

University of Portsmouth  
Doctor of Philosophy by Publication

Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.

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## **Partnership working and solving complex societal problems: policy solutions to knife crime**

This paper links the researcher's new and existing publications in response to the required submission for PhD by publication.

### **Statement**

I confirm that this body of work has not been submitted for any other qualification, either at the University of Portsmouth or any other institution.

### **Abstract:**

This PhD study focuses on the role that multi-agency partnership working has in resolving complex societal issues, with a particular focus on youth violence and knife crime in the UK. The work progresses from an analysis of collaborative working (Roberts, 2016) to a book written for Vernon Press in 2020 on policy solutions to knife crime through modelling a partnership approach in the public sector (VRU, 2020; Roberts, 2020). Across all publications included in this PhD, the theme is reiterated from locally based multi-agency partnerships to nationally supported partnerships between the governments of England and Scotland, plus the partnership approaches used in the USA to combat violent youth crime. Beginning with a conference paper on partnership working in 2016 and moving through to journal articles, book chapters and finally a monograph in 2020, partnership and collaborative working are explored in real-life social issues and latterly, with a detailed focus on youth violence and knife crime. The body of work addresses a recent (within the last five years) dearth of academic research into partnership and collaborative working as a means to address complex social problems such as knife crime. The contribution that this work makes to the field lies in the uniqueness of the primary research and in re-stating the relevance of a partnership approach to knife crime in particular. This is set out in detail in section 1. below.

### **1.0 PhD Body of Research**

**1.1** The body of research presented here for the award of PhD focuses on partnership working and public policy. It later explores the escalating problem of knife crime in Britain with the specific purpose of finding and presenting policy solutions for it which are based on a partnership approach. Uniquely, the suggestions for tackling knife crime shown in the research, particularly the 2019 paper on the London Killings of 2018 (Roberts, 2019) and the 2020 book, Solutions to Knife Crime: a path through the red sea? (Roberts, 2020) came from the people who participated in the research.

**1.2** The reason for a holistic, functionalist approach to the research is to specifically address the urgent practitioner and professional need for robust, primary academic research in this field. This need is demonstrated in the 2019 paper and in the 2020 book. Policy changes can be effectively based upon such evidence-based research, and practical, real world changes may be realised through policy. To bring this into perspective for the body of work

presented here, there are two significant areas in which the research makes a contribution to the field

- a). Through addressing specific gaps in the discourse about youth violence and knife crime
- b). Setting out new developments for partnership working

Firstly, there appear to be three things that are missing in the current discourse within the field of youth violence. These are specifically addressed by the research:

1. **A 'voice' has been absent for those who work with and for communities to address youth violence, particularly knife crime.** This includes professionals, community representatives and offenders. The remedies explored through this body of research mean that the professionals and offenders closely involved in youth violence are given a vehicle for expression alongside the academic discourse on knife crime. It is a unique feature of this research in that civil and public servants' views on the violence, although not routinely sought through primary research within the field, are directly available here. The reasons may be varied, but the researcher hypothesises that access can often be a problem across a full range of professionals such as police, health, education, public safety (local authorities) and social services. The researcher is able to access the views of public and civil servants in this field due to long term practical experience, enabling their voices to be heard. Such voices provide a new, holistic perspective for both the causes and the solutions for youth violence and knife crime.
2. **Primary research into solutions for knife crime from practitioners and offenders.** Existing publications in the field appear to concentrate on specific groups such as young offenders (Sanders-McDonagh, 2019) or marginalised teenagers (Straw, et.al., 2018), for example. Here, research tends to focus on the causes and the effects of knife crime rather than solutions. The value of the current researcher's work lies in the joint focus upon solutions from both offenders and practitioners. This appears to be unique in the field.
3. **A coherent, updated knife crime policy in England.** There is a notable gap in the policy canon as England has no specific knife crime policy. The book, *Solutions to Knife Crime: a path through the red sea?* (Roberts, 2020) proposes the mechanism for this to be established through a process of policy transfer. Whilst it is not intended to show that such a process is easy or could be executed quickly, it is important to emphasise the salience of this remedy in a field which urgently requires it. Those who have addressed knife crime and youth violence successfully, such as the Scottish and Staten Island examples explored in the research (SVRU, 2021; Scottish Government, 2021; CVG, 2021), demonstrate the effectiveness of coherent policies and legislation to tackle knife crime and violent youth crime. It is therefore intended that the body of work presented for this PhD study shows that the mechanisms exist to tackle the issues set out above and could be directly addressed in England towards knife crime in particular.

**1.3** Secondly, the contribution which the body of work presented for this PhD makes to the wider field of partnership and collaboration lies in two areas:

i). Through reasserting the value and relevance of multi-agency partnership in this arena. The voices of those involved in these partnerships as professionals and advisers are given a platform through the research and offenders are brought into the debate which makes the research unique in the field. The research helps to set out new ways in which such partnerships can resolve convoluted societal problems in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, taking special note of the recommendations for collaborative working put forward by research participants. This is directly referred to in the 2020 publication *Solutions to Knife Crime: a path through the red sea?* (Roberts, 2020) specifically on pages 19-20. The recommendations are for widening the composition of partnerships and re-thinking the dynamics of partnership working; embracing virtual groups and communities; establishing special task groups; time-limited action projects; handing leadership or chairing responsibilities to communities where appropriate; working across sectoral boundaries to share information.

ii). Secondly, there do not appear, at the time of writing, to be any recent (in the last five years) robust academic works on multi-agency partnership working as a mechanism for addressing youth violence and knife crime in particular. For this reason, the body of work offered for the PhD by the researcher fills this space, especially in light of the UK Government's own recommendations that partnership working is the best way forward in tackling knife crime (HM. Government, 2018).

1.4 It is not suggested within the work that the challenges behind both establishing new ways of partnership working or transferring the Scottish knife crime policy are simple or straightforward. The subject of policy transfer for knife crime is to be addressed in detail by the researcher in a forthcoming paper, written with policy specialist Dr David Alemna. The complexities of such a transfer are considerable as both countries' systems of local and national political representation are very different.

## **2.0 Evolution of PhD study**

**2.1** Partnership-working for all UK local authorities was a leading feature of Labour Party policy when they held power from 1997-2010, (HM. Govt, 2000). Such partnerships were created for the purpose of tackling multi-faceted social problems in local areas, such as the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) arising from the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 (HM. Government, 1998) and the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) created by the Local Government Act, 2000 (HM. Government, 2000). Since the later advent of the Coalition and Conservative governments from 2010 onwards, multi-agency partnerships have not featured strongly in government policy and correspondingly in academic literature (Roberts, 2016). In short, it was no longer fashionable for government to support partnership working or for academics to write about them. However, collaborative working with a wide range of partners remains a core mechanism for combating difficult, multi-

layered social problems at local and national levels (Rittel and Webber, 1973; HM. Government, 2018, Roberts, 2019; Roberts, 2020) such as knife crime.

**2.2** Partnership working is still very much present in British local authority areas because it is viewed by practitioners as a sensible and proportionate response to the intricate and multi-layered complexity of modern social issues. Youth violence is no exception. In many ways, multi-agency partnerships reflect society through the breadth and range of partner members (Balloch and Taylor, 2001; Glasby, Dickinson and Miller, 2011; Roberts, 2016). The researcher's work over the last six years, culminating in the book "Solutions to knife crime: a path through the red sea?" (Roberts, 2020) demonstrates that partnership principles and collaborative working at government level can provide practical solutions to that most complicated of social problems: knife crime.

**2.3** The focus on partnership-based solutions to knife crime arose from the two-year research project, beginning with the paper entitled "The London Killings of 2018: the story behind the numbers and some possible solutions" (Roberts, 2019). Unexpectedly, both offenders and professionals offered solutions to the problem of youth violence. The researcher's experience has included long-term involvement with multi agency partnerships including criminal justice partnerships such as the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs, now Community Safety Partnerships or CSPs: Local Government Association, N.D.). This experience has provided a valuable, close insight into the day-to-day realities of multi-agency partnership working from a political and a practical standpoint. Such experience has enabled the presentation of a wide-ranging collection of work on the subject of partnership working, culminating in the detailed research project and book "Solutions to Knife Crime: a path through the red sea?" (Roberts, 2020). This book brings together a two-year research project into youth violence and knife crime and the remedies for it.

**2.4** Yet partnership working is not the only collaborative response to knife crime that the research advocates. As explained above, "Solutions to Knife Crime: a path through the red sea?" recommends that the British and Scottish governments should find the means to collaborate in future to reduce knife crime and the mechanism for this is through Policy Transfer (Evans, 2009; Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000). Here it is recommended that the British Government should utilise the tried and tested approach in Scotland for tackling and reducing knife crime. It should be noted that the Scottish Government support multi-agency partnership with a robust policy commitment plus funding and resources. This is demonstrated in the research project shown above (Roberts, 2020). It is not suggested, however, that Westminster and Whitehall would find this process an easy one: rather that the mechanism itself exists in order to address knife crime.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

**3.1** The intended outcome for this PhD study is to impact practice through presenting primary evidence to enable practical change. It is equally crucial to provide the right theoretical framework and thereby the rationale for such changes to take place.

**3.2** The salient features of the theoretical framework for this PhD study are around two significant theories; Anomie (Durkheim, 2013) and General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992). General Strain Theory (GST) explores the “strains” or societal pressures that can give rise to criminal activity on the part of individuals. The behavioural aspects of these strains can be observed through the empirical phenomena of crime and related anti-social behaviour. At a deeper level, Anomie describes the societal context which can give rise to the “deregulation and disintegration” of society (Teymoori, Bastian and Jetten, 2017). Anomie was originally framed by Durkheim in his 1897 book, “The Division of Labour in Society” and describes a reduced state of society in which the individual may experience the destruction of social integration and regulation. From here comes a withdrawal from civic engagement, a sense of alienation from the norms of society, feelings of helplessness and meaninglessness. Throughout the research, it can be seen that the victims and perpetrators of knife crime, and the communities from which they emerge, demonstrate this very Anomie. Where Anomie refers to the failure of social integration and regulation, it includes “collective responses and collective perceptions” (Teymoori, Bastian and Jetten, 2017 p. 1011). Those responsible for Anomie are held to be the same people who construct policies that regulate society: namely, the state or Government. This is an important insight when considering knife crime. This is particularly evident in the researcher’s book (Roberts, 2020) where the recommendation for policy transfer is strongly made in order to address the absence of a knife crime policy in England.

**3.3** Coupled with the pervasive sense of Anomie is the evidence of GST, but it was Durkheim who advanced the first Strain Theory. He developed the first coherent Strain Theory, setting out the link between Anomie and deviant behaviour in his 1893 book, *The Division of Labour in Society* (Durkheim, 2013). However, during the 1940s, Robert K. Merton utilised Durkheim’s Anomie to develop a theory of deviance which became known as Strain Theory. Rising crime rates in America prompted this development. In seeking an explanation for crime rates, Merton pointed out that, in spite of the aims of the American dream in which individuals could succeed whatever their background or social origin, not everyone has achieved it (Thompson, 2016). The tension between this ideal and the reality creates “strain” for the individual and in the face of such pressure to achieve material success, some individuals turn to illegitimate means for achieving it. Various examples are given within the works presented for this PhD of the widening social gap in Britain, post Austerity (Hastings et.al. 2015; Roberts, 2019; Roberts, 2020; U.N., 2018). The ‘strain’ caused by deprivation and inequality for young people in particular is widely evidenced in the 2020 book, *Solutions to Knife Crime: a path through the red sea?* (Roberts, 2020) and the consequences of such inequality are shown to directly correlate to the increase in knife crime in England (YMCA, 2020, p.13). The path from deprivation and inequality to violent crime among young people is very well documented by others (Sanders-McDonagh, 2019; Muncie, 2015. p.9; Merton, 1968). It was clear that Anomie and General Strain Theory together represented the most appropriated theoretical framework for this PhD study.

## **4.0 Ethics**

**4.1** The suggestion for a PhD by publication was first made to the researcher in 2016 by the then Head of School at the University of Portsmouth. His advice was that ethical approval was not required for research already in the public domain via publication. Significantly, the school had lost its long-standard Research Ethics Committee Chair, creating a hiatus for researchers within the University at the time.

**4.2** Aware that the potential research into knife crime would involve contact with vulnerable people and those who were in professional practice at the time, the researcher utilised her own contacts in the field to test for ethical probity. The first semi-structured questionnaire for the 2019 paper on the London stabbings (Roberts, 2019) was sent to two serving Metropolitan police officers plus a member of staff at the University of Portsmouth, Professor Barry Loveday, to test for University of Portsmouth ethical standards. The researcher also has contacts within the world of social work and youth outreach and sent the questionnaire to professionals in London who later supported the interviews with young people by acting as intermediaries. Interviews were not conducted in person in order to safeguard the young people who agreed to be involved in the research, some of whom were vulnerable. Rather, interviews were conducted via intermediaries in the main, and by telephone so that anonymity could be assured. For example, in a group interview in which several young people participated, the detached youth worker led the group and introduced the researcher and project to the young people involved (Roberts, 2019; Roberts, 2020). Where offenders and former offenders were known to the researcher, probation staff and prison officers acted as intermediaries. Safeguarding procedures were therefore vital under these circumstances and the researcher's familiarity with Government regulations (HM Govt. 2021; HM Government, 2004) around child protection provided the necessary experience to approach any research within the bounds of legality and government regulations. The 2004 Children Act (HM Government, 2004) explicitly states that all agencies involved with young and vulnerable children have a duty to ensure the safeguarding of children and to promote their wellbeing. This Act is well known by the researcher, having been a consistent part of her career responsibilities as a local authority manager. Alongside this, the researcher's personal concern for the safety of vulnerable and at-risk individuals remained at the forefront of the research design.

**4.3** Interviews for the 2020 book on solutions to knife crime were held via telephone or online audio meetings without a camera so that anonymity could be preserved at all times. The equipment used to record responses could not be connected to the internet and recordings of interviews were made using a tape recorder to reduce the risk of a digital footprint that may reveal identities. All those who participated gave verbal agreement to the recording. All tapes of the interviews are now destroyed in line with data protection requirements, but anonymous typed transcripts were kept during the writing of the book (Roberts, 2020). These are also now destroyed, but the University of Portsmouth have copies of some transcripts of interviews where non-vulnerable individuals, such as the Chair of the charitable organisation the Ben Kinsella Trust in London, gave permission for their

interview transcripts to be retained. These represent the required evidence for primary research under the University of Portsmouth's research policy.

**4.4** Offenders also agreed to give interviews for the 2020 book, *Solutions to Knife Crime: a path through the red sea?* (Roberts, 2020). Those offenders currently serving sentences in prison were contacted by two prison officers on behalf of the researcher; one from Belmarsh prison and the other from Pentonville. Officer and prisoner identities were withheld for the purpose of personal safety in both Pentonville prison and Belmarsh to ensure safeguarding procedures were followed. Former offenders were selected with the assistance of Police Scotland and Sergeants Stephen Canale and Tom McGunnigle, who acted as intermediaries. A significant former offender, Calum Hutchison, is now working openly for the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit and has appeared on national television to share the story he offered for the 2020 book. Where he and others gave permission for their details to be used and shared, this has been respected. Compliance with the University's research ethics policy is demonstrated through the protections and anonymity afforded in the research, supported by Police Scotland and the individual officers from the Metropolitan Police in London.

## **5. Data collection and analysis**

**5.1** The overall approach for the research into partnership and collaborative remedies for knife crime is qualitative, using a process of inductive reasoning (Thomas, 2006). Here the researcher is referring to an emergent process that analyses raw data in order to generate new concepts and theories that can give rise to fresh insights and conclusions. This process has strong links with Thematic Analysis (Bryman, 2016) in that research findings can derive from the frequency of dominant themes (Thomas 2006. p.238; Azungah, 2018).

**5.2** Based on the semi structured interview questionnaire used in the 2019 paper on the London Killings of 2018 (Roberts, 2018) the researcher widened the number of participants through further research into the importance of solutions for knife crime: a theme which emerged in 2018-19. It is important at this point to mention positionality (Holmes, 2020). Aware of the potential for this due to the professional experience of the researcher, it is important to emphasise that the driving force for the final piece of work offered as part of this PhD study came from the research participants themselves in that it was their wish to explore solutions to knife crime. Their assistance in developing the detailed conversations utilised in *Solutions to Knife Crime: a path through the red sea?* (Roberts, 2020) helped to address the issue of possible positionality on the part of the researcher. A key aspiration for this research was to enable the voices of those involved in knife crime, both as perpetrators and professionals, to be heard. Their world view and beliefs constituted an overriding concern on the part of the researcher, and it is hoped that a platform for their voices has been achieved as a result of this approach.

**5.3** For the research explored in the final publication (Roberts, 2020), the researcher used a loose framework of questions derived from the original 2019 questionnaire deployed in London, allowing the conversation with professionals, offenders, third sector leaders and



communities to evolve more organically. The researcher then analysed transcripts from these interviews using Thematic Analysis (Bryman, 2016) which, whilst popular and logical in general use, was judged to be appropriate by the researcher due to the informal nature of the interviews for the 2020 book. Thematic Analysis, as observed by Bryman (2016), is varied in derivation (p.455) but its suitability lies in its support for a Framework approach to analysis (Ritchie et al, 2003 in Bryman, 2016. p. 455). Here an index of central themes is constructed with sub-themes beneath. A framework can then be applied to the data showing major and minor themes.

**5.3** Identifiable patterns in responses had emerged from the interview transcripts such as comments around the need for partnership or collaborative working by statutory agencies and community workers (a major theme) , plus the need for some form of legislative or policy response from the Government (a further major theme). Themes became more defined during this process and are set out in Solutions to Knife Crime: a path through the red sea? on pages 3-4. The transcription of tape recordings from interviews was undertaken solely by the researcher without the involvement of a third party to ensure complete confidentiality and participant safety. The researcher had first coded key words in the transcripts so that quantitative data could be collected on the number of occurrences such as ‘housing’, ‘deprivation’, (both minor themes) ‘solutions’, ‘benefits’ ‘knife crime’ etc and followed this with Thematic Analysis (Bryman, 2016), as set out above.

**5.4** This process enabled the distillation of the findings and the recommendations set out in the first chapter and the final paragraphs of the book (Roberts, 2020).

## **6.0 Works presented for PhD**

### **“The best partnerships are the ones in which the other partner is dead” (elected member for a south of England County Council, 2002)**

**6.1** When this elderly, white, Conservative local politician uttered the statement shown above, partnership working in multi-agency groups had been part of the local authority canon of formal responsibilities for four years (H.M. Govt, 1998; H.M. Govt, 2000). Quite what his wife of 50 years would have thought of this statement is not a matter of record, but his words perfectly summarised a commonly-heard response from the locally elected Member cohort in the south of England at the time. It should be stressed that this was part of the researcher’s professional experience during her career in local government in southern England. Such comments were regularly made with regard to working closely, first of all with other political parties, and secondly with other agencies as equal partners. Yet one of the major issues for many local councillors throughout the country was the perceived loss of their leadership mandate in partnership settings, a role which they strongly resisted relinquishing (H.M. Govt. 2008). Furthermore, subsequent comments from elected members were witnessed by the researcher such as “I’d rather be dead than work with that lot” and “I’m not sitting in the same room with that shower”.

**6.2** There were reasons for political antipathy towards partnership working among Members. Locally elected representatives not only did not embrace partnership working, they actively fought the concept on two fronts: firstly, from a political stance (it was a Labour government policy and many local authorities in the South of England were Conservative-run) and secondly, from the point of view of local community leadership (Roberts,2016). The thinking was that they had the mandate from the people so why would they need to consult with others in resolving local issues (JRF, 2005)? Nonetheless, the legislation to enforce multi agency partnership at local level, in spite of Member opposition, was sanctioned through two Acts of Parliament in 1998 and 2000 (HM. Government, 1998; 2000). These two Acts enshrined the role that Members and local government officers would play in collaborative working. Multi agency partnerships had a difficult inception in the early 2000s, but over the last two decades, they have persisted in Britain in spite of opposition from politicians (Roberts, 2016). The reasons for this are clear through the body of work presented for this PhD. No longer can any single entity resolve complicated social problems alone. Multi-agency partnership remains a logical response.

**6.3 ECPR Conference paper, 2016: “[Just Good Friends: can Localism succeed through partnership?](#)”.**

This first published paper by the researcher explores the importance of multi-agency partnership as it related to the Localism Act (HM Government, 2011) during the tenure of the Coalition Government in 2011. This was to advance a programme of so-called “Localism”, or the devolution of some central Government powers to local areas. The 2016 paper looked at the importance of multi-agency partnership working, but most importantly, with regard to its survival in spite of the dismantling of the support network for partnerships via the Localism Act 2011. The significance of this paper lies in the attention given to the survival of the multi-agency partnership model at local level without central government backing. Partnership working in collaboration with many partners, such as Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) established in the Local Government Act 2000 (HM. Government, 2000) continued beyond the loss of central government funding and support, persisting in local authority areas across the country. This paper presented evidence for their survival as a direct and proportionate response to complex societal problems. It explores LSPs and partnership working as a common-sense means of resolving highly problematic issues that emerge in local areas and in communities. Yet the problems of party politics are shown in this paper to be a complicating factor when addressing the need for joint working between agencies.

**6.4** Leach and Copus (2004) discuss the effects of the control that respective political parties represent at Local Government level. According to their 2004 paper, Conservative councillors followed the philosophy that they must be free of “citizen interference” (p.339) yet may act in the interests of the wider Party. This is an attitude which has been familiar to the researcher during her work with various councils in England. Councillors sought the personal and political liberty they felt the electorate had bestowed upon them to follow a contrary position to that of the prevailing political leadership of the time (DCLG, 2008. Pp 32-33). In the researcher’s experience, partnership policy opposition on the part of

Members appeared to mean resistance to all policy which was contrary to the dominant Conservatism in the south of England. Partnership working challenged that assumption in the most fundamental way, particularly if the lead role was given to another agency other than the council and more particularly if that agency was represented by an ordinary citizen (ODPM, 2005. p.21).

**6.5** As briefly outlined above, the former Labour government administration from 1997 – 2010 brought two pieces of significant legislation onto the statute books which were very substantial for local authorities; the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the Local Government Act 2000 (HM Govt. 1998, 2000) compelling local government to work in partnership with other agencies, councils and citizens. These two Acts comprised a major legislative imperative, formalising local authority responsibilities in leading, managing or supporting multi-agency partnerships for the specific purpose of addressing complicated societal problems. The first of the studies undertaken by the researcher, “Just Good Friends: Can Localism Succeed Through Partnership?” (Roberts, 2016) explored the role of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), set up under the 2000 Local Government Act, in which all local authorities, except Parish Councils, were tasked with setting up and leading (but not dominating) LSPs. The role of the local LSP was clearly articulated (HM. Government, Guidance 09, 2000) and described in detail the requirement for joint resolution of so-called “wicked” (Rittel and Webber, 1973) or complex problems in society. The legislation was clear and unequivocal. These multi-agency partnerships were intended to tackle the ever-increasing complexity and difficulty of social problems in local areas. The purpose of siting them in localities underscored the recognition that local government, police, health, education and community leaders held the community-based knowledge necessary to address these issues together.

**6.6** Payne (1998) explains the perceived need for multi - agency partnership and the LSP in straightforward terms “the case for treating social problems in a holistic fashion is overwhelming. People know, in a simple everyday fashion, that crime, poverty, low achievement at school, bad housing and so on are connected” (Payne, 1998, p.12). This simple statement demonstrates the connectedness of social issues which are central to the requirement for multi-agency partnership working. Within such related issues lies the stimulus for collaboration. Working together, in the manner indicated by Greek philosopher Aristotle when he reportedly stated that the ‘whole is greater than the sum of its parts’ in his “Metaphysics”, can become something more than the mere collection of single entities. Aristotle’s now oft-quoted aphorism in fact refers to something far more interesting. He stated that a plurality of parts is not merely an aggregate but is able to become a kind of “whole beyond the bounds of its individual parts” (Aristotle, 8.6. 1986). He seemed to be saying that a combination of individual forces could become something much more significant than the basic grouping together of single beings. Following this reasoning, we can suggest that, given the right conditions, a partnership may work together very effectively to address the multifarious problems of society more effectively than a single individual.

**6.7** It is clear throughout the body of work presented for this PhD study that social problems are connected, and this was echoed by Agnew (2006, p.40) when explaining General Strain Theory (GST). It is the context around the social problem which should be uppermost in our minds: not the problem itself. Agnew's GST theory is explored in detail in the book "Solutions to Knife Crime: a path through the red sea?" (Roberts, 2020) as part of the theoretical framework for the research and in this paper at section 3.

**6.8** In simple terms, GST follows the effects of accumulated "stressors" upon individuals and groups in society who experience negative life outcomes such as poverty, deprivation, neglect, violence, worklessness, bad housing or no housing, low levels of education and adverse childhood experiences (ACES). It is not possible to address social problems successfully one by one and in isolation. For example: the researcher's work among young people in Scotland explored the problems of a homeless young person, whose involvement with various agencies included Housing, Benefits, Probation, Social Work, Education, counselling through a local charity, the police, and youth outreach workers. Eight separate agencies are involved in this example. If solely education had been addressed in isolation among this panoply of need, the child would still be vulnerable, abused, homeless and unsupported. No social problem can exist in isolation.

**6.9** This was a theme picked up in a later publication: the shared chapter in "[Multi Agency Working in Criminal Justice](#)" called "A time of change: the expanding role of the Police and Crime Commissioners in local criminal justice delivery", (Loveday and Roberts in Pycroft and Gough (Eds), 2019). Here the researcher discusses the complexity of the MAPPA and MARAC partnerships (Multi-Agency Public Protection Agency; Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference) convened to address issues of public safety and risk to vulnerable individuals and children.

## **[7.0 "The London Killings of 2018: the story behind the numbers and some proposed solutions" \(Roberts, 2019\)](#)**

**7.1** With regard to knife crime, which reached the highest ever proportions prior to the Covid19 lockdown in England, (Office for National Statistics, 2020; Ben Kinsella Trust, 2020), it is again demonstrated that no aspect of this troubling phenomenon can be dealt with in isolation. A partnership approach is just as crucial for knife crime as it is for homelessness or domestic violence. The researcher's [2019 paper on the London stabbings](#) investigated the causes of knife crime in communities. The conclusions from the evidence produced in this paper demonstrate that knife crime is every bit as complicated an issue as other so-called "wicked problems" (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Roberts, 2019). Each individual represented in this study presented to the security and police forces with highly complex, serious needs from homelessness to serious violence, neglect and sexual exploitation. All should be dealt with and addressed by public services who could and often do, work together in partnership by necessity. Yet this paper demonstrated that partnership working is not adequately supported in Britain today (Roberts, 2019).

**7.2** Given that our local authorities are charged with providing basic care and support for those most vulnerable in our society, the partnership approach to finding solutions to the problems that accompany social vulnerability remains essential. The logical conclusion, therefore, is that we are no longer able to support those who cannot support themselves adequately. The researcher's monograph (Roberts, 2020), identifies the ways in which an Anomic society has developed as a direct result of policy decisions by government. This has precipitated an even greater crisis among children and young people which has resulted in so many violent deaths using sharp instruments and knives. It is this publication which brings together much of the research undertaken over the last four years.

## **8.0 "Solutions to Knife Crime: a path through the red sea"?**

**8.1** The researcher's book (Roberts, 2020) re-states the case for a multi-agency partnership approach through new and updated methods to help resolve the complicated issue of knife crime in Britain. The evidence in this research is clear: that without structured collaborative working, knife crime cannot be successfully tackled due to this very same complexity. Looking beyond the knife offence, these are young people who are, generally speaking, suffering from neglect, poverty, lack of opportunity, homelessness, abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, exploitation and general Anomie (Durkheim, 2013). The evidence presented in the book (Roberts, 2020) shows that these are the young people among whom knife crime proliferates but crucially, these are the people best placed to suggest solutions. All those interviewed for the book agree that partnership is the most essential element for effective remedies to knife crime and this evidence is explored extensively.

**8.2** The need for partnership solutions to social issues is further reinforced in the UK Government's own 2018 Serious Violence Strategy in which a full chapter is dedicated to the need for partnership working (H.M. Govt. 2018, Chapter 5). Partnership has not gone away but has not been the focus of co-ordinated attention since the advent of the Coalition and Conservative governments of the last ten years. However, it is important to state that in 2015 the College of Policing published a comprehensive piece of work focusing on domestic abuse and safeguarding. This highlighted the key importance of multi-agency partnership working to criminal justice (College of Policing, 2015). The document summarises the role of such partnerships' ability to embrace a holistic view of risk within localities as follows:

"It makes it possible to see the whole picture, facilitating:

- early effective risk identification
- improved information sharing
- joint decision making
- coordinated action to assess, manage and reduce risk." (College of Policing, 2015)

**8.3** Curiously, it is within policing and law enforcement that multi agency partnership has maintained its salience. The 2018 Serious Violence Strategy's chapter five (HM Govt. 2018) underlines the key importance of collaboration in this way. It should be remembered that there is a marked absence of recent publications on the importance of multi-agency partnership working across the academic canon and from the political corporate centre. This is the reason for the author's eventual focus upon youth violence and knife crime, for

here partnership is still valued among law enforcement agencies and is still supported to some extent, particularly by the Scottish government (Roberts, 2020). It is clear from the body of this research that not only is collaborative working still a viable and practical response to community problems, it is practised extensively within law enforcement and community safety, often without support from government at either national or local levels. The significance of the research therefore is to highlight the relevance of this practice and to help redefine a way forward for it in terms of our most serious law and order issue at the moment in the UK: knife crime.

**8.4** At the same time, it must be remembered that partnership working has not enjoyed an uncritical history. When the researcher met Professor Mike Geddes in Warwick, he was keen to point out that he was not a supporter of partnership working and had conducted some very critical reviews of the effectiveness of LSPs (Geddes, 2006 p.76 and Geddes, 2008). He was not alone. Cheminais, (2008) also criticises aspects of partnership working in her paper on the “Every Child Matters” initiative (HM. Government, 2003), citing competing priorities, lack of clarity in terms of roles and responsibilities and the clash of working cultures, among others (p.27). Atkinson, Doherty and Kinder (2005) discuss similar challenges (pp.11-14) but in the case of both Geddes (2006; 2008) and Atkinson, Doherty and Kinder (2005) challenges *and* successes are discussed. Also, Balloch and Taylor (2001) acknowledge the many difficulties experienced in partnership working, but conclude that there are cases in which it can make a difference (p.286) underlining the significance of a “growing body of knowledge” (p.287) about what makes multi agency partnership work well. The body of research presented here for the PhD study demonstrates that this approach to joint working has not only survived such difficulties: it has evolved over time and is now considered essential for specifically tackling knife crime and youth violence (HM. Government, 2018).

**8.5** In spite of recurring difficulties with elected Member support, negative reviews and ideological differences in the relevance of partnership working, partnership working is now a tried and tested method of tackling “wicked” problems that has endured in spite of criticism. Following the 2016 paper (Roberts, 2016) the researcher published [a blog](#) for the LSE on the relevance of multi-agency partnership in addressing the emerging issue of radicalisation in Britain. This blog appeared (Roberts, 2018) at a time of concern over the terrorist activity seen during 2017 with the London Bridge, Borough Market and Finsbury Park mosque terrorist attacks in London. Again, terrorism and radicalisation are social problems in Britain which have many layers and contributory factors. These include issues with the British child fostering system for unaccompanied young asylum seekers, and the vulnerability of youngsters suffering from depression, anxiety, experiences of racism, loneliness, bullying and social isolation (Roberts, 2017). In a [further paper](#) focusing on radicalisation in communities, published in April 2018, (Roberts, 2018) the question was asked of a Police Community Support Officer “Who gets radicalised?”, meaning, what are the vulnerabilities that are present in young people who are radicalised? The response was similar to that stated above:

- Social isolation
- Bullying

- Racism
- Lack of an extended family
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Loneliness

**8.6** This paper began to focus attention upon the crucial role of multi-agency partnership in eliciting information about local issues and about the role of individuals in fomenting youth violence. The research advanced the view that such partnerships are able to access and share information about problematic individuals, groups and areas where partnerships are comprised of such agencies as the police, health professionals, education, housing, benefits, probation, charities, local authority community safety staff, politicians, community leaders, faith groups and others (Roberts, 2018). LSPs were just such partnerships, but so too are the Community Safety Partnerships or CSPs, which are still very much present in local areas (Roberts, 2016). This is a forum in which information can be shared among professionals in a confidential environment. For example: where an agency may have concerns about a young person whose behaviour has changed markedly, and this change has been noted by the school, the youngster can be brought to the attention of other agencies through communicating within the multi-agency partnership. This is especially important if there are concerns about radicalisation. Added to this is the rising problem of youth violence and knife crime in particular (Roberts, 2019).

**8.7** The research paper entitled "[The London Killings of 2018: the story behind the numbers and some proposed solutions](#)" (Roberts, 2019) arose from earlier work on radicalisation and youth violence in 2016, focusing closely on the worrying rise in knife crime which resulted in the highest number of murders involving knives ever recorded in London and across the UK (Roberts, 2019, p.95). The complexity of issues which surround the rise in knife crime are so great that it seemed clear a partnership solution was not only required but was and is essential. These are youths that in the main are suffering a range of interrelated needs that include poverty, deprivation, homelessness, neglect, abuse, violence, lack of education, hunger, loneliness and adverse childhood experiences or ACES (Roberts, 2019; HM. Government 2018).

**8.8** Such a wide range of need pointed to underlying issues, which in turn indicated the extreme effects of the UK Government's Austerity policy, introduced by Conservative Chancellor, George Osborne. This policy occasioned the loss of funding for local authorities to the tune of 40% (Local Government Association, 2018; Roberts, 2019; BBC News, 2019; Parliament UK, 2020), meaning that social work, housing, youth services, probation, community development, benefits, detached youth workers, and community outreach programmes were all affected. This is the range of services that support the most vulnerable in society, as observed by the United Nations special rapporteur on poverty, Sir Philip Alston. He reported that the UK has

“... a system of government that rightly remains the envy of much of the world. It thus seems patently unjust and contrary to British values that so many people are

living in poverty. This is obvious to anyone who opens their eyes to see the immense growth in foodbanks and the queues waiting outside them, the people sleeping rough in the streets, the growth of homelessness, the sense of deep despair that leads even the Government to appoint a Minister for suicide prevention and civil society to report in depth on unheard of levels of loneliness and isolation. And local authorities, especially in England, which perform vital roles in providing a real social safety net have been gutted by a series of government policies”, (UNOHCHR, 2018).

**8.9** The quote shown above is worth reporting in full as it affirms most of the findings of the researcher’s 2019 publication on the London killings of 2018. Knife crime appeared to reflect much deeper problems within society than just the desire to perpetrate violence. This was amply shown in the researcher’s 2019 publication and provided the basis for the major publication in this PhD study relating to solving knife crime, (Roberts, 2020). As explained on page two, this book explores the central importance of a multi-agency response to knife crime, emulating the Scottish Government’s approach through creating the Violence Reduction Unit in Glasgow. In this, agencies and communities work together to tackle the issue, which is supported through central government policy in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2020). The policy explains the importance of partnership working and government support for tackling knife crime. This is reflected and supported in the researcher’s book.

#### **9.0 A Time of Change: the expanding role of Police and Crime Commissioners in local criminal justice delivery (Joint book chapter, 2019)**

**9.1** The researcher emphasised the importance of trusting, open, professional relationships in partnership working, and this was highlighted in the 2019 joint book chapter, “[A Time of Change: the expanding role of Police and Crime Commissioners in local criminal justice delivery](#)” (Loveday and Roberts in Pycroft and Gough (Eds) 2019). Again, the researcher points out the importance of resolving complex social issues with multi agency partnerships in the context of the above safeguarding and community safety groups, which are significant in the lives of young vulnerable people such as those interviewed during 2018 for the paper on knife crime (Roberts, 2019). The chapter also makes the point that without community intelligence shared within multi agency partnerships, it becomes virtually impossible to maintain neighbourhood policing and local vigilance. This point is expanded in the researcher’s 2020 book on solutions to knife crime in which it is explained that the loss of funding from central government in England has meant that the ability of the police to perform their neighbourhood safety role is seriously compromised. The theme of trusting, open and honest professional relationships is again explored in the [joint paper](#) for the Journal of Contemporary European Research (JCER) in which information sharing, a key element of partnership working, is examined (Field and Roberts, 2020). Although this paper focuses mainly on the European Union, the researcher has again brought attention to the importance of open and honest joint working with others.

**9.2** Partnership and collaborative working are the focus of a full chapter in the researcher’s 2020 book in which the process of policy transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000) is recommended to tackle knife crime in England. The Scottish government have a cohesive



policy statement on tackling knife crime in particular and this rests on a firmly established model of partnership working (Roberts, 2020). Policy transfer involves the literal transfer of one policy within a political setting, to another. Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) describe a group of processes involving lesson-drawing, policy divergence and diffusion as well as policy transfer. Here policies, ideas and knowledge constitute the body of information for transfer. For knife crime in England, this is a very significant recommendation. There is no doubt that the figures for increasing knife offences and deaths in England are rising whilst in Scotland, they are falling. The transfer of the Scottish policy would be essential to the initiative to bring knife crime under control in England. This has been demonstrated within the book, ending with the firm recommendation that policy transfer is undertaken by the British government in using the Scottish knife crime policy to tackle the violence. Fundamental to this is this highly successful model for partnership working used in Scotland.

**9.3** In view of the evidence presented in this body of work, and especially latterly within the final two publications in 2019 and 2020, partnership solutions to youth violence are not only possible: they are needed urgently and are recommended by those involved. The redefined partnership model recommended in the researcher's book sets out the means by which this can be achieved (Roberts, 2020. pp. 19-20). If we are to successfully tackle knife crime in England, those involved have shown the way forward through this research, which is unique in the field.

## **10. Conclusion:**

**10.1** The many levels in which society's needs are expressed, the Anomie which appears to have become as much of a social ill as the Covid19 global pandemic, the variety and complexity of violence among young people and their communities demands a partnership response from us. Working together should never be subject to political division or influence. It was and is the most responsible and proportionate way to deal with the extremity and depth of need in modern society (Putnam, 2000; HM Govt, 2018). This body of work presented here explores the effectiveness of partnership working and the enduring need for it, especially in this increasingly multi-layered world.

**10.2** As far as knife crime is concerned and the title of this piece of work which links the body of research for this PhD, partnership working holds the single key for a range of solutions to knife crime in Britain. As explained in "Solutions to Knife Crime: a path through the red sea?" (Roberts, 2020), there is no single solution for this and many of the other complex problems in modern society. Our communities are now more varied and concentrated with tensions focused around racial intolerance, inequality, violence, deprivation, poverty and an over-riding loss of "community" spirit (Cole and Pantucci, 2013; Putnam, 2000; Roberts, 2019; Roberts, 2020). The urgent need for collaborative working is nowhere more powerfully expressed than in a piece of unpublished evidence recently expressed to the researcher having contacted one of the offenders who took part in the research.

“I’m so glad I done that interview with you man. I ain’t done nothing in my life and now I’m in a book about people like me. Make them listen to you, yeah, and make them talk to each other. I’m telling you”. (Young offender, 2021).

**10.3** Those who took part in the interviews for the book on solutions to knife crime range from offenders to police officers and all those agencies and individuals in between. What is striking about this quote is the voice of a young man speaking from prison where he will spend the next ten years after stabbing someone when he was 20 years old. To have reached such a point in life where he felt he had never done anything good or worthwhile is an indictment of a society which has yet to address knife crime in a socially conscious, holistic and informed way.

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