

Getting Real About Gangs

Simon Hallsworth and Tara Young debunk some current myths about youth and gangs in the UK.

Following the brutal murder of two women in Birmingham in what was styled as a gang shooting, Britain has been gripped by gang fever. Where the street robber was the folk devil *par excellence*, it would now appear to be his brethren the urban delinquent gang.

This has been sensationalised to absurdity by the tabloids and by documentary-makers hell bent on suggesting that Britain's fair streets are being overrun with feral gangs, and a sense of proportion appears to have been lost in the process, a point perhaps best exemplified by New Labour recently conceding to the police the right to break up groups of more than two people.

Sensationalism in the media and knee jerk reaction by law and order governments is of course nothing new. The problem though is that during such moments it is all too easy to get lost in the hysteria of over-reaction. This does not mean that there are not collectives out there who pose risks and dangers, but before we see in the gang menace a 'cause' of contemporary crime, it pays to put the problem into perspective.

A key problem in attempting to do so is that the notion of a 'gang' is terribly permissive. It can be evoked in so many ways that delineating what is and what is not one remains problematic. When is a group of young men not a gang? Does it apply only when they are poor? If so, are the 'gang-like' qualities observed conferred or self ascribed? And just how many crimes do not involve group activity of some kind? Are the groups also gangs and if not why not? And if we want to firm matters up by arguing that, by gang, we mean an organised group pursuing a collectively agreed criminal goal, why apply the label to young people?

Why not talk about corporations such as Enron (a very successful criminal gang but never classified as such) or indeed the activities of government?

Another problem follows through from the fact that there has been little research conducted on gangs within the UK context. The understandings people bring to bear when the gang menace is evoked has, by default, been saturated with references acquired from the American context where it has been extensively studied. At least traditionally, the gang was considered a principle cause of crime in America's inner city barrios; evoked to describe organised and highly ritualised, ethnically based collectives such as the Cripps, Bloods and Latin Kings.

What happens in the US and what goes on in the streets of Britain are not the same. Nor is there any evidence to support the idea that the UK is home to

US style gangs. This is not to deny that there are not groups whose members engage in violence. We must though be very careful to ensure that we don't generalise this US based tradition to describe all and every group caught 'hanging around'.

More importantly we also need to be very careful about accepting the idea that when youths congregate collectively, crime and anti-social behaviour somehow emerge as a consequence. Many of the problems posed by groups of youths arise not because they enter into a collective that becomes immediately pathological, but derive instead from the ecology of the world in which they live.

Locked into compressed spaces like schools and estates from which there is little possibility of escape; motivated like most to identify with a particular group (peers, the estate, ethnic group, school) the conditions are established both for group loyalty and conflict. The very thing that facilitates identification with one collective could be what separates you from another you have to share space with. If this is the case, blaming conflicts upon the group remains highly counterproductive. A more sensible way of looking at the issue would be to see group formation and conflict as a function of the ecology of space – not an emergent property of gang formation.

Everyday life can be mundane and dull. To avoid boredom, young people circumvent it by reconstructing their street worlds in dramatic ways: to be in a world that is rich in excitement and danger. They talk big, they dress hard and walk the gangster walk. Mundane estates become sovereign territories that must be protected and defended. Visits to other neighbourhoods become incursions into strange dangerous space. But, and this is the point, this imaginary reconstruction does not entail that the problem derives from the fact that young people congregate collectively. It remains a creative adaptation to the mundane reality of street life.

This of course does not mean that the reality does not involve acts of vandalism, graffiti and violence – individual and collective. But again it is important to keep a sense of proportion. Fights occur because conflict is inevitable in street life given the cleavages and compressions that characterise it. Given the thrills attached, young men can reconstruct these mundane conflicts into the stuff of legend – which adults and documentary film makers are apt to accept all too seriously. It is also worth emphasising that the overwhelming majority of crime perpetrated in inner city areas is unlikely to be the work of gangs. Smaller groups with no more than two members will perpetrate most low level crime in an area. In fact, considered this way, large numbers of kids collectively

'hanging around' are less likely to cause trouble than when they disperse.

Some groups however do engage in collective violence as well as other forms of acquisitive crime. In such a context using a term such as 'gang' to describe them is apposite. These collectives do identify themselves with their delinquency and can pose problems to others and not least themselves. Some may indeed have a name and will be known as a gang by others. While certainly gang-like in so far as they possess an identity, there remains little evidence to suggest that such collectives are characterised by the forms of ritual traditionally associated with the American gang. Nor, it must be emphasised, are such collectives new. Such groups have always been around.

If we now consider the delinquent collectives that really cause the most problems, then what distinguishes them are a characteristic subculture of hyper-masculinity and the sense of omnipotence they come to acquire by having successfully engaged in some form of delinquent behaviour.

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At the level of subculture what we find is a masculinity at play where being seen to be 'hard' is celebrated and where being able to deploy violence as a competence commands respect. This is a form of masculinity also defined by its repudiation of what society codes as the feminine: a capacity for care and compassion. Let loose within a group this subculture has an ugly potential to recreate the identity of young men and group life in its image. What it produces are men who will retaliate at the slightest provocation (in a world full of provocations and provocateurs) and who having dispensed with 'feminine values' have no alternative means of conflict resolution but escalation and vendetta.

What makes some delinquent groups lethal is when this culture also becomes articulated with the feelings of omnipotence they may acquire from successful engagement in crime. What success may induce is first a sense of invulnerability, and secondly awareness that the agencies of law enforcement are limited in what they can achieve and are by no means omnipresent. This not only encourages group delinquency but can lead its members to transgress boundaries further in a spiral of escalation.

The more successful an organised criminal organisation, the less sense it makes for its members to use violence which, after all, invariably brings down a law and order response. The problem delinquent groups such as those described above face however, is that the macho culture to which

they subscribe is so unstable that business imperatives often get lost. Those beholden to such cultures may consequently not only pose serious risks to others but also importantly to themselves. The appalling murder of the young women in Birmingham is testimony to what can happen. What created the pretext for violence was a lethal symbiosis between a subculture of lawless masculinity propelled forward by unstable men who consider themselves omnipotent and invincible.

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