

# MEDIA MYTH-MAKING

## Creating a girl gang problem

Girls in gangs have recently attracted a flurry of media interest. In October last year, The Guardian ran a piece entitled 'Deadlier than the Male' announcing the arrival of 'yob woman' and, not to be outdone, this story was followed by articles in The Times and Evening Standard. I was interviewed for a BBC 2 Public Eye programme and having explained that there was no female gang problem in Britain, I agreed to describe my research in the United States. Unfortunately, though understandably, given the editing of my remarks, it appeared as if I was commenting on the British situation. The media had found a story of sex and violence and it was not going to be deterred by the fact that there is no data to suggest that British girl gangs exist in any appreciable numbers, nor that they are a new phenomenon or a growing problem.

In the United States police departments in major cities report gang numbers and gang crime to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and research money is targeted to those wishing to perform national surveys of the gang crime problem. In this country no such statistics are routinely collected, largely because juvenile gangs have never been seen to represent a sufficiently significant problem to merit special monitoring. Lacking any direct evidence, the media has turned to crime statistics reporting a 250 per cent increase in serious crimes by women since 1973 as evidence of girl gangs at work. There is a good deal of statistical gamesmanship in the use of such figures. Often the percentage rise in male crime over the same period is conveniently ignored and even though females now constitute a larger percentage of those found guilty of violent offences (though still only about 16 per cent), this is in large part because guilty findings for males have dropped in recent years. In any case, it is clear that changes in crime rate do not speak to the issue of the existence of girl gangs.

### What is a gang?

The media's pernicious usage of the term gang is troubling. Though definitional disputes continue in the States, most researchers believe that a gang must show

endurance over time, identifiable leadership, lines of authority, act in concert to commit crimes, claim control over a territory and/or a form of criminal enterprise and have a name and wear 'colours' that are locally recognised. These requirements are important for they help us to distinguish a gang from a group. There is pervasive evidence that *groups* of youth are responsible for the vast majority of juvenile crime, loners are a rarity. But there is a difference between a temporary clique of delinquent friends and a structured gang. A gang endures over time, outliving the particular friendships which may have initially



composed it. In Los Angeles gang membership is passed down from one generation to the next. Its formal organisation makes it a useful vehicle for well orchestrated and lasting involvement in criminal enterprises such as drug sales and extortion. The existence of a gang raises the possibility of gang warfare over turf and associated criminal opportunities. And a gang becomes a cultural resource in the way that a friendship group does not: it is immortalised in movies and becomes the subject matter of media reports and rap songs. It takes on a life of

its own, becoming available for imitation and exportation, as we see in Puerto Rico's gang problem which it acquired from New York City. Perhaps girls in England will buy into this cultural resource one day, but there is little evidence that they have done it yet.

David Downes (1966) tried and failed to find evidence of gangs in London in the 1960s and, James Patrick's (1973) account of Glasgow gangs notwithstanding, there have been only a few scattered reports of British gangs. Britain has traditionally been the home of subcultures not gangs. Despite the current post-modern bricolage of style, Britain has seen waves

of mods, rockers, skinheads, rastas and punks which have spread through the country from their initial beginnings in clubs and estates in major cities. Subcultures do not depend upon face to face interaction as gangs do; any teenager can buy the right clothes, drugs and music to join the movement. The United States owns the gang, as I have argued elsewhere (see Campbell and Muncer 1989).

Britain has not yet developed a male gang problem. And given that in the United States girl gangs follow rather than precede male gangs, it is unlikely that we have a female gang problem either. In the States, girl members constitute about 5 to 10 per cent of the gang population and the vast majority exist as affiliates of already established male gangs. Furthermore, studies of female friendship patterns (eg Archer 1992) show that girls are far less attracted than boys to large friendship groups, preferring a few close friends. Female groups also display little in the way of dominance hierarchies and formal leadership. These sex differences also exist in the gang. Girl gang members often deny there is any leader and the gang is composed of several inter-mingled cliques of friends. So, if girl gangs emerge in England, it would be surprising if they showed the structure and organisation that the media seems so keen to attribute to them.

### 'Sluts' and 'tomboys'

Myth has always surrounded the female gang member (see Campbell 1991). In the heyday of gang research in the States, girl members were glimpsed through the writings of male street workers or through the reported words of male members.

# MEDIA MYTH-MAKING

Two images prevailed: the Slut and the Tomboy. Sluts were pathetic loners driven to buying the temporary solace of male company through sex. The fact that they had no respect for themselves was evident in their failure to use sex appropriately as a bargaining chip for marriage: they did not see themselves as the kind of girl that

## Britain has traditionally been the home of subcultures not gangs.

a boy would wait for. Other girls avoided them, fearing that they would acquire the stigma by association. Boys exploited them and threw them away. Social workers gave classes in etiquette and make-up hoping to increase their self-esteem, prevent unwanted pregnancies and so save another generation of children from the streets. The Slut echoes through the writings of Konopka (1966) and Thomas (1923) and was the foundation for the mythical and widely-held belief that female delinquency was synonymous with sexual promiscuity. Tomboys mimicked rather than flirted with the boys, begging to be included in their activities. The boys patronised and laughed at them, enjoying the hero worship and amused by their unladylike ambitions. The Tomboy found expression in Adler's (1975) 'liberation thesis' which asserted that as we accord male opportunities to women, we must expect them to become increasingly masculinised in their behaviour. Needless to say, studies failed to confirm any

association between psychological masculinisation or non-traditional economic opportunity and crime, to say nothing of the fact that criminal women come from that segment of society most obviously excluded from any form of 'liberation'.

But these stereotypes have refused to die. They have simply fused themselves into 'The Slutboy' of recent newspaper reports. There is an overwhelming preoccupation with 'gang' girls' sexual promiscuity (especially in the absence of 'yearning for a husband') and their male-like levels of aggression (terrifying, violent, loutish). Though liberal society has sought to encourage young women's sexual autonomy and their assertiveness, we find it acceptable only when it is expressed in a measured middle class context. Nice girls headed for college should have their contraceptives in their pocket and the confidence to speak up to

## Nice girls headed for college should have their contraceptives in their pocket and the confidence to speak up to their teachers just like their male peers. But when their male peers are from Deptford or Peterlee, the media see promiscuity (not autonomy) and violence (not assertiveness).

their teachers just like their male peers. But when their male peers are from Deptford or Peterlee, the media see promiscuity (not autonomy) and violence (not assertiveness). It is a feminist lashback certainly, but one aimed directly at working class girls. The invention of the female gang gives a clear focus for our censure and conveniently identifies the disreputable poor. When they are older, 'single mother' will do the same job.

### References

- Adler, F (1975) *Sisters in Crime* New York: McGraw Hill.  
 Archer, J (1992) Childhood gender roles: Social context and organisation. In H McGurk (ed.) *Childhood Social Development*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.  
 Campbell, A (1991) *The Girls in the Gang* (second edition). Oxford: Blackwell  
 Campbell, A and Muncer, S (1989) Them and us: A comparison of the cultural context of American gangs and British subcultures. *Deviant Behaviour*, 10, 271-288.  
 Downes, D (1966) *The Delinquent Solution*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.  
 Konopka, G (1966) *The Adolescent Girl in Conflict*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.  
 Patrick, J (1973) *A Glasgow Gang Observed*. Bristol: Eyre Methuen.  
 Thomas, WI (1923) *The Unadjusted Girl*. New York: Little Brown and Co.

*Dr Anne Campbell is Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Durham University.*

## LAW FILES FOR THE PROBATION SERVICE AND OTHERS

by Nigel Stone LL.M.

Probation Law File, Fifth Edition

The Probation Law File contains chapters on Pre-sentence Reports, Custodial and Community Sentences, Community Service, Combination Orders, early release, mentally disordered offenders, anti-discrimination and rehabilitation. It includes a supplement which takes account of the changes introduced by the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 and the decision to introduce offenders to electronic monitoring on a trial basis.

Price £10.95 from: **Social Work Monographs, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ**  
 TELEPHONE: (01603) 592087

Cheques made payable to the University of East Anglia

## RESCUE AND REFORM: Juvenile Delinquency 1800-1950

One day conference  
 Robinson College, Cambridge  
 SATURDAY 22 APRIL 1995

How have definitions of delinquency and practices of rescue and reform changed in the last 200 years? This conference explores the different ways in which juvenile delinquency has been constructed as a social problem in modern Britain.

For more information, contact:  
 Pamela Cox, Dept of Education,  
 University of Cambridge,  
 17 Trumpington Street, Cambridge  
 CB2 1QA. Tel: 01223 332875  
 Fax 01223 332894