The Demonisation of Delinquency: Contesting Media Reporting and Political Rhetoric on Youth Crime in the United Kingdom and Addressing Academia's Social Responsibility to Engage

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Abstract

Historically, youth crime has been depicted as an exponential social problem increasing in severity and occurrences. The extent of the United Kingdom (UK) political and media focus on youth crime within contemporary society demonstrates this phenomenon continues unabated. Sensationalist media headlines from right-wing mainstream media and harsh policing policies by the conservative government continued to fuel these debates aimed at tackling the supposed increasing surge of youth crimes in the UK. This paper considers whether the contemporary media and political focus on youth crime in England and Wales from 2008 to 2018 is justified. It does so by considering the intensity of media and political rhetoric in reporting, side-by-side to statistical evidence on the extent of youth crime provided by the UK Ministry of Justice and Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (2019). Theoretical academic concepts of recognition theory (Honneth, 1995), labelling (Becker, 1973) and differential association (Sutherland, 1947) are explored with a view of advancing understanding on the disparities between, media and political perceptions of youth crime. The article concludes that political and media representations of youth crime are unwarranted, unbalanced, and unjustified. Critical analysis of the repercussions of such media framing and political strategising are discussed and recommendations on academic engagement geared towards providing a realistic view of youth crime and enhancing public perception of youth contributions to society are provided.

Keywords: Media; Delinquency; Youth Crime; Political Rhetoric; Stereotypes; Misrepresentation; Academic Engagement; Social Responsibility.

1. Introduction

The misrepresentation of youth crime in media and politics segregates and alienates youths from society (Neary et al., 2013) and has relevant repercussions for youth self-image and self-esteem through negative stereotyping. People rely on respect and esteem to affirm their value in society (Honneth, 1995). This need for mutual recognition must be accompanied by equality and rights as a member of society. However, the lack of political power denied to youths occurs in conjunction with media and political manifestations of negativity, creating stigmatisation preventing youth recognition and opportunity for reciprocal respect within society (Henderson, 2014). Fraser and Honneth (2003) extrapolate upon this theory to argue that recognition also requires a redistribution of societal...
resources to those most disadvantaged, as admittedly, youth crime has been predominantly associated with those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with an over-representation of black and ethnic minority groups (Gunter, 2016). Oosterhoff et al., (2018) argue that youths feel disconnected from the implicit social contract, specifically, the understanding that we obey laws in exchange for citizenship and all the protections citizenship offers. Furthermore, isolation from society can create a gulf between youth and law-abiding influences of adults, which may result in youths spending more time with peers and developing what Sutherland (1947) coins as “differential associations”. That is, as youths socialise together, they enjoy relaxed patterns and rules which they absorb to influence behaviour.

Derogatory terms associated with youth crime in media and politics such as ‘feral’ or ‘wild’ alongside the criminalisation label applied to youths have a self-perpetuating element that is internalised and reinforced as an identity, as suggested by Becker’s (1973) labelling theory. Within this theoretical framework, it is suggested that if a person believes they are wild, then they will have a propensity to display that behaviour. However, not all youth commit crime, including those from socioeconomic disadvantaged backgrounds. To analyse and contrast this matter further this article will consider youth crime in the United Kingdom (UK), specifically in England and Wales from 2008 to 2018 together with the various discourses surrounding youth crime from academia, media and politicians.

Within this paper youth crime is defined as illegal behaviour (i.e.an action which breaks the law and is considered a crime) committed by those aged between 10 and 17 years (UK Government, 2020a). The age range is defined per the UK legal framework whereby crimes committed by children below the age of 10 years cannot be prosecuted and those committed by those over the age of 17 years are considered as adult offences. For clarification, youth crime and antisocial behaviour are distinct terms, with the former already defined above and the latter being defined by Millie (2008) as behaviour which is considered just under the level of criminality.

Although the definition provided above for youth crime may seem simple to understand, it is relevant to emphasise some of the complexities involved in defining youth crime as a concept. Firstly, both youth and crime are socially constructed concepts and therefore, require interpretation within a specific sociocultural context with the awareness that social meanings vary across time and space. Secondly, the gaze of the law in different sociocultural contexts can be redirected within the modification or creation of criminal legislation pinpointed at specific social groups (Bateman, 2015; Whyte, 2008). Thirdly, the multitude of overlapping theories on criminality, juvenile delinquency and antisocial behaviour can make the definition of youth crime very complex (Hartinger-Saunders, 2008), due to the amount of different and at times contradictory perspectives.

2. Extent and Nature of Youth Crime

Statistical trends in youth crime reflect similar declines evident in most crime trends, with reported decreases in youth crime of 79 percent between 2007 and 2015 (Taylor, 2016). The number of youths receiving a caution or conviction in England and Wales decreased from 217,185 in 2007/2008 to 31,383 in 2017/2018 (UK Ministry of Justice [MOJ] and Youth Justice Board [YJB] for England and Wales, 2019). This same dataset confirmed that robbery accounted for 3% and burglary 4% of total youth crime in England and Wales from April 2017 to March 2018 (MOJ & YJB 2019, p. 23). The most common youth crimes within the dataset include theft at 20%, violence at 19% and criminal damage at 14%. The crimes noted represent only some of those listed within the dataset. While some crime may have remained undetected, Taylor (2016) notes most youth crime is carried out in public and is easily detected due to the disorganised and unsophisticated nature of the crime being committed. It is reassuring to note that 62% of youths who commit an offence do not re-offend (ibid.).

Academic literature (e.g., Laub & Sampson, 2003; Petras, Nieuwbeerta & Piquero, 2010) reports that youth crime tends to increase during mid-to-late teenage years, decrease with maturation, and that many youths age out of crime as they reach key adult milestones, such as marriage and employment. This decline in crime has been shown to correlate with greater social responsibility and maturation, progressively leading to increased levels of self-control and empathy (Petras et al., 2010). Altogether, these views echo the notion that transition from adolescence to adulthood represents a developmental period where youth engagement with crime constitutes experimentation of self-discovery through low-level offences which leads to a change of identity as an independent adult (for further discussion see Bateman, 2015; Echazu and Nocetti, 2019).

Yet, despite academic theory empirically suggesting youth crime is a transitional element associated with ageing into adulthood, there appears to be a targeted criminalisation of youth within the legislation, media and political discourses, conveying an exacerbated amplification of youth crime. Firstly and briefly, in what accounts for legislation, the targeted criminalisation of youth within UK-based legislation is evident in the determination of the criminal age of responsibility at 10-years-old in the UK (UK Government, 2020a), despite United Nations (UN) guidelines recommending 12-years-old as a minimum age limit for criminal responsibility (United Nations, 1997). Such determination in UK legislation results in a contradiction whereby children aged 10 years are deemed as having the maturity to abstain from criminal behaviour, yet youths under the age of 18 years are denied voting politically due to immaturity (UK Government, 2020b).
Secondly, an amplification of youth crime within media can be evidenced in the annual volume of articles within UK major newspapers reporting on youth crime in the last decade when consulting the Nexis database. Despite decreasing numbers in the rates of youth crime in England and Wales (217,185 in 2007/2008, to 31,383 in 2017/2018) according to the MOJ & YJB (2019), the number of UK newspapers reporting on youth crime, remained somewhat static. In 2008 youth crime was reported 1148 times, and despite some peaks and dips between years, the number of reports on youth crime for the year 2018 remained relatively unchanged (i.e.1174), when compared to 2008 (Nexis Database, search used the terms ‘youth’ and ‘crime’ in the headlines and lead paragraphs of all UK major newspapers) (see Figure 1). It must be acknowledged that a percentage of this reporting may represent youth victimisation rather than the perpetration of youth crime. When considering this data against decreasing rates of cautions and convictions received by youths in England and Wales in the same period, it becomes apparent despite annual decreases in recorded crime statistics, the extent of media representations, unfortunately, fails to follow a similar pattern.

![Figure 1](image.png) Annual number of UK newspaper articles reporting on youth crime (Nexis Database). (The search focused on the terms ‘youth’ and ‘crime’ appearing in the headlines and lead paragraphs of all UK major newspapers).

While the above dataset obtained in databases such as Nexis cannot offer a comparable analysis due to methodological variances, it can be argued high levels of media reporting on youth crime contributes to public perceptions that youth crime remains problematic and unchanged. Indeed, more rigorous academic studies, such as Dorfman and Schiraldi’s (2001) meta-analysis and Ruigrok et al. (2017) media and youth delinquency study found, despite falling youth crime rates, media continues to over-report, exaggerate, and fail to provide a context within its reporting. It could be argued that the media’s propensity to over-report and their failure to provide a true reflection of youth crime indicate that their focus is unbalanced, unrepresentative and unjustified. This may result in a perpetuation of the myths and unrepresentative unjust stereotypes surrounding marginalised groups.

On the one hand, there seems to be a disproportionate response between overreporting and the real incidence of youth crime. On the other hand, the type of content reported in many instances is not congruent with the real numbers of offences. This is demonstrated for example by the recent media reporting of knife crime suggesting that the UK is facing an epidemic where alarmist headlines were used by The Mail Online: “Youth knife crime now at its highest level since 2009” (Drury, 15th December 2017); “London is being gripped by a knife crime epidemic” (The Sun, 2nd April 2018); “The rise in youth knife crime should be treated as an emergency” (The Independent, 24th June 2018). When comparing the statistics reported by the MOJ and YJB (2019) on knife and offensive weapons offences committed by children leading to caution or conviction in England and Wales from March 2009 to 2018 it is possible to observe that in 2008/09 there were 6446 knife and offensive weapons crimes. This number has been gradually reduced to 2733 in 2012/13; and a slight gradual increase to 4492 in 2017/18, which is still nevertheless lower than in 2008/09. On reflection, it becomes apparent that although youth knife crime has been on the increase since 2012/2013, it is misleading to state that knife crime was at its highest level since 2009 when the number of offences shows a decline. Although it can be argued that there are multifarious sources of crime statistics resulting in various data sources, the failure of some newspapers to provide the higher statistics of 6446 relating to 2008/2009 can be viewed as an attempt to deliberately misrepresent crime rates in order to sensationalise and shock readers (Gray, 2007).

Best (2012) points out that the public considers official statistics as a reliable source of information. However, media manipulation and distortion of statistics, accompanied by sensationalist headlines and political condemnation, provide a compelling and convincing argument. Additionally, the repetition of content across various media outlets may further compound perceptions of knife crime as an epidemic. The interactive format of online newspapers may facilitate consumer commentary below articles to demonstrate public outrage. This is evident in The Mail Online commentary section below its article on knife crime (Drury, 15th December 2017). One reader comments, “Birch anyone caught in possession”, whilst another comments “tougher sentencing” (Drury, 15th December 2017); within these comments, it becomes apparent how media reporting and a lack of transparency can manifest hatred and fear towards youths. This demonstrates that inaccurate media reporting extends beyond being unjustifiable and requires accountability (Petley, 2012).

Lastly, statistics within media supported with quotes from politicians have also greatly contributed to create a negative public perception of youth and portray a larger problem than that happening in reality. This is illustrated for example in The Times (Sylvester & Thomson, 25th June 2018) with the words “... stabbing epidemic”, where Labour MP David Lammy reportedly stated, “The worst I’ve seen it in my 20 years in politics”. Another example includes The Guardian (Halliday, 15th June, 2018) where it was stated “... unprecedented number of killings”, and it proceeds to quote constituency representative Louise Haigh “... serious violence... enormous
increase, believed to be youths.” Schissel (1997) argues youths have become political scapegoats within a commercialised media with an apparent intent of stereotyping youths as negatively as possible. This occurs in an unfair context where youth perspectives are missing from media accounts and where misrepresentation is exacerbated through the lack of representation of their voices (Henderson, 2014).

Although the inclusion of the youth perspective in media is fraught with legal obligations of obtaining parental consent, political and media negative portrayals of youth contribute to a disconnection between youth and politics that results in youths developing animosity towards politics and neglecting their opportunity to vote once eligible (Bastedo, 2015). While the imagery of hooded youths presented within media, portray sinister and threatening strangers, the wearing of hoods provides an element of safety for youths who also fear victimisation through crime (Henderson, 2014). Media usage of hooded youths provides the functionality of legally required anonymity (Henderson, 2014). Faucher (2009) notes, the terminology of media to describe youth crime is alarmist, evocative and creates a narrative of fear and risk, with which youths are more susceptible to engage. It can be said that such media discourses may be symptomatic of a political agenda intent on securing electoral votes or garnering support for policy directives (Schissel, 1997) through instilment of fear. Political rhetoric exaggerating youth crime may create an urgent problem for the electorate with political campaigns promising solutions (Ruigrok et al., 2017).

However, it could be argued that the politicisation of youth crime incurs a responsibility to ensure efficient legislation and politicians as representatives of the electorate need to react to emerging crimes and concerns. Resulting changes in newly elected governments may advocate for retributive policies (i.e., that focus on punishment of offenders) or rehabilitative (i.e., that look to underlying causes of crime to prevent further offending) (Beale, 2006). This was evident within changing governments in the last decade. The retreat from New Labour’s zero-tolerance to all young offenders has changed to a diversionary focus by the new coalition government of 2008 towards first-time offenders (Bateman, 2017). Decreasing crime rates suggest that diversionary mechanisms may successfully deter youths away from crime, indicating rehabilitation may be more appropriate than retributive policies (Taylor, 2016). Yet, media narratives often represent contemporary youth justice as soft or ineffective (Goldson & Muncie, 2015; Jacobson & Kirby, 2012).

Media framing of youth crime may be attributed to a multiplicity of interlocking variables, such as the production of commercialised content intended at delivering crime as entertainment, with a view of increasing newspapers’ sales (Surette, 2010). This may determine the selection of articles deemed newsworthy, leading to an over-representation of youth crime. However, Moore (2014) points out that media can reflect dominant elitist views, delivering hegemonic content determined by those with structured access to determine media content, such as owners of media outlets and politicians. This can lead to structured content underpinned by ideological narratives that reinforce stereotypical beliefs as reality, influencing public perceptions (Jewkes, 2011). Media usage of politicians and statistics as reliable sources provide authenticity to media accounts, yet they often neglect to provide wider context or background regarding influential social structures including class, gender, poverty, unemployment, or education (Surette, 2010). This is exemplified by the often unreported white-collar crimes associated with the wealthier in society (Michel, Cochran & Heide., 2016) and with youth white-collar crime barely recognised (Schoepfer, Baglivio, M., & Schwartz, 2017). This correlates with evidence collected by social scientists focusing on the ongoing prejudice and discrimination towards males from lower socio-economic groups particularly males from black and ethnic minority backgrounds (Bowling, Phillips & Shah, 2003) and constitutes further evidence of the over-policing of these groups. Altogether, this reveals that media is a powerful medium prone to manipulation by those in power, politicians and influenced by consumers’ subjective determinations regarding media consumption (Jewkes, 2011). Over-representation of youth crime within media fails to reflect the reality and continuous negativity contributes to a socially constructed ideology of a progressively degenerative youth.

3. Towards Enhancing Public Perceptions on The Youth: Recommendations for Academic Engagement

Academics have a role in ensuring that the public is well informed, provided with accurate information and in promoting a more just and fair inclusive society. Their role can be said to be dual, both as academics and as members of society (parents of youth, researchers, etc.). Proactively, apart from focusing on researching matters relevant to the youth and society, they should as well conceptualise their role as researchers more widely, to encompass actions that they can undertake to help promoting accurate views on youth and in promoting greater awareness of the positive contributions that youth bring to society. This could potentially result in greater youth engagement in the community, lowering crime and enhancing public perceptions. Actions that academics can undertake to enhance public perceptions of the youth include:

- The creation of independent boards to check out accuracy of media publishing and politicians’ statements.
- To educate journalist and politicians on the consequences of augmentation of youth crime, through higher education (HE) courses provided in journalism, politics, and other degree level courses and beyond.
- Optimisation of the inclusive mindset in HE institutions, to create a well-informed public.
- To conduct more research on the youth phenomena with active engagement campaigns of outreach, aimed at promoting healthy youth lifestyles and promoting positive reinforcement of youth from all backgrounds to society.
To continue to tackling racism and poverty through contributions to that inform public health policies and combating the unfair criminalisation of youth.

Creation of common ground platforms and shared spaces where differences are welcomed, where people with various roles in society interact and work together (e.g., representatives of all communities in visible community leadership roles, representatives of the youth, academics, police, etc.,) advocating for youths to prevent them from offending and promote stabilisation of their role as citizens.

In summary, academic engagement is crucial for tackling youth crime's misrepresentation within media and political discourses. Ongoing research can provide realistic accounts of youth crime's propensity and nature to offer accurate and contextualised data. Research can advance public policies to recognise the intersection of poverty and racism that often underlies youth crime. Academics can disseminate the consequences of youths' negative media and political rhetoric upon public perceptions within higher education courses directed towards political and journalism studies. Creating a more inclusive society that welcomes youth engagement and their political involvement within public life can foster a secure environment and promote respect and recognition. Communities can achieve this through advocacy and outreach activities that encourage publics to value the positive contributions youths bring to society and discourage them from offending.

Conclusion

This article has shown that contemporary media and political representations of youth crime in England and Wales were highly unbalanced, unsubstantiated, and unjustified particularly between 2008 to 2018 when contrasted with figures on youth crime reported by the UK MOJ & YJB (2019) showing a decline. Various theories of media construction and political strategising were briefly discussed to provide a contextualised view on why media and political portrayals are unbalanced. Such contextualisation has put forth the view that commercialised media may supply consumer demand for youth crime as entertainment and as a way in which political reforms are perceived as needed, due to social expectations on a political focus and denouncement of youth crime. Academic literature portrays youth crime as mostly minor, temporary, and decreasing in prevalence with maturation. However, academic literature has so far had very limited impact in overturning dominant discourses by media and those in political power. While it is imperative that media starts to incorporate youth perspectives of crime more actively and provide contextualisation within stories if they are to remain credible. It is also paramount that academia starts to more actively taking the crucial and essential role it should play in ensuring that the voice of the youth is heard and that youth from all backgrounds are welcomed, valued, respected, and connected with the rest of society. Therefore, some suggestions for academic interventions at this level were included.

References


Conflicts of Interest: The author declares that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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