

# Case Study 1: Youth and Knife Crime

## Overview:

Knife crime has been a recurring focus of moral panic in the UK over the past two decades. High-profile incidents, especially those involving teenagers, are often sensationalised in national and local media. Headlines such as “Knife Crime Epidemic” or “Teenagers Terrorising Streets” are common, and television news frequently features dramatic coverage of stabbings in urban areas. While knife crime exists, research suggests media reporting exaggerates its prevalence, sometimes creating the impression that youth violence is far more widespread than it actually is.

## Media Representation:

Young people, particularly those from urban areas, are frequently portrayed as folk devils, threatening social order. Sensationalist language—terms like “feral youths,” “gang culture,” or “killer teens”—contributes to fear and moral outrage. Social media amplifies these fears; video clips of isolated incidents are shared widely, often without context. Political commentary and opinion pieces may reinforce public anxiety, framing knife crime as evidence of a generation lacking discipline and respect for authority.

## Sociological Analysis:

Cohen’s concept of moral panic is clearly illustrated: media coverage of a few incidents generates disproportionate public concern. The deviancy amplification spiral is evident as heightened fear leads to stricter policing, stop-and-search operations, and increased security in schools. These measures, in turn, reinforce the perception that knife crime is an urgent and widespread threat, even when statistics indicate a more nuanced picture. Structural factors, such as poverty, social exclusion, and limited youth services, are often overlooked in media narratives, making young people scapegoats for broader social problems.

## Student Reflection:

Consider the role of adult anxieties and societal expectations in shaping the panic. How does media representation influence public perception? Are the responses—such as policing and legislation—proportional to the actual scale of incidents? What might be the long-term consequences for young people labelled as folk devils, and how could social policy address the root causes rather than simply reacting to media-driven fear?



# Case Study 2: TikTok and Teen Behaviour

## Overview:

TikTok, a social media platform popular among teenagers, has become a source of contemporary moral panic in the UK. Media reports frequently focus on viral “challenges” or trends that appear risky, antisocial, or even criminal. Examples include pranks, minor theft challenges, or stunts that could result in injury. While participation in such trends is relatively limited and often playful, media coverage frequently exaggerates the scale and severity, portraying teenagers as reckless or morally corrupt.

## Media Representation:

Headlines such as “TikTok Fuels Teen Crime” or “Viral Challenges Spiral Out of Control” frame teenagers as folk devils, blamed for broader social problems. News articles often include emotive language, highlighting worst-case scenarios rather than typical behaviour. Social media further amplifies these stories, as viral posts and influencer reactions draw widespread attention. The platform itself is sometimes positioned as a moral threat, accused of promoting dangerous content and facilitating poor behaviour.

## Sociological Analysis:

This panic illustrates the deviancy amplification spiral, a key concept in Cohen’s work. Media coverage raises public concern, prompting schools to monitor online activity more closely and parents to impose restrictions. These responses may inadvertently increase interest in the trends among teenagers, further escalating the perception of risk. The panic reflects wider societal anxieties about youth, technology, and moral decline, rather than the actual scale of antisocial behaviour.

## Student Reflection:

Consider how media exaggeration and social media virality create disproportionate concern. How does adult fear of technology and moral decline shape the response? Are teenagers being unfairly labelled as folk devils? How could educators and parents balance concern for safety with overreaction?



# Case Study 3: Asylum Seekers and Immigration

## Overview:

Moral panics around asylum seekers and immigration have recurred in the UK over decades, often peaking during periods of political debate or high-profile migration events. Headlines frequently frame migration as a threat to national identity, social cohesion, or public services. Terms such as “wave,” “flood,” or “illegal immigrants” are commonly used, creating an image of imminent danger. While migration can present logistical and policy challenges, evidence rarely supports the dramatic claims made in media reports.

## Media Representation:

Asylum seekers and migrants are cast as folk devils, blamed for social, economic, or cultural problems. Visual media often reinforces this, showing crowded border crossings, temporary accommodation, or protests. Social media allows the rapid spread of unverified stories, memes, and opinion pieces that exaggerate the threat. Politicians sometimes contribute to the panic, framing migrants as a risk to security or prosperity, which can influence public perception and policy.

## Sociological Analysis:

The panic demonstrates Cohen’s moral panic framework: public concern is disproportionate to actual risk, and the deviancy amplification spiral is evident as sensational reporting fuels fear, political rhetoric encourages stricter immigration policies, and public anxiety increases. The focus on migrants as folk devils obscures structural factors, such as international conflicts, economic inequality, and the role of governments in shaping migration patterns.

## Student Reflection:

Analyse how language, imagery, and political statements contribute to the panic. Are migrants being scapegoated? How does this reflect societal anxieties about resources, identity, and social change? What might a more evidence-based response look like, and how could media literacy reduce exaggerated fears?



# Case Study 4: Drill Music

## Overview:

Drill music, a genre of rap that originated in urban communities, has repeatedly been linked to moral panics in the UK. While the music often reflects real-life experiences and challenges faced by young people, media coverage frequently frames it as a catalyst for violent crime. Headlines such as “Drill Music Fuels Gang Violence” or “Young People Radicalised by Rap Videos” amplify fears and position the genre itself as dangerous.

## Media Representation:

Drill artists and listeners are depicted as folk devils, blamed for incidents of street violence or knife crime. News coverage often uses emotive language, highlighting lyrics or video clips without context and implying causation between music and criminal activity. Online platforms amplify visibility, and police sometimes remove content or link prosecutions to drill videos, further legitimising public concern.

## Sociological Analysis:

Cohen’s framework is evident: moral panic arises when society reacts disproportionately to perceived threats, creating a deviancy amplification spiral. Public concern leads to increased policing, content removal, and censorship debates, which in turn attract further media attention. Drill music becomes symbolic of youth deviance, obscuring underlying social issues such as poverty, marginalisation, and limited access to education or employment.

## Student Reflection:

Consider whether the panic is about drill music itself or societal anxieties about youth, urban life, and crime. How does media representation shape perceptions of young people? What are the consequences for those labelled as folk devils, and how could policy or community action address root causes rather than simply suppressing music?

