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Understanding and Policing Gangs

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Conference Briefing

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**Identities
& belonging**
2018-19 series



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Foreword

This year's Cumberland Lodge Police Conference explores the attraction of gangs, in order to understand and police them more effectively, and to identify best practice in early intervention and prevention strategies relating to criminal activity (gang crime). It takes a cross-sector, multi-agency approach to exploring the complexities of gang culture in the UK today.

Discussions about gangs can provoke strong and often conflicting feelings and opinions, and this is a rare opportunity to bring together people with wide-ranging expertise, experiences and perspectives, for informed discussions in an open and inclusive environment. This year, we are pleased to have representation from: police officers, students and academics, representatives of non-governmental organisations and community projects, media representatives, policymakers and educationalists.

'Understanding & Policing Gangs' seeks to exchange views and stimulate fresh thinking on how the police and other agencies should approach the closed communities of gang culture, especially in areas marked by social exclusion and economic decline.

The Cumberland Lodge Police Conference is now in its 38th year. The issues it addresses are closely aligned with our charitable mission of empowering people, through dialogue and debate, to tackle the causes and effects of social division. Through our work, we seek to break down silo thinking and incubate ideas that promote progress towards more peaceful, open and inclusive societies.

We hope this conference will lead to innovative thinking with practical outcomes for all involved, and we will ensure that any findings are followed up and widely disseminated, through the conference report that we will launch in central London later this year, and through digital resources that we will publish online and share on social media.

We are grateful to our freelance Research Associate, Dr Robert McLean, for researching and preparing this briefing document, which is designed to help participants prepare for the conference discussions. The Briefing has also been published online to improve public awareness and understanding, at www.cumberlandlodge.ac.uk/resources-publications/understanding-policing-gangs-briefing

We also extend our grateful thanks to KBR and the Dawes Trust for their generous support for this project. As well as helping us to meet the overall running costs, their support has allowed us to provide bursaries to help five doctoral students and charity representatives, and two officers nominated from the College of Policing's Direct Entry scheme, to attend. As well as widening the participation and perspectives in the room, we hope that their involvement will help to ensure long-term outcomes from our work today.

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Executive summary

After many years of decline, reported levels of youth violence and gang culture in Britain began to increase again in 2014 and have continued to do so since, particularly in England and Wales. These issues have arisen against the backdrop of deindustrialisation and as a result of a lack of local community investment, as well as the continuing issues associated with the profiling and criminalisation of young working-class males, and particularly those from ethnic minority communities. This document reviews contemporary literature on gang culture and details the most pertinent findings, in order to brief the Cumberland Lodge conference on 'Understanding and Policing Gangs' in June 2019.

Gang typologies

Gangs currently exist on a shifting continuum in the United Kingdom (UK). Young Street Gangs (YSGs) are primarily located in traditionally working-class communities and characterised mainly by recreational violence. Members (predominantly young men) congregate on street corners and project their sense of disadvantage and vulnerability into territorial street violence. Whilst associate members' involvement is often temporary and short-lived, core members may continue to offend and progress to more serious forms of criminality.

Once engaged in Young Crime Gangs (YCGs), young people tend to become increasingly motivated by financial gain. Social supply of drugs can gradually lead to bulk-buying and distribution, and even to wider criminal endeavour. Increasingly, globalisation has enabled increasing numbers of young men to access wider markets and commodities, but at this stage there are no formal leadership structures and there is no focus on governance.

For those who progress to Organised Crime Groups (OCGs), they can become immersed in full-scale drug dealing; their focus being on being criminal-oriented businessmen and expanding into the governance of drug markets. Progression into fraud, armed robbery, debt collection and other forms of serious crime is common. However, the prominent and expanded focus by criminals on drug dealing has coincided with the growth and availability of illicit markets within the UK, as well as the increasing social inequalities associated with deindustrialisation. Alongside market and product diversification, gangs have become increasingly organised, and so too has their level of involvement in supply chains. This has given rise to a new phenomenon known as 'county lines', where gangs operate at every level of the supply chain, whilst simultaneously distancing themselves from the products they sell. Much evidence suggests that OCGs have increasingly extended their supply lines to rural locations, and members now exploit young people to act as 'runners' and use the homes of vulnerable people as bases from which to store and sell illegal drugs. As experience within OCGs grows, members' criminal endeavours may also expand to include money laundering, tax evasion and engagement in the sex industry.

Whereas in previous generations, gang members may have relied on physical turf to advance their violent and/or criminal reputations, spikes in gang-related activity are now increasingly related to online activity. The Internet generates new conflicts and intensifies old ones. Again, how this plays out is contingent upon the stage of gang evolution. While YSGs may draw on social media to make incendiary remarks about rivals, flaunt their masculinity and promote gang culture through music videos, those who have progressed to OCGs, and even some in YSGs, tend to engage less in the 'dis'ing of rivals but more in the use of social media for the lucrative trading of illicit drugs in a digital landscape.

Gang exit and disengagement

Withdrawal from gangs is dependent upon a range of factors. Gaining employment, entering parenthood, witnessing violent incidents, or becoming a victim of crime, as well as becoming tired and weary of the gang lifestyle, can all be initial 'hooks for change'. Recognising the role of structure and agency in the desistance process is essential to understanding how permanent disengagement from gangs and permanent criminal desistance can best occur.

In terms of policing, drawing on existing success stories is important, and the work of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit provides helpful guidance on how adopting a public health approach can play a valuable role. A balance between enforcement, empathy and social support, wrapped within the context of multi-agency working, is clearly important. While mentoring and education may be more relevant where YSGs dominate communities, partnership work on preventing gang members from progressing to enterprise and governance is essential. Police support for private, public and third sector agencies to protect themselves from organised crime and to disrupt OCGs (where they emerge) is also vital. Most of all, in the British context, a focus on care, compassion and healing at the earliest stage is important in enabling root causes to be addressed and preventing the toxicity of gang culture.

Introduction

In recent decades, Britain has undergone significant change in its socio-economic and political circumstances, which has given rise to some fundamental changes in our urban landscape, leaving some communities feeling increasingly marginalised, isolated and disenfranchised from wider society. Factors relating to globalisation, austerity and the rise of the digital generation have all led to ‘cracks’ in the social fabric, which have manifested in a number of ways. One of these is the growing problem of gang culture in marginalised communities, in cities like Glasgow, London and Manchester (Densley and Stogarrd, 2017; Maitra et al, 2018; McLean et al, 2018). Yet gang culture has by no means remained stagnant over the last 20 years or so, whilst UK scholars have ‘revisited’ it (Hallsworth and Young, 2004, 2006). Rather, gang culture has continued to evolve and adapt in response to the ever-changing socio-economic and political environment. Such group offending has gradually moved beyond delinquent activity alone to become ever more entrenched in various aspects of criminality, including drugs supply.

This proliferation of group offending, typically referenced under the umbrella term ‘gang’, has been a concern for both the general public and law enforcement. The government has voiced concern, time and again, and sought to tackle problematic behaviour through various strategies. This is perhaps best epitomised by the response of the UK government to the 2011 summer riots, following which the Prime Minister, David Cameron, declared ‘war’ against Britain’s growing gang culture. This was promptly followed by the Government (2011) report, *Ending Gang and Youth Violence*, portraying the urban gang as organised, increasingly criminal in intent and purpose, and corrosive to wider youth culture more generally (McLean, 2017). A number of reports and supporting documents have continued to emerge since, including Scotland’s *Serious Organised Crime Strategy; Local to Global: Reducing the Risk from Organised Crime (2011)*; and *Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation (2016)*, to mention but a few. Furthermore, this has coincided with the establishment of a number of specialised institutional bodies dedicated to tackling such activity, including the National Crime Agency (NCA) in England and Wales.

The problematic turn in gang organisation has not occurred in isolation. Indeed, the new ‘*Serious Violence Strategy*’ (HM Government, 2018) cites ‘changing drug market[s]’ as a ‘key driver’ in gang organisation as a means for gang business, as well as increasing violence. This is particularly true as evidenced by the phenomenon of ‘county lines’, whereby criminal actors extend illegal drug supply lines out of major cities or ‘hubs’ and into rural communities. In addition, actors tend to blur the victim/criminal nexus – something which has proved particularly problematic for law enforcement and other interventionist agencies. Yet, given that gang/group definitions – as well as levels of organisation, purpose, intent and harm posed – have been fiercely contested, how best to deal with gangs is controversial. Some of the questions posed challenge the very use of the term ‘gang’ itself. What are gangs? What threat do they pose? What role do social media play in projecting gang culture in society? And, to what extent are gangs involved in illicit business? These are just a few of the important questions for the Cumberland Lodge Police Conference, ‘*Understanding and Policing Gangs*’.

This briefing document presents a summary of key issues to stimulate and inform conversations and debates before, during and after the conference. Whilst by no means exhaustive, it provides a roadmap to help delegates navigate a vast and shifting landscape around gangs and gang membership, gang activities, the changing nature of gang ‘turf’, and strategies for early intervention and prevention.

Section I: Social division, new identities and gang formation

Britain's political and socio-economic landscape has changed considerably in recent decades. Prior to deindustrialisation, heavy industry was at the centre of Britain's economic might. This included coal mining, ship building and steel works, to name but a few of the prominent industries upon which the Empire was built. Such employment supported much of the population, not only economically but also socially (Rogers, 2008). Steady employment in heavy industry helped to establish clear social divisions and class identity (Savage, 2010).

Yet, some have argued that in the post-modern era, coupled with complex issues apropos globalisation and the rise of the free market within a context of neo-liberalism and deindustrialisation, the contemporary British landscape and identity have been fractured (Bauman, 2005; Roger, 2008; Savage, 2010). This is particularly true amongst what were once considered traditional working-class communities. The loss of heavy industry, along with the decline of union power, class identity, decent pay, and the availability of steady, skilled employment, have given rise to poorer wages, zero-hour contracts, insecure work, and of course a broken social class who no longer share the commonalities, close ties of kinship and leisure activities that they once did. Resultantly, it has been argued that such communities are 'broken' ('Broken Britain') and have suffered a fundamental loss of identity. New industries have emerged in the aftermath, particularly amongst the younger population.

Males have always been seen as the 'problematic gender'. Early scholars in the United States (US) who studied youth delinquency, including Thrasher (1927), Whyte (1949), Cloward and Ohlin (1960), and Cohen (1955), along with UK counterparts like Willis (1977) and those aligned to the Birmingham School of thought (Cohen, 1972; Hall, 1978; Hebdige, 1979), suggested to varying degrees that those young males from working-class backgrounds, in particular, often proved more 'problematic' – whether it be due to lack of capital, rebellion through rituals, or inverting or even outright rejecting middle-class values. Theoretical approaches exploring the occasionally problematic behaviour amongst essentially young males from working-class backgrounds are something more contemporary UK scholars have, on the one hand, been keen to explore further, whilst simultaneously noting a need to tread with caution for fear of criminalising working-class populations more generally via labelling processes (Hallsworth and Young, 2006; Pitts 2012).

Studies of youth and peer-group identities and culture tend to have been subsumed under the umbrella term of 'gang' studies, due to the nature of peer offending. Peer groups influence identity formation in young people and, along with the gender gap in offending, the age-related spike in youth and adolescent offending is considered a social fact within criminology (Connell, 1987; Hutton, 2005). This is because adolescents are undergoing great changes: breaking with their parental figures; establishing their own identity amongst peers; transitioning from the world of childhood to adulthood; and engaging in adult behaviour in adult bodies, but with still child-like mindsets. All of this behaviour takes place in front of peers. Thus, the peer group, the 'gang', provides a platform for status building, cementing reputations, and even an inward facing form of social mobility, with popularity being the reward (Deuchar, 2009; Holligan et al., 2016; McLean, 2017). This is particularly true for the working classes, given that many youths from working-class backgrounds lack the economic means to engage in other forms of social activities away from the streets (Deuchar and Holligan, 2010; Holligan, 2013). Ultimately, for many, delinquency is a part of growing up and 'doing crime' is seen as 'doing masculinity' (Messerschmitt's, 1993).

Marginalised communities, disenfranchised with the promise of wealthy capitalist living in a 'liquid society' have seen many youths become embedded within gang culture (Bauman, 2008; Harding, 2012). In the past, young people perhaps would have engaged with these types of groups briefly and then moved on, but this is no longer happening. This is a common phenomenon in periods of recession and immediately thereafter, whereby the gang becomes an outlet for economic activity (see Davies, 2013). Gang organisation becomes a means to an end, in that it facilitates lucrative gang business. The gang becomes a lifestyle and identity, and not just a phase (Harding, 2012).

This process has been particularly exacerbated in certain poor, ethnic minority and immigrant communities (Scott, 2018; Williams et al., 2018), where there is a real lack of investment and effort to help such communities embed into wider society. Instead, they become isolated and fearful of state presence, particularly when hindered by police 'stop and search' activities which profile and even target individuals from particular backgrounds and/or in particular areas of social space (Brotherton and Hallsworth, 2011; Scott, 2018; Williams et al., 2018). However, as the next section illustrates, gang membership exists on a continuum, and to understand the motivations for gang membership and culture, cognisance needs to be given to the 'stage' of involvement within a given gang typology that members may have reached.

Section 2: Gang typologies and factors leading to gang membership and culture

Since the early 2000s, and until quite recently, the debate around British gangs primarily centred on whether or not gangs actually existed at all within the UK (See Pitts, 2012; Hallsworth 2014). More recent studies (Densley et al., 2018; Deuchar et al., 2018; Harding et al., 2018; McLean et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2018; Windle, 2013; Windle and Briggs, 2015), along with an array of strategies and initiatives by the political establishment and third sector agencies, have seen the gradual acceptance that gangs do exist, albeit to varying degrees, and can be problematic in contemporary Britain in that activities have increasingly become criminal, as opposed to merely delinquent. Yet, early forms of the debate essentially compared 'apples with pears' in many respects. This is because, whilst gangs exist, they do differ from one another, and even elements within them can differ. Not all groups are gangs, and not all gangs are the same, nor are all gangs or gang members equal. Peer groups are not gangs, and youth gangs are not the same as OCGs. Gang literature has typically viewed the gang in relation to which group is being studied, by whom the interpretation is being made and for what purpose. Arguably, the problem can lie in the pre-assumed subjective interpretation that the word 'gang' projects (i.e. youth, working-class, ethnic and criminal). Thus, it is not the term but the assumptions attached which are misleading. Studies of the gang, regardless of typology, are often viewed from two distinct branches: cultural criminology and administrative criminology.

Cultural criminology and gangs

Gang scholarship within the context of cultural criminology places the gang in the cultural context and seeks to identify precursors. In doing so, it identifies common gang features in order to identify means of gang dismantlement. As discussed in the previous section, gangs are not independent of the wider social setting in which they are found. They are a result of socio-economic and political inequality. Lawler (2010) argues that the move towards an advanced capitalist global society only perpetuates crime, and the same attention given to profit-making must be given to equality – should the root causes of crime ever be addressed.

In the era of austerity, welfare management and concentration of slum housing, many communities in Britain have come to share a few, and in some occasions considerable, commonalities with the ghettos of the US (Dean, 1997; Holligan, 2013; Pitts, 2008). Emile Durkheim was one of the first to analyse the way in which the oppressive influences of urbanisation in the US stimulated a tendency towards crime. In the late-19th century, he argued that a state of normlessness or 'anomie' can occur in the lives of people who are exposed to unlimited, socially-generated aspirations, but who have no realistic opportunities for achieving their goals (Durkheim, 1897, 1952). Later, Robert Merton took these arguments further when he drew attention to the ways in which some elements of social and cultural structure exerted a 'strain' on some people to engage in nonconformist conduct. In particular, he highlighted the existence of 'culturally defined goals, purposes and interests' that provide a 'frame of aspirational reference' (Merton, 1938, p.672). He argued that delinquency might arise where there is a disassociation between culturally-defined aspirations and 'socially structured means' of achieving these goals (Merton, 1938, p.674). In Merton's view, large sections of the American population found themselves unable to fulfil their aspirations through conventional, legitimate means. Accordingly, the disjunction between means and goals led to a propensity for deviation to emerge (Lilly et al., 2011; Deuchar, 2013).

Those associated with the Chicago School of Criminology attempted, through ethnographic research approaches, to learn more about why young people would become 'deviant' (Lilly et al., 2011). For instance, Shaw and McKay (1942) argued that social disorganisation within cities, characterised by poverty, residential mobility and racial heterogeneity, often led to high levels of juvenile delinquency. Later still, Cohen (1955) identified the particular pressures associated with the presence of the 'American dream', and the difficulties that arose when members of deprived communities found themselves unable to achieve the goals associated with this through legitimate means. The compulsion to draw on criminal means in order to achieve the social and cultural goals projected by society was later illustrated by Whyte (1943), in his ethnographic account of the slum district of 'Cornerville' in Chicago. Whyte argued that, whilst society placed a high value upon social mobility, it was difficult for young men living in deprived communities like Cornerville to 'get on the ladder, even at the bottom rung' (ibid., p.273). The achievement of material possessions was therefore only possible through criminal means. More recently, Elijah Anderson's (1999) research into urban street life in Philadelphia highlights that the inclination to violence often emerges from the circumstances of life among the ghetto poor. Their lives are characterised by unemployment, the dominance of the drug trade and feelings of alienation and marginalisation, and the most profound casualties adopt a 'code of the street' – which amounts to a 'set of informal rules' that direct all of their interpersonal public behaviour, particularly violence' (Anderson, 1999: 33; see also Deuchar, 2013).

In the UK, similar processes have been at work, to varying degrees (See Pitts, 2008, 2012). Lack of investment, policing of immigrant and poor communities, marginalisation, 'punitive welfarism', and privatisation (often in part) of even the most basic of services and facilities, have seen gangs become an embedded feature in certain communities (See Harding, 2014; Pitts, 2008). These gangs may act as a source of protection, respect, status, and means of social mobility, as well as, in some cases, providing access to economic gains through participation in illegal markets. The growth of illegitimate markets in such communities arguably helps some sections of the population – relegated to the economic scrapheap – to once again re-engage and participate in wider society, for example by purchasing branded clothing, cars and luxury goods, having a social life beyond the community's boundaries, and even being able to better support families and extended family networks (Anderson, 1999; Holligan, 2013; Moore, 1991; Wacquant, 2000, 2001, 2010). For many, gangs are seen as a means to live, not just to survive.

Administrative criminology and gangs

While cultural criminology stresses the need to address those more deeply-embedded issues that create the circumstances from which gangs emerge, administrative criminology seeks to combat and intervene in problematic gang activity, usually by placing particular focus on crimes committed. Gang definitions and typologies are generally used as a tool for gang suppression and dismantlement. They capture the evolving nature of gangs, from the somewhat delinquent yet boisterous nature of earlier gangs, to the criminal-intent gangs we see in the contemporary, globalised era. The shift from seeing gangs as boisterous youth groups to criminal outfits is epitomised in an early definition by Thrasher (1927), and a more contemporary definition from Miller (1982). Thrasher states:

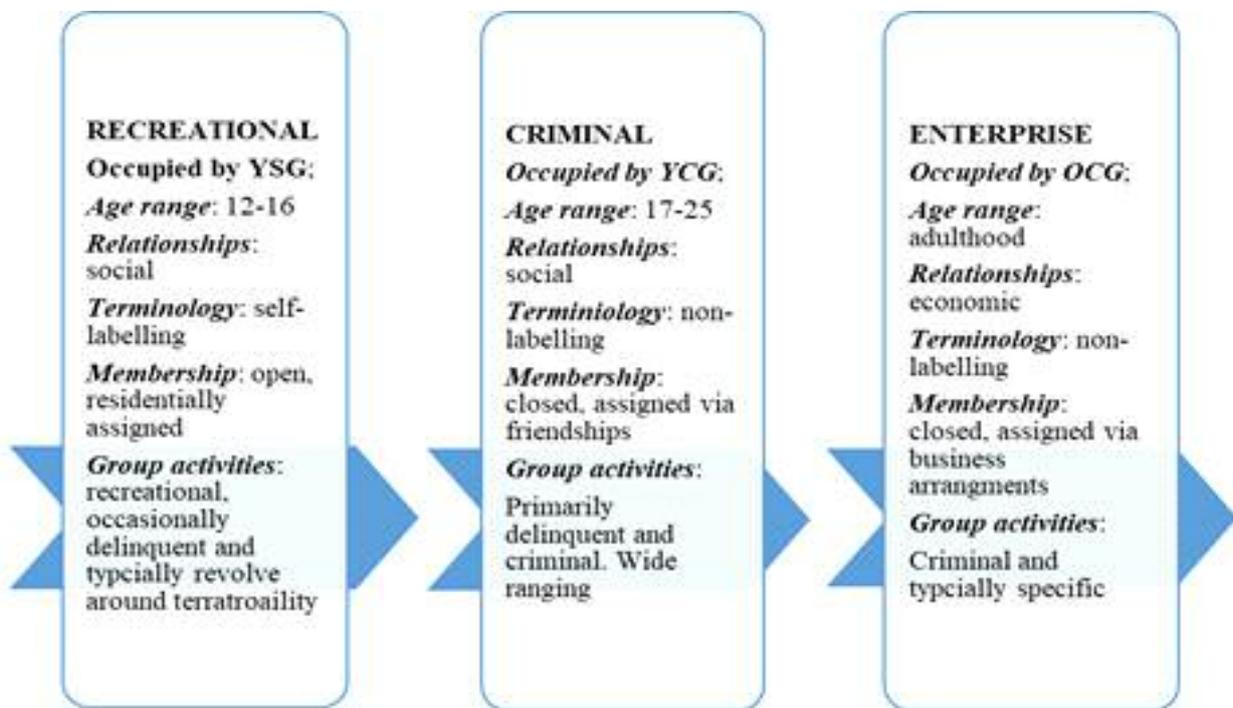
[gangs are] interstitial groups formed spontaneously and integrated through conflict... characterized by ... [interaction], milling, movement ... conflict, and planning ... collective behaviour is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory. (Thrasher, 1927, p.46)

While W. B. Miller (1982) defines gangs as:

‘a group of recurrently associating individuals with identifiable leadership and internal organisation, identifying with or claiming control over territory ... and engaging either individually or collectively in violent [and] illegal behaviour. (Miller, cited in Pitts, 2007, p.10)

Over time, gang research gradually became intertwined with ‘drug-talk’ (See McLean, 2018). Gangs and drugs were increasingly seen to go hand in hand, as such gang research would gradually be used as a key element for fighting the ‘war on drugs’ (See Pitts, 2008). In the UK context, McLean (2018) draws on the work of a number of prominent scholars, such as Densley (2013), Hallsworth and Young (2006) and Pitts (2008), to present a hybrid model to better reflect the evolving nature of the gang along a shifting continuum, as Figure I (below) illustrates.

Figure I: An evolving gang model



Self-nominated gang members are placed under the umbrella term, Young Street Gang (YSG), which describes 'delinquent' peer groups who often refer to themselves, or the group as a whole, as gang members. They are recreational groups who are typically tied to physical territory. YSGs can be split into two sub-units: the 'outer layer' and the 'core'. The outer layer consists of local youths who affiliate with the core body, but only minimally engage in offending. They are the least 'embedded' (Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Piquero, 2013) and typically disengage from the group once they reach adulthood. The core body, by contrast, is the gang 'mainstay'. Although they constitute a minority, core members are the most embedded in the gang and tend to become the most prolific offenders (see also VRU 2011). They come to view crime as intrinsic to their own identity and thus might be deemed 'life-course persistent' offenders (e.g. Moffitt 1993; Farrington et al. 2006). Young Criminal Gangs (YCGs) typically emerge from the core body of YSGs and, while socially formed, criminality becomes an integral feature as the gang and is used for economic gain. Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) are adult criminals involved in organised crime and who typically illegally-govern or exert control over their sphere of activity. Whilst all of these groups are termed 'gangs', the way in which each type should be addressed differs considerably. For the purpose of this briefing, and to retain consistency, the above typologies will be applied.

Nuanced factors leading to gang membership and culture

The factors that influence people to form, join and stay in gangs vary greatly. Often, they depend on the type of gangs that people have the opportunity to be affiliated. Furthermore, the factors influencing female gang membership are often quite different (Deuchar et al., 2018). Studies by Batchelor (2012) and Thornberry et al, (2013) revealed that while males tend to join gangs out of a desire for kinship, thrill-seeking or peer status, females are more likely to join due to peer and partner relationships. Thus, attraction to gang culture cannot be discussed as though it were a cohesive phenomenon. In this section, the factors leading to gang membership and culture will be discussed largely within the context of young men and in relation to the three gang typologies outlined above.

YSGs tend to comprise young adolescent males, primarily from what could be called traditionally working-class communities. Members usually congregate in public space. YSGs tend to comprise two units: the 'core body' and 'loose associates'. The reasons for joining, and factors influencing attraction to the gang, differ slightly according to which unit individuals align themselves to, particularly as core offenders tend to progress towards other gang typologies as they age, mature and acquire various resources. Ultimately, YSGs are recreational youth groups who come together to socialise with peers. These peers are usually of similar age and from the local neighbourhood. With shared backgrounds, history and narratives, and often a collective experience of a range of adverse childhood experiences, they come together as a means of searching for a surrogate family and to project their potential vulnerability into acts of aggression and violence (Deuchar, 2009). In 1973, the pioneering ethnographic study by James Patrick, conducted in Glasgow, illustrated the way in which violence by groups of young men often centred on street-oriented territorial disputes and was motivated by a desire for status and identity (Patrick, 1973).

In the contemporary period, research has also illustrated the way in which young people in inner-city communities in the UK are often intensely aware of subjective territorial boundaries that inhibit social interaction and mobility (Kintrea et al., 2011; Deuchar, 2009, 2013). This form of 'hyper place attachment' is driven by a lack of opportunities for employment, social stigmatisation and oppression (Kintrea et al., 2011, p.68). For members of YSGs, a key motivation for violence is the desire to protect physical territory from perceived enemies (Kintrea et al., 2011; Deuchar, 2013). YSG members in British contexts are thus primarily motivated to engage in solidarity, and with attachment to and defence of local territories via street violence as a means of achieving a sense of empowerment, excitement and status, and to compensate for social inequality and a range of adverse childhood experiences (Deuchar, 2009). These gangs are not inherently criminal, but rather are loose recreation-based peer groups, formed around shared identities, common interests and shared territorial space.

YSGs generally consist of two units:

- Core offenders who tend to continue offending in later years, whether in gang format or not.
- Associated individuals who affiliate with the gang for a variety of reasons, but whose offending behaviour is restricted to territorial violence and is short-lived.

When examining the attraction of gang culture, it is important to distinguish between these units and analyse both independently. For associate members, the gang is often a context for building a short-term sense of status, identity and bonding social capital (Deuchar, 2009). However, some core members become motivated by financial gain and progress to membership of YCGs.

Unlike YSGs, members of YCGs do not self-identify as 'gangs', but rather distance themselves from labels which imply territorial restraints, origins and/or restrictions. By the YCG stage, the imperative of earning and creating 'street capital' starts to wane, or is at least moderated to be generated in other ways. Instead, interpersonal relationships that bring benefit and advancement are pursued (McLean et al., 2018). The need to avoid detection, build a criminal reputation, cultivate and seize criminal opportunities, and be business-astute, necessitates such decisions and, in turn, influences overall group behaviour and criminal outcomes. YCGs are predominantly engaged in bulk-buying and wholesale supply of illegal drugs, yet, in an effort to reduce risk, they also begin to diversify their business and 'spread their wings' into other criminal ventures (McLean et al., 2018).

Maturity, external threats (for example from rivals or police), financial commitments, and social changes – particularly within an era of welfare retrenchment – are all factors influencing engagement in YCGs. As well as retaining extensive access to criminal networks via criminal family ties or peer groups, the transitioning of YCG members towards the edges of organised crime is itself aided by the processes of globalisation. These allow members to access previously inaccessible markets and commodities, as well as to gain previously inaccessible knowledge. Criminal activities often became justified via criminal learning, legal cynicism and group acceptance of criminality as a means to an end or a better life. Yet members of YCGs remain non-hierarchical, with no clear leadership or distinct division of labour and no overall focus on governance (Densley, 2013), although such traits may emerge as the gang continues to evolve in complexity. YCGs, in many ways, capture Yablonsky's (1967) notion of the delinquent gang as a 'near group', situated between fluid gatherings of youths and those more deliberately structured groups that perceive gang membership as a means to achieving long-term monetary goals.

For those young men who, upon maturing to adulthood, progress from YCGs to OCGs, territory is ultimately viewed as abstract, offering endless opportunity for expansion of their authority into governance. Members become recognised as 'business men' on the estates in which they are based, and these adult men change their focus to 'managing' business and keeping it 'under the radar', utilising affirmative sanctions such as favouring and gifting, or negative sanctions such as bribing or coercion, to achieve their goals. Indeed, for members of OCGs, drug dealing proper tends to be the primary modus operandi (Densley et al., 2018) and members are attracted to the lifestyle due to economic motivations and the ability to gain power and financial ascendancy through governing the drugs market. Embeddedness within these criminal networks is also viewed as a means of progression into other criminal activities, including armed robbery, fraud and debt collection. Versatility in crime is attributed to a combination of factors, including new associations, a growing criminal reputation, experimentation, boredom, and the fact that with physical and intellectual maturity comes the ability to compete with and potentially displace established criminals and criminal groupings (Densley et al., 2018). However, given the ascendancy of drug dealing within the business strategies of UK-based OCGs, it is important to consider the ways in which gang evolution processes have coincided with a growth in availability of, and demand for, illicit substances.

Section 3: Operating in illicit markets

Drug markets

Globally, the illegal drugs trade is now a multibillion-dollar industry (Gootenberg, 2007, 2011). Aided significantly by complex global processes, the accessibility and demand for illegal drugs have expanded at an unprecedented rate, from which Britain is not immune. The growth of the UK illegal drug market (IDM) has coincided with voids opening up as a result of a decline in legitimate markets, following sudden, largescale deindustrialisation and the inadequate provision of viable alternatives for many traditionally working-class populations (Holligan 2013; Moore, 2001; Roger, 2008; Wacquant, 2000, 2001). It is not that poverty necessarily leads to the growth of illegal markets, but rather that inadequate replacement of work or tradable commodities with 'worthwhile', 'legitimate' or 'accessible' opportunities can increase the likelihood that drugs, along with other illegal goods, will be sold as a tradable commodity (Levitt and Dubner, 2006; Levitt and Venkatesh, 2000; Venkatesh, 2008).

The proliferation of gangs is a perceived consequence of this process, as they seek to profit from peddling (also see Anderson, 1999; Levnett and Dubner, 2005; Miller, 2000; Venkatesh 2008). With market diversification in supply and demand, and enhanced levels of competition and globalisation, distribution methods have evolved. The '24-hour, dial-a-deal delivery to your front door' culture that has emerged means that there are new points of entry into the market and new value is given to telephone databases of users, whereby customers are accessed via phones and other devices used to reach wide and largely unknown audiences, rather than the networked knowledge of domestic markets (Densley, 2013). Product diversification also plays a part. For example, there is an increased demand for Anabolic Androgen Steroids (AAS), thanks to the huge rise of interest in bodybuilding and body image, and lower levels of police enforcement around these drugs compared to other substances such as heroin (Densley et al., 2018).

The UK Government has responded with a range of initiatives and strategies aimed at reducing drug supply and resulting gang activity. Similarly, in Scotland, the Scottish Government (2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2013, 2015, 2016) has introduced numerous initiatives and publications aimed at tackling Scotland's drug/gang problem. The NCA (2013) and Scottish Government (2013, 2018) both highlight that gang activity and drug dealing tend to be most prevalent in the country's most economically disadvantaged communities. Thus, while far from concrete, it can be assumed that there is possible correlation between both given consistencies throughout the country.

Technological advances, greater accessibilities to networks, the rise of the digital market, and improvements in transport and communication, have all contributed to a diversification of drug dealers and users. Gangs have proved remarkably successful in exploiting such commodities and circumstances. Gangs are excellent facilitators for outsourcing – particularly given wide membership, networks and traditional ties to 'owning turf' or designated territories for gang operations. In previous decades, gangs acted much like the shop floor for drug sales – the point at which customers could purchase the commodity. However, as gangs have become more organised, so too have their levels of involvement in supply chains. This has given rise to a new phenomenon known as 'county lines', where gangs operate at every level of the supply chain, whilst simultaneously distancing themselves from the products they sell (McLean et al., forthcoming; Robinson et al., 2018).

‘Going country’

The diversification and evolving nature of the drug economy, the dealer and the gang member is arguably nowhere better displayed than in this phenomenon of ‘county lines’. This is a term used to describe a growing practice whereby organised crime groups (OCGs), involved in illegal drug distribution and operating out of major cities (e.g. London, Liverpool, Glasgow) extend their supply lines to rural locations across Britain. It has arisen due to the intense competition that OCGs now face, coupled with market saturation and demand shortages within traditional city ‘turf’. In search of new pastures, OCGs travel to remote rural communities, market towns and coastal locations to access new markets, avoid competition and operate in areas that have a significantly smaller police presence (Robinson et al., 2018). Those involved refer to the process as ‘going cunch’ (country) or ‘OT’ (‘out there’). However, this practice has also given rise to new forms of exploitation (Robinson et al., 2018).

While core OCG members remain in the city, they prefer to send out youths, some as young as 12 years old, to act as hired ‘runners’, ‘newbies’ or ‘recruits’, to ‘go OT’ and sell illicit drugs on their behalf. Supplies, weapons, accommodation, and other forms of support are sent up the line to help ‘recruits’ establish a foothold and become embedded within the distant communities. Youths acting as dealers are by no means the only group to be exploited in doing the OCG’s bidding; drug users, indebted individuals, single female-headed households and other vulnerable groups can also be involved. Some rent out their homes as drug ‘storage units’, whilst others even have their homes taken over as a base of operations from which dealers exchange drugs with customers. The latter is a practice known as ‘cuckooing’. There is even evidence that indebted individuals can have their possessions seized and auctioned, whilst others are ‘put out to work’ in street prostitution (See Densley et al., 2018). It is not surprising that tackling county lines has now become a national priority, with the UK Government having recently launched a new, £3.6m National County Lines Coordination Centre, run by experts from the National Crime Agency. The Centre aims to identify threat levels, focus resources, target the most serious offenders, and work in alliance with partners in welfare, health and education (see Robinson et al., 2018).

Evolution of crime

Whilst the country’s illegal drugs trade has proved a particularly lucrative sphere of activity in which gangs have excelled, it is by no means the only area in which gangs seek to ply their trade for profitable gain. Densley et al. (2018), Harding et al. (2018) and McLean et al. (2018) all highlight that whilst gang activity in Britain, at all levels, tends to be primarily focused on the illegal drugs market, to varying degrees, there is often an overlap with other areas of activity, including money laundering, tax evasion, robbery, or the sex trade. In addition, the activities in which gangs engage tend to relate to age, maturity, experience, and access to the relevant criminal networks and knowledge. Whilst younger gang typologies primarily engage in violence, anti-social behaviour and occasionally the social supply of drugs, they may also engage in theft and robbery. These latter activities, carried out for financial gain and profit, are also largely sporadic and individually motivated, although carried out in gang formation. However, criminal gangs are more likely to engage in all kinds of criminal activity, in order to test what is successful and what is not. Of the three typologies, OCGs are the most likely to adopt a more professional approach to crime and they typically specialise in one or two crime types. They also typically blur the legal and illegal spheres of business. In addition, OCGs often govern the activities of others, including some law-abiding citizens, as well as criminals, who operate or act within their sphere of influence. Established OCGs often play the role of middlemen in passing on ‘jobs’ to other criminal outfits and sorting out disputes and tensions for a percentage of the profit. These, and other gang-related activities, not only relate to the positioning of members within the physical environment, but also in the digital one.

Section 4: Gangs, territory and social media

Gangs and physical territory

Gangs have traditionally shared a strong bond with territory, whether they are young peer groups, criminal gangs or organised crime groups. It is primarily the earlier formations that share the greatest direct relationship with physical turf. Tension between turfs is often referred to as 'postcode wars', whereby individuals within certain areas – although not necessarily different postcodes – bond together against those in neighbouring areas and fight with one another. Yet, in their early formation, criminal gangs will also share strong relationships to turf. While they may associate, form new relationships and no longer be confined to the traditional turf, nonetheless strong ties, relationships, long-established friendships and a sense of 'knowing the area and people' mean that fledgling criminal gangs will often start out by operating within their own geographical areas. These gangs often blur the physical/spatial sphere, becoming more spatial as they progress. In time, a need for a greater sense of stability, reduced risk and embodied professionalism emerges, and, as gangs become more criminally-oriented, they begin to expand their geographical spread and also recognise the need to focus less on physical territory and more on longer-term business ambitions.

As young men begin to transition into OCGs, there comes a need for taking fewer risks, for greater stability, enhanced professionalism, and a corresponding shift in violent street activity towards more subtle forms of business-oriented practices, including fraud and money laundering, as well as drug dealing. However, violence is still occasionally required as a means of instilling fear and a sense of retribution among rival, criminally-oriented businessmen (Harding et al., 2018).

Gangs and social media

Greenfield (2014) suggests that the increasing permeation of social media into the daily lives of individuals plays an important role in shaping people's activity and behaviour. Whilst online activity retains significant potential to enhance the quantity and quality of communication amongst people across the globe, it also raises some serious challenges, particularly in relation to policing. One of these challenges is the growing links between gang-related activity in the virtual world and gang-related activity in the real world. Although gang-related activity long predates the advent of social media, international research has found that spikes in offline gang-related activity are increasingly linked to online activity (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2018; Johnson & Schell-Busey, 2016). The Internet appears to generate new conflicts, whilst also intensifying old ones (see Moule et al., 2016).

Data from surveys, interviews and web content analyses confirm that gangs are online and regularly use social media as a tool for encouraging gang activity (King, Walpole & Lamon, 2007; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011, 2012; Van Hellemon, 2012; Knox, 2011; Morselli & Décary-Héту, 2013; Sela-Shayovitz, 2012; Pyrooz et al., 2015). Gang members use the Internet for a variety of reasons. Younger typologies, such as YSGs and YCGs, typically use social media to make incendiary remarks about rivals, to incite challenges, recruit, flaunt illegal commodities such as drugs or weapons, upload fight videos, watch gang-related music videos, and to generally promote gang culture (Décary-Héту & Morselli, 2011; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Hanser, 2011; O'Deane, 2011; Patton et al., 2013; Womer & Bunker 2010). OCGs also use the Internet to extend their criminal networks and activities, and even for recruitment or new ventures. However, unlike YSGs and YCGs, OCGs are less likely to use social media platforms to 'slag off' or 'disrespect' rival outfits. Rather, social media is used almost exclusively for developing and improving gang business (see Moule et al., 2014).

Exactly how social media is used to achieve such ends depends on gang types, objectives and the types of criminal activity undertaken. Yet, social media has altered the way in which gang members perceive themselves and acquire and maintain membership, and their modes of operating, both online and in the real world. Prensky (2001) suggests that members of younger gangs are 'digital natives', who ultimately live their physical lives online in virtual space. This can include carrying out gang activity in real life, recording it and uploading the evidence for others to see. This digital activity can give gang members status. Thus, physical action is projected into the online community, where gang-related actions are viewed and commented upon, and status is gained.

Gang membership has traditionally been about status acquisition amongst peers. The Internet allows this to happen much more widely and rapidly. Yet, the 'flip side' of such attention is that there is enhanced opportunity for rivals to 'dis' members' activities and to share 'real beatings', for example physical attacks of rivals via online platforms. Such actions add to vicarious victimisation, and retaliation and retribution will often be sought, resulting in escalating tensions. For gangs that are more criminally inclined, the Internet and advances in digital technology have enabled the continual monitoring of partners, activities and recruits. Internet and mobile phone apps, such as GPS, Snapchat and FaceTime, allow those higher up the criminal echelons to monitor the activities and movements of those who work on their behalf. 'County lines' is an example of this, whereby youths selling drugs in distant locations can be monitored, drugs can be provided on a 24-hour dial service, and goods and products can even be tracked through GPS, with estimated arrival times provided for customers (Densley & Stogarrd, 2017).

With such a huge growth industry in relation to gang culture, the question that remains is how best to prevent offending and reoffending, and encourage gang disengagement and desistance.

Section 5: Prevention, exit strategies and desistance

Prevention

Prevention is always the best cure, but the problem with prevention is that it can be hard to measure, given that the prevented action has never occurred. One of the issues in preventing gang activity is agreeing what is and what is not a gang. This has always proven difficult, and it influences subsequent intervention methods. There is an increasing recognition that gang membership and associated violence and criminality often result from social inequality and lack of opportunity. Research suggests that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Felliti et al., 1998) also play a role. The combined impact of childhood abuse, neglect and household dysfunction can increase the likelihood of later participation in gang-related activity, violence and crime. In terms of prevention, it has been argued that it is important not only to prevent ACEs from occurring in the first place – through the delivery of multi-agency, inter-professional support for supporting children and young people – but also to reduce their negative impact by focusing on trauma-informed compassionate intervention (Deuchar, 2018).

Exiting the gang and desistance

While a large body of research addresses why youth and young adults join gangs, there have been fewer studies into why and how individuals leave gangs. Examining the reasons for disengaging from gangs, and the processes by which this occurs, is important, because gang disengagement greatly reduces the chances of involvement in crime (Gordon et al., 2004; Melde & Esbensen, 2013; Sweeten et al., 2013). The potential for victimisation is also greatly reduced after leaving a gang (Peterson et al., 2004; Sweeten et al., 2013); however, individuals who retain some ties to their former gang are likely to have higher victimisation levels than those who cut all ties (Pyrooz et al., 2014). Within the nascent research on criminal desistance, researchers have begun to examine the process of gang disengagement, including the factors that hasten or hinder separation from a gang.

Some claims suggest that gang members often need to ‘get jumped out’ – whereby leaving members are assaulted by the wider group as recognition of their departure – to leave the gang as a result of the ‘blood in, blood out’ principle (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011, p.419; Decker et al., 2014, p.270). While this may be common in some parts of the world (such as the US), criminal desistance in the UK context is more often a gradual and ‘drifting’ process that rarely involves a seamless transition, and is usually conditional on a range of triggers, turning points and push/pull factors (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Decker et al., 2014; Deuchar, 2018).

For gang members, pull factors tend to include taking on new responsibilities, such as getting a job or having children, or perhaps being encouraged by significant influential others to leave the gang. Conversely, push factors include witnessing violent incidents or fatalities, becoming a victim of violence, or simply becoming tired of the lifestyle (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Decker et al., 2014; Carson & Esbensen 2016; Deuchar, 2018). Maruna and Farrall (2004) also differentiate between primary and secondary desistance. Whilst the former is seen to be characterised by a temporary lull in criminal activity, the latter is viewed as more of a long-term process which results in a change of personal identity that is conducive to a more conventional lifestyle (Deuchar, 2018).

A centrally recognised element in the process of desistance is also the need for the ‘knifing off’ of offenders from their immediate environment, through introducing them to new institutional structures and routines (Laub and Sampson, 2003, p.145). Further, some have argued that desistance is best understood within the context of supportive human relationships (McNeill, 2004; McNeill & Maruna, 2008). Maruna (2001) also highlights that the process of desisting from crime is often accompanied by an impulse towards generative

care-giving, where offenders commit to 'making good' by drawing on a 'damaged past' and using it to protect the future interests of others (McNeill, 2004, p.432; see also Deuchar, 2018). Ultimately, it is recognised that intervention strategies designed to enable gang members to desist may need to be designed in such a way that supports and complements the natural processes and 'hooks for change' that begin to push and pull them away from the lifestyle.

Case study: Community Initiative to Reduce Violence in Scotland

In terms of the role of policing in Scotland, the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (SVRU) has been instrumental in promoting a public health approach to tackling gang-related violence. In 2008, the SVRU established the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV). Based on similar models in Boston, Chicago and Cincinnati, the CIRV created a partnership between police, social services, education, housing and community safety services, and local communities, to deliver the clear message that 'the violence must stop' (VRU 2011; Deuchar 2013). This initiative was implemented in the east end and north of Glasgow, targeting approximately 1,000 young people (mainly young men aged 12-19), who were consistently on the police radar for their involvement in gang violence.

Young offenders attended 'call-in' sessions in Glasgow Sheriff Court and were literally warned that if they continued to involve themselves in violence, criminal justice repercussions would ensue. Alongside the message of enforcement was a softer message of empathy and the offer of support. Former offenders were asked to speak to young people about their own experiences of making positive changes in their lives, and the mothers of offenders appealed to gang members directly to make alternative life choices. These sessions ended with messages of hope, where a range of agencies aligned with the CIRV highlighted the services and programmes available to any young men who agreed to change their lifestyles (Deuchar, 2013; Deuchar & Weide, 2018).

The initiative thus drew upon a range of existing services in Glasgow, together with new programmes that had been tailor-made to meet the needs of the young people, some of whom benefited from targeted Scottish Government funding (VRU 2011; Deuchar 2013). During the period of implementation, just short of 500 young offenders (predominantly young men) participated in ten 'call-in' sessions, and many went on to engage with follow-on services run by a range of statutory, voluntary and third-sector agencies. As a result, recorded levels of gang-related violence significantly decreased across targeted areas of Glasgow (VRU, 2011).

Multi-pronged approaches for prevention, diversion and deterrence

Given the evidence outlined in this paper about gang evolution and gang typologies, it is clear that there needs to be a multi-pronged approach to targeting members of YCGs and OCGs, alongside supportive, desistance-centred interventions that prevent future criminalisation for minor offenders and members of YSGs (Densley et al., 2018). By focusing on neighbourhoods with high numbers of reported incidents of young men engaging in street-level group offending networks and territorial violence, problem-oriented, community-centred policing approaches focusing on inter-agency working will work best. Mentoring interventions will generally focus on educating these individuals about the impact of violence and avaricious (albeit low-level) crime, while also actively diverting them from the allure of the drug market as a by-product of gang evolution and criminal capital (Densley et al., 2018).

Conversely, in areas where offending behaviour has evolved into the social supply of drugs, policing interventions may need to focus more on deterring young men from becoming ever more deeply immersed in organised crime, through working with local partners and preventing drug trading from growing into enterprise and governance (Densley, 2013). Finally, where patterns of gang activity have evidently become more organised and there are increased incidents of drug dealing proper alongside (in some cases) crimes including money laundering or online fraud, this may indicate an increased presence of OCGs. In these circumstances, the emphasis will shift to deterring OCG activity by supporting private, public and third sector organisations to protect themselves and one another, by detecting and prosecuting those involved in organised crime (Densley et al., 2018).

Ultimately, whatever phase in the evolution stage gangs have reached, and whatever strategies police agencies initiate, a multi-agency approach focused on adopting a public health approach to the prevention of offending and reoffending needs to be prioritised. Across the UK, agencies have begun to initiate conversations about 'healing' and how to show compassion and concern not only for victims but also for perpetrators caught up in a cycle of trauma, crisis and criminality (Anderson, 2017; Deuchar, 2018). Policing of gangs, and the violence and criminality they initiate, is therefore not only contingent on enforcement, but on addressing the root causes, in partnership with others, and supporting desistance through a focus on empathy and compassion.

Section 6: Conclusion

This briefing document has provided an interdisciplinary overview of the causes and evolving nature of gang culture and serious violence in Britain. A typology of gangs has been put forward as a means of explaining the diverse nature of gangs in British communities and the implications for 21st-century policing.

The following questions summarise the tentative issues that police officers and practitioners from related professional contexts may wish to explore and discuss during the 'Understanding and Policing Gangs' conference:

1. How effective are current policies and strategies for policing gangs and preventing offending and reoffending associated with them?
2. What does a 'public health' approach to tackling gangs and violence actually look like?
3. What role does social media play in contemporary gang activity and how should policymakers and the police prepare for anticipated changes?
4. What predictions can be made in terms of how society might have changed by 2029, the impact this may have on further evolution of gang culture and the implications in terms of a ten-year strategy for policing and other cognate professions in relation to gang prevention and violence reduction?

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