city such as Birmingham. This shows that media attention and discourse play a significant role in how the public think of issues and what characteristics they associate with issues.

Figure 19: column bar chart showing the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement “Knife crime is a problem amongst youths”
Figure 20: column bar chart showing the extent to which respondents agree or disagree with the statement “knife crime is a problem amongst youths” in relation to the age group of respondents

"Knife crime is a problem amongst youths" *age groups*

“I know more about knife crime from sources other than the news (personal experience, word of mouth)”

66% (255) of respondents agree with this statement to some extent which is in line with the work of Ericson (1991) who argues that the public are not completely dependent on the news for information about crime, especially if events occur that are “close to home”. (Figure 21). Likewise, 62% (239) of respondents agree to some extent with the statement “The news is not representative of knife crime” (Figure 22) whilst 57% (220) (Figure 23) and 60% (232) (Figure 24) of respondents disagree to some extent with the statements “In general, the news reports events accurately” and “Overall, I trust the way that the news reports on knife crime”. These findings are significant as they demonstrate that a majority of respondents to the survey may not rely on news media solely for information on knife crime and also may not think of the
news media as a credible or reliable source. The answers to these questions tell us that although news media is a source of information about crime, it is not the only and a majority of respondents are not confident in the accuracy of what the news delivers.

Figure 21: column bar chart showing the extent to which respondents agree or disagree to the statement “I know more about knife crime from sources other than the news (personal experience, word of mouth)”

Figure 22: column bar chart showing the extent to which respondents agree or disagree to the statement “The news is not representative of knife crime”
Figure 23: column bar chart showing the extent to which respondents agree or disagree to the statement “In general, the news reports events accurately”

![Bar Chart: In General, The News Reports Events Accurately]

Figure 24: column bar chart showing the extent to which respondents agree or disagree to the statement “Overall, I trust the way that the news reports on knife crime”

![Bar Chart: Overall, I Trust the Way that the News Reports on Knife Crime]
Conclusion

The results for the content analysis are what I expected. I was already aware that the news media usually reports a lot on knife crime, especially in relation to young people and London.

The results for the questionnaire were not what I anticipated in some areas, especially in regards to news sources such as televisions, newspapers and the internet etc, and news media not being a main source of information about knife crime for 46% of people. For example, I would have expected more people to have engaged with newspapers and the television for news and more people to say that the news is their main source of information about knife crime. However, the findings from this research suggest that news media still remains a powerful tool of influence in many ways, particularly when it comes to issues concerning perception or ‘scale’ of the issue. Some of the questions included in the survey were able to capture this notion well. For example, answers to questions on knife crime being a ‘national problem’ or ‘problem in a local area’ highlighted a 30 percent difference in the perception of the problem between national and local, which is likely to be the result of news media reporting on the issue. Additionally, the questions on knife crime being a problem in ‘urban and larger cities’ and a problem ‘amongst youths’ are also common misconceptions put out by the news which a majority of respondents agree with, demonstrating the influence that the news media has on the way that we understand knife crime. Additionally, as the content analysis demonstrates, the news often uses a similar rhetoric when reporting on the issue of knife crime which is why members of the public may have linked terms such as “urban, youth, knife crime” together in order to agree with statements.
On the other hand, whilst the public may be influenced by the news media, this research also demonstrates some resistance towards what the media reports in regards to knife crime. Questions asking specifically about ‘trust’, ‘accuracy’ and ‘representation’ about reports on knife crime all produced responses where a majority of 55% or more of the respondents ‘doubt’ what is reported to them about the issue.

So, to what extent does the news media influence our understanding of knife crime in the UK? By analysing the results of this project, the news media does influence the way that we perceive knife crime as a problem: on a national scale, where it is likely to occur, and who we feel are likely to be perpetrators/victims. These perceptions appear to be to some extent a result of news media reporting. However, other factors that have not been explored in this study in detail such as personal experience likely also come into play when discussing such issues because (a) news media does not report everything and (b) people’s knowledge of knife crime in spite of news media reporting differs from person to person.

Recommendations for future research

If I had more time for the content analysis I would have focused on the context of the sources to group together other terms and phrases associated with “knife crime” rather than focusing on “youth” and “teenager” only. For future considerations, a more detailed content analysis could be conducted to give more a contextual background, and specific news publishers would be chosen and analysed.

To gain more detail and insight about the ways in which people come to know about knife crime, I’d recommend carrying out interviews to gain a better understanding of where people get their information from about the topic, or perhaps open-ended
questions to give participants the chance to elaborate on points and give me as a researcher more detailed and insightful data.

References


