

Gangs: a high price to pay for belonging

Diane Curry describes a pre-release project that helps black prisoners begin the process of disentangling themselves from criminal relationships.

Gangs in one form or another have been in existence for hundreds, possibly thousands of years. In recent years, the term 'gang' has been used to describe any group of people who are involved in criminal behaviour and who collaborate together for anti-social reasons. Gang-like activity has been recognized in this form since the days of pirates in the 17th century, Victorian 'scuttlers' in the 19th century, mobsters in the 1940s and mods, rockers and teddy boys in the 1960s. All members of these gangs would have been identified by dress code, colours, tattoos and/or musical preference.

Today, gang members of the Los Angeles based 'Bloods' and 'Cripps' will also define themselves by the use of coded graffiti, and gang members operating in British cities have added specific terminology to their identity.

So who are the people who are attracted to such gangs and for whom allegiance to such groups may result in their own destruction?

Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group has managed the Black Prisoner Support Project for five years. Based in Manchester, we provide support to black prisoners who are returning to the Greater Manchester area upon release. We also have two community-based mentors for African Caribbean offenders, which are funded by the National Probation Service and we provide monthly group work sessions to black prisoners in HMP Moorland, Lindholme, Doncaster and Wealstun.

As part of our Black Prisoner Support Project, POPS staff have met with hundreds of young black men who are incarcerated for a variety of crimes including drug dealing, extreme violence, armed robbery and murder.

We have discussed the issue of gangs and the impact of gang related offending on individuals and communities and the men have taken part in a variety of activities including making a video about the issue of 'gun crime'. We have also tackled the notion of gangs and what being involved in them means to men in the group. For many of them it raised the issue of belonging and indeed, Maslow (1971) believes that most maladjustment and emotional illness in our society can be traced to the failure to gratify the basic human need for belonging.

Taking this notion further, Adler's theory of 'belongingness' was examined by Crandall (1981)

who found that when students felt they belonged, they had an enhanced sense of the value of work and increased self-confidence.

In our discussions with prisoners, the following points were made about why some young people joined local gangs.

BELONGING: Being part of an organised gang can offer a sense of belonging normally associated with being part of a family or extended family. Many young people do not have a patriarchal role model and there is a marked absence of fathers.

PROTECTION: Boundaries that are set by local youth for numerous reasons, including location of schools, social venues, housing estates and geographical location, mean that youth feel 'safety in numbers' if confrontation becomes an issue with others from differing areas.

STATUS: Many people who are involved in gangs lack legitimate avenues to gain respect and status normally associated with educational attainment, employment and/or career progression.

FINANCIAL GAIN: Lack of educational focus, resulting in no skills, no qualifications and a fatalistic attitude to the work ethos means that many young people become involved in gangs to provide them with an opportunity to earn money that will enable them to provide a lifestyle for themselves and their families.

PLEASURE: Although gang involvement can lead to imprisonment, cause death and bring misery to communities, many people stated that being a gang member provided them with 'good times'. Laughter, camaraderie and a general feel good factor was highlighted by many.

So, where do we begin to stem the rising numbers of young people finding themselves embraced by gang culture? Firstly, we recognize that they have needs. They have feelings, values and ambitions for themselves and their families. They are very often children who themselves have been victims of socio-economic factors such as poverty, poor parenting, a failing educational system and a society that places massive emphasis on material possessions. They have the same natural desire to fit in and belong as the rest of us, but in a lot of cases do not have the opportunity. If young people are failing in the mainstream they tend to seek their own sense of belonging. It is acknowledged that gang membership is not something that appeals only to

black youth but that gang culture can offer young people generally the things that they may feel are lacking in their lives. Many of these factors will be associated with inner city living (Kaplan and Johnson 1992).

But let's not forget the one issue that uniquely affects gang members from black and minority ethnic backgrounds – racism. For these individuals, racism is an everyday reality and must have some effect on how black youth perceive themselves.

Young people have been influenced by negative media images and caught up in a contemporary attitude that lacks respect for traditional norms and devalues human life. Survival is the name of the game and in many communities the only way to survive is to have the back-up of other gang members.

However, although we may accept some or all of the above points, POPS staff play a vital role in using the monthly support programmes that we facilitate in prisons to challenge the views of those who attend and to inform them of alternatives. For many who argue that gang related activity is their only real option, we begin to raise their awareness of the political and historical agenda. Discussions about black on black violence and the systematic destruction of black potential via inappropriate educational curricula are just some of the topics that are covered.

Facilitators who act as positive role models are invited to talk to the men to inform them of other ways that they can gain respect, belonging and status. Debate about the importance of money and material possessions is instigated, leading eventually to sessions about their roles as fathers and the future they are providing for their own children. For many, valued personal relationships and maturity are reasons enough for making life changes. For others, it is just not the time for them to do so. However, another component of the group looks at black history. For many in the group this is the first time they have had the opportunity to take pride in themselves with regard to historical importance and to feel a sense of value – extremely empowering for these men. Black history explains the conspiracy of slavery and travels further back to times of greatness for black people and the massive positive influence black people have had on society as a whole. The facilitators encourage the men to support each other and not fight against each other in either a verbal or physical sense.

Those prisons that have a contract with POPS to provide these monthly support sessions reap the benefit of:

- A black prisoner population that has a 'safe space' to explore these issues, resulting in less individual frustration being demonstrated by black prisoners.
- An informed black prisoner population who are encouraged through the values of personal

responsibility and supported to utilise the prison's internal mechanisms for requests and complaints.

- Access to the views of the black prisoner population, which aids in the duty to provide an equal and diverse regime.

Gang related crime and those who may get caught up in it is not the main focus of the groups that we work with but it is a factor for many of the men who attend. This article has been an opportunity to share their perspective on such association and to hear about how our organisation begins to address such issues.

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References

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