Violence in the City: Inequality, Intimidation and Fear
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What is the current crisis and why has it arisen?

Today, violence is an issue that is difficult to completely ignore or to avoid. Evidence of it is seemingly everywhere: violence receives prevalent coverage in the 24-hour news media and it is also pervasive within our popular culture, such as in film, television and literature. There is a similarly vast amount of policy and academic literature that addresses violence in historical, comparative and theoretical contexts. The problem of violence is one that is frequently considered to be synonymous with large cities. In particular, certain neighbourhoods within cities often have reputations as dangerous places and can become spaces of both fear and fascination. While prevalent, and at times sensationalist, coverage of violence in the media can create a sense of fear that does not match the risks of experiencing violence in the city, it remains a fact that risks are not distributed evenly. Some groups are at much greater risk than others and in British cities today violence is a genuine and persistent issue in some neighbourhoods.

Although crime in Britain has been in decline for over two decades, *violent* crime has started to see real rises and to have a hugely detrimental impact, particularly within more excluded communities. As a result, it now figures highly on the political and public agenda. Between 2017 and 2018, 285 people were killed by use of a knife or sharp instrument, the highest number recorded in a year since 1946 when the Home Office started recording the number of murders committed annually (ONS, 2018). Much of this recent violence has been concentrated in particular areas of the UK's large cities including London, Birmingham and Liverpool. These are cities with sometimes vibrant economies and considerable wealth, but which also retain large, disconnected and under-resourced communities to whom few policies or programs have been designed or devoted for over ten years now. Many such areas remain poor, with low quality and under-resourced public services that have been made considerably worse by austerity measures over this period.

The increase in violence has been accompanied by considerable concern from the media and politicians regarding what some see as a kind of 'epidemic' of knife violence afflicting some of Britain's major urban centres, with talk of 'blood-soaked streets'. In response, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced additional funding for the Crown Prosecution Service, an additional 10,000 prison places and a toughening of sentencing guidelines to tackle rising rates of violent offending. While there is evidence that 'higher harm' forms of violent offending are increasing in particular parts of some British cities, the media frenzy that surrounds this issue obscures and disguises a range of structural factors that continue to remain peripheral to policy debates addressing the causes and potential solutions.

It is perhaps fair to say that cities are not intrinsically violent places but they contain sites and conditions that, in particular combinations, can be generative of violence. This can be highlighted by the considerable variations in the shape and trends of violence both between and within cities. We tend to find few voices in the public domain questioning the presence of violence in our cities. However, it is clear from many years of research on these issues that violence is unevenly distributed across the sub-areas of cities and often in close parallel to the distribution of forms of social marginalisation and disenfranchisement which have blended to create excluded, contained so-called 'dangerous' communities.

There are sections of cities which continue to be subject to various coercive policies of aggressive stop and search and 'hotspot' policing tactics, many of which sit closely alongside much more affluent neighbourhoods that have become increasingly securitised and gated. Trends in knife violence, which

have had the gravest effects on young men in certain communities, have appeared alongside the evacuation of welfare and institutional supports and this includes the loss of many youth clubs, Sure Start programs, social work and other youth diversion provisions. While these communities have become designated 'hotspots' for aggressive policing strategies, much of the media and political talk regarding crime and violence has become heavily racialized. The effect of this has often been to obscure the role of inequality and the loss of social and economic protections as key factors that help us to understand these problems.

An obsession with the 'dangerous streets' often identified as the backdrop for these events, has also perhaps skewed our focus away from the threats found within the presumably 'safe haven of the home'. Between 2017 – 2018, more than a million women in England in Wales reported being a victim of domestic abuse (ONS, 2019). Further analysis reveals the tendency amongst victims not to report such incidents, which highlights that this figure is likely to be a significant under-estimate. The considerable attention that has been directed towards 'public' violence between young men on Britain's city streets draws our gaze from this heavily gendered violence against women from men known to them, which endures and receives a very different political response.

How are people and places becoming more precarious as a result?

To think of violence as purely a product of the culture of those that are confined to the margins creates a fallacy that this is a 'subcultural' or pathological issue isolated from the rest of society. Furthermore, such an approach focuses upon violence as a solely physical act perpetrated by individuals. This draws our attention away from the systematic trends of brutality that lie behind more insidious processes of capitalism that connect geographies of inequality, exclusion and violence. What seems to be a connection between violent *acts* – the tangible, extraordinary and spectacular violence – and violent *processes* – the endemic and embedded violence – is however somewhat difficult to unpack. We should nevertheless pay more attention to how violent *processes* of austerity, the dismantling of social welfare, and growing inequality, filter down into the lived realities of vulnerability and fear that characterise violent *acts* that are unfolding in cities today within a variety of different spaces.

Many of those caught up in what is being termed an 'epidemic' of urban violence are confined to specific sub-geographies of British cities that rely more heavily upon numerous services and amenities that have been starved of investment and stripped down by years of austerity cuts. Youth projects that have been closed leaving groups of young people with fewer positive provisions and activities; cuts to early intervention services to support children at-risk of abuse; women and children caught up in abusive relationships with fewer services and hostels to house and protect them; fewer police officers to respond to violent and offending behaviour that has detrimental effects on communal life; and the 'vigilante' groups and local 'hard men' popping up in some of these sub-geographies to fill the void. These cuts arrived on the back of decades of economic re-structuring in Britain that fundamentally altered traditional labour markets, fractured and weakened workers' movements, and led to greater economic inequality. With options that mostly consist of low-paid, insecure forms of work, amid the ubiquity of images of desirable consumer products and lifestyles, and the wealthy groups who possess them, considerable numbers of people are now living out their lives with little hope or optimism.

For some young males in particular who are confined to particular marginalised sub-geographies of British cities, the success of some local organised criminals and drug dealers provide evidence of a viable, potentially lucrative alternative to zero-hours contracts, minimum wages, unsocial hours, and the ignominy of employment in the low-level service economy. With diminished options for gaining and maintaining self-respect, violence can become for some disenfranchised and poor men a means of acquiring respect and making their way in a competitive and potentially dangerous criminal economy.

The increasing incidents of serious violence recorded and reported during the past several years are partly a reflection of a culture that promotes individualism and celebrates consumer competence in a broader context of inequality that creates structural disadvantages and limits opportunities, alongside the declining presence of services in some communities that can protect citizens. Such feelings of insecurity and vulnerability may also speak to the problem of declining trust in police and faith in local authorities to provide protection. The withdrawal of welfare does not stop at social and economic support, but extends to a lack of protection and security provided by police who share poor relations with some communities and that have been further aggravated by the hostile treatment of minority groups through over-policing.

Physical *acts* of violence, that are pushing up violent crime figures, are difficult to detach from the harmful consequences of economic crises and poorly thought-out political decisions. Despite these connections the media and politicians continue to focus solely upon the exceptional and more easily quantifiable forms of public violence involving marginalised groups of young men, which leaves these structural conditions unaddressed. To quote Danny Dorling (2008: p40) at length:

> Behind the man with the knife is the man who sold him the knife, the man who did not give him a job, the man who decided that his school did not need funding, the man who closed down the branch plant where he could have worked, the man who decided to reduce benefit levels so that a black economy grew…The harm done to one generation has repercussions long after that harm is first acted out.

There is a *slow* process of violence that unfolds here which cannot be detached from matters of uneven economic transformation and austerity that create fear and insecurity for particular groups. However, these vulnerabilities present themselves differently across the city and unfold gradually over time. The challenge is to remain sensitive to the gender, class and geographical features of contemporary violence across the city without conflating the solutions that different violences require.

What could be done to build new forms of personal and local security for the 21st century?

It is important to acknowledge that there are continuities between these violences that transgress different 'public' and 'private' spaces in the city, all the while garnering different levels of political attention and action. To talk of precariousness in the city should therefore take note of the different spaces in which these vulnerabilities unfold both in terms of sub-geography, gender and class, but also in terms of how they accumulate over time. We hope that the following efforts listed below provide some response and optimism for moving forward in responses to violence in the city.

Economic Reinvestment in Local and National Services.

The concerted withdrawal of city resources aimed at managing, responding to and preventing violence in cities has become a significant obstacle in the effort to reduce violence. It is important that politicians and policy makers re-invest in services that have seen consistent budget cuts. These cuts have had a lasting impact on all forms of services from charities for the homeless, women's refuges and community centres and other welfare services to police, probation and prisons. The cuts to these services have a particularly violent effect on the most vulnerable of communities, which non-profit charities also struggle to support as funding cuts create the pressure of competition and threaten the risk of closure. If resources were driven back into these services, we hope that people in marginalised and vulnerable communities would have renewed access to support, opportunity and be better able to seek safety.

This economic reinvestment might also extend to re-establishing shared public, creative spaces which different communities feel safe and confident in accessing. It seems that as the number of public spaces

decline there is less opportunity for meaningful exchange and more opportunity for fears for personal safety and insecurity to emerge. While some communities are consistently excluded from participation in certain spaces, others have sought to limit the free use of parks, squares and centres. As more shared, creative spaces become more available and accessible to people, we hope that more opportunities emerge for collaborative debates from the ground.

Democratic Decision-Making: Listen to Families and Communities.

Closely linked to the promise of economic investment is the importance of renewing a sense of confidence in political leadership. The current climate is marked by uncertainty and ambiguity in politics which has experienced changes in leadership, decision-making and policies almost on a day-by-day basis fuelling a growing disconnect between people and politics. Many are increasingly disillusioned in the ability of authorities such as the police to protect citizens and, in some communities, are fearful of the efforts of stop and search and other aggressive surveillance tactics. More attention should be placed on encouraging the active participation of local communities in decision making about the solutions and perceived obstacles to reducing violence.

Much better provision should be made available for these services to support and empower local communities to participate in debates on violence in cities. This would involve talking *to* rather than *about* or *around* those most affected by these events and ultimately avoid stigmatising those who are already in vulnerable positions. This requires listening to families, communities, and, rather than laying responsibility at their door and treating them as suspects, paying attention to what they consider to be the best ways of moving forward for *their* community.

Shared Agendas: Collaborative Partnerships and Integration into Public Policy

We have highlighted in this discussion that violence in cities is not, and should not, be the responsibility of one authority. Rather it should be the concern of a network of agencies which work collaboratively, speaking across rather than down to one another. The response to violence touches upon issues of economic and social exclusion, fear, insecurity and vulnerability, which require the attention of not only criminal justice agencies, but public health and welfare ones too. This is an idea that has been gathering increasing pace in recent discussions of public health approaches to violence trialled in both Glasgow and London in recent years. This approach focuses on a holistic, ecological approach to violence which situates it within broader dynamics of relationships, communities, economic and social conditions. This requires a cross-sectoral approach where support services in housing, education, family, employment and health work together using the same agendas and approaches to violence. If violence prevention was incorporated into broader public policies there would be better recognition of the economic and social insecurities and vulnerabilities that precede violence as well as a better understanding of the wider impacts of violence in cities.

References

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