

Tragic killings of teenagers in London used to urge greater police powers

Paul Mitchell
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The media, politicians and police are using the brutal murders of young teenagers in knife and gun crime attacks in London to restore police measures once routinely used to victimise working class, particularly black, communities. The most telling is the demand for greater powers to stop and search—along the lines of the “sus” (suspicion) laws that led to widespread resentment, rebellion and riots in the 1980s.

The heartfelt pleas of grieving mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters who have seen young lives destroyed are being cynically exploited. The newspapers and airwaves are full of stories claiming the capital is overwhelmed by an epidemic of knife and gun crime organised by hordes of feral youth. Particular attention is directed towards “black-on-black” and gang-related crime.

Leading the pack was Rupert Murdoch’s *Sunday Times*, which seized on the 15 murders in February (up from 8 in January) to proclaim that violence in the UK capital was now so bad that it had surpassed New York—where 11 homicides had taken place in the same month.

Other media outlets joined in the chorus, including London’s *Evening Standard*, whose new editor, George Osborne, has a major responsibility, as Conservative Chancellor from 2010 to 2016, for the drastic cuts that have plunged many of the capital’s youth into desperate straits.

Disgracefully, the *Sunday Times* report gave another opportunity to Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) Commissioner Cressida Dick, who led the anti-terror operation that ended with the police murder of Jean Charles De Menezes in 2005, to call for more stop and searches—something she has pursued since being appointed in 2017. Dick announced that a new Violent Crime Task Force of 120 officers would target “gang

members” for “any crime” and get them “locked up.”

Home Secretary Amber Rudd weighed in with a new £40 million Serious Violence Strategy, telling social media companies to act against content that incites violence or glamorises crime. All this was dressed up with the ritual promise of “new partnerships within the community” to help young people with employment and “work experience opportunities” that never materialise.

As Rudd made her announcement, the Department of Education revealed a 25 percent drop in the number of apprenticeship starts this year and that employers were using the current Apprenticeship Levy fund to subsidise training for existing employees.

A major reason for the ramped-up right-wing law and order campaign is next month’s local elections. The Conservatives are so hated, particularly after the Grenfell Tower tragedy, that they face a wipe-out. Latest polls show just 28 percent of voters support them. They could lose several flagship councils, including Kensington and Chelsea, the site of Grenfell Tower, which has been Tory-controlled for over half a century.

No reactionary furore would be complete without the asinine intervention of Boris Johnson, foreign secretary and one-time London mayor. He made no bones that the aim was to whip up a law-and-order campaign.

Johnson said that, unlike his successor, Labour’s Sadiq Khan, he had been tough on crime—increasing the use of stop and search powers after he became mayor in 2008. He had removed knives from the street while mentoring young people to stop them “getting sucked into gangs ... this is what Sadiq Khan needs to do. You cannot be soft on this.”

Labour’s response was predictable. Leading Labourites queued up to insist they were the real

defenders of law and order and police powers.

Khan declared that everyone would “welcome the promise from [Labour leader] Jeremy Corbyn—a Labour Government would recruit 10,000 more police officers nationally to help keep us all safe.” While social programmes are being gutted, Khan promised to take on an extra 1,000 police officers.

Former Labour minister David Lammy blamed cuts to Border Force officers for a rise in “foreign gangs” attracting local youth to crime.

The 1970s and 1980s were the heyday of the “sus” laws, based on the 1824 Vagrancy Act, which allowed the police to stop any “suspected person” to arbitrarily harass working class areas, particularly the poorest black communities. Their unrestrained use provoked urban rioting in the early 1980s. This led to the Scarman Inquiry into the Brixton riots recommending that police ought to be more “reasonable” with their suspicions before stop and search operations.

Recording stop and searches was a recommendation of the 1999 Macpherson Inquiry into the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence and was supposed to reduce fears among Britain’s minority population that the police unfairly targeted them. At the time, liberal commentators and equal rights campaigners welcomed the changes, saying it would make the police more accountable and help overcome the “culture of institutional racism” in the force.

More recently the “Analysis of Metropolitan Police Service panel data, 2004–14” report found stop and search had no effect at all on violent crime. It was estimated that, if weapon searches were 10 percent higher in week one, violent crime would have been 0.01 percent lower in week two.

In 2016, the Home Office published a report into the impact of Johnson’s self-glorifying Operation Blunt II. It found the dramatically increased number of stop and searches in London had “no statistically significant crime-reducing effect from the large increase in weapons searches.”

Those involved with the plight of young people have spoken out in opposition. Runnymede Trust’s Dr. Zubaida Haque said the use of stop and search is not effective against violent crime because it does not address the root cause of the problem:

“The biggest predictor of violent crime, of any crime, is poverty. ... And we know from research that in areas

where they have addressed poverty, crime has gone down. That happens in multi-ethnic areas, as well as less diverse areas.”

Beth Murray from youth charity Catch 22 said, “Most of the shootings and stabbings that we see often aren’t linked to organised crime or gangs, they are kids with knives getting out of control with each other.”

Murray admitted social media was an “aggravating factor” in youth violence, but something more fundamental was at work. “A lot of young people in London don’t have anywhere to go ... There have been huge challenges and cuts to preventative youth services ... It’s hard for young people to find purpose ... We’re seeing a lot of young people who don’t feel like they have a lot of hope.”

According to a recent Unison report, between 2010 and 2016 £387 million was slashed from youth services; between 2012 and 2016 a total of 603 youth clubs were closed. Another report by the London Green Party revealed that in the last five years £28 million has been slashed from council youth service budgets in the capital, resulting in the closure of 36 youth centres and a 48 percent cut in council youth service employment.

Such criticisms barely scratch the surface of the social problems that give rise to the increase in gun and knife crime and so-called “gang culture.” Youth unemployment in London is the second highest rate in the country—20 percent for white youth and 44 percent for black youth in 2017. What jobs there are often are poorly paid, insecure and temporary in the most expensive of cities to live. Britain has polarised along class lines as successive governments have carried out policies serving the interests of a tiny, privileged elite.

Addressing this situation demands a frontal assault on the biggest criminal gangs in London—who sit in the City’s boardrooms and mansions.



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