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A HATE CRIME CRISIS? INVESTIGATING THE FUNCTION OF BREXIT, TERRORISM, COVID-19 AND BLACK LIVES MATTER ON LEVELS OF HATE CRIMES IN TODAY'S UNITED KINGDOM

'Hate crime' is a term used with increasing regularity in today's United Kingdom (UK). Relatively new, it came to prominence following the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in London in 1993², the racist and homophobic nail bomb attacks by neo-Nazi terrorist David Copeland in London in 1999³, and the 9/11 and 7/7 terror attacks⁴: each drawing public and political attention to the harassment and violence experienced by minority groups. It was however the publication of the Macpherson Report⁵ and its evidencing of the failures of the Metropolitan Police's investigation into Lawrence's murder that catalysed change, in particular how crimes motivated by prejudice and hostility were recorded and duly responded to via the criminal justice system.

While so, hate crime remains ambiguous and at times subjective not least because of how it is conceived and understood. For academics, hate crime should be expansively understood, incorporating any act of violence, hostility or intimidation directed towards people on the basis of their identity or perceived 'difference'⁶. Premised on 'difference' functions

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² Kushnick, Louis. "Over Policed and under Protected": Stephen Lawrence, Institutional and Police Practices." *Sociological research online* 4, no. 1 (1999): 156–166.

³ Spaaij, Ramón. "The enigma of lone wolf terrorism: An assessment." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010): 854–870.

⁴ Hussain, Yasmin, and Paul Bagguley. "Securitized citizens: Islamophobia, racism and the 7/7 London bombings." *The Sociological Review* 60, no. 4 (2012): 715–734.

⁵ Lea, John. "The Macpherson Report and the question of institutional racism." *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 39, no. 3 (2000): 219–233.

⁶ Chakraborti, N., Garland, J. & Hardy, S. (2014) *The Leicester Hate Crime Project: Findings and Conclusions Executive Summary*. Leicester: University of Leicester.

to illustrate how anyone from any background is liable to becoming a victim of hate and not only those from minority groups. A much different approach is evident however when it comes to how hate crime is operationalised by the police. According to the College of Policing, a hate crime is any criminal offence that is perceived by the victim – or importantly, any other person – as being motivated by hostility or prejudice⁷. While in principle expansive, police are only required to record hate crimes on the basis of five characteristics: disability, race⁸, religion, sexual orientation and transgender. While some police forces do incorporate other characteristics such as sex workers and misogyny, they are locally implemented and only on a discretionary basis.

Since 2012, the UK government has annually published data relating to hate crimes recorded by police forces across England and Wales. Over the past half-decade, this data shows that as well as the number recorded for each of the five characteristics having increased exponentially so too have the total number been at record levels year on year. There is little consensus about what has been described by some as a hate crime crisis in the UK today⁹. Using this as a start point, this article seeks to investigate what has been behind this unprecedented rise in hate crime numbers. First setting out the methodological approach, what is currently known about hate crime in the UK is considered and contextualised. In doing so, the incidence and impact of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit), terror attacks and plots, COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter (BLM) are critically analysed. Here, Perry's 'permission to hate' model¹⁰ is drawn upon to theoretically frame and subsequently attempt to explain. In conclusion, new thinking is put forward to better understand the relationship that exists in today's UK between the level of hate crime and the broader socio-political landscape.

Methods

A twofold methodological approach informs this article. First, a comprehensive review of appropriate scholarly and non-scholarly literatures. As well as centring on academic literatures relating to hate crime in the UK, the review was broadened to incorporate other pertinent topics, such

⁷ College of Policing (2014) Hate Crime Operational Guidance. Coventry: College of Policing.

⁸ While 'race' is typically understood within the social sciences to be socially constructed, it is used here in the context of the official language and terminology of the UK's legislation relating to hate crime, race relations and equalities among others. According to the Equalities Act 2010, race includes skin colour, nationality and ethnicity.

⁹ Allen, C. (2018) Hasskriminalität in Großbritannien. Wissen schafft Demokratie (No. 2018/4: 84–93).

¹⁰ Perry, B. (2002). In the name of hate: understanding hate crimes. London: Routledge.

as Brexit, COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter. Where appropriate, grey literatures were also reviewed and indicatively included hate crime policies, strategies and reports as also guidance and operational documents relevant to the policing of hate crime. Finally, appropriate non-academic sources were also necessarily reviewed given the 'live' nature of the topic being investigated and the timeliness of its focus. Here again, these indicatively included news reportage and op-ed type pieces relevant to a range of appropriate issues.

Second, a secondary review of hate crime datasets from both official and non-official sources in England and Wales. As well as including the annual datasets published by the UK government via the Home Office, so too were datasets published by charitable and community focused organisations also included. For some of these organisations, the data collected is referred to as 'third party reporting'. In the UK, this is where victims of hate crime that do not want to report directly to the police can still do so via certain charitable and community organisations. This approach is justified for two reasons. The first is in response to research which shows that hate crimes are significantly under-reported¹¹. Additional and alternative ways to report are intended to make the process easier and therefore provide a better picture of hate crime levels. The second is a response to evidence showing that while some identity groups and communities are known to be disproportionately targeted for hate crime, they also do not want or feel apprehensive towards reporting to the police¹². Among others, these include black and Muslim communities.

Hate Crime in Context

As before, hate crime numbers in the UK have been on an upward trajectory for the past five years. From government data published at the end of 2020, this upward trajectory continued despite the country having been placed under lockdown conditions for around a quarter of the year due to COVID. Accordingly, more than 105,000 hate crimes were duly recorded¹³. Despite data from Greater Manchester Police – the fourth largest police force – not being included due to IT issues, total hate crime numbers had increased by 8 per cent. So too was it the fifth year in succession hate crimes numbers were at a record high. That same data also showed that in less than a decade, the total number of hate crimes recorded by

¹¹ Chakraborti, N., Garland, J. & Hardy, S. (2014) *The Leicester Hate Crime Project: Findings and Conclusions Executive Summary*. Leicester: University of Leicester.

¹² Chakraborti, N., Garland, J. & Hardy, S. (2014) *The Leicester Hate Crime Project: Findings and Conclusions Executive Summary*. Leicester: University of Leicester.

¹³ Home Office (2020). *Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2019/20*. London: Home Office.

police had doubled: from 42,255 in 2012/13 to 109,736 in 2019/20. In 2016/17, data showed the largest overall increase in any one year¹⁴.

Breaking down the data, more than three quarters were racially motivated; a 6 per cent on the previous year, now exceeding 76,000. It was however the number of hate crimes targeting those who were or were perceived to be lesbian, gay or bisexual (sexual orientation) that had the largest percentage increase: 19 per cent to just over 15,800. Increases were also evident in relation to transgender identity (16 per cent) and disability (9 per cent). Only religiously motivated hate crime numbers were lower than the previous year, down 5 per cent. Noting that more than half targeted Muslims¹⁵, had the data from Greater Manchester Police been included it is likely the overall decrease would have been lower or even have increased given the significant Muslim and Jewish communities residing in the areas they cover.

As hate crime numbers have increased, questions have been asked about the reasons for this. In recent years, official data has been published along with a statement from government that the increases are 'likely' due to a better awareness of hate crime, improved recording mechanisms by police forces, and a greater willingness of victims to come forward when they experience hate crime¹⁶. Allen however is dismissive, suggesting the official explanations to be somewhat biased and overly simplistic¹⁷: deliberately ignoring known causal factors. If they were to acknowledge these, he goes on, not only would it inculcate government but so too would it demand a response.

Causes and Drivers

According to non-governmental data, numbers of hate crime increased 23 per cent in the 11 months following the 2016 Brexit Referendum¹⁸. However, 'Leave' campaigners – those supporting the UK's withdrawal from the EU – dismissed such claims. For Goodenough, "perhaps the

¹⁴ Dearden, L. (2017) Hate-crime reports rise by almost a third in year as Home Office figures illustrate EU-referendum spike. *The Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/hate-crimes-eu-referendum-spike-brexit-terror-attacks-police-home-office-europeans-xenophobia-a8004716.html>

¹⁵ Home Office (2020). Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2019/20. London: Home Office.

¹⁶ Casciani, D. (2015) Hate crimes reported to police up 18% in England and Wales. BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34515763>

¹⁷ Allen, C. Under the Spectre of Brexit, Hate Crimes Are Again At Record Levels, Medium 2019 <https://drchrisallen.medium.com/under-the-spectre-of-brexit-hate-crimes-are-at-record-levels-again-12e9d6c24af5> (accessed 1 May 2021).

¹⁸ Bulman, M. (2017) Brexit vote sees highest spike in religious and racial hate crimes ever recorded. *The Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/racist-hate-crimes-surge-to-record-high-after-brexit-vote-new-figures-reveal-a7829551.html>

referendum did lead to a rise in hate crime...perhaps it didn't...the only thing that is clear is that there is little proof either way"¹⁹. That 'proof' has since become available and not only does it show an increase in hate crimes in the months following the Referendum but even more worryingly, in the hours and days immediately after²⁰. Unlike the racially-motivated hate crime typical of the UK – that which targets non-Whites – in the immediate aftermath of the Referendum, racially-motivated hate crime took on a distinctly European flavour, targeting those with Mediterranean and Eastern European heritages²¹.

The correlation between hate crime and Brexit has become more apparent ever since. This was evident in September 2019 when two sharp increases in hate crime numbers were reorded. One coincided with the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson describing the proposed Brexit bill as a "surrender bill"²². Recurrent in the Leave campaign, political The other increase coincided with government debates about the reopening of Parliament and the UK's Supreme Court ruling that the current prorogation – the formal end of a parliamentary session that was called in an attempt to rush through new Brexit legislation – was unlawful²³. Here, political discourse countered by suggesting the Supreme Court was somehow in cohorts with the EU. As Chief Constable Charlie Hall of the National Police Chiefs' Council put it when asked about hate crime increases, "...sometimes the way things are said [by politicians] can be perceived as giving permission to people to act beyond the normal boundaries...it does have an impact"²⁴.

Increases in hate crime numbers also occur immediately after terror attacks. Given the relatively high number of plots and attacks in the UK over the past five years, this also has to be seen as having had an impact on rising numbers. This was especially true of 2017 with attacks in Westminster (March), Manchester (May), London Bridge (June), Finsbury Park

¹⁹ Goodenough, T. (2017) Hate crime is up – but it's not fair to blame Brexit. *The Spectator*, <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2017/10/hate-crime-is-up-but-its-not-fair-to-blame-brexite/>

²⁰ Devine, D (2018) Hate crime did spike after the referendum – even allowing for other factors. *LSE Brexit*, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/03/19/hate-crime-did-spike-after-the-referendum-even-allowing-for-other-factors/>

²¹ Sime, D. (2018) Young Eastern Europeans Are Reporting Increased Racism And Xenophobia After The Brexit Vote, *Huffington Post*, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/eastern-europe-brexite_uk_5acc2f5e4b0152082fdd6c8

²² Rowena Mason, PM's divisive 'surrender bill' phrase is neither careless nor casual, *Guardian* 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/26/pms-divisive-surrender-bill-phrase-neither-careless-nor-casual> (accessed 2 June 2021).

²³ BBC News, Supreme Court: Suspending Parliament was unlawful, judges rule, BBC 2019 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-49810261> (accessed 12 May 2021).

²⁴ Lizzie Dearden, Hate crime surged during Brexit 'surrender' bill debates in parliament, police reveal, *Independent* 2019 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/brexit-hate-crime-surrender-bill-boris-johnson-debate-bennact-police-a9152106.html> (accessed 17 May 2021).

(June) and Parsons Green (September). As research has shown, increases in hate crimes following terror attacks was first evident in Europe in the wake of 9/11²⁵. Since then, post-terror attack hate crimes targeting Muslims and their communities embody a sense of 'revenge'²⁶. This is evident in non-official third-party datasets published by Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks). Following every terror attack in 2017, sharp and dramatic increases in hate crimes targeting Muslims was recorded²⁷. For Tell MAMA, the correlation between terror attacks and hate crimes targeting Muslims is unequivocal and a driver for hate crime numbers increasing year on year.

Another relates to COVID and pertinent to the increase despite the country being under lockdown. Prior to lockdown, new COVID-specific trends began to emerge including the targeting of those of Chinese and South East Asian heritage. Similar to those occurring following terror attacks, so too did these COVID-specific hate crimes display 'revenge'. With verbal abuse centring on 'Chinese virus', 'China Virus' or 'Wuhan Virus' those being targeted were clearly being blamed²⁸. During lockdown, another COVID-specific trend emerged targeted towards Muslims. Having begun on social media, Muslims were blamed for spreading the virus due to claims they could not understand government guidelines due to not being able to read or speak English and because Islam forbids alcohol meaning they could not use hand sanitiser²⁹. Despite there being no evidence to support such claims, they were shared thousands of times in conjunction with the hashtag #CoronaJihad³⁰. While the number of hate crimes recorded during lockdown were below average, non-official sources suggest that these online claims saw Muslims being blamed and duly targeted for hate crime.

Following lockdown, another trend resulting in higher numbers of hate crimes being recorded than in the same months the previous year was also evident. According to official datasets, the sharp increase in numbers

²⁵ Allen, C., & Nielsen, J. S. (2002). Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001. Vienna: EUMC.

²⁶ Allen, C. (2010) *Islamophobia*. Farnham: Ashgate; Allen, C., Isakjee, A., & Young, Ö. Ö. (2013) "Maybe we are hated": The experience and impact of anti-Muslim hate on British Muslim women. Birmingham: University of Birmingham.

²⁷ Tell MAMA (2018). Beyond the incident – outcomes for victims of anti-Muslim prejudice. London: Tell MAMA.

²⁸ Walters, M. (2020) Hating the coronavirus is pointless. But no good will come from turning anxieties and anger against Chinese people, *INHS Blog* <https://internationalhatestudies.com/hating-the-coronavirus-is-pointless-but-no-good-will-come-from-turning-anxieties-and-anger-against-chinese-people/> (accessed 2 February 2021).

²⁹ Allen, C. (2020) COVID-19: Blaming Britain's Muslim Communities, *British Journal of Community Justice Blog*, <https://www.mmuperu.co.uk/bjccj/blog/covid-19-blaming-britains-muslim-communities> (accessed 1 February 2021).

³⁰ Allen, C. (2020) Islamophobia, the far-right and the 'new normal', in Faliq, A., Boynukalin, A., Forman, H. D., Tusin, S., & Shire, M. (eds.) *Emerging European right-wing narratives and the refugee crisis in the 'COVID-19 era'*. London: Centre for British Turkish Understanding, pp.11–14.

in June and July 2020 were directly catalysed by BLM protests two months prior³¹. 34 per cent higher than the same months the previous year, while these increases were neither localised nor restricted to locations where protests took place, they were overwhelmingly motivated on the basis of race or religion. Reverting back to type through the targeting of non-Whites, it is unclear at this juncture the extent to which notions of 'blame' or 'revenge' were either causal or catalytic. What can be concluded however is akin to Brexit and terror attacks, so too would there appear to be some causal link between COVID and BLM to numbers and levels of hate crime.

Permission to Hate

The thing that links Brexit, terror attacks, COVID and BLM is that all occur in the socio-political spaces. For Perry, this is important because socio-political spaces cannot be disentangled from the incidence of hate crime³². As she explains, this is because socio-political spaces are where hospitable climates can be established that subsequently bestow 'permission to hate' and by extension, permission to enact hate crime³³. This is made possible through the ongoing predication of divisive ideologies and ideas put forward by political and elite actors that seek to demarcate 'us' from 'them'. Constructing various 'Others' that are seen to be oppositional, threatening and fear-inducing, so too are they seen to be to blame for a whole host of social, political, cultural and economic ills. Accordingly, those Others are adjudged to be deserving of hate.

This was evident in how Leave campaigners regularly and routinely identified a whole range of Others to argue that not only did they not belong in the UK but if we withdrew from the EU, they would have to leave. For them, the 'problem' was that the EU imposed immigration law on the UK; the 'solution' then was to leave. In reinforcing notions of 'us' and 'them', the Leave campaign bestowed permission to hate those Others that were simultaneously the 'problem'. For Allen and Ogem-Young³⁴, Brexit affords a perfect example to evidence and understand how permission to hate functions. Similar is evident in relation to terror attacks also. Over the past two decades, political actors have unequivocally constructed UK

³¹ Home Office (2020). Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2019/20. London: Home Office.

³² Perry, B. (2002). In the name of hate: understanding hate crimes. London: Routledge.

³³ Poynting, S., & Perry, B. (2007). Climates of hate: Media and state inspired victimisation of Muslims in Canada and Australia since 9/11. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 19:2, 151-71.

³⁴ Allen, C. & Young, Ö. Ö. (2017). Brexit, Birmingham and Belonging: Anxieties About 'Home' Among Secondary Migrant Somali Families. *Sociological Review*, <https://www.thesociologicalreview.com/blog/brexit-birmingham-and-belonging-anxieties-about-home-among-secondary-migrant-somali-families.html>

Muslims as a wholly problematic Other³⁵. While the constraints of this article do not allow a full investigation into this here, the link between Othering and permission to hate can be easily illustrated. Shortly after the Prime Minister described Muslim women who wear the full face veil as “letterboxes” and “bank robbers”³⁶, not only was there a marked increase in the number of hate crimes targeting veiled Muslim women but so too did the perpetrators use the same language as Johnson³⁷.

Given COVID and BLM are both still ‘live’, drawing unequivocal conclusions could be problematic. While so, both would appear to have functioned in much the same ways as Brexit and terror attacks. At the start of lockdown, the increase in hate crimes targeting those of South East Asian appearance would seem to resonate with the political Othering and subsequent blaming of China³⁸. Likewise, when the politician Craig Whittaker claimed that Muslims were to blame for the spread of COVID³⁹. The same might also be rue of the harsher lockdown conditions that were placed on some densely populated Muslims areas of the country⁴⁰. BLM was maybe a little subtle, for instance when the Prime Minister criticised the protests given their propensity for violence⁴¹. As many of those protesting were young, male and Black, Johnson’s criticisms could have resonated with stereotypes about young Black men being aggressive and violent.

Conclusion

In line with Perry, it is extremely difficult to disentangle the UK’s current hate crime crisis from its contemporary socio-political spaces. While this has been invisible in official attempts to explain the hate crime crisis,

³⁵ Allen, C. (2010). Fear and loathing: The political discourse in relation to Muslims and Islam in the British contemporary setting. *Politics and Religion*, 4:2, 221-36.

³⁶ Johnson, B. (2018) Denmark has got it wrong. Yes, the burka is oppressive and ridiculous – but that’s still no reason to ban it. *The Daily Telegraph*, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/08/05/denmark-has-got-wrong-yes-burka-oppressive-ridiculous-still/>

³⁷ Dearden, L. (2018) ‘Letterbox’ insults against Muslim women spike in wake of Boris Johnson comments. *The Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/boris-johnson-burqa-muslim-women-veil-attacks-islamophobia-letterboxes-rise-a8488651.html>; Tell MAMA (2018) Pensioners loudly echo Boris Johnson’s niqab comments in doctor’s surgery, <https://tellmamauk.org/pensioners-loudly-echo-boris-johnsons-niqab-comments-in-doctors-surgery/>

³⁸ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-11/u-k-risks-china-spat-with-johnson-attack-on-demented-medicine>

³⁹ <https://news.sky.com/story/tory-mp-condemned-for-blaming-bame-and-muslim-people-for-rise-in-coronavirus-cases-12039949>

⁴⁰ Chris Allen Perspective.

⁴¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2020/jun/12/boris-johnson-we-should-not-support-black-lives-matter-protests-churchill-statue-video>

there can be little doubt that the UK's contemporary socio-political spaces have been hospitable to highly divisive discourses and ideologies that would seem to have the potential to not only bestow permission to hate but so too the permission to enact that same hate. Accordingly, the current hate crime crisis can be seen as something of an echo chamber: one that reflects the socio-political spaces of today's UK. Demarcated, differentiated and divided, various Others now exist in those same spaces upon which legitimacy to hate is duly conferred. To some extent, it could be argued that hate has become normalised and thereby unquestioned.

Year on year increases and record levels of hate crime is therefore a culmination of Brexit, terror attacks, COVID and BLM. So too might it be the culmination of a decade of austerity politics that has not only deepened poverty and deprivation for many but so too has it contributed to the social divisions that currently exist. This is important because the likely post-COVID economic downturn will further exacerbate the situation. Blaming and scapegoating various Others not only provides a quick and easy solution to an extremely complex problem but so too does it deflect criticism away from political actors. It is highly likely therefore that far from getting better, levels of hate and hate crime will continue to rise in the UK at least for the foreseeable future.

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Summary: Since 2012, the United Kingdom government has annually published data relating to the number of hate crimes recorded by police forces across England and Wales. Over the past half-decade, the number of hate crimes has increased year on year and are currently at record levels. Some have referred to this as a crisis. This article seeks to investigate the drivers and causes for this, to try and better understand what hate crime looks like in the UK today. First, this article considers and contextualises what is currently known about hate crime in the UK. Having identified some correlations, it explores the relationship between increases in hate crime numbers and the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit), terror attacks, COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter. In trying to explain these relationships, Perry's 'permission to hate' model is used. In conclusion, this article argues that while hate crime numbers are currently at record levels it is highly likely that they will continue to increase for at least the foreseeable future. A timely and contemporarily salient study, this article puts forward new thinking about hate crime in the UK and the correlation that is clearly evident with occurrences that take place in the country's socio-political spaces.