Youth gangs in the UK: context, evolution and violence
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1. Context

The dominant view of youth gangs in Britain was established during the 60 and 70s. Downes, in his influential, *The Delinquent Solution*, argued that delinquent groups in the East End of London lacked structured cohesion, institutional permanence and a group commitment to delinquency similar to that described by contemporary American criminologists such as Cloward, Ohlin and Yablonsky. In this sense, he concluded that at most, in his research site, there were street-corner groups or 'small cliques whose members committed illegal acts sometimes collectively, sometimes in pairs, sometimes individually, in some cases regularly, in others only rarely' and for which delinquent engagement was not more central than 'sexual prowess' (Downes, 1966: 199). These groups did not either 'obtrude, let alone dominate an area'. Despite the fact, his work was grounded in a particular area of London and Downes' own work suggest that 'gangs' with leaders and territorial disputes had historically been present in the East End, his research was interpreted as evidence by the British criminological community that there have never been gangs in the UK. Howard Parker's ethnographic account of delinquent youth networks (*A View from the Boys*) also concluded there were no gangs in Liverpool, insofar as this delinquent groups did not 'possess such rigid defining criteria', and despite their persistent offending involvement, their *raison de'etre* was primarily social. Again, although his observations and descriptions are not too dissimilar from some descriptions of gangs in the US, his research was widely interpreted to offer support for the notion that gangs are an American anomaly. The UK had groups of rowdy working-class adolescents involved in a succession of youth subcultures (teddy boys, punks, skinheads, rude boys, etc) but, according to the dominant view, they were not gangs. They were loosely structured groups for which fighting, crime and antisocial behaviour was incidental and secondary to their social and developmental functions (Pitts, 2008).

The only piece of research from this period that was unashamedly supportive of the existence of gangs in the UK was Filpatrick [brief summary of Filpatrick here.]

In the British context, gangs were more commonly understood to be established adult criminal networks, or alternatively, among school-aged children, as a term used to refer a group of friends. Use of the term began to change during the late 1980s and early 90s. A number of shootings of black young people involved in drug dealing in the Manchester area were said to be linked to 'gang wars' and the control for the lucrative drug markets provided, eventually, by the new night time economy. So unusual were these events that they received considerable media attention and Manchester was dubbed 'Gangchester' or 'Gunchester' in the press. A research report carried out by Bullock and Tilley (2002) evaluating Manchester responses to these problems offered further support for the notion that gangs were responsible for this escalation into firearm violence. Since this time, similar developments have been reported by the media in Birmingham and later on in London, Liverpool and Nottingham. Alongside this, a number of often controversial journalistic and biographical accounts about these new British gangs begun to appear in the 'true crime' section of bookstores.

The academic community in general was slow to respond to the emerging moral panic about gangs. A number of ethnographic accounts of marginalised young people or young offenders, published early in 2000 continued with the view that youth gangs simply did not exist in British marginalised areas (Alexander, 2000; Batchelor, 2001; Sanders, 2005), and that the media were, to a large degree, inventing the problem. Some of these authors questioning the existence of gangs were quite critical of opposing views insofar as they perceived them misrepresenting the experiences of young people (Batchelor, 2001), contributing to the stigmatisation of ethnic minority youth in the UK and imposing 'a conservative culturalist perspective on black youth identifications' (Alexander, 2000: 238). These studies were quite right in pointing out the excesses and the tone of the media reporting, but may have been premature in some of their conclusions. Given this reluctance in the British academic community to directly engage the study of gangs, it is perhaps not surprising that it took a young Dutch ethnographer to come to Manchester to carry out the first contemporary ethnographic study of gangs in Britain. His research, often neglected by subsequent British 'gang' studies (see Pitts, 2008; Centre for Social Justice, 2009), questioned the established view by providing a detailed ethnographic description of some gangs in Manchester and theoretical account of their development.

Mare's research was followed by a number of self report surveys with samples of arrestees (Bennett & Holloway, 2004) and young people (Communities that Care, 2004; Hayden, 2008; Bradshaw, 2005; Sharp et al., 2005) with a specific focus on measuring gang membership. These surveys document a level of gang involvement in the UK that, despite some interpretations to the contrary (e.g. Hallsworth & Young, 2008), is remarkably similar to those levels encountered in other advanced capitalist societies, including the US (see Klein and Maxson, 2006). Contrary to some interpretations, the measures employed are not so broad than they suggest that 'most of Britain's 10 to 18-year-olds' are gang members (Pitts, 2008: 18). The Offending Crime and Justice Survey, a nationally representative study, suggested that, depending on the operationalisation, 3% to 6% of 10 to 19-year olds belong to a group that can be defined as a gang (Sharp et al., 2005). These surveys also suggest that young people that are gang-involved present a more serious offending profile and problematic background than other young people, even other young people whose peers are offenders. This developing body of survey evidence also suggests that British gangs show a less pronounced institutional identity than those encountered in the USA (Winfree et al).

Equally, a new generation of ethnographic or qualitative studies of gangs has emerged over the last five years in Cardiff and surrounding areas (Maher, 2007), London (Pitts, 2008), an anonymous 'Research City' (Aldridge et al., 2008), and other areas that are considered to be hotspots for gang violence (Youth Justice Board 2008). The Scottish Executive is currently funding a multi-site study of gangs in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee and West Dunbartonshire. It is significant that these studies, in particular, continue the perennial tradition in gang research of agonising about the gang concept and the adequate characterisation of these groups. Maher's (2007) systematic observation of a wide variety of street oriented youth groups points to the difficulties of using offending as a clear-cut criteria for distinguishing gangs from other youth groups and recognises various degrees of offending involvement and commitment of these youth groups. She suggests seven group types based on these

differences. Aldridge et al. (2008) recognise the messiness and looseness of the social networks referred to as gangs, as well as their permeable and fluctuating boundaries. In contrast, Pitts (2008) claims, arguably without providing much evidence for it, that we are witnessing the development of new articulated 'supergangs' with long histories of involvement in organised crime, clear subgroups, role differentiation, established territories and neighbourhood control, vertical links into higher echelon organised crime, and organised drug dealing activity.

Equally slow has been the development of policy responses to the media's increasingly sensationalist reporting of gangs and gang violence. As Pitts (2008) has highlighted, this is particularly curious for a government that has exploited fear of youth crime for electoral advantage. This sluggishness has changed significantly since 2007. That year, Tony Blair, still Prime Minister, presided over Britain's first 'gun crime summit' as a response to new shootings of very young innocent bystanders in what were presented as gang related incidents. Later that year, one of the first measures adopted by Gordon Brown as second New Labour Prime Minister was the formation of the Home Office's *Tackling Gangs Action Programme* (TGAP) to identify good practice in dealing with gangs and gun crime. This resulted in the toolkit: '*Tackling Gangs: practical guide for local authorities, Crime Disorder and Reduction Partnerships (CDRPS) and other local partners*' (Home Office 2008) and a government guidance leaflet for parents on how to detect children's involvement in gangs. Increasingly, police forces and local authorities are drawing on US interventions, importing models developed in Los Angeles and Boston of dedicated firearm/gang units and multi-agency gang intervention teams. At the policy level, thus, the term 'gang' has now become entrenched in both national and local crime and disorder strategies (e.g. Home Office 2008). However, considerable confusion still remains at this level as to what a gang is. A serious concern for civil liberty advocates and gang researchers is how the 'gang' label is both being used in a rather indiscriminate manner and disproportionally applied to ethnic minority youth (Ralphs et al, 2009).

2. Evolution

The gangs of Inner West: tracing the origins

Notwithstanding voices in the UK who are fearful, critical or sceptical of the use of the 'gang' label in research, policy and practice (e.g. Downes 1966; Parker 1974; Bullock and Tilley 2008; Hallsworth and Young 2008), it is probably fair to say that groups meeting the Eurogang Definition[1] have existed in socially excluded parts of urban Britain for a very long time (Patrick 1973; Parker 1974; Mares 2001; Hallsworth and Young 2004), even going back to the nineteenth century (Davies 2008). Our own research confirms that this kind of group is not a recent phenomenon in Research City. Some of our older informants (now in their 50s) described their experiences in street-oriented, territorial, offending and fighting groups as part of their growing up in poor areas of Research City during the 1970s, and police likewise described enforcement tactics used with these groups dating from around this time.

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[1] Def here.

The so-called emergence of youth gangs in the UK over the past few decades, it can be argued, simply represents a change at the discursive level: a new label to designate the – not radically changed – experiences of marginalised urban youth. But has anything aside from the discourse around gangs changed in recent decades? Pitts (2008) suggests that there is indeed a new phenomenon to be observed in Britain arising from conditions of marginalisation and flourishing drugs markets. This perspective is consistent with research from within the drugs and crime literature that suggested that in Britain in the 1980s, young people were increasingly drawn into the informal economy and drug dealing to secure 'a standard of living better than mere survival' (Auld, Dorn *et al.* 1986: 173).

In *Inner West* we have clear evidence that during the 80s and 90s territorial peer groups of ethnic minority youth were becoming increasingly visible and involved in the retail sale of heroin and crack in very successful open drug markets, what might be described as pyramidical distributions systems (May and Hough 2004). Accounts provided by former gang members in their thirties and forties confirmed the reputation of *Inner West* during this period as the place for drug users and dealers from all over the city to make drug purchases, a reputation also confirmed by local 'drugs unit' specialist police: *"There were mainly street markets whereby anybody could go to that market place and buy drugs basically, mainly heroin, and people would travel great distances to Research City to buy from these open markets simply because the reputation was of good quality gear and good, reasonable, prices."* (Drug Unit, police). This status as specialist 'drug gangs' represented a key transition in *Inner West*, as described by this *Inner West* gang member: *"There were always gangs, but they weren't selling drugs. People just used to hang around together in groups. Before Gang A and Gang B appeared. [...] My brother is 8 years older, so when he was younger they did go out and commit petty crimes, they were gangs, but they were doing different things".*

The emergence of a new informal economy in *Inner West* during the late 80s coincided with the seeds of what would become a vibrant night-time economy in the centre of Research City. For some, the new illegitimate opportunities allowed the pursuit of a life style of conspicuous consumption and intense partying (Decker and Wright, 1997) or, using the terminology of Hall and colleagues (2008), the development of criminal identities with roots in a narcissistic consumer culture.

Our interviews with older informants who were active during this time confirmed that gang members pursued goals of conspicuous consumption: *"kitting themselves out, new trainers, new clothes, you know, jewellery, you know, with the big thick chains (laughs), the big bracelets and everything."* *Inner West* gang members that were active during this period, 15-20 years ago often referred to large incomes of £1-2,000 a week working in open heroin markets. It is likely that the potential riches figures like these imply could have been more apparent than real. Indeed, most previously high-earning ex-gang members we learned about, today were in prison or living on state benefit. But, for a while and for some, the profit generated at the time, helped some to fund new spending habits: *"I was driving, I was buying champagne, I was wearing Armani when you had to go to Armani to buy it, you couldn't buy it in TK Maxx, you had to go buy it in Armani, you know what I mean? And we used to get invited to the Armani new season openings, because I'd go and buy three pairs of*

jeans at once, at like 90 quid each and I'd get invitations to these things and it would just be full up of footballers and TV stars".

We found considerable evidence of conflict that arose from within the illegal drugs markets these gang members participated in. This conflict was not, however (as commonly supposed), over the markets themselves, but tended to result from dealers stealing from one another – 'taxing' – and often members of their own gang. In this context, dealers began to arm themselves with guns. Violence linked to these market conditions and personal disputes from interpersonal conflict resulted into a spiral of retaliatory, primarily gun, homicides: *"We just wanted to make money, sell drugs, get rich. And,we was getting robbed, getting shot at, and then what are you gonna do, shoot back, innit? [...] All of sudden you start to sell drugs obviously and it starts to be like jealousy, we were clashing with each other so before you knew it everybody had like beef with each other. They started to rob people".*

This violence, although of a magnitude considerably lower than that found in the US, has continued to today and marks *Inner West* as separate from other gang areas in Research City. As one city official put it to us: *"Today a lot of our kids weren't even born at that time when these gangs started. And they've grown up knowing only of the war, as they like to call it. And they don't know why it started, and they don't know what it's all about, they just know that it goes on and they're on one side of it."*

Changes in Inner West: from 'drug gangs' to 'juvenile nuisance with 9mm'

The groups in *Inner West* have evolved in several ways. Changing market conditions and successful police operations disrupted the status of the specialist drugs gangs. As in other parts of Britain, we have witnessed the transition from a 'highly structured pyramidical distribution system' into a 'fragmented, non-hierarchical market with little structure' (May and Hough, 2001: 555). Equally, the breakdown of the street markets facilitated the move from gang co-ordinated drug dealing to individuals trading as free agents: *"Back in the day there was a structure of you know, you'd have your leader, you have the little second person and then you would have your workers and that. But nowadays its more like you make your own money and do your own thing. Whereas back in the day you used to like go out and earn money for the gang and put it in and then you know you'd share it between them but nowadays its everyone for themselves basically".* This picture contrasts starkly with the recent evidence of Pitts (2008) in London, where it is asserted that many 'supergangs' operate gang co-ordinated illegal activity.

Most police intelligence officers we spoke to recognised the dilution of drug dealing amongst gang members, noting a diversification into other earning opportunities like stealing from cars or robberies in *Inner West*. Nevertheless, even today, most gang members we spoke to were involved to some degree in dealing even if their gangs did not specialise in this way. In a context of limited opportunities for good jobs, drug selling provides economic incentives 'that raise income prospects in ways that legal markets cannot' (Fagan, 1997: 48; Hales et al. 2006). But although drug sales are now fundamentally individual activity, we still find some cooperation and division of labour amongst gang members (primarily between retail level dealers their delivery focussed 'runners').

Criminal income within gangs today was is less, and accrued from a range of sources, with cannabis sales and personal robbery significant. Gang members today earn money from a combination of legal and illegal opportunities in what could be described as 'cafeteria-style' earning. An exclusive focus on illicit incomes is misleading because legitimate earnings (e.g. paid employment, business, state benefits) are as important. As the work and crime literature has established legal and illegal economic activities are not mutually exclusive and 'doubling up' in crime and other earning activities is common (Fagan, 1997). 'Income in kind' (i.e., living with others without paying rent) was key way in which gang members in *Inner West* and *Far West* got by day-to-day. Only a small minority of older gang involved individuals appear to have established consistently successful 'illegal only' incomes by using their gang reputation and contacts to get involved in more serious criminal enterprises (i.e., prostitution, importation, and multi kilo drug distribution). However, whether these individuals can be considered any longer to be 'gang members' is in question, given the extent to which their contacts and operations spread across Research City, and involve dealings with a wide range of what they may previously have considered 'rival' gangs and family firms.

Other changes included the intergenerational transmission of gang identities; an associated entrenchment of a 'gang culture' in Inner West linked to its prolonged recognition and the development of more organised community and official responses to it; and to what some perceive as the fragmentation of the existing gangs into more amorphous unpredictable networks and less organised little factions or cliques that are also less oriented towards profit activities.

The entrenchment of gang culture in Research City over the last twenty years is something on most observers in the city agree. Many informants, such as this youth worker, talked to us about the intergenerational transmission of gang identities: "Now it's kind of a legacy that's been passed down from dads and uncles that this gang thing, but they've not had to earn the money, they're just automatically there… it's their birthright kind of thing, that's where they are born and that's where they live and the money's kind of secondary now. I'll take the piss out of my boys and all the time at work, I'll be like 'just hold on' like you were saying before 'you're begging cigarettes and you're begging money'".

Gangs in Far West

Neither the political nor police local authorities have ever recognised *Far West* as a 'gang' area. For them the problems of violence that have in the past erupted there were linked to feuds between crime families. According to police sources the youth groups that operate in Far West are nothing but groups of antisocial youth, not gangs.

Yet, if we are to use standard criminological definitions, it is hard not to conclude that there are youth gangs in *Far West* with characteristics that overlap substantially with those in *Inner West*. Although we do not have the same level of detail about the social history of these youth gangs that we do about gangs in Inner West, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that 'warring' highly territorial gangs have existed in this part of Research City at least for the last two decades. As one of our key

informants, an anthropologist, concluded: "*In the true sense of the word, Far West gangs are 'youth gangs'. They are a group of young people that hang out together, classify themselves as such, are involved in various sort of offending and have a distinct territory*".

The groups from *Far West* have perhaps a more defined territorial identity than those from Inner West and their names are taken from the neighbourhoods in *Far West* they occupy. This strong territorial identity is a key factor in explaining the persistence of group identity despite individual 'members' turnover. As with other youth gangs elsewhere the social function of these groups play a key role and, as one informant reported, they are about 'getting pissed', 'having a shag' and 'being hard' in otherwise boring daily routines of socially excluded youth. Violent conflict, even if sporadic and more talked about than experienced, plays also an integral part in shaping the identity of these groups. Violent events often take place when a young person ventures into the parts of *Far West* that are identified with the rival gang. Most of the violence linked to these groups, although occasionally very serious, has not tended to be gun-related – despite well documented access to guns in our field observations. We detected a cultural preference for fist fights and a certain dislike for the use of firearms for resolving conflict violence as unmanly and cowardly. Some informants have associated the death and severe beatings of some individuals in *Far West* to inter-gang conflict, but the visibility and lethality has not reached the levels we observe in *Inner West*. On the other hand, some of our data suggest a greater involvement in drug retail of individuals associated with these groups than those operating in *Inner West* today, as well as greater involvement of females 'hanging out' and minor offending.

3. Violence

The United Kingdom does not, in the European context, have a particularly high rate of homicides, but does have the highest victimisation rates for assaults and threats (Van Dijk et al., 2007). For some observers (e.g. Hallsworth, 2008; Hallsworth and Young, 2008), the ongoing concern with gangs in the UK as part of an upsurge in violence is problematic for two reasons. First, they question whether violence has in any meaningful way increased in the UK; and second, they question the link between gangs and violence.

British Crime Survey data indeed suggests that violent crime, as well as general crime, has been in decline in England and Wales for most of the 1990s. This pattern is consistent with that found in other advanced capitalist societies – even if data from the International Crime Survey suggest that the decline has not been as pronounced in the UK as in other countries (Van Dijk et al., 2007). The first national self-report offending survey was conducted in 1992 and subsequent self-report studies have used different designs making comparisons impossible. Thus, we only have trend data on self-reported offending from 2000 to 2008 from the surveys conduced by MORI for the Youth Justice Board. These surveys suggest a remarkable degree of stability over this period in youth offending (Phillips et al., 2009), although the proportion of those who have threatened or assaulted someone in public has doubled during the period (from 15% to 31%) and persistent offending (5 or more offences) has been on the rise since 2002 (from 34% to 46%). Both victim and self-report surveys, in any case,

present important limitations for the study of violence insofar as they tend to significantly underestimate serious injurious violence (Cook, 1985). It is, thus, critical to turn to other data sources.

Public health data offer a mixed picture. On the one hand, emergency department data collected in a number of non-representative locations across the UK suggest a decline in violence that parallels the decline documented by the British Crime Survey (Sivarajasingam et al., 2007). However, these data exclude most 'gang', knife and gun–violence hotspots in the UK. On the other hand, hospital admission data for England suggests an increase in all categories of violence that is particularly notable for firearm-related injuries, injuries produced by cutting instruments, and injuries among young people (Maxwell et al., 2007). The last data source element in the jigsaw is provided by homicide data. From 1970 to 2000, homicide rates increased considerably. Although a significant element of the crime decline in the US was the drop in the homicide rate, in England and Wales the homicide rate remained stable for most of the 90s and the beginning of the new millennium (Povey, 2008). Even more significant, analysis of this data suggests that national trends mask important local variations and that, alongside increasing spatial polarization of wealth (Dorling et al., 2007), poorer areas experienced a significant homicide increase, whereas more affluent areas experienced a decrease (Shaw et al., 2005). In sum, it seems as if common assaults may have been in the decline, but it cannot be discounted that more serious injurious violence produced by firearms and knives may have increased in some marginalised locations and among young people.

We cannot, therefore, as some have, conclude that violence has not been increasing in relevant periods and contexts as regards youth gangs. So what is the link between gangs and violence in the UK? According to the Offending Crime and Justice Survey, gang members age 10 to 19 present a higher risk of 'core' offending (63% vs. 26%), serious offending (34% vs. 13%), persistent offending (28% vs. 7%), arrests (26% vs. 6%) and any violence (44% vs. 17%) than non gang members (Sharp et al., 2005). The 6% of gang members in the sample were responsible for 20% of all violent offences measured by the survey. They were also more likely to have carried a knife than non-gang members (13% vs. 1%) but only a tiny minority (1%), which was not significantly different from non-gang members, had carried a gun. This national survey was, however, limited in its capacity to capture local variations and the sample was unlikely to include many hardcore gang members. The survey possibly captures and measures well the 'lower' end of the gang spectrum, but is likely to have captured gangs involved in more serious offending less well (indeed, the sample excluded young people in young offender institutions). Criminal justice data with older offenders, such as those from the evaluation of the NEW-ADAM programme (Bennett and Holloway, 2004), suggests that current gang members are more likely to have possessed a gun than non-gang members (59% vs. 21%) and to have used some weapon during an offence (63% vs. 20%).

The Tackling Gangs Action Programme (Home Office, 2008), and similar research from the Scottish Executive, clearly makes the point that gang violence is highly localised and that, according to police intelligence, there is a clear link between gangs and violence in Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, London and Glasgow. Approximately half of individuals identified as key gang members in these locations have a criminal conviction for a violent offence. Equally, these sources suggest very

diverse scenarios for each of these cities. In Manchester and Birmingham, for example, ethnic minority gangs are said to have evolved from drugs gangs which operated in the 1980s and 1990s with shootings linked to entrenched but highly fluctuating 'tit-for-tat' violence around issues of 'respect', whereas in Glasgow, the weapons of choice are knives, the gangs have a long history, sometimes going back to the 60s, are highly territorial and almost exclusively white.

Gun violence and shootings, in particular, seem to be closely tied to illegal drug markets and gangs (Hales et al., 2006). Although fatalities from firearms are exceptional in England and Wales (59 in 2006/2007, or 0.15 deaths per 100,000), precisely because of their rarity they raise significant public alarm. In England and Wales these disproportionately affect black young people as both perpetrators and victims. Both police intelligence and independent research suggest a close tie between gangs and firearm violence in affected communities (Bullock and Tilley, 2002). Qualitative research with gun offenders suggests that for many, conflicts around respect and status ('beef') are common and that gang structures 'serve to escalate and perpetuate violence' transcending individual incidents and becoming generalised (Hales et al., 2006: p. xiv). This research suggests that gangs often underlie a changing criminal culture in which guns are becoming increasingly significant.

Our ethnographic work in Research City offers consistent support to these observations. Gangs in the *Inner West* area of the city developed and armed themselves during the late 80s and 90s in a context in which predatory attacks to dealers, as well as dealing activities, were increasing. The two dominant gangs at the time initiated a cycle of retaliatory violence that continues today. We found a considerable degree of within-gang conflict. Most within- and between-gang disputes, as also reported about gangs elsewhere, emanated from interpersonal disputes regarding friends, family, and especially romantic relationships. Jealousy and the recovery of debt were important sources of this sometimes violent within-gang conflict. Supporting the notion of crime as social control (Black, 1983), a key source of violent conflict arose because of `vendettas' resulting from unsolved murders that occurred even a few decades prior to, as well as during our research. Disaffection from the police, partly as a result of historical and continuing patterns of police discrimination, results in the use of violence as a mechanism to resolve local interpersonal conflict (see as well Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003). In Research City, references to violence and exposure to violent events as victims, perpetrators and witness, was part of everyday conversation and of growing up for many of the young people we spoke to. In Inner West, this often involved references to gang related shooting events that occurred during our time in the field. Individuals affected by this exposure to violence often complained about the absolute lack of services, programs and treatment to deal with trauma associated with these experiences. In general, a public health approach to violence prevention is developing at a lower pace in the UK than in the US.

4. Discussion

5. References

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