



groups, gangs and weapons



Youth Justice Board
Bwrdd Cyfiawnder Ieuentid

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales would like to thank Tara Young, Marian FitzGerald, Simon Hallsworth and Ian Joseph for their work in compiling and writing the full report on which this summary is based.

© YJB 2007

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be photocopied, recorded or otherwise reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means without prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN: 978 1 906139 06 3

Front cover image posed by models.



Youth Justice Board
Bwrdd Cyfiawnder Ieuentid

A summary of research into the nature and prevalence of young people's involvement in group offending, gangs and weapons

INTRODUCTION

A conference held by the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (YJB) in 2003 highlighted two related problems:

- **growing concerns in Britain about the reported increase of gang-related offending and the use of weapons by young people**
- **a lack of hard evidence on both of these issues and still less evidence about whether the two were related.**

The YJB commissioned research to try to fill these gaps and to discover the factors underlying any trends, as well as identifying their implications for policy and practice.

METHODOLOGY

The research comprised:

- **a review of the international literature and relevant statistics**
- **a survey of youth offending team (YOT) managers**
- **interviews in five case study areas (which varied in their geographical spread, crime rates and levels of deprivation, and the age structure and ethnic mix of their local populations) with:**
 - **practitioners working with young people who had offended, or were at risk of doing so**
 - **24 young men identified by YOTs as having been involved in group offending, and some of their parents/carers**
 - **25 young women identified by YOTs and through further means as having been involved in group offending¹**
- **an ethnographic study based on eight young men from one area who were known to be involved in local gangs.²**

¹ These 24 young men and 25 young women are referred to in this summary as 'group offenders'.

² Referred to in this summary as 'gang members'.

LITERATURE AND STATISTICS REVIEW

Gangs

Much of the original research on gangs was conducted in America and dates back to the 1930s. It produced a stereotype of the gang³ which has tended to be either dismissed or misused in a British context. An overview of the literature reveals no consensus about what constitutes a gang, and there is disagreement over how far such groups can be viewed solely in terms of their criminal activities or whether their primary function is to serve social and emotional needs. Accordingly, while the characteristics of gang members may ensure that crime almost inevitably results from their association, in particular local circumstances, this is not necessarily the main reason for their existence.

Therefore, the juvenile gang can be seen as one of the types of peer association which are an essential feature of most young people's transition to adulthood. Where gangs have been identified, research has shown considerable variations in their membership and activity between areas; and more recent studies have begun to note that the traditional image of the American gang is itself changing.⁴

Meanwhile gang culture has been reflected in styles adopted by individual young people who may not be involved in any criminal group or even in minor offending. Some commentators, therefore, caution against the use of the term 'gang' in relation to young people since this may lend a spurious glamour to the minor forms of delinquency committed by groups, and actively encourage them to become involved in more serious offending.

³ This stereotype is based on notions of hierarchy, and depicts rituals and symbols as essential attributes of gang membership, as well as ethnic homogeneity linked to neighbourhood 'turf'.

⁴ More fluid groupings have begun to develop which are less confined to deprived, high crime neighbourhoods.

Despite evidence of adult criminal gangs in Britain, British academics have been particularly reluctant to apply the label to group offending by young people. While evidence shows that most offending by young people is group related in some way, no distinctions have been made according to the nature of the group or the seriousness of their offending. What is less clear is whether group offending by young people has increased in recent years, despite an increase in public perceptions of groups of young people as posing a problem, which is associated with fear of crime.

A study of school children in Edinburgh and a national survey by the Home Office are now shedding more light on group offending by the younger age range. The study confirms that most offending by young people is group related and shows that asking young people whether they think of the group they belong to as a gang can produce unexpected results which may be misleading. Some will ascribe the term to friendship groups which are not involved in criminal activity, whereas others who are involved in relatively serious group-related offending may not see themselves as a gang.

Weapons

Currently, there are no national trend data on knives available to support the growing concern (shared by professionals working with young people) about the extent to which knives are carried by 10 to 17 year-olds.

Evidence from the YJB's surveys, shows that while young people may carry weapons:

- **these are far more likely to be knives than guns**
- **the majority of young people excluded from mainstream education said they had carried a knife within the last year.**

In all cases, young people were more likely to carry a knife if they had been a victim of crime, but most young people who had carried a knife claimed this was only for protection and that they had never actually used them. Knife carrying, however, has been found to be more prevalent among those involved in more serious group-related offending.

FINDINGS

Practitioner perspectives

Although less than half of all YOTs (44%) responded to the survey, they covered a wide range of areas. Asked about ‘troublesome youth groups’:⁵

- **two-thirds said they were aware of such groups in their area**
- **half said that these had been identified as a specific local problem.**

YOTs were unlikely to be in the lead in trying to tackle the problem locally, but where they were working with young people known to be involved in group offending, they used a variety of interventions to tackle this aspect of their behaviour. Group work was less common than work on an individual basis, and interventions specifically around the use of weapons were rare.

Interviews with practitioners produced a striking degree of consensus between different professional backgrounds and across all five case study areas. They were concerned about what they saw as the current indiscriminate use of the term ‘gang’ and some echoed the concerns found in the literature review that this would encourage young people who offended in groups to become involved in more serious crimes. Practitioners emphasised that young people had always tended to offend in groups and to find ways of distinguishing between themselves on a group basis. In some areas these distinctions were rooted in local tradition, with territory as a common marker; in a few areas, ethnicity was now also coming into play, including divisions between different Minority Ethnic groups.

The young people involved tended to have grown up together, often in adverse circumstances which already increased their risk of involvement in crime, and many practitioners saw the risks being exacerbated in the school context as a result of:

- **exclusion**
- **unauthorised absences**
- **lack of affordable youth facilities.**

⁵ The term and the definition associated with it were coined for a European study of gangs.

Practitioners also stressed that young people who offended together were not necessarily tied exclusively to a particular group and they might also associate with non-criminal peers.

As far as gangs did exist, practitioners saw them as marked out from these more typical delinquent groups by the intensity and seriousness of their offending behaviour. Interviewees acknowledged that gangs were operating in three urban areas out of the five covered by the study. However, they tended to associate them with young adults rather than the age range covered by the YOTs, and these gangs of young adults, in turn, might be connected with older, organised crime groups.

In this context, reference was often made to control of local drug markets, where competition was likely to involve violence (including the use of guns) and where, ironically, police success in breaking up one gang might simply result in internecine attempts to fill the vacuum.

Younger people in these areas could be affected by this environment in many ways:

- **kinship connections may exist to gang members and older people involved in organised crime, which meant that other family members could be drawn in to gang feuds**
- **in the context of gangster culture, the apparent glamour of the young adults involved could also make them seem worth emulating to younger people; so young people could easily be exploited by getting them to do menial chores.**

However, it was stressed that individual young people were more commonly recruited than groups and that young adults were unlikely to allow people in the youth offending age range to play any central role in their gang-related activities.

Local efforts to address the problem of group offending by young people typically involved the following:

- **law enforcement activity designed directly to disrupt gangs and gang-related crime**
- **proactive, diversionary interventions designed to prevent young people from participating in gang-related activity**
- **attempts to mobilise local communities to stand against and confront gang-related crime in their neighbourhoods.**

Practitioners also mentioned common obstacles to the effectiveness of these interventions, specifically, all three elements needed to be in play at the same time. Some practitioners had concerns over some interventions in the name of tackling anti-social behaviour, including the conditions attached to some Anti-Social Behaviour Orders. Other factors inhibited good partnership working and community distrust of the police was cited as a particular stumbling block.

The practitioners interviewed believed strategies were needed to address some of the underlying causes that produced the problems. Many of these were sets of complex, interlocking factors which were often specific to certain neighbourhoods. While there was broad agreement about the types of partnership solutions needed, these had to be tailored to local circumstances.

practitioners believed strategies were needed to address the underlying causes that produced the problems

Young men's perspectives

Many of the young men shared perceptions that the areas they lived in were run down and crime-ridden. Despite the fact that violence was often commonplace, many had a strong attachment to their neighbourhood, and the relationships between the young men and others in their group were often rooted in local connections such as schools and family networks. Some family members might themselves be involved in crime, and several young men had experienced stress, tension and disruption in their family lives, including all of the gang members in the ethnographic study.



While most of the YOT sample of group offenders referred negatively to school and tended to have low levels of academic attainment, all of the gang members had experienced particular educational problems and/or had been excluded from mainstream schooling. However, even they did not associate solely with other gang members but, like the YOT sample, tended to have a number of friendship networks, and they also associated with non-criminal peers. Some groups were ethnically mixed but they tended to be male or male-dominated. The gang members in particular had relationships with young women, but these women played a subsidiary role in respect of their gang-related activities. Women's support could be crucially important but they were not co-offenders.

All the young men (group offenders and gang members alike) were exercised by the need for respect, and for many this was associated with questions both of reputation and image.

For all of them, their current involvement in group offending was the result of a gradual process which had often begun with anti-social behaviour at an early age. Progression to increasingly serious forms of delinquency, however, did not occur evenly and might be triggered by a number of factors, including coming under the influence of a new set of friends and attempts to emulate older siblings and their associates, as well as the impact of specific distressing events in their personal lives. A common theme, though, was the influence of older males and some respondents cited the transition to secondary school as an important turning point.

The types of crime committed by the young men in a group seemed to be expressive (for example, fighting) at least as often as they were instrumental (for example, theft). Where larger groups were involved, they tended to happen spontaneously. By contrast, the rare examples of crimes which were planned involved only a few individuals. Violence was rarely premeditated but it could easily erupt spontaneously and escalate in group situations. Fighting could also be triggered by inter-group rivalries, with retaliation for previous acts of violence or acts of disrespect serving as a pretext.

Where group violence was anticipated, members might carry weapons, which included knives but might also be improvised, such as sticks and bottles. Few of those interviewed, however, routinely carried a knife – not least because of the risk of being stopped and searched by the police. Also, despite claims that many knew how to obtain guns, with the exception of one gang member, there was little to suggest they had ever had possession of a gun, still less used it.

In some instances fighting could be facilitated by alcohol or drugs, but these were not the main factors in explaining group violence. None of those interviewed was a problem user and there was no evidence that acquisitive crime was related to this. Rather, the interviews confirmed the views of the practitioners in relation to drugs: drugs were a factor in offending mainly since young people were at greater risk in areas where older people controlled a significant local drug market and young people became involved.

Distinguishing features of the gang members studied in Area B included:

- **adverse personal histories**
- **links with older people involved in organised crime, including drug supply.**

This strand of the research also corroborated the fact that where adult gangs of this type were disrupted, this could itself create instability in local criminal networks which might affect young people – whether directly, or by its ripple effect through family and communal networks.

The young men involved in group offending recognised that there was a certain kudos in claiming to be a gang. However, they tended to see most such claims as empty boasts, and they drew clear distinctions between their own group affiliation and gang membership. Real gangs were distinguished by transgressing certain norms they themselves adhered to, particularly with regard to their deliberate use of unacceptable levels of violence.

Meanwhile, the gang members saw the advantages of their association in terms of:

- **protection**
- **opportunities to make money**
- **status in the eyes of others.**

But some were also very aware that it ultimately made them more vulnerable.

Asked to reflect on what might have prevented their own involvement in group offending the young men cited:

- **having a significant, respected adult they could turn to**
- **having a chance to develop their skills and potential**
- **access to fulfilling diversionary activity.**

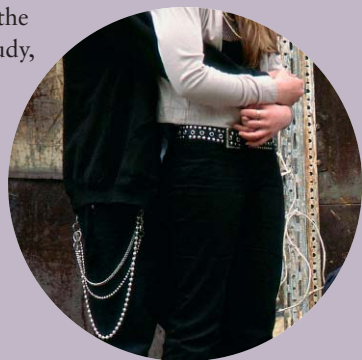
real gangs were distinguished
by transgressing **certain norms...**
particularly regarding their
deliberate use of unacceptable
levels of **violence**

Young women's perspectives

It proved more difficult to identify a sample of young women who had been involved in group offending, but, like the main sample of young men, those interviewed were adamant that they were not part of a gang either. They too described the areas they grew up in as rundown and violent, and one way of managing the particular risks they faced in this context was to negotiate public space in the presence of others rather than alone.

Most had also experienced problems at home – from serious overcrowding and endemic violence to bereavement and other forms of serious loss; and several had either been thrown out or had simply left.⁶ In some cases this had left them open to abuse and exploitation, including by older males. Yet many were matter-of-fact about these experiences and, for the most part, failed to make any connection between these and their problems at school, (although, on their own admission, some of these had been of their own making). In general, they had a positive view of education and they differed from the young men in the importance many attached to academic attainment.

While the group provided protection, it also served a more positive role in the lives of these young women and, as with the young men, was often based in friendships that had built up over a long time. They too associated with different groups and, while some were in female-only groups, others were in mixed groups. However, in these cases, the young men were usually seen as friends and treated on equal terms. That is, by contrast with the role of the women associated with the young men who were interviewed for the study, most of these young women saw themselves as autonomous and independent females, despite their frequently adverse circumstances.



⁶ Including one at the age of 12.

Many used illegal drugs, although few currently took hard drugs and alcohol was their drug of choice. Binge drinking in a group was common and was strongly associated with violence. Resorting to violence was not unusual since it was often the norm in the contexts they had grown up in, but the young women might also use other techniques for avenging the perceived slights or injustices which were the usual triggers for aggression.

Mostly, aggression tended to be directed at people they knew, although there were instances of attacking strangers, including robberies. The young women's accounts gave the impression that, while robbery was mainly seen as something males did, when females were involved the violence component had more saliency than any material gain.⁷ Others in the sample had shoplifted and three had become involved in prostitution before they were 15, two of them while they were in care homes.

While this sample also produced accounts of how easily they could obtain a gun, the young women's attitude towards weapons was generally negative. Two admitted to having carried a knife but knife-carrying tended to be associated more with young men, and while some took the view that using weapons was a sign of weakness, it was apparent that their views were also coloured by their own past experiences. Some young women had been threatened with guns and knives, and some had lost loved ones as a result of weapon use, so there were instances of them actively trying to persuade men they were close to, to give up their weapons.

the young women's attitude towards weapons was generally negative

⁷ Despite the fact that some had committed robberies to feed a drug habit.

Their rejection of the gang label also reflected the experiences of the young women. Like the young men, they saw gangs primarily in terms of violence and extortion but, importantly, several had also directly been on the receiving end of these. Some had been raped by gang members, some forced to carry drugs and some were indebted to gangs through receiving drugs on credit. While they recognised that their own activities might appear gang-like to others, these young women drew moral distinctions between what they had done and the types of crime committed by (male) gangs, as well as insisting that their own group affiliations were mainly based on ties of friendship.

Most were already beginning to grow out of group offending by the time they were interviewed and they aspired to moving on. To an extent this was simply by virtue of maturing, but it also appeared that in some cases being caught and sentenced had itself had an important impact. In these instances, interviewees were most likely to say they had benefited where their sentence had involved one-to-one work.

**the young women drew
moral distinctions between
what they had done and the
types of crime committed
by male gangs**

CONCLUSIONS

Gangs

The research suggests that while there are gangs that use serious violence and threats to assert control locally (often in competition with similar groups), these are more likely to involve young adults than 10 to 17-year-olds. Though juvenile versions of these gangs may exist, these are relatively rare, but offending by young people in groups of three or more is a wider phenomenon.

Group offending can include types of activity often associated with gangs, but it also accounts for much offending by young people. Offending in this age range by individuals acting completely alone is relatively rare. Trying to distinguish real juvenile gangs from the very much larger numbers of groups of young people collectively involved in delinquency is complicated by a number of factors, including:

- **young people's own claims to gang status in order to boost their credibility**
- **labels ascribed by others to any form of group offending by young people**
- **the groups young people are involved in tending to overlap and continually change.**

In areas where there are young adult gangs to emulate, younger people may ensure the perpetuation of these gangs for the future as they in turn progress from purely social forms of association, through collective anti-social behaviour and into progressively more serious group offending.

The young adult gangs, in turn, may have links with older people involved in serious, organised crime and both may effectively groom juveniles by actively involving them at the margins of their activity.

Weapons

- **Knives and other weapons are far more prevalent than firearms, especially in the case of young people.**
- **Carrying weapons increases the risk of serious injury or death while fighting, and these risks multiply in group situations.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategies need to be developed that aim to break the cycle which can lead from group offending in adolescence to involvement in gangs – and ultimately to serious organised crime. These need to take full account of the relationships between those involved, which are often deeply rooted in wider family and social networks, community involvement is therefore essential. They will also vary according to local circumstances, partly because communities themselves vary but also because the problem may manifest in different ways in different areas.

The main focus of these strategies should be seriously delinquent youth groups – that is, young people who are known to have committed crimes above a given point on the scale of seriousness used by the YOTs in a group of three or more. This approach would ensure that the activities of any recognisable, real juvenile gangs were covered in the areas where these exist, but it would avoid the many pitfalls of trying to identify these, and the related risks of:

- **giving an exaggerated impression of the prevalence of gangs**
- **missing out on tackling a cause of serious crime in areas which do not have an identified gang problem.**

Breaking the cycle would also entail addressing the stages leading up to young people's involvement in serious group offending, as well as the influence on young people of older gangs and criminals. Local strategies should therefore aim simultaneously to:

- **tackle the causes of the young people becoming involved in serious group offending**
- **prevent those young people at greatest risk from becoming further involved**
- **ensure that the young people already involved in seriously delinquent youth groups desist from crime.**

Success will depend on co-ordinated action by all of the relevant agencies, in tandem with local communities. The most obvious framework for adopting such a strategy is the local crime and disorder reduction partnership; and good information sharing between the partners will be essential.



Tackling the causes will involve interventions at several different levels. More consistency is needed in responding to the direct and indirect victimisation of young people since this is often an important factor in subsequent offending, as well as the reason young people claim to carry weapons and to seek protection from groups. At the same time, robust action is needed to disrupt the gangs of young adults and the organised crime groups at the furthest end of the cycle in order to undermine their influence on the next generation. Where there are inter-communal tensions, these also need to be addressed since they may become a pretext for inter-group feuding by young people.

Targeting those most at risk includes providing more opportunities for pro-social group activities by young people, but the staff involved must themselves be equipped both to prevent anti-social groups forming in the context of these activities and to tackle any inter-group tensions imported from the wider community. Schools have similar responsibilities to their own pupils, but some also need to take action to avoid delinquent groups forming outside school in the context of unauthorised absence.

Parents need support in tackling the influence of anti-social peers on their children. Foster parents and those working in care homes may play a crucial role in the lives of some of the most vulnerable young people and the particular needs of young women should be given special attention in this context.

Work with young people already in the Criminal Justice System who are involved in serious group offending requires:

- **improved identification**
- **effective interventions to address the group-related aspects of their offending**
- **tackling the ongoing risk factors in their personal circumstances.**

Where group-related offences occur, these should be routinely recorded. Serious group offence figures should be monitored at a local level and used to form the basis for identifying areas where local strategies are urgently needed.

Information from key partners should be used to profile peer networks of young people who are being supervised for serious offences – this will help discover any links with young adult gangs or older criminals as well as inform work with individual young people within the YOT. This information is also relevant to decisions about placements in the secure estate and later, in post-release plans.

A general review of approaches to work with young people supervised by YOTs and within the secure estate should be undertaken to ensure these address the group-related aspects of their offending. Any approaches by YOTS that specifically tackle serious group offending should be reviewed as a priority with a view to identifying and disseminating the lessons from these.

Weapons

Information on knife-related crime should be collected on a comparable basis as for gun-related crime to help assess the size and nature of the problem. This should make it possible to measure trends, help inform local policies to tackle the problem, and monitor the impact of interventions.

Police searches are an essential way of discovering knives, but are also a major source of tension between young people and the police, so it will be important to explore the potential of non-invasive methods such as search wands for this purpose.



The full report on which this summary is based and further copies of this summary can be obtained from:

Telephone: 0870 120 7400 or Facsimile: 0870 120 7401

Stock code

B329



Youth Justice Board
Bwrdd Cyfiawnder Ieuencid

Youth Justice Board for England and Wales

11 Carteret Street

London SW1H 9DL

Telephone: 020 7271 3033

Facsimile: 020 7271 3030

www.yjb.gov.uk