Review Manuscript

Fear and Masculinity as Motivational Narratives for Knife-Related Crime: A Systematic Review of the Literature

TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, & ABUSE
1–14

DOI: 10.1177/15248380241266206
journals.sagepub.com/home/tva


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Abstract

Males are routinely identified as both the victims and perpetrators of knife-related crime. Explanations have typically fallen into two categories: fear of further victimization (i.e., need for protection) and masculine gender norms (e.g., a display of "toughness"). However, these two works of literature have not yet been brought together to provide us with a fruitful theoretical understanding of why some young men engage in knife-related crime. The purpose of this systematic review is to consolidate and synthesize the available research on fear and masculinity as explanations for knife-related crime. In all, 23 studies were identified as meeting the inclusion criteria. The findings of the studies reviewed highlight the importance of considering the cognitive analysis of risk and perceptions of risk in young males' decisions to engage in knife-related crime. These perceptions of risk are shaped by previous victimization through a contagion effect and contribute to the development of an aggressive masculinity that justifies the behavior. However, it is not very well understood the role of fear contagion, and victimization in the shaping of masculine ideals within groups of young men involved in knife-related crimes. Additional research is needed to explore these findings and shed light on the complex interplay between these factors to inform viable treatment options for young men engaged in knife-related crime.

Keywords

community violence, youth violence, violence exposure, mental health and violence, violent offenders

Since the turn of the millennium, a series of knife-related homicides in the United Kingdom has drawn the attention of researchers and politicians alike, and of particular concern was the lack of detailed information on the factors that predispose individuals to engage in knife crime and knife carrying (Eades et al., 2007). This lack of information could be due to past focus on the use of firearms (Densley & Stevens, 2015; Hales et al., 2006; Matthews, 2002; McLagan, 2006; Pitts, 2007; Squires et al., 2008). Globally, one in every two homicides is committed with a firearm, and one in four with a sharp object such as a knife (World Health Organization, 2014). It appears that the availability of types of weapons determines the prevalence of those crimes. For example, in the United States, 75% of homicides involve firearms, whereas firearm use only accounts for 25% of homicides in Europe. Instead, 37% of homicides in Europe involve sharp objects (World Health Organization, 2014). Therefore, research focused on knife-related crime, including its predictors and consequences, is warranted.

According to the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in the United Kingdom, between April 2021 and March 2022, offenses involving knives or sharp objects rose by 10% (to 48,931 offenses nationwide) compared with the previous year (ONS, 2022). Although hospital admissions in English hospitals in 2020/2021 as a result of assaults by sharp objects were 14% lower than in 2019, this was 12% higher than in 2014/2015 (Allen & Harding, 2021). Malik et al. (2020), in their hospital study of patients aged 16 and over admitted to hospital with knife injuries as a result of interpersonal violence, report that between May 2015 and April 2018, knife injuries constituted 12.9% of the trauma team workload (532 patients). This single-center, observational study was set in an urban Major Trauma Center (MTC) in Birmingham (UK). This MTC receives patients aged 16 years and above living within its locality, across a region encompassing a population of 2.44 million (Malik et al., 2020).

The vast majority of patients admitted to the trauma center for knife-related injuries were male (93%), and 98 patients (18.5%) had previously attended the accident and emergency services with violence-related injuries caused by bladed articles (Malik et al., 2020). In the United Kingdom's largest city, London, we see nearly 300 fatal stabbings each year

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with perpetrators being predominantly under the age of 25 in the year ending March 2022 (ONS, 2022).

Young people are disproportionately affected by knife crime (HM Government, 2018), and given that knife use and carrying is strongly associated with injury severity (Brennan et al., 2006), young people are often both victims and perpetrators of knife-related crime (Bailey et al., 2020). Children exposed to violence often exhibit information processing biases that facilitate the rapid identification of anger (Shackman et al., 2007), heightened emotional reactivity to negative cues that could signal the presence of threat (McLaughlin et al., 2015), and generalization of threat responses to a wide range of stimuli (McLaughlin & Sheridan, 2016). So, children who have a history of being exposed to violence may have difficulty distinguishing between threat and safety cues as previous experiences of violent victimization could lead to altered perceptions of risk and presumptions that other young people are armed (Asmussen et al., 2020).

The research currently available on knife-related crime identifies many overlapping factors including carrying a knife with the intention to attack a person, the need for protection, the perception of feeling unsafe, lack of trust in the police, belonging to criminal peer groups, desire for social status, and previous victimization (Brennan, 2018; Dijkstra et al., 2010; Harcourt, 2006; Haylock et al, 2020; McVie, 2010; Palasinski et al., 2012; Traynor, 2016). Palasinski and Riggs (2012), in their qualitative study, highlighted how carrying a knife becomes a symbolic representation of masculine power and protection to young males. Despite some research available indicating fear of further victimization as a risk factor for knife-related crime (Gray et al., 2021) and males being disproportionately affected both as victims and perpetrators (Walsh, 2019), these two works of literature have not yet been brought together to provide us with a theoretical understanding of why some young men engage in knife-related crime.

As such, the first essential step toward the binding of these two works of literature is to consolidate and synthesize the available research on fear and masculinity as explanations for knife-related crime. This systematic review will provide an overview of the current landscape on risk factors for knife-related crime, focusing particularly on the role of fear and masculinity constructs as motivational narratives. There were two research questions guiding this review:

1. What is the current evidence on fear associated with previous violent victimization as an explanation for knife-related crime?
2. What is the current evidence on masculinity as an explanation for knife-related crime?

A Note on Terminology

Before we embark on the literature review itself, it is imperative to clarify the use of terms because the literature has not been consistent in the terminology related to this type of offending. "Knife carrying" refers to the carrying of a knife, without lawful purpose, making it a criminal offense. "Knife crime" is a broader term that covers a wide range of offenses associated with a knife (Allen & Harding, 2021). There are many studies examining overall weapon use that capture knife carrying as well as other forms of weapons (e.g., firearms). However, in this review, we have opted for the term *knife-related crime* as an umbrella term covering all forms of offending that involve carrying and/or using sharp objects (typically knives) to achieve illegal objectives (e.g., to threaten, for protection, to cause physical harm, and/or death). Due to the use of varied terminology throughout the literature (i.e., weapon carrying, knife crime, knife-carrying), we will primarily use the term knife-related crime for consistency unless another term is necessary to the research findings being presented.

Method

Eligibility Criteria

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines were used. Furthermore, the Population, Intervention, Comparison, and Outcome model (PICO) was used to guide eligibility criteria. Studies were included if they focused on young males aged 10 to 25 who were involved in knife-related crime. We included studies with and without comparison groups and as long as they examined the specific factors of interest, that is, fear, masculinity, trauma, and victimization. We also included studies that employed quantitative and qualitative designs, published in English, and from the year 2000 onwards. We excluded articles that were literature reviews, editorials, or empirical studies with only female participants.

Search Strategy

The following electronic databases were searched in February 2022: PsycINFO, Medline, APA PsycArticles, OpenGrey, PsycArticles, PubMed, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, Criminal Justice Abstracts, and Academic Search Complete. The search terms were based on the concepts derived from the PICO criteria and they represented the core constructs listed in the study's research questions. The search terms, in various combinations using English and American spellings, were as follows: knife crime, knife carrying, weapons, weapon carrying, youth violence, fear, victimization, trauma, masculinity, male gender norms, and young males. Truncations were used to avoid excluding papers in error and a Boolean search was conducted. Reviews that include only electronic searches may lead to unintentional bias (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008), as such hand searches, which consisted of checking the reference lists of selected papers, were also included to ensure studies that met the inclusion/exclusion criteria were not missed.

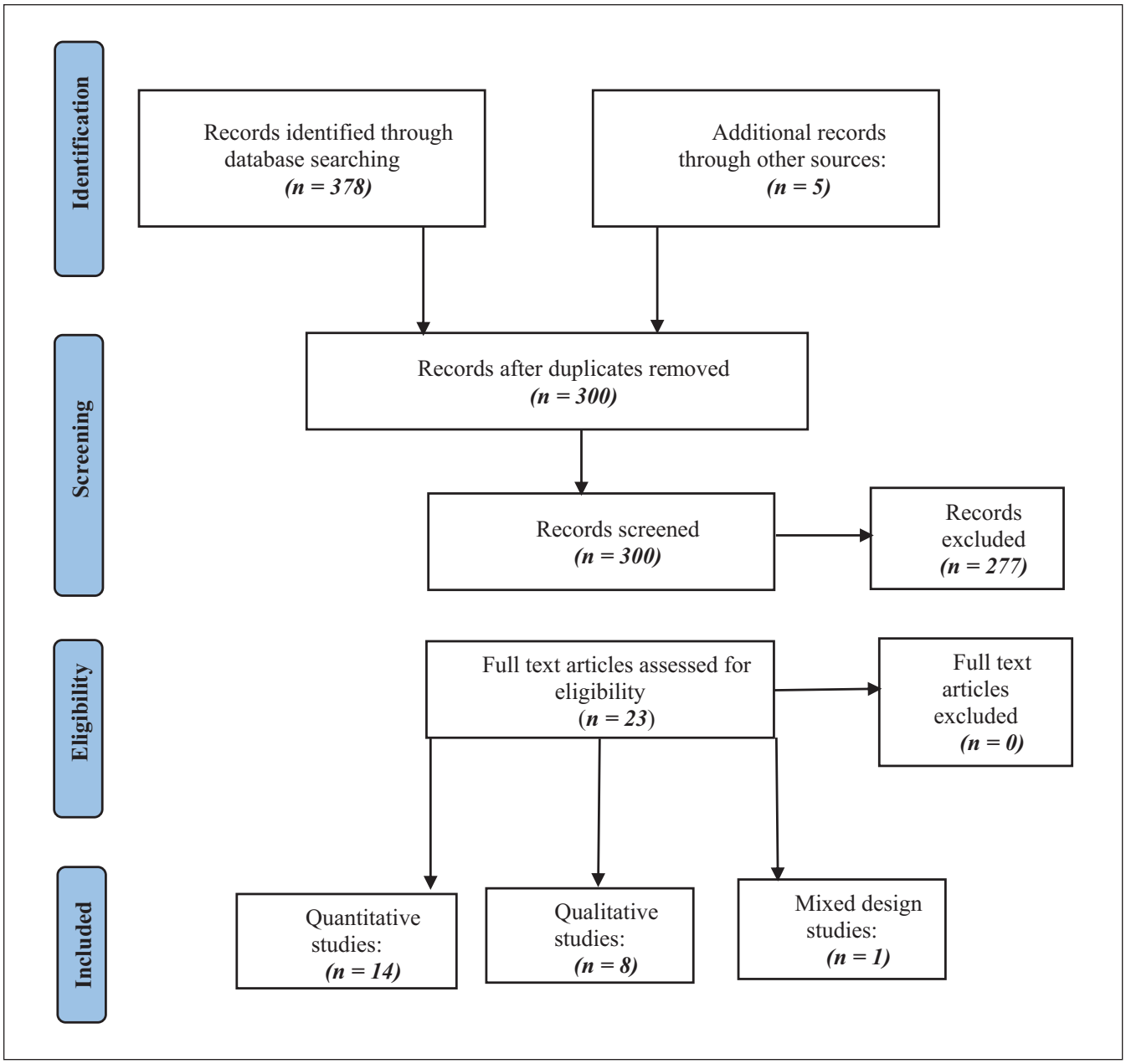

Figure 1. Search process of systematic review adapted from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (Page et al., 2021).

Study Selection

The initial search yielded a total of 383 articles. Following the removal of duplicate studies, 300 articles were screened, resulting in 23 papers identified as meeting the inclusion criteria. The articles that satisfied the inclusion criteria included the following: qualitative ($n=8$) and quantitative ($n=14$) designs, and one study using a mixed methods design. The search process is depicted in Figure 1.

Assessment of Study Quality

The full texts of studies meeting the inclusion criteria ($n=23$) were all reviewed by the first author using the quality criteria developed by Kmet et al. (2004). This is a standardized, empirically grounded set of quality assessment criteria used within systematic reviews to assess the risk of bias in articles, and the chosen set of criteria used to assess the articles included in this review. Our initial plan was to follow the

guidance on inter-rater reliability which includes 20% of the total sample to be reviewed and rated independently. However, due to the limited number of studies that met the inclusion criteria ($n = 23$), two independent raters were asked to review all 23 studies. Once the ratings were completed separately, both raters met to discuss the divergences until there was agreement.

The quality assessment criteria for the quantitative studies consisted of 14 items (see Table 1) and for qualitative studies consisted of 10 items (see Table 2). Each item was scored as follows: condition not met (0), partially met (1), or condition fully met (2). For quantitative studies, the overall quality score was calculated by dividing the total sum by the total possible sum (28 − [number of "N/A" *2]). The overall quality score for the qualitative studies was calculated by dividing the total sum by the total possible sum (20). Scores obtained for both the qualitative and quantitative studies were then converted into percentages, with a minimum threshold of 60% quality score set for inclusion. This is consistent with past systematic reviews (e.g., Chapman et al., 2018) which regard a 60% quality score as a threshold-enabling inclusion of a sufficient proportion of articles, while only reviewing those of good quality. All 23 articles met the threshold of 60%, so were included in the review.

Results

Study Samples and Design

For those studies that met the inclusion criteria, the following information was extracted: author(s), study aims, sample, comparison group(s), design/measures, and key findings. The majority of the quantitative studies selected employed a cross-sectional design ($n = 8$) with the remaining six adopting a longitudinal design. One article used a mixed methods design (qualitative and quantitative cross-sectional). Two qualitative studies employed an ethnography design whereby participants were recruited following observations in two respective housing associations in inner London. Thirteen studies (56.5%) examined for this review originated from the United Kingdom with the remaining 10 studies (43.5%) focused on research undertaken in the United States. Eleven studies (48%) included in this systematic review used school samples and focused on understanding weapon carrying within school settings. The remaining 52% of studies recruited participants from settings such as youth justice services (community and custody) and local youth clubs,[1] using data gathered from surveys, police records, and snowballing sampling on social media. Table 3 depicts the details of the 23 studies used in this review.

Key Findings

The two research questions guiding this review focused on examining the roles of fear of victimization and perceptions of masculinity in the perpetration of knife-related crime among young males. The majority of the studies included in this review investigated the relationship between past victimization and fear of future victimization and knife-related crime (65%), with 5 studies originating in the United Kingdom and 10 studies in the United States. Seven studies (30%) examined masculinity in relation to knife-related crime, all research undertaken in the United Kingdom. One study did not specifically set out to examine fear or masculinity specifically in relation to knife-related crime. This study examined the relationship between Serious Youth Violence and Adverse Childhood Experiences using a sample of children working with the Youth Justice Service in the United Kingdom (Gray et al., 2021). A decision was made to include this study because some of its key findings were pertinent to the aims set out in this systematic review, particularly in relation to fear of victimization and knife-related crime.

With the two research questions in mind, the key findings of this review are presented in two main sections: fear of victimization, and masculinity and associated gender norms. Each section includes sub-sections guided by the findings of the systematic review.

Fear of Victimization. Upon reviewing the 15 studies examining fear of victimization and knife-related crime, three main themes emerged from the research findings. The themes were as follows: past victimization and fear of future victimization; victimization and knife-related crime relationship moderated by aggression; and the victim-protection paradox.

Past Victimization and Fear of Future Victimization. Some studies found evidence of previous victimization being linked to knife-related crime (Gray et al., 2021; Marfleet, 2008; Mukherjee et al., 2020). This seems to be more evident among adolescents who had been injured and/or threatened with a weapon (Mukherjee et al., 2020). However, it was unclear how adolescents then conceptualized knives to be a viable option to increase safety. Traynor (2016) puts forward the idea of carrying a knife as a behavior that can help young people bridge or close a "security gap." The author noted that these young people had experienced a sense of physical or psychological insecurity that was not alleviated by the actions or the presence of certain individuals (i.e., parents, professionals such as teachers, or police). Traynor (2016) coins this as a "security gap" that is created by experiences of, or threat of, violent victimization. The study argues that among adolescents who engage in knife-related crime, there was a recognition that a knife could at times be effective in preventing victimization and in reducing anxiety about victimization (Traynor, 2016). Traynor suggested that these distorted beliefs about safety (e.g., carrying a knife prevents future attacks) underpinned young people's conceptualization of a knife as a viable option to increase safety.

Table 1. Quality Assessment of All Included Quantitative Studies.

Author	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Total Sum	Total Possible Sum	Summary Score (%)
Bailey et al. (2020)	2	2	1	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	1	0	N/A	2	2	14	20	70
Brennan (2021)	2	2	2	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22	22	100
Brown and Benedict (2004)	2	1	1	1	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	17	22	77
Button and Worthen (2017)	2	1	2	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	21	22	95
Dijkstra et al. (2010)	2	2	2	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22	22	100
Dijkstra et al. (2012)	2	2	2	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22	22	100
Gray et al. (2021)*	2	2	2	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	1	2	1	0	0	1	2	15	22	68
Johnson et al. (2019)	2	1	2	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	20	22	90
Lane et al. (2004)	2	1	1	1	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	19	22	86
Li et al. (2021)	2	1	2	2	2	N/A	N/A	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	21	24	87
Melde et al. (2009)	2	2	1	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	21	22	95
Miller (2002)	2	2	2	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	0	0	1	2	16	22	72
Mukherjee et al. (2020)	2	1	2	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	2	2	2	19	20	95
Palasinski et al. (2021)	2	2	1	1	N/A	N/A	N/A	1	2	2	2	0	1	2	16	22	72
Wilcox et al. (2006)	2	2	2	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	22	22	100

*Included both qualitative and quantitative components, which are examined for bias separately, using the appropriate quality assessment.

Table 2. Quality Assessment of All Included Qualitative Studies.

Author	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Total Sum	Total Possible Sum	Summary Score (%)
Gray et al. (2021)*	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	18	20	90
Holligan et al. (2017)	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	0	15	20	75
King (2022)	2	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	16	20	80
Marfleet (2008)	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	0	2	1	15	20	75
Palasinski (2013)	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	17	20	85
Palasinski and Riggs (2012)	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	2	18	20	90
Traynor (2016)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	19	20	95
Trickett (2011)	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	13	20	65

*Included both qualitative and quantitative components, which are examined for bias separately, using the appropriate quality assessment.

Table 3. Details of Studies Included in the Systematic Review.

Author(s)	Study Aims	Sample	Comparison Group	Design/Measures	Key Findings
Bailey et al. (2020) United Kingdom	The study examined the victim–offender overlap of offenders who use knives to commit crimes using data from police records used by the Thames Valley Police of England and Wales.	*n* = 10,099 Knife crime victims, *n* = 6,896, males, *n* = 5,112, females, *n* = 1,642 Knife crime offenders, *n* = 7,231, males, *n* = 6,336, females, *n* = 945 Age range = 16–34	N/A	Quantitative, cross-sectional study Police records are used for information on individuals including affiliation with gangs, prior offenses, and victimization. Descriptive network analysis is used to illustrate how the social networks of knife crime offenders are constructed in Thames Valley.	Knife crime represents a small proportion of crime (1.86%) and is associated largely with violence offenses. White males aged 16–34 year-old are at greatest risk of being the victims, offenders, or victim–offenders of knife crime. Knife crimes are usually not gang-related (less than 20%)
Brennan (2021) United Kingdom	To identify longitudinal predictors of weapon-carrying in a sample aged 10–25 years.	*n* = 4,234 Age range = 10–25	N/A	Quantitative, Longitudinal survey using data from the Offending, Crime, and Justice Survey in 2005 and 2006. Self-report measures on carrying a weapon, direct experience of violence, worry about being a victim of violence, trust in the police, and peers in trouble with the police	Victimization does not predict weapon-carrying, but the experience of violence does. Distrust of police and peer criminality drivers for weapon-carrying.
Brown and Benedict (2004) United States	The study examines the presence of weapons and fear of weapon-associated victimization at school with a majority of Hispanic students.	*n* = 230 Ethnicity = 93.8% Hispanic 4.4% White 1.8% other ethnicity Females, *n* = 48.2% Males, *n* = 51.8%	N/A	Quantitative, exploration study using data from a survey conducted between 2000 and 2001 using mostly dichotomous (yes/no) questions related to demographic and crime-related issues.	More than 1 in 5 students reported concerns about weapon-associated victimization at school. Fear of victimization is associated with an increase in weapon carrying and a reduction in educational achievement.
Button and Worthen (2017) United States	The study examined the relationship between sexual identity, school victimization, social support, and school weapon carrying	*n* = 8,172 total sample from three surveys *n* = 7,633 Heterosexual sample Age range *n* = 14–18 Males, *n* = 51% Females, *n* = 48%	*n* = 484 LGBQ sample	Quantitative, cross-sectional using data from the High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS-HS) Self-report measures: school weapon carrying, sexual identity, school victimization, social support, and social isolation	The study found that LGBQ and heterosexual youth weapon carrying is related to school victimization. Being male is significantly related to heterosexual youth's weapon carrying, but sex is not related to weapon carrying among LGBQ young people.
Dijkstra et al. (2010) United States	The study investigated the role of peers, status, and vulnerability in weapon carrying in and outside of school.	*n* = 167 All male sample Age range = 12–16	N/A	Quantitative, longitudinal. Self-report measures on weapon carrying, best friends, aggression, and victimization. Data collated at two different time points 1 year apart.	Weapon carrying functions as a status symbol within peer groups and is subject to peer influence. Peer-reported aggressiveness predicted weapon carrying 1 year later.
Dijkstra et al. (2012) United States	To examine the relative contribution of weapon carrying of peers, aggression, and victimization to weapon carrying for male and female adolescents over time.	*n* = 468 Males, *n* = 224 Females, *n* = 244. The sample comprised adolescents attending grade 10 and grade 11 (equivalent to year 11 and year 12 respectively in the United Kingdom).	N/A	Quantitative, longitudinal. Peer networks were derived from best friend nominations. Self-reports and peer reports were used to assess weapon carrying, aggression, and victimization.	Self-reported victimization decreased weapon carrying 1 year later. Peer-reported victimization increased the likelihood of weapon carrying, particularly for highly aggressive adolescents. Processes of peer contagion as well as individual vulnerability identified as drivers for weapon carrying.
Gray et al. (2021) United Kingdom	The study investigated the relationship between Serious Youth Violence and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).	*n* = 200 Males = 90% Females = 10% Sample out of a possible 424 cases of children open to Manchester Youth Offending Service.	N/A	Mixed-methods, cross-sectional study using data from a bespoke ACEs assessment tool. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with youth justice workers and narrative interviews with justice-involved children using the McAdams Life Story methodological concept.	The study revealed that youth-involved children presented a number of ACEs with 66% (*n* = 132) of the 200 children assessed having 5 or more ACEs. The most commonly identified ACE was parental separation/loss which was evident on 84% (*n* = 167). Children reported feeling unsafe as their main reason to carry a weapon.
Holligan et al. (2017) Scotland	The study examines the construction of space, time, and social settings of young men who are weapon carriers using signal crime theory to interpret findings.	*n* = 20 males The sample was selected on three key criteria: lived in Glasgow for most of their lives, had gang or been on the periphery of the gang, or street violence or other forms of offending behavior, and were at least 16 years of age.	N/A	Qualitative, using narrative analysis. Interview schedules were designed to invite participants to share situations whereby they experienced, fear, risk, conflict, and danger which may have led them into violent or offending behavior whereby they had carried a weapon.	Overarching themes from participants' narratives were identified within the context of youth violence, masculinity, risk, and fear of crime.
Johnson et al. (2019) United States	The study examined the extent to which psychological difficulties (fear of crime, family history of mental illness, and low self-control) are related to student weapon carrying and use and whether these varied across school contexts.	*n* = 7,308 Average age *n* = 13.5	N/A	Quantitative using data from the Rural Abuse and Violence Project (RSVP), a longitudinal study of students attending schools in Kentucky from 2001 to 2004. Data were collated in two waves (wave 1 in 2011; wave 2 in 2002). Multi-item scales were used to measure weapon use and carrying, fear of crime, victimization, self/family history of institutionalization, anxiety/depression, and gun access.	Findings generally support the link between reported psychological difficulties and student weapon carrying and use. Family history of mental illness, fear of crime, and low self-control were positively related to student weapon carrying and use. Low self-control was the only psychological difficulty significantly related to student weapon carrying and use.

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Author(s)	Study Aims	Sample	Comparison Group	Design/Measures	Key Findings
King (2022). In "Young Black Street Masculinities" United Kingdom	The study explored the experiences of vulnerability among young Black men who resided in a London Housing Estate explored the pressures these young men face to carry knives and investigated these young men's broader attitudes toward knives and knife-carrying.	*n* = 41 All adult black male sample Age range = 18–23 Youth workers interviewed, *n* = 5	N/A	Qualitative, using an interactionist approach within an urban ethnography design. Methods used: observations, informal conversations, interviews, and focus groups.	The study suggests that young males operate within a street code that endorses violence, knife-carrying, and challenging masculinity. Knife-carrying helps these young males in constructing a "masculinity" that enables them to navigate through street life. Masculinity is seen as being context specific with masculinity formations and performances varying across spaces, time, and individuals.
Lane et al. (2004) United States	To investigate whether African-American inner-city adolescents are motivated by a fear of victimization or by delinquency to carry a knife or gun.	*n* = 223 Females, *n* = 130 Males, *n* = 93 Age range, *n* = 13–19	N/A	Quantitative, cross-sectional survey. A survey was administered either through audio-computer-assisted self-interview or via telephone interview. Measures devised for study to capture: fear of victimization, delinquency, and intention to carry a gun	For both genders, the intention to carry a gun was associated with higher levels of past delinquent involvement and greater fear of victimization. Weapon-carrying appears to be more strongly associated with aggressive or delinquent behavior than with a fear of victimization.
Li et al. (2021) United States	The study investigates the relationship between both low- and high-rate adolescent weapon carrying and examines the differences in both groups in relation to several common predictors of weapon carrying.	*n* = 1,285 students (sixth- to ninth-grade students) High-rate weapon carriers defined as having carried weapons over 6 times, *n* = 44	Groups of non-weapon carriers, *n* = 1,136 One-time weapon carriers, *n* = 49 Low-rate weapon carriers are defined as carrying a weapon between 2 and 5 times, *n* = 56	Quantitative, longitudinal study. Self-report survey data were collected during three different periods: Autumn semester of 2004, Spring semester of 2005, and Autumn semester of 2005. Measures captured: weapon carrying, fear of crime and perceived risk of victimization, self-efficacy, victimization, prior weapon carrying, offending, and delinquent peers.	The findings suggest that although victimization differentiates non-weapon carriers from infrequent weapon carriers, it does not predict higher rates of carrying. High-rate weapon carriers reported lower fear but higher levels of self-efficacy when compared to less frequent weapon carriers. Weapon carriers are part of a general offending lifestyle and individuals who carry weapons are already engaged in a deviant lifestyle.
Marfleet (2008) United Kingdom	The study investigated the motivation of teenage boys to carry knives, in particular, whether the decision to carry a knife is primarily an offensive or defensive act.	*n* = 76 All male sample Young people in a custodial estate sentenced for a knife-related offense, *n* = 4 Focus groups with young people attending a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), *n* = 72. Age range, *n* = 15–17	N/A	Qualitative, using focus groups with children attending an alternative education provision and one-to-one interviews with children sentenced to custody.	The study found the need for protection as a driver for weapon carrying, and a strong positive relationship between weapon carrying and feelings of fear and vulnerability. Prior experience of victimization or fear of victimization preceded the decision to carry a weapon.
Melde et al. (2009) United States	The study investigates the fear and victimization hypothesis as an explanation for adolescent weapon carrying.	*n* = 1,113 Age range, *n* = 10–16	N/A	A quasi-experimental, longitudinal study using data from a school-based victimization prevention program delivered to students in grades six through nine. Data from three waves were collected at 6-month intervals between October 2004 and February 2006. Measures were devised for study to capture: hidden weapon carrying, fear of crime and risk of victimization, peer weapon carrying, victimization and offending, and gang membership.	The study identifies that the perceived risk of victimization is positively associated with weapon carrying for those young people who report both victimization and offending history. For young people who were involved in offending but had no recent victimization, fear and the perceived risk of victimization were unrelated to carrying weapons. For these young people, weapon carrying served a functional purpose in committing a crime or as a means to enhance their criminal identity.
Miller (2002) United Kingdom	The study examined how fear of crime among young people may be related to weapon-carrying behavior	*n* = 110 Males, *n* = 53 Females, *n* = 57 Age range, *n* = 16–24	N/A	Quantitative, cross-sectional using self-report data. Measures used captured: participants fear of crime in general, sources responsible for generating fear of crime, participants' area of residence, and behavioral implications of fear of crime.	Female participants reported a higher overall fear of crime than males, but they were not more likely to carry weapons due to this fear. Previous victimization had little effect on weapon-carrying behavior.
Mukherjee et al. (2020) United States	The study examined the relationship between high school students' perceived lack of safety and their likelihood of possessing and carrying weapons.	*n* = 195,280 The sample comprised male and female students in grades 9th–12th	N/A	Quantitative, cross-sectional using self-reported data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) from 1991 to 2017. The survey collates information on a number of areas including information on weapons carrying in the past month and gun carrying in the past year, perceived lack of safety at school or during commute, being bullied and/or threatened, involvement in physical fights, and demographic characteristics.	Students who had missed school due to feeling unsafe were significantly more likely to carry weapons in the community overall as well as on school property. This was particularly common among those adolescents who had been injured and/or threatened with a weapon, and those who had been involved in physical fights. Victims of bullying were significantly more likely to carry weapons.
Palasinski (2013) United Kingdom	The aim of the paper is to provide an overview of adolescents' views on knife-carrying and their reasons for engaging in this type of behavior.	*n* = 25 All males sample Age range, *n* = 16–17	N/A	Qualitative design using semi-structured interviews focusing on knife-carrying. Narratives were analyzed by drawing on the classical discourse analysis and the concept of narrative repertoires.	Key findings suggest that the young males in the sample made sense of the social and legal consequences of knife-carrying as normal, trivial, and inevitable. The study identified three broad discursive repertoires in relation to knife-carrying, namely personal security, respect, and culture.

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Author(s)	Study Aims	Sample	Comparison Group	Design/Measures	Key Findings
Palasinski et al. (2021) United Kingdom	The study examined factors that influence knife-carrying tolerance (i.e., the extent to which it is seen as acceptable and justified) and perceptions of anti-knife messages (i.e., slogans and posters aimed at reducing knife crime.	*N* = 797 All male samples in all studies Study 1, *n* = 277, age range = 19–25 Study 2, *n* = 200, age range = 18–25 Study 3, *n* = 169, age range = 18–25 Study 4, *n* = 115, age range = 18–25 Participants were recruited across the United Kingdom using a snowballing technique on social media, like Facebook and Twitter.	N/A	Quantitative, experimental study using Likert scales. Study 1 included a 10-min structural equation study and explored concepts predictive of knife-related crime (i.e., aggressive masculinity, limited control over status, need for respect and physical self-defense, and lack of trust in the government and police). Study 2 involved a 10-min survey with items measuring: pathology, respect, injury, fatality, and control. In study 3, participants were shown real anti-knife posters and indicated the persuasiveness and believability of the poster. Study 4 used advanced computer graphics of male avatars featuring graphics with various injuries to the face.	Study 1 revealed that both latent factors such as "saving face" and deprivation directly predict knife tolerance. The study found that the need for physical defense, need for respect, limited trust in authorities, and limited control over status were found to be intercorrelated and predictive of aggressive masculinity which as then predictive of knife tolerance. Study 2 found that the injury slogan was rated as the most persuasive. Study 3 revealed that the fresh injury poster was rated as the most persuasive, emotional, and believable. Study 4 shows that the avatar image with eye injuries is the most persuasive, emotional, and believable.
Palasinski and Riggs (2012) United Kingdom	The study examined the issues of power and control among young males who carry knives.	*n* = 16 All male sample Age range = 16–17	N/A	Qualitative, using semi-structured one-to-one interviews. Interview schedules comprised of questions about the community, college, and friends, and questions about street violence. Interviews were examined utilizing Wetherell and Potter's (1992) approach.	Two main repertoires emerged: an attribution of blame to authorities for a lack of protection and a subsequent justification of knife-carrying, and discussions of masculinity in relation to knife-carrying. Knives were attributed a symbolic function for these young men as providing protection and control.
Traynor (2016) United Kingdom	The study investigated the motivations and experiences of young people who carry knives aiming to provide an understanding as to what may have triggered those behaviors.	*n* = 23 Males, *n* = 21 Females, *n* = 2 Age range = 9–19	*n* = 64 Males, *n* = 34 Females, *n* = 30 Non-knife carriers living in the same or near area of knife carriers group Age range = 9–19	Qualitative, using in-depth interviews and group interviews. Data collection took place between March 2011 and September 2013 using young people open to Youth Offending Teams as well as school children and young people engaging with voluntary services.	The study's main finding is the idea of carrying a knife as a behavior that can help young people bridge or close a "security gap." This "security gap" is created by experiences of, or threat of, violent victimization and knife carrying. There was a recognition that a knife could at times be effective in preventing victimization and reducing anxieties about victimization.
Trickett (2011) United Kingdom	The study examines the fears and anxieties of a group of young men who regularly engage in violence.	*n* = 45 The sample was divided into three age groups: 16–21, *n* = 15; 21–45, *n* = 15; and 60 plus, *n* = 15.	N/A	Qualitative, using interview schedules with open-ended questions. A combination of cross-sectional and non-cross-sectional indexing was used in the data analysis.	Findings suggest that males who carry weapons hold a social identity that is characterized by "hard" masculinity, informed by their ideas about how to be a man and "feelings of belonging" to an area. To maintain that "hard man" image, a continual demonstration of bravado was necessary which was achieved by involvement in a series of behaviors that involved the use of violence.
Whelan (2013) United Kingdom	The study investigated young men's experiences of masculinity and fear in public spaces and explored how these experiences could related to involvement in street violence.	*n* = 31 In depth-interview, *n* = 1, male Youth clubs participants, *n* = 20, males, *n* = 17, females, *n* = 3 Focus groups, *n* = 10, males, *n* = 3 and females, *n* = 7 Age range = 14–19 No clear information on the actual number of participants in street observations captured	N/A	Qualitative using a practitioner research approach within a street-based youth work setting. Combination of ethnography with Critical Discourse to analyze data captured through interviews, focus groups, and observations.	The study revealed that for these young men having or claiming a propensity for violence over other young men is an available resource that they can tap into to help them construct a more "masculine identity." Knife-carrying is seen as a "resource" to be used when other more legitimate avenues of gender identity construction are rebuffed or through marginalization are not available to young men.
Wilcox et al. (2006) United States	The study investigated school-based gun carrying among a sample of school-aged young people and measured fear and perceived risk of victimization using multi-item crime-specific scales, prior to weapon carrying	Age range not reported but consisted of seventh-grade students who were followed until the ninth grade (equivalent to year seven through year ten in the United Kingdom, with possible age range = 12–15) *n* = 4,102	N/A	Quantitative, longitudinal study. The data used in this study were collected as part of the Rural Substance Abuse and Violence Project (RSVP), a longitudinal study designed to examine individual and contextual factors that affect substance use, victimization, and offending among middle and high school students in the state of Kentucky. Data were collected between 2001 and 2004.	Results of the study were not supportive of the fear and victimization hypothesis. The authors found that elevated risk perceptions were inversely associated with future gun and non-gun weapon carrying and fear of victimization was found to be unrelated to the decision to carry weapons.

However, Brown and Benedict (2004) suggested that knowledge of weapons (in this case all types of weapons including knives) being carried in school has a greater impact on fear of knife-related victimization than abstract beliefs about safety. In their study, they found that students who reported having seen other students carry knives at and to school were significantly more fearful of being stabbed while at school, and students who reported having seen other students carry guns at school were significantly more fearful of being shot at school (Brown & Benedict, 2004).

So, while the above findings suggest that victimization is an antecedent to knife-related crime, some authors have argued that fear of victimization is a consequence of weapon carrying (all types of weapons including knives) rather than an antecedent (Wilcox et al., 2006), with fear of victimization being only predictive of knife-related crime for those young people who report recent victimization and offending (Melde et al., 2009). Indeed, some studies have found that weapon carrying (all types of weapons including knives) is more strongly associated with aggressive or delinquent behavior than fear of victimization (Lane et al., 2004) and that the carrying of weapons emerges over time as a product of engaging in and being victims of crime and violence (Brennan, 2021).

Victimization and Knife-Related Crime Relationship Moderated by Aggression. Some studies found an interaction effect between aggression and victimization in relation to knife-related crime, with the likelihood of knife-related crime increasing when aggression interacts with victimization (Dijkstra et al., 2012). Dijkstra et al. (2012) argue that the act of carrying a weapon (not just knives) is, in effect, a by-product of the offender–victim overlap. This victim–offender overlap has been evidenced in other research (Bailey et al., 2020) whereby an individual can be a victim in one knife-related incident and an offender in another separate knife-related incident or indeed, in the same incident. Bailey and colleagues in their study found that the majority of individuals who were arrested for a knife-related offense were known to the Criminal Justice System for prior offending (74.2%). The victims were also known to the police, with 39.8% having a criminal record and nearly half of those victimized being repeat victims (47.1%).

The Victimization-Protection Paradox. In some studies, fear, perceived risk, and the need for protection were often mentioned as signifying the same. It can be argued that fear is an emotional reaction to the perception of imminent victimization, whereas the perceived risk of victimization is simply the cognitive determination of the probability of victimization and does not necessarily translate into fear (Warr, 2000). Indeed, Li et al.'s (2021) study suggests that self-efficacy may play a role in young people's decisions to carry a weapon. Feelings of self-efficacy may increase in young people their feelings of self-confidence in their ability to protect themselves with a weapon. From this perspective, fear is determined not by the actual threat in a situation, but by the *perception* of threat and the person's belief in his or her capacity to handle the perceived threat. As such, some young people may carry weapons for protection against victimization, which may not be driven by fear. Their decision to carry a weapon is based on their "analysis" of *perceived risk* and may not necessarily be accompanied by the emotional reaction of fear. While this is an interesting perspective, caution is needed in the generalization of this finding given that the role of self-efficacy in young males' decisions to engage in knife-related crime is not very well understood.

Miller (2002) conducted a study to understand gender differences in the relationship between fear of crime, victimization experiences, and weapon carrying (again, not just knives) among young people in the United Kingdom between 16 and 24 years old. Findings showed that females reported a higher overall fear of crime than males, but they were not more likely to carry weapons because of this fear (Miller, 2002). Additional analysis of the data suggested that being a victim did not necessarily suggest being more likely to carry a weapon. Individuals who reported having never carried a weapon were slightly more fearful of crime than the weapon carriers. This may be because, for the young people who carry weapons, this activity works as a strategy to reduce fear. Another interesting finding was in relation to knowledge of weapons and the law, with weapon carriers demonstrating a far greater level of knowledge than non-weapon carriers. Although these results need to be interpreted carefully, they suggest that weapon carriers are more concerned with their immediate safety than punishment, with weapons being conceived as an available and cost-effective way to reduce their perceived risk. In relation to the males in this study reporting lower levels of fear compared to females, this may be due to males feeling as if they need to conform to some type of machismo culture, whereby admitting to being fearful may cast doubt on their masculine identity.

Masculinity and Associated Gender Norms Studies. Seven studies investigated the relationship between masculinity and knife-related crime, with five studies employing a qualitative design and the remaining two having quantitative designs. Four of the qualitative studies adopted a practitioner-research approach and discourse analysis was utilized in all to analyze the data captured through interviews, focus groups, and observations. Interview transcripts often revealed themes of bravado, loyalty, retaliation, and a need for a certain type of reputation when participants were recounting their experiences of victimization. It emerged from the literature this idea that young males who engage in knife-related crime do so because of a shared social identity. This social identity is characterized by "hard" masculinity, informed by ideas about how to be a man (Tricket, 2011) and influenced by a street code that endorses violence, knife-carrying, and challenging masculinity (King, 2022). Knife-carrying enables these young males to construct a "masculinity" characterized by

being "tough" and "aggressive" which helps them to manage and navigate complex spaces characterized by risk and uncertainties (Holligan et al., 2017). Whelan (2013) suggests that for these males, acts of violence are a resource available for the construction of this aggressive masculine identity. Factors such as the need for physical defense, need for respect, limited trust in authorities, and limited control over status have been found to be inter-related and predictive of this aggressive masculinity which is predictive of knife-related crime (Palasinski et al., 2021).

Two studies discuss the idea of masculinity being context specific and males adopting different "types" of masculinity, with masculinity formations and performances varying across spaces, time, and individuals (Holigan et al., 2017; King, 2022). For some young men carrying a weapon is an important resource in constructing a credible threat of violence and a resource for gender identity construction particularly when more legitimate avenues are rebuffed or because of their marginalization become unavailable to young men (Whelan, 2013). However, this may be different for non-heterosexual males. One study examined the relationship between sexual orientation and weapon carrying (Button & Worthen, 2017) with findings suggesting that within the heterosexual male sample, participants were more likely to carry weapons but the same did not apply to the LGBTQ equivalent. Interestingly, in both groups, previous victimization was related to weapon carrying.

In the masculinity and knife-related crime literature reviewed, there is this underlying finding that displays of weakness or vulnerability undermine these young men's constructions of masculinity (Holigan et al., 2017; King, 2022). It can be argued that for these males openly talking about fear in relation to knife-related crime can be seen as a weakness and therefore it presents as a dilemma to them.

The Fear and Masculinity Dilemma. Some studies suggest that for males to engage in knife-related crime, they need to look tough and "hard" while presenting as vulnerable to defensibly justify that behavior (Palasinski & Riggs, 2012). There is a need to develop and exhibit a particular form of masculinity that denies vulnerability but at the same time, vulnerability is driving the knife-related crime behavior (Palasinski & Riggs, 2012). Previous victimization for these young males does not seem to trigger the emotional reaction of fear as such but rather triggers the need for these young men to respond and behave in a manner that will keep them physically safe in the eventuality of another experience of victimization (Palasinski & Riggs, 2012). The idea of perceived risk as mentioned earlier could be what drives these young males into deciding to carry a knife. This may be the case for those males who have constructed aggressive masculinity (Palasinski, 2013; Palasinski & Riggs 2012) as discussed above, and who subscribe to masculine norms that emphasize and encourage toughness, risk-taking, and the need to gain respect.

There is an alternative theory within the literature that suggests a contagion/fashion effect driving the perpetration of knife-related crime (Marfleet, 2008). An important consequence of a "culture" of knife-related crime is the perception by an individual that many of their peers are carrying knives (Brennan & Moore, 2009). However, it is not very well understood the role of fear contagion and victimization in the shaping of masculinity ideals within groups of young men involved in knife-related crime.

Discussion

In summary, 23 studies met the inclusion criteria for this systematic review. As indicated by the research questions, these studies were demarcated into two inter-related topic areas: studies investigating the relationships between past victimization, fear, and knife-related crime (15 studies); and studies examining the role of masculinity in the perpetration of knife-related crime (seven studies). One study did not set out to investigate fear or masculinity as such but was decided to be included as the findings were relevant to the systematic review namely in relation to fear of victimization as a motivational narrative for knife-related crime.

The review highlights how there is mixed support for the fear and victimization hypothesis in relation to knife-related crime, observed both within the cross-sectional and longitudinal studies While some studies demonstrate this link (Gray et al., 2021; Marfleet, 2008), others suggest that rather than being driven by an emotive reaction such as fear due to previous victimization, knife-related crime is a result of young people's cognitive recognition of the need for protection (Melde et al., 2009). As such, for some young people, their decision to engage in knife-related crime is based on their "analysis" of perceived risk and may not necessarily be accompanied by the emotional reaction of fear.

Interestingly, the studies examining masculinity and knife-related crime suggest that males who engage in this type of behavior tend to adopt an aggressive masculine identity. Within this identity, the knife is perceived as a resource available to help them embody a credible violent persona that others would then fear. In this sense, the act of carrying a knife reduces feelings of vulnerability, which is needed for these males to maintain this masculine identity to navigate complex and violent contexts. Consequently, young men engaged in knife-related crime may not express vulnerability because they don't feel it. So, while fear and masculinity within the context of knife-related crime can appear distinct, they are very much connected and further research is needed to untangle this relationship.

In the studies reviewed, we see the emergence of two explanations in relation to how they connect. On the one hand, it seems that fear due to previous victimization appears to trigger the need to develop an aggressive masculinity (to protect against future victimization). On the other hand, the construction of this aggressive masculinity may be due to

these males' *perceived* analysis of risk rather than fear itself. With this in mind, we see the emergence of a theoretical explanation for knife-related crime. A knife is regarded as an instrumental tool to achieve a nonviolent goal namely for defensive reasons due to previous violent victimization and not purely as an expression of aggression. It is also an available tool for young men in the building of a masculine identity which will also serve a defensive purpose (i.e., to deter others from harming them physically). Therefore, the factor that appears to knit together past victimization, masculine identity, and knife-related crime is their cognitive analysis of perceived risk.

There are limitations to the generalization of these findings, with the review covering a small number of studies. Nearly half of the studies (48%) included in this systematic review used school samples and focused on understanding knife-related behaviors within school settings. These studies are limited through their reliance on short and superficial assessments of knife-related crime. In addition, knife possessions lead to school exclusions (APPG Group on Knife Crime, 2019) so studies using only school children to investigate knife-related crime are unlikely to include those adolescents who are regularly engaging in knife-related behaviors as they are very likely no longer attending school. This means that findings are limited in terms of psychosocial and demographic characteristics of adolescents who engage in knife-related crime. In addition, 39% of the studies reviewed were conducted in the United States of America, which, as mentioned, raises the issue of generalization of findings. Caution is needed in the interpretation of these findings and their applicability to the United Kingdom population and young people. Particularly in relation to demonstrations of masculinity whereby different cultures and contexts are likely to shape the development of traits accordingly. Two studies included within the review (Holigan et al., 2017; King, 2022), discuss knife-related crime being context specific. The researchers assert within their studies that males involved in knife-related crime adopt different masculinities according to their context. As such, any further research investigating knife-related crime ought to outline how the behavior is to be understood within a context and outline from the outset the need for findings to be interpreted within that context and its limitations in applicability to other contexts depending on how these are defined. Limitations on the research quality of the studies reviewed are also noted due to a lack of control groups as part of their study design which is identified as a significant methodological limitation. Only one study out of the 23 reviewed employed a mixed design/method (Gray et al., 2021). Studies using quantitative methodologies seeking to understand and assess the impact of a range of factors in shaping a behavior have much to offer. However, in relation to knife-related crime adopting a mixed design is more likely to yield more meaningful results in terms of understanding the complex interaction of drivers for knife-related crime through the eyes of those engaging in the behavior that is also supported by quantitative data.

Conclusion

This review found that the literature available on knife-related crime is riddled with varying terms likely due to the fact that the current literature does not distinguish between carrying of knives and using knives within violence. It also found that knife-related crime tends to usually be investigated as part of wider weapon carrying behaviors and rarely seen as a distinct behavior with unique motivations. Future research investigating knife-related crime should aim at exploring whether the *use* of knives and *carrying* of knives should be seen as distinct and, as such, influenced by different factors using samples that employ more rigorous sampling methods.

While this review is preoccupied with understanding the research that investigates masculinity and fear as motivational narratives for males who engage in knife-related crime, it is apparent that there is a lack of research into females who engage in this type of behavior. Much of what is understood in relation to females who engage in knife-related crime is anecdotal. A number of areas remain unexplored including females as "holders" of knives, their role within male-dominated group dynamics and in the "mediation" of violence, and whether there are any connections between females who carry or hold knives for males and sexual violence victimization against them.

There is also a need to work toward the development of a theoretical understanding of knife-related crime. With young males being repeatedly identified as both perpetrators and victims of knife crime, further research is needed to support the development of our theoretical understanding of why some males engage in knife-related crime. This review suggests a theory for understanding knife-related crime. Young males' decisions to engage in knife-related crime are based on their analysis of risk and *perceptions* of risk. These perceptions of risk through a *contagion effect* are shaped and further influenced by instances of previous victimization as a result of knife-related crime. This, in turn, contributes to the development of an aggressive masculinity that justifies the behavior. Additional research is needed focusing particularly on understanding this complex interplay. As knife-related crime has become more and more embedded in political agendas, high-quality research will support further government initiatives, particularly in relation to the allocation of funding for the development of interventions to target and address knife-related crime.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. A local youth club is a club/social hub where young people can socialize and take part in various pro-social activities.

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Author Biographies

Ana Figueira is a second-year Forensic Psychology PhD student at the University of Kent. Ana completed her BSc in Psychology and MSc in Forensic Psychology at London Metropolitan University in 2012. After spending many years working with mostly adult forensic populations both in custody and the community, Ana developed an interest in understanding better the needs of young people involved in offending behavior. Ana is particularly interested in understanding serious youth violence with a focus on weapon-enabled violence perpetrated by young males.

Emma Alleyne completed her BSc (Honours) in Psychology at McMaster University (Hamilton, Canada), followed by her MSc and PhD in Forensic Psychology at the University of Kent. She began her lectureship at Kent in 2011 and is now a Reader in Forensic Psychology at the University of Kent. Dr Alleyne's theoretical and empirical work examines the social, psychological, and behavioral factors that explain various types of aggressive behavior. She is particularly interested in how human–human versus human–animal empathy relates to animal abuse specifically and interpersonal violence more broadly. She pursues research lines that investigate how other types of regulatory processes (e.g., emotion regulation, moral disengagement) facilitate offending behavior.

Professor Jane Wood is an Emeritus Professor of Forensic Psychology at the University of Kent. She is also a Chartered Forensic Psychologist and HCPC Registered Forensic Psychologist. Professor Jane Wood's research interests include prison gang activity, street gang formation and activity, bullying in prison and schools, trauma/mental health links with offending, group offending, and polygraph testing in the management of individuals convicted or suspected of offenses.