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Exploring the Factors Responsible for Gun and Knife Violence Among the Young Generation in the UK: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

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Background: Youth violence is the fourth leading cause of death among individuals aged 10-29, representing a significant global public health concern. In the UK, gun and knife crimes among youth are particularly troubling. This scoping review aims to identify the contributing factors of gun and knife violence among young people in the UK and their impact on mental health. **Method:** We searched literature using Medline, PubMed Central, Sunderland Library, Google Scholar, CINAHL, and approved government websites. Boolean operators were used with specific search terms, including only full-text, English-language, and original research publications. The PRISMA flowchart was used to document the selection process. **Result:** Out of 648 identified articles, 11 met the inclusion criteria. Three primary themes emerged: socio-economic factors, gang involvement, and mental health. **Conclusion:** Gun and knife violence among young people in the UK poses a significant public health burden. Effective interventions require addressing socio-economic disparities, preventing gang involvement, and providing accessible mental health support.

Keywords: youth violence; gun violence; knife violence; mental health

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), identifies youth violence as the fourth leading cause of death among those aged 10-29, highlighting its global public health significance. In the UK, gun and knife crime among youth has escalated, with knife violence offences increasing by 80% in England and Wales over the past five years (Vinnakota et al., 2022). The Office for National Statistics (2018) reports that these crimes are a significant concern, significantly impacting psychological and social functioning and contributing to premature mortality, injury, and disability.

A person's psychological and social functioning is extensively and frequently impacted by gun and knife crime, and it also significantly increases the global burden of premature mortality, injury, and disability. 84% of victims of adolescent knife violence internationally are men (WHO, 2020). The majority of those who participated in these incidents were Black or Asian individuals, particularly young people between the ages of 10 and 25 (Vinnakota et al., 2022). Traynor (2016) also mentions that gun and knife crime is also caused by racism, which is a series of events that continue to this day.

The author continued, saying it led to several trials, law changes, and the 1999 publication of the Macpherson report, which made a moment of deep introspection concerning problems related to racism in institutions and youth knife and gun violence in Britain. According to Williams (2023), black and Asian families in the United Kingdom are disproportionately exposed to violence and crime in impoverished environments because they are twice as likely to live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods as their white counterparts.

Densley et al. (2020) stated that the problem of violence is national. Furthermore, as violence increases, fewer people are being found guilty, which erodes public confidence in the police to give victims and their families the answers they need. For this reason, the Home Office invested £40 million and released a new Serious Violence Strategy in April 2018. Youth violence (gun and knife) increases the cost of health, welfare, and criminal justice services as well as decreasing productivity and property value (WHO, 2020).

The gun rules and regulations in the United Kingdom are renowned for being extremely stringent (Ministry of Justice, 2023). Even deactivated weapons need to pass a rigorous process and many tests to confirm that they cannot fire live ammunition (Ministry of Justice, 2023). Despite this, there is still a high rate of gun crime in the UK;6,369 cases were registered in the year that ended in September 2022 (Ministry of Justice, 2023).

According to the Ministry of Justice (2023), the government is committed to taking decisive action against the ongoing epidemic of violence that is destroying communities, and combating knife crime will be their top priority. The House of Commons Library (2019) stated that early intervention techniques included in the strategy are collaborating with government agencies on projects like creating efficient police-school partnership models and providing support for vulnerable children, such as those who are "looked after" and excluded from school. The government increased contributions to the Community Fund to combat knife crime by up to £1 million.

As per Pitts (2020), gang-related factors were implicated in 31% of London homicides, 47% of firearm discharges, 58% of firearm victims, and 22% of knife crime among those under 25 years old. Pitts (2020) also mentions that Marion Fitzgerald (2009) discovered that Black young men made up 58% of the victims in the 10 to 17 age group in her research on killings in London from 1999 to 2005. Pitts (2020) also stated that Mark Jackson (2010) discovered that African-Caribbean males made up 32% of all homicide victims in his analysis of London killings from 2000 to 2010, with 15 to 19-year-olds making up 56% of that group.

African-Caribbean men made up most the capital's homicide perpetrators (Pitts, 2020). The largest African-Caribbean population in London is found in Lambeth (Pitts, 2020). Six murders four with a gun and two with a knife occurred in Lambeth in the first half of 2007, and by December of that year, the total had grown to 25 (Pitts, 2020). Of the 32 London boroughs, this one had the second-highest rate of both fatal and non-fatal shootings between 2004 and 2006. According to data from the Mathematical Programming System (MPS), children and young people aged 10 to 18 accounted for 22% of gun crime in Lambeth during this period, and this crime was tied to gangs (Pitts, 2020).

Neyroud thought that the violence on the streets of Britain demonstrated that the lack of policing had to do with the knife crime in Britain Organization for World Peace (Roberts, 2020). Theresa May rejected this idea and refuted any connection between knife crime and police cuts. Nevertheless, her government's leaked data claimed that fewer police officers have "probably contributed" to increased violent crime (OWP, 2020). According to Golding and McClory (2008), murder is always horrifying, but never more so than when the victim and the murderer are both young. Golding and McClory (2008) further stated that this human loss has a more significant financial impact. The economic burden of all gun-related homicides exceeded £200 million. When murders with knives are included, the cost is approximately £628 million.

According to Kinsella (2011), three factors consistently appear in all communities and cities: financial gain/poverty, lack of opportunities, and gang mentality. Kinsella (2011) mentions that many of the young individuals who have committed gun and knife crimes and whom she has spoken to appear to be from low-income households and do not have enough money to get by. Kinsella (2011) further notes that, as money is frequently insufficient to buy material or luxury goods or even adequate food, young people resort to unethical and alternative means of obtaining what they desire, which puts them on the path to crime. Silvestri et al. (2009) note that various parenting styles can be protective or risk factors. An increased risk of gang involvement is linked to inadequate parental supervision and control.

As per Skarlatidou et al. (2021), recent study conducted on youth in England and Scotland found that practices such as stop-and-search raise severe doubts about the legitimacy of law enforcement and decreases public trust in the system, which in turn leads to a rise in criminal activity. Skarlatidou et al. (2019) also mention that young people were interviewed and risk factors such as lack of guardian, peer influence, weapon carrying, substance abuse, and unsafe public spaces were identified as high-risk factors that increase daily. They argue that “a strong partnership with affected communities" is necessary for community involvement, which is the cornerstone of a public health approach. Both the Offending Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS) and the Youth Justice Board (YJB) Survey show that young people's carrying of knives is primarily influenced by feelings of insecurity and protection (Eades et al, 2007).

According to the 2004 YJB Youth Survey, 2% of students in school and 10% of excluded children had "carried a weapon to school to defend oneself" (Eades et al, 2007). Evidence shows that victims who do not trust the police have a bigger chance of going to prison because they may choose to resolve the issue with violence rather than comply with the police protocols (House of Commons Library, 2019). According to Eades et al. (2007), 48% of the increase in knife-related crimes occurs in London. Pitts (2020) found the highest rates of adult and youth

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unemployment in Europe in the poorest neighbourhoods. Pitts (2020) notes that by 21st century, 1 in 5 White and 1 in 2 Black 16 to 24-year-olds did not have a job.

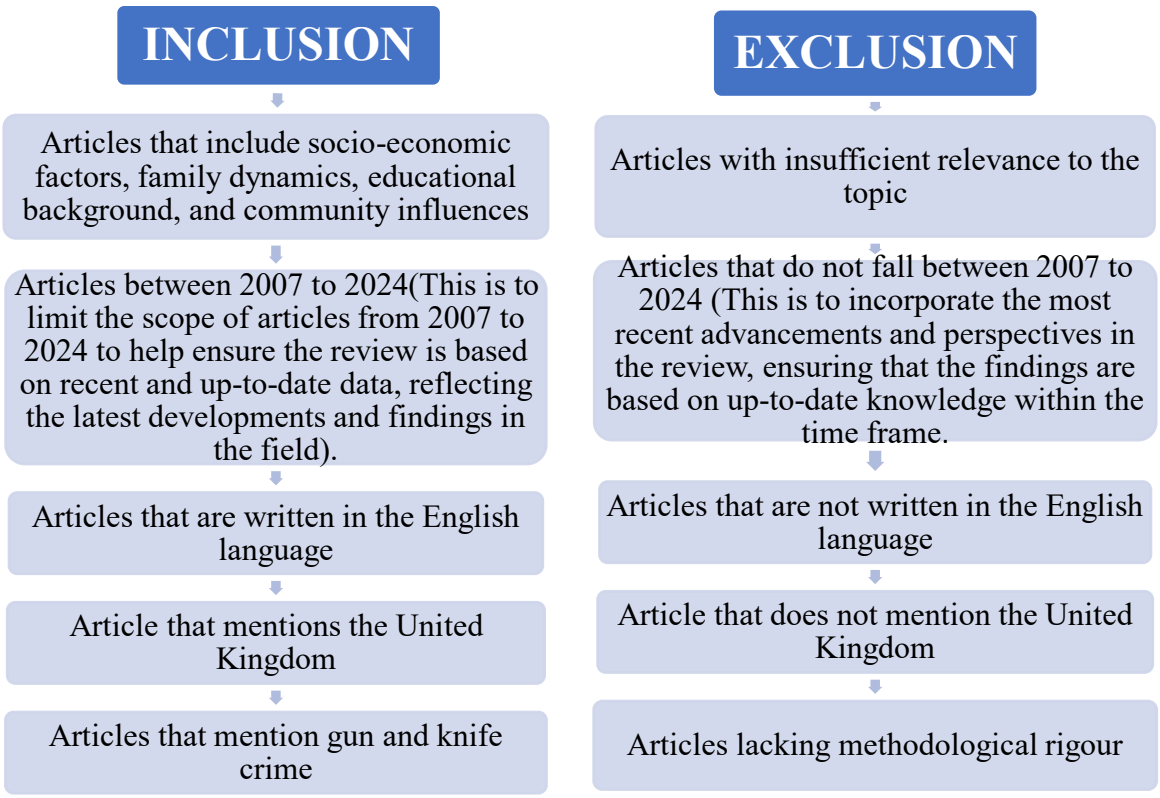
According to Haylock (2019), there has been a global rise in youth criminal activity, which has had severe adverse effects on the economy, society, and mental health. Interpersonal violence and homicide rank as the third most common cause of death for individuals aged 15 to 19 worldwide (Haylock, 2019). Despite being recognised as a significant and growing problem at the World Health Assembly, efforts to reduce youth violence have not yet been prioritized or implemented. Haylock (2019) also notes that this public health concern appears to be influenced by geographical location. For instance, London accounts for 48% of the rise in weapon related crimes, and current statistics show that the number of offences varies across major cities. This variation may reflect differences in crime rates, social status, educational attainment, and access to weapons (Haylock, 2019).

Methods

The search strategy included terms related to youth violence, gun crime, and knife crime, combined using Boolean operators. Inclusion criteria were primary research studies published in English between 2007 and 2024, focusing on the UK. Exclusion criteria included non-peer-reviewed articles, reviews, and studies not focusing on the specified age group.

This scoping review has included quantitative, mixed method, and qualitative primary research studies. The electronic databases used to search for articles are CINAHL, Medline, PubMed, Sunderland Library, Google Scholar, and other approved websites. Thematic analysis was used in this review.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria



Ethical Consideration

There are no specific ethical considerations required for this study. This research is a knowledge synthesis that employs a systematic and iterative approach. The researcher reviewed existing articles to determine what ethical approvals had been used in those studies.

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Table 2. PICO

PICO (Research Question)	Problem Population	Invention	Control	Outcome
A study to examine contributing factors of Gun and knife violence among young people between the ages of 10 and 25 years old in the United Kingdom.	Factors of Gun and knife violence among young people between the ages of 10 and 25 years.	Awareness in school from an early age, primary, intermediate, and tertiary about the consequences and dangers of carrying a knife and engaging in knife crime.	Engagement in mentoring programs, sports, and community centers.	Reduction of crime in the United Kingdom.

Results and Discussion

A total of 648 articles were identified, with 11 meeting the inclusion criteria. The studies were analyzed to identify contributing factors to gun and knife violence among young people in the UK, resulting in three primary themes: socio-economic disparities, gang involvement, and mental health.

Table 3: PRISMA Flowchart for Scoping Review

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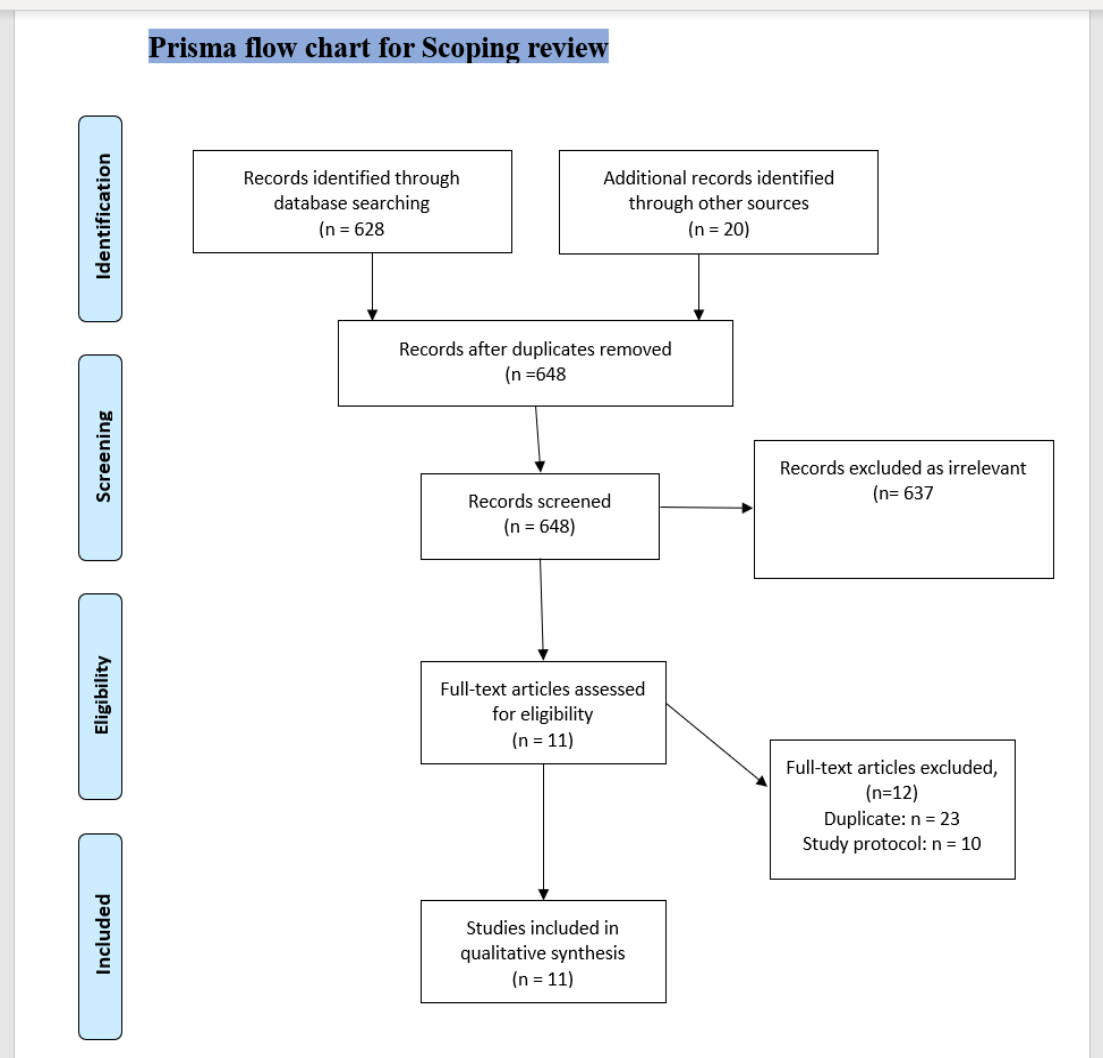


Table 4. Database Search Result

Database	Year	Search Results	Excluded	Included
Approved Government Website	2007 - 2024	101	96	5
CINAHL	2007 - 2024	57	57	0
Google Scholar	2007 - 2024	68	66	2
Medline	2007 - 2024	102	101	1
PubMed Central	2007 - 2024	240	238	2
Sunderland Library	2007 - 2024	80	79	1
Total		**648**	**637**	**11**
Duplicates Removed	**648**			

Three primary themes were identified to the contributing factors and effects of gun and knife violence among young people in the UK. The first theme examines community disparities, shedding light on the contextual factors influencing the prevalence of such violence. Theme two delves into the intricate relationship between gang

involvement and incidents, exploring the dynamics contributing to these associations. Lastly, theme three delves into the often overlooked yet crucial aspect of mental health concerning gun and knife violence, aiming to uncover the nuanced connections between an individual's mental well-being and their propensity for violent behaviors. Throughout the 11 publications that make up this review, many of the themes and codes that have been identified are interconnected. The themes are presented below-

Theme 1. Socio-economic Disparities: The first theme, socio-economic disparities, highlights the influence of economic inequality and community deprivation on youth violence. Golding and McClory (2008) argue that, as observed in some communities of London and other major British cities, the use of firearms can impact public safety and confidence in general. They contend that the only successful strategy to address the escalating rates of gun and knife violence in the community is to implement a multidimensional system of prevention, intervention, and repression.

Pitts (2020) mentions the Black community due to the perception that the police frequently use it as a tool to criminalize Black youth unfairly. Vinnakota et al. (2022) points out other risk factors for interpersonal and community violence that can lead to knife and gun crime. These are deprivation, poverty, lack of education, gang membership, territory, and a lack of recreational activities. They also stated that since knife crime is a public health issue, precautions should be taken to protect people's quality of life.

Theme 2. Gang Involvement: The second theme, gang involvement, emphasizes the role of peer influence and gang dynamics in escalating violent behaviours. Silvestri et al. (2009) mention that the likelihood of engaging in gun and knife violence is significantly predicted by gang membership between the ages of 14 and 16. Additionally, being involved in a gang is alsoexpectedd by having acquaintances who commit violent crimes. 23mit more and more crimes that they find difficult to stop, whether to support their family or to pay for the lifestyle they already lead. Vinnakota et al. (2022) reported that the top three causes of gun and knife crime are family problems (7.7%), fights/gang attacks (15%), and street violence including robbery (23.1%). These factors have identified as a significant risk factors for knife crimes and need to be carefully considered.

Theme 3. Mental Health: The third theme, mental health, explores the psychological impact of violence exposure and its contribution to violent behaviour among youth. Moreover, Densley, et al. (2020) researched the effectiveness of new harm reduction and contextual protection measures and police gang databases. There is also a discussion of the paths that lead to violence and resistance, focusing on mental well-being. The focus on mental health is a crucial component of studies on teenage violence and its underlying causes. However, gang members' mental health and emotional states are still in its infancy. This research differences between young people who are involved in gangs and those who are not in terms of psychological discomfort, anxiety, despair, and self-conscious feelings like shame and guilt. Their study, which involved recruiting youth from secondary institutions in London between the ages of 13 and 19, reveals that gang members suffer from higher levels of psychological anguish.

Table 5. characteristics and data extraction

Author's/Year	Aim/ Objective	Methodology/ Study design	Title	Population/ Origin of Country	Results/Outcome/Limitation

Densley, et al., 2020	To study youth violence and its cause from the ground up, to inform discussions that are otherwise dominated by policymakers, media commentators, and armchair theorists who are disconnected from the empirical realities of street-level experiences.	Qualitative Method	An Introduction to Gangs and Serious Youth Violence in the United Kingdom	Young youth/ UK	As the violence in the UK becomes an increasingly serious issue. practitioners and politicians are still looking for evidence-based answers. As editors, we hope that no reader will leave this particular collection thinking, "So what?" instead, we hope that this edition will operate as a standard for further study and practice and a critical evaluation of the area.
Eades et al., 2007	The aim is to consolidate existing information and research, and to make tentative assessments of the programmes in place to combat knife usage.	Qualitative method	Knife Crime A review of evidence and policy	Young People/UK	The estimate for the total number of knife-related violent incidents over the decade is somewhat lower for 2006–2007 compared to 1997. Specifically, the estimate was 108,000 in 1997 and 148,000 in 2006–2007. Despite this, the number of knife events appears to be increased over time. According to lower estimate for 2003-2004, the number of knife-related events has never fallen below 104,000.
Golding and McClory, 2008	To focus on the lesson that policymakers can learn from abroad on how to tackle gun and knife crime effectively.	Quantitative method	Getting to the Point	Young People/UK	The onset of violent crime and the duration of the strategies in each of these four cities differ. While, their tactics for violent crime varied, some similarities exist. It is challenging to compare their rates of violent crime as a result. Nonetheless, we can fairly compare the circumstances in each city over time.

Pitts, 2020	To focus on the relationship between crime and gang involvement among a small minority of Black young people in London.	Qualitative methods	Black Young People and Gang Involvement in London	Young People/UK	The overrepresentation of Black African-Caribbean children and young people in serious violence in London is still debatable, despite a substantial body of research regarding the ethnicity of both the offenders and victims of serious violence. On one hand, some academics, and organisations, such as Amnesty International, argue that the role of Black youth in crime has been dramatically exaggerated due to the government, media, and police's intense surveillance of this demographic and the moral panic they created about a fictitious "gang problem."
Silvestri, et al., 2009	To examine what evidence exists about the effectiveness of interventions aimed at tackling young people's involvement in 'gun' and 'knife crime'.	Qualitative method	Young People, Knives and Guns	Young People/UK	The evaluation, which was an SMS level 4 study, revealed that young people who took part in "Caught in the Crossfire" had a 60% lower chance of an unfavourable outcome than those in the comparison group (such as being placed on probation, getting re-arrested, or breaking probation rules) (Becker et al 2004).
Skarlatidou, et al., 2021	To understand young people's experiences and perceptions of knife crime, compare these to the understanding of police experts to explore the perceptions shaping trust in the police and policing, and ultimately identify effective strategies to re-establish trust between young people and the police.	Quantitative method	Understanding Knife Crime and Trust in Police with Young People in East London	Young People/UK	Over two months, from 2020-01-15 to 2020-03-10, volunteers utilised the CinCity App to record their personal experiences and compile their peers' experiences at the two East London Colleges. On March 3, 2020, and March 10, 2020, there were two workshops where volunteers participated in data drives by visiting college students to inquire about their experiences with knife incidents. If we consider only the number of reports that were either "Fairly worried" or "Very worried," Hackney does not feature as a location for many worrying incidents. Instead, it is the surrounding boroughs, Waltham Forest (22), Haringey (11), Camden (7), Islington (7), and Westminster (6), where most "worry" incidents were reported (Figure 2). Thus, while local areas may influence concerns, the specific instances of worry about knife crime are spread across various locations where young people are likely to encounter issues that cause them concern.

Traynor, 2016	To explore knife-carrying from multiple perspectives, not just those who carry knives.	Mixed methods	Closing the 'Security gap' Young People, 'StreetLife' and Knife Crime	Young People, Male and Female, Mix Ethnicity	When looking at data on knife crime, it is evident that a large portion of the available data is either inconsistent, poorly reported, or outdated. Thus, gathering fresh information on knife crime is essential. However, more efficient use can also be made of already-existing data sources and to enhance data presentation and analysis systems. The study has revealed specific significant themes that might benefit from future research, for example, relating to young people's attempts to develop security and resilience, 276 and the operation of a 'civic code'.
Vinnakota et al., 2022	To evaluate potential knife crime in the UK from 2011 to 2021 and analyse the causes and risk factors associated with the crimes.	Qualitative method.	Exploring UK Knife crime and its associated factors: A content analysis of online newspapers	Young people/UK	Between January 2011 and December 2021, 692 reports were discovered. Three-quarters of the knife crime cases reported by the six online news portals that were screened came from the metro, with the Guardian coming in second (26.2%), Evening Standard (15.6%), Daily Mirror (15.5%), and Sun (8.8%). Six hundred eighty-two cases were recorded, with a 61.8 % southern and a 14.9% northern distribution. These 692 reports included victims who numbered 911 in all. In approximately 81.8 % of cases, just one victim is mentioned, but 18.2% of reports indicate two to eight victims.
William, 2023	To retrace the interactions and communication that gradually assigned these associated meanings through the 2000s, arguing that the construction of knife crime youths has performed a critical hegemonic function by both facilitating cohesive social outage and justifying the extension of police powers in post-industrial Britain.	Qualitative method	Policing the Crisis in the 21st Century; The Making of "Knife Crime Younths" in Britain	Young people/UK	Investigating this further, media studies have shown that, while it is still a prominent news value, violence is no longer as intense as it once was. Before the term "knife crime" was coined, many non-fatal stabbings, knife carrying, knife threats, and knife homicides were not considered newsworthy.

Haylock, 2019	To identify and synthesise evidence from a broad range of literature to identify risk or protective factors associated with weapon carrying, weapon usage, homicides, gang involvement, or victimisation of weapon-related crime, for young people (age 10 – 24 years) within the UK.	Mix Method	Risk factors associated with knife crime in the United Kingdom among young people aged 10 to 24 years.	Young People / UK	The results contradict the popular perception presented in the media by showing no correlation between gender or ethnicity and juvenile violence. Adverse childhood experiences and poor mental health are positively connected with youth and gang violence in multiple study publications. It was proposed that there was a common link between juvenile violence and social and community risk factors, such as economic disparity and prejudice. Since this is a rapidly expanding field of study, only a small number of studies were included in the review, which may have limited the number of risk variables that could be found. It was impossible to conduct a meta-analysis due to the heterogeneity of the studies.

William (2020) stated that knife crime has historically been associated with concerns about public space management. However, the current spike in stop-and-search activities in these locations blatantly demonstrates who is considered welcome and who is not, delineating between a citizen and an "Other."

Haylock's (2019) study shows that adverse childhood experiences and poor mental health are positively connected with gun and knife violence. Several articles identified high rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among gang members.

Evaluation of the Findings

The review highlights the significant influence of socioeconomic disparities on the prevalence of gun and knife violence among young people in the United Kingdom. For example, areas characterised by high levels of poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to educational and employment opportunities were found to have higher rates of violence. Additionally, the review underscores how limited resources in disadvantaged communities contribute to feelings of hopelessness and marginalisation, which can manifest in violent behaviours. In a study conducted by Vinnakota, et al. (2022), Knife and gun crime are associated with individual risk variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, financial hardship, and socioeconomic status. These characteristics are also linked to past victimization, exposure to violence, mental illness, drug addiction, low academic success, and exclusion from mainstream schooling. Kinsella (2011) conducted a study identifying three factors prevalent in all communities: financial gain, poverty, and lack of opportunities Gun and knife crime have a significant and frequent influence on an individual's psychological and social functioning. It also significantly raises the global burden of premature mortality, injury, and disability (WHO, 2020).

Across the 11 articles, various dimensions of gang involvement were explored, including recruitment tactics, gang membership duration, and the impact of gang affiliation on mental health. Findings suggest that gang involvement is associated with increased mental health risks, such as trauma exposure and psychological distress. Through the Integrated Socioeconomic Support (ISS) program, the government and community organization should prioritize initiatives to address socio-economic disparities. This approach will provide access to education, job opportunities, affordable housing, and social welfare programs targeted at disadvantaged youth.

There is a critical need for targeted interventions to address gang involvement among young people in the United Kingdom. Implementing community-based programs, such as Gang Intervention and Prevention Programs (GIPP), which offer alternatives to gang affiliation, including mentorship, vocational training, and recreational activities, can help divert at-risk youth away from violence. Enhanced Mental Health Services (EMHS) by improved access to mental health services and early intervention programs, is essential. Investing in mental health resources within schools, communities, and healthcare systems can provide support for young people struggling with mental health challenges, reducing the likelihood of resorting to violence.

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Table 6. Common themes and Codes

Socio-economic Disparities	Gang Involvement	Mental Health
• Poverty	• Firearms	• Inadequate Mental Health
• Deprive Community	• Peer Pressure	• Lack of Opportunities
• Lack of Education	• Personal Safety	• Drug-related Activities
• Inadequate Law Enforcement	• Easy Accessibility to weapon	• Substance Abuse
• Employment Opportunities	• Easy Access to Weapons	• Untreated Psychiatric Disorders
• Social Class Inequality	• Lax Gun Laws	• History of Violence
• Income Inequality	• Illegal Arms Trade	• Trauma
• Occupation	• Political Instability	• Depression
• Wealth	• Weak regulations	• Anxiety
• Intervention	• Shape Blade instrument	• Psychological distress

Conclusion

This review underscores the multifaceted nature of youth violence in the UK, highlighting the influences of socio-economic disparities, gang involvement, and mental health issues. Effective strategies should integrate socio-economic support, preventive measures against gang involvement, and accessible mental health services to address this pressing public health issue.

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