What can the lived experiences of young gang members tell us about what occupies the ‘black box’ that mediates gang membership and offending? A systematic review

Thomas Boden
What can the lived experiences of gang members tell us about what occupies the ‘black box’ that mediates gang membership and offending?

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Aims

- To discuss working definitions and population characteristics of youth gang members who have offended.
- To argue the need for increased multi-agency policy and practice in relation to youth gang membership.
- To briefly discuss the rationale for inquiry and the systematic methodology used in the research.
- To share thematic findings in relation to the mediating processes occupying gang members’ lived experiences of offending.
- To discuss the implications for practice.
Problems with gathering data about gangs

Gangs in the UK: How big a problem are they?

By Tom de Castella & Caroline McClatchey
BBC News Magazine

A major obstacle standing in the way of tackling gangs is an extraordinary lack of information.

The Home Office has no figures on the number of gangs, or indeed the level of gang-related crime, in Britain. There are official statistics on murder rates and the number of people admitted to hospital with knife wounds, but any gang element does not have to be recorded.

There are other reasons why reliable data is thin on the ground. A significant proportion of gang-related crime and violence is never reported and young criminals do not identify themselves as gang members when they appear in court.

The Home Office cannot even provide a definition of what a gang is. And this lack of an agreed definition is another reason why collecting data is so difficult.

Where does a gang begin and a group of mates dressed in sportswear end?

John Heale, author of One Blood, a study of British street gangs, defines a gang as such: "It's a group of about 10 or more individuals who have a name and who claim an allegiance to a geographic area but the reality is that it's a lot more messy."

Source: BBC News, 2011
Operationalising definitions of gangs

- Inconsistent use of the term gang makes defining the term difficult for any generalisable research.
- Gang research was initially carried out in the US, and is more prevalent there.
- US definitions are social constructionist in approach. They involve either self or peer nomination definitions.
- These are problematic due to a variety of methodological and reliability limitations (Klein et al., 2011).
Development of UK and European Definitions

- In the early 2000s gang membership was gaining political and scholarly interest across Europe and the UK (Aldridge et al., 2008).

- Pre-2000 research focused on youth sub-cultures.

- Eurogang definition developed to aid cross-comparative research through the use of a criterion based definition (Klein et al., 2006)

- “Any durable, street orientated youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Weerman et al., 2009)
Population Characteristics

- Most recent records: Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (discontinued 2006) and Youth Justice Board Survey (discontinued 2009).
- Majority of gang members aged below 25 and begin offending form their early teens.
- 98% male.
- Gang membership significantly higher in inner city areas of low socio-economic status (Home Office, 2010).
- Gang members are disproportionately represented by vulnerable or minority groups inc. LAC, those with MH difficulties, SCLN, learning needs, psychosocial difficulties (Bateman et al., 2003).
Offending Profile

- US findings: gang members are associated with a profile of offending of serious or violent crime that persists beyond that of even prolifically offending non-gang related peers (Klein et al., 2006).

- Considered ‘one of the most robust and consistent observations in criminological research’ (US Department of Justice, 1998; pp.147).

- Considered to align with UK – 63% of UK gang members have committed an offence within the last year of a serious/violent nature (Sharp et al., 2006).
UK Policy Around Gangs

- Taylor’s (2016) Review of the Youth Justice System acknowledges that there have been substantial drops in YP convictions, but reoffending rates are increasing.
- Those that remain in the system typically have highly complex needs.
- Recognition therefore, that ‘almost all of the causes of childhood offending lie beyond the reach of the Youth Justice System’ (Taylor, 2016, pp.3).
- Promotes the devolution of the role of the YJS and role of education.
‘School to Prison Line’ posters put up on London Tube on GCSE results day (Picture: Aamall/Twitter)
Further recent developments..

- Home Office funded county lines project in Kent (Home Office, 2018) found that variation from home location meant it was more difficult to access services.

- Of the 41 children referred to pilot services:
  - All had episodes of missing from home/care.
  - 60% had a diagnosed or undiagnosed learning difficulty, but only a small number had EHCPs in place.
  - 40% had a child protection plan.
  - All attended alternative provision. Majority were ‘recruited’ in proximity to such provision or when missing.
Gangs have been specifically targeting children who have been excluded from school to groom them as drug dealers in towns across the UK, a Home Office report is to warn.

The report, which is due to be published next week, said children were particularly vulnerable when they were sent to local authority-run pupil referral units (PRUs) after exclusion. It said gangs had been taking advantage of the propensity of some image-conscious institutions to remove difficult pupils.

The research, which was first reported by the Times, was conducted into “county lines”, in which young people are recruited by gangs to deal hard drugs on their behalf in market and coastal towns and rural areas.

“PRUs ... appear to be fertile ground for recruitment and continuing involvement in a variety of negative activities including county lines,” the report said. “Exclusion from school does appear to be a highly significant trigger point for the escalation of county lines involvement for children who might be on the fringes of such activity.”

It added: “Provision in the PRU does not seem to engage the children and offers very little substance.” The researchers quote a social worker as saying
Disparity between espoused and actual policy

- SEN Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2015) outlines provision with regards to looked after children (LAC), detained persons and the welfare of children. However, gang membership and exploitation, or the role of YO in the community is given no recognition.

- Only a small amount YP involved in gangs received EHCPs (Home Office, 2018). No literature/enquiry as to why.

- Yet, ‘Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation’ (EGVE) (Home Office, 2016) refers to “looked after children, children known to Social care or youth offending teams’ where ‘residential children’s care homes and pupil referral units are being targeted [by gangs]”(p.6-7).

- EGVE highly criminalised and punitive in focus.
The UK government is criticised as having a longstanding reluctance to talk about gangs in some quarters (Aldridge et al., 2008).
Rationale for understanding the ‘black box’ which mediates gang membership and offending

- Paucity of research/policy around the role and context of YP involved in gangs.
- Gang membership associates with disproportionate levels of delinquency and severity of serious and violent crime, beyond that of prolifically offending non-gang member peers (Klein et al., 2006)
- When a gang member leaves a gang, their profile of offending decreases to a degree that is no greater than their non-gang member comparators (Melde & Esbensen, 2012).
- This indicates then, that there are underlying mechanisms unique to the phenomenon of gang membership itself that are linked with offending (Ariza et al., 2014).
The need to elucidate the black box mediating gang membership and offending

- Current research on the area is predominantly in the field of criminology, typically quantitative and involves the use of protective and risk factors (Wood & Alleyne, 2010).
- This presents a one directional view of the causal factors that determine delinquency that often assume young people as “motiveless vessels that are simply filled with societal burdens” (Alleyne & Wood, 2012, pp.3).
- This has been conceptualised as one directional ‘black box’ approach where the implicit assumption is that gangs operate as sites of social learning for delinquency values and behaviours (Katz et al., 2011).
- Gangs are often therefore, passively conceptualised within research as the product of the risk factors that feed into it and the deviant outcomes that result (Ariza et al., 2014).
- Need to understand more about the psychological processes which mediate it in the context of the gang.
Methodology

- **RQ:** *What can the qualitative lived experiences of young gang members tell us about the processes that mediate gang membership and offending?*

- Systematic review guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) statement for reporting (Moher et al., 2009).

- This outlines a flow of information through different systematic phases of the search.

- Individualised search strategies were created for each database and search engine, all involving use of the terms you* AND gang AND offend* OR delinquen* OR crime AND experienc* OR live* OR perspective*.

- Search criteria broadened to US and UK samples, and to encompass Grey Literature. Searches of ProQuest ProQuest Global Thesis Repository, along with additional searches using Google Scholar and eThOs were therefore also carried out.
Figure 1: Systematic search strategy (Moher et al., 2009)

- Records identified through database searching (n = 345)
- Additional records identified through other sources (n = 3)

Records after duplicates removed (n = 48)

Records screened (n = 300) → Records excluded (n = 263)

Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 67) → Full-text articles excluded, with reasons (n = 61)

Studies included in qualitative synthesis (n = 6)
Appraisal of studies

- Included studies were assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2016). This follows the recommendations of the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews (Hannes, 2011).

- Inclusion/exclusion criteria applied which included:
  - Only US self-selection samples.
  - Only UK studies using the Eurogang definition (Weerman et al., 2009).
  - Female gang members excluded.
  - Both current and retrospective accounts of young gang members under 25 accepted.
  - Research design must be qualitative.
  - As the Eurogang definition was first introduced to the literature around 1999, the search was limited to 01/01/2000 to 01/11/2017.
Figure 3: A summary of key questions on the CASP checklist (CASP, 2017)

1. Was there a clear statement of the aims for the research?
2. Is the qualitative methodology appropriate?
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?
6. Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered?
7. Have ethical concerns been taken into consideration?
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?
Search Results

- 6 studies included, thematic synthesis of themes carried out (Thomas and Harden, 2008).
- UK studies: EP thesis (Benjamin, 2014); clinical psych thesis (Agnew, 2016); journal articles (Densley, 2012) and government based research paper (Harris et al., 2011).
- US studies were both doctoral theses in clinical psychology: Jacobs, 2010; and Ojo, 2007.
- Thematic synthesis of these studies carried out (Thomas and Harden, 2008).
Figure 2: Thematic synthesis (Thomas and Harden, 2008)

1. Familiarisation of thematic findings from studies.
2. Generation of initial descriptive thematic codes from the studies.
3. Organisation of these codes into related construct areas.
4. Refinement and defining of common themes in relation to the research questions of this systematic review.
The role of offending in reinforcing gangs as a community of belonging

- Majority of participants referred to the gang as a commitment for life and referred to the gangs role as a ‘surrogate family’.
- Acts of offending were related to seeking belonging through status, approval and improved affiliated to the social entity.
- In group and out group processes also played a role in reaffirming gang identity whereby an individual seeks to achieve a sense of identity and self-esteem by positively differentiating their in-group from a comparative out-group (Harris et al., 2011).
- Such processes were closely associated with gang rivalry, territoriality, and criminal activity, and the use of symbolic collectives, consistent with wider literature (Papachristos, 2009).
- Symbolic collectives such as attire, gesture, language, music, behaviour demonstrate allegiance to a collective social identity and reinforce expected norms of conduct, structure and social order.
- Densley (2012) refers to the increased reliance on such processes in maintaining a structured group hierarchy as the size or activity scope of the gang expands.
The role of the gang as a provider in maintaining offending

- The gang as an ‘enterprise’ – constructs of the role of the gang as a business (Agnew, 2016; Densley, 2012; Harris et al., 2011).
- Offer of not only monetary remuneration but also an improved sense of self through an associated sense of vocational value, business competency, entrepreneurialism.
- Providing for family dependents within low SES circumstance.
- Gang as providing perceived safety needs and security. Reference to “soldiers and uniform” in all studies – shared cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).
- The salient role of internal group processes within the gang is demonstrated through this perception of safety. This is contrary to evidence that gang members are at an increased risk of victimisation (Peterson et al., 2004).
Gang related offending as a response to living within an oppressive context

- Themes relating to stress or social strain theory (Hirschi, 2004). whereby participants’ intermediate experiences of stress both symbolic and physical in nature affects their psychological wellbeing and as such, requires a response to manage these effects.

- These included constructs of social strain relating to a lack of economic opportunity, stereotyped or racist ideological social discourses.

- Diminished access to social bonds to enable them to resolve such strain e.g. school, institutions, adherence to social norms, and belief that those things are important.

- Perceptions of social strain and the need to resolve such strain was referred to by participants as occupying a legitimising role for criminal behaviour, and a bias towards an external locus of control (Rotter, 1966).
Internalised constructs of being defective, ‘other’, or a threat to the moral or social order.

Impact of moral panic (Cohen, 1955) legitimising disciplinary action (Loseke and Best, 2003).

This was associated with a further loss of material opportunity.

The gang was therefore, construed as providing a space whereby young people can seek to resolve such strain by developing an improved sense of self within the group and a sense of vocational purpose.
Implications for practice

- Providing early intervention to young people with attachment needs and family discord to ensure emotional needs are better met.
- Assessing for social beliefs in relation to social bonds using techniques to illicit the voice of the young person to understand their emotional needs and adopt techniques that allow the young person to develop a more positive sense of self identity.
- Restructure thinking errors regarding falsely held ideals of the protective function of the gang vs. the risk of victimisation.
- Work closely with educators to enable early intervention to develop Executive Functioning skills (Blijd-Hoogewys et al., 2014) and protective strategies for those at risk of gang membership and exploitation.
- Review of how EHCPs can better reach and support YP at risk.
Implications for a community led EP approach

- Most importantly, this research demonstrates the need for a systemic community-based EP role to improve both material and non-material opportunity for young people within oppressive contexts.
- Moving away from an individualised approach in gang related policy and research and towards a community psychology approach that works with people in their wider systemic context is likely to be more effective (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).
- This should look to encompass an improved sense of vocational purpose, self-efficacy, and esteem and a greater internal sense of locus of control. Access to such support will play a role in countering these internal processes that lead to perspectives which legitimise offending.
- Early intervention from a person-centred planning approach could be used to further enable this, such as Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (Pearpoint et al., 2001).
MAC-UK represents a community-based approach towards supporting young people in London who have offended where mental health intervention is taken out of the clinic and applied alongside young people in their environment to create systemic change.

This has resulted in 75% of its 50 participants (many of whom were linked to gangs) being employed or in work experience within its pilot project between 2010-2012 (Cosh, 2011).

At MAC-UK, our approach to services and practice is called the INTEGRATE approach.

INTEGRATE is a psychologically informed approach, delivers multi-level interventions that create change in social environments and co-produce services with those who have lived experience. To reach those who are most excluded, the MAC-UK approach is to go out to where they are and offer a flexible, responsive and holistic service which goes beyond just providing one to one therapy. This means working in communities (sometimes even in the streets), not in clinics! INTEGRATE, implements a set of service level and practice level principles to work alongside young people and communities.
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Thank you for listening.

Any questions?
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