

# Gangs Revisited: What's a Gang and What's Race Got to Do with It?

Politics and Policy into Practice

# Runnymede: Intelligence for a Multi-ethnic Britain

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# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>What's a Gang and What's Race Got to Do With It?</b> <i>Ian Joseph and Anthony Gunter</i>	<b>4</b>
<b>On Gangs and Race: A Rejoinder to Joseph and Gunter</b> <i>Simon Hallsworth and Tara Young</i>	<b>5</b>
<b>What Young People Say</b> <i>Femi Adekunle</i>	<b>23</b>

# Foreword

Gangs and youth violence are strangely fascinating topics for researchers, politicians, the media and the public. This perhaps reached its high tide mark with the Prime Minister declaring ‘a concerted, all-out war on gangs and gang culture’ in a speech at a youth centre in Witney, his Oxfordshire constituency in late August 2011 following the summer riots. Gangs remain very much on the political agenda. Yet the more we write and talk about them, the less we seem to understand. For this reason, ‘gangs’ are useful vehicles to identify how we negotiate the complexities around youth and crime.

There appears to be no consensus as what ‘gangs’ actually are or if they even exist, let alone how and why they form. However, as Runnymede has argued in previous publications – *A Tale of Two Englands: ‘Race’ and Violent Crime in the Press* and *(Re)Thinking Gangs: Gangs, Youth Violence and Public Policy* – it is clear that the public debates around gangs and youth violence are viewed and projected through the lens of race and ethnicity.

The August Riots have thrown this into stark contrast. It is hard to find a better example of this than the historian and broadcaster Dr David Starkey’s view that ‘the problem is that the whites have become black’ (Newsnight, BBC Television, 13 August 2011) – one of many examples within the right-wing press that linked crime with race and young people. We challenge this view, rather saying that a combination of high unemployment, low school attainment and an absence of a stake in society felt among young people in some communities was creating the conditions where conflict might erupt. Furthermore, in two recent reports (*Passing the Baton: Inter-generational Conceptions of Race and Racism in Birmingham* and *Fair’s Fair: Equality and Justice in the Big Society*), the Runnymede Trust had even named Croydon and Birmingham – sites of conflict in these riots – as potential flashpoints.

Joseph and Gunter are right to point out that liberal left anti-racists (Runnymede included) have failed to develop a convincing counter-argument to these cultural explanations popular with politicians and the right-wing press which link violent crime to young people. Perhaps consequently, we find ourselves in a position where anti-racist campaigners deny any role of culture in crime patterns, whereas the right-wing press revels in asserting over and over again that black cultures are inherently criminogenic. The authors helpfully suggest that we need to strike a balance between acknowledging the problem and not being hysterical about it. In order to find that balance, we need a frank debate on the relationship between structure and culture, and how particular aspects of this discussion have influenced policy for better or worse. This challenging paper throws up several important questions on where the debate is currently going, and why the authors think we have reached an impasse.

Perhaps finding solutions would be best done by an amended policing presence, ‘better’ parenting or whatever policy suits your ideological slant. Still, within this chorus of opinions, it is hard to hear the voice of young people themselves. There’s a lot of good work being done with disaffected youth, as the authors know well by virtue of being involved in this work themselves, but young people’s voices are conspicuously absent from policy making. Campaigns such as 99 Per Cent and the Stopwatch Youth Group are seeking to rectify this. These youth led campaigns show that when young people have a platform to voice their opinions, they demonstrate a nuanced understanding of why they and their peers do what they do. Whilst this need to understand does not condone, it does set a context for ensuring that events such as the riots in August do not happen again and lessons are learnt. It must be worth acknowledging that a way out of this impasse identified in these papers is to enable young people to do the talking and policy makers to listen to them.

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November 2011

# What's a 'Gang' and What's Race Got to Do with It?

Ian Joseph and Anthony Gunter

## Introduction

The media's current fixation with 'endemic' serious youth violence, particularly with regard to teenage fatalities and injuries from knife and gun wounds, has regenerated widespread anxiety about 'dangerous' black youth residing in Britain's major urban centres. Whilst it is true that weapon-enabled violence in our cities also involves Asian and white youth, statistical and anecdotal evidence do point to the fact that young black males – including those of African, Caribbean and Mixed heritage – are disproportionately affected both as perpetrators and victims.

Whilst a considerable amount of media time and research literature has been given over to this perceived pandemic, the purported 'gang industry experts' (consisting of largely liberal oriented policy makers and academics) have generally failed to make sense of the emergent and ongoing changes in the patterns of serious youth violence and the contemporary urban youth (or Road) culture that drives it. In addition these 'experts' have failed to reach any kind of consensus on whether or not gangs actually do exist within the UK context and how they might be defined (Aldridge and Medina, 2008; Alexander, 2008; Broadhurst et al., 2009; Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009; Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, 2010; Pickles, 2009; Pitts, 2008.). Consequently, crime and community safety strategies tasked with tackling gun and knife youth violence continually fail to make sense of the complex and nuanced local drivers behind the: escalating levels of cyclical retaliatory violence, falling age ranges of victims and perpetrators, and the increasing numbers of geographic or 'postcode' based conflicts. Unfortunately, it is our contention that current 'gang industry' thinking (and in turn official policy, policing and preventative practice) on urban youth violence, precludes to the most part the possibility of examining urban youth away from the 'gang'.

During the past six years or so, discussions on the UK gang have largely been dominated by two distinct schools of thought – John Pitts and his 'Reluctant Gangsters' thesis and Simon Hallsworth and Tara Young with their 'Three-tier Gang Typology'. According to Pitts (2008), during the past 18 years or so Britain has witnessed an unprecedented rise in violent youth gangs and associated gang-related street culture, whereby particular sections of the population have been disproportionately affected. As a consequence of changes in the global economy, in addition to neo-liberal government social and economic policies, many families residing in poor neighbourhoods have become trapped in a cycle of poverty and disadvantage. In particular black and minority young ethnic young people have found themselves 'immobilized' at the bottom of the economic ladder and cut adrift from the values of mainstream society. The acute social marginalization faced by black youth has seemingly resulted in their responding to their powerlessness with frustration, rage and the creation of alternative social and cultural values that promotes and normalizes gang membership and violence. Of particular interest, with regards to this paper, is the general model of youth 'collective delinquency' and gangs as articulated by Hallsworth and Young in their article 'Getting Real About Gangs' (Hallsworth and Young, 2004) and their report 'Urban Collectives: Gangs and Other Groups' (Hallsworth and Young, 2005). Their three-point gang typology has seemingly been more successful in capturing the imagination and permeating the thinking of mainstream policy, practice and policing; and indeed we shall be discussing (and critiquing) their general model of UK gangs in more detail later on in this paper. Fundamentally, however, the positivist theoretical underpinnings of both schools of thought, has in our opinion, created a gang industry that has not only overdefined the problem but has continued in:

- a) the pathologization and essentialization of black youth as a peculiar social problem; and
- b) unwittingly helped focus policy and practice away from effective prevention.

This paper will largely concern itself with critically assessing the substantive ideas that have developed in recent times on serious youth ('gang-related') violence in the UK, and examines how race and ethnicity – with reference to black male youth – has largely been down-played by policy makers and academics ('gang-industry'), and hysterically overplayed by the media. The refusal on the part of the UK 'gang-industry' to confront full on the sensitive issue of race and violent youth crime in urban areas, apart from a cursory acknowledgment of poverty and relative deprivation, has created a vacuum where right wing media commentators have begun to dominate and frame the public debate; and in so doing continue to stigmatize and problematize black male youth as the perennial 'criminal other' (Keith, 1993). This paper has an intended operational focus that attempts to reframe debates around race/ethnicity and violent crime in ways that give more balanced insight to the drivers of contemporary urban youth violence in order that policy and practice interventions might better be able to meet the needs of those vulnerable at-risk young people.

## Serious Youth Violence

The growing concern about the rise in gang violence and the use of weapons, particularly knives, alongside the perception that youth crime and anti-social behaviour is 'out of control', has resulted in a number of national and local government initiatives aimed particularly at tackling youth exclusion in deprived neighbourhoods.

During its period in office the former New Labour Government introduced a dizzying array of programmes and initiatives aimed at tackling youth crime and the other associated 'problems' of marginalized youth; best highlighted by the introduction of its 'ambitious and far reaching' Youth Crime Action Plan (YCAP) in 2008 (HM Government, 2008). In London Mayor Boris Johnson also made the issue of tackling serious youth violence a key priority of his administration as evidenced by the launch in 2008 of his 'Time for Action' strategy document on preventing youth violence (Greater London Authority, 2008). However, before going on to briefly look at the statistical evidence as to the nature and extent of violent youth offending, it is important that we flag up the fact that – notwithstanding the pain and suffering inflicted on families and communities – youth homicides caused by knife or gun wounds make up a very small proportion of overall violent crime statistics: 'less than 0.5% of recorded crime

involves guns... levels of knife crime reflected in the British Crime Survey have remained fairly stable at around 6-7%' (Squires et al., 2008).

Furthermore the widespread concern about the escalating nature of youth on youth homicides caused by knife wounds ignores the evidence which indicates that most children/young people are killed by their parents. During the reporting period 2008/09, there were 50 homicide victims aged 16 or under and 56 per cent were killed by their parents (Povey et al., 2009).

## A London Perspective<sup>1</sup>

The wider discussion of serious youth violence and gangs is by no means restricted to London, as there are a number of cities that are widely perceived as 'gangland hotspots' overrun with gun and knife wielding young males. Squires et al.'s (2008) report on gun and knife crime across the UK – particularly focusing on five major cities – concluded that the problems of violent youth offending tend to be mainly concentrated in the most socially and economically deprived urban areas. In four of the English cities examined in the report, it was found that young black males were disproportionately affected as victims of weapon-related violence. Even in 'Liverpool where victims of violence were predominantly white, victims of minority ethnic groups were over-represented' (Squires et al., 2008: 106). In London there were 103 teenage homicides (as a result of either a knife or gun) between January 2006 and July 2010. During this four year period the high point was 2008 with 30 youth fatalities, a figure which was cut by more than 50 per cent the following year in 2009 when there were 13 teenage murders; as of July 2010 there had been 14 young male homicide victims. It is also clear that teenage homicides are not evenly spread across the city, but rather tend to be concentrated in a small number of wards that score highly on all indexes of social and economic deprivation. Furthermore, unpublished government figures indicate that between April 2007 and August 2010 three quarters (75%) of homicide victims aged 10 to 19 were of black (African, Caribbean or mixed) heritage. According to Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) statistics for the reporting period July 2009 to June 2010, the number of victims of serious youth violence<sup>2</sup> in the London Metropolitan Police Area was 6874. Whilst there is no serious youth violence data available before April 2008, there is data available for the period April 2008 to March 2009 which allows for a one year comparative analysis. As such during the financial year period 2009/10 there was a slight

(1.6 per cent) increase in the number of serious youth violence victims in London on the previous financial year.

There is no specific data – available for inclusion in this paper – with regards to the racial/ethnic profile of either the victims or perpetrators of serious youth violence in London for the period 2008/10; however, unpublished official government figures indicate that whilst black 10–19 year-olds in London comprise 21 per cent of the general youth population, they make up 30 per cent of the young offender population. Not surprisingly, of all those children and young people in custody during the reporting period 2008/09, 35 per cent of young men were from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (Tye, 2009). Whilst there is sufficient evidence to support the view that young black males are unfairly targeted by the police via stop and search and then subsequently excessively punished by the state – which might go some way to explain their over-representation within all areas of the youth justice system – there is nonetheless widespread acknowledgement from academics, policy makers, practitioners and community groups that young black males are disproportionately affected by serious youth violence within London, both as victims and perpetrators. The recent Greater London Authority Young Londoner's Survey Report (2009:4) reported that 'there is a striking level of concern about young Londoners' own safety particularly with relation to violent crime and their own peer groups'. The report further goes on to highlight that young black people are 'statistically significantly more likely than their counterparts to cite a number of reasons why they feel unsafe in their local area' (Greater London Authority, 2009: 31). One quarter (26%) of young Black Londoners felt unsafe due to gun crime and nearly two fifths of them (38%) reported that they were concerned about knife crime.

## Race/Ethnicity, and Representations of Youth Violence

Sveinsson (2008:3) in his study examining race and violent crime in the media maintains that 'notions of race still tint the lens through which criminality is both viewed and projected....[where] violent crime is perceived to be endemic', within the youth populations of particular minority ethnic communities. However, he further goes on to assert that whilst the media is overly fixated with reporting on black youth gun and knife violence, it fails to

discuss issues of racism, structural inequality and relative deprivation that drive such offending in minority ethnic communities. The arguments put forward by Sveinsson (2008), whilst illuminating overall, tend however to highlight the main fault line inherent with liberal academic and policy driven thinking around the race and crime nexus; namely, a readiness to highlight structural bias and inequality whilst at the same time failing to confront the specific cultural contexts to crime and victimization within BAME communities, due to the wider political and ideological implications. Indeed, UK youth criminologists are reluctant to tackle the 'criminological taboo' that is black youth and violent crime, because they are mindful about creating further 'false pathologies' that lead to the continuation of age old stereotypes of the black criminal 'other' (Keith, 1993). Whilst this is understandable to a certain extent, it also further highlights the current and perennial limitations of academic research on black British youth. Rather than solely focusing on black youth cultures (via a small number of seminal studies in 1980s and 1990s) or black youth criminality (as was the case in the 1970s and 1980s), more longitudinal research studies are needed that attempt to holistically explore young black people's lives.

In Gunter's (2010) study, issues of violent crime are addressed as part of a broader analysis of the impact and significance of 'Road culture' and 'badness' on young black people's identities, lifestyle choices, experiences and transitions. Road culture is a black influenced youth culture that is played out in public settings 'on road' (streets and housing estates), where the young people choose to spend the majority of their leisure time. Whilst many of the young people spoke about 'being on road' and 'catching joke' with their friends, it was only those young people involved in 'badness' who were referred to as 'living on road'. According to the young people in Gunter's study, the term badness refers to a social world characterized by display of violent behaviour, criminal activity and low-level drug dealing. Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009) in their article on gun-related violence in the UK recount how many of the respondents, who featured in a number of their independently conducted research projects, regularly used the term 'on road'. All of the respondents viewed 'life on road' as a place where violence and its threat was everywhere and the choices available were:

*... stark: survive or become a victim... Violence can emerge over perceived honour slights, territorial disputes between gangs and is endemic*

*within the retail sector of the illegal drug market which is where many young men 'on road' sought a living.* (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009: 366)

However, whilst acknowledging its existence and significance Hallsworth and Silverstone fail to provide any detailed socio-economic or cultural analysis as to why some groups of young black men are attracted to 'life on road'. A further example of the current liberal orthodoxy prevalent amongst gang researchers (or researchers of 'troublesome youth groups'), is the recent London Probation Trust commissioned scoping report of youth gangs in London (Stevens et al., 2010: 7-10). Drawing on recent UK research this report argues against viewing the current youth crime problem as a moral panic, and instead argues that young people's group offending and gang involvement should be seen within the broader context of social exclusion and 'structurally determined powerlessness'.<sup>3</sup> The authors also refute the assumed linkages currently being made in the media between serious youth violence and race; rather they assert that the ethnic composition of gangs in Britain's urban centres 'tend to reflect the neighbourhoods in which young people live'. Throughout the report the authors<sup>4</sup> again fail to confront or explore the attractions and seductions of crime, and badness amongst some young black males growing up in Britain's poor neighbourhoods.

Such reticence to look at cultural factors with regards to black youth violence is not shared by those in the news media, as highlighted by an article in the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper (Palmer, 2010) headlined 'Official police statistics have shed fresh light on the link between crime and race in London' and goes on to 'authoritatively' assert that whereas only 12 per cent of London's male population are black they nevertheless commit 54 per cent of all the street crimes, 46 per cent of all knife crimes and more than 50 per cent of the gun crimes in London. Implicit in this article is an assumed understanding about the negative impact of 'gangsta rap' culture on urban black youth, which is deemed to be the root cause for the recent escalation in serious violence. On the face of it, the statistics upon which the *Daily Telegraph* article is framed seem quite compelling and lend substance to the claims made by right wing commentators such as the former BBC Radio 4 Today editor Rod Liddle, that most violent crimes and sexual offences are committed by young black males (Liddle, 2009). However, on further inspection the statistics presented in the

*Daily Telegraph* article, purporting to demonstrate the link between race and violent crime in London, relate to those 'proceeded against':

*This includes those prosecuted in court, whether convicted or acquitted; those issued with a caution, warning or penalty notice; those the Crown Prosecution Service decided not to charge; and those whose crimes were 'taken into consideration' after a further offence.* (*Daily Telegraph*, 27 June 2010)

Consequently, such statistics perhaps tell us more about the biased and unjust practices of the police and other agencies of the criminal justice process than they do about the offending behaviour of young black males (see particularly, Bowling and Phillips 2007; Crown Prosecution Service, 2003; Sharp and Atherton, 2007; Sveinsson, 2010; Wilson and Rees, 2006).

Whilst the UK 'gang industry' argue amongst themselves about gang definitions and talk about 'structurally determined powerlessness', black community activists and academics such as Tony Sewell (1997; and numerous newspaper articles) reject 'politically correct' arguments such as this, and assert that the reasons for young black males' social alienation and under-achievement comes as a result of their adoption of a destructive and violent youth subculture which is compounded by the absence of black fathers actively playing a role in their lives. Of course there is a large body of literature by critical cultural theorists of racism and crime who have taken issue with the notion of 'criminal' black youth sub cultures, and argue that black youth are unfairly labelled by the media as criminals, and then actually turned into criminals by the police, law courts and immigration authorities, as a result of institutionalized racism. Clearly, as Sveinsson (2008) illustrates, the media is overly fixated with black male youth violent offending today, as it was in the 1970s and 1980s with moral panics concerning mugging (Gilroy, 1987; Hall et al., 1978) and inner city riots (Keith, 1993). This obsession with the black youth folk devil further obscures the fact that white youth, with regards to ethnicity and class, are anonymous in discussions about ethnicity and crime (Webster, 2008: 294), even though 'whites' according to self report studies 'disproportionately offend compared to other ethnic groups'. In truth, these circular academic and media discussions should not blind us to the fact that retaliatory gun and knife violence impacts disproportionately upon black youth, and discussions about relative deprivation and structural determinism – without taking into account the formation of locally situated black



youth cultures and friendship networks – cannot by themselves explain this disproportionality.

## Gangs, Subcultures and Troublesome Youth Groups

Following years of uncertainty and contested discussions as to the existence, nature and definitions on gangs in the UK, the Policing and Crime Act (PCA) 2009 that came into effect on 31 January 2011 is perhaps the first piece of legislation that specifically makes mention of, and clearly attempts to define, gang-related violence. The Act itself gives new powers to police offices and local authorities to take out injunctions as a way of preventing serious violence, break down gang culture, and provide opportunities for multi-agency gang prevention programmes. Within this legislation 'gang-related violence' is defined as 'actual violence' or a 'threat of violence' which occurs in the course of, or is otherwise related to, the activities of a group that:

- a) consists of at least three people;
- b) uses a name, emblem or colour or has any other characteristic that enables its members to be identified by others as a group; and
- c) is associated with a particular area.

The PCA (2009) legal definition offers a problematic understanding of what a gang is and the authors fear that it could easily lead to groups of young people hanging about in public spaces and 'doing nothing' (Corrigan, 1979) becoming criminalized. This problematic piece of legislation has largely arisen as a result of the recent explosion of academic and policy-driven research on gangs and urban youth violence in the UK, and has major implications for generic and targeted community-based work undertaken with 'socially excluded' black youth.

The term 'gang', although a contested and imprecise construct, is permeated with social meaning that both expresses fears and moral panics about violent crime that are fuelled by race-based stereotyped distortions (Alexander, 2008). There has been a longstanding academic resistance to the existence of gangs in UK, indeed Campbell et al. (1982: 77) assert that during the post Second World War period America has produced 'a wealth of gangs' whereas Great Britain has been 'the home of at least five major working-class youth subcultures... with little evidence of structured gangs'. Indeed whilst gang research

thrived in America, class-based subcultural analyses of youth in society dominated British youth studies during the post War period.<sup>5</sup> During the past thirty years or so, mainstream youth studies in the UK has largely been focused on the changing socio-economic context of young people's lives, and in particular the post-16 'school to work transitions' of poor and working class youth.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, contemporary youth cultural studies have tended to concern themselves with young people's music cultures, tribes, scenes, identities and individual lifestyles and consumption patterns.<sup>7</sup> The recent interest in youth violence and gangs by academics and policy makers has strangely failed to engage with contemporary youth studies but has rather preoccupied itself with the much narrower concerns and agendas of criminology, policing and community safety.

The beginnings of the UK gang industry, and corresponding discernible shift away from mainstream youth studies, owes a great deal to the work of the Eurogang Network (see for example, Decker and Weerman, 2005; Klein et al., 2001: 7-10; Klein et al., 2006). During the past decade, this work has sought to challenge European academics' denials as to the existence of street gangs in Europe 'because the gang patterns don't fit the American patterns of highly structured, cohesive violent gangs' as portrayed by Hollywood. Paradoxically, according to the authors, European understandings of American gangs are outdated and based on the pre-1970s classic texts of Thrasher, (1927), Cohen (1955), Cloward and Ohlin (1961), etc; rather than on the plethora of studies undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s which have documented the massive changes in, and proliferation of, American street gangs. Most significantly the Eurogang participants were able to agree on:

*... a consensus nominal definition of street gangs. A street gang (or a troublesome youth group corresponding to a street gang elsewhere) is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose own identity includes involvement in illegal activity.*  
(Klein et al., 2006: 6)

Hallsworth and Young (2004; 2005: 62/68) continue with the British academic tradition of denying the existence of gangs, but significantly they argue that the UK is 'home to a number of different' urban collectives that exhibit 'gang like features', and indeed many of these delinquent collectives 'pose risks and dangers to themselves and others'. Furthermore they go on to define the gang as:

*... a relatively durable, predominately 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.*

Hallsworth and Young's definition interestingly shares remarkable similarities to the Eurogang Network definition with its reference to durability, street orientation and specifically a distinguishable youth group identity and that centres on violent and criminal activity. This definition has, however, attracted a good deal of criticism (see Gordon, 2000; Howell, 2007; Katz and Jackson-Jacobs 2004; Marshall et al., 2005; Pickles, 2009) with the intensity of much of this criticism focusing on the way in which these structural characteristics have contributed to an 'over-definition', and for some commentators an exaggerated claim as to the scale of the problem in the UK.

Similarly it is our contention that this particular re-analysis of the British gang situation has subsequently created a space whereby parallels could start to be made with the American gang problem, and thus heralding the official birth of the UK gang industry. This notion of 'delinquent collectives' has subsequently come to be a primary reference point for a new wave of thinking about violent urban youth crime and has become the cornerstone in conceptualizing what the 'gang' is within the British context and has informed the current official view. This re-analysis of the 'gang' has influenced local crime prevention strategies and has been used extensively by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), forming the basis of its review of the scale of gang activity in London. In 2007, using Hallsworth and Young's (2005) definition, it estimated that there were 171 gangs operating across London. Furthermore, an 'erroneous interpretation' of Hallsworth and Young's gang typology:

*... one that has gained currency among some practitioners, is that it presents a continuum in which the peer group is a threshold or springboard to gang involvement. (Pitts, 2008: 18)*

## Urban Collectives and the Three-tier Gang Typology: A Critique

Hallsworth and Young's (2004; 2005<sup>8</sup>) interpretation of the UK 'gang' situation and collective youth violence has helped to re-define official policy and practice (policing and gang intervention programmes) with regards to serious youth

violence and group offending within urban neighbourhoods. Two of the key remits of their research report was tasked with:

1. Identifying delinquent group/gang structure and organization as it may be observed to operate in the UK;
2. Assessing what works and what can be done to reduce the risks and dangers posed by gangs. (Hallsworth and Young, 2005: 9)

However, we believe the conclusions of the study – with regards to the authors' understanding of urban youth violence – to be problematic and fundamentally flawed, and that the corresponding official policy, practice and policing initiatives to be similarly misguided and misinformed. The cornerstone of Hallsworth and Young's gang definition relates to their development of a 'general model' of what they characterize as 'delinquent street collectives'. Within this 'general model' there are a varying number of collectives (within which young people might be drawn into) that are positioned along a continuum, each with their own discrete organizational and structural characteristics. These collectives are identified as organized crime groups, street gangs and peer groups. Careful to note that there may not be American style gangs, the UK has different types of street collectives, some of which have gang-like features. A corollary of differing levels of involvement with violence and crime determines that each collective poses varying levels of risk and danger, both to the public at-large and to other rival gang members. Therefore, rather than simply building a typology of discrete collectives they instead use the idea of differing risk to create a layered structure, sifting the collectives into a pyramidal hierarchy. Each collective therefore corresponds to a level in the risk pyramid with violence and crime, with offending behaviour (criminality) characterized as the most significant and defining feature. The higher a collective is located in the pyramid, the greater the level of risk and danger posed, correspondingly the pyramid structure includes a small number of organized criminal groups at the top and a relatively large number of peer groups at the bottom.

The basic logic behind Hallsworth and Young's three types of 'delinquent street collective', is in our opinion flawed, as this re-definition of UK gangs unwittingly problematizes the day-to-day activities of groups of young people hanging about 'on Road' and 'doing nothing'. It is our contention that any attempt to characterize the behaviours of

groups of young people solely (or largely) through their structural characteristics will inevitably lead to some measure of inappropriate labelling, in which benign youth activity can be unfairly interpreted as deviant or anti-social; and therefore subject to punitive control. Unfortunately, the primarily criminological and positivist traditions on which these current concepts are premised, has resulted in a relentless – and in our opinion – misguided search for structural characteristics that attempt to define and locate the ‘gang’; but in so doing fails to reflect the interplay between those complex local factors and nuances that are oftentimes the cause of interpersonal and collective youth violence (see Gunter, 2010; Sanders, 2005). Consequently, the authors of this paper conclude that the current ‘gang’ preoccupations of policy makers and academics have unwittingly consorted to signify the everyday and mundane activities of young people (many of whom are black) growing up in deprived urban neighbourhoods as inherently deviant and gang-related; when in reality for the vast majority they are not.

The demarcation of youth peer groupings into different types of delinquent collectives, such as peer groups and street gangs, is a rather challenging (and misguided) undertaking. As such demarcations of the types of youth ‘gangs’ are based on assumptions about young people’s involvement in, and commitment to either, a) a subterranean lifestyle characterized by crime and violence, or, b) petty crime and anti-social behaviour. However, in our opinion it is not necessarily possible to make clear distinctions between young people based on ‘criminal activity’, or degrees of involvement and commitment to crime, violence and anti-social behaviour; correspondingly the dividing line separating ‘delinquents’ and ‘non-delinquents’ is seen by some commentators as being non-existent.

Indeed, it is much more common to see behaviour changing with time, place, mood, opportunity and friends and longitudinal patterns of offending varying with age and need. Young people are therefore much more likely to drift ‘between convention and crime responding in turn to the demands of each, flirting now with one, now with the other, but postponing commitment’ (Matza, 1964: 28). Most importantly, as we will return to argue on the next section, current ideas provide little scope in which to take account of contingent human episodes, unpredictable daily events and unscripted social processes that constitute the fabric of social life. The three-tier model

fundamentally ignores the importance of culture and non-illicit activity in explaining youth behaviour, but instead relies upon on a crude criminogenic typology that makes sweeping depictions about young people’s peer group activities.

In conclusion, we maintain that the prescriptive and static definitions presented within the ‘general model’ of Hallsworth and Young’s UK street ‘gangs’ fails to reflect the complex, dynamic, and nuanced realities of contemporary ‘Road Life’. It is quite apparent that this model is not able to clearly define at what point [some] young people’s involvement in petty criminal activity (described as ‘episodic, intermittent and opportunistic’) associated with the ‘peer group’ ends, and their commitment to more serious crime and violence begins. Interestingly, will all of the associates of the peer group be expected to engage in low level crime and anti-social behaviour that is sporadic and opportunistic? More significantly, is it not possible for peer group associates to also be key members of street gangs (and vice versa) and so be also involved in ‘serious assault’ and ‘acquisitive crime’? Lastly, it is our main contention that the three-tier gang model does not take sufficient account of the complex and dynamic friendship patterns that constitute life on ‘Road’ (see Gunter, 2010; Joseph, 2010); and as such is a largely unhelpful conceptual tool by which to fully understand serious youth violence and group offending within urban neighbourhoods.

## The Three-tier Gang Typology: Politics and Policy into Practice

The Department for Children, Schools and Families’ practice guidance document ‘Safeguarding Children and Young People who may be affected by Gang Activity’ (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010) is addressed to those frontline practitioners, senior managers and policy makers who work:

*... in voluntary and statutory services across the children’s workforce, whether in social care, crime prevention, the police, prisons, probation, health or education. It should help you to understand the nature of risk that gang activity poses to children, how signs of gang involvement may manifest themselves and provide guidance on dealing with these issues. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010: 3)*

Significantly, this practice guidance document

draws extensively on Hallsworth and Young's (2004) model of 'collective delinquency' and employs the concept of distinguishable types of collectives to propose a three-tier approach of scaled interventions. Based on the three-tier gang model this policy into practice publication proposes that the least at-risk peer groups (those young people seemingly exposed to low-level risk factors) require nothing more urgent than universal youth programmes. However, the guidance document goes on to suggest that as a young person progresses upward through the risk pyramid with their 'increasing' likelihood of gang involvement, then direct supportive interventions will be necessary until finally enforcement, public protection and safeguarding measures are put in place to tackle the offending behaviour of those engaged in street gangs and criminal gangs. The three-tier model, not unsurprisingly, underpins the Metropolitan Police Service's (MPS) operational strategy and practice with regard to tackling serious youth violence in London. In its guidance document *Gangs, Group Offending and Weapons: Serious Youth Violence Toolkit* (Metropolitan Police Service, 2008), the MPS establishes a set of definitions on the 'gang' for police officers, youth justice practitioners and other partners across the children and young people's workforce. The 'Toolkit' document maintains that the definitions have been formulated so as to allow for the focusing on 'criminal behaviours displayed as opposed to the existence of the group itself', thereby avoiding the whole scale criminalization of large swathes of young people. According then to the MPS a 'gang' is defined as:

1. A group of criminals who band together for mutual protection and profit;
2. Any group of adolescents (particularly those seen to engage in delinquent behaviour);
3. A group of people who associate regularly on a social basis. (Metropolitan Police Service, 2008: 21)

Adopting Hallsworth and Young's (2004, 2005) three-tier gang typology, the 'Toolkit' rejects the one-size fits all definitional approach, and argues that the 'gang label' by itself is an inadequate conceptual tool with which to describe or understand serious youth violence and group offending behaviour. Rather by referring to the 'pyramid of risk in relation to groups and their activities' the MPS definition incorporates: the peer group at the base of the pyramid and represents the least risk, the street gang in the middle and organized criminal network at the pinnacle as this

group represents the most serious risk.

The 'Toolkit', whilst making clear distinctions between the different groups and associated activities, acknowledges the 'grey areas' that exist between groups and the fact that rating risk involves a certain degree of subjectivity – hence the need to focus on criminal activities as opposed to group characteristics. Whilst this reading of the gang attempts to move away from a highly prescriptive definition of gang activity, without careful application this more open-ended criterion can open the way for the type of criminalization it seeks to avoid. In our view, in failing to provide any behavioural reference points as to what constitutes 'delinquent behaviour', the subjective decision-making that it warns against can be used disproportionately against black youth peer groups, whereby they are perceived to be street gangs. Furthermore, the authors of this paper are of the opinion that the definitional flowchart (see Metropolitan Police Service, 2008: 23, Figure 2.2) fails to:

- a) articulate or explain the migrations in and out of organized criminal networks, gangs and peer groups; or
- b) provide explanations as to the practical drivers of these movements.

The inherent difficulties and contestations of gang typologies was recognized at an early stage by the Home Office, and in recent years have tended to adopt a mixed response to the problem. Its earliest definition (see Home Office, 2006), built on findings from previous research (see Sharp et al., 2004), avoided using the term 'gang' altogether, choosing instead to refer to 'delinquent youth groups'. Interestingly, the way this is defined is in many ways similar to that of the classic 'gang' and draws heavily on structural and group characteristics that included:

- Durability – the group has existed for three months or more;
- Acceptance of delinquent activity – the group believes it is acceptable to do illegal things;
- Involvement in group level delinquency or criminal activity – the group has engaged in delinquent or criminal behaviour together;
- Structure – the group has at least one structural feature (name/place/leader/rules). (Sharp et al., 2004: 1-2)

Of course this one-size fits all definitional approach

to 'gangs' is not without its critics, and perhaps as a result, the Home Office in the ensuing years maintained an ambivalence with regard to the government's official public position that is not made clear until its guidance paper on *Tackling Gangs* (2009). The uncertain official position on the gang problematic is continued in *Groups, Gangs and Weapons* published by the Youth Justice Board (2007), and is an attempt to ascertain the existence and prevalence of UK street gangs; although ultimately this study mainly comprises conflicting perspectives. Based on a national sample it suggests on the one hand that 'gangs' are essentially just another type of peer group and that overstating their existence should be avoided.

The guidance document then moves on to assert that 'gang' activity is mostly restricted to young adults aged 18 and over, with children and young people who fall under the jurisdiction of the youth justice system being largely unaffected. However, further on into the document we are informed that gangs are becoming more pervasive and that they were found to be in existence within three of the four (urban) sites where the fieldwork was undertaken. Within *Groups, Gangs and Weapons*, gang involvement is characterized by:

- a) serious offending;
- b) involved young teenagers as well as young adults;
- c) was tied to the local drug markets and;
- d) would almost invariably involve the use of violence.

In conclusion the YJB report argued that locally developed 'gang' prevention and exit strategies should focus primarily on serious delinquent youth groups. The Home Office, in its *Tackling Gangs: A Practical Guide for Local Authorities, CDRPS and Other Partners* (Home Office, 2009), attempted to set out the New Labour Government's position on youth gangs in more detail. At the time of publication, the matter of definition was still keenly contested and perhaps as a result it highlights the importance of developing situationally relevant responses suggesting that partnerships locally agree a definition.

However, this practical guidance document makes explicit reference to those official definitions used in other government initiatives, surreptitiously suggesting prescribed ready-made options that might inform those locally determined definitions. The guidance gives clear indication on what definitions should contain and in so doing validates

its suggested 'three-tier approach' to dealing with gang related activity.

Perhaps the most comprehensive review of the UK gang situation to date, and the subsequent Governmental and Third Sector policy and practice responses, was undertaken by the Policy Report by the Centre for Social Justice's Gangs Working Group. The published policy report *Dying to Belong: An In-depth Review of Street Gangs in Britain* (Pickles, 2009) firstly articulates some of the challenges and difficulties that have beset those academics who have attempted to locate and define the UK 'gang'. It then moves on to assert that the academy's failure to arrive at a standard definition has resulted in confusion as to what constitutes a gang, which has resulted in the label being inappropriately applied to groups of young people engaging in any type of anti-social behaviour. Unfortunately, the report then proceeds to recommend that a 'standardized definition' of a gang should be universally adopted as a precursor to coherent and consistent interventions. The definition that the Gang Working Group proposed should be adopted for Britain was:

*A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who (1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, (2) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence, (3) identify with or lay claim over territory, (4) have some form of identifying structural feature, and (5) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs.* (Pickles, 2009: 48)

Whilst proposing the adoption of a standardized definition, the report's policy recommendations note that 'gangs are disparate' and that a 'one-size fits all' anti-gang prevention strategy will ultimately be unsuccessful. Other recommendations include the setting up of a Gangs Prevention Unit, operating at the heart of Government within the Cabinet Office; the identifying of Gang Prevention Zones within small geographical localities; a targeted zero-tolerance multi-agency enforcement approach on all offences be undertaken as part of the strategy for ensuring a cessation of violence; increased stop and searches, knife arches and sweeps done in consultation with local community and faith leaders and youth workers; more widespread use of Civil Orders (ASBOs, Gang Activity Desistance Orders) to disrupt gang activity. All of the proposed policy recommendations are quite contentious, as they hinge upon those in authority – such as police officers, housing officers, community wardens and such like – subjectively and 'correctly' identifying these highly localized

and disparate street gangs by applying the Working Groups standardized definition. The report fails to make the crucial link between friendship networks and 'Life on Road' and how this informs youth group behaviour.

Rather this policy document, like much of the gang industry thinking over the past decade, takes its cues from a checklist of characteristics that seeks to distinguish different groups of young people, ranging from peer groups, street gangs through to international criminal networks. In doing so, it aligns itself to a policy approach that regardless as to how generalized or broad ranging a gang typology it might present, ultimately it will only type-caste, label and inappropriately criminalize the behaviour of certain groups of young people.

## Conclusion

We have so far argued that any attempt to characterize youth group activity solely (or largely) through their structural characteristics will lead to some measure of inappropriate labelling, in which mundane and benign youth activity can be unfairly interpreted as deviant or anti-social. The narrow criminological and perspectives within which these current concepts are premised, has resulted in a relentless – and in our opinion – misguided search for structural characteristics in an attempt to define and locate the 'gang'; but in doing so fail to reflect the complex local factors and nuances that are oftentimes the cause of interpersonal and collective youth violence (see Gunter 2010; and Sanders, 2005). We argue therefore that the current structurally determinist preoccupations of policy makers and academics unwittingly consort to signify everyday and mundane activities of young people (many of whom are black) as inherently deviant and gang-related; when in reality for the vast majority they are not.

Fundamentally, in our opinion, the recent re-defining and re-locating of the UK gang and urban collectives has, in our opinion, had a profound effect on the direction and content of policy and practice tasked with addressing the increasing levels of serious youth violence within many poor urban neighbourhoods. In particular the ambiguities inherent within Hallsworth and Young's 'three-tier gang typology' has in our opinion left the door wide open for policy makers, the police and practitioners to 'erroneously interpret' and criminalize groups of young people hanging about on Road and 'doing nothing', or viewing such groups as a springboard to much more serious offending and violence (e.g. the 'street gang' or organized criminal network'). Interestingly, Hallsworth and Young (2008)

in their more recent article 'Gang Talk and Gang Talkers: A Critique' rail against a 'gang-industry' – which includes politicians, policy makers, the media and academics – that their own earlier research unfortunately helped to create. These 'gang talkers' largely maintain that the current escalation and proliferation of urban gang violence in the UK can only be controlled by police crackdowns and punitive gang prevention initiatives. However, the majority of:

*... 'street-level' violence was low level and appeared to be concerned with what we came to identify as volatile peer groups. These we identified as groups that engaged in an array of delinquent behaviours, including violence, but for whom crime and delinquency is not intrinsic to the identity and practice of the group as the gang as it is typically defined today (Hallsworth and Young, 2008: 181).*

Whilst we are in agreement with Hallsworth and Young's recent pronouncement that most urban youth violence is not 'gang-related', we reject their suggestion about 'volatile peer groups'; as in our opinion this is just another description of a 'gang' even though the authors in question refuse to define it as such. The profound implicit ambiguities inherent within their 'three-tier' model of delinquent urban youth collectives (Hallsworth and Young, 2004, 2005), supposes that each type of group has discernible characteristics that can be easily located in everyday life, when in reality it is impossible to do so. Furthermore their volatile peer groups thesis suggests that although different groups of young people look the same, commit similar offences and engage in retaliatory territorial violence, somehow some of the peer groups can be super-sized in ways that make it possible to class them as being a street gang.

Significantly, the three-tier model fails to take into consideration issues of race and ethnicity with regards to urban youth violence, even though black young people are disproportionately affected both as victims and perpetrators. Generally the gang-industry (apart from Pitts, 2008) see this disproportionality as being a consequence of social marginalization and the fact that black youth tend to reside in the poorest neighbourhoods. However, we argue that this unwillingness to explore the Road cultural, as well as the macro structural, drivers of black youth offending and victimization, has created a space whereby the right-wing media have continued to dominate (and racialize) the public debate on gangs and urban youth violence; through the sensationalist characterizations of violent black young gangs fuelled by grime and rap music.

Unfortunately, academic research, government policy, youth work/youth crime prevention practice and policing have largely failed to get a handle on contemporary urban Road youth culture. Friendship networks and social interactions are central to Road life creating the unique local conditions – in conjunction with those broader macro structural constraints alongside the influences of expressive black Atlantic cultures (Gilroy, 1993) – whereby petty disputes and rivalries can only be resolved through interpersonal youth violence. In essence the criminological and community safety discourses of the 'gang-industry' needs to be integrated within the broader youth studies approaches of subcultures and transitions. Indeed such an approach might help to shift academic and official thinking away from always looking to locate urban youth violence within a narrow gang paradigm, which in turn misinforms policing and youth work practice. Furthermore, researchers need to engage in prolonged periods of ethnographic field work if they are to:

- a) better understand the relational processes and friendship patterns that determine young people's social networks and in particular their areas-based conflicts; and
- b) fully examine and contextualize the whole range of mundane and spectacular behaviours that characterize Road life and street culture.

It is clear that much of the youth violence tends to be located in those urban localities that score highly on all indexes of social deprivation; however, it would be wrong to fall back on a crude economic determinism as Pitts (2008) does with his 'reluctant gangsters' thesis. This theory maintains that a disproportionate number of black youth are socially excluded and consequently they turn their frustration and rage upon themselves. However, Pitts' argument only serves to take us back in time (academically speaking) to when black youth were 'essentialized' and portrayed as the pathological and criminal other. Also the Social Exclusion agenda explicit in Pitts' work (and adopted by the previous New Labour Government) fails to say exactly what the issue is; namely that poverty and deep rooted social and economic inequities within British society require radical social policy interventions (Goldson and Muncie, 2006; Rogowski, 2010; Smith, 2007) and not necessarily regeneration programmes and youth crime and gang prevention programmes that tinker around the edges.

Lastly, this so-called gang and urban youth violence epidemic needs to be viewed within the long history

of: 'what to be done about the problem of poor/working class youth' and the message for those working with young people, according to Jeffs and Smith (1999), is that informal educators should not and cannot be expected to provide quick fixes for the moral panics of the day (whatever they might be at any given period in time).

In conclusion, what does this paper mean for those who are on the frontline working with young people deemed 'at-risk', disaffected' and vulnerable to 'gang involvement'? Unfortunately, the continuing precarious financial position of youth services and Third Sector agencies working within communities with children, young people and families has meant they have had to be prepared to jump through whatever funding hoops are available to continue their work. Consequently, they have been compelled to accept labels (and work agendas) such as 'disaffected' and 'at risk' youth and 'gang intervention programmes' rather than challenge them. During the past three decades universal youth provision has been cut and replaced by piecemeal and short term funded targeted diversionary work linked to youth offending, youth inclusion, and gang intervention programmes. This agenda has unwittingly put out a message that only 'bad kids' need to be worked with, thus in one stroke stigmatizing some young people whilst ignoring the majority of others. Rather than focusing on specialist youth intervention projects and evermore punitive policing practice, this paper calls for the development of youth provision and formal/informal education projects that attempt to meet the holistic needs, and raise the aspirations, of *all* young people growing up in Britain's poor urban neighbourhoods.

## Notes

1. Source for this section (unless otherwise stated) gleaned from unpublished data provided by the Greater London Authority.
2. Serious Youth Violence is defined by the Metropolitan Police Service as any offence of Most Serious Violence or Weapon Enabled Crime. Serious Youth Violence is a count of victims rather than a count of offences.
3. Hallsworth and Young (2005: 5) locate extreme forms of youth group delinquency within the broader context of 'multiple deprivation and extreme marginalization'.
4. This argument is symptomatic of the failure of gang-experts to address these issues or explicitly refer to black youth without making references to relative deprivation and poverty.

5. As illustrated by the body of literature that emanated out of the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) during the 1970s and early 1980s.
6. See, for example, Ball et al. (2000), Banks et al. (1992), Bradley (2005), Cregan (2002), MacDonald (1997), and Johnston et al. (2000).
7. See, for example, Bennett and Kahn-Harris (2004), Hodkinson and Deicke (2007) and Muggleton and Weinzierl (2003).
8. Their report *Urban Collectives: Gangs and other Groups* was prepared for the Metropolitan Police Service and Government Office for London.

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# On Gangs and Race: A Rejoinder to Joseph and Gunter

## Simon Hallsworth and Tara Young

On Wednesday 13 April 2011 the *Daily Mail's* front page ran with the headline 'The Machine Gun Arsenal under a Schoolboy's Bed' (Evens and Fernandez, 2011). A photograph showing the 'terrifying' cache of weapons (which included a loaded submachine gun, a shotgun and ammunition) found in the youth's bedroom accompanied the article. The 'owner' of these weapons was a young black boy aged 15. The weapons were discovered during a police investigation into the murder of 16 year-old Agnes Sina-Inakoju, an aspiring young black schoolgirl. It is alleged that two members of a notorious street gang, the 'London Fields Boys', indiscriminately fired an Ingram 2000, 9mm submachine gun into a shop where members of a rival gang 'the Hoxton Boys' were thought to be waiting. Agnes happened to be standing in the shop, and within range of the target, when the attack occurred. She was, like other victims of gang violence, caught in the crossfire. Her killer was a young black male aged 22. Together with his accomplice, he received a life sentence of no less than 32 years (Evens and Fernandez, 2011). The death of Agnes Sina-Inakoju illustrates the serious nature of street gang violence in the UK and marks yet another instalment in the ongoing cycle of retaliatory violence in which young black men kill people and lose their liberty and/or their lives.

On the same day the Runnymede Trust brought together practitioners, police officers and academics to debate a new report they had published entitled *What's a Gang and What's Race Got To Do With It?* (Joseph and Gunter, 2011). In the context of the tragic murder of Agnes Sina-Inakoju, it was a necessary debate to have; and it was the right time to have it.

The aim of the report was to provide a critical appraisal of current academic debate on the formation, composition, prevalence and violent nature of UK gangs, particularly those involving young black men. From the outset, the authors argue that the current debate in this area is fundamentally flawed and needs revision. Joseph and Gunter claim

that existing gang research has: a) exacerbated the problem; b) pathologized and essentialized disaffected Black youth, and c) hindered effective policy and practice (Joseph and Gunter, 2011: 3). The authors are particularly critical of the work by Hallsworth and Young, notably their 'general model delinquent street collectives' which has impacted significantly (and negatively) on official gang policy and practice (Joseph and Gunter, 2011: 8). Joseph and Gunter suggest that 'Hallsworth and Young's definition of the gang and their 'gang typology' has contributed to the over-definition of the gang and led to an exaggeration of the scale of the gang situation in the UK' (Joseph and Gunter, 2011: 7). In particular, Joseph and Gunter contend that the model:

- by emphasising structure 'fails to reflect the interplay between complex local factors and nuances that best explain the violence' (Joseph and Gunter, 2011: 8). In particular the model ignores the importance of black culture in an account that otherwise stresses marginalization and exclusion. In the absence of critical discussion on the role of 'blackness' in gang culture from liberal left academics such as Hallsworth and Young, a right-wing narrative depicting young black males as pathologically violent has emerged;
- by labelling groups according to criminal behaviour (e.g. peer group, street gang and organised crime group) makes assumptions about young people's engagement in law-breaking activity that are not easily identifiable (or distinguishable) in 'real life' (Joseph and Gunter, 2011: 9); and
- ignores the dynamics of wider youth culture and non-criminogenic influences on youthful behaviour and so makes generalizations about peer group activities (Joseph and Gunter, 2011:9)

In sum, Joseph and Gunter maintain that the work of Hallsworth and Young does not adequately engage

with the cultural dynamics of the street and thus fails to reflect the nuanced and complex nature of 'road life'. In addition, the uncritical assimilation of Hallsworth and Young's model into public policy and practice has led, they believe, to a problematic labelling of groups as 'gangs' and the construction of inappropriate strategies to deal with the gang issue. Finally, Hallsworth and Young are guilty of failing to address the issue of ethnicity in relation to the study of street-based violence.

Academics are not immune from criticism and we thank the authors for engaging with our work. We recognize that only through ongoing debate and dialogue can the complexities of youthful involvement in 'gang' groups and the life 'on road' become apparent. In light of this we welcome a robust exchange of ideas on the correlation between 'gangs', race and violence since understanding this phenomenon requires a sophisticated academic debate.

However, we argue that Joseph and Gunter have misread and misrepresented our work in several key respects. We argue that their report, whilst attempting to [re]ignite the important debate on race/ethnicity and violence, has presented a flawed critique of our attempts to make sense of the problem of urban violence, specifically that perpetrated by young black men.

In this rejoinder, we respond to the key criticisms made by Joseph and Gunter.

We begin by contesting their critique of our model of group delinquency. We then examine the relationship between gangs and street violence pointing out that we have always been sceptical of those who overstate the significance of gangs. We conclude by questioning how far an analysis of street violence will move the debate forward by attempting to reduce it to the problematic issue of 'black culture'.

## Contextualizing Street Collectives

Much of the criticism in the report focuses on our 'general model of delinquent street collectives' (Joseph and Gunter, 2011: 8). The general problem with this model, according to the authors, is the imposition of a rigid structure on the complex and shifting landscape that is 'road life' or youthful group behaviour. In particular, Joseph and Gunter argue that the structural determinism inherent in this model

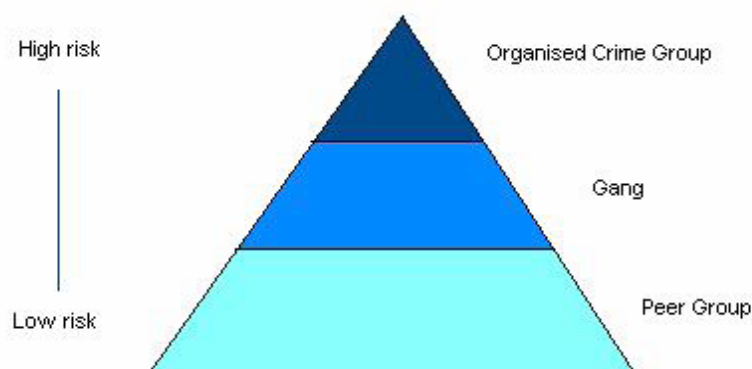
'problematizes the day-to-day activities of groups of young people' and leads to the 'inappropriate labelling of benign youthful activity as anti-social or deviant' resulting in evermore punitive responses (Joseph and Gunter, 2011: 8).

The model to which Joseph and Gunter refer was developed for practitioners amidst rising concerns about 'the gang' in the UK at a time when a moral panic (Cohen, 1972) had begun to develop around gangs in general and 'black gangs' in particular. It emerged from a commissioned piece of research by the Metropolitan Police Service who wanted us to develop a framework for interpreting collective delinquency in the UK (Hallsworth and Young, 2006). Rather than follow the lead of American gang researchers, like Klein and Maxson, and develop a typology of gangs we examined the gang as one of a number of delinquent collectives in urban society. The model disaggregates street groups which may be associated with crime into three broad categories: peer groups, gangs and organized crime groups (see Figure 1). What separates each group is its differential relationship to crime and violence and the risks each poses to the wider population (Hallsworth and Young, 2006).

The first point to note is that this model was not intended to be, nor was presented as, a 'gang typology'. It avoids being considered as such in so far as it does not reduce the problem of street collectives into a typology of gangs. In our model, the 'gang' is only one of a number of types of groups found in urban (and rural) areas.

In making this point we had several concerns in mind. First, we were keen to make clear that the street-based groups to which young people belong are not always gangs. Our intention was to prevent the kind of net-widening narratives that the media and enforcement agencies were engaging in which appeared to classifying all kids 'hanging around' as 'gangs'.

By making the distinction between peer groups and gangs we wanted to encompass the ordinary, benign nature of peer group life, including the low-level delinquency which is often associated with it; and distinguish this from the more prescribed 'organized' offending of career criminals and offences perpetrated by gangs. In sum, we specifically set out to illustrate that peer groups were not as systematically criminal as gangs like the reputed London Field Boys who murdered Agnes Sina-Inakoju. Indeed in *Urban Collectives: Gangs and Other Groups* (2006) we were careful to consider the existential nature of each group and ensure that pro-social and law-abiding interpretations were



**Figure 1.** Pyramid of risk

Source: Hallsworth and Young, 2006:63

included in our analysis. Consider the following passage as an example of our understanding of the peer group:

*Delinquency and criminal activity is not integral to the identity or practice of the [peer] group but can occur in given contexts. This does not mean that members are not (individually or collectively) involved in some delinquent behaviour but this will be episodic, intermittent and opportunistic. In common parlance, it is likely to be low-level anti-social behaviour not engagement in serious assault or acquisitive crime. Peer groups are not, in any way, unnatural or pathological. They are a natural expression of what being human is in our kind of society. They are natural specifically because what motivates people in general to belong to a group are the kind of positive things we all believe we share such as the desire for comradeship, friendship, and not being isolated and alone.... Adulthood will, for most, stabilize young people's identity in the direction of law-abiding behaviour and this will end their 'drift' into delinquency. (Hallsworth and Young, 2006: 64).*

To reiterate, our model was constructed with the aim of assisting practitioners and policy makers to think more carefully about the way in which they engaged with delinquent groups and their members who had a range of relationships towards crime and violence. At a time when the British law-enforcement agencies were turning towards America for inspiration in the 'war' against gangs, our intention with the publication of the report was to divert policy makers away from criminalizing peer groups through inappropriate crackdowns and US-style gang suppression techniques.

By making a distinction between 'gangs' and 'organized crime groups' we also wanted to identify differences in relation to the organization of crime, distinguishing between the more organized and professional elite of criminals (the 'core' of the criminal underworld) who by and large have an 'off-road' presence, from the far more volatile 'on road' presence that gangs which occupy the periphery of this underworld typically exhibit. In developing our typology, we also wanted to show that, if our definitions were deployed, there were far fewer gangs around than media hype otherwise suggested. Quite how a model that clearly advocates for non-criminalizing interventions to be directed at young people who simply 'hang around' in peer groups could be read as criminalizing them, escapes us.

In sum, the model is:

*... a heuristic, which is in effect, a guide to understanding. The features we highlight as distinctive are thus not [necessarily] real descriptions of actual groups. What we present should be viewed, therefore, as an abstract visualization of the most distinctive features of the groups in question. In sociological terminology what we thus provide are 'ideal types.' (Hallsworth and Young, 2006: 62)*

While Joseph and Gunter critique our 'essentialist' viewpoint in the construction of this model they mistake its purpose; which is simply to help practitioners make sense of a complex street reality in ways that do not, as the media so often does, define all groups as pathological gangs.

## On the Gang and its Significance

From the outset we have consistently stated that not all street-based groups are gangs and that serious violence is not, necessarily, the proclivity of all gang members. We are mindfully sceptical of meta-narratives or models that seek to pigeon-hole young people (and/or their behaviour) into simplistic descriptions which is why we have consistently challenged the 'added value' of classifying youth violence as 'gang violence' while also taking steps to understand the cultural dynamics of the street and its constitutive ecology in ways that do not over-privilege the gang.

Indeed, and to correct another misrepresentation of our work by Joseph and Gunter, we have been critical of attempts to overstate the presence of, or the significance of, the 'gang', in relation to violence amongst young people, black or otherwise. This, it could be noted, is the central point of departure in the debate between our position and that developed by academics such as John Pitts who, we believe, overstate the centrality of the gang as 'the new face of youth violence' (Pitts, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

This is not a new position; we have made the same argument in all our publications on this subject (Hallsworth and Young, 2004; Hallsworth and Young, 2006; Hallsworth and Young, 2008). It was, however, in our 2008 paper 'Gang Talk and Gang Talkers: A Critique' published in *Crime Media and Culture* that we challenged, head on, the 'gang talking' thesis that the UK was being overrun by organized gangs (Hallsworth and Young, 2008). In this paper we argued that this was a thesis deeply flawed on empirical, methodological and epistemological grounds. By reference to the available evidence we illustrated that there were few gangs in the UK and argued that the term 'gang' was saturated with racial connotations that made its use difficult to justify. We concluded the paper with a stark warning: 'do not do gang talk to your friends, do not do gang talk to your enemies and do not do gang talk to your self' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008: 192).

In more recent work we have developed our critique of 'gang talk' further. In two publications Tara

Young has confronted media representation of 'girl gangs' by demonstrating that there is little credible evidence to substantiate the hyper-violent, feral girl gangster thesis (Young, 2010; Young, 2011). Similarly, in a critical analysis of media and policy documents dedicated to quantifying the gang and examining the damage caused by such groups, Hallsworth has argued that current concerns about the gang stem not from a significant rise in gangs but from the emergence of a general moral panic and the rise of a 'gang industry' that has a vested interest in discovering the entity it aspires to suppress (Hallsworth, 2011).

## The Culture of the Street

Another criticism of our work by Joseph and Gunter is that it fails to reflect the complex, dynamic and nuanced realities of contemporary 'road life' (Joseph and Gunter, 2011: 8). The problem here is that Joseph and Gunter fail to take into account our academic publications on the cultural dynamics of life 'on road' and place too much emphasis on a heuristic produced for practitioners; whose limits we have carefully delineated.

In 'Young People, Gangs and Street-based Violence' (Young and Hallsworth, 2011) we begin to explore the 'road life' as described by young people. This article draws attention to the 'push and pull' factors that propel young, principally black males, into street-based groups and provides some cultural analysis concerning why young people are attracted to life 'on road' and engage in violence; something Joseph and Gunter suggest we fail to do. In other words, here we continue our attempt to 'get real' about the violence in which many young black men are involved.

In 'That's life Innit!: A British Perspective on Guns, Crime and Social Order' Hallsworth and Silverstone examined the life-world of those who used firearms in the commission of violent crime; many of whom were young, black, males. The paper began with an explicit rejection of any attempt to reduce firearm violence to the issue of gangs and made a distinction between the professional gun-using criminal (who occupies the core of the criminal underworld) and people involved in the volatile 'on road' culture that defines its periphery (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009). The violence expressed by men in this article was principally associated with the disorganized nature of street life populated by highly volatile, often psychologically damaged, young men. The paper was predominantly descriptive of 'on road' and did not attend to issues of ethnicity as it was an

<sup>1</sup> In response, John Pitts has accused us of failing to recognize the reality of the gang. We have never denied the existence of gangs. We recognize the risks such groups pose to themselves and others. In this sense we are quite happy to have the boys who murdered Agnes labelled as the gang members that they evidently were.

examination of the subculture of people who used firearms in the commission of a crime. That said, the paper does provide a conjecture about why so many black males appear over-represented in gun-related fatalities. This was their over-representation in the hyper violent retail sector of the street based illegal drug economy.<sup>2</sup>

## And What Has Race Got to Do With It?

If, as Joseph and Gunter assert, the problem with liberals is that they do not confront the relationship between race and violence this implies that black culture is a causal factor in crime. We have not pursued this avenue of enquiry as it is not clear to us that such research will deliver accounts that possess explanatory power.

As John Pitts' careful excavation of the socio-economic profile of the areas where 'gang-related' violence is concentrated shows, it remains a disproportionate feature of multiple deprived, inner urban areas (Pitts, 2008). Though dismissive of accounts that stress exclusion and marginalization Joseph and Gunter need to recognize that political economy matters and so does class. It matters because individuals who typically perpetrate the violence classified as 'gang related' are themselves part of what Wacquant terms the 'precariat'; the sub-proletariat that is now surplus to production in a neo liberal order which no longer requires an organized working class in general and them in particular (Wacquant, 2009,; Hallsworth and Lea, 2011). As Pitts' work also shows, the black community are over-represented in this residual population.

Just as poverty, violence and crime have forged their own destructive symbiotic relationship in the de-industrialized ghettos of the US, in the UK the same dynamic can be identified. What we term 'self-destructive reproduction from below' follows from (and emerges as) a response to the self-destructive tendencies inherent in capitalist development from above (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009). However, and this is an important caveat, it must also be noted that engagement in self-destructive violence is not the province of young black males alone. As ethnographies into the urban culture of de-industrialized, predominantly white working class, estates in the north of Britain have shown (Hall and

Winlow, 2006) these areas also have more than their fair share of violent individuals engaged in volatile street subcultures. This raises the question of how far the violence today can be explained away, as Joseph and Gunter would appear to suggest, by focusing on the dysfunctional attributes of 'black culture', as opposed to the exclusory tendencies inherent in free market societies, and the often destructive adaptations these provoke.<sup>3</sup>

But let us not shy away from the question of culture and its influence in determining the violence which some young black men do. Macro structures do not alone determine social action; culture intervenes and must be studied. In the Runnymede Trust seminar Gunter made a case for suggesting that the violence in which young black men were engaged was itself, in part, a consequence of their immersion into a street subculture which encourages violence which they then reproduce. It would be wrong to ignore the impact that this culture has on the lives of young black men.<sup>4</sup> Through embracing the persona of the gangster, people who possess little capital and power can, as Messerschmidt argues, come to accumulate it in their own mobilization of violence (Messerschmidt, 1993). Violence, in this sense, is also about masculinity being performed and accomplished but in self-destructive ways; for example, through 'postcode wars' and interpersonal confrontations. To understand the violence that men do we need to attend the dysfunctional way in which masculinity continues to be constructed. Such analysis requires the examination of a dysfunctional economy that condemns many young men to a situation of powerlessness; this is not just a problem confronting black men only; it is a problem that transcends ethnicity.

## Conclusion

In this rejoinder we have sought to show that the critique directed against us by Joseph and Gunter is as misdirected as it is misplaced. On the basis of our arguments here, we see no reason to abandon the group typology we developed. All we ask is that practitioners treat it as the heuristic device it is intended to be.

As commentators who have been critical from the outset of attempts to reduce the problem of urban violence to a problem of gangs, it is difficult to see how we can be guilty of over-defining the problem of the streets as a problem of gangs as Joseph and Gunter argue. Likewise, as long time critics of 'gang talk' and 'gang talkers' and the industry that

<sup>2</sup> To test the 'on road' conjecture, Professor Alison Leibling at Cambridge University made the paper available to long-term prisoners serving weapon related offences at a high security prison. They agreed with our depiction.

surrounds it, quite how we can be located into this constituency escapes us.

We do accept, and here we agree with Joseph and Gunter, that we need to 'get real' about the very real violence that some young black men are involved in and recognize that to do so means challenging, head-on, the culture of denial that has prevailed for too long in the UK. We accept Joseph and Gunter's point that we need to address issue of culture in order to understand the 'on road' life in which some young black men are immersed. We would suggest, however, that such analysis should not proceed without being located within the wider political economy. While we recognize the reality of black involvement in crime, as this rejoinder makes clear, the similarities it bears to contemporary violence perpetrated by white males needs to be recognized as well.

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# What Young People Say

## Femi Adekunle

Since the voice of young people is not often heard in debates about crime, ethnicity and gangs, the aim of this section is, in part, to remedy this. The recent riots were, at least in the media, typified by the young age of the looters giving youth violence a prominence it has not had for years. The media narrative and the government line have blamed 'gangs' and 'gang culture' as a principal cause for the violence. There is a danger of debates such as the one in this paper degenerating into arguments between practitioners and professionals. Given this, the debate is perhaps too important to be left to the usual voices of practitioners, academics and politicians.

In the weeks before the unrest, the Runnymede Trust held a focus group in Birmingham with a number of young people who had, through various ways been affected directly by 'gangs' and crime. It was seen as important to sound out the views of various young people that were being described by our authors outside of a London context.

There are various reasons why we conducted our study here: Birmingham in general, and Handsworth in particular, has been the site of key events in the history of race relations in the UK. Handsworth and Lozells witnessed uprisings in the 1960s and again in the 1980s. It was the uprising in the 1960s that sparked the publication of Runnymede's first report *Race and the Inner City* by Professor Gus John in 1970. We had also just finished a comprehensive intergenerational community consultation called Generation 3.0 meaning that our contacts were current and ready.

### Context

The focus group itself was held at the Oakland Youth Centre: a youth club with a huge local and

historical resonance. Twelve years ago a young man was tragically murdered on its doorstep. The violence was seen as too important to be allowed to rest and, soon after, the Centre began to focus on young people from the area, quickly becoming a hub for local youth services from sexual health education to counselling.

Oakland now provides a range of services over and above what one might expect in a youth club. At the centre they have a range of sports (basketball, football, table tennis) in its Sports Hall as well as an IT suite, film/video editing suite and a music studio. They also run a carnival workshop that has a significant role in the organisation of the annual Birmingham Carnival.

The focus of this section, however, is on the community projects and the variety of youth projects focused on 13-19 year olds. Under the aegis of one of these projects, we spoke to 4-5 young men about a number of issues. A follow-up interview was held with the lead youth worker Craig Pinkney (a prominent experienced local anti-gang practitioner) after the focus group to provide further contextualization.

### The Focus Group

The focus group itself was based around asking our participants what they think of the views expressed by the authors and how far it relates to their own lived experience. It provided a snapshot of some of the tensions in talking about gangs and race.

The format of the debate was based around asking the inter-related questions below.

- What do you think a gang is? How much is it a problem?

- What do you call 'gang crime'? What has race got to do with it?
- Why does so much reported crime seem to include black men as victims and offenders?
- Should the word 'gang' be replaced with something else? Some academics have started talking about being 'on road'. Do you think that this is more accurate?

What follows is a synopsis of the major points covered on the day.

### Crime and Violence

What was gratifying was the nuanced and sophisticated response to most of the issues involved. To illustrate, whilst they were aware that crime in total had gone down in absolute terms – particularly murders – in their view, this was not the whole story. Each was adamant that whilst the number of murders had reduced (and must be trumpeted as a success) this was offset by the fact that other crimes had actually increased: knife crime, extortion, drug dealing and robberies in particular. In short each of the participants gave credence to Gunter and Joseph's view that more attention must be given to making sense of complex local drivers of crime such as cyclical retaliatory violence, 'post-code' based conflicts and other geographic factors. In the words of one member:

**Respondent:** *People are finding ways to get at people worse than killing them, disrespecting family members and things like that. It is different.*

### Gangs: A(nother) Definition

The perennial question is 'What is a gang?' The debate foundered on a range of definitions from it being a 'family' to a group of people that outsiders saw hanging around and labelled each definition reflecting the complexity of the issue. Indeed, echoing the tension that Hallsworth and Young spoke about in calling only one of a number of types of groups found in urban areas a 'gang', one participant said:

**Respondent:** *I wouldn't go around saying, yeah, I am with my gang... I am obviously with my brethren and that but when people start seeing you with the same faces and that then [they] say That's your gang'.*

**Runnymede:** *So who gives you the name then?*

**Respondent:** *The public.*

**Respondent:** *The way the media make it sound worse than it is. Though it is bad, I am not going to lie, but they make it sound worse than it is.*

Indeed, Craig, the contact and the lead youthworker commentating on the range of answers offered, said that the question is almost a Rorschach test. As someone who had often posed that question to young people in a range of contexts, he was quick to say:

**Craig:** *You could ask disaffected young people what a gang is and you could ask socially included young people what a gang is and everyone's perspective on what a gang is will be completely different.*

### Gang Crime and Culture

As to the question as to whether there was such a thing as gang culture, our respondents were equally as nuanced in their take of events. One said:

**Respondent:** *Depends on what area you talking about... what type of thing a gang is doing... depends on circumstances... it could be just one man but the gang gets the whole [blame]. A lot of the time it might be just one or two people but the whole group gets in trouble... we are not in a gang or nothing, we just grew up in the same area*

This suggests 'guilt by association' whereby one young person in a friendship group acts in a criminal manner and the whole of his friendship group is assumed to be the same. Indeed, it was in discussing the implications of this that the focus group became their most animated. Each

gave accounts of how the police had stopped and searched them on numerous times and attempted to intimidate them. For them, at least, some of the contours of what could be called 'gang culture' were formed due to a confrontation with the police.

**Respondent:** *Say that there was a robbery or something like that. The police would stop and search us. First there would be one car and then there would be five but we are not going to take that.... Police are trying to take advantage.*

### Gangs and Ethnicity

Talk about how gangs seem to be related to being young, being black and being male sparked a reaction. Most cohered around the idea that it simply wasn't all that important.

Despite the range of opinions expressed, the one that seemed to gather the most consensus was the view that:

**Respondent:** *As black people, you are going to be around more black people so the people you socialize with are black people so if you have a problem, then you have a problem with black people.*

Indeed, for the group they believed ethnicity was consistently an issue only when the police were present. All saw racism from the police as something to be endured and then forgotten like rainy weather: 'You can't stop racism; nothing can be done about it'.

Far more important were local drivers and borders. As to the question as to why black young men continue to fight other black young men, the answer was because they were there.

**Respondent:** *That's the way it has always been... mostly the zones from where you from... places where you can't meet because of all the stuff that has happened.*

This did have real implications for personal safety as it meant that people were far more likely to take matters into their own hands over

issues of personal safety especially since the police were not trusted. Indeed, one mentioned an instance when he went to the police because he was fearful for the safety but this was only taken seriously *after* he was attacked.

### On Road Culture or 'Gang' Culture

The question was posed whether anyone could recognize the term 'on road' and the response was mixed. One was quick to say how it was:

**Respondent:** *Doing whatever you need to do to make your money*

... while others seem indifferent or at best bemused by the concept. It was Craig that summarized the point best:

**Runnymede:** *Do you think the word gang should be replaced by something a little more sensitive to local context?*

**Craig:** *Personally, I don't think it makes any sense because young people would soon start to feel uncomfortable using the words 'on road'. It is about knowing the community. One thing you have to understand is the language of the people you are talking about... and if the language is applicable for that young person then that is what you should use... all these terms that academics use can change any moment.*

Still, does a description of 'gang culture' have more conceptual traction? Here, a little local context must be given. Handsworth and Birmingham in particular has been notorious for the presence of two rival gangs – the 'Burger Bar Crew' and the 'Johnson Crew'. What is interesting is despite the ubiquity of these names in local community safety narratives, none of the young people ever referred to this. Commentating on this Craig said:

**Craig:** *The youth are constantly changing the names of their groups, but I guess in order for outsiders to understand who they are talking about then they utilize names from the 1990s. [The] majority of the so-called Burgers and*

Johnson's are doing 35 years and the rest are outdated and have no connection with the new school 'bangers'.

## Summary

It would be easy to denigrate this argument as a debate over language. Still, the robust exchanges of ideas prove the importance of this issue as a valid academic argument with *considerable* real-world implications.

Both sets of authors display considerable theoretical prowess allied with empirical evidence to capture the links between crime, violence and ethnicity. That they disagree merely points to the formidable difficulty of capturing lived experience.

Still, we would highlight the importance of the youth voice in this debate as especially crucial in light of recent events. Whilst debates over the causes of the August Riots continues, we would emphasize the importance of listening and responding to what young people say, whether they see themselves in a gang or not.

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# Selected Runnymede Publications

## **Fair's Fair: Equality and Justice in the Big Society**

A Runnymede Report by Kamaljeet Gill and Kjartan Sveinsson (2011)

## **Diversity and Solidarity: Crisis What Crisis?**

A Runnymede Perspective by James Gregory (2011)

## **New Directions, New Voices: Emerging Research on Race and Ethnicities**

A Runnymede Perspective edited by Claire Alexander and Malcolm James (2011)

## **Passing the Baton: Inter-generational Conceptions of Race and Racism in Birmingham**

A Runnymede Report by Kamaljeet Kam and Kjartan Sveinsson (2011)

## **Widening Participation and Race Equality**

A Runnymede Perspective edited by Debbie Weekes-Bernard (2011)

## **Achieving Race Equality in Scotland**

A Runnymede Platform by Sir Jamie McGrigor, Robert Brown, Humza Yousaf and Johann Lamont with responses from Professor Kay Hampton and Ephraim Borowski (2010)

## **Financial Inclusion amongst New Migrants in Northern Ireland**

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Runnymede Perspectives aim, as a series, to engage with government – and other – initiatives through exploring these and development of concepts in policy making, and analysing their potential contribution to a successful multi-ethnic Britain.

### About the Authors

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**Femi Adekunle** is a doctoral research student at University College London. His research project, situated in London, is based around his experience as a volunteer youth worker. It explores how young people react both positively and negatively to the part of the city that they call home. It seeks to find out why certain young people are happy to remain within their locality and actively resist others from coming into theirs.

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