



12-Jul-2019

Dear Dr. Humphreys,

# BMJ-2019-050778 entitled "Media coverage of the "violence epidemic" in England and Wales: are we adding fuel to the fire?"

Thank you for sending us this paper and giving us the chance to consider your work. We sent it out for external peer review and discussed it at the Analysis manuscript committee meeting (present: Peter Doshi, Sophie Cook, Emma Rourke).

Unfortunately we do not consider it suitable for publication in its present form. However if you are able to amend it in the light of editors' and reviewers' comments, we would be happy to consider it again.

The reviewers' comments are at the end of this letter.

The editors' comments are below:

On the whole, we enjoyed reading your paper. We agreed the topic was important and timely, and the article well written and engaging. Editors felt the reviews provided useful guidance regarding suggestions for further development of the paper, particularly the review by Jairo Lugo-Ocando. Additional notes from the editors are listed below:

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

We hope that you will be willing to revise your manuscript and submit it within 4-6 weeks. When submitting your revised manuscript please provide a point by point response to our comments and those of any reviewers. We also ask that you keep the revised manuscript within the word count of 1800-2000 words.

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I hope you will find the comments useful. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss this further.

Yours sincerely,

Emma Rourke  
ERourke@bmj.com

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Reviewer(s)' Comments to Author:

Reviewer: 1

Recommendation:

Comments:

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 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.

Additional Questions:

Please enter your name: Christine Goodall

Job Title: Senior Clinical Lecturer Honorary Consultant Oral Surgery

Institution: University of Glasgow

Reimbursement for attending a symposium?: No

A fee for speaking?: No

A fee for organising education?: No

Funds for research?: No

Funds for a member of staff?: No

Fees for consulting?: No

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Reviewer: 2

Recommendation:

Comments:

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.

Additional Questions:

Please enter your name: Claire Thompson

Job Title: Assistant Professor

Institution: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Reimbursement for attending a symposium?: No

A fee for speaking?: No

A fee for organising education?: No

Funds for research?: No

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Reviewer: 3

Recommendation:

Comments:

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., Protes, D., & McCombs, M. (1981). The news business, crime, and fear. *Agenda Setting: Readings on Media, Public Opinion, and Policymaking*; Protes, 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.

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.

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.

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., Tarn 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.

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.

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.

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.

Additional Questions:

Please enter your name: Jairo Lugo-Ocando

Job Title: Professor in Residence

Institution: Northwestern University in Qatar

Reimbursement for attending a symposium?: No

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