

# Loading the policy blunderbuss

Jon Shute, Judith Aldridge and Juanjo Medina examine Coalition policy and find it wanting

**Ending Gang and Youth Violence: A Cross Governmental Report** including further evidence and good practice case studies (EGYV) (HM Government, 2011) describes the Coalition's attempts to develop a coordinated policy strategy to reduce gang related and more general youth violence. The report extends to 84 pages, 23 headline measures, and refers to over 60 reputedly relevant initiatives. Amidst some refreshingly honest admissions ('We understand that you can't arrest your way out of the problem'), significant emphases are placed on locally coordinated multi-agency action, and on an articulated strategy of family level prevention, individual intervention and police suppression. While the report evidences much good-will, good practice and hard work, at least three core problems relating to expertise, evidence and moral vision critically undermine its strategic coherence; and we contend that the measures flowing from it will, at best, produce weak evidence of no overall effect, and at worst, prove counter-productive.

## Phenomenon

The first flaw of EGYV is that while the consultation process seems to have been genuinely wide, the framing of the policy problem remains unclear, under evidenced and partial. The problem is *unclear* to the extent that there is a fundamental conflation of gangs, guns and knife crime that suggests both a widespread crisis and a unitary phenomenon to be tackled. Leaving aside the general context of

stable or declining police recorded knife and gun crime, reference to the Home Office's own *Offending Crime and Justice Survey* (Sharp et al., 2006) suggests a rather complex picture of youth, group identity and violence. In this self report survey of over 4,000 10–19 year olds, the prevalence of membership in 'delinquent youth groups' – the definition closest to EGYV's 'gang' definition – was just 6 per cent and of these, 37 per cent had committed no offence in the preceding year, 66 per cent had not committed a serious offence, 87 per cent had not carried a knife, and 99 per cent had not carried a gun. Gang membership amplifies risk of offending and has a higher prevalence in socially excluded communities; however, it remains a generally rare, short lived and non ethnically specific phenomenon that is co-terminous with neither offending *per se* nor serious violence, which also remains rare. The policy problem is further under evidenced in relation to the contested plurality of British gang research and suggests a picture of group and group dynamics that many (including US researchers) would not recognise.

One prominent example is the repeated suggestion that gangs actively 'groom' young people, when ethnographic evidence suggests that entering a gang is better conceptualised as a voluntary qualitative shift in existing friendship and family networks (Aldridge and Medina, 2008). Finally, the construction of the problem is *partial* in the expertise and evidence it draws upon: of the

34 non-governmental attendees at a consultative 'international forum of gang experts', 24 (70 per cent) were current or former senior police officers, with British gang research represented by a single academic best associated with research in one London borough. What emerges is a picture of youth gangs and youth violence distorted to conform to a London-centric and police-constructed image of organised hyper-violent predatory youths and that seems purposely designed to mask variation and complexity, create a sense of crisis, and legitimate primarily police led responses.

## Solutions of evidence

The second flaw lies in the report's casual attitude towards evaluation evidence, the ideal purpose of which is to assess the worth of initiatives in a comprehensive and unambiguous way, and so enable policy decisions that maximise impact and prevent waste of public funds. This is a particular issue in relation to gang research, where over eight decades of well funded but poorly evaluated American programmes have left senior researchers (Klein and Maxson, 2010) doubtful as to whether anything reliably 'works' in gang reduction. The problem of 'solutions' evidence in EGYV is four-fold. First, reference to problematic British gang initiatives are conspicuous by their absence, for example, Bullock and Tilley's (2008) description of a south Manchester multi-agency programme that experienced project drift and disagreement over definitions, net widening and the labelling of children. Second, while welcome interest (see Shute, 2011) is shown in two high quality family interventions – 'Family Nurse Partnerships' and 'Multisystemic Therapy' – commitment to roll out may be premature before the first full British evaluation results are known, and when no gang data has been collected in either evaluation. A third problem relates to the promotion of two programmes - Intensive Intervention Projects (IIPs) and the 'Strathclyde model' of deterrence policing – that have relatively weak evaluation designs without adequate

comparison groups, and where 'progress' is judged subjectively by the practitioners delivering the intervention.

Little confidence can be had, therefore, in some quite grandiose effectiveness claims. Finally, reference is made to four government Bills and over 60 further initiatives, all of which are adduced as relevant, effective or promising, but where evidence of such is often purely anecdotal. In short, EGYV uses a relatively weak and selective evidence base to justify major commitments, and seems to favour a 'blunderbuss' approach of variable quality approaches whose independent and interactive effects may prove almost impossible to evaluate, even if there were a strong commitment to do so. In these circumstances, there seems little potential for learning and as great a potential for disregarding the truly effective as there is for pursuing the ineffective and wasteful.

### Policy doublethink

The third flaw of the report lies in the absence of a clear moral vision regarding the treatment of the socially excluded. Welfarist sentiments are expressed in relation to youth job creation, increased 'early years' support, emergency re-housing, community-based localism and prisoner resettlement. However, these sit alongside antagonistic references to a *Welfare Reform Bill* criticised for reducing the income of the poorest, Sure Start Centres that face major cuts and specific mention of fast track eviction, repressive community policing and new mandatory prison sentences. There seems little intellectual/moral coherence in combining policies that remove need with those that reimpose it. While EGYV invokes largely pre-announced welfarist policy initiatives, much of what is 'new' in the report tends towards coordinated punitive action, whether it be deterrence policing and sentencing, the sanction threat behind IIPs, or penalties for breach of expanded civil 'gang injunctions'. Serious offending deserves appropriate punishment, however this structural imbalance towards punitiveness belies attempts to convey

policy 'balance' and emphasises the police-led nature of EGYV.

### Conclusion

The criticisms levelled here are not to deny that there are some useful ideas in EGYV, nor to dismiss the trauma experienced in violence-affected communities or the hard work of the very many committed stakeholders discussed therein. But as over 80 years of American gang focussed programmes will attest, good intentions and hard work are no guarantors of success, and some approaches have proved counterproductive (Klein and Maxson, 2010). As the UK begins to recognise and respond to gangs, therefore, an opportunity seems to have been squandered to learn from the full range of British and international research evidence, and to articulate this into an intellectually and morally coherent programme of activity capable of assessing its own effects. To move forward, a number of basic points must be recognised and actioned.

First, gangs arise globally in conditions of deep social exclusion, so a difficult but essential task is to ensure that cross departmental policy work in an articulated way to dissolve existing pockets of exclusion and prevent the formation of others. It also means moving away from contradictory 'support-then-punish' rhetoric, to a more fundamental emphasis on prevention, where the positive impact on families with children is a prime success criterion of *all* government policy.

Secondly, while policing suppression may have an important role in crisis management, liberty concerns mean their role must be very circumscribed: police have long been criticised for racialised, weapon focussed operational gang definitions, overly liberal application of gang labels and long term data retention (Ralphs et al., 2009); and it is uncomfortable to hear senior police argue for an expanded role on the streets as well as in schools, youth justice and family services. Do we really want to commit to a society where police are portrayed uncritically as 'tough-love' jack-of-all trades practitioners; always a solution

to, but never a cause of community problems (cf. racialised stop and search policy; the role of Operation Trident in the August 2011 disorder in Tottenham)?

Finally, the gap between academics and practitioners must be bridged in order to develop robust assessments of gang involvement that enable efficient service prioritisation, and develop and advocate minimum high standards of evaluation for all new major policy initiatives (Shute, 2011). No doubt some will see these recommendations as idealistic, but in the context of economic stagnation, record youth unemployment and ongoing concerns about racialised gang discourse and criminal justice practices, the alternative as envisaged by EGYV may only be expensive but fruitless activity, leading to greater community tension, and more, not less gang and youth violence. ■

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### References

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