Youth Gang Phenomenon in Tower Hamlets

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Foreword

This study was commissioned by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets Community Safety Unit. It explores the phenomenon of gang conflicts among Bangladeshi youth in Tower Hamlets. This was in response to the recommendations made in the borough's Crime and Disorder Audit 1999 – 2001 of gaining a 'better understanding of the root causes'.

Fieldwork was undertaken during June 2002 – August 2002. Selected from different areas of Tower Hamlets, focus group interviews with twelve groups of young Bangladeshi males (one hundred and eight young people) and one to one semi-structured interviews with eighteen professionals and community leaders were carried out.

The summary findings in this report reveal the extent of the problem (The full version contains appendices with transcripts of the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews with participants studied in the paper), while unveiling some of the core themes within the gang culture dynamics within the Bangladeshi community. The objective of the study was to gain an inside understanding from gang members themselves and others who are concerned about this issue.

It is hoped that the research findings will be used by relevant authorities and community organisations to develop policies, strategies and programmes to effectively deal with and prevent further youth gang violence.

Acknowledgements

Our acknowledgement and appreciation are expressed to the following people and organisations:

Our wives, for their patience and support

Fareha Lasker and Abdullah Folik, for their academic support

Abdul Hannan for his efforts and NAFAS for providing us their premises

Rehan Jamil for his photographs

Abdul Mukit and Imam Hussain for his technical Support

Aminul Hoque, Richard Webb and Fillipo for providing their editing input

Nozmul Hussain and Saidul Uddin for their advice and assistance

And finally our thanks are due to the all participants, without whom this study would not have been achieved.

Section 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1   Key Findings

The key findings are as follows:

- The phenomenon of Bangladeshi youths and gang related violence remains an escalating problem for the community in Tower Hamlets.
- The definition of gangs was found to be more about young people coming together and supporting each other, rather than a hierarchal system of organised crime.
- There was a lack of meaningful engagement with youth service provisions.
- Media influence and music were found to have a significant link in projecting negative role models, which were regarded as standards in behaviour.
- Intimidating and provocative approaches employed by police to youths on the street, in particular from the Territorial Support Group officers, caused backlash from the youths.
- The use of stop and search powers were found to be abused by the police.
- Lack of positive interaction and communication between rival gangs further compounded the issue.
- Mosques not being utilised for positive activities by youths.
- There is a commitment from young people and community leaders to improve this situation.
- The need for long-term investment and commitment in dealing with gang conflicts is essential.

1.2 Background

Over the years, the community in Tower Hamlets has witnessed many violent clashes, in particular intra-racial conflicts between groups of Bangladeshi young people. This is concurred with the well documented media coverage over the years in the local and national papers as well as the Tower Hamlets' Crime and Disorder Audit 1999 – 2001 (Audit). The Audit states that, between April 2000 and March 2001 Tower Hamlets had the highest level of violent crime in comparison to neighbouring boroughs. There were 5,965 violent crimes recorded within the same period. The majority of these crimes were committed by youths against other youths. The same document highlights the disproportionate number of Bangladeshi males accused of committing these crimes to the number of Bangladeshis in the borough.

First generation Bangladeshi immigrants congregated in groups on street corners and in café bars within the Brick Lane area to find some form of social comfort and protection against an initially hostile indigenous population. This first generation of Bangladeshi youths were generally united and fought back against racial aggression. However, within two generations these groups appeared to be less concerned in fighting racism and instead fighting each other. This phenomenon is an aspect of community safety that haunts many families and estates within the borough. It is a widely recognised problem, however little has been done to halt the spiral of violence.

Given this recent situation, together with the Audit's recommendations, Brick Lane Youth Development Association (BLYDA), Crowder Youth Project (CYP) and Elite Youth (EY) were commissioned by the LBTH Community Safety Unit (CSU) to investigate the causes and issues surrounding youth related violence in the Bangladeshi community.

Despite the severity of the situation in recent years, such events must be placed into a historical context. As far back as the mid nineteenth century the part of East London now known as Tower Hamlets has been notorious for violence and crime. Regardless of the racial make-up of the resident population of the time, gang culture has always been a part of this (Morton, 2001), more specifically amongst youth. In 1966 Wilmott (cited in West 1974) carried out extensive research into white youth gangs who attracted similar publicity to Bangladeshi gangs of today. Similar sociological studies carried out in other major urban areas, particularly in the USA, shows that the situation in Tower Hamlets is not unique.

Until recently, most studies of youth gangs have tended to stem from the USA, naturally concentrating on the USA's urban areas. Studies done in the UK have focused around subcultures such as skinheads or football hooligans and are of limited use when looking at Bangladeshi youth gangs. Therefore this research is important, not just as a piece of sociological work, but most importantly for helping us to identify effective solutions to today's problems.

Section 2: RESEARCH

2.1   Research Brief & Aims

- To identify key factors / contributors to youth gang conflicts.
- To identify peer group leaders for targeted diversionary work.
- To explore roles and options for relevant professionals to develop proactive intervention to tackle youth gang conflicts.
- To find out from young people how they would like to deal with and resolve youth gang conflicts in the borough.

2.2   Research Methodology

In order to avoid the problems of rigidly sticking to one research technique this study utilises a range of methodologies. These ranged from semi-structured interviews, which extract feelings and opinion, to quantitative studies, which can be used for statistical purposes. Therefore, this research cannot be defined as following one school of methodology.

2.3   Researchers

The researchers contracted to undertake this study were front-line practitioners within the Youth and Community sectors in Tower Hamlets, with experience in working with disaffected young people. It was felt that they would be able to gain better access to young people than academic researchers.

2.4   Participants

The Young people (gang members and non gang members)
Twelve groups of Bangladeshi males (108 in total) between the ages of 16 – 27 years old were selected from eleven separate areas covering the whole of the Tower Hamlets borough. Eleven participant groups were involved in territorial conflicts, while one participant group was engaged in positive activities such as education and spiritual development.

The Professionals
Eighteen professionals and community leaders from various disciplines and locations across Tower Hamlets were included in the study. The professions included Youth and Community Workers – both strategic and operational, Mosque Imams, Councillors and Community Leaders. A full list and a key to the abbreviations can be found in the Appendix 3 in the main document.

2.5   Area covered

Focus groups from the following eleven areas were used, Brick Lane (2 groups), Burdett, Cannon Street, Clichy Estate, the College Link project, Crowder, Limehouse, Shadwell, Stepney, Poplar and Turin Street.

Section 3: UNDERSTANDING GANG CULTURE

3.1   Past Research

As mentioned in Section 1.2, historical research of gang culture is plentiful. Gang research comes mainly from the USA, which dates back to 1920s-50s from the classical works of Thrasher (1927), Shaw and McKay (1931), Cohen (1995) and Whyte (1955).   More recent studies that proved helpful in understanding gang cultures include Campbell (1990), Taylor (1989), Huff (1990), Lal et al (1993), and Thornberry et al (1993).

3.2   Definitions

Definitions of a gang, and what constitutes a gang, are difficult.   Despite this, Goldstein & Huff (1993) while acknowledging the intricacies in the definitions of gangs, highlight four main features which regulate and underpin a gang: 1) members frequently interact with each other; 2) they are often and deliberately involved in illegal activities; 3) they share a common collective identity and 4) express an identity by adopting certain symbols (taste in clothes, music, hair styles, attitudes, use of codes in language, etc). The Encyclopaedia of Crime and Justice (Kadish eds. 1983) also provide a helpful definition of youth gangs as "self formed associations of youths distinguished from other youths by routine participation in crime."

3.3   Gang culture

Research has found that gangs and their members are often in denial of their own very existence. For example, Wilmott cited in West (1974) claimed that while the vast majority of youths went out in groups they denied being in a gang. This self - deprecation is not borne out of the existence of named gangs in the Bangladeshi community. However, Croall (1998) shows such gangs as a result of a mixture of myths and realities, perpetuated by the media that is quick to seize on the names of gangs, as this makes for sensationalist reading.

Section 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

Although the young people studied, were responding to different promptings, each section includes the findings from all three groups, gang members, non - gang members and professionals. A full list of prompts and questions can be found in Appendix 3, 4 and 5, of the main document.

4.1   Characteristics of Gang Members

- The age group of the participants ranged from fifteen years to twenty-seven years of age.
- All were Bangladeshi males.
- Majority of them were either in education or some sort of Life skills training (65%) and the rest were unemployed (35%).
- All participants reported living in a council estate.   The average accommodation had three-bedrooms.
- The psychological experiences of overcrowding were highlighted.
- All participants lived with their family, with an average of six siblings per household.
- Nine of the participant groups reported that their older siblings had previous involvement in gangs. They explained that they had aspired to be like them when they grew up.
- Gang members had little attachment towards their fathers compared to their mothers, when they felt troubled or needed warmth and support.

4.2   Definitions of Gangs

"We're just a group of mates, from the same estate,
just chilling and hanging around together"

Gang Members

- A consensus was reached that the word 'gangs' meant a group of young people, particularly males, coming together and living in one area. Most participants stated that the term 'gang' was not understood here in the same way as it is in America, as it has a negative connotation.
- A gang in the local area was non-leadership based but was based on mutual understanding and regard. Being in a gang did not require a membership criterion; rather it was a social group of friends who grew up together, living in the same neighbourhood.
- The participants felt that respect; self-image and similar attitudes were important values, which were prominent features in a gang.
- Gang members had focal meeting points, which represented their base or starting point for activities.

- All participants shared the following activities: 'having laughs'; smoking, drug dealing; drinking; fighting, dating girls, playing football, stealing and driving cars, causing trouble and 'beating' the police. Robbing mobile phones was only stated by two of the groups and scamming (credit fraud) was stated by eight groups.

Non Gang Members

- The group felt being involved in gang culture was a 'waste of time'.
- They reported that although many of their childhood friends were involved in gangs, they had refrained from membership.
- They perceived gangs as 'kids games', which can have harmful implications.

Professionals

- Bangladeshi gangs were described as groups of young people who were caught up in territorial associations and were not gangs as perceived in American society.
- Although they have no initiation rites or formal codes and rules, two of the professionals observed that many gangs have informal patterns of behaviour that may be perceived by society as unacceptable.
- Similarly, a youth worker also felt that the term 'gangs' was not appropriate within the context of Tower Hamlets. The reasoning for this was that the term gangs implied engagement in highly organised and sophisticated activities and demonises a section of the youth community. An alternative term given was 'youth conflict'.

4.3   Location of Gangs

All areas covered were found to experience the problems of youth gangs. The concentration of gangs was found in the west of Tower Hamlets. In comparison to the other parts of borough, the west was also found to have the majority of Bangladeshi residents. In the East of the borough the gang concentration was relatively small however there are indications that it is gradually increasing.

4.4   What It Means To Be In A Gang
"We've been together for a long time…. we check for each other….anything happens, we are der for each other, we are like bruvvers"

Gang Members

- Six areas felt that being in a gang was a way of maintaining a historical reputation of previous gangs.
- All participants had particular names for their respective gangs. Some had inherited names, while others created new ones. The identity and structure

of the groups were similar to the findings highlighted in section 4.3, in that there was no hierarchy but a group of friends 'hanging around' together.

- The use of language in many groups appeared quite different. Three groups had participants spoke English with a West Indian idiom, while five others spoke English with an Indian accent. The remaining participants spoke English without an accent.
- In terms of their clothing, there was no distinct uniform of any form, every one wore designer label garments.
- The participants felt that two to three members of their gangs, who were more skilled than others, co-ordinated and organised their activities of the gang.
- There was also a designated base, where all the weapons and paraphernalia would be 'stashed'.
- All participants identified themselves in terms of having a strong religious and national identity, Bangladeshi Muslims.
- Four of the participant groups reported that gang culture was modelled from rival clans in Bangladesh while one reported gang culture was part of inner city life and one inheriting Black culture. The remaining participants reported that there was no link between their ethnicity and gangs.

Non-Gang Members

- Similar to section 4.3 this group of participants construed gang membership as a 'waste' and unsurprisingly for non-gang members could not understand the attraction (of gang membership).

Professionals

- This section covered much of the same ground as section 4.3, the professionals saw the definitions of gangs as also highlighting what it means to be in a gang.

4.5   Why Young People Get Into Gangs

"Yeah, my brother was in a gang, he was a hard nut, he had a reputation. I wanted to do more than him when I grew up"

Gang Members

A majority of participants reported many socio-cultural factors, which encouraged them to become involved in gangs.

- Six areas felt that being in a gang was a way of maintaining a historical reputation of previous gangs, while the others stated it was a way of gaining recognition.
- Some participants reported that the starting point was at school, where they had poor literacy skills and were unable to gain motivation for learning. Nine

of the groups claimed teachers were more involved with the successful pupils.

- A consensus was reached on the view that overcrowded homes, compounded with little constructive provision on the estate, was a strong reason for feeling compelled to congregate outside in gangs. Participants reported that the feeling of safety and protection were also factors in coming together as a gang. This cohesion was reported to be a way of overcoming boredom.
- Peer pressure was understood differently across the participant groups. Seven groups viewed it as a forceful persuasion from gang members to conform where they were otherwise made to feel isolated.
- Others reported inheriting the 'area mentality' as being another cause for gang membership.
- A consensus was reached on the reasons for fighting. They reported the following: very stupid reasons; jealousy; to build and maintain respect; dirty looks and walking with an attitude (bowling); girls (boys competing against each other for the same girls); appearance (someone wearing clothes, which are disliked); drug and alcohol induced; and retaliation after being attacked.
- A consensus was also reached on the shift in the usage of weapons used in fights. A concern was raised that gangs have progressed from using fists to knives, and now worryingly the use of guns are being considered by some.

Non Gang members

- The group reported that the reasons why young people join gangs is because it gives them 'power', which helps to replace low self-esteem.
- Many thought that gang members were all living in the 'movie world'. This was a way of escaping responsibilities of living and growing up in the 'real world'.
- Many also commented that gangs do not know what life is about or know little what awaits them in the future, as they lack vision and ambition. They lack a sense of harm caused to themselves, nor do they fear the consequence of their actions on others.

Professionals

The professionals reached the consensus that there are 5 broad categories that were key issues related to youth gangs.

- **Home environments:** poor parenting skills, education backgrounds and lack of adequate English speaking abilities were thought to be strong factors in the distance between the youths and their parents. Gang membership can be seen as a reaction to this and gangs can be viewed as a second family.
- **Socio-economic conditions:** poor housing in terms of size and quality, lack of opportunity in education and unemployment were noted as important factors, which caused 'ghetto' communities. This lack of basic needs encourages more young people to feel dependent on gang culture.

- **Lack of positive role models:** young people are turning to glamorised role models perpetuated in the mass media, because of a lack of community role models to whom young people can aspire to. This has resulted in young people trying to imitate adult rap stars such as, Tupac Shukur.
- **Structural Racism and Institutional Racism:** many Asian youths were leaving secondary education without being able to articulate themselves in the English language. Teachers from white middle class backgrounds are also reported to view parents negatively coupled with low expectations of the young people. This results in a lack of motivation for young people to develop ambitions and goals.
- **Identity:** young people have little opportunity to explore their ethnic and religious identity.

4.6   Involvement with Police

"They need to treat us wid respect, we are not animals"

Gang Members

The majority of the participants reported that police interaction was hostile and abusive. They felt agitated and made to feel suspect in the way police dealt with them. Four groups reported that the police constantly use derogatory terms and some times undue force in order to provoke aggression and behaviour that leads to arrest. One participant group mentioned that they were planning on beating some officers. Five groups reported overuse of 'stop and search' powers, some were stopped four times in one day. Two groups mentioned that the police should focus more on the drug dealers. One group had a participant reported experiencing verbal abuse of an Islamaphobic nature from a Sikh police officer. Despite this, various groups had ideas on how to improve the situation:

- Reduce the use of the 'stop and search' powers on general young people and target the 'main ones – the drug dealers'.
- Stop using excessive force.
- Police should be better trained.
- Police to get rid of racist police officers.
- Police to change their attitudes and have courtesy for those who they are dealing with.
- Recruitment of more Bangladeshi officers in the police force.

Non-Gang Members

There were no specific comments made on this.

Professionals

Despite the recommendations made in the Lawrence Inquiry report, the professionals still viewed the police as still being institutionally racist. Police

hostility and low threshold on arrest, has also played a part in making young people feel criminalised and to react violently and accentuate the cycle of violence.

4.7 Schooling and Education

"Teachers pay too much attention to the goody boys leaving us out"

Gang Members

All groups had mixed experiences of school. However, the majority saw school as positive for a variety of reasons:

- Participants from six groups reported favouritism from teachers towards more academically able students.
- One participant group reported that school environments were so poor that it was the first place to learn about crime.
- The remaining participants, in contrast, reported that their experiences in school were the best part of life.
- One participant group reported that the school should not be situated in the middle of a residential estate, as this causes territorial conflicts.

What can they do to improve?

- Teachers should give equal input and support to students irrespective of their academic ability and background.
- More support teachers should be provided for those needing extra support.
- Teachers need to be more proactive in assessing everyone's literacy levels, as no one admits to their problems easily.
- Teachers to change their teaching methods, make learning fun, spend time in helping students understand more.

Non-Gang Members

While not questioned directly, it was inferred that this participant group generally had positive views of school.

Professionals

The professionals perceived schools in the same way they perceived the police as, institutionally racist. Teachers from white middle class backgrounds, viewed parents in a negative way, while having low expectations of young people. This results in a lack of motivation for young people to develop ambitions and goals.

4.8 Council Services and Youth Provisions

"The council does jack for us, we need a place to cotch, a park to play, but there is nothing around. They just build houses for the yuppies"

Gang Members

Gang members were also prompted to discuss the role of the council, and how they provide for Tower Hamlets residents and youths. Most participants had minimal contact with the council. The experiences they did have were mostly negative:

- Complaints relating to housing matters were highlighted by five groups.
- Others felt that there was favouritism in the allocation of housing, 'you get what you want because of who you know'. Poor quality housing stock and a lack of leisure services were also reported.

On experiences with the local facilities, there were varied responses:

- Groups of participants reported having a good relationship with their youth clubs. Other participants reported poor relationships and a lack of no contact with youth facilities.
- Although there were some youth facilities, two groups of participants reported having no respect for their local youth workers, as they were being used for publicity purposes.
- The general feeling was that youth workers are rarely seen on the streets providing outreach support. A serious lack of financially accessible sports facilities for young people was also reported.

There was broad agreement on what could be done to improve youth service provision:

- Youth clubs need to be more open and provide better challenging and stimulating activities that will engage hard to reach groups.
- Effective youth workers and more contact through detached / outreach.
- Organise more events.
- Young people need training to become youth workers. In turn they can be positive role models in the future.
- Youth clubs should be more than just a place for playing pool and snooker.

Non-Gang Members and Professionals

These groups of participants were not prompted or asked about the role of the council and their youth provision.

4.9   Religion and Culture

"A lot of mosque members say bad things about us, they should get to know us.
We still respec dem"

Gang Members

Local elders

The elders were generally felt to hold stereotypical views and make young people feel ostracised. Some felt that the reason for the distance between the elders and youth might be because the elders feel frightened by the way the young people dressed. Others felt that the elders do not even reply to their cultural greetings. However participants did suggest ways to improve their condition:

- Elders should not judge the youth negatively.
- There should be more communication between the elders and the youths.
- Bi-monthly meetings should be held with the elders, to build bridges.
- For the elders to give advice and show respect.

Local Mosques

Participants had mixed experiences with their local mosques:

- Four groups of participants reported that they had minimum contact with their local mosques.
- One participant group felt that the mosque members gossiped about them.
- However, the majority reported positive aspects of the local mosques such as the importance of Friday congregation prayers, the welcoming aspects of mosques and being treated nicely and with respect. These made them feel valued and involved.
- Others commented on the benefits of having a good Imam, who they can relate to.

However, suggestions for improvements were made in the following areas:

- Seven groups claimed they should get to know more about young people – outreach work.
- Six groups suggested mosques to provide more activities for youth and keep them involved.
- There should be more discussions / circles in mosques.
- Friday sermon should be in English, so it is understood by the youth.
- Mosque members should not to be judgemental of the youth, especially with regards to their clothes, hairstyles etc.

Non-Gang members and Professionals

These respondents were not prompted to discuss the role of culture and religion.

4.10   External Influences

"Tupac's lyrics really describe for us what life is really like on the streets"

Gang Members

Gang members were questioned whether external factors influenced their behaviour.

Music

All participants agreed on the most prevalent types of music: R&B, Hip Hop and Rap were the most popular. Additionally some reported listening to traditional Bangla, Bhangra, Drum & Bass and Garage. Participants agreed that it was Gangsta Rap and Hip Hop, which influence violence and gangster 'mentality'. One participant group commented these forms of music reflected the reality of street life and inner city deprivation.

Films

Again agreement was reached on popular types of films: action, gangster (e.g. "Menace to Society", "Colors", "Boyz in the Hood") and horror. 5 groups also reported watching Indian, Bengali and others also admitted to liking comedy and cartoons. Participants agreed that it was films that contained violence and action that influenced gang behaviour and aggression.

Portrayal in Media

A consensus was also reached that the media portrayed the Bangladeshi young males in a negative light.

Professionals and Non Gang Members

These respondents were not prompted to discuss the role of external factors.

4.12   Solutions To The Problem
"If there is going to be mediation, do it wiv those that the fight is with, not everyone or just the older group…do it quick…..when the fights first start!"

Gang Members

Despite the levels of crime and violence participants remained positive about the future:

- A majority of the participants felt that it was possible to minimise gang violence. There was a feeling that no one will learn unless there are deaths, resulting from violence.
- Many also reported that gangs from different locations needed to be brought together through some sort of youth work convention. This will start to breakdown territorial barriers and enable young people in Tower Hamlets to communicate and get to know each other.

- Some also commented that instead of having regular raves and social events, which often leads to fights, there should be more regular leisure and recreational events like football tournaments.
- Two participant groups said there was very little hope in preventing gang violence, because mediating alone does not work. Long-term strategies need to be employed to prevent gang violence.

On exploration of the idea 'if young people had power - what they would do', the response was similar across the participant groups:

- Participants felt that they could build proper youth clubs in every area, give young people jobs and help them with their careers.
- Others wanted police patrols to be increased.
- Focus on spirituality and religion was also highlighted. Many commented that their religious faith and ethnic identity were important aspects. This could be used to distract young people away from anti-social activities.
- Mosques and Islamic institutions can provide educational activities, which could include education and career development.
- A consensus was reached on the imprisonment of all known drug dealers in the borough. One participant group commented that they would identify areas that have problems with each other then provide resources to deal with the issues and help them get jobs. They would also keep them busy doing activities and then replicate this in other areas.

Participants also expressed their opinions on the various authorities and professionals who can minimise gang violence.

- Politicians should 'mingle' more with young people and be around when incidents take place. Their role should be more than just wanting power and recognition.
- Police should 'ease up' on the stop and search policy and instead put more police on the streets. A consensus was reached again on the point that all drug dealers should be arrested, as they are all known to the police.
- Many also commented that the police should start communicating with young people in a friendly manner; instead of treating them like 'enemies'.
- The fire brigade was praised for communicating and building relationships with the youth in the estate, and felt this should be a model for the police.
- Schools should not exploit the use of expulsions in school. More attention should be given to those with poor literacy skills, as they are often left behind and they feel embarrassed to ask for help in big groups.
- Many also commented that the youth should be taught from the beginning not to get into gangs, by inviting 'old timers' to do talks at school assemblies.
- Some commented on employing 'street wise' youth workers in schools.
- For community elders, many commented on wanting elders to 'pray' for them and give them advice and respect, instead of stereotyping them.
- The participants also commented that elders should patrol their respective areas. This would help to build relationships with the youth.

- A majority of participants commented that there should be a mosque specifically for the youth or even have youth clubs in the mosques. The workers should pray for the youths, carry out outreach work in the community and organise talks on specific issues.
- One participant group felt there should be younger Imams.

Non-Gang members

These findings are crucial as they uncover what has prevented certain individuals from joining gangs.

- Although they were living in a deprived community, they nonetheless had awareness of what was wrong and most importantly they had the 'fear and love of Allah (God)'.
- They mentioned that as many of them attempt to practice Islam in their daily lives they are occupied with positive activities, which divert them from anti-social activities.
- Membership with the School Link Project (SLP) and Young Muslim Organisation (YMO) has also been motivating factors to 'stay on track – cultural and spiritual guidance.

The participants were also queried on what can be done for others who are involved in gangs and violence. They suggested the following:

- Raising awareness among young people on the consequences of being involved in gangs.
- Helping young people to understand the strengths of their own identity, culture and religious beliefs.
- Encouraging young people to get to know each other; there will be tolerance and respect for each other.
- Young people to develop good morals from a young age.
- Work with the 'hard core ones' for them to become role models.

Professionals

Despite the existence of general crime prevention work in Tower Hamlets, specific gang related intervention had not taken place. However, awareness of the issues involved in gang related crime was being demonstrated through some youth projects, which include Rapid Response, Aasha and On the One. These services provide an outreach and mediation service between rival gangs and explore the consequences of gang culture, for young people in youth clubs. A consensus was reached that the current youth provisions were not adequately addressing the problems associated with the gang culture. The work was reactive as opposed to proactive and preventative work. The professionals' participant group made the following recommendations:

- A consensus was reached among the participants that a project needed to be developed, which would primarily target gang related issues. This project should include the community and mosques.
- The factors, which cause young people to join gangs and participate in criminal behaviour, need to be addressed.
- Some participants commented that the local authority and the police should use their powers to identify and convict 'hard core' gang members and drug dealers.
- Early intervention may also serve as a deterrent for those youths that are thinking about taking part in gang culture.

Section 5: CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATION

Concluding Discussion

The findings from this study have significance in helping practitioners and community leaders in understanding some of the salient themes in Bangladeshi gang culture in Tower Hamlets. During the research, the importance of placing the investigation within the context of the lifestyles and perspectives relevant to the target population was reinforced. The inclusion of local elders, mosques, religion, racism, education, housing and poverty were important themes considered. This approach was quite different to the traditional methods employed in social research, which often take a non-holistic and isolated view of life. This has helped to engage the ethnic life experiences of the participant groups and take us close to the gang culture. We were surprised at the openness and willingness of some of the participants and professionals to explore the issues. Nearly all the participants felt that this type of study was long awaited. They commented on the importance of finding a resolve to the current problems faced by the Bangladeshi community. This was also an indication of how little the participants felt valued and for how long they have been ignored.   The following conclusions can be drawn:

- The definition of gangs was found to be more about youths coming together and supporting each other, rather than having a hierarchal system of organised crime, despite some young people being recruited by older and organised drug dealers.
- The participants' identity was based more on territorial association (linked to residency), rather than initiation rites or formal codes
- In addition to poor housing and unemployment, which is often related with anti-social behaviour, all participants explicitly highlighted more of a link between poor literacy and gang culture.
- Participants reported living in run down environments, while new developments were being created around them for the more affluent. This creates resentment towards the system and low self-esteem, while polarising the class difference.
- A lack of meaningful engagement in youth provisions was also a factor that was mentioned strongly.   Perhaps, the utilisation of life skills and activities in gangs were a compensation for constructive stimuli.
- Harassment and abuse of powers by the police was also noted to be psychologically unsettling for the youths. This further reinforced racism and encouraged a lack of respect for the law and authority.
- Media influence and music were found to have a significant link to projecting negative role models, which were regarded as standards in behaviour.
- Strong connections with, and the importance of, religion and culture were also noted.   All participants commented on wanting to restore their relationship with the elders, while desiring closer links with religious institutions such as mosques.   Mosques were mentioned as positive environments, which could provide incentive and motivation towards constructive behaviour.

Although this study has to a certain degree, uncovered some of the important meanings that the Bangladeshi youths hold, there still exists a desperate need for more in-depth and long term ethnographic studies to be done on this group. Much was discovered from this study, which could only be observed from a distance but not explored more closely, which would have been desired. Some reasons for this was due to the obvious limitations on the study period (only three months) on this participant group.

Recommendations

In many ways this is the most important part of the study, as we are attempting to identify what should be done in the future. We appreciate the responsibility that this research has in terms of the decision making process. The following recommendations are not quick fixes; they require patience and a commitment to the future of both the Bangladeshi community and Tower Hamlet's wider population.

Funding and resources for youth and community organisations

Resources need to be made available for youth projects that will work with young people involved in gangs, community elders and mosques. They will work proactively to address the following:

- Identifying and working with young people involved in gang conflicts through a detached programme with a view to engaging them in constructive activities, as this is a clear service gap.
- Empower gang members to participate in a peer education programme. They will become positive role models, working with schools and local youth clubs in order to de-glamorise gang culture.
- Youth workers to encourage cross boundary co-operation. This will encourage youths from different parts of the borough to get to know each other and build positive links.
- Establish a borough-wide forum. The function of this forum will be to monitor gang fights and to mediate between them. Strategies may develop from this, which will help teach gangs how to deal better with conflicts and help eliminate gang intimidation tactics.
- Youth projects to start considering the role of family work, providing counselling and group work. Parents whose children are gang members may come together to discuss their concerns and gain support from each other.
- Youth and community projects should incorporate in their work approaches; religious, spiritual and cultural identity themes and aim to work with local mosques.
- Youth Champion needs to be appointed\nominated to oversee the needs and service requirements of young people in the borough.

Family and community

- Parents to take more responsibility for their children's development and behaviour on the estates and in schools.
- Community organisations to develop a forum for youth and community members. They will meet regularly to build support networks and discuss issues of significance in their locality. This will also raise awareness of issues facing young people and help the residents become better informed about the services available.
- Local authority to help community organisations to develop culturally sensitive parenting skills training programmes. The mosque Imam's should be included in designing this training.
- Mosques to start considering youth provision within their premises. This will help to engage young people to take part in positive events.

Housing

- Houses need to be larger with improved facilities and landscapes. This will renew young peoples' sense of self-worth and pride for their environment.
- When planning refurbishment and renovation work, private *and* public landlords should incorporate more youth facilities.

Police

- The police need to approach young people on the street professionally and not be intimidating. If the police give them respect, it is more likely to be reciprocated.
- The stop and search powers (used on Bangladeshi youth) should be looked at critically, as the abuse of this power leads to young people feeling angry and distrusting of the police authority. This power should be executed using intelligence, targeting known criminals, rather than any young people in groups.

Education

- Schools should invite community practitioners to carry out workshops that discuss the consequences of anti-social behaviour.
- Teachers need to be mindful of pupils who have limited abilities and focus on providing specialist support mechanisms for them.
- Teachers need to be trained in anti-discrimination practice and made aware of the socio-political implications of migration.
- Schools should be a part of a multi agency approach in which police, parents, youth service and other relevant organisations, which investigates serious fights in schools. This will open up the lines of communication and help prevent potential fights occurring outside school premises.

Clearly, the above recommendations cannot be implemented quickly or easily. However, if implemented, the recommendations will have a real impact on the

different levels of youth gang occurrences; lower various types of anti-social behaviour and pave the way for a brighter future for both Tower Hamlets' Bangladeshi and wider community.