

Sharp Manias: Knife Crime in London

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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London. A bleak London assailed by daily news about Brexit negotiation, prospects of food shortages and higher prices in the event of a no-deal with the European Union, provides the perfect apocalyptic backdrop for headlines. The city is ailing; the residents are panicked; and the authorities are gloomy.

Such environments are ideal for talk about emergencies. One doing much filling on London airtime is that of knife crime. Not that knife crime in of itself is unusual: for years, stabbing implements have made their way into broader law and order issues in the city's policing scene, a good number featuring errant youth. These have encouraged a wide array of myths masquerading as solid fact: London, the city of the "no-go" area; Londonistan, city of perpetual, spiralling crime.

In 2008, Britain's public institutions – political and public – became darkly enraptured with knife crime afflicting inner city areas, with a heavy focus on London. Stabbings were reported in lurid fashion; threats to urban safety were emphasised. As Peter Squires noted in a fairly withering [examination](#) of the phenomenon in *British Politics*,

"The knife crime 'epidemic', as it came to be called, coincided with a series of youth justice policy measures being rolled out by the government, and significantly influenced them."

Kevin Marsh of the BBC, [writing](#) at the same time, wondered how best a news organisation might report such crime figures.

"How much does tone and prominence distort the real picture? Is some coverage self-fulfilling prophecy? Does it spread fear and anxiety way beyond the rational?"

Marsh would admit that being a victim of a knife crime was "very, very unlikely"; and that young men, in the main, did not carry knives; "most young people are not components of what some politicians are calling the 'broken society'."

For all that, Marsh found himself admitting that "it's part of the purpose of our media to draw things to our attention, however crudely." The crude element remains the sticking point, resisting nuance, despite the hope that reporters might help "us citizens really think hard about possible solutions".

Knife crime has become the bread and butter of lazy reportage, one hitched to the coattails of the broken society argument. Describing a broken fence is easier fare than describing a

mended one; solutions remain dull, academic matters. The emergency narrative tends to emerge ahead each time; matters of social causes and complexity receive short shrift. In 2017, Gary Younge turned his noise up at the panic merchants, and [deemed](#) teenage knife crime “a tabloid obsession, blamed on feral youth running riot in our cities.” Such fears speaks to an obsession with decay and decline; youth go wrong if society does not go right.

In 2018, knife crime became a meme of terror. The *Express* shouted with “London BLOODBATH” in a June headline, and subsequently began using it as a running title for any knife-related crime. Political parties also capitalised on the atmosphere. In the east London borough of Havering, a [local Conservative leaflet](#), buttering up electors ahead of the March local elections, promised mayhem. “Mayor Khan and Corbyn’s men are desperate to grab power in our Town Hall, so get ready for... A London crimewave with even less police.” In Lewisham East, UKIP candidate David Kurten added his bit in a by-election with a leaflet featuring the words “STOP THE KARNAGE” placed across a picture of a knife.

The dreary world of knife crime figures is erratic. Between 2008 and 2014, offences involving knives or sharp instruments fell from 36,000 recorded offences to 25,000. Then came an increase in 2015/6 – a nudge to 28,900. The figures on death occasioned by knife crime are even more inscrutable, prompting [Spiked Online](#) to conclude that there was “no huge upsurge in knife violence because society overall is becoming less violent, and crime in general is falling.” This was not to say that no concern should be felt: the issue is particular in London, and its effects disproportionate on young working-class black men. A possible explanation? Not just indigence or exclusion, but nihilism and plain susceptibility.

Barely two months into this year, and the rounds of panic are in full swing. As always, it’s the deceptive field of statistics dragged out to give a picture of clear, bolt-the-doors-and-hide doom. It began with a spate of violent actions on New Year’s Eve, which saw four young men stabbed to death in London, prompting London Mayor Sadiq Khan to berate the government for its squeeze on youth services, policing and education.

Police statistics, [pounced](#) upon by the *Evening Standard* just in time for the evening commute on Monday, suggest that 41 percent across London’s boroughs involve those between the green years of 15 to 19. Eight percent range from the even greener 10 to 14.

The Standard’s Martin Bentham sliced and spliced the announcement from the police with maximum, terrifying effect, all assisted by a picture perfect grim background of law enforcement officials at a crime scene on Caledonia road.

“The new figures came as a Scotland Yard chief warned that attacks in the capital were also becoming ‘more ferocious’ as offenders were ‘more and more young’ tried to kill or injure by ‘getting up close and stabbing someone several times’.

Descriptions on police tactics follow, resembling those of urban battle plans keen on frustrating potential attacks. Chief Superintendent Ade Adelekan, head of the Met’s Violent Crime Task Force is quoted as claiming that “some progress” is being made. There was also a more frequent use of search and “other tactics” including “the deployment of ‘embedded’ plain clothes officers to work with uniformed counterparts” in acts of prevention.

As Younge rightly notes, such realities are “more complex – and we cannot save lives if we

do not understand it.” But understanding is a term absent in times of panic. These are times rich for exploitation. With Brexit having become the great psychodrama, all else is ripe for distraction and manipulation.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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Kampmark](#)

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