

An Arc of Time Through Crime: Representations of Gypsies and Travellers in Police Killings

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This paper examines newspaper stories reporting on the killings by Gypsy and Traveller offenders of PC Leslie Meehan in 1960 and PC Andrew Harper in 2019. These media representations are used as heuristic devices to explore differing media discourses about this white minority ethnic group. Sixty years apart, these stories demonstrate supportive media commentary in the earlier period and more corrosive coverage in the recent period. Making a contribution to historical criminology and its consideration of race, this paper draws from extensive archival analysis and the extant literature. It highlights the political-economic significance of home ownership, the partial inclusion of Gypsies and Travellers in the multicultural polity, and broader trends towards increasing punitivism in criminal justice, as key explanatory factors in these different media and political representations.

KEY WORDS: Gypsies, Travellers, history, race, racism, newspapers

INTRODUCTION

On 2 March 1960, Jim Smith was driving in Woolwich, London, with five sacks of stolen scaffolding clips. PC Leslie Meehan, who suspected the car contained stolen goods, asked Smith to stop. Instead, Smith accelerated, and Meehan, in a bid to prevent him, leaped onto the bonnet. Smith drove chaotically into oncoming traffic, Meehan lost his grip and fell, dying almost instantly after being hit by an oncoming car. Less than a month later, Mr Justice Donovan donned the black cap and sentenced Jim Smith, aged 26, to death by hanging.¹ This sentence was subsequently commuted to life imprisonment.

On 15 August 2019, Henry Long, Albert Bowers and Jessie Cole stole a quad bike from outside a house near Bradfield Southend, Berkshire. They attached it to their car using a strap that had been previously stolen. The quad bike burglary victim reported the theft to the police

1 ‘Ragman to die for PC’, *Liverpool Echo*, 7 April 1960, 1.

immediately, and PCs Andrew Harper and Andrew Shaw responded. Abandoning the quad bike, the offenders tried to flee but, in the melee, Harper's foot got caught in the looped strap. He was dragged some distance at speed as the offenders sought to outpace the police car. PC Harper 'suffered catastrophic injuries from which he died within minutes'² Long, the driver, was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 16 years, while Bowers and Cole received custodial sentences of 13 years. An appeal by the Attorney General, claiming undue sentence leniency was unsuccessful.

The media narratives regarding these serious crimes, occurring almost 60 years apart, were markedly different. Little was made of the fact that Jim Smith was a Gypsy. Accustomed as we have become to the routine vilification of Gypsies and Travellers, it seems extraordinary that Smith was not subjected to the frenzied ire of the tabloids. Instead, notably, the *Daily Mail* developed a sympathetic narrative regarding Smith and his family's predicament. In contrast, Baillie's (2019) media analysis for 2014–16 found the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* running typically negative stories about Gypsies and Travellers, far in excess of any other tabloids or broadsheets. No surprise then that the *Daily Mail*'s coverage of PC Harper's manslaughter in 2019 was deeply negative; and, significantly, laid at the door of Traveller *communities* rather than three Traveller *individuals*. What, we then might reasonably ask, has changed so much in the intervening decades where the killing of two police officers could be represented so differently by the media?

Police killings are self-evidently exceptional. Their use in this paper lies neither in making assertions about Gypsy and Traveller offending or police killings per se. Nor do we claim that media representations were *routinely* more positive in the earlier period. Instead, we use the Meehan and Harper cases as heuristic devices to examine the characterization of Gypsies and Travellers in media formulations and political reflections over the two time periods. Our argument contributes to the 'historical turn' in criminology (Catello 2023). No longer of marginal interest to the discipline, burgeoning theoretical and empirical engagement with the historical study of crime, justice and punishment has offered valuable insights (Channing *et al.*, 2023), even if preoccupied with the 19th century (Tepperman and Rickabaugh 2023) and less concerned with race (Seal and Neale 2020a; cf. Glynn 2022). Our contribution partially addresses this lacuna and considers a minority ethnic group hitherto neglected within criminology (James 2020a). As a further point of departure, we heed Churchill's (2018: 9) urging that to 'think historically' requires a mode of enquiry that considers 'transformative ruptures, incremental shifts and enduring continuities'. This avoids what Lawrence (2019: 495) calls the 'jarring counterpoint' with historical criminology at its best when it disrupts assumptions of uncomplicated linear progression.

Below, we first historicize the role of print media in shaping public and political opinion on crime and justice, before introducing our methodology for excavating racializing tendencies in media stories. Referring next to our extensive archival material, we then use the archival analysis and extant literature to offer a tentative explanation for the stark differences in these contrasting media constructions.

CRIME, MEDIA, POLITICAL AND PUBLIC OPINION

Historians have long recognized the role of print newspapers in informing public opinion about crime, victims and offenders, even when situated within factual legal reporting (King 2007; Shoemaker 2017). Bingham's (2009) work demonstrates just what a staple court and crime reporting was for local and national newspapers by mid-twentieth-century Britain: in the late

² Court of Appeal (Criminal Division) on Appeal from the Central Criminal Court Mr Justice Edis Case No: 202002171/2172/2174 A2.

1940s, 10 per cent of the *Daily Mail*'s content, and 27 per cent of *The Mirror*'s was a combination of crime and court reporting. By the mid-1950s, crime news was the second most significant news category after sport (Rowbotham *et al.* 2013). Sensationalist reporting did not go unremarked, with 'quality' newspapers disparaging 'popular' newspapers for exploitative reporting that coarsened public debate. There were government calls for accurate legal reporting of cases so as not to inflame public fears or lead to imitation (Bingham 2009). By the 1960s, the salacious crime news reporting we are familiar with today had taken hold, with content analyses documenting further increases in crime stories over subsequent decades (Reiner 2007). More recent confirmation of the media's reach finds in 2013–14, 67 per cent of Crime Survey of England and Wales respondents said TV and radio news informed their perceptions of crime nationally, alongside 31 per cent citing tabloid and local newspapers and 21 per cent broadsheets, whereas 45 per cent reported local newspapers as influencing local crime estimates (ONS 2015). And despite the exponential proliferation of online (and social) media sources, Greer and McLaughlin (2017) maintain the centrality of newspapers in shaping public and political discussion about crime and justice.

Media stories land well when they are skewed towards the 'maps of meaning' that audiences are already tuned into (Hall *et al.* 1997: 29). The vulnerability associated with crime lends itself particularly well to being marshalled through crime control measures, and when the index of race is available, it too can mark out and sustain a recycled framing of offenders as different, deviant and dangerous compared with the rest of society (Garland 2001; Pratt 2007). It is, of course, in Hall *et al.*'s (1978) seminal analysis of the 'mugging' moral panic in Birmingham that the depiction of racial others is comprehensively examined. They identify euphemistic and explicit references to race in national and local newspapers, often fused with descriptions of depressed economic and social conditions. Once Black resistance to police violence also entered the media storybank, mugging became thereafter synonymous with black men. Such stories' ideological function can detract attention from government crises, upholding a fragile hegemony through coercive authoritarianism (Hall *et al.* 1978). As Tufail *et al.* (2023) maintain, 40 years on, media actors still have at their disposal tools of misrepresentation, omission or distortion. A reservoir of racist imagery and language can be deployed to reinforce long-standing tropes linked to inherent immorality and criminality (see also Elliott-Cooper *et al.* 2014; Williams 2024). Even in contemporary media spaces that have pluralized and polarized political positions, individual desires for moralizing narratives that uphold their primacy over an identified scapegoat persist (James and McBride 2021). The contemporary targets—Black men, Muslims, asylum seekers, White Eastern Europeans—seem easily substitutable in this regard (Bhatia *et al.* 2018, 2023). To this list—as we shall explore in this paper—we can add Gypsies and Travellers, building on previous research documenting biased media reporting that alleges their anti-social, predatory and aggressive behaviour (Morris 2006; Richardson and O'Neill 2012).

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

While Carter Wood (2016: 301) has observed, 'the appeal of crime news has transcended all eras, formats, and national borders', it is only through unpacking this universality that we can assess its specific historical dynamics. To examine the racialising elements of the media stories surrounding PC Meehan and PC Harper's deaths, sixty years apart—from incident reporting to police investigation to trial and sentencing—we utilize a descriptive analysis of newspaper stories. For the Smith case, material was collated from digitized broadsheet and tabloid newspapers (*The Times*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*). Access to local and regional newspapers was limited to the *Belfast Telegraph*, *Aberdeen Evening Express*, *Liverpool Echo*, *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, and the *Peterborough Standard*, as the British Library collection's digitization

of local newspapers for the twentieth century remains piecemeal (Stephens *et al.* 2014). Taken together, these titles appear illustrative of the case reporting and attitudes of the time. Titles were searched 1 March 1960 to 31 December 1961 with search terms 'Jim Smith', 'PC Meehan', 'dealer', 'gips'³, 'gyps', 'death sentence' and 'capital punishment'. For the Harper case study from 2019, the Lexis database was used to gather references, followed by scrutiny of the original sources. The search, from 16 August 2019 to 31 March 2023, used the search terms 'PC Andrew Harper' and derivatives, 'death', 'dying', 'die*', 'kill*', 'murder*', 'manslaughter', 'Gyps*' and 'Travell*'. In total, 126 articles indicated the suspects/defendants were of Gypsy or Traveller origin. Table 1 displays the spread across different types of newspapers. Noteworthy is the more common use of the ethnic referent in local newspapers.

Applying Chibnall's (1977) oft-cited schema for understanding story selection processes, recently updated by Jewkes (2015), to the Meehan and Harper cases is also instructive. These stories of police killings certainly meet the *threshold* of national interest, and they are also *predictable* news fodder as *simplistic* stories that orient around the *risks* of the policing enterprise. The stories are *individualized* by focusing on the personal circumstances of the various offenders and victims, and the *violence* of their content is reinforced through *visual spectacle* and *graphic imagery*. Most importantly perhaps, the manslaughters offer *cultural proximity* with the victim from the majority white ethnic group and the offenders from a minority ethnic group.⁴

Table 1. Count of Gypsy or Traveller Mentions in the PC Harper Killing 2019

	Gypsy/Traveller mentioned
National broadsheets	37
National tabloids	28
Local/regional newspapers	61
Total	126

What follows in our analysis, however, is not a conventional content analysis that quantifies word frequency or the timings and framings of racialising tendencies by headline, news story, feature or editorial (cf. Hall *et al.* 1978; Baillie 2019; Rif 2019). The limits to comprehensiveness in the Smith case make such an exercise of limited value. Instead, we note the use of the ethnicity descriptor as it can reasonably be argued that this is not germane to the story. We selectively highlight the ways journalists shaped the narrative in the PC Harper case, acknowledging that the referent can, though it may not always, operate as a rhetorical cue of racial otherness; its invocation priming readers to make connections to culturally inferior behaviour using the registers of immorality and criminality. Observing the ethnicity of the suspects/defendants has a particular political currency, particularly when viewed alongside consistently negative public opinion data for this ethnic group that outstrips that associated with immigrants and Muslims, who have also been regularly maligned in media and political narratives (Abrams *et al.* 2018).

From there, we use our analysis of archival sources and the extant literature to elaborate processes of social change in the position of Gypsies and Travellers in British society, which, in turn, offers insights into the relative absence of racialization in the 1960s media coverage and its relative presence in 2019. The primary sources we use are the records of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government/Department for Environment, Association of County Councils and the Association of District Councils, held at the National and London Metropolitan Archives.

3 Derivatives thereof.

4 Sex, Celebrity and Children are not relevant for these case studies.

These illuminate legislative and policy thinking and practices both nationally and locally, with regard to secure stopping places, housing, education and multicultural initiatives. These provide a historical window into some of the economic and socio-political forces shaping Gypsy and Traveller lives, particularly in their troubled relationship with the state and settled society. It is, of course, the case that these sources represent archival collations of collective memory that, nonetheless, are inevitably mired in the ideological interests of the local and national state (Seal and Neale 2019). Precisely for this reason, they provide a rich data source (along with the extant literature) to develop our argument. But first, we engage with the media narratives in more detail.

THE PC LESLIE MEEHAM CASE STUDY

The (relative)absence of negative racialization of gypsies (and travellers)

In the reports of the incident, the initial court hearing and trial, Jim Smith declared that he was a 'gipsy' who 'could not read or write [and who] dealt in scrap iron and rags'.⁵ This was possibly, following Seal and Neale (2020a), an attempt to paint himself as too ignorant to understand the implications of his actions; elsewhere, Seal and Neale (2020b) note the strategic use of racialized tropes to mount defences of mitigation. Notwithstanding, it was only after the verdict of capital murder that the label 'gipsy' was routinely used by newspapers: 'Gipsy Jim won't die'; 'Gipsy Jim Smith case surprise'; or 'Gipsy Jim case goes to the Lords'.⁶

This label sometimes went hand-in-hand with descriptions that dwelt on reporters' assumptions of the stark divisions between Gypsies and settled society. In 'The gajos will tell Gipsy Jim his fate', the cultural gulf between the judicial process and the Gypsies caught up in it was emphasized. The article described the three appeal judges as 'red-robed "gajos"', explaining that while to the court staff they were 'Justices', 'to Gipsy Jim Smith—and a whole row of aunts, uncles, sisters and cousins—the three men who would decide whether he should hang ... were "gajos", the Romany word for anyone not of them'. Warming to its racialized theme, the article moved on to describe how, in court, Smith occasionally:

glanced at the row full of his Romany relatives who sat weather-tanned – the women wearing gold earrings... There was Mrs Jenkie Smith, an aunt, Bill Smith her son; Phoebe King; Elvy Lee and Goldie Smith, his three sisters; Belcher Upton, a cousin... Outside the court Mrs Elvy Upton, a cousin by marriage played with her three children: Ruby, Belcher and Markie... 'We Romanys [sic] are a small race, but when one of us is in trouble we stick together. We held a big meeting last night to decide who would come to court. We shall all be here when the case continues tomorrow'.

What work were these descriptions doing? The use of Romani—'gajo'—the golden earrings, the weather-beaten faces, the unusual first names—Jenkie, Belcher, Elvy—all sought to inject something of the exotic into the courtroom. And the sheer number of relatives and the mention of a big gathering to make decisions seemed to evoke a tribe. All the more so in the context of the post-war trend towards nuclear families with 2.2 children (Burnett 1986: 279).

But, as time went on, the picture that the *Daily Mail* built up of him, his wider family, and, by extension, the place of Gypsies in 1960s Britain became more complex. Perhaps because PC

⁵ See, for example, 'Dealer accused of killing constable', *The Times*, 4 March 1960, p.8; 'Accident says man accused of PC's murder', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 3 March 1960, p.25; 'Ragman is due to die for PC', *Liverpool Echo*, 7 April 1960, p.1; 'Jim Smith to die for PC murder', *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 7 April 1960, p.1.

⁶ *Daily Mail*, 11 May 1960, p.10; *Liverpool Echo*, 31 May 1960, p.1; *Daily News*, 1 June 1960, 1.

Meehan's wife, Jean, did not attend the original trial, the human interest angle transferred to Mary Smith, wife of Jim, mother of Elvina, who was also heavily pregnant. One report described her breaking down and being carried out of the court in deep distress by her relatives 'when the black cap was placed on the head of Mr Justice Donovan', following it up with Mary's own words:

I did not know the policeman, but I have seen him talking several times to Jim in the street. I have never met Mrs Meehan, but I feel terribly sorry for her. Jim might have been in slight trouble before, but he was never a violent man. I shall never believe that he intended doing the policeman any harm.⁷

The close attention paid to Mary continued, and *Daily Mail*⁸ readers received further updates. Mary Smith, now advanced in her pregnancy, was finding it harder to visit Jim, but relatives were taking Elvina every day to see her father: 'The baby recognises her father and plays quietly with a wool doll he made for her. Seeing Elvina gives him hope and a glimpse into the family life he loved so much before this dreadful thing happened'. Not only did the reporter work here to evoke Smith's lost family life, but in going on to quote Mary Smith in some depth, the article actively advocates for Gypsies more generally: 'I am not a gipsy by birth, but they are wonderful people', said Mrs Smith. 'They are helping me just as if I was one of them. Anyone who despises the gipsies should be ashamed'.⁹

Here, PC Meehan's death had been left far behind in the emotional journey of the media story. Seal and Neale's (2020a) analysis of ten capital murder cases involving intimate partner violence, similarly observed that where newspapers developed human interest stories, there could be space for more sympathetic portrayals of offenders to develop. Significantly, there is no evidence that once Jim Smith, the scrap dealer, had been found out to be Jim Smith 'the Gipsy', the press changed their attitudes towards, and reporting of, him and his case. And it is hard to read the *Daily Mail*'s development of this human interest story as anything other than generously sympathetic to the Smith family's situation. The readers' focus was directed to the domestic drama of a young father separated from his wife and children by the judicial system; and on the faithful young wife and mother stoically keeping things running in his absence. Jim Smith was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for manslaughter following a successful appeal, but then the Director for Public Prosecutions appealed to the Law Lords who reinstated the original verdict. Subsequently, the then Home Secretary, Rab Butler, an opponent of capital punishment, commuted Smith's sentence to life imprisonment.

THE PC HARPER CASE STUDY

The presence of negative racialization of (Gypsies and) Travellers

In contrast to the Smith case, newspaper reporting of PC Harper's death was more willing to extrapolate racialised 'maps of meaning' (Hall 1997) from the ethnicity of Long, Bowers and Cole. The *Daily Mail* asserted the suspects were from a 'well-known [T]raveller site'.¹⁰ This was likely sufficient to percolate in readers' minds negative images associated with anarchic lawlessness and welfare dependency (Picker *et al.* 2015; Richardson 2017), just as the 'ghetto'

7 Harry Longmuir, 'Women sob as PC's killer is sentenced to death', *Daily Mail*, 8 April 1960, 11.

8 'Every day this baby goes to see the father sentenced to death', *Daily Mail*, 12 April 1960, p.3.

9 *Ibid.*

10 'Burglary victims who called 999 before PC Andrew Harper was murdered get extra security because police fear reprisals after detectives arrest ten men at traveller site', *MailOnline*, 18 August 2019; also, without respectfully capitalizing Traveller (*Media That Moves* 2023).

invoked a ‘circle of associations’ linking crime and blackness in the mugging moral panic of the 1970s—with neither interrogating these symbolic locations’ political–economic origins (Hall *et al.* 1978: 101). Readers were then briefed that the offenders were from an ‘organized criminal gang’; the gang trope readily signalling racialized depravity (Alexander 2008; Williams 2015). Meanwhile, a *Daily Telegraph* article—‘Trail of blood marks the spot where Pc died’¹¹—somewhat unusually, perhaps because there was little investigative material to include at this stage—did humanize the Traveller site, describing a ‘child’s play-car and washing left out in the rain, amidst the dozen or so caravans’. A resident was quoted: ‘I don’t understand why so many people had to be arrested ... They can’t all be guilty. It’s like the police just think we’re [T]ravellers, so, of course, we did it’. This rounded representation,¹² then returned to the familiar theme of hostile Traveller-settled community relations, thefts and wildlife crime.

The Sun reminded readers of the hero’s death during a ‘botched robbery’, a senior police officer saying ‘the defendants had shown no remorse or helped police piece together what happened’, with Long pleading guilty to manslaughter ‘not because it was ‘the right thing to do’ but because of “overwhelming evidence”¹³. Subsequently noting that the offenders did not live on the site but had strong family connections there, as a ‘focal point of where their criminality started and finished’, thus imputing wider responsibility for the incident to other residents.¹⁴ Later at trial, the prosecuting QC—quoted at length by *The Mirror*—made much of two of the offenders being found in a high end (‘Fendt Diamond’) trailer on the named Travellers’ site, while adducing the collusion of ‘other members of the travelling community who were not arrested’ but who hid the offenders’ mobile phones.¹⁵ Multiple newspapers expressed disgust with the suspects’ disrespectful behaviour during the trial, observing their smirking at various points, and one of the suspects having fallen asleep.¹⁶ Unlike the positive depiction of Jim Smith’s supporters crowding the public gallery in 1960, there were claims of jury interference and the assumed criminality of the families and friends of the defendants.¹⁷ *The Sun* informed readers of a Facebook post ‘next to a pic of the feral trio’ with a relative hailing the offenders as ‘the bravest boys’, cementing a broader sense of moral deficiency in Traveller communities.¹⁸

Some reporting directly or implicitly denigrated Gypsy and Traveller cultures. *The Express* and *The Telegraph*’s focus on the offenders’ illiteracy and limited formal education seemed likely to fix audience views of cognitive inadequacy and nonconformity with the cultural norms of settled society.¹⁹ Further irrelevant comments appeared referencing the defendants’ involvement in hare coursing and hunting as traditional livelihood and leisure activities.

The Times took this further, running a deliberately provocative ‘Let’s not be afraid to challenge Traveller culture’ headline, while professing balance noting that ‘[t]arring all Travellers with the brush of these men’s callousness is as unfair as tarring all Catholics for paedophile priests or all Muslims for terrorist attacks’²⁰ (cf. Tufail and Poynting 2013). Such snide commentary is a familiar technique used to ward off accusations of racism (Augoustinos and Every 2010). What then followed, however, was an unflinching rejection of ‘wokeness’ that criticized

11 *The Daily Telegraph* 17 August 2019.

12 Though without an upper-case T for Travellers (LeedsGATE 2022).

13 ‘Manslaughter: Who are PC Andrew Harper’s killers and where are they now?’, *The Sun* 24 July 2020.

14 ‘Traveller community protected PC Andrew Harper’s killers’ *thetimes.co.uk*, 1 August 2020.

15 ‘Teen accused of PC Andrew Harper murder told police he ‘didn’t give a f***’, *mirror.co.uk*, 24 June 2020.

16 ‘PC Andrew Harper’s smirking killers face longer jail terms after widow’s emotional plea’, *Daily Star Online*, 21 August 2020; ‘Pc Andrew Harper case: alleged jury tampering to be referred to the attorney general’, *telegraph.co.uk* 24 July 2020; ‘Chilling Threat: Leader of gang of teenage burglars who dragged PC Andrew Harper to his death previously threatened to mow down a cop’, *thesun.co.uk* 24 July 2020.

17 ‘PC Andrew Harper’s widow writes to PM to ask for murder retrial of his killers’, *The Independent*, 29 July 2020.

18 ‘Vile ‘ashes’ jibe’ *The Sun*, 2 August 2020.

19 ‘Criminals who kill our officers must get life’, *The Express*, 25 July 2020; ‘A blight on the community: Driver who killed Pc Andrew Harper had been a criminal since childhood’, *telegraph.co.uk*, 24 July 2020.

20 *The Times*, 27 July 2020.

other newspapers' reticence to identify the offenders as Travellers, going on to make wilfully misleading claims that family offending, youth convictions and domestic violence are more prevalent among Traveller communities.

Jan Moir's editorial for the *Daily Mail* followed similar contours. There was a feigned but clever statement: 'The guilty men are all members of the travelling [sic] community—am I even allowed to say that?'²¹ Then later a common refrain that *Travellers* are not conforming to a narrow stereotype of *Romany Gypsy* authenticity—'Not all travellers [sic] are bad people, of course, but sometimes it is hard—to say the least—to believe in the romantic, folksy, traditional, stick-whittling image they have of themselves'. This implicitly challenged the 'political correctness' of enshrining protective rights for (undeserving) minority ethnic groups whose mode of being does not fit with an archaic and demeaning representation of Gypsiness. The academic literature is replete with such deliberate misidentifications (Taylor 2008). Invoking 'squeamishness' to confront alien cultural practices because of retribution reinforces the assumed inherent violence of Gypsies and Travellers. Richardson's (2006:90) comment a decade earlier is apposite—'[i]t is virtually impossible to imagine a published piece of writing about any other ethnic group describing them as thieves, liars, lazy and dirty being allowed past the editorial control of the newspaper' (see also Morris 2006). As Cammaerts (2022: 736) has documented in his discourse analysis of anti-wokeness and the culture wars in political texts, however, pushing back against narratives like those of the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* positions opponents as 'deviant, crazy and dangerous, as an imminent threat to "our" way of living'.

Finally, there is a certain irony that Gypsy and Traveller community organizations expend considerable resources to police the racist vitriol that is regularly expressed about those they represent, only for their integrity to be impugned by writers such as Moir.²² 'If anyone had hoped for words of condemnation or regret from their [the offenders] community leaders, forget it. The silence, as always, has been deafening. Or did I miss something?' Yes, given *The Guardian* had been able to interview a Traveller Movement representative who said, '[t]here's so much shock and horror that this should happen—and to someone in the line of duty. The alleged lack of remorse is unforgivable ... We are asking for an understanding that we condemn this crime, that it was morally wrong'.²³

Finally, widely read would have been the stories about *Andrews Law*, the metonymic device used by PC Harpr's widow, Lissy, in her campaign for changes to sentencing involving killings of emergency service workers. Evincing the 'visceral emotions of identification and righteous indignation' that victims can embody (Garland 2001: 144), especially when pictured in her wedding dress, Lissy Harper received an MBE for services to victims of violent crime and their families.²⁴ Colloquially known as *Andrew's Law*, the mandatory imposition of a life sentence on a person aged sixteen or over found guilty of the *manslaughter* of an emergency service worker, made its way onto the statute books in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022.

EXPLICATING TWO CONTRASTING MEDIA CONSTRUCTIONS

Here we return to our interpretive challenge—what can the dramatic change in how newspapers covered these two police killings tell us about how one racialised group became increasingly

21 'I've shared the fear - and now the fury - of police families', *Daily Mail*, 31 July 2020.

22 The open letter by Traveller Movement *Open Letter to Priti Patel—Travellers Deserve an Apology*. Another recent example—Traveller Movement (2022), *Cambridge Labour Leader and Traveller Movement issue joint statement on Jimmy Carr's appearance in Cambridge*. <https://travellermovement.org.uk/news/jimmy-carrs-appearance-in-cambridge> and London Gypsies and Travellers (2022), *LGT shares outrage at Carr comments*. <http://www.londongypsiesandtravellers.org.uk/news/2022/02/10/lgt-shares-outrage-at-carr-comments/>

23 'End the prejudice against Travellers—police chief', *The Guardian*, 1 August 2020.

24 Cabinet Office (2022), *Awards for New Year 2023*. London: Cabinet Office.

othered over time? We draw attention to some key economic, political and social trends that we suggest can help to understand media and political representations of Gypsies and Travellers over this 60-year period. But firstly, it is important to acknowledge Jim Smith, married (to a non-Gypsy woman) and father, embodied a more palatable offender than the younger joyriders Long, Bowers and Cole. That PC Meehan's death was at the hands of a different driver than Smith may also have made a capital sentence seem unreasonably harsh to the public.

Secondly, the wider context of the post-war social democratic settlement is relevant. As the public sphere expanded, the revisiting of the death sentence was but one attempt to construct a fairer, less punitive response to social problems (Garland 2001), even as the emerging welfarist solutions were deeply racialised, classed and gendered (Perry 2023). Thus, the legitimate beneficiaries of social entitlements were not Black and Asian (colonial) citizens, invited to migrate to assist in Britain's reconstruction (Williams 1989; Whitfield 2004). The former, in particular, as the 'dark strangers in our midst' (Waters 1997) were suspiciously regarded as antagonistic to state authorities, particularly the police, 'possessed of violent criminal tendencies and low moral standards' (Whitfield 2004: 141), whereas Gypsies and Travellers in the 1960s were racially framed as more involved in anti-social nuisance than dangerous (Taylor 2008).

Third and relatedly, within debates over what kind of society post-war Britain aimed to be, the death penalty became 'one of the defining ethical and political issues' around which this reconfiguration took place, even though political opinion was sharply divided on the issue (Langhamer 2012: 439; Seal 2014; Rock 2019). The Homicide Act 1957 constricted the use of the death penalty to only certain murder cases, and the number of annual executions declined (Seal 2014). Moreover, while reformists and retentionists were wont to draw heavily on emotive cues to make their case, the changing social and political landscape did mean those sentenced to death might be accorded sympathetic comment, though Seal and Neale (2020a) have shown that public empathy was highly conditional. While women and the very young often elicited compassion—as with Mary Smith and daughter Elvira—racialized others, as well as people living in unconventional domestic circumstances, were far less likely to either receive public support or find their appeals for clemency successful. And, as the *Daily Mirror* reporter, Keith Waterhouse put it when reflecting on the appeal of the last woman to be hanged, Ruth Ellis, as a woman, a mother and a victim of domestic violence, readers were far less likely to protest the killing of 'nondescript men committing nondescript murders'.²⁵

Nonetheless, even given these important contextual factors, we argue for a broader set of historical shifts that, from the mid-1960s onwards, help explain the possibilities of humane representations of Gypsies and Travellers compared to their more recent caustic portrayal. A close reading of our archival data threw up four themes. This should not be taken to mean these are the *only* factors that illuminate changes in the conditions of Gypsies and Travellers' lives. Rather these ones emerged from our archival analysis as especially significant for explaining shifts in media discourse: specifically, the unintended impacts of the Caravan Sites Act 1968; also combined with the trend towards housing owner-occupation; the ambivalent inclusion of Gypsies and Travellers in the multicultural polity, and the (already well-documented) shift towards punitivism in criminal justice. Below, we opt for a broadly chronological approach that sees these dynamics intertwine with a disturbing effect.

Smith's case came at a particular political moment in which the 'liberal hour' was falteringly beginning to assert itself (Rock 2019), taking place as it did between the Homicide Act 1957 that retained capital punishment for murder of a police officer and the Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965 that eventually led to full abolition. The compassionate media narrative that emerged gradually exposed readers to details of Smith's embeddedness—and by

25 'If we hanged five pretty women', *Daily Mirror*, 25 August 1955, p.2.

extension the Gypsies of the area (Taylor 2008)—in south-east London. Although Smith had been ‘born in a gipsy caravan’, he had lived most recently in a house close to the Meehan’s house. Nearby Belvedere Marshes and other unauthorised encampments and, increasingly, permanent housing and prefabs, had been home to the UK’s largest long-term Gypsy and Traveller community²⁶ (see also Greenfields 2006a). Norman Dodds, local MP, had recently spoken in the House of Commons of how Gypsies were embracing modern (sedentary) life.²⁷ Hinks and Taylor’s (2022) study of Hampshire’s ‘rehabilitation centres’ explored one such example where local state efforts centred on cultural assimilation through residential settlement in prefabs alongside training, recreational activities and welfare clinics. While media accounts sometimes did demonize Gypsies for criminal behaviour, they were more readily conceived of as culturally backwards, possibly a public health nuisance, rather than as inherently criminal. Crucially, they were redeemable: given the right (paternalistic) support, they might be brought into the fold. The Caravan Sites Act 1968 can then be considered the high-point of this way of thinking about the relationship between Britain’s hereditary nomads and wider society, establishing as it did the right for Gypsies and Travellers to have legal stopping places, and thus momentously enshrining the theoretical right to a state-supported nomadic life (Greenfields 2006a; Taylor 2008; James 2020b).

Local authority site provision had been mandated in 1968, but it faltered (Elcock 1979; Sibley 1981; Hawes and Perez 1996). Local populations were typically hostile, and with local authority spending cuts in the wake of the 1970s oil crisis, councils balked at the cost of providing accommodation for people not considered ‘local’ (Greenfields 2006a). Those that were built were typically located in unattractive peripheral areas near major arterial roads, sewage plants and waste disposal sites (Taylor 2008). These were not the building blocks of conviviality and social connection (Gilroy 2004; Nava 2007; Richardson 2017), but rather were spaces of isolation and confinement that bred mistrust and animosity within local communities—being ‘ghetto-like’ (Richardson 2017: 499). Just like housing estates with concentrated Black and Asian minorities, also seen to exert a downward pressure on house prices, but even more separated from the wider population, Gypsy and Traveller sites and unauthorized encampments (Sibley 1981), resulting from insufficient state provision ran ‘counter to dominant landscape aesthetics’ (Belton 2004; Kabachnik and Ryder, 2013: 95). Such unwanted presence locally also ignited local fury to arguably unprecedented levels—even involving criminal acts by vigilante residents (Gypsy Council 1982; Taylor 2008; Richardson 2016). The irony was not lost on the Gypsy Council (1982):

A large number of local authorities have, in the past twenty-two years, deliberately flouted the law by not providing sites, or by opposing all plans for site provision in their area, and yet in the eyes of the general public it is the Gypsy who is to blame for camping illegally.

Simultaneously, the rise in home ownership as a proportion of housing tenure from 42 per cent in 1960 to 53 per cent in 1976 (Dunleavy 1979) presaged a more profound socio-political cleavage, pitting homeowners as welfare-contributors against council tenants (including Gypsies and Travellers on local authority sites) as welfare-dependents. Conservative Party ideology extolling home ownership, embodied in the Right-to-Buy policy with 30-50% discounts for council houses, transformed Britain’s landscape.²⁸ Gurney’s (1999) analysis of Conservative

26 Taylor, *Unpopular people and the rewriting of history*, UEA inaugural lecture series, 23 March 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?>

27 Norman Dodds, HC Debates. 1 December 1961, vol. 650, col.793.

28 Disney *et al.* (2023) suggest it added 10% to home ownership rates between 1979 and the early 2000s.

policy documents identified normalizing discourses of owner-occupation imbued with warm notions of home, pride, and moral, responsible citizenship, set in binary contrast to irresponsible, even abnormal non-home owners. Or as Smith (2015: 62) put it, owner-occupation became culturally 'infused with existential qualities (like safety and security) which comfortably co-exist, in the same space, place and time, as their demonstrably precarious opposites'. Threats (perceived or actual) to this security will perhaps inevitably be defended against. Moreover, over time, owner-occupation has become intimately connected with intergenerational wealth (Ball 1983; Hiscock *et al.* 2001; Disney *et al.* 2024). When combined with a heightened fear of crime too in this period, it seems likely that 'homeowners will be more attentive to signals about crime risk coming from the media regardless of their own primary risk perception of the[ir] neighborhood' (Simon 2010: 198).

Through archival analysis of the Gypsy Council's interactions with the Race Relations Board over its campaign to end 'No Gypsies' signs in pubs in the early 1970s, and in the National Gypsy Council's annual reports from the early 1980s, it is clear that its national officers, activists and local members fought hard to establish Gypsies' and Travellers' political presence and to engage with the emerging race relations landscape (see also Acton 1974, 2019; Taylor, forthcoming).²⁹ Collectively, the Gypsy Power movement vigorously challenged assimilationist attempts to extinguish Gypsiness, influenced as it was by Black radicalism that asserted proud ethnic identification (Walters 2019).

Yet, the numerical presence of Gypsies and Travellers was fragmented across cityscapes in a way not true of Britain's larger Black and Asian populations. They were unable to reach a critical political mass within the local population, nor to gain political representation as councillors, and to then be included in the 'sari, samosa and steel band' organs of 1980s municipal multiculturalism (Troyna 1992: 74; Turner 2000). Gypsies' and Travellers' ethnic status was also continually contested. The Caravan Sites Act 1968 blurred the boundaries over whether 'gipsy' was an ethnicity or a lifestyle by mandating provision of local authority sites for 'gipsies and other persons of nomadic habit'. This happened at a time when popularly understood markers of Gypsiness—notably horse-drawn, bow-topped wagons—had all but disappeared in the face of motorization and mass-produced, larger and more comfortable modern trailers. 'Genuine' and 'local' Romany Gypsies came to be distinguished in local and central government papers from 'itinerants' and 'long-distance travellers', a de-ethnicised code for Irish Travellers (Department of Environment 1982). Gypsies and Travellers were thus forced into a grey space of (de)ethnicised unbelonging, simultaneously too 'other' to belong yet not 'other' enough to claim a place in multicultural Britain (Taylor, forthcoming).

Marginalized from urban spaces where progressive politics were developing, local fault lines in rural and suburban areas brought Gypsies and Travellers into conflictual contact with the police and local authorities, which treated them increasingly as anti-social and criminal threats. With insufficient site provision (Greenfields 2006a; Taylor 2008), some Gypsies and Travellers were forced into settled accommodation that caused significant distress and cultural dislocation (Smith and Greenfields 2013), while others felt they had little choice but to move onto land and apply for planning permission retrospectively. However, although 80 per cent of general planning applications were successful, 90 per cent of those made by Gypsies were refused (Williams 1999; Murdoch 2002), so that growing numbers faced eviction from their own land for breaching planning regulations (Ryder 2011).

This hostile situation was exacerbated by the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (CJPOA) 1994, which was, according to James (2007: 369), 'the most over-arching limit placed on Gypsies' and Travellers' lives in the 20th century'. Demonstrating an enduring continuity with

29 The National Archives, Kew: CK2/156; and Gypsy Council (1982).

violent state action circumscribing nomadic lifestyles for centuries (Mayall 2004; Greenfields 2006a; Kabachnik 2010; James 2020b), this 'racist disciplining' (Phillips 2017: 340) led to fraught standoffs and terrorising evictions (Greenfields 2006b; James 2007), as it became an offence for anyone to stop on any land that they did not own, or have planning permission to reside on, with six or more vehicles. The use of guerilla tactics such as 'bunding'—the physical blocking of areas by ditch digging or dumping of hardcore—served as pre-emptive responses by local authorities and landowners to the mere presence of Gypsies and Travellers.

Relatedly, as readers will know, authoritarian enforcement practices became a more common feature of crime control more generally (Garland 2001). While crime rates in the mid-1990s appeared to be declining after their exponential rise from the 1950s, a series of interventions by the Conservative and New Labour governments shifted up a gear in a period marked by increasing punitiveness (Newburn 2007). Political and public anxiety about crime became tethered to an unthinking political response that favoured incapacitative measures in a show of state omnipotence (Garland 2001). This sentiment was also evident in New Labour's Respect agenda that sought to turn back the tide of permissiveness and to re-instil deference to authority (Squires and Stephen 2005). Multiple forms of vaguely defined anti-social behaviours were penalized in attempts to enforce decency, individual responsibility, and law-abidingness (Bannister *et al.* 2006; Flint and Nixon 2006). At an affective level, political discourse around crime and justice has claimed order, authority, tradition, and absolute forms of morality with a message that 'intrinsically evil or wicked, some offenders are not like us'; rather, they are 'dangerous others who threaten our safety and have no calls on our fellow feeling' (Garland 2001: 184).

This constriction of solidarities among groups wanting to share public space can also be seen in political perspectives that challenged the rights of undeserving groups to be afforded legal and human rights protection (Richardson 2006; Taylor 2008). Travellers, for example, fell foul of romanticized images of racial authenticity when, in 1999, Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw claimed criminal Travellers were masquerading as 'law-abiding Gypsies' during a radio interview (Clark and Dearling 1999). The dissociation was especially jarring, occurring as it did when Straw was asserting the presence of (anti-Black) racism in state institutions. As Turner (2000: 68–9) put it, '[W]hy is it that it appears to be acceptable to discriminate against, and insult, one ethnic minority group, when to do the same to another, say Jews or Muslims, would land a politician or newspaper editor in court?' Romany Gypsy scholar-activist, Damian Le Bas (2010: 67) has also decried this 'cyclic-oxymoronic situation [...] that the Gypsy speaking to you cannot be trusted to tell the truth, even about the fact that they are a Gypsy, yet the only reason for this lack of trust is *that they are a Gypsy!*'

As Richardson (2006) has noted, Gypsies and Travellers were increasingly placed within a discourse of control that served to inhibit site provision and subsequently negate any sort of travelling lifestyle. The powers of the CJPOA 1994 were augmented by the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003, allowing police eviction powers where Gypsies and Travellers gathered with three or more vehicles (James 2020b). This made it virtually impossible to travel in preferred extended family groups. Richardson and O'Neill (2012) specifically note the pivotal nature of *The Sun*'s high-profile 'Stamp on the Camps' campaign that fed electoral politics that year (see also Okely 2014). A 2005 *Daily Express* ICM poll, which then formed the basis of a strident article, found three-quarters of respondents felt they should face reduced council tax bills to compensate for their assumed lower house prices because of a Gypsy presence nearby (Clark and Taylor 2014). Analysing media stories across 12 broadsheet and tabloid newspapers in the period 2014–16, Baillie (2019) similarly found a heavy focus on crime and sites, particularly in the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*. Once again, media framing offers an ideological tool to position racialised groups as dangerous, predatory, and as a threat to the prevailing social order (Hall *et al.* 1978; Bhatia *et al.* 2018).

Seemingly in response to such campaigning-reporting, civil planning guidance and legislation narrowed official definitions of Gypsy and Traveller identities in a policy sleight of hand, so as to reduce plot and site requirements. According to [James and Southern \(2019\)](#), Gypsies and Travellers' authentic ethnicity was denied for those who were not permanently *mobile* in the government *Planning Policy for Traveller Sites* ([MHCLG 2015](#)), while sedentarianist practices of home-fixedness denied others' claims to minority ethnicity and legal protections ([Richardson 2017](#)).

And finally, if we have learned anything from decades of research on public opinion and crime, punitive policy actions follow when security is threatened. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 not only established *Andrew's Law* (as noted above), but it also directly attacked the nomadic cultural practices of Gypsies and Travellers. At the Bill stage, Deputy Chief Constable Janette McCormick, National Police Chiefs' Council Lead for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, in her oral evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights (2021) raised profound concerns about the extension of police powers to seize homes (vehicles), echoing the police's perennial but unheeded frustration that 'where we have an increasing number of sites, we have a direct correlation with a reducing number of unauthorized encampments'.³⁰ Déjà vu and back to the unintended consequences of the Caravans Act 1968.

CONCLUSION

[Corfield \(2007\)](#) understands time as a dynamic process, reaching into the past, being of paramount importance for the present, and offering insights into the vast expanses of the future. Contributing to historical criminology with its limited consideration of race, this paper has used the newspaper framings of two police officers' killings by Gypsies and Travellers sixty years apart, to reflect on racist public and political attitudes towards a minority ethnic group neglected within criminology. Using archival analysis and existing literature, this paper has documented how the brief moment of social democracy, dawning at the time of the Smith-Meehan case, created a space in which Gypsies could be seen as human and redeemable, even after the killing of a police officer, but also as appropriately deserving of local authority site provision. While the Caravans Act 1968 held promise as a transformative rupture with past state violence against Gypsies and Travellers' nomadic modes of being, its promise was unmet. Coupled with an economic, socio-political, and affective imperative to prioritise owner-occupation, this inflamed local conflicts over the use of public space, such that from the 1970s we can see a hardened and increasingly unapologetic hatred towards Gypsies and Travellers. A nimbyish consternation about the location of sites, fuelled by the media, and effectively nourished by senior politicians, has combined to create some of 'the worst excesses of racism in Parliament and the British national print and broadcasting press' ([Clark and Taylor 2014](#): 175). The escalation of crime control measures through the CJPOA 1994, the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, and planning policies, bear all the hallmarks of continuity with centuries-long state-sustained racism towards Gypsies and Travellers, which contextualizes the treatment of the Travellers found guilty of PC Harper's manslaughter in 2019.

While commonsense understandings tend to assume greater racial tolerance over time, with racial animosities dissipating, empirically, such a conclusion is premature. Experiences of racial discrimination in Britain have held constant. Notably, Gypsies and Travellers have expressed marked vulnerability to insults, property damage and physical assaults, though these experiences of *victimization* do not seem widely known ([Bécaries et al. 2024](#)). Coupled with the

³⁰ Joint Committee on Human Rights Oral evidence: Legislative Scrutiny: Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, HC91 Wednesday, 19 May 2021.

ongoing ideological dominance of tabloid reporting and the virulence within which media discourses about race and crime land, our paper's implications are rather bleak. It is hard to see a return to the humane media representations that accompanied the Jim Smith case in 1960, even with progressive initiatives like *Media That Moves* (LeedsGATE 2022) which champion careful framing of Gypsies and Travellers or other calls for ethical journalism. Future time, in Corfield's (2007) sense, then, does not bode particularly well for Gypsies and Travellers.

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