

Gangs and Global Exchange: Confronting the Glasgow Gang Complex

Conference Report

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OVERVIEW

Across the globe, the phenomenon of youth 'gangs' has become an important and sensitive public issue. In communities from Chicago to Rio, Capetown to London, the local realities of violent groups present complex dangers and instabilities for children and young people, and generate high levels of public fear and anger. At the same time, myths and stereotypes relating to gangs circulate through the global media of film and TV, feeding a heightened global consciousness of gangs as a fundamental social evil. Added to this, a range of global and local actors – police, youth workers, academics, journalist and policy-makers, as well as young people themselves – define and respond to youth 'gangs' in different and often contradictory ways. Increasingly, multifaceted issues surrounding youth violence are viewed through the narrow lens of the 'gang complex', in which representation and reality merge and blur, making it difficult to determine fact from fiction.

This publication reports on the contributions to a one-day conference held in Glasgow on the 2 December 2010. The conference sought to explore the issues outlined above by examining the past, present and future of the gang phenomenon in the city of Glasgow, through dialogue between relevant academic, community, media, policy, and practitioner audiences. The seminar brought together cutting-edge criminological, sociological and historical research on the development of the gang phenomenon in Glasgow alongside key figures in public, media, policy and practitioner communities; in an effort to comprehend the competing demands of these diverse groups, and work towards more informed, evidence-based collaborations. These local responses were located within the global exchange of knowledge on the 'gang complex' through dialogue with international experts.

This report represents the collation of notes taken by postgraduate student scribes at the event – thanks to Shadi Whitburn, Aneel Bhopal, Samantha Whipp, Ann Marshall, Orla Clohessy and Claire Paterson for their enthusiastic involvement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Michele Burman, SCCJR, University of Glasgow

Alistair Fraser, SCCJR, University of Glasgow

1.1 The idea for the Gangs and Global Exchange conference came about due to a tendency in responses to the gang phenomenon – a tendency we call the ‘gang complex’. Basically, this is the idea that stereotypes of gangs are incredibly powerful, and sometimes without knowing it, these stereotypes colour our judgements of young people; and in turn have an impact on how we respond to young people – in our communities, in our police forces, in our criminal justice system, and in our newspapers. This image – of a gang as a criminal, violent, and static entity, everywhere the same, and inherently dangerous – is an alluring image, but crucially one that doesn’t really match up with reality – and can in fact have a damaging and stigmatising effect on children and young people. The image reduces the diversity of young people’s experiences – differences of age, gender, social class, and ethnicity – to a set of violent stereotypes, resulting at times in our viewing of young people as ‘gang members’, not as individuals.

1.2 Having looked in some detail at American responses to gangs, and the growing concern over gangs in the United Kingdom as a whole, it appeared that: while the ‘gang complex’ has taken a full hold in the United States, and has an increasing foot-hold in England (evidenced by the first explicitly anti-gang legislation), Scotland’s more welfare-oriented traditions of youth justice (and also the groundedness of Scottish people) have prevented us from getting too carried away with the issue. So we thought that in inviting people from the key groups that respond to gangs in to discuss these issues, it might help inoculate us against excessive hysteria. The theme of ‘Gangs and Global Exchange’ is intended to bring out some of these differences in responses – with contributions from Chicago and London – as a way of locating our experiences in a broader context.

1.3 None of this is to say that the gang phenomenon in Glasgow is neither real or important – there is no doubt that the problems associated with gangs, predominantly violence and territoriality, cause ongoing fears, harms, and anxieties for children and young people, and the communities they live in, across Scotland. However, it is to say that going too far down the line of policies directed at gangs, rather than individual behaviour or offending, may be counter-productive in encouraging young people away from violence. The point of today’s conference, then, is to cut through much of the myth, stereotype and hype that surrounds the issue of gangs, to talk about the real challenges faced by young people and communities, as well as police, criminal justice agencies and the media, in

responding to the issue of gangs. While there are talks from academic researchers, the audience is a real cross-section from these differing agencies – these talks are intended to kick-start discussion and debate, rather than presenting ‘facts’ or ‘truth’.

2. GANGS IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT (KEYNOTE ADDRESS)

John Hagedorn, University of Illinois Chicago

2.1 Professor Hagedorn’s talk covered a number of key questions relating to gangs in a global context. Starting from the premise – based on global data relating to youth violence and poverty – that ‘gangs are not going away soon’, Professor Hagedorn argued that these realities are often coloured by powerful media images and stereotypes of gangs. Hagedorn emphasised that gangs often have strong ethnic, racial, or religious identity – and have a history of involvement in struggle, activism and social change as well as crime and violence. To emphasise this point, Hagedorn took the audience on the tour covered in his recent book, ‘A World of Gangs’, which analysed the development of different types of gangs throughout the world, whilst avoiding framing these groups through the stereotype of the ‘gang complex’ – including Milwaukee gangs in the 1980s, which formed as a result of a lack of job opportunities, turning street-based youth into economic enterprises in the drug trade; and the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria, which turned from gang members to being vigilantes and then eventually state militia. Summarising, Hagedorn, emphasised the point that ‘Culture Matters’ - it is important to understand what is happening within gangs to define and describe, not to frame – and that ‘Social Change Matters’, and we need to understand how to direct youth towards change.

3. LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Dr Andrew Davies, University of Liverpool

Dr Angela Bartie, University of Strathclyde

Chair: Professor Mike Nellis

In the first session, the papers from Dr Davies and Dr Bartie show up well the changing ways in which gangs have been reported, prosecuted and used by different agencies during two periods of Glasgow’s history – the 1930s and the 1960s – in which media coverage of gangs were particularly pronounced, resulting in specific police and policy responses. Reports suggest, however, that gang identities were part of life in Glasgow during the years previous, interceding, and since – resulting from ongoing need to form protective group identities in areas with few resources –

forming an ongoing, cyclical, source of identity and community, as well as fear and instability, in communities in Glasgow since this time. In John Hagedorn's evocative phrase in *A World of Gangs*, gang identities have institutionalised in certain communities – a hand-me-down identity, passed on from generation to generation; but used and interpreted in different ways by different generations – but it is only at certain moments that gangs have emerged as particular issue in public debate.

Dr Andrew Davies, University of Liverpool

Main question – what can we learn from the past?

1. Gangs are not new. Public anxieties caused by gangs, and the behaviour that gives rise to these anxieties are not new. They are assumed to be novel, however, due to media coverage and political response.
2. Glasgow as a 'city of gangs' stretches back 80 years. In the late Victorian period, there was nothing distinct about Glasgow in comparison to other cities in terms of gangs. Anxiety was ignited in the 1920s, and the protagonists were seen as older men pursuing profits.

The timeline of gangs in Glasgow shows two local panics: 1906-1908, and the middle years of the First World War. Between the late 1920s and the late 1930s territorial feuding and sectarianism began to leak from local to national press and Glasgow gained notoriety as 'The Scottish Chicago'. 'No Mean City' (1935) drew upon previous information and sensationalised it. Many scenes are strikingly similar to press reports, as if the action has been dramatised.

Gang conflicts have always been centred in some parts of the city, and not in others. In Glasgow, gang conflicts have always been concentrated in the East, and never the West. In certain areas of the East End and South Side, e.g. Bridgeton and the Gorbals, gangs became institutionalised part of the community. They were a means through which individuals excluded from employment sought to attain a part of a more affluent lifestyle.

There are two myths which society needs to let go of:

1. The honourable fighting man, the 'decent' criminal.
2. The crusading cop.

In conclusion: current difficulties surrounding gang conflicts are embedded in the past. Problems of youth violence persist only where economic difficulties persist.

Dr Angela Bartie

The Chief Constable in 1965 stated that there was no evidence of gangs. However, an increase in articles written about gangs in the media in the beginning of 1966 led to a moral panic about gang conflict.

In June 1966, an article was published with the headline 'Are Glasgow's Gangs Back?', which linked a new wave of hooliganism to 'famous' gangs of the 1930s e.g. the Billy Boys. Although the gang behaviour wasn't new, media focused on new aspects of the deviance, and so gang conflict seemed more threatening. These new hooligans became 'folk devils' and co-existed with an increase in crime. However, the moral panic led to more public concern, which likely led to more reports of crime. Public concern, therefore, could have been the factor which led to the increase in crime.

In June 1968, the justification of public unrest was questioned, as it was argued that incidents and 'crimes' had been blown out of proportion for political ends.

At the end of 1968, Frankie Vaughan visited Glasgow, specifically youths at Easterhouse. He tried to persuade these youths to end the gang violence. He arranged a weapon amnesty in exchange for setting up a youth centre for the gang members. This reminded the public that it was children that were involved in gang conflicts and that it a lack of social investment in youth reflected their delinquency. The Easterhouse Project was set up in 1969, and gang warfare seemed to be reduced in the area. It looked like the project was going to be a success.

Folklore was brought into the spotlight by Vaughan. Groups of individuals became seen as 'gangs' and previously tolerated behaviour was criminalised. It became a self-fulfilling exercise – the more the public, police and media spoke about gangs, the more gang conflict became apparent.

A long-term solution to gang conflict would be to improve community and social environments in the more deprived housing areas of the Eastend of Glasgow.

4. UNDERSTANDING THE PRESENT

Jon Bannister, University of Glasgow

Dr Alistair Fraser, University of Glasgow

Chair: Donna MacKinnon, Scottish Government

In the second set of papers, we looked at the ways in which gangs have been researched in the present – focusing on the recent Scottish Government report ‘Troublesome Youth Groups, Gangs, and Knife-Carrying in Scotland, and Alistair Fraser’s PhD research, which looked at young people’s understandings and experiences of gangs in a community in the east end of Glasgow.

Jon Bannister, University of Glasgow

The research was conducted in 5 case study locations, namely: Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire. There were two major data collection components. First, the research interviewed those engaged in the delivery of services designed to manage and challenge problematic youth behaviours, inclusive of youth gangs and knife carrying. Second, the research gained access (via these services) to a large sample of young people holding some form of group affiliation.

Perspective

In each case study area ‘troublesome youth groups’ were recognized to exist, though to significantly different extents. The tendency to regard these as symptomatic of a youth gang problem, however, was variable. Everywhere there was a lack of a tight definition of a troublesome youth group or gang. Differences in definition seemed to arise, at least in part, out of the perceived political and resource (dis)advantages of recognizing gangs (or not) locally and not purely the reality of the behaviours of groups of young people. In-line with the mixed recognition of troublesome youth groups or gangs, there was variable monitoring of problematic youth behaviours across the case study settings.

Based on the views of agency representatives, troublesome youth groups or gangs across Scotland are not all the same. In the West of Scotland interviewees defined youth gangs according to their strong territorial affiliations and rivalries manifest in gang fighting. In contrast, interviewees in the East of Scotland mainly identified troublesome youth groups that were engaged in (relatively) low-level antisocial behaviour. Neither youth gangs nor troublesome youth groups held criminal

behaviours as a reason for their existence. Far more youth gangs were identified in the West of Scotland than troublesome youth groups in the East.

Presentation

Whilst some young people referred to the groups they were involved with as 'gangs', in general they resisted the gang label, preferring to talk about the people they hung about with in terms of an 'area', a 'team' or a 'group'. The groups were mostly small, with relatively narrow age ranges, though at weekends these groups might consist of as many as 30 to 60 young people.

The vast majority of the groups were mixed-gender, but predominantly male. Both male and female respondents reported that young men, in general, were more heavily involved in offending and violence than young women. Young women, in contrast, were perceived primarily as group associates. The groups can best be characterised as fluid and informal friendship networks that met regularly, but not in any formal capacity. Group membership and, for some, violent group behaviour were regarded as a normal part of growing up in particular families and neighbourhoods. Young people articulated an interweaving of individual, friendship and group identities.

Place

Territorial fighting was the most common type of violence reported, particularly in the West of Scotland. Longstanding traditions and historical arguments were often mentioned as precursors to violence with a rival gang. In the East of Scotland, there was not the same degree of focus on the past battles or feuds. In addition, fights in the west were often orchestrated and planned, whereas violence in the east was more often described as opportunistic. Most fights were not serious and instead involved a great deal of bluster, posturing and stand-off. However, young people also reported occasions in which gang fights had led to serious injuries.

Alistair Fraser, University of Glasgow

The 'gang complex' consists of a view that there is a thing called a gang that is:

- a) structured, organised and cohesive;
- b) static, with fixed membership, leadership and values;
- c) criminal, and violent;
- d) homogenous across time and space; and
- e) discernible, and capable of categorisation.

This construction forms a central strut in much of the US gang research – and increasingly the UK and Europe – yet crucially is one which is seldom – if ever – borne out by empirical evidence. In fact, while there is little doubt that gangs, gang violence, and gang reputations create fears and harms for young people and communities across Glasgow, it is easily forgotten that gang identities can also play a positive role in young people's lives – expressing community, solidarity and excitement in what are often difficult environments.

The research reported was carried out in a community in the east end of Glasgow – where the researcher worked as a youth worker, outreach worker and high-school tutor – and the research reported today was about the experiences of a group of young men called 'The Langview Boys'. The talk emphasised the importance of context on territorial/gang identities – deindustrialisation, gentrification, delocalisation, commercialisation have all impacted on Langview, restricting young people's mobility. In this context, space itself becomes a resource to be drawn on in forming identity – to act out different roles at different stages of social development. Focused here on 'playing gangs' as one way to emphasise the complex, fluid and contingent role played by gang identities.

5. MEDIA/COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO YOUTH GANGS

Facilitator: John Hagedorn, University of Illinois Chicago

The main discussion in the workshop surrounded how many positive actions have come about in Glasgow as a response to youth gangs, yet Glasgow continues to receive very bad publicity in the media. Issues brought up include;

- Historically, the media had a good relationship with engaging with the community and community issues in a positive way.
- Negative stories about crime and gang culture don't necessarily sell more in the media.
- The point was raised how reporting on gangs in the media goes through a form of boom times in the media-it was largely reported on in the 1960s, declined greatly in the 1990s and now in more recent times it is very much so present in the media again.
- Different styles of media tend to report on different aspects of gangs, for example television style news tends to report more on the courtroom proceedings more so than newspapers do.
- The media can produce positive effects by reporting on local champions doing good in the area, but good community voices are considerably lacking in today's media.
- The media can result in social change, for example, a couple of years ago they 'named and shamed' those who parked on yellow lines in the city and as a result a law was passed to combat this. Positive media, producing good social changes is required when comes to reporting on gangs.
- The media is inclined to glorify crime much more than it did before. "The Digger" a small local magazine in Glasgow that reports on crime in the area, focusing largely on the gangs has become an institution in Glasgow. Gang members buy it to see if they were discussed in it and tend to have a sense of pride on being named in it.
- The severe negative effects that come about due to the media labelling criminals as "beasts", etc. This was discussed in regards to how it causes difficulty for anyone trying to leave gangs.
- The media needs to report more on the constructive things being done about youth gangs, an example was given of how an award ceremony was held in the east end of Glasgow to celebrate good youth behaviour, all media in Glasgow was invited and none turned up.

The question that was formed to pose to the panel was; How can the mainstream media give a positive voice to young people?

6. CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESPONSES TO YOUTH GANGS

Facilitator: Michele Burman, SCCJR, University of Glasgow

How do we characterise a Scottish criminal justice response to youth gangs?

- Depends on the age of the youth. Over 16 = more punitive. Under 16 = Children's Hearing System. There is a divide between the age groups.
- There should be an element of rehabilitation, but the overriding element should be deterrence. For example, many gang youths are offered rewards for not joining into gang behaviour. Youths that have never been involved in gangs don't get free days out. Unfair.
- It becomes like a badge of honour, other youths shouldn't be punished for not being in gangs. Under 16s should be prosecuted if public interest dictates that they should. Similarly, if over 16s don't deserve to be prosecuted then they shouldn't be just because of gang affiliation. The Scottish system sees court as a last resort, if it is deserved and for the interest of both the public and the offender.
- The age of criminal responsibility is always questioned. Many people think that it is 16 or 18 years old, and that's when you can be punished for crimes. The credibility of the system before that age is questioned.
- Nobody can give a straight answer for what goes on a criminal record, when the slate is wiped clean, what the impact is of conviction before the age of 16.
- Offenders often have their own tariff system for prosecution that is passed on like Chinese whispers by friends, parents etc.

What are the longer consequences of getting involved in the criminal justice system? Do people know about them?

- The younger people often don't know. They have their own tariff system that is passed around.
- For an over 16 year old to be found drinking in the street, a fixed penalty notice is often the consequence. Yet, many of these individuals have multiple FPNs on

their records, so what is their effect? They don't know the consequences for their criminal record.

- Where do gangs come into this?
- Often people commonly arrested are known to be gang members.
- To what extent is the offence actually gang related?
- The vast majority of young people are not offenders. It is the behaviour that is displayed that determines whether someone is arrested.
- The focus of the Violence Reduction Unit is on gangs. It deals with potential offenders on the basis of their gang membership. Their identity as a member of a gang is identified by the Police Intelligence Unit. The gang is their identity.

How many youths are related to gangs?

- Information isn't categorised that way. Often individuals take responsibility for a whole group that may be involved, you can't really tell who was involved in each crime.
- It would be difficult without reading through each individual police report.
- Tolerance levels differ between places. More affluent places are often less tolerant of gang conflicts. Reports of gang violence might reflect tolerance levels, not just actual crime.
- How many youths would you come into contact with if they weren't in gangs?
- The vast majority have, or are, associated with a gang.
- Are disorderly groups 'gangs'? Do they know the consequences?
- Youths know that there are consequences, but they are not bothered by how it might affect their future. The importance of the current situation, and the friendships, outweighs future consequences.

Does the knowledge that someone is a member of a gang affect their perception in the Criminal Justice System?

- It doesn't affect how they are perceived, but it effects the treatment that is used. For example, more intervention methods might be used with known gang members.
- It is easier to intervene with individuals.
- 'Divide and conquer'. Individuals that want out of a gang might be swayed by the collective, but individual intervention is more successful than trying to persuade a whole group.

What are the greatest challenges posed by gang youths to the criminal justice system?

- Their current life choice is always more appealing, there are not enough negative consequences to make them desist.
- The sense of belonging to a gang is too important.
- So a key challenge is the sense of belonging to the gang, and overcoming the psyche of the age group?
- How do you deter people? We will always have group disorder, surely deterrence and prevention is better than intervention.
- When should we intervene? From birth? Its not an explanation, but current financial climate wouldn't allow for this.

7. COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO YOUTH GANGS

Facilitator: Jon Pickering, University of Glasgow

Jon Pickering facilitated the session on Community Responses to Youth Gangs and initiated discussions by firstly prompting group members to briefly introduce themselves. The professional diversity of the group was vast, with research interests ranging from gangs in Columbia to research on identity and territorialism. In additions to research interests, several group participants were professional involved in youth justice partnerships.

The group was prompted to consider the following questions:

- What are the different ways in which communities and community groups respond to issues of youth gangs?
- Based on your experiences, what are some of the challenges associated with providing a community response to the issue of youth gangs?
- Based on your experiences, what are good examples of effective responses to young people in youth gangs?
- How can some of the challenges you have identified by overcome?

One interesting idea the group considered was the positive aspect of gang associations and the importance of understanding the positive aspects in additions to the negative. The group suggested placing focus on positive aspects (rather than negative aspects) in order to understand and support young people, and also to help reduce the barriers for young people to exit gangs. Several group members criticised the media influence on portraying the negative aspects of gang associations, with news reports focusing on gang violence etc.

One participant suggested the influence family and community relationships present for young people, and the importance of developing strong bonds. A number of community organisations were highlighted and discussed. Following discussion on

community youth programmes experienced by the group, the discussion turned to the challenges faced by communities aiming to run youth projects. From the experience of professional group members the main challenges surrounded financing and accessing programmes. The group considered the youth projects available; however one interesting point raised was the effectiveness of services (and programmes) in reaching the “minority” of young people with links to territorialism and violence.

The group consensus surrounded the requirement for co-operation between youth projects in different communities. Co-operation between youth projects aid in developing bonds between communities and also helps to reduce tensions between youth projects (and young people involved in projects).

The final group thoughts surrounded whether the problem was with gangs or with communities.

8. POLICE RESPONSES TO YOUTH GANGS

Alistair Fraser, SCCJR, University of Glasgow

What are the various ways in which the police currently respond to youth gangs?

- Alistair asked the group as a whole what are the various way in which the police currently respond to youth gangs? Immediately a representative of the police made a contribution which explained in great depth the numerous ways in which his police force deals with issues relating to youth gangs and crime. There was mention of the Gangs Task Force which is used to break the cycle of violence by identifying, finding and arresting gang members involved in crime. He went on to discuss the prevalence of territorial street gangs in Glasgow and noted that in his 20 years with the police force the culture of the gang has not changed. He noted that prison is an ineffective means of punishment for young people and there are many in the police who share this view. However he did point out that the threat of a long term sentence to persistent offenders could be beneficial to reducing crime rates. He then went on to discuss the work of Serve which allows for increased police involvement in gangs and the local community and noted that this was extremely advantageous instilling positive attitudes in young gang members towards authority figured such as the police, teachers etc. Mention was made of the need for action to be delivered visibly by the community in order for it to have its maximum effect; dialogue between police and gang members was greater than ever before and this should be celebrated.

However on a more negative note he then went on to say that he believes that criminal activity within gangs serves no purpose for criminal enterprise unlike gangs in the US (Cincinnati) and it does not exist for the sake of behaving in an anti-social manner. Furthermore he claimed that there were those in the force who hold on to the generalisation that “gang violence is the exception rather than the rule” in the East End of Glasgow. He described this as being dangerous and cited a similar misjudgement made in Boston, USA which brought about negative implications.

- A Representative of CIRV discussed her work with young gang members and said that her work involves focus on developing a relationship with the individual which she said will promote a positive influence. She went on to express the importance of positive peer influence and good role models in breaking the cycle of gangs and stated that there are improving relationships between the police and young people.
- An academic representative went on to discuss the merits of Serve saying it had “broken down barriers”.
- This point was commended by a representative of a youth organisation in Glasgow, who said that there should be more initiatives similar to this. He went on to explain his work in football coaching with 12 – 16 year olds in the Easterhouse area of Glasgow saying it had been a tremendous success in keeping young people from a particularly deprived area of Glasgow’s east end out of trouble.

What are some of the challenges associated with policing of the youth?

- The discussion in relation to this question was kick-started by a Strathclyde police officer’s assertion that very few youth gangs in Glasgow are involved in serious organised crime (She mentioned that the figures were as low as 2 out of 70 gangs being involved in serious organised crime). This claim was approved by an academic participant who said that his research found very rare instances of youth gangs involved in serious organised crime such as the selling of drugs.
- A representative of a community youth organisation then went on to pose a question to a police officer which brought about very deep discussion. He asked when will territorial boundaries with regards to gangs in Glasgow will be broken. Upon this question the aforementioned Strathclyde Police officer interjected and said the geography element in

youth crime is very important. She says that in particular Glasgow's East End is problematic as it consists of many different "areas" which are in close proximity to one another. This, she said, caused problems as violent altercations between rival gangs easily occurred due to the closeness of the "opposing areas". She contrasted this with the situation in Edinburgh where particularly deprived areas are usually situated far apart from each other, thus youth gang violence is not so much of a problem as it is in Glasgow. She raised the point that schools within Glasgow were trying to challenge young people's views on boundaries within their own city at a very young age and said that this attempt was having successful results. All participants appeared to be unanimous in their agreement that the encouragement to children of breaking boundaries should be done at a very young age, perhaps even as young as 3 or 4 some participants suggested. The same officer then raised the point of sectarianism, which she claimed was a cause of gang violence amongst youths in Glasgow. This point was immediately rejected by a representative of CIRV who said that there were rare examples of feuds due to sectarianism and that often youth gangs were in fact mixed. The point was then made that violence often exists within gangs with fights occurring due to conflict over girls, ego etc.

- A point was then raised by an academic participant who wondered what the motivation for youth gangs in Glasgow was. The representative of CIRV went on to answer saying that the key problem here was boredom and a lack of recreational facilities in deprived areas in Glasgow. However this point was rebutted by the aforementioned police officer who made the claim that facilities don't work. She stated that there were more recreational facilities in deprived areas than more affluent areas yet it does not seem to have any effect on the reduction of youth crime. She went on to say that youth gang culture was not just a problem in the most deprived areas of Glasgow but is prevalent in the suburbs also, claiming that areas such as Bearsden and Milngavie have recently had numerous cases of gang related youth violence.
- In the closing minutes of the discussion numerous points were made by different participants on what should be done to curb the problem of young gangs in Glasgow. An academic participant made the point that we must try and make projects that help reduce youth violence sustainable and that very good progress has been made but it needs maintaining. A representative of a community youth organisation said that the conference in general was very valuable and there should be more similar events. He also expressed the need for more media interest in regard to

the matter and that the media promote matters of youth justice in a positive way. Another participant questioned whether there was too much focus on youth gangs and violence in Glasgow and asked whether an issue such as domestic violence particularly with young females in mind was being ignored.

9. CONCLUSIONS

John Pitts, University of Bedfordshire

I notice that many of the presenters at this conference have expressed some unease about using the term 'gang'. This is not uncommon because in both political and academic circles, the 'gang issue' remains highly contentious. Nonetheless, while, in 'gang-affected' neighbourhoods, police officers, professionals, adults, children and young people appear to believe that violent youth gangs exist (Pitts 2007, 2008a, 2008b, Palmer, 2009), many academics working in England express scepticism.

They argue that the stylistic differences between contemporary youth cultures and those of the past notwithstanding, the contemporary furore surrounding violent youth gangs is akin to the 'moral panics' which attended the teddy boys in the 1950s, the 'mods. and rockers' in the 1960s, the punks in the 1970s, the lager louts in the 1980s and so on. They contend that these periodic expressions of popular outrage tell us more about the anxieties of an adult public, 'opinion formers' and the media than the behaviour of young people. For them, the most important task is to allay popular anxieties by pointing to historical continuities between contemporary youth cultures and those of yesteryear (Youth Justice Board, 2007). Simon Hallsworth and Tara Young (2008), for example, argue that:

This anxiety has coalesced in a perception that the gang is a serious and growing problem, that the rise in lethal violence, as seen recently in inner cities such as London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool, is connected to the proliferation of the gang, and that the solution to the problem of urban gang violence lies in its suppression.

In this critique, allegedly exaggerated portrayals of violent youth gangs are presented as a product of 'moral entrepreneurship' (Becker, 1964), wherein criminal justice agencies, dramatise a problem and stoke popular anxieties in order to gain increased resources and greater political influence. Other academics believe that this demonization has a more sinister purpose however, arguing that current concerns about violent youth gangs are orchestrated by the state, its agencies and

the media in order to justify ever deeper incursions into our freedoms and ever greater control over our lives (Muncie & Hughes 2002, Simon 2007)

Academics associated with the *Eurogang* project by contrast, hold that youth gangs exist throughout the UK but, unlike popular North American portrayals, they have a fluid membership, porous boundaries and are, for the most part, engaged in only relatively innocuous adolescent offending (see Klein, 2008 and Aldridge et al, 2008). For them, the academic task consists in demolishing unhelpful stereotypes (Aldridge et al, 2008) and identifying those personal, familial and environmental characteristics of gang-involved young people which set them apart from others, in order to develop targeted intervention programmes (Klein, 2008).

This mixture of scepticism and reductionism is one of the reasons that academics and policy makers have had such difficulty arriving at a definition. For example, having deliberated for four years *Eurogang*, a consortium of US and European social scientists, produced the following (2004):

Any durable street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal acts is part of their identity

Its vagueness is accounted for by the resistance on the part of some European members to what they saw as North American definitional entrepreneurship. This reluctance to name the phenomenon is also evident in a recent report of the English Youth Justice Board (2007). Thus, its authors are at pains to emphasise that the 'gang' is, essentially, just another kind of peer group; that group offending is a common form of youth crime; that many non-offending young people adopt a gangster 'style' although they do acknowledge that some of the young people interviewee were armed and did have links into far more serious, organised, adult crime. In a (failed) quest for greater specificity, the Home Office (2006) posits:

Young people (who) spend time in groups of three or more. The group spends a lot of time in public places. The group has existed for 3 months or more. The group has engaged in delinquency or criminal behaviour together in the last 12 months. The group has at least one structural feature (a name, an area or a leader).

The definition devised by the Centre for Social Justice in its report *Dying to Belong* (2009) offers a sharper definition, suggesting that the violent youth gang is:

... a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who (1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, (2) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence, (3) identify with or lay claim over territory, (4) have

some form of identifying structural feature, and (5) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs.

This builds upon the definition devised by Simon Hallsworth and Tara Young (2008) who, usefully, endeavour to distinguish the youth gang and other *urban collectivities*.

| Hallsworth & Young's Three Point Typology of Urban Collectivities |
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| The Peer Group: A small, unorganised, transient grouping occupying the same space with a common history. Crime is not integral to their self definition. |
| The Gang: A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is integral to the group's identity. |
| The Organised Criminal Group: Members are professionally involved in crime for personal gain operating almost exclusively in the 'grey' or illegal marketplace. |

This too is what Robert Gordon (2000) endeavours to do in his study of youth grouping, all of which are sometimes colloquially described as gangs, in Vancouver.

| Robert Gordon's Six Point Typology of Youth Groupings |
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| Youth movements: are social movements characterised by a distinctive mode of dress or other bodily adornments, a leisure-time preference, and other distinguishing features (e.g. punk rockers). |
| Youth groups: are comprised of small clusters of young people who hang out together in public places such as shopping centres |
| Criminal groups: are small clusters of friends who band together, usually for a short period of time, to commit crime primarily for financial gain and may contain young and not so young adults as well. |
| Wannabe groups: include young people who band together in a loosely structured group primarily to engage in spontaneous social activity and exciting, impulsive, criminal activity including collective violence against other groups of youths. Wannabees will often claim 'gang' territory and adopt 'gang-style' identifying markers of some kind. |
| Street gangs: are groups of young people and young adults who band together to form a semi-structured organisation, the primary purpose of which is to engage in planned and profitable criminal behaviour or organised violence against rival street gangs. They tend to be less visible but more permanent than other groups. |
| Criminal business organisations: Are groups that exhibit a formal structure and a high degree of sophistication. They are composed mainly of adults and engage in criminal activity primarily for economic reasons and almost invariably maintain a low profile. Thus while they may have a name, they are rarely visible. |

What this work suggests is that if we want to conduct serious research and develop coherent policy and practice we do need definitions which allow us to identify, name and differentiate the phenomena that concern us because, as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1921) observed, *whereof we cannot speak thereof we must pass over in silence*.

My own work in three London boroughs suggested that what I called 'violent youth gangs' were characterised by:

- A shared name or designation that is recognised by both affiliated and non-affiliated children and young people, local adults and local criminal justice, educational and social welfare personnel
- A discernible structure characterised by hierarchical role differentiation (a 'pecking order') and, in some cases, links into upper echelon organised crime
- The influence they exerted over neighbourhood, drug dealing or institutional territory by dint of local loyalties or the threat or imposition of (sometimes lethal) violence
- A paramount concern with the illicit acquisition of wealth and the maintenance of 'respect' in the territories where they have their influence
- Conflictual relationships with other, similar, groups or networks and the police

While, of course, I accept that there are historical continuities between youth subcultures past and present and the, sometimes misplaced, social anxieties they engender (Pearson, 1983). And while I accept that there are many adolescent groups in the UK, characterised by fluid membership and porous boundaries, engaged in relatively innocuous adolescent misbehaviour that are identified as 'gangs' (Klein, 2008). And although I concur with the view that the term 'gang' is used indiscriminately in popular discourse, the media and the criminal justice system and that, all too often, its use is stigmatising and racist (cf Alexander, 2008). And even though I recognise that from the late 1970s, UK governments have exploited the fear of crime for electoral advantage (Pitts, 2003). I nonetheless maintain that violent youth gangs exist and that their existence poses a serious threat to the safety and wellbeing, and in some cases the lives, of the children young people and adults who live in gang-affected neighbourhoods and I believe that the best English research supports this view (Bullock & Tilley, 2003, Youth Justice Board, 2006, Palmer & Pitts, 2006, Pitts, 2008, Matthews R. & Pitts J. 2007, Palmer, 2009 and Centre for Social Justice, 2009, Balasunderam, 2009).

If, as C. Wright Mills (1957) suggests, our duty as social scientists is to strive to transform private troubles into public issues; to ignore this reality and perpetuate the sentimental fallacy that the profound social, economic and political changes we have experienced in the past three decades have not changed and worsened the crime perpetrated against the urban poor, in the mistaken belief that in doing so we are in some way averting the 'demonisation' of young people, is not only bad social science, it is also a dereliction of our professional duty.

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