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## A Vicious Cycle: How Racialised Moral Panics Simultaneously Reproduce (and are Reproduced by) Repressive Policing Practices

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# A Vicious Cycle: How Racialised Moral Panics Simultaneously Reproduce (and are reproduced by) Repressive Policing Practices

**Oscar Sharples**

*Policing and moral panics exist in a mutually reinforcing, reciprocal relationship, the harmful outcomes of which are disproportionately directed towards poor communities of colour. This paper will draw on two examples of moral panics: those surrounding Islamic terrorism and Black crime, in order to illustrate the harm that this reinforcing relationship can cause. This harm manifests itself in increasingly restrictive antiterrorism laws, Prevent initiatives, racial profiling, and internal surveillance within the Muslim community; as well as the policies of Joint Enterprise, Knife Crime Prevention Orders (KCPOs), and the strengthening of the school-to-prison pipeline, which disproportionately target Black youth. With reference to Hall et al's notion of a 'law and order society', this paper will argue that these moral panics, rather than being wholly distinct, rather, bleed into one another. Whilst they target their own 'folk devils' and manifest independently through policies that target specific ethnic or religious groups, they cumulatively serve to justify increasingly repressive policing practices. It is the control of perceived racial, cultural, or religious 'others', or deviants, that these moral panics serve to justify. This network of interconnected moral panics is self-perpetuating; policing acts as a catalyst for these panics and, at the same time, is presented as the solution to them.*

Under the UK's policy of Knife Crime Prevention Orders (KCPOs), a young black boy can end up in police custody without any involvement in knife crime. The police need only 'suspect' him (for any reason) of carrying a weapon to subject him to a KCPO, which can prevent him from going to certain areas such as work and school, or interacting with certain people, including family members. If this boy breaks the terms of his KCPO, he can then be met with a custodial sentence (Cooper, 2021). This policy is just one example of the ways in which racialised moral panics, in this case surrounding the criminality of young Black boys, serve to justify increasingly repressive policing strategies. This policy is driven by anxieties surrounding Black criminality, and it works to incarcerate more Black boys, thus making the original panic seem justified. It is a self-perpetuating cycle that reproduces and entrenches harm.

Policing involves the direct influence of the police as a social institution, but can also extend to the both the functioning of the justice, prison, and education systems, and the set of discourses, ideologies, images, and stereotypes that exist around and between said institutions. As will be discussed, policing can also extend to individuals' capacity to surveil themselves and their community. Therefore, the role that policing plays in reproducing contemporary moral panics is necessarily multifaceted as it operates at many levels of social life. Through the use of two case studies of moral panics, this paper will explore how policing reinforces (and is

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reinforced by) said moral panics, which serve to justify the intensification of policing and militarisation targeted at racialised groups. Policing and moral panics therefore exist in a mutually reinforcing, reciprocal relationship, the harmful outcomes of which are disproportionately directed towards poor communities of colour. After establishing what exactly constitutes a moral panic, this paper will focus on the panics surrounding (1) Islamic terrorism and (2) Black crime to illustrate the harm that this reinforcing relationship can cause. It will be shown that the moral panic surrounding Islamic terrorism not only serves to cause Muslims harm in a general sense, but serves to justify restrictive anti-terrorism laws, racial profiling, and internal surveillance within the Muslim community itself. The same will be shown in terms of how the panic surrounding Black crime again causes general harm, but specifically has led to the policies of Joint Enterprise, Knife Crime Prevention Orders (KCPOs), and the strengthening of the school-to-prison pipeline.

### SITUATING MORAL PANICS

First it must be established whether current societal concerns surrounding Muslim terrorism and Black crime constitute the label of a ‘moral panic’. Cohen provides a definition of moral panics entailing five elements: (1) *concern* about a potential or imagined threat, (2) *hostility* towards the actors or ‘folk devils’ that embody the problem, (3) a *consensus* that the threat exists and is urgent, the extent of public concern is (4) *disproportionate* to the harm, and (5) *volatility*: the panic “erupts and dissipates suddenly and without warning” (Cohen, 2011, p. xxvi). He also describes the object of moral panics: they are new, but also old (new insidious forms of deeper evils); they are damaging in themselves, but are also warning signs of a deeper

threat; they are transparent and easy to see, but also opaque in that it takes a trained eye to see the threat in something that seems harmless (Cohen, 2011). Cohen makes it clear that to label something a moral panic does not “imply that this something does not exist or happened at all and that reaction is based on fantasy” (Cohen, 2011, p. vii), but rather that the panic surrounding that perceived threat seems to take on a nature of its own; it grows beyond and extends further than the object that triggered it. The intention of this paper is not to dismiss the potential threat of either Islamic terrorism or Black crime, but rather, as Cohen identifies, aims to comment upon the broader function that these disproportionate, racialised panics serve to perform.

The question must be asked then, do these instances of public concern amount to a moral panic? Clearly there is public concern directed at specific ‘folk devils’ (Cohen, 2011), the images of ‘the terrorist’ and ‘the gang’ are the primary locus upon which general anxieties are attached. The term ‘moral panic’, however, specifically refers to such a concern being disproportionate to the threat. As the following statistics show, the public concern around these images or folk devils is in many ways inflated or, at least, misdirected. A report by Our World in Data found that between 1970 and 2020, 97% of terror related deaths took place in the Middle East, Africa, or South Asia (Ritchie, Hassell, Mathieu, Appel, & Roser, 2022). It is notable, then, that the panic surrounding terrorism relies upon an image of the victim as a citizen of Western Europe or the United States, despite this clearly not being the typical victim of terrorism-related violence. The same study found that the number of terror related deaths in the United Kingdom dropped by 70% in the same time period, whereas it has risen by

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894,700% in Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet concerns around international terrorism are clearly not data-driven efforts to protect people in Africa and the Middle East from terrorism, but are instead focused on the West as the overwhelming victim of terror attacks by individuals from majority Muslim countries.

A comparative content analysis of elite American newspaper coverage of terrorism found that “American papers covered attacks in non-Muslim-majority societies prominently and framed them as acts of terrorism, and covered attacks in Muslim-majority societies scantily and framed them as internal conflicts” (Elmasry & el-Nawawy, 2022, p. 533). This discrepancy between the real threat of terror attacks and the discourse surrounding terror is reflected in the finding that, across media sources, attacks received an average of 357% greater coverage if the attacker was Muslim, which rose to 758% for major outlets (Ritchie, Hassell, Mathieu, Appel, & Roser, 2022). Considering the fact that an additional fatality only meant a 46% increase in coverage (Ritchie, Hassell, Mathieu, Appel, & Roser, 2022), the attackers’ potential Muslim identity could amount to between 8 and 16 additional deaths, in terms of ‘newsworthiness’, depending on the outlet. The narrative of the panic is one where Muslims are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of terror-related crime, and rarely, if at all, the victim, despite the fact that this isn’t supported by evidence. Clearly the panic surrounding terrorism has diverged, at least to some extent, from the real nature of the threat.

In terms of the panic surrounding ‘gang crime’, research commissioned by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies found that in London, Black youth made up 72% of those labelled as part of a gang, yet only 27% of serious youth violence (Williams & Clarke,

2016). The same research found that in Manchester, Black youth comprised 81% of those labelled as part of a gang, yet only 6% of serious youth violence as a whole (Williams & Clarke, 2016). The discrepancy between these two figures suggests that the label of ‘gang crime’ holds specific racialised connotations that exist outside of the nature of the crime itself. In other words, the difference between a crime being labelled as a ‘gang crime’, or as ‘serious youth violence’, this suggests, is merely the race of the young people involved. The report concludes that: “If these police ‘gang’ lists increasingly fail to map onto serious youth violence incidents in the same location, we cannot assume that their construction is an objective response to violence occurring within particular communities” (Williams & Clarke, 2016, p. 11). It is not a coincidence that public concern is focused on ‘gang crime’ (despite this not being a clear legal category) rather than youth crime as a whole: panic and fear are directed overwhelmingly towards young Black men and boys, despite the fact that they contribute only a small proportion of total youth violence. This is what situates both case studies of panic (surrounding Islamic terrorism, and Black crime) as moral panics. To label these instances as moral panics is not to undermine the legitimacy of concern. However, the ways in which these harms are inflated with particular racial narratives points to the ways in which moral panics such as this feed into (and are fed by) repressive policing strategies.

The disproportionate nature of the public concern surrounding these case studies is clear. However, Cohen identifies another element to the moral panic that is pertinent to understanding racialised moral panics. Cohen refers to the ‘folk devil’ as the target, or scapegoat, that moral panics generate

(Cohen, 2011). They are the character at the centre of the panic, that accrue various negative connotations – in these cases, connotations of a racialised threat. The moral panic surrounding Islamic terrorism is centred around the folk devil of the terrorist: a middle eastern male Muslim, who, as Bhattacharyya describes, is positioned in opposition to “freedom, life, education, women’s rights, free speech, religious freedom” (Bhattacharyya, 2008, p. 7). The harm caused by this imagery of the folk devil isn’t isolated to Middle Eastern male Muslims, but this is the essentialised form of ‘the terrorist’. Bhattacharyya describes this folk devil of the “dangerous brown man” as a “sexualised figure”. He is accused of “intrinsic homophobia and other sexual repression”, this “psychologised allegation of sexual anxiety” is used to explain his “sexual and social dysfunction” (Bhattacharyya, 2008, p. 10). Muslim bodies are perceived as “too veiled, too bearded, too covered”, the “refusal to participate in the public cultures of commodified physicality” (Bhattacharyya, 2008, p. 98) singles him out, and is used to explain his deviancy.

It's noteworthy that the two case studies of moral panics used here (Islamic terrorism and Black crime) are not wholly independent or disconnected from one another. Bhattacharyya notes how the folk devil of the Islamic terrorist is an “adaptation of earlier racist mythologies” directed towards Black men, that, when they are directed at Muslim men, enable “the inclusion of more recent racialised anxieties” (Bhattacharyya, 2008, p. 96). This draws attention to the fact that the folk devils of the Islamic terrorist and the Black gang member are, in fact, created using the same tropes, profiting off the same racialised fears. This fact is reminiscent of Hall et al’s description of a ‘law and order society’, involving a “mapping together’ of moral

panics into a general panic about social order” (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 2013, p. 219). ‘Law and order’ might be seen as the arena in which these moral panics overlap: it is often through an appeal to ‘law and order’ that intensified policing strategies and militarisation that target Black and brown communities are justified. Hall’s notion of the ‘law and order society’ also makes it possible to trace the implications of these moral panics across national borders. Although these panics may manifest in specific legal terms within the UK for example, the very same racialised moral panics, and the very same appeals to ‘law and order’ through intensified policing, proliferate in ways that transcend the boundaries of particular governments or states.

#### **HOW MORAL PANIC SURROUNDING ISLAMIC TERRORISM REINFORCES THE REPRESSIVE POLICING OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES**

The moral panic surrounding Islamic terrorism feeds into policing strategies in a number of ways. There is evidence of police power to stop-and-search being used disproportionately against Muslims on the basis of this racialised folk devil (Hargreave, 2018). The moral panic also gains “popular consent for greater levels of unchecked state intervention in everyday life, including greater levels of state-sanctioned violence” (Bhattacharyya, 2008, p. 74). Bhattacharyya identifies four elements of the increased militarisation that is fed by moral panics: using greater levels of force, erosion of due process, changes in the presentation of officers, and saturating certain areas with officers to subdue the population through intimidation (Bhattacharyya, 2008, p. 74). Following the 9/11 attacks, both the USA’s PATRIOT Act and the UK’s Anti-Terrorism, Crime and

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Security Act were passed in 2001. Both acts empowered the police in similar ways, such as allowing detention without charge or trial, allowing law enforcement agencies to conduct surveillance and have access to personal medical, financial, and student records and make deportation easier (Bhattacharyya, 2008, pp. 93,94). This violence weaponised against Muslim communities is evidenced through studies of Muslims in Britain. One study documented longstanding concerns that “state authorities can interpret normal, everyday acts as indicators of risk within the racialised climate enabled by Prevent” (Rights & Security International, 2022, p. 14). It notes that surveillance and the awareness of the potential to be surveilled – is an “ever-present experience that reminds Britain’s Muslims of their societal position as outsiders” (Rights & Security International, 2022, p. 14). Simply being a Muslim in Britain, with the implementation of these policing strategies, becomes a justification for suspicion and surveillance.

This surveillance has implications for the lives of British Muslims beyond overt interactions with the police. Abbas, in her research with British Muslims in Leeds and Bradford, highlighted the ways in which Muslims can become an “internal suspect body”, as terror is reproduced within Muslim communities through both a “fear of suspected extremists and fear of suspected informers operating within Muslim communities” (Abbas, 2019, p. 264). She describes a “culture of fear” where “shame of being (wrongfully) accused are internalized, precipitating self-surveillance to avoid suspectification” (Abbas, 2019, pp. 267, 270). Being perceived as a threat to national security, through the mutually reinforcing relationship of moral panic and repressive policing strategies, mean that any and all aspects of Islamic

identity become a cause for suspicion. The harms that the moral panic surrounding terrorism enacts on Muslim communities operates at many levels as it encourages strict policing on the basis of a racialised imagined threat. At the same time, this strict policing will target individuals to criminalise, thereby making the initial threat seem real, and immediate.

### **HOW MORAL PANIC SURROUNDING “BLACK CRIME” REINFORCES THE REPRESSIVE POLICING OF BLACK COMMUNITIES**

A similar case of this can be explored in relation to the panic surrounding Black crime, which is often discussed under a variety of euphemistic language such as ‘gang crime’, ‘mugging’, and ‘knife crime’. Gang crime, though not a criminal offence in itself, is a category of crime produced by “melding together a collection of already existing offences, popular fears and racist images” (Bhattacharyya, et al., 2021, p. 51). The stereotype of the gang evokes “images of young black men, hooded, masked or in mugshots” (Bhattacharyya, et al., 2021, p. 42). The definition of gang crime is not clear-cut, it can extend to a variety of crimes such as mugging and knife crime, so long as, it seems, these crimes were committed by Black youth. Hall asserts that ‘mugging’ has also “come to be unambiguously assigned as a black crime” (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 2013, p. 322). These images combine into a larger panic surrounding the perceived threat of ‘gangs’ of young Black men in urban areas, who allegedly, are heavily involved in mugging and knife crime.

Said imagery has had direct implications for policy. The policy of Joint Enterprise (JE) enables people to be jointly convicted of the crime of another, under incredibly weak

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evidence that defendants were part of a ‘gang’. JE overwhelmingly directs this criminalisation towards friendship and kinship between young Black men: “despite only constituting 3.3% of the general population, Black people received over a third of JE convictions between 2005 and 2013” (Cooper, 2021, p. 136). Somewhat similarly, Knife Crime Prevention Orders (KCPOs) allow police to criminalise “suspect communities” without requiring a conviction nor any concrete evidence. KCPOs can “prevent a young person from going to a specific area (including routes to work or study), seeing specific people (including family members), or using social media” (Cooper, 2021, p. 152). Breaking these rules, despite the young person never being found guilty of a knife related crime, can lead to a custodial sentence (Cooper, 2021, p. 152). Within the narratives that these militarised policing practices operate on, a young Black boy simply living on the same housing estate as someone convicted of a crime, can quickly become ‘affiliation’ or gang membership, which under joint enterprise, can lead to a custodial sentence. Similarly, if a young Black boy is ‘under suspicion’ of carrying a knife (without evidence), who subsequently breaks the terms of his KCPO by going on Instagram, can again, end up in police custody. As Bhattacharyya describes, the “spectacle of that uncontrolled violence mobilises widespread anxieties over national identity, cultural difference and insecurity in ways that prove politically useful” (Bhattacharyya, et al., 2021, p. 40). The result of these repressive policing practices is that the large population of young Black boys in police custody can then be used to justify the policing strategies that put them there. This moral panic is ‘politically useful’ in that they justify the over policing of Black communities, and this

over policing leads to overincarceration, which then feeds the moral panic surrounding Black criminality.

Policies such as Joint Enterprise and Knife Crime Prevention Orders point to an overarching issue that is fed by this moral panic – the overincarceration of Black people, again, specifically young Black men and boys. Graham points to how “poor and predominantly Black students [are] pushed out of schools and directly into the criminal justice system” (Graham, 2016, p. 30), this trend being known as the school-to-prison pipeline. She states “it seems that schools cannot differentiate between working class and Black cultural norms and criminality” (Graham, 2016, p. 132). Whether it be for not adhering to school uniform rules, or discriminatory rules on hairstyles that label Afro hair as improper, Black students face the brunt of school discipline and are more likely to be temporarily, or permanently, excluded from their education. This of course increases a young person’s chance of unemployment, crime, and subsequently, imprisonment. Graham accuses the education system of engaging in the “direct preparation of marginalised male pupils for the future role of prisoner” (Graham, 2016, p. 136). In school, young Black males are isolated from their peers as a form of punishment, heavily monitored, and have their physical movements restricted (Graham, 2016, p. 136). Combined with the effects of JE and KCPOs, there is an entrenched pathway pushing young Black boys out of education and into the prison. This is of course, only justified by the reproduction of panic, concern, and fear directed at these boys’ perceived potential for violence.

### CONCLUSION

Cohen picks up on the overall function of moral panics, asserting that they are

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“condensed political struggles to control the means of cultural reproduction” (Cohen, 2011, p. xliv). Although the repressive policing practices noted in this paper such as Prevent and Knife Crime Prevention Orders are specific examples of how particular racialised moral panics can manifest within policing, these instances are part of a much larger network of racialised images that are directed

at many intersecting minority groups in various ways, and that transcend national borders. It is the control and repression of perceived racial, cultural, or religious ‘others’, or deviants, that these moral panics serve to justify. This network of interconnected moral panics is self-perpetuating; policing acts as a catalyst for these panics and, at the same time, is presented as a solution to them.

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