Working with Gang Culture

Report of a Centre for Social Policy Seminar

Held at Somerset House, London, 13th February 2019

Introduction

There is widespread concern in the media about the what is termed 'gang culture' in British cities and its association with murders of young people and links with organised crime. The common perception is of young black males maintaining territorial control of the drugs market and killing rivals with knives and guns to protect their trade.

The seminar was convened to analyse this situation by:

i. ascertaining an accurate picture of the problems specific to gang culture in London and elsewhere
ii. investigating the causes of the problem
iii. hearing how government departments, local authorities and charities are tackling the problem
iv. exploring the dilemmas and achievements of this work
v. identifying the important organisations and projects working in these areas and learning from the experience of other cities and countries.

The discussion was led by Sherrylyn Peck, Andrew Whittaker and Andrew Gunter and was chaired by John Diamond.

The portrayed context of gang culture

A preliminary scrutiny of press reports on gang behaviour portrays a situation whereby young black males in inner city areas are terrorising neighbourhoods by committing serious crimes, such as mugging, aggravated burglaries and drug dealing, and killing rivals who stand in their way. Thus, the logical response is to 'get tough' by applying policies such as stop and search, metal detectors in schools and lengthy prison sentences for those convicted.

But this picture is not only statistically suspect - only a small proportion of young black males behave this way - but is also descriptive rather than analytic. Hence, we need to know the true extent of the problem and search its causes. These begin with immigration from the West Indies after the Windrush arrival in the late 1950s and the way this was managed and received by the host population. It has led several generations later to large numbers of black youths living in deprived urban areas where services, especially for youth and leisure, have been decimated. Their situation is exacerbated by the increased likelihood of being brought up in families with limited male role models but in a culture that praises masculinity, being rejected early on by the education system and experiencing bullying, racism, discrimination and heavy-handed treatment from the police and courts. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that for some of these youngsters at a certain time in their lives, gangs provide a supportive peer group, status in the community, 'successful' role models and, if indulging in criminal activities, opportunities to earn money to acquire consumer desirables. It is reported that organised criminal groups deliberately recruit disaffected or vulnerable children (sometimes very young children) to carry out routine tasks such as running county lines drug supplies.

While the effects of this toxic environment may be superficially acknowledged, a deeper explanation is required to explain why some young people and not others behave like this despite being exposed to the same pressures. Here, the concepts of resilience, the balance between risk and protective factors and, perhaps less significant, opportunity and life choice are helpful. Understanding the transition to adulthood and the developmental stages and changing sense of self associated with it is also fruitful and may explain why boys seem to face more difficulties than girls and why some older males seem stuck in an adolescent phase. A broader view also emphasises that for angry and unhappy boys, gang membership and criminal activity are a perfectly logical life style choice and demonising it or castigating those involved as psychologically disturbed misses this point.

The dilemma of an element of truth within a broader untruth

Even though 'popular' explanations of gang culture might be limited, it is dangerous to be complacent. Sociologists often exaggerate the significance of structural factors, important as these are, just as psychologists are more comfortable with individualistic interpretations. Structural forces clearly shape the rates, trends and locations of crimes, and studies of individuals reveal high rates of mental health issues and learning difficulties. In Andrew Whittaker's research, 60% of the young people studied had an anxiety or PTS disorder and a third had attempted suicide.

Similarly, the evidence on murders cannot be denied: a third of the victims of the 119 homicides in London in 2018 were aged 16 to 24. Of these, 30 were stabbed, nine were shot, two died in attacks involving a knife and a gun, and one died in a fall. Many of these victims were black and gangs and drug dealing were often portrayed as the main reason for this. Anthony Gunter noted that his research examining contemporary 'Road Life' of young people in London and England's other urban centres shows that the majority of serious violent youth homicides are neither gang nor drug related but are linked to territoriality and petty 'beefs' (disputes) that escalate out of hand due to masculinist 'code of street' values and behaviours. Many of the others resulted from domestic violence and relationship tensions. Andrew's comparison of changes in gang behaviour in Waltham Forest over the past decade identified growing 'county line' networks, greater significance accorded to territory and financial gain and more involvement of girls. There was also more use of media technology, links with other criminal or terrorist organisations and 'cuckooing' whereby members' private accommodation is used as a hideaway for the gang's activities.

Each of those concerned about the situation will pick the evidence to suit their view of the causes of this phenomenon. Guardian readers will warm to structural explanations, Daily Mail fans will relish reports of black psychopaths while elected members and MPs will worry about the effect on local communities as they hear complaints from residents that the streets are unsafe and 'it never used to be like this'. The hope of achieving a political or public consensus on causes and remedies is, therefore, pretty low.

So, it would be foolish to deny the existence of serious and violent crime - especially as it affects localities - but the question is how much of a social threat is it and how significant is the role of gang culture?

The concept of gang

Discussions about urban gangs were a regular feature in the American sociological literature of the 1950s and 60s but their emphasis on deviance added a quite different dimension to the 'classic' 1927 account by Frederic Thrasher. More pejorative features were added to the perception in the 1990s with the racialisation and problematisation of the 'street gang', linked to Presidents Reagan's and Clinton's 'war on drugs' which was in reality a 'war' on Black urban America and helped create the country's current prison crisis. But in highlighting this, it is important to note that in the UK, the concept of street gangs and their prevalence are contested and the evidence base is partial as there have been very few recent gang studies. This is in contrast to the much larger number of youth subcultural and territorial investigations where, particularly significant for this discussion, gangs are a marginal issue in terms of their existence and impact.

The public perception of gangs in the UK, therefore, seems to have adopted the US definition without questioning its validity for the British context with the result that their alleged characteristics closely fit the stereotypes described above - mutual collective and individual support, ongoing relationships, a degree of permanence and some organisation with possibly elevated criminal activity. There are also often initiation rituals, a distinct name and symbols of membership or territorial power. Particularly important is recognition of the gang's existence by others.

But, again, there is a hazy boundary between gatherings of young people, such as those congregating in the park on a summer evening, and gangs. The former might show some gang characteristics but they are neither perceived nor labelled as such by insiders or outsiders. Similarly, the links between gangs and crime may be tenuous; for example Hells Angels appear threatening but are not excessively criminal. In other cases, groups like punks and rockers are highly visible and arouse anger from older people but are perceived as harmless followers of fashion rather than gang members. Likewise the functions of groups, gatherings and gangs vary, for example from providing a friendship network and leisure facilities to the operation of an alternative economy.

It is important to note that some gangs have none of these features. In the 1930s the Crazy Gang were a group of entertainers and the children's book *The Midnight Gang* by David Walliams described a group of children in hospital being given treats by a kind member of staff.

A key question, therefore, is that although serious crimes being are being committed by individuals perceived as or claiming to be gang members, is the extent of this phenomenon and the threat it poses to others exaggerated? Is it fuelled by public perceptions and media reports serving wider political agendas? Can it be considered as a moral panic rather than a major challenge to society?

The concept of moral panic

The concept of moral panic was developed in the 1960s by the sociologist Stanley Cohen, and later by Goode and Ben Yehuda, to explain the public responses to emerging youth cultures, such as mods and rockers. It has since been applied to other groups facing public opprobrium, such as communists, muslims, Travellers and paedophiles. Cohen defined it as 'a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to social values or interests'. Its main features are a focus on a matter of high public concern, public hostility

to those allegedly involved, consensus about the extent of the threat and volatility in that it eventually fades as other issues arise or problems are resolved or perceived differently, as happened when child prostitution became incorporated into child exploitation. It is also important that the perceived threat is disproportionate to the reality of an ordinary citizen being harmed.

Some observers say that moral panics are functional for capitalist societies in that they induce fear which promotes dependency, divides the workforce and diverts attention from the real threats to public wellbeing like globalisation, climate change and diminishing public services. But whatever the merits of this view, it does behove us to remain curious and keep asking who is constructing the definition, who is maintaining it, and for what purpose?

The issue of origins and maintenance is not just a question of the right-wing media highlighting gang and knife crime as an opportunity to advertise their policy of demonising the poor and emphasising individualistic explanations, as described by critics like Bywaters and Featherstone, but also of recognising the range of forces supporting this perspective. The Home Secretary has to comply with government policy, politicians dare not publicly acknowledge structural explanations as they imply government failure, the police are caught in the middle but anxious to prove their worth in times of cut backs, the press seek sensational headlines and research funders and academics buy into the system with the sorts of studies undertaken.

All of these features do seem to suggest a moral panic as defined in the traditional sense, but with underlying and enduring social problems of deprivation and discrimination that are always likely to erupt in a dramatic way. The complication is in this case is that these forces have been exacerbated by a downward spiral of escalating distrust. Responses to recent gang behaviours and killings have been largely counterproductive with too many knee-jerk and simplistic reactions. In addition, widespread stereotyping has gone unchallenged and heavy-handed actions have annoyed innocent people, leading to alienation from social agencies among whole communities. This has led to further negative manifestations affecting black men, such as high rates of school exclusions and imprisonment with this statistical over-representation seen as justifying individualistic explanations rather than as the outcome of policy decisions.

Responses to the problem

There is no shortage of initiatives to address the problems described and these operate at all levels from Whitehall, to the London's Mayor's Office, local authorities, charities and community level. Many encouraging examples were given.

Sherrylyn Peck described the activities of *Safer London* which works with those involved in gangs and people affected by their behaviour. It finds itself working in the contexts of deprivation and mistrust described and provides a range of services including empowerment, mentoring, gang exit, education, group work and help for young people. In some circumstances, it offers rehousing to provide safety by breaking harmful interaction patterns.

The London Borough of Waltham Forest followed up Andrew's research by reshaping its existing gang prevention programme and increasing its capacity to seize criminal assets under the Proceeds of Crime Act. The authority has a well-developed crime and disorder partnership to help young people involved in, or on the periphery of, crime - the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). This comprises professionals from children's, health, education,

police, probation, housing, early intervention and prevention services, youth offending and Victim Support teams. It is accompanied by a 'Think Family' approach that sees the family as the fundamental tool to help young people stay away from crime and enjoy a successful future. There is also a 'trauma-informed' service that offers a mental health assessment for young people who have been arrested or who are on the periphery of crime, although this has been challenged by the tendency for gangs to become more organised and involved in the drug trade, and the risk of adolescents being groomed to participate in illegal activities.

Anthony Gunter, in contrast, was less optimistic about the benefits of these approaches. He bemoaned the collapse in funding for community and youth services that succeed in engaging young people and establishing the trust essential for effective preventive and therapeutic work. Having worked as a youth worker and undertaken a number of studies in Waltham Forest looking at youth violence, including discussions with young people and other stakeholders, he found that problem of gangs to be racialised and unduly compounded. In his view, it is an issue largely 'constructed' by the police and some senior local government officers and, as such, his findings differ greatly from those of researchers like John Pitts and Andrew Whittaker.

In arguing this, he emphasised that there is nothing new in the crimes described or the fact that they are committed by young people, but the lack of facilities for youngsters alienated from families and schools means that gangs often fill a gap in their lives. It is wrong to see what is happening as totally abnormal as much of it is common adolescent behaviour. The problem is when this becomes toxic; hence, it is not the process *per se* that is harmful but the form it takes. This is why a combination of historical, cultural, environmental, service and individual factors have to be considered to construct the knowledge base necessary to inform policy and practice.

He continued by emphasising that racist stereotypes portray an image that what is happening is a 'black problem'. This produces fear among other people and increases the ghettoisation and social isolation of ethnic minorities. The reluctance of non-black people to get involved is sad because everyone can help in some way provided they are trained to go about it in the right way. The key is to offer practical help and show alternative life routes in a non-judgemental way, but without condoning criminal or anti-social behaviour.

Several other initiatives were described: mentoring programmes at Cookham Wood and Feltham YOIs, an arts project in Hackney working with and offering support to young offenders, the Shannon Trust doing similar work with a focus on literacy (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Shannon_Trust), User Voice (www.charityjob.co.uk/recruiter/user-voice/15621) which allows children to talk about their lives with reliability while feeling safe, noticed, respected and remembered and the Crib in Hackney which has built up valuable experience in radical community work with young offenders (https://hackneylocaloffer.co.uk/kb5/hackney/localoffer/service.page?id+I9ObdDHtm2c). Other relevant interventions are work by Professor Simon Hackett at Durham University with young men and their sexualised behaviour https://www.dur.ac.uk/sociology/staff/profile/mode=pdetail&id=752&sid=752&pdetail=20 828) and the programmes of St Giles with regard to county lines activity.

Nationally, the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (www.actiononviolence.org), founded in 2005 and initially led by a nurse, provides a model as it has had a marked effect on young

people's behaviour, especially in Glasgow which was affected by violent gangs at the turn of the century. Similarly, New York city has published details of how it reduced gang related deaths (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/03/nyregion/new-york-city-shootings-gang-violence.html).The recent American film *Resilience* was also recommended as offering useful messages about tackling violence https://kpjrfilms.co/resilience/about-the-film/.

Conclusions

It was obviously unrealistic to expect a two hour seminar to produce new findings or reveal issues that have not been extensively discussed but as the Centre for Social Policy fellows are a multi-professional group, there was a possibility that it might help take things forward by bringing together findings and recommendations from diverse sources.

The first message is the perennial issues of effectively coordinating services. The economic turndown has meant that each agency is protecting its budget and retreating to its narrow, often statutory, area of work. Working Together seems a distant chimera. But solutions to gang related crime have to incorporate inputs from all levels: government policies on welfare, health, housing, criminal justice and education; local practice in policing, schools and community services and ground level work by social workers, charities and volunteers. It is no use having high quality work in one part of the system when other parts are poor or delivering ineffective services. This is why there have to be some underpinning principles (so easily dismissed as idealistic) supporting the work, for example on rights, quality of life and safeguarding, along with the application of what works research evidence and skilled practice at the micro-level.

One practical issue confounding cooperation results from the recent GDPR legislation. Whatever its other merits, is hindering communication as it is based on the need for secrecy and requires that information sharing must include the subject. This requires a need for trust which, as the earlier discussion argued, is noticeably lacking in work with gangs.

A second conclusions is the danger of relying too heavily on charities and local initiatives. There are fundamental social problems behind the 'gang problem' and these can only be alleviated by government action. Politicians must not be allowed to get away with arguing that all is well because charities are active in the areas concerned. Charities have a vital role that needs to be properly funded but must not be expected to fulfil impossible tasks.

A third conclusion highlights the role of schools. They have a key role in that they are the interface between families and society. The 1988 Education Reform Act, the pressures from Ofsted to focus on academic achievement and attendance at the expense of creative subjects, the lack of intermediary provision between mainstream schools and pupil referral units and the dearth of safety valves - meaning that decisions are too much either/or - and the neglect of children's emotional and social development in teacher training all contribute to children's alienation and withdrawal. There is also an tendency to resolve problems by moving the child, for example when he or she is being bullied (why not move the perpetrator?), adding to disconnection from mainstream provision.

A fourth conclusion emphasises the logical aspects of the situation. Given the situations young people find themselves in, it is not surprising that many become involved in gang culture. Many aspects of their behaviour seem 'normal' for adolescents but have become toxic. Andrew's research shows that while adolescence is characterised by short-term experiments, gang membership requires a commitment that is difficult to reverse and young

people get trapped in the system. More studies are needed to examine the relationship between normality and toxicity and how one transforms into the other.

Fifthly, the police are in the midst of all this public concern and face something of a conflict between applying the law and maintaining community support. The evidence suggests they have not been all that successful in doing this, at least in many localities. But before condemning this shortcoming, the dilemma that affects all preventive work must be highlighted: do they use evidence to identify those likely to be breaking the law, even though this produces many false positives, or do they assume everybody is a suspect and scrutinise everyone? Both policies will rebound as those thought likely to be members of a criminal gang are likely to be black, while across the board approaches cause general annoyance. This tension affects many professions, such as customs officers and child protection workers, and there could be some benefit in coordinating learning on this dilemma from other contexts.

Sixthly, as the gang situation is fluid, continuous research and monitoring are essential. While police and local authority statistics chart changes, this has to be underpinned by qualitative studies that explore the motivations and meanings of behaviours, as these are most likely to lead to services that offer young people more positive choices and ways of escaping from toxic relationships with gangs. Anthony recommended that rather than ask, "what shall we do about youth violence?", we should ask, "what should we do about inequality and injustice"?, given the high rates of BAME young males in prison and excluded from school (2018 saw the proportion of inmates from such backgrounds in young offenders institutions exceed half - 51% - for the first time and Black Caribbean pupils are permanently excluded at nearly three times the rate of White British ones). The problems such as drug dealing and county lines should, therefore, be placed within the context of marginalised young men seeking out alternative school to work transitions (working 'on Road') and not as part of an imported and problematised gangs agenda.

Finally, as with any major social policy issue, there has to be an effective balance between state, local and voluntary activities. The state makes laws and allocates resources, the local agencies manage key services and the voluntary associations operate at the micro-level. There is a danger that too much is left to the local level, although as James Gilligan has argued, it is an essential part of any strategy. Without political consensus between parties, credible managers, local leaders and a strong political will, interventions will be destined to fail, especially as welfare initiatives tend to be ephemeral and some are little more than vanity projects. It would help if this micro-level work could be better coordinated and researched if learning is to advance.

Participants

Speakers

Sherrylyn Peck, CEO of Safer London, a charity working to ensure that every young person is given the opportunity to live free from exposure to gangs, exploitation and crime.

Anthony Gunter, Principal Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of East London and author of *Race, Gangs and Violence: Policy, Prevention and Policing* and *Black Youth, 'Road Culture and Badness in an East London Neighbourhood.* He worked as a community and youth work practitioner for many years prior to entering academia.

Andrew Whittaker, Associate Professor, School of Health and Social Care, London South Bank University and author of *From Postcodes to Profit: How Gangs have Changed in Waltham Forest*

Chair

John Diamond, CEO the Mulberry Bush, a charity working with severely traumatised children and running the famous residential school in Oxfordshire

Participants

Anne Boustred (retired barrister and local authority child protection lawyer)

Peter Boustred (non-practising solicitor)

Christine Bradley (child psychotherapist)

Roger Bullock (former Director of the Dartington Social Research Unit)

Jan Constable (retired social work consultant)

Heather Geddes(educational psychotherapist)

Danya Glaser (child and adolescent psychiatrist)

Suneetha Goring (early years teacher and children's librarian)

Ben Hartridge (researcher, Dartington Service Design Lab)

Bertina Ho (university education)

Francia Kinchington (special needs consultant)

Dinah Morley (hon Sen lecturer, City University of London, vice chair of People in Harmony)

Arran Poyser (CSP fellow and retired government inspector)

Chris Stanley (former head of policy and research at NACRO, Michael Sieff Foundation trustee, retired magistrate)

Keith White (residential child care specialist)

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