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Dr Emma Rourke
The BMJ,
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23rd July, 2019

Dear Dr. Rourke and colleagues,

We are resubmitting the manuscript (BMJ-2019-050778) entitled “Media coverage of the violence epidemic in England and Wales: are we adding fuel to the fire?” to the BMJ for consideration as an *Analysis* article. We are extremely grateful to the three reviewers (Professors Goodall, Thompson and Lugo-Ocando) and to the editorial team for the constructive and thoughtful feedback on the first submission of this manuscript, and for giving us the chance to revise this work for resubmission.

We have endeavoured to address each concern raised by the editorial team and the reviewers and we have explained all subsequent changes to the manuscript in the attached ‘response to reviewers’ file. We think the changes motivated by your comments have vastly improved the paper.

We very much hope that this manuscript can contribute to a more rigorous public discussion of recent changes in patterns of violence in England and Wales. We look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David K. Humphreys'.

Dr. David K. Humphreys
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BMJ-2019-050778 entitled "Media coverage of the "violence epidemic" in England and Wales: are we adding fuel to the fire?": Response to Reviewers Comments

Editors comments

1) We thought that the link between reporting of knife crime and increasing numbers of people carrying weapons was insufficiently substantiated. This needs to be better supported or toned down.

Author Response

We agree that this connection was insufficiently substantiated, we have toned down the language describing this relationship (in line with the recommendations of other reviewers) and have framed this relationship more cautiously. In addition, we have also provided more evidence to substantiate some of the links we are making between media coverage and adverse effects on violence. We describe these in response to the reviewer comments below.

2) Given the recent examples of multiple stabbings in the London area over a 24 hour period, we wondered whether it might be worth reflecting on these so as not to give the impression that recent examples have been overlooked

Author Response

We agree that it is important not to overlook or undermine the justifiable concerns of members of the public living in those areas where concerning changes in violence are taking place. As a consequence, we have made explicit reference to the situation in London, both in the body of the paper (see p.7 in reference to weapon imagery) and also in the conclusion (p.8, lines 16-19)¹ where we make this point more explicitly.

3) Editors wondered if there had been any involvement of citizen / grass roots groups in trying to approach this issue?

Author Response

While citizens and grass roots groups were not formally involved in writing this manuscript, motivation for this paper emerged from informal conversations with such groups. For example, DKH and MDE have both consulted with analysts from the Police and the Home Office on this subject in recent months. At the same time, JS has been directly involved in the Prime Minister's Summit on serious violence held in London in April 2019, in which grassroot and community organisations were represented.

Reviewer Comments

Reviewer 1:

This is a really interesting paper which recounts many of the concerns shared by many of those who work in violence prevention about the exaggeration of the magnitude of violent crime and injury and the reliability of data particularly police recorded crime and its ability to give a clear picture of what is actually going on. The use and analysis of other data sources to give a more balanced view is to be welcomed and does paint a different picture. As such I think it is very deserving of publication. It addresses a nationwide (England and Wales) issue and is very

¹ Line numbers are provided in the tracked change document

timely. The issue of media representation of violence is also important but I think the paper should have included some comment on the imagery included in media reports -often including photographs of large knives and the potential that this may have to lead to fear of violence and possible increase in knife carrying among at risk groups. Similarly this is carried through into social media but not just media outlets but also by the police on their twitter accounts where large knives are often shown. I think if a short comment on that could be added it would be helpful.

Author Response

We appreciate Professor Goodall's encouraging comments. We agree that the use of media imagery of knives and other weapons is an important factor which is relevant to our discussion on *imitation*. We've added reference to this on page p.7. (lines 24-30).

Reviewer 2

I really enjoyed this, it is excellent. I think it makes an important distinction between the worrying rise in urban knife crime and oft conflated concerns about violent crime more generally. I am encouraged to see this type of comment - especially alongside the recent Critical Public Health issue on media analysis - highlighting debates around the role and power of media in public health issues.

I would recommend that the paper be accepted without revisions.

Author Response

We are extremely grateful to Dr. Thompson for these positive comments.

Reviewer 3

Comments on the piece: Media coverage of the "violence epidemic" in England and Wales: are we adding fuel to the fire?

Overall, this is a good and very relevant piece and I recommend publication after some revisions. The topic is timely and the authors have put forward a strong and comprehensive argument. However, in order to strength and contextualize this argument, I suggest considering the following suggestions:

1) *The overall discussion is under-theorized. By this I mean, the authors should take into consideration a series of studies on this topic carried out in the areas of sociology, media and cultural studies. A lot of what has been researched and written confirm and underpin what these authors are arguing so it is important to include them in the argument. Among these references, I suggest incorporating some works such as:*

- *Chibnall, S. (2013 [1977]). Law-and-order news: An analysis of crime reporting in the British press. London: Routledge.*
- *Chiricos, T., Eschholz, S., & Gertz, M. (1997). Crime, news and fear of crime: Toward an identification of audience effects. Social Problems, 44(3), 342-357.*
- *Gordon, M. T., Heath, L., Protess, D., & McCombs, M. (1981). The news business, crime, and fear. Agenda Setting: Readings on Media, Public Opinion, and Policymaking; Protess, DL, McCombs, M., Eds, 71-74.*
- *Lugo-Ocando, J. (2017). Crime Statistics in the News: Journalism, Numbers and Social Deviation. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.*

- Schlesinger, P., & Tumber, H. (1994). *Reporting crime: The media politics of criminal justice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Smolej, M., & Kivivuori, J. (2006). *The relation between crime news and fear of violence*. *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, 7(2), 211-227.

Author Response

We are very grateful for Prof. Lugo-Ocando's thoughtful comments and suggestions for how we could improve the paper. We have tried to address the points he makes in this and the subsequent comments within the constraints of the word limit. We feel that this has helped to strengthen the paper. In response to point 1, we have added references to several of the studies he suggests here. Including:

Lugo-Ocando, J. (2017). *Crime Statistics in the News: Journalism, Numbers and Social Deviation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Smolej, M., & Kivivuori, J. (2006). *The relation between crime news and fear of violence*. *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, 7(2), 211-227.

Chiricos, T., Eschholz, S., & Gertz, M. (1997). *Crime, news and fear of crime: Toward an identification of audience effects*. *Social Problems*, 44(3), 342-357.

2) *The authors suggest that "misleading and inaccurate media coverage of violence trends could fuel further increases in violent injury if it causes individuals to carry weapons in response to heightened safety concerns". I would not disagree with such claim but certainly needs further substantiation and discussion in the paper as there are very important caveats to this claim. Please see:*

- *Knife crime: important new findings could help us understand why people carry weapons.* <https://www.hull.ac.uk/work-with-us/more/media-centre/news/2018/knife-crime.aspx>
- *Lugo-Ocando, J., & Faria Brandão, R. (2016). Stabbing news: Articulating crime statistics in the newsroom.* *Journalism Practice*, 10(6), 715-729.

Author Response

We have edited the manuscript removing this sentence from the abstract and toning down the reference to carrying weapons. We attempt to deal with the broader concern of substantiating this point in the main text, where we more directly discuss how harm may follow from the way the media coverage has been framed.

We have made substantial changes to the latter sections of the paper (which Prof Lugo-Ocando references here), particularly under the new heading "Are we adding fuel to the fire?", to further expand, substantiate and discuss the ways in which the disproportionate news coverage could be counterproductive. See the comments below for further details.

3) *The authors comment that: "Recent media coverage of the violence epidemic places considerable emphasis on an increase in raw numbers of police-recorded violence, often with little scrutiny of the complexities and limitations of these data". There are important reasons and rationales as to why the media covers this in this manner and the authors should try to engage with this rationale from the point of view of the sociology of journalistic practices, the professional ideologies in play and the political economy of the news media. I suggest consulting the edited volume produced by An Nguyen, which has several chapters dealing with this:*

- Nguyen, An (2017). *News, Numbers and Public Opinion in a Data-Driven World*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Author Response

We found both the suggested reference (Nguyen, 2018) and also sections from the reviewer's own book (Lugo-Ocando, 2017) very useful in describing the context (and challenges) of reporting on data releases from official bodies, particularly in the case of crime data. We've added clarification of this on page 5 (lines 4-11) and have directed readers to the two key publications that cover these issues in greater depth.

4) *In page 7, lines 3 & 4) the authors highlight their concern about the possible boomerang effect. This indeed an important concern, but requires further substantiation. There is a important body of literature that has dealt with this, including:*

- Altheide, D. L. (2017). *Creating fear: News and the construction of crisis*. Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Lowry, Dennis T., Tam Ching Josephine Nio, and Dennis W. Leitner. "Setting the public fear agenda: A longitudinal analysis of network TV crime reporting, public perceptions of crime, and FBI crime statistics." *Journal of Communication* 53.1 (2003): 61-73.

Author Response

We've now removed the reference to the "boomerang effect" from the paper. We've significantly changed the section under the heading "Are we adding fuel to the fire" in which we have discussed the possible negative effects from recent coverage through two pathways: through increased fear of victimisation and through *imitation*. We've supplemented the discussions on the relationship between media generated fear and weapon carrying, offering further discussion as well as emerging evidence of this in the context of media coverage of mass shootings (page 7 lines 11-24). For *imitation*, we've supplemented this section with the recent example of criticism of the Metropolitan Police by representatives from CitizensUK, who argued that social media imagery was fuelling an arms race for knives among London youth. In both instances, we've been careful to caution that these links are not yet clearly established in the research literature and should be subject to further research.

5) *In page 7, the authors say: "If imitation is a pertinent factor in relation to knife crime, the framing of the recent crisis as a national violence "epidemic" could have disastrous effects if weapon carrying were to increase as a result of growing fears prompted by the recent media coverage". Again, I would not dispute this. But I think at the moment it is a reductionism. Other studies point out that is instead because the news coverage happens at times of low trust towards the police and officials that people [young in particular] decide to take justice in their own hands and armed themselves. I suggest reviewing the existing literature in this area to make this point more comprehensive and critically sound.*

Author Response

The argument that individuals acquire weapons as a result of lack of trust in police competency is an interesting hypothesis and one that we have considered carefully. The main reason that we have not discussed this within the paper is the potential complexity and circularity of this relationship.

The majority of the literature (mainly from a US context) on lack of trust in the police and weapon carrying approach this from the viewpoint that individuals carry weapons due to a distrust of Police's ability to respond to an emergency in sufficient time. This, it is argued, leads to a situation in which individuals, concerned for their safety, acquire arms to use in self-protection. This has recently been termed "DIY-security citizenship", which Harvard

ethnographer Caroline Light describes as the growing trend of armed citizenry motivated by public anxieties (see Light, 2017).

The reviewer appears to be pointing to a different body of research, often located in procedural justice and legitimacy literature. Here, the suggestion would be that individuals who are cynical or see the police as having low legitimacy would be less likely to conform to rule abiding behaviours and would see weapon carrying as a means to protect themselves and to administer their own form of (legitimate) justice.

There is very little research supporting these hypotheses in response to weapon carrying. Brennan's recent analysis (2018) is one study that finds a link between lack of trust in police and weapon carrying. But this study does not examine the role of intensive media coverage, which could be a common cause of both weapon carrying (through the direct pathways we discuss) and of distrust in police (and subsequent weapon carrying) in response to extreme policing tactics that may be implemented in the response to a media fuelled crisis. We know from an extensive criminological literature that certain types of proactive policing or criminal justice tactics employed in response to crises of law and order can often have detrimental effects on trust in the police.

In sum, we think that this is an interesting hypothesis that requires further attention. However, we felt that this relationship was potentially too complicated and may overwhelm the paper if included.

6) *I think when the authors say in page 8: "The consequences of disproportional media coverage are not yet known, but recent coverage could have adverse effects, such as heightening fears of personal safety and potentially fuelling justifications for carrying weapons for self-defence".. It would better to tone down the speculative wording and suggest instead that further research is required to explore how the creation of moral panics by the news reporting of violent crime could trigger in itself an increase in violence yet because of fear or because of imitation (by the way this last claim needs further discussion). In any case, it is worth including some mention of 'moral panics' as it is phenomenon that seems at the center of your argument. To do this, I suggest engaging with:*

- Cohen, S. (2011 [1972]). *Folk devils and moral panics*. Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Killingbeck, D. (2001). *The role of television news in the construction of school violence as a "moral panic"*. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 8(3), 186-202.

Author Response

We have made changes to the final sentences (see p. 8, lines 21-26) to remove the speculative wording. After discussion between the authorship team, we felt that ending the article on a call for further research would not be an appropriate way to conclude the article—even though we agree with the sentiment. We have made further attempts throughout the article to clarify where the research literature is in its infancy, which we hope will address this particular concern.

We agree with the reviewer that this has direct relevance to the "moral panic" literature—which is well established in sociology and criminology—but we've opted against introducing this term here. We do this for two reasons: first, we think it would require considerable further explanation for the intended audience (i.e. regular readers of the BMJ); and second, we fear that the term could be misinterpreted and potentially insensitive to members of those communities in which recent increases in violence are most acute—a point we have tried to respond to in light of the editors comments.

7) *I am not suggesting to include all this additional reading in the article as I am aware of the*

constrains of space. However, there are sections which frankly are not that relevant to the discussion and it would be better to develop a more comprehensive and well-grounded literature review that acted as a theoretical explanatory framework for the piece. Again, a) I think is publishable, b) I think is relevant and important and c) I encourage the authors to consider these suggestion in order to strengthen this piece of work.

Author Response

We are extremely grateful for the input of Prof Lugo-Ocando, we have attempted to incorporate this advice where the word limit will allow; this included developing a more detailed acknowledgement of the relevant literature. We think this has strengthened the depth and structure of the paper.