Children and young people in gangs: a longitudinal analysis

Summary and policy implications

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About this project

This project was a collaboration between the Centre for Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Manchester and NatCen Social Research.

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Introduction

Youth gangs have received widespread political and media attention in the last decade. Gang membership has been linked to violent crime among young people, particularly in cases of gun and knife crime. More recently, this focus on gang membership among young people has been amplified by the rioting in some UK cities in summer 2011.

Based on the suspected link between gangs and violent crime, government and different agencies have begun to develop policy responses to gangs. In November 2011, the government published its cross-government strategy to combat gang and youth violence. Alongside this, police forces and local authorities are drawing on US models to tackle gangs, including the formation of dedicated units and multi-agency teams.

This study aims to enhance the evidence base for the developing policy context. We have used data from the *Offending, Crime and Justice Survey* (OCJS) to explore the circumstances that lead to young people joining, remaining, and leaving gangs in England and Wales. The OCJS provides the best nationally representative data available on young people's victimisation and offending in the UK.

Our findings, which are discussed in more detail in this briefing paper, are that gang membership **increases** the chances of offending, antisocial behaviour, and drug use among young people. This finding vindicates the current policy approach of treating gang membership as a distinct part of crime prevention and youth policy.

However our findings also show the diversity within the different groups defined as 'gangs'. There are dangers in adopting an overly-general conception of 'gangs', namely the risk of drawing young people unnecessarily into anti-gang policies ('net-widening'), and the widespread and counterproductive stigmatic labelling of youth. In light of this, preventative and restorative interventions need to take care in differentiating between deviant youth group types. Blanket interventions may have desired consequences in some groups but create or exacerbate problems in others.

Aims of the study

Our study had three main aims:

1. to improve our understanding of the antecedents and consequences of gang membership;
2. to enhance our knowledge about patterns of gang membership; and
3. to provide a more accurate characterisation of juvenile gangs in England and Wales.

What is a gang?

For our analysis we followed the operationalisation of gang membership based on the *Eurogang Network* definition of street gangs as "any durable, street-oriented youth group whose identity includes involvement in illegal activity", as well as a variant of it that focused

on "durable, street oriented youth groups that engage in offending behaviour".[1] Respondents were classified as gang members not on the basis of their own self-definition, but on the basis of their responses to questions about the characteristics of their peer group (see Weerman et al. 2009).

Methodology

We carried out both simple descriptive and more complex multivariate inferential analyses of the Offending Crime and Justice Survey (2003-2006), a longitudinal survey of young people in England and Wales. This survey followed what is often referred to as an accelerated longitudinal (or 'cohort sequential') design, where a group of different age cohorts are followed for a number of years. We focused most of our analyses on young people who were 10-16 in 2003 (the only age groups for which we had relevant gang membership measures up to 2006) and analysed how their behaviour changed from that year to 2006.

It is important to highlight that household-based surveys by design exclude young people in youth offending institutions and other locations. This means that by design this type of survey excludes some young people at high risk of being gang members. It is, thus, particularly important to compare our findings with those of studies that focus on high-risk or criminal justice populations (see Bennett and Holloway, 2004; Wood, 2006).

Findings and policy implications

1. Gang membership increases the chances of offending, antisocial behaviour and drug use, but it is not a sufficient condition for these outcomes.

Independently of pre-existing individual characteristics, gang membership increases the chances of offending, antisocial behaviour, and drug use. This applies at the point of joining a gang, but also extends to problem behaviour measured a year later. Our findings, based on a propensity-score analysis comparing otherwise similar young people, contradict the argument that gangs exert no independent effect on violence and other offending (for details see Medina et al. 2013b). On the other hand, we did not find evidence that joining a gang makes it much more likely that young people will be fearful of crime, be the subject of violent victimisation, or suffer injury from violent victimisation (as has sometimes being reported).

However, gang membership is not a sufficient condition for offending or other forms of problem behaviour. Many young people in gangs do not report any offending. Previous analysis of the OCJS reported the fact that 37% of gang member did not report a criminal act in the year preceding the study (Sharp et al., 2006). We find similar figures.

Implications: Gangs are an important factor in shaping problem behaviour and should continue to be acknowledged as part of crime prevention and youth policy and when

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[1] We slightly modified the EG operationalization so that young people that socialises with peer groups involved in only illegal drug taking were not counted as gangs. See our discussion in point 7 of this report for the rationale.

developing interventions and preventative programmes. Although policies that address all the factors that shape youth offending and violence are essential (including welfare, family and community strength and poverty),[2] it is important to recognise that schemes that neglect gangs run the risk of ignoring an important factor in shaping problem behaviour. However, it is important that these policies oriented to tackle gangs do not equate gang membership with offending, something which the current tone of policy discussions, as well as current practice, seem to do more often than not.

2. It is difficult to explain how gangs produce these outcomes, but it is likely various mechanisms (i.e. change in routine activities and normative orientation) play a role.

Our propensity score analysis also suggests that young people joining a gang increased the likelihood of spending time socialising in the street and of expressing support for pro-delinquency values. Young people who joined gangs also became more committed to their delinquent friends even if this would get them into trouble with their parents or the police. Finally, joining a gang also leads to greater police attention, even adjusting for other potential explanations for this police attention such as offending.

This resonates with American findings which suggest that gangs operate as a social learning context in which negative values are transmitted and which favour a disengagement from pro-social peers and commitments. But it also invites the possibility that police attention may play a role in gang identity reinforcement (for details see Medina et al., 2013b).

Implications: While we know gang membership affects problem behaviour, we know less about how or why this happens. This makes it difficult to design interventions aimed at affecting the group dynamics within gangs because we lack evidence on the relevant process at work. These emerging and tentative findings may help to design better interventions in the future. They also suggest that care needs to be exercised when policing young people associated with known gang members. We discuss this latter finding in greater detail further below.

3. Leaving a gang does not automatically and immediately leads to less problem behaviour, but within a year there is a discernible effect. Additionally, most members leave the gang in under one year.

This finding is consistent with previous British research that documents leaving the gang and desistance from crime as gradual processes. For example previous ethnographic work conducted by our research team (Aldridge and Medina, 2008; Medina et al., 2013c) has suggested that leaving the gang is not equivalent with breaking all social ties with gang members (which on occasions may render young people vulnerable to "backsliding", particularly in the short term), and that those that aim to disengage from the criminal activities of the group often face serious difficulties in getting rid of their gang reputation among practitioners and community members.

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[2] We should not forget many of these factors have been linked by researchers to gang formation itself.

Moreover, although durability is key to what defines a gang, the membership of individuals is fluid and unstable, with short-term membership (no longer than a year) the most typical. The likelihood of membership increases to the age of 15 where it peaks, and then quickly decreases. This is consistent with the pattern that emerges from U.S. based research. There is, therefore, a considerable degree of "natural" disengagement from gangs that should not be jeopardised by preventative or punitive interventions.

Implications: Policy-makers and practitioners should have appropriate expectations about desistance when working with young people leaving gangs. This evidence should be used to inform the definition and evaluation of programmes that aim to encourage both the process of leaving the gang and desistance from crime. The key for intervention work is to find ways to facilitate the process of desistance without jeopardising it when there is evidence of backsliding in the short-term. Continued support and attention should be offered throughout this process.

4. Problem and anti-social behaviour are the strongest predictors for joining a gang.

We also conducted analysis to identify risk factors for gang membership affiliation and disengagement. We did this using a variety of multivariate modelling and machine learning approaches (i.e., multilevel analysis, generalised boosted regression) that control for various confounders. The strongest predictors of both joining and staying in a gang were pre-existing problem and anti-social behaviour. Having a sibling who is also a gang member and previous violent victimisation were significant factors for persistent gang membership. There was a lack of evidence relating to parenting, but the parents who knew their children's peers (a proxy measure for parental supervision and monitoring) were less likely to have children who joined and remained in a gang. These risk factors are consistent with research carried out elsewhere in Europe and the US.

Neighbourhood characteristics, such as deprivation and young people's perceptions of the area, were not found to be significant predictors of gang membership.[3] This is likely a methodological artefact. The OCJS, like many other youth offending surveys, was not well suited to capture neighbourhood effects on behaviour. A different survey design is required to understand the social ecology of gangs and community characteristics that predict gang membership.[4]

Implications: Our findings suggest problem behaviour should be the key focus of identifying young people for preventative programmes. Other British scholars have made similar calls on different grounds (Bullock and Tilley, 2008). Voluntary[5] family interventions with young people perceived to be at risk of gang membership may want to emphasise and strengthen the capacity of parents to supervise their children, although

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[3] This is in contrast with findings from the Edinburgh Study on Youth Transitions and Crime (see McVie 2010) and with recent analysis of survey data from London (Alleyne and Wood, 2011). In this sense, it is important to keep in mind the OCJS did not measure the single community characteristic more likely to predict gang joining: the presence of gangs in the community. This may imply that breaking up gangs will have longer-term community effects.

[4] Please note that this study design cannot say anything about the factors that predict gang formation (as opposed to gang joining). Most of the existing literature seems to suggest a greater impact of ecological factors on gang formation than in gang joining (for a review see Klein and Maxson, 2006).

[5] For an argument against coercive family intervention projects in this context see Shute, 2011.

we still need a better understanding of the relationships between factors operating in different risk domains. We should not consider them in isolation and think that tackling one will offer a magic bullet. Voluntary intervention models that treat the family as a whole (such as functional family therapy or multi-systemic therapy) may be particularly appropriate in this context. We should focus on early family-level intervention as a means of addressing risk at both family and individual levels simultaneously and in ways that may have beneficial 'spill-over' effects to all children in the family unit (for more details on the potential of family interventions in this area see: Aldridge et al., 2009; Medina et al., 2010; Shute, 2011).

5. Gang members who are more likely to offend are less likely to leave the gang.

Our multivariate analysis also suggest that gang leavers (as opposed to those who stayed in the gang) exhibited less problem behaviour at an early stage; had more friends who were not local; and had a lesser degree of perceived family financial stress. In the same way that there is an element of self-selection in joining the gang, there is clearly an element of self-selection in leaving the gang. In other words, those with greater propensity to offend are less likely to disengage from the gang.

Implications: Programmes designed to facilitate the natural processes of disengagement from gangs should consider the particular challenges posed by young people with a more problematic behavioural background, particularly if their full network of friends is bound by close territorial boundaries. Perhaps these young people may benefit from access to extra-neighbourhood opportunities to travel and interact with peers outside their own territories.[6] Again, these findings are consistent with a narrative (see: Clarke, 2009; Churchill and Clarke, 2009) that emphasises a comprehensive approach to family interventions and policy, aiming not only to strengthen particular family dynamics such as parental supervision, but *also to foster the financial capacity of these families and their ability to cope with financial stress*. It may also be more disruptive of gangs to focus initially on those more likely to leave or who are easier to disengage (cf. Kennedy, 2012).

6. There is no evidence that the number of young people joining gangs has increased over time.

We found no evidence that gang members are becoming younger or that the prevalence of joining gangs has changed over time in the seven age cohorts we examined.

Implications: Moral panics emerging over allegedly rising prevalence of gang and gang crime is misplaced (see also Hallsworth and Young, 2008). This finding matches what we know about trends in both youth offending from the Youth Justice Board surveys and in victimisation from the *Crime Survey for England and Wales*. It also matches our ethnographic observations in a North West city (Medina at al., 2013c).

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[6] Extra-curricular activities are generally only effective where the activity is both structured and supervised. Also, some simplistic interpretations of these findings (e.g. suggesting wide catchment areas for school) need to be aware of emerging British findings that identify the transition from primary schools with small catchment areas to secondary schools with wide catchment areas as a problem (see Bannister et al.,2010 and Aldridge et al., 2011).

7. There are diverse sub-groups within the groups commonly labelled as gangs.

Current survey measures (and policy uses) of the term gang, including our own operationalization in the previous analysis, mask considerable diversity. Some groups labelled as gangs only engage primarily in illegal drug taking, whereas others have a stronger criminal orientation. We also found youth formations that may look like "gangs" because they have leaders or territories or similar, but which did not engage in illegal activities. We defined five types of youth formation, three of which have little or no participation on illegal activities, and two which have some involvement in illegal activity.[7]

No illegal activity:
- pro social groups (60%)
- pro social street groups (20%)
- quasi formal peer groups (4%)

Involvement in some illegal activity:
- drug user groups (11%)
- higher level offending groups (5%)

We argue that only the latter group deserves the gang label,[8] given its damaging consequences. Similarly, contrasts with the *Arrestee Survey* suggest enormous variation in the type of activities and structure between youth groups formations we may identify as gangs *through representative self-report surveys* of children and juveniles and the type of gangs we identify when we work with young adults and older adults *that have been arrested*. Unsurprisingly criminal justice populations tend to exhibit a more serious criminal record. Although this diversity may seem self-evident, it is a detail often lost in the policing and policy framing of youth gangs. It would be troublesome to use the image of gangs we obtain from criminal justice populations (less prevalent and more serious) as representative of all gangs.

Implications: Much work remains to be done in describing and defining youth group formations in the UK. There are dangers in adopting an overly-general conception of 'gangs', and doing this may lead to both 'net-widening' (drawing young people unnecessarily into anti-gang policies) and widespread and counterproductive stigmatic labelling of youth (see Bullock and Tilley, 2008). Preventative and restorative interventions need to take care in differentiating between deviant youth group types: blanket interventions may have desired consequences in some groups, but create or exacerbate problems in others (for a discussion see Maxson and Klein, 2006).

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[7] We used a technique called latent class analysis for this purpose. This technique classifies respondents in differentiated groups upon the basis of their responses to a predefined set of survey questions. The questions we used included different group characteristics in terms of their structure, behaviour, and normative orientation.
[8] Not all gang researchers would agree with this assessment.

8. Our findings suggest that police practice tends to focus attention, such as stop and search and stop and account, on two groups: individuals with prior police contact and individuals whose friends have had prior police contact - the "usual suspects" (McAra and McVie, 2005).

Our propensity score models mentioned above (see section **2.** in particular) noted that gang membership increases unwanted attention from the police, net of other factors (including self-reported offending). This finding led us to carry out a series of multivariate analysis, which although outside the scope of the original project, we report here and in section **9.** for their relevance in this context. This additional analysis was not funded by the Nuffield Foundation (for more details see Medina et al. 2013a).

These analyses suggested that having delinquent friends and prior contact with the police seem to be better predictors, more consistent across our models and generally have a stronger effect, than one's own self-reported offending behaviour. In particular, it seems to matter more and more consistently across our models *who you hang out with* rather than *what you do*. There is indeed clear evidence of "policing by association" when it comes to gangs (see as well Bullock and Tilley, 2008; and Ralphs et al. 2009). It seems as if in practice, "intelligence-led" policing means that hanging out with the "wrong crowd", including gangs, is likely to exacerbate the chances of a young person being approached by the police regardless of their own level of offending. These findings also connect with the long critical criminology tradition exploring self-fulfilling prophecies about policing.

Implications: "Intelligence" products, such as the databases of gang members and associates that have started to penetrate British policing practice (and are subject to little quality or legal control), have the potential to magnify the disparate treatment of those who have offended in the past, or who happen to be friends or family members of individuals engaged in offending and known to the police. Our findings here suggest the need to better regulate these intelligence practices and products (see a discussion of suggested good practice in the American context: Barrows and Huff, 2009).

9. Ethnicity seems to matter more than self-reported offending behaviour for explaining the probability of being stopped and searched.

Our multivariate analysis of unwanted police contact mentioned above is one of the few British studies that assesses the probability of being stopped and searched, adjusting simultaneously for likely confounders such as self-reported offending or drug use (as well as other possible explanations such as presence in the street). Ethnicity still matters for explaining the probability of stop and search. In fact, its effect size is considerably larger than that of other variables, including offending. Controlling for other potential explanations, the odds of being stopped are over four times higher for Black young people than for White young people. Nonetheless, sample limitations shade the precision of this estimate. To the degree that the disproportionality ratio on stop and searches has increased since 2005 (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010), it is possible these effects would be more striking today.

Implications: These findings reinforce what many suspected. The racial disproportionality in the application of police powers to stop and question citizens cannot be explained away by hypothetical racial differences on offending. Practices that result in these disparities and that may foster attitudes of legal cynicism and distance from the police (Fagan and Tyler, 2005) need to be supported by clear and strong evidence of positive impacts for public safety.

Although many police practitioners argue that stop and search is an effective crime control tool, there is no experimental evaluation of its effectiveness in England and Wales (or elsewhere). Furthermore, the few non-experimental evaluations of public initiatives that relied heavily on increasing stop and search, such as the *Tackling Knives and Serious Youth Violence Programme*, offer less than conclusive evidence of their benefits and actually raise some serious doubts as to what those benefits may be (Ward, Nicholas, and Willoughby, 2011; see as well, Miller, Bland and Quinton, 2000). It is thus imperative that the proposition - that these powers are beneficial for public safety - is rigorously evaluated. To contend, as a recent Police Foundation (2012) briefing does, that estimating the deterrent effect of stop and searches is simply too difficult is to seriously underestimate the level of development of criminological research on targeted deterrence and the capacity of social science to precisely evaluate initiatives like this. Similar policing tactics have been evaluated elsewhere and their impact estimated using randomised experiments. Nothing, other than a lack of political will, makes it difficult to estimate these impacts. The recent policy movements to reconsider the use of these police powers seem in line with this set of considerations.

Taken together we believe our findings suggest that early interventions to tackle gang membership should be:

- parsimonious, welfare-oriented and diversionary;
- offered on the basis of demonstrable problem behaviour as opposed to real or imagined social status such as gang membership;
- focussed on identifying and assisting natural gang disengagement processes; and
- alert to possible stigmatising or labelling mechanisms that may counterproductively reinforce gang identities or exclusionary processes.

Recommendations for future research

This research project suggests a number of areas that require greater attention in the British context:

- We still have a very limited understanding in the UK about the neighbourhood conditions that are linked to gang emergence and to joining a gang. Instruments like the *Offending, Crime and Justice Survey* are not optimal for answering these questions, so we need study designs that allow us to develop this understanding. The *Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development Study* (PADS+), the *Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime*, the *Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighbourhoods*, and the *MacArthur Foundation Studies on*

Successful Development in High-Risk Settings (Denver and Chicago) provide leads on how this can be achieved.

- Our research examined data for a limited age-group and for a limited period. We need longitudinal studies that allow us to assess change in gang membership and offending over a longer period of time. Only then will we be in a position, for example, to assess the long term impact of adolescent gang membership. There is emerging evidence from the US that gang affiliation, even if brief, can cast a long shadow on a number of developmental outcomes.

- The core questions developed by the *Eurogang Network* that allow for operationalisation of gang membership are brief and have now been adopted in a number of countries and studies (including the *International Self-Report Delinquency Study-II*). Their use in other government sponsored surveys, evaluation projects and administrative data collection may provide useful information for expanding our knowledge on this topic and to advanced evidence-led policy.

- Although we have a clear sense that gang membership increases the risk of problem behaviour, we do not have sufficient research on the particular group processes or mechanisms that underpin these increases in the UK context. Few good prospective British data exist on the group-level context of young people resisting, entering, persisting or leaving gangs. The relative (and discriminative) importance of social status, social learning and conformity processes, together with changing perceptions of self- and group identity, deserve to be addressed, ideally in a mixed-methods design.

- Our work on disengagement from gangs needs to be complemented with studies that assess more criminally-involved populations (such as those reflected in samples of those arrested). It is particularly important to understand the factors that explain disengagement from gangs and attempt more differentiation between young people with different patterns or propensity to be at-risk of greater or lesser criminal involvement. We also need a prospective study (ideally randomised control trials) to show whether and to what extent natural (non-intervention mediated) disengagement from gangs can be assisted (or hindered) by both criminal justice and or other model intervention programmes. Furthermore, the distinction between desistance from the gang and desistence from offending needs further attention. The Ministry of Justice should seriously consider looking at the US *Pathways to Desistance* study as a template for possible replication and extension in the British context.

- Too little is known about how different youth groups may respond (differentially) to policy interventions. More work is needed in this area. We also need to develop research that assess the different developmental outcomes of affiliations with the diverse groups we have uncovered, and that assesses how these groups may change through time. In particular, we need greater scientific scrutiny of existing police practice regarding gangs.

Unfortunately, the future of survey research on gangs (and more generally, youth offending) is uncertain, at least in the UK. The OCJS was discontinued in 2006; and cognate Youth Justice Board surveys also ceased in 2009. The remaining opportunity to ask gang-relevant questions is in the *Crime Survey for England and Wales*, though this is with a relatively small subsample (roughly around a 1000) of 10- to-15 year-olds, without a panel element, and using a rigid definition that does not allow for international comparisons. What is worse is that the two existing editions of the *Crime Survey for England and Wales* use two completely different definitions of gang membership (with the more recent definition using looser more ambiguous criteria with less grounding in the academic literature). And so, despite the UK Coalition Government's rhetorical emphasis on evidence-based gang policy (Shute, Aldridge, Medina, 2012), we have, in fact, witnessed a major disinvestment in the production of high-quality research data that constitutes a major part of this evidence base. We hope the Home Office revisit its decision to support a national survey that allows the general public and the scientific community to adequately monitor trends and development on youth offending, whilst at the same time allowing rich theoretically-informed secondary analysis.

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