



# The reemergence of Engels' concept of social murder in response to growing social and health inequalities

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## ABSTRACT

In 1845, Friedrich Engels identified how the living and working conditions experienced by English workers sent them prematurely to the grave, arguing that those responsible for these conditions – ruling authorities and the bourgeoisie – were committing social murder. The concept remained, for the most part, dormant in academic journals through the 1900s. Since 2000, there has been a revival of the social murder concept with its growth especially evident in the UK over the last decade as a result of the Grenfell Tower Fire and the effects of austerity imposed by successive Conservative governments. The purpose of this paper is to document the reemergence of the concept of social murder in academic journal articles. To do so we conducted a scoping review of content applying the social murder concept since 1900 in relation to health and well-being. We identified two primary concepts of social murder: social murder as resulting from capitalist exploitation and social murder as resulting from bad public policy across the domains of working conditions, living conditions, poverty, housing, race, health inequalities, crime and violence, neoliberalism, gender, food, social assistance, deregulation and austerity. We consider reasons for the reemergence of Engels' social murder concept and the role it can play in resisting the forces responsible for the living and working conditions that kill.

What power, what incisiveness and what passion drove you to work in those days! That was a time when you were never worried about academic scholarly reservations!

– Karl Marx (1863).

## 1. Introduction

In 1845, Friedrich Engels identified how the living and working conditions experienced by English workers sent them prematurely to the grave, arguing that ruling authorities and the bourgeoisie responsible for these conditions, being aware of these effects, yet doing nothing to change them, were guilty of social murder (Engels, 2009). The term, with its implications of criminal responsibility for those in power, remained, for the most part, dormant in academic discourse through the twentieth century.

There has been a resurgence of the concept of social murder in academic discourse in the new century as well as mainstream and social media and this is especially the case in the UK. The two most immediate stimuli for the return of the concept were the 2018 UK documentary

*Grenfell Tower and Social Murder* and the 2019 academic article by UK academic Chris Grover *Violent Proletarianization: Social Murder, the Reserve Army of Labour and Social Security 'Austerity' in Britain*. The latter two received wide coverage in the UK mainstream media and stimulated its use in social media in the UK and elsewhere.

The potential use of the term social murder for provoking public policy action on health inequalities was examined by Raphael et al. (2021) who suggested that social murder represented the use of a high valence negative term which could elicit an emotional response amongst the public that would spur public policy action. Considering the profound adverse health effects that result from the living and working conditions that create health inequalities, such an approach could be seen as long overdue (Popay et al., 2010). Evidence suggesting that emotions play a role in social and political movements provides support for this hypothesis (Jasper, 2011).

In this paper, we examine use of the term social murder in the academic journal literature from 1900 to the present and consider its increasing use since the first decade of the 21st century. We also consider how true its use has been to Engels' original formulation. To our mind, there are four key components to Engels' concept of social

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murder. The first is individuals – usually workers – die prematurely as a result of their living and working conditions. The second is that these living and working conditions are a result of workers' exploitation under capitalism. The third is there is a class within society – the bourgeoisie – that benefits from this exploitation. The fourth is since the bourgeoisie and ruling authorities are aware of these processes yet do nothing to change them, they are guilty of social murder. We use the term bourgeoisie here as Engels used it: the capitalist class who owns most of society's wealth and the means of production.

Finally, we place the social murder concept against other terms used to describe the forces that sicken and kill and consider their potential and limitations for reducing health inequalities. This involves considering the role that polemic can play in arousing the public to demand public policy responses to the social and health inequalities that kill.

## 2. Background

In his 1845 classic *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich Engels made the case for accusing – and convicting – the English bourgeoisie and ruling authorities of social murder for causing the premature death of workers in Victorian-era England (Engels, 2009).

When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another such that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live – forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence – knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains (p. 127).

One hundred and twenty-five years later the World Health Organization channeled elements of Engels' concept stating that "Social injustice is killing people on a grand scale" (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008). In academic discourse these living and working conditions are now identified as social determinants of health and like Engels, it is understood that their quality and distribution result from public policy decisions made by governing authorities. In the cases where the quality and distribution of these social determinants of health lead to adverse health outcomes, the World Health Organization states: "The toxic combination of bad policies, economics, and politics is, in large measure responsible for the fact that a majority of people in the world do not enjoy the good health that is biologically possible." (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008).

### 2.1. Social murder and health inequalities

Despite the obvious relevance of the social murder concept to the issue of health inequalities and governing authorities' neglect of the social inequalities that spawn them, there has been little use of the term in the academic literature with authors deferring to terms such as "health inequalities", "health inequities", "health disparities", "premature mortality", "excess deaths" and "inequities in morbidity and mortality between groups". One notable exception – and there are others – is Canadians Robert Chernomas and Ian Hudson's 2007 volume *Social Murder and other Shortcomings of Conservative Economics*. While author Raphael began deploying both Engels' (2009) and Chernomas and

Hudson's (2007) work in his writings (Manzano and Raphael, 2010; Raphael, 2009), the concept made little entry into broader academic discourse. Two recent UK developments may have shifted this landscape. The award-winning documentary by Hamlett (2018) based on the Grenfell Tower Fire tragedy and the academic article by Grover (2019) received wide coverage in the UK mainstream media and stimulated the use of the term in academic literature, mainstream and social medias.

We were intrigued by the potential of the social murder concept for promoting action on reducing health inequalities in Canada, the USA, and the UK as little progress had been made in Canada and the USA, and what progress had been made in the UK during the first years of the 21st century is being reversed (Raphael and Bryant, 2020; Stuckler et al., 2017). To our knowledge there had been no review of the use of the social murder concept in regard to health and well-being in the academic journal literature. Thus, the purpose of our review is to examine the frequency as well as the context within which the concept of social murder has been used in academic journals in relation to health, illness, or well-being. We want to first understand how the term has been used in scholarly journals since the early 20th century and then confirm its increasing use in the 21st century. We also consider its potential value for stimulating action by governing authorities to reduce health inequalities. We recognize that the concept of social murder has also been used in books and book chapters as well as reports. These will be the focus of later inquiries.

## 3. Methods

Scoping reviews can map key concepts, forms of evidence, and their sources for a research domain (Mays et al., 2001). We applied Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five stages of a scoping review: specifying the research question, identifying relevant studies, selecting from these studies, charting the data, and collating, summarizing and reporting the results. The framework provides a rigorous and transparent method for presenting results in an accessible and replicable format.

We used Google Scholar™ for our literature review as Martin-Martin et al. (2018) show it "finds significantly more citations than the WoS Core Collection and Scopus across all subject areas" (p. 1175). Most importantly, Google Scholar™ surpasses Web of Science™ and Scopus™ in its coverage of literature in the social sciences and humanities.

Using the keyword "social murder" we searched in two rounds for academic journal literature from 1900 to 2021 in 6-year increments. To assure comprehensiveness, we looked at "all relevant literature regardless of study design" (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005, p. 22). During the first round we reviewed returned article titles and abstracts to identify all articles relating to health, illness, or well-being. During the second round, we read the full articles to identify the author(s)' concept of social murder and the domains to which it was applied. All authors of this paper reviewed and discussed the codings to ensure reliability and resolve any disagreements.

## 4. Findings

Our analysis of academic journals as to the presence of Engels' social murder concept since 1900 revealed three main findings. The first is that it was seldomly used. The second is that when the social murder concept was used, it usually contained the key elements of Engels' concept: 1) the capitalist economic system creates living and working conditions that kill; 2) there are those who benefit from these effects; and 3) since they are aware of these effects; 4) they are guilty of social murder.

The third and perhaps most interesting finding is that the social murder concept – in all its richness – is now experiencing a reemergence in academic journals. This increasing presence appears to be related to the Grenfell Tower Fire and the imposition of austerity in the UK. We also identified occasional use of the term social murder in relation to racism, rape, capital punishment, and poverty. In these cases, there is no apparent link to Engels' concept of premature death due to capitalist exploitation.

#### 4.1. Overview

We identified 111 instances of coupling of the term social murder with health, illness or well-being in academic journals since 1900 and these are provided in the supplementary file. We came across a pamphlet entitled *Food and the Workers: Social Murder* published in 1934 by the UK Labour Research Department, 1934 but the first relevant academic article found was the 1945 *The Wynds of Glasgow: A Hundred Years of Property or Life* published in the *Lancet* (Garland, 1945).

Fig. 1 shows the number of instances found in academic journals from 1900 to 1959, 1960–2020 in six-year intervals, and in the first half of 2021. Of the four articles from 1900 to 1959 (on average one every 15 years), two were unrelated to Engels' concept focusing instead on state executions (Willis, 1927) and euthanasia (Heseltine, 1932) as constituting social murder. The two relevant ones were concerned with housing (Garland, 1945) and racism (Willcox, 1908). The first specifically referenced Engels, while the second implied familiarity with Engels: "And in still nearer time it was proved to the absolute satisfaction of certain economic philosophers, that the conflict between capitalists and laborers was an inevitable conflict which must lead to poverty and social murder of the masses." (Willcox, 1908, p. 836).

For the overall modern period of 1900 to the present, there were 62 articles published – with none published prior to 1960 – which applied Engels' concept of social murder as caused by capitalist exploitation and 19 – with only one published prior to 1960 – which saw social murder as resulting from bad public policy without identification of the culpability of capitalism, the bourgeoisie or governing authorities. There were also six instances of racism – with only one published prior to 1960 – and five of rape as social murder which were unrelated to capitalist exploitation or bad public policy.

The nineteen-year period from 1960 to 1978 saw only three instances of the term. Hyman (1962) provided a review of Engels' 1845 "neglected masterpiece" while Silverman (1973) used the term in a completely unrelated way to issues in marriage counseling. Only Schatzkin's (1978) examination of health and labour-power employed social murder as being caused by capitalist exploitation, constituting its first modern academic application to the health scene.

The period from 1979 saw an increasing use of the concept through to the present. The increase is especially noteworthy from 2009 onwards and the 2015–2020 period averages six a year. The first five months of

2021 already sees 18 articles. The sources of all 111 articles – based on the first author's affiliation – are primarily the UK and USA, each providing 40 articles. Sixty-five of the 111 (59%) directly referenced Engels with fifty-four citing Engels' 1845 work. In some cases, familiarity with Engels is strongly implied. A personal communication from a USA author whose two articles discussed racism as social murder resulting from capitalist exploitation, stated that during the 1980s and 1990s referencing Engels would have served no purpose. Another, whose depiction of poverty as social murder was published during the 1980s, recalled reading texts about Victorian England that referenced Engels.

#### 4.2. Unrelated Instances of Social Murder

Across the entire time period, nine articles contained the term social murder that were totally unrelated to Engels' concept. Sterilisation of people with disabilities (Heseltine, 1932), executions by the State (Caldararo, 2016; Willis, 1927), and suicide (Krebs, 2020) were conceptualized as social murder. Similarly, the term social murder was also used to refer to child abuse (Bilal, 2021), inadequate health care services for cancer patients (Haileselassie et al., 2019), the psychological stunting of women in marriage (Silverman, 1973), a discussion of binary identities (Banerjee, 2002) and 'face work' as a "deliberate destruction of someone's face" (Putnam, 1999, p. 181).

#### 4.3. Reviews of Engels, 1845 volume and historical analyses of living conditions

Two articles discuss Engels' 1845 *The Conditions of the Working Class* without application to the period during which the article is published. Hyman (1962) provides an overview of a "neglected masterpiece" without application to the 1962 period. Himmelfarb (1983) sees Engels' 1845 work as "inventing the proletariat".

Six articles applied the social murder concept in historical analyses of health outcomes. Armstrong (1981) used archival data to show an increase in mortality rates in Carlisle, England between the 1780s and the 1840s supporting Engels' characterization of the health effects of industrialization while Williamson (1982) said the jury is still out on the adverse health effects of the industrial revolution. Similarly, Boyer (1998) examined social and political events during the time of Marx's

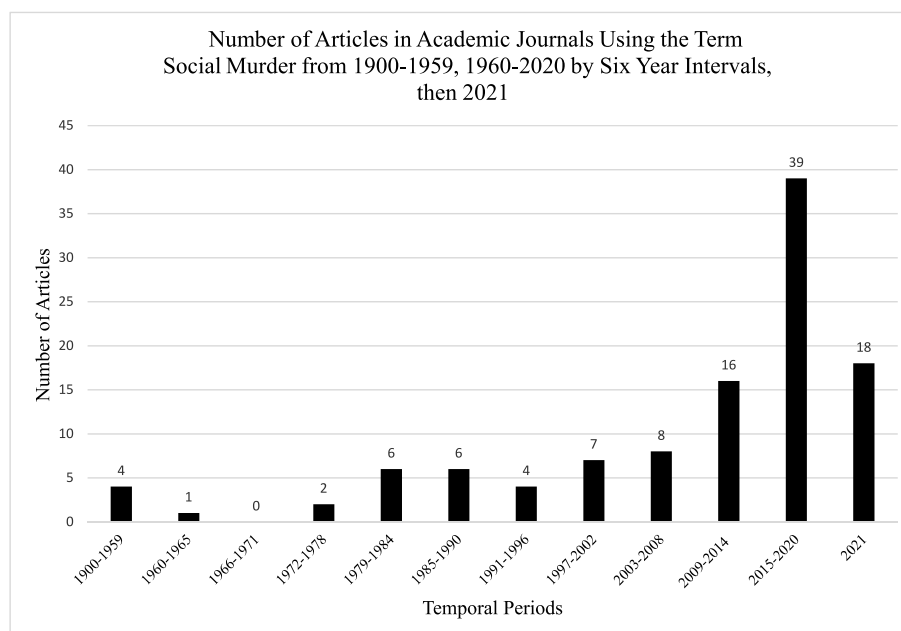


Fig. 1. Number of Articles in Academic Journals Using the Term Social Murder from 1900 to 1959, 1960–2020 by Six Year Intervals, then 2021.

*Communist Manifesto* critiquing Engels' description of life in Manchester as oversimplified and unrepresentative of England.

Addressing the question of whether economic growth during the industrial revolution affected quality of life, [Easterly \(1999\)](#) described Engels' denunciation of working and living conditions during industrialization. [Lewandowski \(2005\)](#) examined accounts of urbanization and urbanism provided by Engels and Simmel in relation to Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project or *Passagen-werk*.

4.4. *Applying the Social Murder Concept to Health, Illness, or Well-being in the Modern Era (1900-present)*

Our primary focus was use of the social murder concept in relation to health in the modern era. We identified six concepts of social murder and specified the domains examined. These are provided in [Fig. 2](#). All 111 articles except three – each coded as both capitalist exploitation and patriarchy/masculinity – were coded within a single concept. All except two were published from 1960 on.

To illustrate, in an early instance, [Schatzkin \(1978\)](#) saw health outcomes – including social murder – as a product of labour-power under exploitative capitalism. Domains examined were living conditions, working conditions, housing, food, environment, poverty, race, colonialism, social assistance, and health care. Shortly thereafter, [Jacobs and Stevenson \(1981\)](#) used the concept of capitalist exploitation – contributing to social murder – to explain the housing and health relationship. The article explored domains of housing, living conditions, working conditions, food, environment, and health care. The following sections provide illustrations of the different concepts of social murder and their applications across a variety of domains.

5. Social murder results from capitalist exploitation

Sixty-two articles were classified under the concept of capitalist exploitation. These articles captured the essence of Engels' concept of social murder. For example, [Schatzkin \(1978\)](#) examined the role that capitalist exploitation plays in determining health in relation to labour-power while [Jacobs and Stevenson \(1981\)](#) did so in relation to housing:

We thus have several different conceptions and possible determinants of health under capitalism. It is the contention of this paper that while all of these play a role, it is the conception of health as labor-power that leads us to what primarily determines the level of health and medical care in a capitalist society: the tendency toward maximization of the rate of exploitation. It is, after all, the exploitation of labor which lies at the heart of the capital accumulation process ([Schatzkin, 1978](#), p. 217).

Housing exists as a commodity in construction and during rental. In construction, housing is produced by alienated labor - labor which has no control over the labor process or the product of its labor-in a manner designed to extract as much surplus value as possible. The production of housing as a commodity carries the same implications found in other commodity production: alienated and exploited labor and struggle over the labor process and amount and distribution of surplus value ([Jacobs and Stevenson, 1981](#), p. 107).

[Fig. 2](#) shows most articles concerned with capitalist exploitation considered issues of living and working conditions, housing, poverty, and health inequalities, with noticeable mention of other domains. Domains of less quantity such as austerity, neoliberalism, social services and deregulation have, however, been recently coming to the fore. In the following sections we separate out Grenfell Tower Fire articles from housing in general due to its salience in recent discourse.

5.1. *Living and working conditions*

Not surprisingly, living conditions are considered in no fewer than 41 of 62 and working conditions in 43 of 62 articles classified under capitalist exploitation as social murder. Twenty-one of these also focus on domains of race and colonialism. [Magubane \(1986\)](#) investigates the political economy of colonialism in South Africa, arguing that the system of racial segregation and repressions is a form of capitalist super-exploitation evident in the working conditions of South African gold mines.

[Johnstone \(1989\)](#) provides a comparison between colonial capitalism and state socialism to show that in both regimes (white power - in South Africa/the Rand and Bolshevik power in USSR's/Kolyma) were used for coercive growth of capital. [Short \(2010a\)](#) provides a detailed

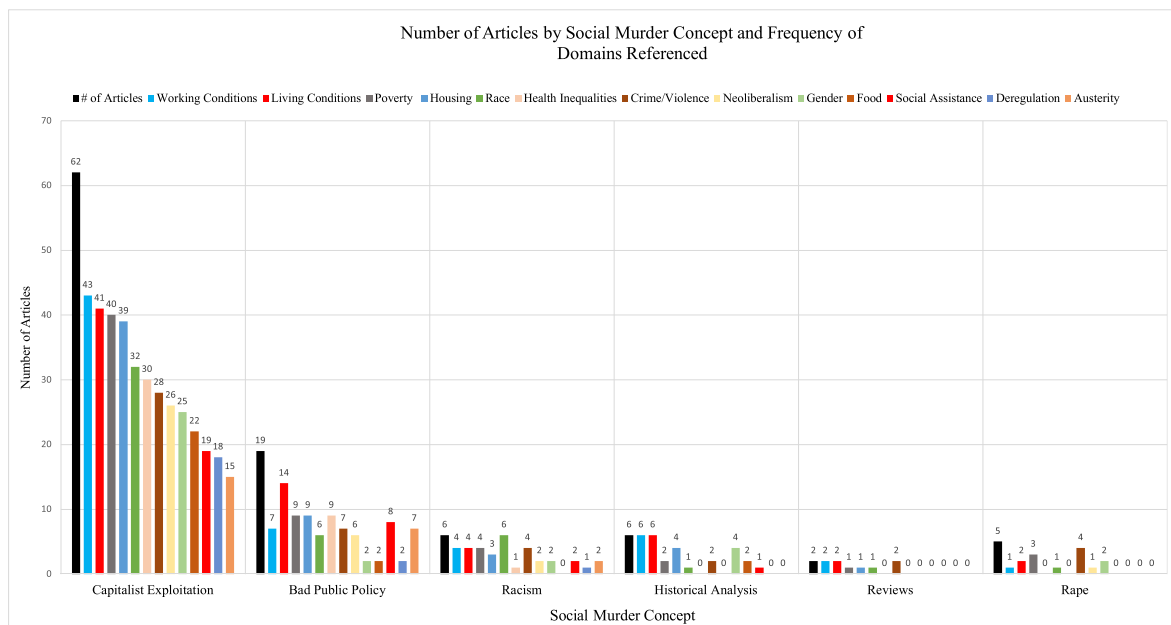


Fig. 2. Number of Articles by Social Murder Concept and Frequency of Domains Referenced.



analysis of the term genocide using social murder to refer to the extreme conditions of life which result in early death, and disease, a “by-product of an incompatible expansionist economic system” (p. 842). Fleming (2012) discusses the nature of intense and widespread violence directed at non-Polish ethnocultural groups which is the result of the re-creation of capitalist social relations and the reconfiguration of socioeconomic hierarchies.

Living and working conditions have also been examined by scholars who draw attention to gendered exploitation under capitalism. Bdinjki (2018) examines the novel *Mary Barton* and unpacks the exploitation of working-class women and their value of morality under poor working conditions. Chaudhary (2021) investigates “the typologies of vulnerability” (p. 1) in Delhi, India, arguing the adverse effects of capitalist development must be understood through the lens of gender and social reproduction.

Fleming (2011) examines the differences between objective, symbolic and structural violence, arguing that there are also forms of acceptable counter violence. Fleming refers to Engels when discussing structural violence stating that “social murder is inscribed” (p. 24) in dominant social relations under capitalism.

Using Enron as a case study, Chernomas and Hudson (2010) unpack how conservative economics facilitated the creation of policies that favor the business sector, its executives and the elite. The authors state that the owners of capital have an “inevitable advantage over those who earn income from their labor” (p. 76) and use the term social murder, referencing Engels, in relation to current economic and political environments which they argue kill (Chernomas and Hudson, 2010).

Raphael (2015) provides evidence that the power and influence of the business sector dominates public policy making process in Canada. Social murder is used to describe the living and working conditions of the working class in the current economic system which result in material and social deprivation that cause premature mortality (Raphael, 2015).

More recently, social murder has been related to the living and working conditions of digital labourers. For Saha (2021), digital labour perpetuates capitalist exploitation by disrupting the possibility of working-class solidarity, erosion of social relations and creating conditions that make social murder and social violence possible. Fuchs (2021) argues that in digital capitalism, capital accumulation occurs through the exploitation of digital workers – as platform workers, hardware assemblers, and Facebook™ and other social media users as well – as “unpaid digital workers” (p. 38).

## 5.2. Housing

The domain of housing under capitalist exploitation is found in 39 articles. Jacobs and Stevenson (1981) argue that housing is a commodity which is prioritized for its exchange value instead of its use value. Malva (2017) examines the relationship between housing, land ownership, and capital accumulation in New Zealand using Engels to position housing in Aotearoa as a site of social murder similar to the Grenfell Tower Fire. Malva (2017) argues that capitalist housing markets have created one of the most unaffordable housing markets in the world alongside poverty, homelessness, ill health, and death due to poor maintenance and sub-standard quality of rental properties.

## 5.3. Housing – Grenfell Tower Fire

Housing in specific relation to the 2017 Grenfell Tower Fire was discussed in five articles. For Robbins (2018), Engels’ work on the inability of capitalism to resolve the housing crisis during the 19th century in Britain is still relevant to contemporary housing issues as the

deaths of dozens of Grenfell Tower residents constituted social murder. Hoover (2019) argues that global justice is threatened by oppressive social structures which marginalize, exploit, and devalue individuals and maintain the position of the powerful, resulting in tragic consequences such as the Grenfell Tower Fire.

Costas and Grey’s (2019) discussion of social murder and the Grenfell Tower Fire links it to Galtung (1969)’s conceptualization of structural violence. Tombs (2020) sees the fire as a case of state-corporate violence linked to the systematic dismantling of long-standing regulations under neoliberalism-inspired austerity. Heslop and Ormerod (2020) deconstruct the dominant narratives of the housing crisis in the UK and refer to Labour Party Leader John McDonnell’s description of the Grenfell Tower Fire as social murder (Guardian, 2017).

## 5.4. Poverty

Poverty is considered in 40 articles as a result of capitalist exploitation. A 2016 reprint of Clara Zetkin’s 1902 *Protect Our Children* states that capitalism exploits proletariat children and causes “deprivation of health, vitality, childhood and education as well as the destruction of the body and the soul of future generations” (p. 1751). The bourgeoisie is guilty of social murder as capitalism is committing a “Bethlehemite infanticide”.

Kenny’s (2006) examination of poverty under capitalist exploitation argues that globalization contributes to increased suffering through colonization, urbanization, increased trade and growing inequality. More recently Shaw (2019) states that austerity policies and enforced poverty caused by capitalism have resulted in forms of violence which is referred to as ‘slow uricide.’ Like Engels, Shaw (2019) sees dilapidated housing conditions that cause social murder as a “crime of ‘omission’ rather than ‘commission’” (p. 979).

## 5.5. Health inequalities

Within the concept of capitalist exploitation, 30 articles examined health inequalities. Cooper et al. (1981) investigated the social origins of race-based health inequalities by examining bio-medical mechanisms in combination with Marxist social theory. The authors state that one of the major “contradictions created by the capitalist mode of production is the promotion of mass disease” (p. 409) of which racism is an essential element. Twelve years later, Cooper (1993) examines health inequalities between Black and white Americans arguing that racism within the economic structure of the 1970–1980s solidified the exploitative nature of capitalism leading to poorer health status and higher mortality for the Black population.

Singer (1990) suggests that medical anthropologists draw upon Engels’ account of living and working conditions resulting in social murder to identify micro- and macro-level processes that lead to health inequalities. Wojnarowicz and Guattari (1990) highlight how unjust treatment and exclusion of HIV/AIDS-positive individuals by the medical industry causes social murder which is legitimized by politicians, the medical complex, and religious organizations. Scott-Samuel (1995) reviews eight selected writings, which by exemplifying the exploitative nature of capitalist relationships, help explain the sources of health inequalities.

Birn (2009) sees the World Health Organization’s *Closing the Gap in a Generation* report as apolitical and directs attention to the works of Engels, Virchow and Chadwick and the beliefs and ideologies shaping their proposed solutions. Tootle, Ziegler and Singer (2015) call for making explicit the politics behind approaches in drug treatment interventions. The authors see the rich and powerful committing social murder by legitimizing a legal system that punishes drug users.

Most recently, Eisenberg-Guyot and Prins (2020), Borrás (2020), Riley (2020) and Kipp and Kretz (2021) saw health inequalities growing under capitalism. Eisenberg-Guyot and Prins (2020) look at temporal trends in self-rated health and mortality rates in the USA and how the relationship between class and mortality varies by race. Borrás (2020) calls for an intersectional approach to address health inequities, seeing social murder as a consequence of economic distributions that adversely shape working and living conditions for the working class.

Riley (2020) and Kipp and Kretz (2021) examine health inequalities under capitalism in relation to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Riley discusses the work of Engels, Virchow and Marmot in relation to COVID-19 deaths and socioeconomic deprivation. Riley (2020) concludes that “the poorest in society have died disproportionately of COVID-19, suggesting that the social murder observed by Engels in 1845 is still going on today” (p. 1). Kretz is a visual artist who designed face masks with “social murder” to portray how the bourgeoisie risk the lives of working-class frontline workers while they enjoy life as usual.

### 5.6. Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism was mentioned in 26 exploitation under capitalism articles – 15 of which are from 2019 onward. White (1994) examined the important role civil society groups play in democratization and uses social murder to describe “key problems of development - poverty, exploitation and inequality and the ‘social murder’ they cause through ecological deterioration, structural unemployment, socio-political instability, and the lack of national sovereignty” (p. 376). Dixon (2009) examines nutrition and food transitions and applies social murder to describe food deprivation among English workers.

Chernomas and Hudson (2009a, 2009b) published two articles based upon their 2007 book *Social Murder and other Shortcomings of Conservative Economics*. These articles provide succinct summaries of how conservative economics help maintain the power and privilege of the wealthiest, while reframing environmental law and agricultural policies, regulation of consumption and exposure to carcinogens, all of which threaten health, as benign.

Taylor (2013) uses social murder to show the current relevance of Engels’ analysis of how economic and social systems of capitalism create death, misery, starvation and disease. Franco (2017) analyzes the privatization of Spain’s monopolies, stating that “massive harm and social murder constitute the pure essence of capitalism, and much of its criminal activity is legal” (p. 6). Garrett (2019) examines neoliberalism’s main tenets and suggests an emergence of a new form of neoliberalism which uses “communication of ‘messaging’ strategies that aspire to disguise the continuing and true intent of the neoliberal project” (p. 196).

### 5.7. Deregulation

Eighteen articles – 11 of which are from 2019 onward – discuss deregulation within capitalism and its impact on health. In the American context, Foster (2019) discusses how class contradictions of modern-day capitalist society extend beyond workplace exploitation to broader structures of working-class lives including working and living conditions, education, health systems, communication, and the environment. The destruction of these areas of social reproduction led to declining working-class life expectancy, described as social murder.

Tombs (2016) highlights how the lack of effective regulations and enforcement of pollution controls, food safety, and workplace safety in the UK adversely affect health outcomes. Tombs sees these harms, resulting from political and economic decisions, as state-facilitated violence as well as social murder. “Business harms are routine, systematic and, crucially, avoidable: they are a form of violence. In fact, the harms indicated below are so widespread that they are a form of what others have called ‘social murder’” (p. 3).

More recently, Tombs (2021) examines the formal policy shift from

enforcement to advice arguing these austerity-related social and labour market policies are embedded in a wider framework of neoliberal transformation of public services. These processes of austerity, de-democratization, and decline of social protection produced the Grenfell Tower Fire. Launchbury (2021) also links deregulation to the Grenfell Tower Fire, viewing it as social murder, the consequence of a privatized, unaccountable, and deregulated housing provision system in the UK which prioritized the greed of the private sector over residents’ safety.

### 5.8. Austerity

Fifteen articles – 12 of which date from 2019 onwards – that fall under capitalist exploitation consider the domain of austerity. Laurie and Shaw (2018) examine how violent conditions under capitalism can draw upon discourses on the geographies of violence and the effect it has on racialized, gendered, and working-class populations: “In his definition of social murder, Engels (2009) located violence within the social conditions of capitalism” (p. 10). The authors state that society must not be complicit to violence arguing that “social murder hangs across the truncated lives of capitalism” (p. 15) due to capitalism preventing individuals from reaching their full potential.

Grover (2019) argues that social assistance benefit cuts and increasing conditionality of welfare benefits could be understood as violent proletarianization with the consequence of social murder. Grover (2019) defines violent proletarianization as “using socio-economic inequality and injustice to force the commodification of labour power, and a consequential creation of diswelfares that are known and avoidable” (p. 1). Through the reduction to benefits and the constant threats to remove them, violent proletarianization forces the working class to commodify their labour power through structural violence. This policy is contradictory as it pushes people further away from commodified labour power and socially murders some of its reserve army members.

The most recent article under the domain of austerity under capitalist exploitation states that the COVID-19 pandemic and the responses to it revealed the fragility of the capitalist food system with its high levels of food waste – and resultant food insecurity – caused by disruptions in supply chains, injury and death among exploited food system workers (Rose, 2021). Rose references the work of Abbasi (2021) whose editorial in the *British Medical Journal* accused governing authorities of social murder in their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 5.9. Social assistance

Nineteen articles – 11 dating from 2019 – considered the domain of social assistance within the capitalist mode of production. Bale (1990) looks at the occupational safety and compensation for work-related injuries. The author draws upon a class conflict perspective referencing Engels’ 1845 volume when discussing the pain and suffering of workers that occur due to employers’ misconduct. Ahmad et al. (2020) examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the extended lockdowns on migrant workers’ employment and living conditions. The authors report that due to border closures, transportation shutdowns, and the closing of non-essential economic activities, migrant workers have lost their livelihoods resulting in homelessness. The term social murder is used to describe the deaths of 18 migrant workers who died on railways tracks after falling asleep due to exhaustion.

Two articles published in 2020 drew on the work of Grover (2019) when discussing welfare programs in the UK. Wright et al. (2020) interview individuals receiving employment and benefit services and found that recipients experienced social harm through the punitive measures of benefit sanctions and welfare conditionality. Redman (2020) looks at how benefit sanctions impacted the health of male young adults, revealing the ways in which stigma emerges under Britain’s ‘welfare-to-work’ program.

### 5.10. Social murder results from bad public policy

As mentioned, the majority of articles in the modern 1960-present era used the full richness of Engels' concept of capitalist exploitation as causing social murder. There has also been a noticeable increase in articles (19 in total) that identify health-threatening public policy as causing social murder, but do not raise the issue of capitalist exploitation and those who benefit from it.

### 5.11. Living and working conditions

Under the concept of bad public policy, 14 of 19 articles address the domain of living conditions and seven working conditions. While examining the politics of sexuality in India, [Narain \(2007\)](#) criticizes the institutions of family and marriage for marginalizing groups that do not adhere to heteronormative roles. [Hammett \(2007\)](#) considers the positives and negatives of the Cuba-South Africa medical doctor exchange program, stating that Cuban doctors contribute greatly to South Africa's rural healthcare. [Hammett \(2007\)](#) uses social murder to draw similarities between Engels' description of the working class in England to those of South Africa.

[Maschi et al. \(2012\)](#) examine the living and healthcare conditions available for older prisoners with dementia. The authors call the treatment of older prisoners social murder and rally for changes in mainstream ideology around prison time and policy reforms to reduce this injustice ([Maschi et al., 2012](#)). [DiCristina \(2016\)](#) discusses the challenges of defining crime and suggests that in order to understand crime we need to examine power differentials and class conflict noting that Engels made this point in the mid-1800's.

### 5.12. Housing

Nine of 19 articles examine housing. The earliest example of housing as a domain under bad public policy appears in [Garland's \(1945\)](#) article *The Wynds of Glasgow* where Garland discusses two approaches: the balance-sheet approach developed by Chadwick and the humanist approach of Engels. [Garland \(1945\)](#) states that "property has had priority over life" (p. 424). Garland's arguments are relevant today as he calls on the government to use the labour and resources spent on manufacturing aircrafts and tanks, on public health programs instead. Only one more article coded under bad public policy precedes the new millennium: [Klinenberg \(1999\)](#) *Denaturalizing Disaster: A Social Autopsy of the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave*.

[Klinenberg \(1999\)](#) analyzes the 1995 Chicago heat wave which claimed hundreds of excess deaths and identifies the socio-spatial and political conditions that led to the disaster. He discusses three processes: 1) social morphology and the political economy of vulnerability; 2) the role of the state in determining this vulnerability; and 3) the tendencies of journalists and political officials to render invisible both the political economy of vulnerability and the role of the state. Even though the concept of social murder is present throughout Klinenberg's article with an explicit reference to [Engels' 1845](#) work, it did not examine the role of the bourgeoisie under capitalism, rather placing blame on problematic public policy.

More recently, [Buckley \(2014\)](#) uses social murder to refer to the conditions of city life in Kigali calling for a plan that is sustainable, affordable and beneficial and will help avoid the creation of urban slums.

### 5.13. Housing – Grenfell Tower Fire

Of the nine articles that examine housing, four UK articles from 2017 to 2021 used the concept of social murder in relation to the Grenfell Tower Fire. [Foellmer \(2017\)](#) uses the term social murder in reference to the Grenfell Tower Fire whose remnants serve as a powerful icon, a leftover, of the "depravations in an economically driven political

system" (p. 84). [Foellmer \(2017\)](#) states that necrocapitalism has fostered capital accumulation that centers around "dispossession and subjugation of life to the power of death" (p. 81). [Norrie \(2018\)](#) discusses social murder within the framework of the criminal justice system of UK examining the legal definitions of murder versus manslaughter. [Norrie \(2018\)](#) states that murder involves an intent to cause harm, however when intent is indirect there is a certain "moral elbow room" (p. 4) especially for those in positions of political power, who by the virtue of their status are "immune from criminal action" (p. 18).

[Simcock and Machin \(2019\)](#) highlight the complexity of addressing housing needs for social workers and their clients, identifying the difficulties of navigating those needs within an increasingly austerity-driven system. [Simcock and Machin \(2019\)](#) argue that instead of facilitating barrier-free services, authorities become gatekeepers in a system that reduces housing to a 'commodity' which results in support options that are "dictated not by accommodation needs but rather the limits of restrictive policy characterized by commoditization" (p. 1046). [Connelly and Joseph-Salisbury \(2019\)](#) explore how Engels' work can be used to help students understand the systemic inequalities that resulted in the Grenfell Tower Fire.

### 5.14. Health inequalities

Health inequalities were examined in nine out of 19 articles under bad public policy, of which seven were published in the 21st century. [Cooper \(2021\)](#) provides a commentary on his experiences of the pandemic, stating that the lack of control of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in avoidable deaths, not due to the failures of epidemiology, but due to political and social undermining of public health. [Cooper \(2021\)](#) states that Virchow's famous dictum "Mass disease means society is out of joint" (as quoted in [Cooper, 2021](#), p. 1) could not be more applicable to the current situation in the United States where social murder is "perpetuated by the uncontrolled" (p.1) COVID-19 pandemic.

[Abbasi \(2021\)](#) states that the failures of political leadership and the media who reinforce particular political ideologies constitutes social murder. This social murder is not just applicable to the COVID-19 pandemic but is rather "exposed and magnified" (p. 2) by it.

### 5.15. Neoliberalism

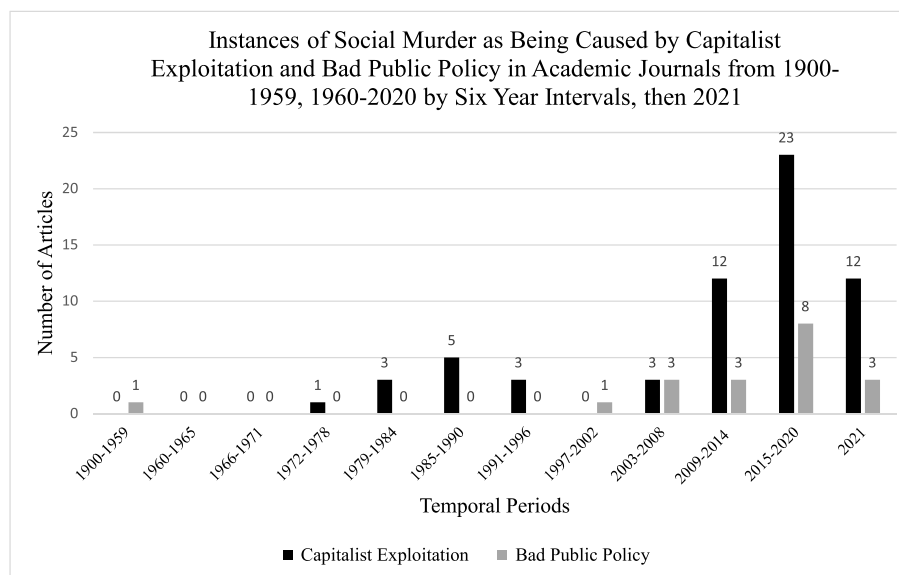
Six of 19 articles highlighted the role of neoliberalism under bad public policy, all published after 2005. [Wright and Patrick \(2019\)](#) examined two longitudinal studies looking at the lived experiences of social benefit recipients and found that people claiming benefits and back to work support services experience poverty and mental distress due to welfare conditionality and sanctions. [Short \(2010b\)](#) used the term social murder when discussing the culturally distractive policies of Australia that contribute to a genocide of Indigenous populations arguing that "the imposition of extreme conditions of life on a group could result in a form of 'social murder'" (p. 51).

### 5.16. Deregulation

Two articles examine deregulation. [Cannon \(2005\)](#) walks us through the historical background of dietetic and nutritional sciences from 4000BCE to the present era. Even though [Cannon \(2005\)](#) discusses the role of politics, economy and science in the development of the field, this account of social murder does not critique capitalism and its modes of exploitation, nor does it draw attention to the role of the dominant class.

### 5.17. Austerity and social assistance

Three articles used the concept of social murder in relation to austerity policies and poor health in the UK. [Williams \(2019\)](#) links British welfare system reforms and spending cutbacks to social trends such as an increase in rough sleeping, homeless families, and the use of food banks.



**Fig. 3.** Instances of Social Murder as Being Caused by Capitalist Exploitation and Bad Public Policy in Academic Journals from 1900 to 1959, 1960–2020 by Six Year Intervals, then 2021.

Two studies reference [Grover \(2019\)](#) use of the term social murder. [Inckle \(2020\)](#) highlights that austerity policies in the UK have increased health inequalities resulting in the exclusion of disabled people in public health policies. [Redman and Fletcher \(2021\)](#) also draw on the work of [Grover \(2019\)](#) in their analysis of interviews with front-line workers and managers in public/contractor employment services agreeing that “social murder” has been an indirect outcome of post-2010 reforms” (p. 19) in the UK.

[Fig. 3](#) shows the increasing use of the two main concepts of social murder as capitalist exploitation and bad public policy, while [Table 1](#) provides illustrations of these two primary concepts applied to the key domains with the highest application. We provide quotations for the six highest mentioned domains as well as the social assistance and deregulation domains since these two areas have been the focus of much recent inquiry.

## 6. Social murder results from racism

The primary focus of six articles is that racism leads to social murder. In the USA, [Williams \(2012\)](#) references Engels’ concept of social murder to illustrate that social class and social contextual factors are a critical determinant of the social distribution of disease. In their discussion of how social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter challenge structures of inequality [Bailey and Leonard \(2015\)](#) use social murder to describe the systematic devaluation of Black life and culture. [Jackson Sow \(2021\)](#) states that social murder is employed to maintain a racially casted domination through mechanisms of mass incarceration, immigration policy, dispossession of lands and community utilities, gentrification schemes, and systematic killings.

In the UK, [Beckles-Raymond \(2019\)](#) examines how in the context of post-Brexit, the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and the Windrush scandal there is movement for educational reform in Britain to better serve students racialized as Black, referencing John McDonnell’s description of the Grenfell Tower Fire as social murder ([Guardian, 2017](#)). [Bergbs and Dyson \(2020\)](#) examine the intersections of social identities of race, class, sex, and disability to understand why certain areas of Black disabled people’s employment experiences are neglected, citing [Grover \(2019\)](#) process of ‘violent proletarianization’, disabled people are seen as subject to changing welfare conditionality and sanctions.

## 7. Social murder results from patriarchy/masculinity

The primary focus of four articles is that patriarchy leads to social murder. In three of these a strong focus on capitalist exploitation led to their also being coded under that concept. In their examination of undocumented labours and cultural constructions of patriarchal masculinity [Walter et al. \(2004\)](#) link the political economy of labour relations in modern industrial capitalism to the violence and social murder of the working class.

[Scott-Samuel \(2009\)](#) and [Scott-Samuel et al. \(2009\)](#) apply Engels’ concept of social murder to discuss hegemonic masculinity and structural violence. Engels’ description of oppressive and exploitative working conditions as social murder is compared to the avoidable damage and increased inequality created by austerity-inspired policies imposed by the World Bank and World Trade Organization. [Scott-Samuel et al. \(2009\)](#) state that in both patriarchal and economic modes of domination political, social, and cultural structures systematically oppress vulnerable and powerless groups resulting in social murder. [Klassen \(2016\)](#) analysis of social relations in which men are perceived as the dominant social class and women as subordinate references social murder as a condition of annihilation in which social identities are constructed and deconstructed through systems of oppression and marginalization.

## 8. Social murder results from rape

*Rape as Social Murder* by [Winkler \(1991\)](#) is the first account that describes rape as a form of social murder. However, in this context social murder is meant as social death resulting from an attack on the whole individual affecting their social, physical and psychological identities. [Winkler’s \(1991\)](#) use of the term gained traction in feminist and women’s studies literature. We found four articles, [Gibson \(2005\)](#), [Mann \(2021\)](#), [Klassen \(2016\)](#), and [Smith \(2016\)](#) that use [Winkler \(1991\)](#) definition of social murder. The last instance of social murder in relation to rape is found in [Mutsotso \(2002\)](#). None of these articles reference Engels, thus providing a novel interpretation and conceptualization of the term by feminist scholars.



**Table 1**

Selected quotations illustrating the primary concepts of social murder as capitalist exploitation and social murder as bad public policy applied to six key content domains and two of recent focus.

Concept	Domain	Illustrative Quotations
Capitalist Exploitation	Working Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 175 years after Engels published CWCE in 1845, poor working conditions and the racist exploitation of migrant workers have in the COVID-19 crisis created new forms of social murder where workers cannot keep social distance and working conditions result in COVID-19 that makes it hard for infected poor workers to breathe and results in the death of a specific share of those who caught the virus. (Fuchs, 2021, p. 36)</li> </ul>
	Living Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [...] modern capitalism/neoliberalism operates to create and sustain deeply divisive and socially unjust levels of inequality. Of course, this is at odds with trickle-down neoliberal economics, which sees unrestrained capitalism as leading to higher standards of living for all. (Rogowski, 2021, p. 6)</li> </ul>
	Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [...] Grenfell could have happened anywhere. It was the result of long-term, systematic disinvestment in and the denigration of council housing, a contemptuous attitude to tenants and front-line workers by a remote, impersonal bureaucracy, with cuts on one side and expanded opportunities for private profit-making on the other. (Robbins, 2018, p. 235)</li> </ul>
	Poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [...] the burden of suffering in 2020 fell disproportionately on low-income sectors and people of colour, with as many as 500 million more people falling into poverty, the world's billionaires experienced a bonanza year, with their collective wealth increasing by nearly \$4 trillion. (Rose, 2021, p. 5)</li> </ul>
	Race	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The motivating force in capitalist society is the drive for profits, and thereby the accumulation of capital. Profits are generated by exploitation; the employer pays the worker less than the value of what he produces and keeps the rest. The rate and intensity of exploitation—a reflection on the one side of how rapidly labor power is being used up in the process of production, and on the other of the expenditure on its maintenance—in general determine the health status of the worker. Supply and demand will decide what exploitation a worker must accept. The source of the health differential suffered by minority workers can be traced to the increased rate and intensity of exploitation, or “super-exploitation,” to which they are subjected in a racist society. (Cooper et al., 1981, p. 40)</li> </ul>
	Health Inequalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [...] the three fundamental societal systems that underlie class-, race/ethnicity-, and gender-based health injustice are neoliberal capitalism, structural racism, and patriarchy. These systems act in silos or combination to shape economic maldistribution, cultural misrecognition, and political misrepresentation that, in turn, whether in silos or combination, influence public policies impacting the social determinants of health such as labor, income, housing, food, and health care systems and services that result in health injustice. (Borras, 2020, p. 12)</li> </ul>
	Social Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synergetic with theory of social abjection, Scambler's (2018) recent exposition shows how stigma is not simply a marker of shame, but a weapon used to impute blame and harnessed to meet the interests of the capitalist class (Scambler, 2018). Scambler traces the weaponization of stigma back to the Thatcherite fiscal and social policies, which presaged the explosion of financial capitalism and, along with it, the restoration of capital's omnipotence (Harvey, 2021), (Redman, 2020, p. 88).</li> </ul>
	Deregulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulation, ostensibly in existence to protect consumers, residents, workers, and so on, is being transformed into a form of State-corporate collusion by contract which protects the private sector from law enforcement. A form of State-corporate violence, no less. (Tombs, 2020, p. 136)</li> </ul>
Bad Public Policy	Working Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Britain's American loan allowed for the construction of a more generous welfare state, but in order to fund this revamped post-war society, ordinary citizens had to endure ongoing austerity regarding their living standards. (Williams, 2019, p. 16)</li> </ul>
	Living Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [...] the climate, the living conditions of the city's most precarious residents, and the local government, the organization most responsible for protecting the welfare of citizens, interact to determine the level of danger and damage that a disaster such as the heat wave inflicts. In 1995, the city's climatic, sociospatial, and political conditions were all extreme: not only was the weather unprecedentedly severe, in addition the advancing state of poverty and the inadequacy of the state's response created an unusually deadly crisis. (Klinenberg, 1999, p. 242)</li> </ul>
	Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The debate around welfare and especially social housing is one of the topics the media, politicians and activist groups are linking to the catastrophe, itself being the devastating result of an ongoing pressure through real-estate trading in a neoliberal economy, going along with the increasing neglect of (safe) housing as a fundamental social right. Even after the 'wake-up call' of the fire the government still 'does nothing to address the chronic shortage of low-cost housing' (Foellmer, 2017, p. 78).</li> </ul>
	Poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For the majority, the experience over time was of continuing to claim benefits whilst falling deeper into poverty, debt and, for many, extreme hardship. There were also common experiences of moving from out of work to in-work poverty. Individuals subject to repeat benefit sanctions experienced long lasting negative impacts that pushed them near to or into destitution. (Wright and Patrick, 2019, p. 11)</li> </ul>
	Race	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We showed that racially minoritised people are disproportionately housed in tower blocks, that 'most children who live above the fourth floor of tower blocks in England are Black or Asian' (Runnymede Trust, 2010: 5) and that certain racially minoritised groups are particularly susceptible to 'housing deprivation'. (Connelly and Joseph-Salisbury, 2019, p. 1030)</li> </ul>
	Health Inequalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [...] PHE's active travel strategy marginalises people with disabilities, and entirely excludes disabled people from cycling, despite seeking to avoid the reproduction of health inequalities. This exclusion is problematic both in terms of the public sector equality duty as well as reinforcing the mental and physical health disparities that disabled people already endure. (Inckle, 2020, p. 425)</li> </ul>
	Social Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theoretically-driven analyses have interpreted recent British social security cuts and reforms from Marxist or governmentality perspectives as autonomy-eroding (Wiggan, 2015), 'criminalising' (Fletcher and Wright, 2018) and 'vindictive' (Grover, 2019). Grover (2018: 4–5) goes as far as to say reforms constitute 'structural violence' and 'social murder' because of the resultant large-scale, extreme and 'avoidable physical and mental diswelfares'. (Wright and Patrick, 2019, p. 599).</li> </ul>
	Deregulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The laissez-faire ideology dominant since the 1980s is hostile to legal, fiscal and regulatory intervention in the public interest and to admission that food, nutrition and disease patterns have social, economic and political causes. Governments have withdrawn from public health, resist interventions designed to improve food systems, and mostly confine food and nutrition policies to information and education on prudent 'lifestyle'. (Cannon, 2005, p. 704).</li> </ul>

## 9. Social murder results from poverty

One article was classified under poverty as the main concept. Jones (1986) examines how poverty leads to death for skid row residents:

The death of another human being, especially when the death results from human agency, demands moral assessment and response. Given the inherent character of our dignity, the death engendered by skid row poverty, which wrongfully repudiates the dignity of the skid row person, can only be viewed as unjustifiable homicide, caused by a tragic interplay of social murder and suicide (p. 572).

While having affinities with Engels' concept, there is no reference to Engels' or his 1845 volume. A personal communication with Jones revealed uncertainty about his evoking Engels' concept. He did not recall being aware of Engels' work at the time but noted accounts of the Victorian era he read as background did reference his work and may have influenced his thinking.

## 10. Discussion

Our analysis of the presence in academic journals from 1900 to the present of the social murder concept as conceptualized by Friedrich Engels revealed 1) that it was seldomly used; 2) but when used, it usually contained the key elements of Engels' concept; and 3) the concept is now reemerging in academic journals.

### 10.1. Limited use of the social murder concept since 1900

We were somewhat surprised of how limited the social murder concept was in the academic literature. We identified only 62 examples over the 121-year period we studied in which capitalist exploitation was explicitly identified as being the cause of social murder. Even adding the additional 19 cases in which it may have been implied that economic and political systems contributed to bad public policy causing social murder, the total of only 82 articles over this period is striking.

This limited use was not only seen in its application to contemporary health issues but also in a very small number of book reviews and historical analyses of Engels' insights. The first instance of its use in the health-related academic literature was in a 1945 *Lancet* article which remains remarkably relevant to the current scene in its argument that property rights take precedence over human life. The 1970s and 1980s saw initial applications of the social murder concept to issues of labour power and racism in the USA and it is noteworthy that these articles appeared in Vicente Navarro's *International Journal of Health Services*.

### 10.2. Full use of the social murder concept when used

We found that most of the articles using the social murder concept did so in all the richness of Engels' original conceptualization. This is the case right across its use from the early 1970s to the present. Social murder is a result of adverse living and working conditions brought by capitalist exploitation in which those who benefit from it are morally culpable. This assumption is clear in 62 articles, and in an additional 19 where bad public policy causes social murder, many authors implicitly drew upon Engels' concept.

Particularly interesting invocations of the concept are seen in (Cooper et al., 1981, 1993) 20th century application of the concept to explain the health effects of capitalist-generated racism in the USA, Scott-Samuel (2009), and Scott-Samuel et al.'s (2009) analysis of the health effects of patriarchy and hyper-masculinity, the Grenfell Tower Fire as social murder in the UK, and Tombs' (2016; 2020; 2021) work on deregulation and its health effects in the UK. Another growing focus is the adverse health effects generated by austerity-generated welfare reform in the UK.

The 19 latter instances where bad public policy rather than capitalist

exploitation is seen as causing social murder suggests why the full concept is seldomly used in academic journal articles. Very few have been willing to evoke one of the authors of *The Communist Manifesto* to make explicit their critique of capitalism and its adverse health effects. This should not be surprising considering the long-standing aversion to Marxist concepts in the capitalist West. Note that our review was limited to the English language literature which emanates primarily from Anglo-Saxon liberal nations where the suppression of anti-capitalist, Marxist-inspired analysis and activity has been greatest (Ollman and Vernoff, 1986). The few articles we found from the 20th century evoking Engels' full concept of social murder may be examples of the exceptions that prove the rule. It has been noted by many that political economy approaches to understanding health and health inequalities are uncommon, with Marxist analysis even less so (Harvey, 2021).

### 10.3. Increasing use of the social murder concept since 2019

However, there appears to be a reemergence of the social murder concept in all its richness since 2019. This increase is rather striking and suggest that we may be entering a new period of academic inquiry that draws upon the social murder concept as formulated by Engels. There are numerous reasons why this may be the case.

The stage has been getting set for its reemergence by the disturbing public policy developments in the UK since the defeat of the Labour Party in 2007. While many of these problematic public policies date from the period of New Labour under Tony Blair (Daguerre, 2004), they have become particularly acute during Conservative Party rule (Grover, 2019). Of particular note has been the changes to the social welfare system resulting from the imposition of austerity. Numerous articles documented the health threatening effects of these as well as public policies increasing already existing social inequalities.

Many of the concerns about these policies were given a focus by the conceptualization of the Grenfell Tower Fire as a stark example of the social murder concept. It involved aspects of neoliberal inspired austerity and deregulation combined with racism, classism, and anti-immigrant sentiment. The use of social murder had the strongest influence on academic publications after the Grenfell Tower Fire because the term is tied to unjust and visible deaths, unlike when the term is used to illustrate the complex relationship between adverse health outcomes, early mortality, conservative economics and capitalist exploitation. The second impetus is the article by Grover (2019) on how UK welfare policy, through a process of enforced proletarianism, led to adverse health effects so extreme as to merit the description of social murder. It had quite an impact in the mainstream and social media. The fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic provided further impetus for the use of the social murder concept, it even appearing in a *British Medical Journal* editorial (Abbasi, 2021). This trend represents a shift from what has been suggested to be a systematic suppression of Marxist analysis in academic journals (Das, 2020a, 2020b).

### 10.4. Engels, social inequality and academic inquiry

We perhaps should not be surprised at the sporadic presence of Engels' social murder concept in the English-language literature. It is a heavily laden term combining a critique of dominant capitalist ideology with a call to identify the wealthy and powerful who both benefit from and are responsible for its health effects. Certainly, one of the main sources of such analyses has been Navarro's *International Journal of Health Services* which, as noted earlier, published articles as early as the 1970s explicitly outlining how capitalist exploitation was a cause of social murder and overall published eight articles applying the critique of capitalist exploitation.

The finding that similar-themed articles are now appearing in additional journals is noteworthy. This reemergence of the social murder concept is certainly consistent with societal trends indicating increasing greater awareness of neoliberal-inspired approaches to governance

across developed and developing nations (Lynch, 2020). It may also be related to growing acceptance of socialism as opposed to capitalism as a preferred approach to the production and distribution of resources in Canada, the USA, and UK. This trend is particularly evident in the USA where now 37% of the population is said to prefer socialism over capitalism and among Democrats the figure is as high as 57% (Newport, 2018). Among young adults in the USA, positive attitudes towards socialism now hover near 50% (Elkins, 2018). In a 2019 poll of Canadian voters, 58% of respondents said they have a positive view of socialism, whereas four in 10 said they hold negative opinions about it (Banares, 2019). In the UK, overall figures are 36% favourable towards socialism versus 33% for capitalism (Dahlgreen, 2016).

### 10.5. Implications for moving the health equity agenda forward

To date, the terms used to describe the situations that lead to excessive morbidity and premature mortality have been social determinants of health, health inequalities and health inequities (Kawachi et al., 2002). Stronger language employs the terms structural violence (De Maio and Ansell, 2018) and social death (Short, 2016). Raphael et al. (2021) suggest that the latter terms of structural violence and social death can be characterized as possessing stronger negative valence – or emotional content. The term social murder contains even more emotion-laden language to describe the adverse health effects of capitalist-created social inequalities. The reasons why using these high negative valence terms may be useful is that they involve the greater likelihood of evoking public reactions through anger arousal and class-oriented mobilization (Korpi, 2006, 2018). Support for this approach comes from the social movement literature which increasingly identifies the role emotions play in fostering change (Jasper, 2011).

The term polemic captures the essence of this more aggressive approach to addressing social problems. This is what McGibbon and Lukeman (2019) call for in their article which examines the concept of moral bystanding of nurses in the face of oppressive structures and processes in the health care systems and society in general that threaten health. McGibbon and Lukeman (2019) ask that nurses employ language of critical social justice by utilizing terms such as social murder, social pathogens, and emancipation among others.

Communication theory depicts these more aggressive approaches as involving the use of high valence (intensity) negative (depicting problems) messaging (Cox and Béland, 2013). The most commonly applied of these more laden terms, for describing adverse health effects of oppressive structures and processes of society, structural violence, shares similarities with social murder but does not identify those who are responsible and profit from these adverse health outcomes, including premature death. Interestingly, opting to use the term social murder seems to supersede use of the term structural violence (McLean and Panter-Brick, 2018). Only 18 of 62 articles (23%) classified as capitalist exploitation also contained the term structural violence and only 2 of 19 (10%) evoking bad public policy as causing social murder did so.

Raphael et al. (2021) examine the potential benefits and threats arising from applying anger mobilization and polemic as means of advancing the health equity agenda. Benefits include provoking public policy responses that reduce health inequalities while potential threats include having the concerns of researchers and advocates' arguments dismissed by an increasingly conservative public and neoliberal-oriented ruling authorities thereby creating additional barriers to reducing health inequalities.

## 11. Conclusion

Raphael et al. (2021) suggest that considering the limited success in placing health inequalities and their sources on the Canadian and USA agenda, and the problematic developments in the UK, use of anger arousal and polemic may be means of arousing the public to resist health threatening public policy directions being taken by governing

authorities. Efforts to promote public policy that equitably distributes resources amongst the population is becoming increasingly difficult due to increasing acceptance of neoliberal inspired approaches to governance (Lynch, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has not only made the health effects of these inequalities in resource distribution explicit but has also exacerbated them (Bryant et al., 2020; Raphael et al., 2021).

Questioning the legitimacy and competence of these governing authorities is another possible means of public mobilization (Raphael et al., 2019). Such analyses have the purpose of educating and mobilizing the public to resist health threatening public policy and those who are behind it. Putting a face to those who create and benefit from the social inequalities that create health inequalities is another means of building resistance to health threatening public policies (Langille, 2016; Navarro, 2009).

But perhaps the greatest benefit from the reemergence of the social murder concept is to make explicit that the source of much of the excessive morbidity and premature death present in our societies is to be found in the capitalist economic system. For those of us who see 21st century capitalism as causing the health inequalities that kill, evoking Engels' concept of social murder with all its implications for shifting power and influence from those who profit from these structures and processes is the preferred option for building a movement to change the economic system that is "killing people on a large scale" (Popay et al., 2010).

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114377>.

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