

Reluctant Gangsters

Youth gangs and victimisation

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Overview



- Defining youth gangs and typologies of gang members
- Victims, perpetrators or somewhere in between?
- Youth Gangs in the UK – why here and why now?
- Criminal justice and/or welfarist /safeguarding approach to interventions.
- Treating the cause or treating the symptom?

Defining youth gangs



- Numerous definitions
- Gangs or youth subcultures/youth movements?
- Similarities/overlaps and differences
- one size fits all?
- The need for consistency - easy to under/over estimate extent of gang involved young people
- Clear need for criminal justice agencies to separate 'criminal' youth gangs from other groups

Gang Definitions - Correction or Appreciation?



- Matza (1969) believes that it is possible to divide gang studies/definitions into:
- Those that are designed to enable us to correct or eradicate the gang phenomenon *AND*
- Those which aim to help us understand the conditions for the emergence, the meaning and the social significance of the youth gang
- Whereas the former tend to abstract the gang from its social context, the latter endeavour to understand the interplay between the gang and its social context

Gang definitions – Appreciative approach



Thrasher (1927)

‘Groups of rowdy unsupervised, youths in conflict with one another. An ‘Interstitial’ phenomenon’ (between childhood and adulthood/between the zone of transition and the socio-economic-cultural mainstream (continuum)). A product of social disorganisation but also a ‘haven in a heartless world’.

- Too Broad?

Gang definitions - Correctional approach



- The Chicago Municipal Criminal Code describes the gang as:
- *Any ongoing organisation, association or group of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, having as one of its substantial activities the commission of criminal gang activity, and whose ... members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal gang activity.'*

Differentiation: Hallsworth & Young's Three Point Typology of Urban Collectivities



- **Peer Group:** A small, unorganised, transient grouping occupying the same space with a common history. Crime is not integral to their self definition
- **Gang:** A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is integral to the group's identity
- **Organised Criminal Group:** Members are professionally involved in crime for personal gain operating almost exclusively in the 'grey' or illegal marketplace.

Contemporary (Correctional) Gang Studies consist of:



- Studies of behavioural characteristics of, usually apprehended, gang members to identify the 'risk factors' associated with gang involvement and to facilitate early intervention.
- Longitudinal studies designed to establish the life events and personal characteristics which presage gang involvement
- Studies of the frequency and nature of offending
- Self-report studies aimed to establish the extent of gang involvement in particular populations or locales.
- Anthropological studies of the signs and symbols, the iconography, and rituals of gang membership, designed to enable early recognition and intervention

Victims, perpetrators or somewhere in between? Pitts' Gang typology



- A group composed **mostly** of **boys** but with some girls
- The group (***Gang, Fam, Crew, Brerrs, Mandem, Boys***) has a **shared name** or designation and those involved are recognised and recognise themselves as affiliates
- They **control** drug-dealing, neighbourhood and/or school/college **territory**

Victims, perpetrators or somewhere in between? Pitts' Gang typology (cont'd)



- The group has structure and role differentiation: ***Faces, Elders, Youngers (aka Soldiers), Shotters, Tinys.*** ***Reluctant members and wannabees***
- **Crime** (**street robbery /drug dealing**) is central
- **Violence**, (sometimes using weapons) to achieve ***Revenue, Respect*** and/or ***Revenge***
- They are in **conflict** with other named groups
- They have been around for **between 5 & 8 years**

Victims, perpetrators or somewhere in between?



- What about protection?
- *They're crouched up in the corner crying cos they brought the gun out to protect themselves and they've been challenged so they've pulled the trigger. They haven't wanted to pull the trigger... (Christopher)*

Youth Gangs in the UK – why here and why now?



- Crime like most behaviour does not occur in a vacuum but in a context; i.e. socio economic context. Since the 1980s:
- Poverty and inequality have grown phenomenally as a result of labour market reorganisation and welfare retrenchment.
- Youth labour market (16-25's) shrinks by approx 40%
- Concentration of most disadvantaged groups in poorest neighbourhoods
- Neighbourhood destabilisation –weakening kinship and friendship ties and established mechanisms of informal social control and social support
- Retrenchment of the welfare arm of the state and the simultaneous strengthening of its punitive arm (*Wacquant, 2001*).

Why here and why now?



- **Status frustration** - 'With the welfare state and mass education spreading a **'mythology of opportunity'** and the mass media broadcasting a message of generalised wealth and lifestyles to match, the sense of frustration and failure on the part of those sizeable numbers of people left behind could only increase.' (Lea & Young, 1992)
- Mass consumption replaces individual identities in a situation where lower class young people become 'flawed consumers because they are unable to participate fully in 'market society'.
- Who you are is not defined by what you do but rather what you own.

Criminal justice and/or welfarist /safeguarding approach to interventions.



- Despite rhetoric on dealing with causes of (youth) crime, successive governments have adopted a *punitive populist* response to and gang associated crime in particular.
- Increase in use of Joint Enterprise law
- Criminal justice response is seen as a way of reducing crime and victimisation
- Pathologisation of the gang member and his/her group
- Much less emphasis and resources focussed on preventing gang involvement or dealing with the causes

Treating the cause or treating the symptom? *Pathological individuals or a pathological State?*



- Whilst it is widely accepted that individuals have free will and exercise choice when committing crime, and biology may also be a factor, socio-economic causes have been sidestepped.
- Therefore when trying to understand what gangs are, why they exist, why young people get involved in gangs, and just as importantly, how to prevent and respond to (victims and perpetrators of) gang crime and violence, we should not forget to factor in the:

'the inherent dissonance between capitalism's heady and seductive cultural aspirations and its structured socio-economic reality of unequal opportunities, which engendered an anomic and therefore criminogenic cultural climate.' (Hall and Mclean, 2009)