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Public perceptions of violent knife crime: a reflexive thematic analysis

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Introduction: Violent knife crime in the UK is a complex issue, littered with ambiguities between understanding the problem and actioning impactful strategies to address it. Understanding of knife crime is complicated by inconsistent practices regarding official statistics and a lack of definition; however, social psychology may offer a means of understanding VKC that is independent from official statistics.

Methods: The current study aimed to research violent knife crime from a social identity approach (SIA) to understand the psychological structures and group processes that contribute to its continuation. Fifteen interviews were conducted with participants recruited via social media and interview transcripts were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA).

Results: Four themes were identified: (1) Views of VKC connected to stereotypes; (2) Media influence on beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes related to VKC; (3) Categorization of offenders as members of the out-group and victims as part of the in-group; and (4) The importance of multi-agency action.

Discussion: The themes were framed within a social identity approach, with reference to the social identity model of collective action. Discussions around the need for collective action toward social change are explored and a SIA informed public health approach is considered.

KEYWORDS

knife crime, knife-enabled violence, reflexive thematic analysis, social change, social identity model of collective action

1 Introduction

Knife crime in the UK is a complex issue, littered with ambiguities between understanding the problem and actioning impactful strategies to address it (Frater and Gamman, 2020). While the College of Policing defines knife crime as “crimes involving knives or other bladed or pointed articles” (Sidebottom et al., 2021; p. 8), there is currently no Home Office definition of knife crime (Williams and Squires, 2022). The College of Policing recognizes their definition as one which encapsulates a broad range of offenses which fall under two types: ownership and possession of illegal weapons and use of knives or sharp instruments during the commission of crime such as violence, threats, and burglary (Sidebottom et al., 2021). As such, the term knife crime, from a policing perspective, includes a wide range of offenses from relatively low-level crimes such as ownership of banned knives, to the most serious of knife-involved offenses such as homicide and sexual assault.

National statistics suggest that knife-enabled crime has steadily risen since 2014 (Office for National Statistics, 2024a). In the year ending December 2024, cases of police recorded knife-enabled crime rose by 2% compared to the previous year to 54,587 offenses (Office for National Statistics, 2025a). In comparison to pre-pandemic levels, incidents of knife crime at the national level have seen a 1% reduction, however, within metropolitan

areas police recorded incidents have increased. Areas policed by the Metropolitan Police Service have seen a 14% increase in cases in comparison to the year ending March 2020, while Greater Manchester Police have observed an increase of 8% (Office for National Statistics, 2025a). In contrast to police recorded incidents, hospital admission data suggests a 6% decrease in admissions resulting from injury caused by a knife or sharp instruments in the year ending December 2024 in comparison to the previous year, representing a decrease of 23% in comparison to pre-pandemic levels (Office for National Statistics, 2025a). While such decreases are promising, the discrepancy between police recorded knife crime and hospital admission data requires further analysis.

While national statistics can be somewhat useful in identifying statistical trends, there are limitations to consider when using the data, particularly that which relates to knife crime. In previous years, police recording practices had resulted in inconsistent reporting of knife-enabled offenses in some areas of the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2023b). An early example of such a limitation relates to recording practices of what is considered a “sharp instrument,” with some police forces including unbroken glass bottles in this definition while others did not define such items as sharp instruments (Office for National Statistics, 2012). Such inconsistencies in reporting impacted comparability to earlier years and consequently, official statistics are only reported from April 2010. In 2017, Greater Manchester Police (GMP) conducted a review of their recording practices with regards to knife-enabled crime and found they had under-reported cases, as a consequence, data from GMP prior to 2017 has been omitted from reports (Office for National Statistics, 2024c). As a result, statistics should be understood as an approximate representation of trends over time and should not be regarded as definitive.

Risk factors that make individuals vulnerable to involvement in knife crime as victims and/or offenders are well established within academic literature. Risk factors are inclusive of gender (Ajayi et al., 2021; Bailey et al., 2020; Lemos & Crane, 2004; Vinnakota et al., 2022), deprivation and poverty (Haylock et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2022; Reilly et al., 2023), exposure to gangs (Harding, 2020) which is also linked to deprivation and poverty (Dupéré et al., 2007), adverse childhood experiences, and mental ill health (Haylock et al., 2020). In terms of offender and offense characteristics, Browne et al. (2022) indicated that offenders are more likely to be male when the offense occurs in the community, however when females offended, this was more likely to occur in a domestic setting. According to Wood (2010), both offenders and victims were more likely to be male and while those that resided within London and Greater London were more likely to be Black and minority ethnicities with connections to gangs, those outside of London were more likely to be white with no gang involvement. In contrast, Bailey et al. (2020), found that victims and offenders in the Thames Valley area were more likely to be white males which is substantiated by homicide statistics (Office for National Statistics, 2024b).

According to Williams (2023), knife-enabled crime is often framed as a phenomenon associated with young people and homicide statistics suggest that in the year ending March 2024, 83% of teenage homicide victims were killed with a knife or sharp instrument (Office for National Statistics, 2025b). However, the total number of homicides involving knives or sharp instruments

was 262, of which 40 victims were aged 17 and under. The highest age ranges for victims were 18–24 ($n = 57$) and 25–34 ($n = 57$), followed by 35–44 ($n = 41$). This suggests that it is not only young people that are affected by knife-enabled violence (Office for National Statistics, 2025b). Indeed, Williams (2023) argues that there is no statistical justification for the construction of knife crime as a problem pertaining predominantly to youths. Despite this, academic research in previous years has tended to focus on adolescents and young adults (Harding, 2020; Skarlatidou et al., 2021; Palasinski and Riggs, 2012; Hobson et al., 2022; Vulliamy et al., 2018; Reilly et al., 2023).

The tendency to associate specific characteristics with knife-enabled crime is not limited to academic literature, and it extends beyond assumptions of age. Knife crime is commonly associated with gang-involvement within public discourse (Williams, 2020); however, academic research suggests this forms only part of the reality of VKC in the UK. Bailey et al. (2020) argue that the majority of knife-enabled violence is not gang related and with regards to knife carrying, academic evidence suggests that a greater proportion of knife carriers were not involved in gang activity (Coid et al., 2021). Furthermore, while research indicates that gang-influenced VKC does make up part of the social reality of VKC, this is not the full picture and other presentations such as one-off reactive VKC and intimate partner VKC are also significant (Partington et al., 2025). Ethnic groups are also subject to association with knife crime. While knife crime emerged as a commonly utilized term within news reports during the early 2000s, by 2006 the term was predominantly used in reported cases involving young, Black, males with links to gangs in London (Williams, 2023). While this type of media discourse has shaped perceptions of VKC in the UK, research has indicated that such perceptions provide only a snapshot of the overall picture of knife-enabled offending in the UK (Wood, 2010). Such narratives perpetuate harmful stereotypes, may contribute to ineffective or misdirected policy responses (Grimshaw and Solomon, 2008), and lack support from academic evidence (Williams, 2020; Mason, 2019).

Social psychology may offer a better understanding of knife crime. If knife crime, in particular violent knife crime (VKC), is understood as being a form of conflict, it is necessary to analyze its social contexts to understand how it occurs (Billig, 2002). As Billig (2002) argues, the study of conflict should involve the examination of the beliefs and attitudes that groups hold about each other. Therefore, to understand VKC as a form of conflict, group processes, perceptions, and attitudes should be embraced, thus the study of VKC should involve social psychology perspectives. According to the academic literature, the tendency to adopt punitive measures to address knife crime is problematic, because it does not consider social context and the underlying social issues that contribute to the continuation of knife crime (Squires, 2009; Hendry, 2022; Grimshaw and Solomon, 2008; Hitchcock, 2010; Straw et al., 2018).

Application of social psychological theory, more specifically the social identity approach (SIA), to the accounts of individuals within society may offer insights into perception and attitudes relevant to VKC. SIA is a psychological metatheory (Haslam et al., 2020), inclusive of social identity theory (SIT), which is

concerned with the meaning and self-esteem derived from group membership and intergroup behaviors (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (SCT), which addresses the ways in which individuals assign themselves to social groups (Turner, 1985). Social identity was defined by Tajfel (1982) as an individual's knowledge that they belong to certain social groups and that membership of these groups has emotional and value significance for them. It focuses on the “we’s” people ascribe to and how when “we” self-categorize as a group member “we” interact with “them” (the out group). SIT is a theory of social change which gives insights into the approaches that oppressed groups, such as those vulnerable to involvement in VKC, can use to challenge the oppression ascribed to them by groups that are perceived to have more power (Billig, 2002). In terms of VKC, oppressed groups relate to those perceived as being likely to be involved in VKC, while groups perceived as having more power may include police, government, the media, and society. Thus, understanding the psychological structures and group processes that act as causal mechanisms in the continuation of VKC and addressing those collectively, may be fruitful in addressing VKC in the UK.

Within the context of VKC, consideration of underlying social contexts may enable an understanding of the ways in which intergroup relationships may hinder or enable effective strategies to reduce knife crime. Social change is referred to as “a process that involves transformation in the structure, behavior patterns, and values in society” (Iba et al., 2024; p. 47). According to Meyer et al. (2016), the construction of oppressed groups is a necessary condition for social change because those in marginalized groups, such as those at risk of involvement in VKC, recognize their position within the social order as subordinate and deem the social order as illegitimate. This is not to suggest that intentional oppression of groups should be encouraged to trigger resistance. Nor should oppressed groups be further marginalized, but that the existence of such groups within the social order currently may actually facilitate social change. That said, it is not solely the responsibility of oppressed to mobilize collective action and work toward social change. Action is also required from the wider public and those in positions of power to recognize inequalities that place individuals in a position of vulnerability. The SIA offers a framework which conceptualizes the formation of group identities and interactions and how they may contribute to the formation of problematic social structures and the oppression of low status groups (Brown and Pehrson, 2020).

SIA is concerned with the ways in which social context impacts psychological processes and aims to explain how social structures and belief systems impact individual behavior and agency (Reicher et al., 2011). As Tajfel (1981) argues, social psychology cannot be value-free, as it is a reflection of the cultural context from which it is formed. Furthermore, Brown and Pehrson (2020) argue that intergroup and intragroup behaviors cannot be fully understood without the concept of social identity, and that social identity salience is always dependent on social context. Context is relevant to the concept of conflict as it occurs within specific contexts which are both historically and psychologically relevant and determined by individuals and group members' predisposition to psychologically align to a specific context (Eggin et al., 2002). In addition, Brown and Pehrson (2020) assert that social context

is operational on distinct levels, at the micro-level of specific social environments, but also at the macro-level of societal structures and value systems. Therefore, to fully understand VKC from an SIA perspective, it is necessary to understand social structures, values, and belief systems related to VKC, but also how those structures and systems provide the macro-level context for VKC related social identity salience at the individual level. From a psychological perspective, understanding the psychological significance of group processes is key, while societal structures, values, and belief systems can be understood as providing context.

Within the context of VKC, intergroup behaviors can be understood in terms of actual conflict between victims and offenders which occurs at the micro-level within specific social environments. However, it can also be applied to individuals and groups within society, and how they may conceptually categorize and separate themselves from individuals that they perceive to be likely to become involved in VKC. SCT posits that when individuals self-categorize, they view themselves as characteristically similar to members of the in-group and, as a consequence, they separate and differentiate themselves from members of the out-group (Sindic and Condor, 2014). In separating themselves from individuals vulnerable to involvement in VKC, individuals demonstrate a category salience which places those expected to engage in VKC in the out-group category.

The readiness of individuals to separate themselves from those they perceived as likely to become involved in VKC may contribute to feelings of alienation within those individuals and groups. Alienation of particular demographics of individuals is discussed within academic literature as a risk factor contributing to VKC (Clement, 2010; Harding, 2020). Additionally, consideration of the ways in which intervention strategies may result in mistrust of professionals thus contributing to alienation has also been afforded attention (Straw et al., 2018; Timmis, 2019). While public health approaches are considered the most effective in tackling knife crime (Phillips et al., 2022; Ramshaw and Dawson, 2022; Sethi, 2010), mistrust and alienation are noted to be barriers to such strategies (Skarlatidou et al., 2021). Alienation of individuals vulnerable to involvement in VKC can be understood from a SIA perspective, as social identity enables one to define and evaluate concepts of the self to determine how they may be perceived and treated by others (Hogg, 2016). In making group comparisons, individuals tend to ensure the positive distinctiveness of their own group and employ strategies to promote in-group status above that of other groups (Hogg, 2016).

In previous years, law enforcement and criminal justice measures have largely been the preferred responses to VKC in the UK (Bullock et al., 2023; Stephen, 2009; Eades et al., 2007), with such responses being referred to as a “cops, courts, and corrections approach” (Grimshaw and Solomon, 2008; p. 44). Strategies were inclusive of tougher sentencing for knife related crime (Stephen, 2009; Eades et al., 2007), increases in stop and search practices, police use of tasers, the inclusion of new knife related offenses in law, and implementation of new criminal and civil orders (Williams and Squires, 2022). Civil orders included the introduction of Knife Crime Prevention Orders (KCPOs), which were introduced in 2019 (Hendry, 2022) and carry criminal consequences if they are breached (Chung, 2023). While intended to reduce VKC, such

practices may be considered as exclusionary and contribute to alienation of individuals. From an SIA perspective, alienation of individuals contributes to the formation of “us vs. them” dynamics, resulting in intergroup hostility and conflict (Reicher et al., 2008). Therefore, punitive measures, which contribute to feelings of alienation, may actually hinder efforts to reduce VKC by emphasizing group distinctions which lead to reduced cooperation with authorities and increased conflict.

Academic literature suggests that salience of a common superordinate social identity, that is shared between low status groups (such as individuals at risk of involvement in VKC) and higher status groups (such as other individuals in society) is related to increased intergroup cooperation (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000) thus identification of a superordinate identity may be influential in tackling feelings of mistrust and alienation in the context of VKC. Meyer et al. (2016) argue that while identification of an overarching social identity is influential in facilitating social change, success is limited unless subordinate group identities are valued as being clearly distinct. In addition, academic research has demonstrated that establishing an overarching social identity, as opposed to maintaining separate social identities based on race and ethnicity, can reduce perceptions of injustice and group-based efficacy resulting in lower levels of collective action intentions (Ufkes et al., 2016). This suggests that failure to acknowledge distinct group identities denies the opportunity for oppressed groups to be recognized as such, ultimately removing the legitimacy of social action for those groups and the motivation for those groups to challenge the social order.

Promoting superordinate identities between perceived high and low status groups, while recognizing the presence of distinct groups may be a useful tactic in working toward social change within the context of VKC. SIA suggests that social change occurs when individuals act collectively on the basis of shared social identity as opposed to acting individually based upon personal identities (Reicher et al., 2011). Collective action is defined as “any action that individuals undertake as group members to pursue group goals such as social change” (van Zomeren et al., 2010; p. 1). Re-categorization of social groups and their status, to a shared superordinate social identity, may facilitate social change through mobilization of collective action. However, Hogg (2016), warns re-categorization of groups and group status has the potential to be perceived as an identity threat and may be met with resistance and thus, for social change to be successful, consideration of the ways in which to alleviate the perception of identity threats is necessary. Preservation of the subordinate group identities, while promoting the overarching group identity may resolve the perception of identity threats that have the potential to result in resistance, while also preserving perceived injustice and efficacy.

1.1 The social identity model of collective action

The Social Identity Model of Collective action (SIMCA) posits that group identification, group efficacy, and group-based injustice are key motivators for the mobilization of collective action (van Zomeren et al., 2018). In other words, social identity, the belief in the group's ability to act collectively, and the experience and

perception of group-based injustice are significant predictors for the mobilization of collective action to bring social change. The SIMCA focuses on the significance of politicized social identity (identification with a particular social movement or political issue) which enables group-based understanding of their positioning within society. A further focus within the SIMCA is moral convictions or the extent to which an issue reflects the individuals' views on what is right or wrong (van Zomeren et al., 2018). Research indicates that when moral convictions are violated, social identity with disadvantaged groups can be increased, leading to motivation toward collective action through increased feelings of injustice and anger (van Zomeren et al., 2011).

In order to mobilize social groups and understand groups' power and status, it is first necessary to understand the nature of existing social categories, their perceived positioning within society, and the extent to which moral convictions are present. Such mechanisms may, in turn, give insight into the presence or lack of perceived and/or experienced injustice and the belief that current groups are able to action social change. Understanding the views, opinions, and attitudes of individuals regarding VKC may highlight some of the social categories present within society. Commonly held views of individuals may also indicate the presence of social structures, politicized social identities, and moral convictions that provide the context which contribute to the formation of social categories that contribute to the pervasiveness of VKC in the UK. They may also indicate public perception and opinions of low status groups (those more oppressed who may experience injustice) and those that are relatively more privileged. What is currently lacking from VKC literature is the understanding that can be gained from analysis of common opinion and attitudes on VKC in the UK.

A database search was conducted of Proquest, PsychInfo, and Wiley on 23rd October 2023 using the terms “knife crime” AND “public opinion OR public attitudes OR public views” “knife crime” AND “public” and “knife crime” AND “society” AND views OR opinions OR attitudes. The search was refined to include only UK-based publications. The available research comprised one empirical study which explored the impact of offender age and previous history of abuse on the attributions of personal control applied to young offenders by the public (Pfeffer et al., 2012). Given the lack of literature addressing collective views of VKC, empirical research that explores the views and opinions of individuals within society from a SIA perspective provides a unique contribution to the academic literature on VKC.

1.2 The present study

According to Haslam et al. (2009), “social identity theory helps to explain how social identities can be associated with positive or negative health outcomes by focusing on the way in which individuals understand and respond to the social structural conditions in which they find themselves” (p. 6). To further their discussion, Haslam et al. (2009) suggest that social identity, within the context of health, is related to symptom appraisal and response, health related norms and behavior, social support, coping, and clinical outcomes. Adapting this to a public health approach to VKC social identity may be related to threat appraisal and response, VKC related norms and behavior, access to social

support for victims, witnesses, and offenders, coping, and VKC intervention outcomes.

The present study aimed to explore how social psychological structures can influence individual agency thus contributing to the continuation of VKC in the UK. To achieve this, it is suggested by the researcher that the common views and opinions expressed by participants could be analyzed from a SIA perspective. The aim was to give insight into the psychological mechanisms that contribute to the social construction of categories and groups in the UK that are relevant to VKC and their potential to act collectively. It was further suggested that understanding the ways in which these structures are formed and operate would enable strategies to be devised to mobilize collective action and work toward social change. The present research aimed to provide foundations of understanding, by identifying and conceptualizing group processes as a function of salient group memberships and highlighting the presence of oppressed groups. Ultimately, the present study aimed to address the research question: “What are the psychological mechanisms that contribute to the construction of social categories and groups, evident in the accounts of the participants that have the potential to be a contributing factor related to VKC in the UK?”

2 Methodology

2.1 Participants

Fifteen participants were recruited having responded to recruitment material circulated via social media by the primary researcher. The current study represents one phase of a three study PhD thesis. The sample size was decided based upon the guidance from [Terry et al. \(2017\)](#). They recommend 15–20 participants are interviewed for a piece of research that contributes to a body of research which will be included in a PhD thesis to promote richness of data and ensure patterned responses across the dataset. All participants reside in the UK and have some level of familiarity with VKC and how it is reported upon in the UK. With the exception of one participant from the Derbyshire area, all participants reside within the Greater Manchester area. Thus, they are policed by Greater Manchester Police, which reported the third highest level of police recorded knife crime in the UK for the year ending March 2023 ([Office for National Statistics, 2023a](#)).

Participants were required to meet the inclusion criteria of being aged 18 and over and having no previous first-hand experience of VKC. This exclusion criterion was included as participants’ opinions and views of VKC may be impacted by first-hand lived experiences. It was recognized that potentially a significant proportion of the public may have experiences of incidents of VKC. However, it was felt that personal experiences may become more prevalent within interviews with individuals who have witnessed or been involved in incidents of VKC potentially deterring from the aim of the study.

2.2 Use of reflexive thematic analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is a qualitative method of analysis which places emphasis on the interpretation and

understanding of the subjective experience of participants ([Drinkwater et al., 2022](#)). [Braun and Clarke \(2022\)](#) assert that the ontological and epistemological positioning of RTA should be made transparent. The current research adopted a critical realist (CR) approach, which accepts the existence of one objective reality but suggests it cannot be fully accessed directly ([Braun and Clarke, 2022](#)). Instead, the perception of reality is influenced by perception, context, and culture, with emphasis on experience which is located in a wider social context ([Braun et al., 2024](#)). Research from a CR perspective produces interpretations of reality, based upon analysis of people’s words ([Braun et al., 2024](#)). The present study aims to understand some of the social psychological categories present within the UK that may contribute to the continuation of VKC, based upon the accounts of participants. It is argued that such categories operate within the context of social structures, both of which can act as causal mechanisms, influencing individual agency. Understanding of social categorizations may therefore offer insight into the underlying causes of VKC and thus indicate how to address this problem in the UK.

The current research aims to understand causal mechanisms contributing to VKC that may be present in the UK, therefore exploring factors that contribute to occurrences of VKC. However, it does not seek to attempt to determine causality and thus it is not necessary to reach generalizable conclusions. Instead, the aim is to generate knowledge which is transferable and focused upon meaning and experience. [Erickson \(2012\)](#) argues that qualitative analysis can be utilized to understand social action, contexts, and behaviors that contribute as causal mechanisms. While subjectiveness of participants has previously been described as a limitation of qualitative analysis when exploring causality ([Mwita, 2022](#)), RTA recognizes its value within empirical research.

With regards to the current research and its use of RTA, it is suggested that participants’ commonly held views and opinions of VKC in the UK would indicate the presence of perceived or experienced social categories. These were thematically defined via researcher engagement with and immersion in data. Further, researcher reflexivity enabled exploration of these social categories and structures and contextualization of the ways in which they may act as causal mechanisms via their influence on individual agency. In adopting RTA, the researcher utilized the six steps outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2022\)](#); familiarization with data, coding, generating initial themes, developing, and reviewing themes, refining defining and naming themes, and writing up. As per guidance, the six steps were approached with the understanding that movement between the stages is not linear but is instead recursive dependent on researcher interpretation and reflexivity ([Braun and Clarke, 2022](#)).

2.3 Procedure

The use of RTA enabled the examination of what may be perceived as social structures based upon the transcripts of the narrative accounts of participants. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to produce the data upon which analysis was conducted according to a pre-prepared interview schedule. Interviews were conducted and transcribed using Microsoft Teams and the

transcriptions were edited in the days following the interviews to ensure accuracy. At the commencement of the interview, participants were advised not to explore specific details of individual cases of VKC to avoid any psychological discomfort.

Prior to the interview, participants were provided with a participant information sheet and consent form, and interviews were scheduled once consent forms were completed. Given the nature of the topic of VKC, it was recognized that there was potential for participants to disclose criminal activity. Therefore, the participant information sheet detailed the circumstances under which disclosures would result in a breach of participant confidentiality and referred to third parties. Participants were discouraged from such disclosures and reminded of the exclusion criteria regarding previous lived experience of VKC.

The interview comprised 16 questions which covered aspects of VKC: social constructs, media, events and political responses, agencies and organizations, and social groups. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min, began with a general introduction and were concluded with a debrief. Interviewees were reminded of their right to withdraw from or terminate during the interview at any time. Participants were encouraged to take breaks as required and during the interview, the researcher monitored participants for outwards signs of psychological discomfort.

2.4 Rigor

The current study utilized a 15-item checklist, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013), to produce good quality RTA and to ensure quality of research and findings. The checklist covers all elements of research procedures including transcription, coding, analysis, and writing up. Further quality assurance was ensured via researcher triangulation. The researcher independently coded the data and developed themes, and these were discussed with the co-authors who agreed with the themes and offered additional guidance pertaining to how the themes could be better presented. D'Souza et al. (2022) suggest such practices enable a deeper level of thinking about data, thus providing a richer account within RTA analyses.

3 Findings

Following the application of the RTA procedure, four distinct themes were identified and deemed as significant: (1) Views of VKC Connected to Stereotypes, which included three subthemes; Offender characteristics, External factors, and Impact of stereotypes; (2) Media Influence on Beliefs, Perceptions, and Attitudes Related to VKC; (3) Categorization of Offenders as Members of the Out-group and Victims as part of the In-group; and (4) The importance of multi-agency action, which included three subthemes; Police Involvement, Education, and Government Responses.

3.1 Views of VKC connected to stereotypes

Stereotypes featured consistently throughout the dataset and were discussed explicitly but were also evident at a more

implicit level. Additionally, within this theme there were three subthemes: Offender characteristics, External factors, and Impact of stereotypes.

3.1.1 Offender characteristics

In terms of explicit discussion, stereotypes of VKC offender characteristics were stable across the participants' responses and featured a level of specificity that detailed the types of clothes that participants expected offenders of VKC to wear:

"Like, young, young like adolescence/teenagers in, in like inner-city, inner-city areas like you get a picture of people in, like, joggers, trackies and stuff like that." (Edward).

Within this extract, Edward discusses very specific items of clothing suggesting a high level of familiarity with the stereotype. He also offers the perceived areas of residence of offenders and their expected age. Regarding age, VKC was overwhelmingly assumed to be an offense committed by adolescents, as demonstrated by Lucy, Emily, and William who refer to teenagers and young people when exploring their ideas of who is likely to be involved in VKC:

"I seem to hear more of an increase in teenager crimes so of gang related crimes, but again, it's like teenage years." (Lucy).

"I do think that young people especially, because I think a lot of this is around young people, I'm not saying that old people don't do. I'm sure they do, but a lot of it is younger people erm, and it is just about who you end up hanging out with erm, and what the what they do, you know, I mean." (Emily).

"Whereas before you'd think like maybe it was older people that would have access to weapons and things like that, whereas now it's literally kids, isn't it, you know." (William).

Lucy, Emily, and William demonstrate a common view from participants regarding the perceived ages of offenders. This view is stated clearly by using terms such as kids, teenagers, and young people suggesting clear views around age. While Lucy, Emily, and William clearly state these ideas around offender age, at the more implicit level, stereotypes were evident in participants responses which were answered with assumption of certain offender characteristics. This was most often seen as an assumption of age, with answers assuming offenders to be young. Henry demonstrates this point while answering a question about educational settings:

"I think. And the nature of educational settings is that you put in lots and lots of impressionable young people together in the same place, and there's a lot of peer influence that feeds into that. You know, peer pressure. Teenagers, young people, they tend to go with the crowd a lot." (Henry).

By immediately referring to teenagers, with no consideration of educational settings which cater for older students, Henry reveals an assumption that offenders are assumed to be young individuals that attend schools. William demonstrates

a similar assumption, this time in the context of the role of social media:

"I think it's really easy for kids to get involved and escalate arguments on social media and by messages and stuff, whereas normal face to face you might back down and like years ago and we didn't have social media by the time we went back into school or college or whatever and by the Monday you might have forgotten about it a bit." (William).

William specifically relates social media use to "kids" within the context of disagreements escalating into real life, and in doing so implies this is a scenario less likely to apply to older individuals. Interestingly, William refers to schools, again assuming offender age; however, he also references college within his extract. This is one of only two instances within the interview transcripts in which college is considered. This suggests that most participants share the view that offenders are likely to be younger and of school age, while it is uncommon for offenders to be assumed to be older.

3.1.2 External factors

When discussing communities expected to have high rates of VKC, stereotypes were evident as these communities were often expected to be within inner city areas and were often discussed as being areas with high rates of poverty and deprivation. Alex's comment highlights this point, which is representative of common responses when participants discussed their perceptions of communities with high rates of VKC:

"The areas with the highest poverty would have... the highest, maybe not the highest knife crime, but you would. I would assume that the areas with the most poverty would have the most people that would get into it." (Alex).

Within this extract, Alex appears to use distancing language, initially stating "you would" before correcting to "I would assume," suggesting some initial hesitancy on Alex's part to claim the position as their own. Additionally, Alex uses some hedging language when they state, "the highest, maybe not the highest." This may indicate that while Alex does indeed hold this view, they may not be fully confident in expressing this. This may be due to being unsure if this is the case, or alternatively, Alex may feel uncomfortable that the view may be perceived as discriminatory and/or oppressive. Despite the hesitancy, Alex's view is an accurate representation of commonly held views across participants and demonstrates that views around stereotypical characteristics extend beyond individuals, but also to communities.

Another community level stereotype expressed by participants is demonstrated in the extracts of James and Samantha and related to the view that gangs are related to VKC.

"Umm, so my general like, sort of, impressions. I guess like they've been involved in a lot of like gang activity that's sort of, my sort of, idea on it." (James).

"Erm... I always think about. Young people. Teenagers. Probably Hanging about on the street corners. Gangs, those are kind of things that come to my mind when I think about knife crime." (Samantha).

Again, Samantha integrates stereotypes related to offender characteristics regarding age and the areas she would expect offenders to spend time, however the focus of the current analysis is the reference to gangs. By including this reference alongside commonly discussed stereotypes of offender characteristics, Samantha indicates that gangs are assumed to be related to VKC offending in a similar way to other stereotypes such as assumed age. Additionally, by stating she "always" thinks about these characteristics with regards to VKC, Samantha demonstrates she has very concrete ideas around who would be involved in VKC. In contrast, James' language suggests he does indeed recognize gangs as relevant but is not as confident in his expression. This is demonstrated in the use of language such as "I guess" and "sort of." While the two extracts from James and Samantha demonstrate differing levels of confidence in relating VKC to gangs, gangs were a common feature throughout participant responses demonstrating persistent stereotypical views regarding gang involvement and knife crime.

3.1.3 Impact of stereotypes

Despite adopting such assumptions about offenders of VKC, participants were often aware that such stereotypes could be damaging to the people that fit those characteristics, with some explicitly referring to self-fulfilling prophecies.

"Again, I think it can be really around that self-fulfilling prophecy. That idea of this is how we behave. This is how we're expected to behave. You know, this is how this is how people think we behave and therefore it sort of becomes the norm. And, and I, you know, it is a stereotype, isn't it, that when you hear of a knife crime, people might assume that it's coming from a certain demographic when it actually isn't." (Amelia).

Amelia gives a clear description in this extract of the ways that individuals are characteristically similar to stereotypes can be influenced by the stereotypes in negative ways. What is interesting about this concept, demonstrated by Amelia's comment, is that participants are aware of stereotypes, and these are so engrained in their responses that characteristics are often assumed within responses. However, participants are also very aware of the potential negative impact of those stereotypes, giving insight into the moral convictions of participants. Amelia's comment is interesting because she clearly expresses her ideas around self-fulfilling prophecies, describing the concept in the first person. However, when discussing stereotypes, she seems hesitant to express these views as her own, beginning the sentence in the first person before quickly correcting this and continuing in the second person stating, "you know" and "people might assume." This may suggest that Amelia is uncomfortable with the realization that by assuming stereotypical characteristics, individuals may indirectly contribute to the persistence of stereotypes and self-fulfilling prophecies.

3.2 Media influence on beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes related to VKC

A second theme involved the consistency of answers across participants when discussing particular topics. Overwhelmingly, participants recognized that stereotypical views of VKC originated from the media, with some noting that the media and social media are where people get their information regarding VKC:

"I think it's the perception from the media and how the media always portray it. So usually, they portray it with being in the inner city, especially if it's erm... someone that's been stabbed and related to gang culture and gang violence" (Edward).

"Media, I suppose. Yeah, Media... has to be. Because that's the only way, you know, it's the way this sort of information is relayed to us." (Sophie).

As discussed previously, the use of the words "always" suggests fixed and concrete views and Edward's use of the word indicates the media consistently report incidents of VKC in a particular way. This view is echoed by Sophie who recognizes the role of media, stating that the media are the only source of VKC related information. Given the consistency of such narratives across the data set, it is clear that there is a common source of information related to VKC and its associated issues. Sophie explains that this common source "has to be" the media.

Related to media, social media is another area of consistency. Often unintentionally linked to young people and their use of social media, there was the idea that arguments can originate on social media and with no opportunity to detach from arguments, these can often escalate into incidents of VKC.

"I also think, think you can have arguments on social media platforms. They're viewed by everyone and if those arguments are taking place, we'll go for stereotypes between gangs. OK. Then there's a kind of disrespect, if you will, that has to be acted upon one way or another. And it you know whereas in the past before social media, things might have been very much... have a quick argument, maybe and it's done with, now it becomes this whole humiliation and disrespect thing that's going on." (Daniel).

Daniel's comment demonstrates the role of social media in escalating situations that might have otherwise diffused naturally. However, an interesting element of Daniel's discussion is that he clearly articulates this in terms of stereotypes and explains his point using gangs. In discussing his views that social media makes arguments highly visible, linking this to ideas of disrespect and humiliation, Daniel describes the presence of identity threats. While identity threats outside of social media may be less visible, their presence on social media platforms publicizes them. Thus, a situation arises that Daniel states "has to be acted upon."

Another consistent narrative across participants was the glamorization of violence in general by particular genres of music. This was usually related to rap music and its influence on young people.

"Are we thinking like rap music and music, where violence is glamorized? In a very theatrical way. So, I kind of think that if we think of erm, rap style music and rappers per se, there is always that element of crime involved in music and that they're living a glamorous lifestyle and that they can sing about it and rap about it, and all those with the things and children are buying that music and then they then learning that it's OK because. It's, it's allowed because it's allowed in, in music." (Alex).

Alex's comment is one which demonstrates the link to rap music in particular and its role in glamorizing violence. What is interesting is that within the rap music genre, lyrics are often related to gang culture, with some artists clearly aligning with particular gangs. Thus, while rap music is not specifically related to VKC, it may conceptually be linked via connections to gang culture. Alternatively, such consistent narratives suggest that there exists a main source of information regarding VKC and intricately linked topics such as social media and music influences. While the media was identified as that source by many of the participants, it was also noted that media narratives and frequency of publication of articles on VKC can impact those vulnerable to involvement and society as a whole by making them more fearful.

"If somebody's already quite fearful, it can make them even more scared and make them choose to carry a weapon to protect themselves possibly." (Henry).

"Um, I think it creates a very fearful society, doesn't it? Where? Um. I think people will view a certain look and generalize them. Ohh well, the bad un's and they're involved in crime and, and then that can result I guess in that young person fulfilling that prophecy and going down that route." (Elizabeth).

Henry clearly demonstrates the link between media reporting, fear of victimization and weapon carrying. Thus, he identifies the ways in which media reporting of VKC can be problematic. Meanwhile, Elizabeth also recognizes the problematic nature of media reporting on VKC but relates this to the perpetuation of stereotypes and the impact to individuals that are characteristically similar to them.

What is clear throughout this theme is that participants understand that the media is the source of information regarding VKC and that it is this information that influences the formation of beliefs, perceptions, and views related to VKC. Participants also understand ways in which these views and stereotypes can be problematic and damaging to those most vulnerable to involvement in VKC. These ideas are substantiated by the account of one participant who stated they do not access the news media. Although there were areas of some consistency with other participants, one example being views related to musical influences, responses from Alex, for the most part, did not follow the thematic consistency of other participants. Alex explains: -

"I don't watch television, so I don't hear the news, don't watch it. And so, a lot of a lot of where I'm learning about it is social media. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram." (Alex).

Areas of consistency in Alex's account may be those encountered over social media, however, Alex's views differed from other participants and stereotypes were less likely to be evident in their responses. An example below demonstrates this point. When asked about Alex's general ideas when thinking about people involved in VKC, Alex does not give a stereotypical account.

"Erm, I always kind, I always think what's happened to the to the, to the person committing the crime, what's happened in their life. That has, got them to where they are now. And then the, the victim of said stabbing knife crime is erm... what impact is that now gonna have on their life?" (Alex).

Instead, Alex's response is more analytical and questioning, as opposed to other responses demonstrated previously which are more assumptive in nature. While Alex does later discuss stereotypes when specifically asked to do so, their tendency not to immediately link VKC to stereotypes is notable. Since Alex does not access news media, and their response patterns differ from the remaining participants that do, it may be suggested that consistency of narratives and of stereotypes across the dataset is related to media narratives.

3.3 Categorization of offenders as members of the out-group and victims as part of the in-group

One theme recognized as significant in terms of social categorization, was the presence of othering of offenders of VKC. While it should be recognized that there was no malicious intent from participants, ingrained stereotypes, and conceptual separation of participants from offenders was notable within the interview transcripts. One such way this could be observed was in participant's accounts which aligned themselves with victims by imagining scenarios in which they could be victimized.

"I think they're probably both the same because of... I suppose though, anyone could be a victim like I could be walking home tonight, and something could happen. But I think if the kids are carrying knives, then they're more likely to be a victim because they're in that kind of circle and putting themselves in that kind of situation, maybe." (William).

In this extract, William refers to a normal scenario (walking home), in which he could find himself become a victim of VKC. While he aligns himself with victims in this way, he also recognizes the role that knife carrying plays with regards to becoming a victim. Interestingly, using the common assumption of age regarding VKC involvement by referring to "kids," William separates himself from victims that are knife carriers. Further his language suggests an element a victim blaming toward individuals that carry knives as he suggests they put themselves in that situation. This may indicate that William views knife carriers not as innocent victims, but as potential offenders who became victims due to their own decision to carry a knife. Therefore, he makes a clear distinction between the victims he aligns himself with and those that choose

to carry knives. Thus, William's extract demonstrates distinct levels of social categorization between those deemed innocent victims that are going about their normal lives, potential offenders who are victimized due to their choice to carry a knife, and offenders that use knives to harm others. This point is further demonstrated when participants discussed victims and offenders.

Offenders were often discussed with reference to stereotypical characteristics, whereas victims were often described as being "in the wrong place, at the wrong time." Additionally, participants suggested that anyone could be a victim, suggesting that they did not feel that the same was true of perpetrators:

"I think there's. Probably a lot of innocent, you know, people. You know, they're just in the wrong place at the wrong time" (Sophie).

"A lot of the time it's kind of... its reported on as someone being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or... you know... but I guess victims can be from rival gangs when its gang related, or I don't know it's hard to say. Anyone can be a victim but... Can anybody be an offender?" (Daniel).

Within the above extracts, Sophie slightly hedges her views by using the word probably, but by referring to a lot of innocent people she suggests this is often the case. Both extracts refer to being in the wrong place at the wrong time, however, Daniel seems to debate the issue with himself, before concluding that anyone can be a victim. By questioning if anyone can be an offender, Daniel indicates that he does not believe this to be the case. The tendency to view victims as innocent people, victimized by circumstances, and offenders as stereotypical demonstrates a level of othering. As such, victims are categorized more favorably than offenders and potential offenders.

3.4 The importance of multi-agency action

This theme was, by nature, more superficial than those described above due to the tendency for participants to be more descriptive in their answers around initiatives and responses and less reflective and analytical. That said, an important aspect of this theme was the recognition of involvement of different agencies and the need for multi-agency involvement moving forwards. This was demonstrated through responses that address positive and negative strategies, or indeed a lack of strategies, employed by different agencies. Within this theme, subthemes were present: police involvement, education, and government responses. Issues were often framed as successes or failures on the part of the different agencies, suggesting the need for involvement from all relevant agencies, while this was not explicitly expressed.

3.4.1 Police involvement

Police initiatives were recognized by participants however, responses to such measures were largely mixed. Participants consistently identified knife amnesties as a police measure, although its effectiveness was unclear.

“These, some knife amnesties, I never really felt that they worked particularly well. I think they made a statue out of knives somewhere. I think they made a statue out of it, and people used to stand and go and. And I know because we used to look at it on the Internet, at school, the kids looked at it and said, oh, I know somebody’s got one of those. I want one of those.” (Lily).

“I, erm, see quite a lot of that, these amnesties, I think they’re called where you can drop your knives off and there’s no, no consequence to the individual for having done that. I’m not sure how effective knife amnesties are. They do seem to get things submitted, and maybe it gets those bigger knives off the street, but I think a small knife can be a problem and those are available in most households across the UK, so I’m not sure how effective knife amnesties could be.” (Henry).

Both Lily and Henry question the effectiveness of knife amnesties, however, Henry notes that while some knives are indeed taken off the streets, the availability of knives in the UK makes the effectiveness of knife amnesties questionable.

A Police initiative which was viewed more positively was the use of social media post which made visible the measures taken by police to address knife crime within communities.

“I see a lot of social media posts from police now, and it’s kind of, about installing these safety boxes. You can go and deposit knives and you know, I think it’s just making it more visible in communities that they’re addressing, that kind of thing nowadays.” (Amelia).

The extract from Amelia suggests that it is important for the public to be aware of some of the measures taken by police to address knife crime. This suggests a lack of visibility may be perceived as a lack of action by the police, which may increase fear of crime for the public.

3.4.2 Education

Collaboration between police and educational settings was viewed positively, however, it was recognized that school and teachers lacked support and funding to manage VKC.

“Because staffing in schools is so like, on its knees, you know the pastoral support sometimes well, the pastoral expertise and knowledge, sorry just one second. And sometimes the pastoral expertise isn’t necessarily there to spot the signs of how bad it can go.” (Amelia).

“It can just become a very big situation, and I don’t think that teachers are given enough support and funding to be able to manage that. I think it’s; it’s very dangerous situation in that respect.” (Daniel).

Within the above extracts, both Amelia and Daniel recognize a significant barrier within education settings is a lack of staff that is trained to deal with at risk individuals. This suggests the public may understand the importance of early intervention and that staff within educational settings play a significant role in

recognizing and supporting those individuals that may be at risk before dangerous situations occur. What is evident in the above extracts is that there is a view that early intervention within schools is lacking due to inadequate resources being available.

3.4.3 Government responses

In terms of government responses, very few participants were aware of any initiatives that were implemented by government, with some explicitly referencing a lack of response from government bodies as problematic.

“What’s made it worse is that just the lack of government initiative and support that the government are offering in, in the places that knife crime would be doing, the statistical evidence to suggest certain areas are more susceptible to it. Yeah, I can’t say I’ve seen anything from the government. So, in, in that in itself to me makes it worse.” (Lucy).

Lucy’s extract demonstrates her strong views around a lack of government response. While it may be that responses have not been visible to her, it was not uncommon for other participants to reference such a lack of response from government bodies. By framing this perceived inaction as problematic; Lucy suggests that to address knife crime, government bodies should be involved in strategies. The extracts throughout this theme demonstrate the participants’ view that there is a need for collective action from multiple agencies, inclusive of police, educational settings, and government. Thus, indirectly suggesting the need for a multi-agency approach to addressing VKC.

4 Discussion

The present study aimed to understand participants’ views of VKC and their perceptions of events, experiences, and factors that contribute to its continuation. It was suggested that academic study of these areas would identify some of the social categories present that provide the context in which social identities operate and may contribute to the perpetuation of VKC. The focus of the analysis was on the ways that processes of social categorization may increase feelings of alienation, and that establishment of a superordinate social identity may be useful in breaking down intergroup relations that contribute to mistrust and alienation.

Four themes were identified: (1) Views of VKC Connected to Stereotypes; (2) Media Influence on Beliefs, Perceptions, and Attitudes Related to VKC; (3) Categorization of Offenders as Members of the Out-group and Victims as Part of the in-group; and (4) The Importance of Multi-agency Action. Each theme gives insights into the underlying social categories and structures present, firstly, stereotypes explore the ingrained views participants have and how these can become problematic. Meanwhile, the consistency of participant narratives within the “Media Influences on Beliefs, Perceptions and Attitudes to VKC” theme, suggests media influence may be a contributing factor to the perpetuation of stereotypes. Furthermore, othering of individuals deemed to be potential offenders within the “Categorization of Offenders

as Members of the Out-group and Victims as Part of the in-group” theme may contribute to their feelings of alienation and/or oppression and a lack of multi-agency responses was viewed as problematic when considering its impact on group efficacy within the theme “The Importance of Multi-agency Action.”

Each of the identified themes offers insights into the ways in which social identities can perpetuate feelings of alienation, and ultimately how these may be challenged to facilitate the establishment of a shared super-ordinate identity. In summary, stereotypes represent distinct social divisions which may contribute to us and those dynamics as opposed to establishing a sense of we-ness. The theme “Media Influences on Beliefs, Perceptions, and Attitudes to VKC” demonstrates the media’s roles in continuing problematic stereotypes and reinforcing feelings of alienation. Further reinforcement of social division is demonstrated in the theme “Categorization of Offenders as Members of the Out-group and Victims as Part of the In-group.” However, the theme “Importance of Multi-agency Action” recognizes the need for collaborative working which may increase group efficacy and reduce social division. Each of the identified themes are dissected and discussed below.

One of the most striking features of the interview contents was the level to which stereotypical views on VKC were ingrained into the narratives of the participants. Prior to the development of SIT, Tajfel (1963), discussed positive and negative aspects of stereotyping. He noted that stereotyping was useful when understanding the social environment and enabling the prediction of the behaviors of strangers. While stereotypes were present in participant responses, these were often in the form of passive and assumed characteristics and participants did not discuss stereotypes in a negative or discriminatory way. From the perspective of SIT, the presence of such consistent stereotypes across the dataset indicated depersonalization of the out group, in this case, individuals characterized as likely to become involved in VKC (Stets and Burke, 2000). Depersonalization is an element of SCT which suggests that members of the out group are viewed as similar to each other and are defined by the expected characteristics of the group as opposed to those of the individual (Reicher et al., 2010). It is thus suggested that given the consistency of stereotypes across the dataset, the depersonalization of individuals perceived as likely to be involved in VKC is evident. As a result, participants viewed such individuals as belonging to the out group, thus viewing themselves more positively in comparison. This indicates the presence of potentially oppressed groups within the context of VKC. While this may seem to be problematic, the construction of oppressed groups is suggested to be a necessary condition for social change (Meyer et al., 2016), because the perception of injustice for those groups enables them to conceptualize the social order as illegitimate. Thus, the presence of a lower status group (made up of those deemed to be prototypical representations of VKC offenders) may actually be a vital component needed for social change to occur. However, it should be acknowledged that while this study provides some evidence of a perceived out group, it does not provide evidence that perceived out group actually exists. Thus, further research should focus on exploring stereotypes in more detail and exploring the experiences of individuals that “fit” the expected characteristics of VKC offenders.

The consistency of stereotypes and narratives across the dataset suggest an outside influence has a significant impact on the perceived group entitativity of VKC offenders. Group entitativity relates to the degree to which particular groups are seen as being distinct (Hogg, 2016). Participants themselves were able to identify such influences on the entitativity of VKC offenders as coming from the media.

Media influence is an area that has previously been afforded academic attention and has demonstrated the impact of media influence on public perception. Research indicates that 41% of individuals recognize that the media is instrumental in shaping their perceptions (Ehsan Elahi et al., 2023). Interestingly, the same research indicated that 74% of participants were reliant on social media with regards to accessing news media, which may suggest a shift from news media websites or physical newspapers. Content analysis of 692 online news reports on knife crime in the UK indicated that the characteristics most frequently featured in published articles were indeed those considered to be stereotypical (Vinnakota et al., 2022). Therefore, individuals’ perception may be shaped by the continued publication of stereotypical characteristics, which may affect their perception of the social standing of such groups within society and their moral convictions toward them.

The current research indicates the significance of the influence of media narratives regarding VKC. This is clearly demonstrated within academic research via conjunctural analysis of media reporting of specific cases (Williams, 2023). Research highlights shifts in media narratives toward the more stereotypical representation of VKC as a crime largely perpetrated by young, Black males and the subsequent impact of this shift on stereotypical views of offenders (Williams, 2023). Such narratives may be relevant to the SIMCA because they enable the formulation of politicized social identity by influencing the perceived social standing of individuals vulnerable to involvement in VKC and enabling those not involved to form stereotypical views of such individuals in a way which enables their own positive distinctiveness. Additionally, by invoking such distinct social groupings, the media also impacts individual’s moral convictions toward those vulnerable to involvement in VKC. Given the significant influence of the media in the formulation of public perception with regards to societal issues such as VKC (Cogan et al., 2023), it is suggested that a move toward ethical news reporting, and away from sensationalist reporting of stereotypical cases may have a profound impact on the way in which VKC is perceived.

While a move toward ethical news reporting may be an impactful strategy in changing perceptions of VKC, the associated stereotypes may offer a necessary component for social change, construction of an oppressed group (Meyer et al., 2016). The presence of a potentially oppressed group is also demonstrated within the theme “Categorization of Offenders as Members of the Out-group and Victims as part of the In-group” through the othering of those deemed likely to be offenders of VKC. Othering, a process in which the individual positions their in-group in unequal opposition to the outgroup via alienation and the attribution of inferiority (Brons, 2015), is evident throughout the dataset in a somewhat subtle but significant manner. The tendency of participants to perceive themselves as potential victims, express ideas that anyone can be a victim, and describe victims as being

in the wrong place at the wrong time, positions them in direct opposition to their stereotypical ideas of offenders. The presence of othering is significant as it perpetuates the perceived separation between potential victims and potential offenders and is suggested to be largely influenced by media narratives and rooted in fear of victimization.

Othering of those vulnerable to involvement in VKC can be problematic when it results in feelings of alienation. [Harding \(2020\)](#) suggests that alienation is further reinforced by the perceived absenteeism of police, teachers, and parental figures. It is therefore not surprising that mistrust in agencies occurs and is evident within the academic literature on VKC which identifies the presence of mistrust in police ([Brennan, 2019](#); [Riggs and Palasinski, 2011](#); [Foster, 2013](#); [Stephen, 2009](#)) and that feelings of mistrust are identified as barrier to the successful use of strategies to address the problem ([Skarlatidou et al., 2021](#)). The reduction of mistrust from those vulnerable to involvement in VKC may be successful if the tendency of the public toward othering is addressed. It is thus suggested that the weaponization of media influence to focus upon the breaking of stereotypes and reduction in fear may indeed result in less othering of individuals, contributing to reduced feelings of alienation and increased feelings of inclusivity.

The SIT suggests that individuals are more likely to act collectively toward social change when cognitive alternatives, or alternative groups relationships can be perceived as achievable ([Lutz et al., 2025](#)). For social change to occur, there needs to be recognition of low group permeability for low status groups, where upward social mobility is restricted, thus creating the motivation of low status groups to redefine their value and engage in social creativity ([Hogg, 2016](#)). When the social order is deemed illegitimate, the creation of cognitive alternatives that redefine the relationship between groups provides the context in which social change becomes possible ([Hogg, 2016](#)). Reducing mistrust among individuals vulnerable to involvement in VKC may be more effectively achieved by addressing the public's tendency to engage in othering. Rather than relying on narratives that reinforce marginalization, media influence could be harnessed to challenge stereotypes, reduce fear, and promote inclusive representations. This shift may help foster a greater sense of belonging and reduce feelings of alienation. While it is important to acknowledge the role of "cognitive alternatives" in enabling social change, it is also important to acknowledge that mobilization can occur through a variety of inclusive and empowering pathways ([van Zomeren et al., 2008](#)). Further research into resistance and collective identity formation is needed to better understand how social change can be supported without reinforcing exclusionary dynamics. Establishment of a superordinate social identity, that recognizes and challenges the marginalization of low status groups offers a cognitive alternative that emphasizes social inclusion and cohesion, may therefore enable mobilization.

The final theme that was explored during analysis was "The Importance of Multi-agency Action." Throughout this theme, strategies and influences from various agencies were explored, with recognition of a range of potential causal factors. One of the most consistent narratives within this theme was the use of knife amnesties as a police intervention. While it was noted that the deployment of measures such as amnesties was positive, it

was common for participants to question their effectiveness. This reflects previous findings within academic literature which suggests amnesties to be ineffective as a stand-alone measure ([Foster, 2013](#)) and that they are likely to have very little impact ([Eades, 2006](#)).

According to literature on VKC, what is recognized to be the most effective strategy is to employ a multi-agency/public health approach ([Foster, 2013](#); [McVie, 2010](#); [Phillips et al., 2022](#); [Ramshaw and Dawson, 2022](#); [Reilly et al., 2023](#)). While such approaches were not explicitly discussed by participants, the recognition of failings and successes from a range of different agencies, such as the police, educational settings and government bodies demonstrated an understanding of the need for multiple agencies to contribute to addressing VKC in the UK.

In terms of the depth of themes, the "The Importance of Multi-agency Action" theme was much more superficial in nature than the three previously discussed themes. Participant responses were largely descriptive which was a limitation of the current study. That said, the current research was able to present an in-depth understanding of how the participants' views and opinions may be based upon group processes. Participants acknowledged their use of stereotypes when discussing VKC offenders and understood those consistent stereotypes to have come from media influence. However, participants also demonstrated an understanding that the presence of those same stereotypes could negatively impact individuals whose characteristics fit stereotypical ideas of VKC offenders. In addition, participants specifically stated that the existence and perpetuation of stereotypes could act as a self-fulfilling prophecy. To understand this concept from a social identity approach, SCT ([Turner, 1985](#)) suggests that individuals self-categorize themselves as belonging to particular social groups. The presence and persistence of stereotypes associated with VKC may influence individuals that are characteristically similar to self-categorize with as belonging to that social group. In turn, this results in individuals adopting the perceived associated group norms, for example, knife carrying. Social identification is made more concrete if other individuals within the social group also adopt the same group norms. Feelings of alienation between individuals and society only further confirm positioning in terms of ingroups and out groups. Furthermore, if efficacy is highlighted by the SIMCA as being a predictor of collective action and social change, then participants' views on the limitations of initiatives and agencies may impact their beliefs that social change to address VKC is possible.

What this demonstrates is the unintentional role people may play in the perpetuation of "us" and "them" dynamics that are relevant to the continuation of VKC. This recognition makes it possible to conceptualize the ways in which changes in social perception can have a significant impact in working toward social change and improving the current situation in the UK with regards to VKC. Theoretical approaches to leadership may offer some insight into strategies that would have a positive impact on the impact of "us" and "them" dynamics that may, in turn, positively impact VKC. Leadership is described as not being about getting individuals to do things but getting them to want to do things ([Haslam et al., 2020](#)). Thus, addressing VKC is not just about getting parties to work together toward social change, but getting them to want to work together toward social

change. If social change is suggested to occur when collective action is taken (Reicher et al., 2011), then victims, offenders, associated agencies, and the public collectively have a role to play when addressing, and positively impacting VKC. Indeed, academic research, albeit on young samples, indicates that individuals are prepared to actively participate in debate and solution seeking when it comes to knife crime, but only if they feel included in the process and not persecuted (Skarlatidou et al., 2021). This suggests that belongingness and shared social identity with the ingroup, as proposed by the SIMCA, is a considerable factor when attempting to engage those vulnerable to involvement in VKC in order to promote collective action. Salience of an overarching identity, while maintaining subgroup distinctiveness may indeed be impactful (Hogg, 2016; Meyer et al., 2016) because it establishes a shared social identity, while preserving the perceived illegitimacy of the social order. Furthermore, leadership (in this case, toward addressing VKC), should not be about forcing compliance or the use of incentivization to provoke action (Haslam et al., 2020). The limited success of punitive measures to address VKC, such as harsher sentencing (Foster, 2013) serves to substantiate this point.

Instead, it is suggested that the breaking down of “us” and “them” dynamics may be key, with Haslam et al. (2020) suggesting that for all parties to establish a superordinate identity and identify as “we” as opposed to “us” and “them,” it is necessary for parties to want to work together toward shared goals and social change. Regarding VKC, addressing stereotypes is one area requiring attention which may begin to minimize the extent of othering that occurs from individuals within society toward individuals vulnerable to involvement and vice versa. Media influence may be profoundly impactful in this endeavor by challenging the perceived social order and promoting shared social identity. However, a more challenging aspect is to achieve shared goals, particularly given the demographic of those likely to be involved in VKC who are likely to have experienced poverty and deprivation (Eades, 2006). Such deprivation may impact on perceptions of efficacy because the interests of such individuals and groups may instead be focused upon financial stability and not toward addressing VKC via social change. It is thus suggested that while the promotion of “we-ness” may be pivotal to achieving social change, societal issues such as socioeconomic strain on vulnerable individuals may be a barrier to successful strategies and therefore, ways to address issues such as these are also necessary.

The public health approach advocated in this paper is deemed to be the most effective strategy in addressing VKC (Phillips et al., 2022; Ramshaw and Dawson, 2022; Sethi, 2010) and the SIA may offer the theoretical foundations to improve its success through the application of the SIMCA. Firstly, agencies involved in a public health approach should be inclusive of the very groups and individuals they aim to support (Skarlatidou et al., 2021) in order to promote a shared social identity. SIA approaches to social change suggest that identification of superordinate identities may be useful within a public health approach (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000). However, it is important that subgroup identities are acknowledged and validated to avoid identity threats and to maintain the perceived illegitimacy and

perceived injustice required for collective action to occur (Hogg, 2016; Meyer et al., 2016). In addition, cognitive alternatives that redefine the relationship between social groups should be identified, as should practical alternatives to address external factors such as poverty and deprivation to increase the perception of group efficacy. Leadership of public health approaches should consider ways in which leaders can be perceived to be prototypical of the constructed superordinate identity (Haslam et al., 2020) and successful leadership will, in turn, also positively impact perceived group efficacy.

Discussions around alienation in literature (Clement, 2010; Harding, 2020) suggest that those currently perceived as leaders acting to reduce VKC are not perceived as representative of the groups they are attempting to lead, which may explain the limited successes of police and government actions thus far. In addition, the current analysis identifies perceived limitations of agencies in addressing VKC, suggesting a perceived lack of efficacy currently and thus, this is an area requiring further academic attention. Development of a public health approach model which incorporates the SIA foundations, namely the elements of the SIMCA, may be pivotal in improving outcomes and thus, a necessary direction for future research and discussion is to consider the conceptualization, development, and implementation of such a model.

5 Conclusion

The present research study aimed to address the research question “What are the social structures and mechanisms evident in the accounts of the general public, which have the potential to contribute to incidents of VKC in the UK?” Interviews were conducted and RTA was used to analyze the data. Four themes were identified; (1) Views of VKC Connected to Stereotypes; (2) Media Influence on Beliefs, Perceptions, and Attitudes Related to VKC; (3) Categorization of Offenders as Members of the Out-group and Victims as part of the In-group; and (4) The Importance of Multi-agency Action. Stereotypes were discussed as being evident in the data both explicitly and implicitly and the consistency of these stereotypes was noted. Also consistent were certain narratives within the data, suggesting outside influence on the views and opinions of the general public. Participants identified such influences as coming from the media. Also explored was the presence of othering within participant narratives via identification as potential victims and separation from those perceived to be typical offenders. Additionally, participants identified the successes and failings of a range of professional bodies, indicating the need for a multi-agency approach to tackling knife crime. Findings were discussed with reference to SIA theories and the SIMCA. Strategies that may be useful in changing public perception and were explored in the context of working toward social change and reducing VKC in England and Wales. Finally, it was argued that a model of the ways in which the SIMCA can be implemented into a public health approach may be useful in addressing VKC, concluding with the recognition for conceptualization, development and implementation of a SIA informed public health approach.

6 Limitations of the current research and recommendations for future research and practice

The current study identified the significance of social context with regards to VKC, specifically approaching the topic from a SIA perspective. While analysis and discussion identified the need for the construction of a superordinate identity to be implemented in public health approaches to reduce VKC, it is not able to identify what such a superordinate identity may be. It is therefore necessary to devise future research which may enable such identification. In addition, while the research offers qualitative support for the application of the SIA to the context of VKC, further research should be conducted to test the applicability of the SIA to VKC to substantiate or falsify its effectiveness within preventative initiatives. This paper argues that shared social identity and breaking down of us and them dynamics may be effective strategies to reduce VKC. Future research should therefore explore and test the effectiveness of SIA informed strategies. Should the findings suggest that SIA informed interventions are not effective, then this would call into question the extent to which social identity can be applied to VKC. While the current study aimed to produce transferable findings that may apply to the wider public, it does not offer statistical generalizability. Further research could therefore aim to produce generalizable findings through large-scale quantitative methods, which explores the extent to which the themes identified within the current study apply to larger samples.

A further limitation of the current analysis is its focus on stereotypical offenders of VKC. This arose due to the prominence of stereotypes within the interview transcripts; however, a consequence of this is an inability to consider theoretical explanations and impactful strategies for non-stereotypical presentations of VKC, such as incidents which arise as a result of domestic violence. It is therefore suggested that research which focuses solely on those non-stereotypical presentations of VKC and the social categorization evident related to those presentations may add to the analysis conducted within the current study or alternatively enable the development of other models to address specific VKC presentations. In addition, while this study suggests that stereotypical representations of VKC offenders is a consequence of media narratives, it does not specifically analyze new reports to explore the extent to which stereotypical characteristics are reported within news reports. While analysis of media discourse has been conducted previously (Vinnakota et al., 2022; Williams, 2023), content analysis of media reporting would be an avenue worthy of further research. Specifically research should focus on the extent to which media narratives portray VKC as a problem commonly associated with particular groups.

A final limitation to consider is that the samples used in this study were all representative of the mainstream general public and fell within the in-group presented within this paper. As a consequence, it is unclear how the perceived low status and marginalized groups may experience or even challenge the stereotypes presented within media narratives, or how their experiences may support or challenge the assumptions presented within this research. This is particularly important given the

presence of victim offender overlaps evidenced within academic literature (Bailey et al., 2020), which may complicate the group-based categorizations discussed. Future research should therefore consider the experiences of those directly impacted by VKC and those directly impacted by stereotypes related to VKC as presented within media narratives.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Health and Education Research Ethics and Governance Committee at Manchester Metropolitan University - Project Number 42440 - email FOHE-ethics@mmu.ac.uk. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

ZP: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RW: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. DL: Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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