


Report

Understanding and Policing Gangs

Robert McLean



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Understanding and Policing Gangs

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Foreword



This Cumberland Lodge Report on gangs in the United Kingdom (UK) seeks to identify best practice in early intervention and prevention strategies, to help improve understanding and inform policing responses. It takes a multi-agency perspective, drawing on the collective wisdom and experience of police officers at all

levels, as well as academics and researchers, non-governmental organisations, media representatives, policymakers, and community practitioners.

Understanding and Policing Gangs combines independent, interdisciplinary research with insight from guest presentations and candid, multi-sector conversations convened by Cumberland Lodge. Part I is largely informed by the conference briefing we commissioned ahead of our Police Conference on this topic in June 2019. Part II presents key themes and best-practice recommendations that emerged from this conference and were subsequently reviewed and refined in October 2019, at a smaller consultation involving diverse specialists.

Cumberland Lodge has been creating a safe space for constructive dialogue on the most pressing policing and criminal justice matters in the UK since 1981. Our renowned annual Police Conference is guided by a steering committee of senior police leaders and serving police officers. *Understanding and Policing Gangs* was one of four key issues that Cumberland Lodge addressed in its 2018-19 series on 'Identities & Belonging'. We look forward to seeing how it informs and inspires positive interventions, in the police force and wider society, to help tackle social divisions in the years to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Edmund Newell".

Canon Dr Edmund Newell

Chief Executive, Cumberland Lodge

About the author



This report is written by Dr Robert McLean, who was commissioned by Cumberland Lodge to support its 2018-19 *Understanding and Policing Gangs* project, as a freelance Research Associate.

Robert's research, broadly speaking, is concerned with serious and organised criminal activity, gang/group processes and offending behaviour, criminal life trajectories, desistance, and offender rehabilitation. He has worked extensively with career criminals involved in organised crime and drug supply networks throughout the UK, but more specifically in the West of Scotland and Merseyside.

Robert's latest research explores the links between firearm distribution, homicide rates, and the organisation of both indigenous and ethnic criminal groups. This has coincided with the recent publication of *Gangs, Drugs and Disorganised Crime* (Bristol University Press, 2019) and *County Lines: Criminal Networks and Evolving Drug Markets in Britain* (Springer Publishing, 2020).

Robert is a lecturer in criminal justice and policing at the University of the West of Scotland. In this role, he has taught and carried out research in a range of disciplines outside of the field of criminal justice, including education, social policy, and sociology.

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We are grateful to KBR for sponsoring our annual Police Conference. KBR has a long history of working with the public sector and government, to transform the delivery of public services. kbr.com

We are also grateful to the Dawes Trust for providing bursaries that enable a broader participation in our annual conference.

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Executive summary

After many years of decline, reported levels of youth violence and gang culture in Britain began to increase again in 2014, and have continued to do so since, particularly in England and Wales. This has happened against the backdrop of deindustrialisation, and as the result of a lack of local community investment, as well as the continuing issues associated with the profiling and criminalisation of young working-class men, particularly those from ethnic minority communities.

This document comprises two parts. Part I reviews contemporary literature on gang culture and highlights the most pertinent findings, which were used to brief conversations at the Cumberland Lodge Conference on 'Understanding and Policing Gangs' in June 2019. Part II draws upon those conference conversations and presents key themes that cut across the various panel discussions. It also outlines recommendations that emerged from both the conference discussions and a follow-up consultation to further scrutinise the findings, held in October 2019. These recommendations seek to outline ways in which gang culture might be addressed in the UK, and how communities might be better policed.

Gang typologies

Gangs currently exist on a shifting continuum in the UK. Young street gangs (YSGs) are primarily located in traditionally working-class communities, and chiefly characterised by recreational violence. Members (predominantly young men) typically congregate on street corners, and project their sense of disadvantage and vulnerability into territorial street violence. Whilst the involvement of associate members is often temporary and short-lived, core members generally continue to offend and may progress to more serious forms of criminality.

Once engaged in YSGs, young people tend to become increasingly motivated by financial gain. The social supply of drugs can gradually lead to bulk-buying and distribution, and even to wider criminal endeavour. Increasingly, globalisation has enabled greater numbers of young men to access wider markets and greater quantities of commodities, but, in YSGs, there are no formal leadership structures and no focus on governance.

Those who progress to organised crime groups (OCGs) can become immersed in full-scale drug dealing – their focus being on criminally oriented businessmen and expanding into the governance of drug markets. Progression into fraud, armed robbery, debt collection, and other forms of serious crime, is common. However, the prominent and expanded focus of criminals on drug dealing has coincided with the growth and increased availability of illicit markets within the UK, as well as increasing social inequalities associated with deindustrialisation.

Alongside market and product diversification, gangs have become increasingly organised, and so too has their level of involvement in supply chains. This has given rise to a new phenomenon known as ‘county lines’, whereby gangs operate at every level of the supply chain, whilst simultaneously distancing themselves from the products they sell. Much evidence suggests that OCGs have increasingly extended their supply lines to rural locations. Members now exploit young people to act as ‘runners’, and use the homes of vulnerable people as bases from which to store and sell illegal drugs. As experience within OCGs grows, members’ criminal endeavours may also expand to include money laundering, tax evasion, and engagement in the sex industry.

Whereas, in previous generations, gang members often relied on physical turf to advance their violent and/or criminal reputations, spikes in gang-related activity are now increasingly related to online activity. The internet generates new conflicts and intensifies old ones. Again, how this plays out is contingent upon the stage of gang evolution. YSGs may draw on social media to make incendiary remarks about rivals, flaunt their masculinity,

or promote gang culture through music videos. Those who have progressed to OCGs, and even some in YSGs, tend to engage less in the 'diss-ing' of rivals, and more in the use of social media for the lucrative trading of illicit drugs in a digital landscape.

Gang exit and disengagement

Withdrawal from gangs is dependent upon a range of factors. Gaining employment, entering parenthood, witnessing violent incidents, or becoming a victim of crime, as well as becoming tired and weary of the gang lifestyle, can all be initial 'hooks for change'. Recognising the role of structure and agency in the desistance process is essential to understanding how permanent disengagement from gangs, and permanent criminal desistance, can be facilitated most effectively.

In terms of policing, drawing upon existing success stories is important, and the work of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) provides helpful guidance on how adopting a public health approach can play a valuable role. A balance between enforcement, empathy, and social support, within the context of multi-agency working, is clearly important. Whilst mentoring and education may be more relevant where YSGs dominate communities, partnership work on preventing gang members from progressing to enterprise and governance is essential. Police support for private, public, and third sector agencies to protect themselves from organised crime and to disrupt OCGs (where they emerge) is also vital.

Above all, in the British context, a focus on care, compassion, and healing at the earliest stage, is important for enabling root causes to be addressed and the toxicity of gang culture to be prevented.

Recommendations

Drug dealing has become a central mechanism for aiding gang organisation, as criminal groups seek to further gang business.

Given that the 'war on drugs' has continued to flounder for several decades now, a complete overhaul is required in regard to contemporary approaches to UK drug policy and policing strategy. This includes: bringing the supply of drugs under state regulation; decriminalising certain drugs and quantities; and approaching drug issues from a social harms perspective.

Furthermore, it is important to tackle the social and structural factors that create conditions in which young people are more likely to engage in drug supply, through greater local investment. There is also a need for greater attention on certain aspects of policing, through the adoption of a public health model (PHM) approach to gang and knife crime. More specifically, safeguarding strategies are required to ensure effective intervention, as is a greater degree of cultural competency amongst officers involved in working with ethnic minority communities.



I.

A review

1

Introduction to Part I

In recent decades, Britain has undergone significant change in its socio-economic and political circumstances, which has given rise to some fundamental transformations in our urban landscape, leaving some communities feeling increasingly marginalised, isolated, and disenfranchised from wider society. Factors relating to globalisation, austerity, and the rise of the digital generation, have all led to 'cracks' in the social fabric, which have manifested themselves in a number of ways. One of these is the growing problem of gang culture in marginalised communities, in cities like Glasgow, London, and Manchester (Storrod and Densley, 2017; McLean et al., 2018).

Yet gang culture has by no means remained stagnant over the last 20 years or so, whilst UK scholars have been 'revisiting' it (Hallsworth and Young, 2004, 2006). Rather, gang culture has continued to evolve and adapt, in response to the ever-changing socio-economic and political environment. Group offending has gradually moved beyond delinquent activity alone, to become evermore entrenched in various aspects of criminality, including drugs supply.

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This proliferation of group offending, typically referenced under the umbrella term 'gang', has become a pressing concern for both the general public and law enforcement. The UK Government has voiced concern, time and again, and has sought to tackle problematic behaviour through various strategies. This is perhaps best epitomised by the Government response to the 2011 summer riots, after which the then Prime Minister, David

Cameron, declared 'war' against Britain's growing gang culture. This was promptly followed by the 2011 Government report *Ending Gang and Youth Violence*, which portrayed urban gangs as organised, increasingly criminal in intent and purpose, and corrosive to wider youth culture, more generally (McLean, 2017).

A number of reports and supporting documents have continued to emerge since, including: *Local to Global: Reducing the Risk from Organised Crime* (Scottish Government, 2011); *Scotland's Serious Organised Crime Strategy* (Scottish Government, 2015); and *Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation* (HM Government, 2016). This has coincided with the establishment of a number of specialised institutional bodies dedicated to tackling such activity, including the National Crime Agency (NCA) in England and Wales.

This problematic development in gang organisation has not occurred in isolation. Indeed, the recent *Serious Violence Strategy* (HM Government, 2018) cites 'changing drug market[s]' as a 'key driver' in gang organisation, as a means for gang business and increasing violence. This is particularly true of the phenomenon of 'county lines', whereby criminal actors extend illegal drug supply lines out of major cities or 'hubs' and into rural communities. In addition, the people involved in 'county lines' activity tend to blur the victim/criminal nexus – something that has proved particularly problematic for law enforcement and other interventionist agencies. Yet, given that gang/group definitions – as well as levels of organisation, purpose, intent, and harm posed – have been fiercely contested, the question of how best to deal with gangs remains controversial.

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Some of the key questions raised by the 'Understanding and Policing Gangs' discussions at Cumberland Lodge in 2019 challenge the very use of the term 'gang' itself. These included:

- What are gangs?
- What threat do they pose?
- What role do social media play in projecting gang culture in society?
- To what extent are gangs involved in illicit business?

Part I of this report presents a summary of current research and thinking around gangs in the UK today. Much of its content was presented in a conference briefing for participants in the June 2019 Cumberland Lodge Police Conference on 'Understanding and Policing Gangs', to help stimulate and inform discussions. Whilst by no means exhaustive, it provides a roadmap to help us navigate a vast and shifting landscape around gangs and gang membership, gang activities, the changing nature of gang 'turf', and strategies for early intervention and prevention.

2

Social division, new identities, and gang formation

Britain's political and socio-economic landscape has changed considerably in recent decades. Prior to deindustrialisation, heavy industry was at the centre of Britain's economic might. This included coal mining, ship building, and steel works, to name but a few of the prominent industries upon which the British Empire was built. Such employment supported much of the population, not only economically but also socially (Rodger, 2008). Steady employment in heavy industry helped to establish clear social divisions and class identity (Savage, 2010).

Yet some have argued that, in the post-modern era, coupled with complex issues around globalisation and the rise of the free market within a context of neo-liberalism and deindustrialisation, the contemporary British landscape and identity have been fractured (Bauman, 2008 Rodger, 2008; Savage, 2010). This is particularly true amongst what were once considered traditional working-class communities. The loss of heavy industry, along with the decline of union power, class identity, decent pay, and the availability of steady, skilled employment, have given rise to poorer wages, zero-hour contracts, insecure work, and a broken social class who no longer share the commonalities, close ties of kinship, and leisure activities that they once did. As a result, it has been argued that such communities are 'broken' and have suffered a fundamental loss of identity. New industries have emerged in the aftermath, particularly amongst the younger population.

Men have always been seen as the 'problematic gender'. Early scholars in the United States (US) who studied youth delinquency – including Thrasher (1927), Whyte (1943), Cloward and Ohlin (1960), and Cohen (1955), along with UK counterparts like Willis (1977) and those aligned to the Birmingham School

of thought (Cohen, 1972; Hall and Jefferson, 1975; Hebdige, 1979) – suggested, to varying degrees, that young men from 'working-class' backgrounds, in particular, often proved to be more 'problematic'. This could be due to lack of capital, rebellion through rituals, and subverting – or even rejecting, outright – middle-class values.

Theoretical approaches to understanding the occasionally problematic behaviour of essentially young men from working-class backgrounds, is something that more contemporary UK scholars have been keen to explore further. However, these scholars have also noted a need to tread with caution, for fear of criminalising working-class populations more generally, via labelling processes (Hallsworth and Young, 2006; Pitts, 2012).

Studies of youth and peer-group identities and culture tend to have been subsumed under the umbrella term of 'gang' studies, due to the nature of peer offending. Peer groups allow young people within them to form their own identities, and, along with the gender gap in offending, the age-related spike in youth and adolescent offending is considered to be a social fact within criminology (Hutton, 2005). This is because adolescents are undergoing great changes: breaking away from their parental figures; establishing their own identity amongst their peers; transitioning from the world of childhood to adulthood; and engaging in adult behaviour in adult bodies but still with child-like mindsets.

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All of this behaviour takes place in front of peers. Thus, the peer group – the 'gang' – provides a platform for status-building, cementing reputations, and even an inward-facing form of social mobility, with popularity being the reward (Deuchar, 2009; Holligan et al., 2016; McLean, 2017). This is particularly true for

the working classes, given that many young people from working-class backgrounds lack the economic means to engage in other forms of social activities, away from the streets (Holligan, 2013). Ultimately, for many, delinquency is a part of growing up, and 'doing crime' is seen as 'doing masculinity' (Messerschmidt, 1993).

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Marginalised communities, disenfranchised with the promise of wealthy capitalist living in a 'liquid society', have seen many youths become embedded within gang culture (Bauman, 2008; Harding, 2014). In the past, young people would perhaps have engaged with these types of groups briefly and then moved on, but this is no longer happening. This is a common phenomenon in periods of recession and their immediate aftermath, whereby the gang becomes an alternative outlet for economic activity (see Davies, 2013). Gang organisation becomes a means to an end, in that it facilitates lucrative gang business. The gang becomes a lifestyle and a source of identity, not just a phase (Harding, 2014).

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This process has been particularly stark in certain poor, ethnic minority, and immigrant communities (Amnesty, 2018), where there is a real lack of investment and a lack of effort to help such people embed into wider society. Young people in these communities can become isolated and fearful of state presence, particularly when they are hindered by police 'stop and search' activities, which profile and even target individuals from particular backgrounds and/or in particular areas of social space (Brotherton and Hallsworth, 2011; Amnesty, 2018).

However, as the next section illustrates, gang membership exists on a continuum. To understand the motivations for gang membership and culture, and to start thinking about early intervention and prevention approaches, cognisance needs to be given to the 'stage' of involvement that members have reached within a given gang typology.

3

Gang typologies and gang membership

Since the early 2000s, and until quite recently, the debate around British gangs primarily centred on whether or not gangs actually existed at all within the UK (see Pitts, 2012; Hallsworth, 2014). More recent studies (Densley et al., 2018; Deuchar et al., 2018; Harding et al., 2018; McLean et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2018), along with an array of strategies and initiatives by the political establishment and third sector agencies, have led to a gradual acceptance that gangs *do* exist, albeit to varying degrees. In contemporary Britain, this is problematic, in that activities have increasingly become criminal, as opposed to merely delinquent.

Yet, early forms of the debate around gang culture essentially compared apples with pears, in many respects. This is because, whilst gangs can be said to exist, they differ from one another, and the elements within them can also differ. Not all groups are gangs, and not all gangs are the same; nor are all gangs or gang members equal. Peer groups are not gangs, and youth gangs are not the same as organised criminal groups.

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Gang literature has typically viewed the gang in relation to which group is studied, by whom the interpretation is made, and for what purpose. Arguably, the problem can lie in the assumed subjective interpretation that the word ‘gang’ projects (i.e. youth, working-class, ethnic, and criminal). Thus, it is not the term itself, but the assumptions attached to it, which can be misleading.

Studies of the gang, regardless of typology, are often viewed from two distinct branches of research: *cultural criminology* and *administrative criminology*.

Cultural criminology and gangs

Gang scholarship in the context of *cultural criminology* seeks to identify precursors. In doing so, it identifies common gang features in order to identify ways of dismantling gangs. As discussed in chapter two above, gangs do not form independently of the wider social setting in which they are found; they are, to a large extent, an outcome of socio-economic and political inequality. Lawler (2010) argues that the move towards an advanced capitalist, globalised society perpetuates crime, and that the same level of attention given to profit-making should also be given to equality, if the root causes of crime are to be addressed.

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In the era of austerity, welfare management, and concentration of slum housing, many communities in Britain have come to share a few (in some cases, considerable) commonalities with the ghettos of the US (Pitts, 2008; Holligan, 2013). Emile Durkheim was one of the first to analyse the way in which the oppressive influences of urbanisation in the US stimulated a tendency towards crime. In the late 19th century, Durkheim argued that a state of normlessness or 'anomie' can be expressed in the lives of people who are exposed to unlimited, socially generated aspirations, but with no realistic prospects of ever achieving their goals (Durkheim, 1897/1952).

Later, Robert Merton took these arguments further, when he drew attention to the ways in which certain elements of social and cultural structure exert a 'strain' (in other words, a pull) on some people to engage in non-conformist conduct. In particular, Merton highlighted the existence of 'culturally defined goals, purposes, and interests' that provide a 'frame of aspirational reference' (Merton, 1938: 672). Merton argued that delinquency might arise wherever there is a disassociation between culturally

defined aspirations and 'socially structured means' of achieving those goals (Merton, 1938: 674). In Merton's view, large sections of the American population were unable to fulfil their aspirations through conventional, legitimate means. Accordingly, the disjunction between means and goals led to a propensity for deviation to emerge (Deuchar, 2013).

Scholars associated with the Chicago School of Criminology attempted, through ethnographic research, to learn more about why young people became 'deviant'. For instance, Shaw and McKay (1942) argued that social disorganisation within cities characterised by poverty, residential mobility, and racial heterogeneity, often led to high levels of juvenile delinquency. Later, Cohen (1955) identified particular pressures associated with the 'American dream', and the difficulties that arose when members of deprived communities found themselves unable to achieve the goals associated with it, through legitimate means.

The compulsion to use criminal means, in order to achieve the social and cultural goals projected by society, was later illustrated by Whyte (1943), in his ethnographic account of the fictitious slum district of 'Cornerville' in Chicago. Whyte argued that, whilst society placed a high value upon social mobility, it was difficult for young men living in deprived communities like Cornerville to 'get on the ladder, even at the bottom rung' (Whyte, 1943, p.273). The attainment of material possessions was, therefore, only possible through criminal means.

More recently, Elijah Anderson's (1999) research into urban street life in Philadelphia in the US highlights that the inclination to violence often emerges from the life circumstances of the 'ghetto poor'. These are people whose lives are characterised by unemployment, a dominance of the drug trade, and feelings of alienation and marginalisation, and the most profound victims adopt a 'code of the street', which amounts to a 'set of informal rules' that direct all of their interpersonal public behaviour, particularly violence' (Anderson, 1999, p.33; see also Deuchar, 2013).

In the UK, similar processes have been at work, to varying degrees (see Pitts, 2008, 2012). Lack of investment, policing of immigrant and poor communities, marginalisation, 'punitive welfarism' (see Roger, 2008), and privatisation (often in part) of even the most basic of services and facilities, have all contributed to gangs becoming an embedded feature in certain communities (see Pitts, 2008; Harding, 2014). These gangs may act as a source of protection, respect, status, and means of social mobility, as well as, in some cases, providing access to economic gains through participation in illegal markets.

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The growth of illegitimate markets in such communities arguably helps some sections of the population – which have been relegated to the economic 'scrapheap' – to once again re-engage and participate in wider society, for example by: purchasing branded clothing, cars, or luxury goods; having a social life beyond the community's boundaries; and even being able to better support families and extended family networks (Anderson, 1999; Wacquant, 2010; Holligan, 2013). For many, gangs are seen as a means to live, not just to survive.

Administrative criminology and gangs

Whilst *cultural criminology* stresses the need to address those more deeply embedded issues that create the circumstances from which gangs emerge, *administrative criminology* seeks to combat and intervene in problematic gang activity, usually by placing a particular focus on crimes committed. Gang definitions and typologies are generally used as a tool for working towards gang suppression and dismantlement. They capture the evolving

nature of gangs, from the somewhat delinquent yet boisterous nature of earlier gangs, to the criminal-intent gangs we see in the contemporary, globalised era.

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This shift from seeing gangs as boisterous youth groups to criminal outfits is epitomised in an early definition by Thrasher (1927) and a more contemporary definition from Miller (1982). Thrasher (1927, p.46) states that:

[gangs are] interstitial groups formed spontaneously and integrated through conflict... characterized by... [interaction], milling, movement... conflict, and planning... collective behaviour is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory.

Several decades on, W B Miller (1982, cited in Pitts, 2007, p.10) defines gangs as:

a group of recurrently associating individuals with identifiable leadership and internal organisation, identifying with or claiming control over territory... and engaging either individually or collectively in violent [and] illegal behaviour.

Over time, gang research gradually became intertwined with 'drug-talk' (see McLean, 2017). Gangs and drugs were seen to go hand-in-hand. As such, gang research increasingly became a key element of fighting the 'war on drugs' (see Pitts, 2008).

In the UK context, McLean (2017) draws on the work of a number of prominent scholars, such as Densley (2013), Hallsworth and Young (2006), and Pitts (2008), to present a hybrid model to

better reflect the evolving nature of the gang along a shifting continuum, as Figure I (below) illustrates.

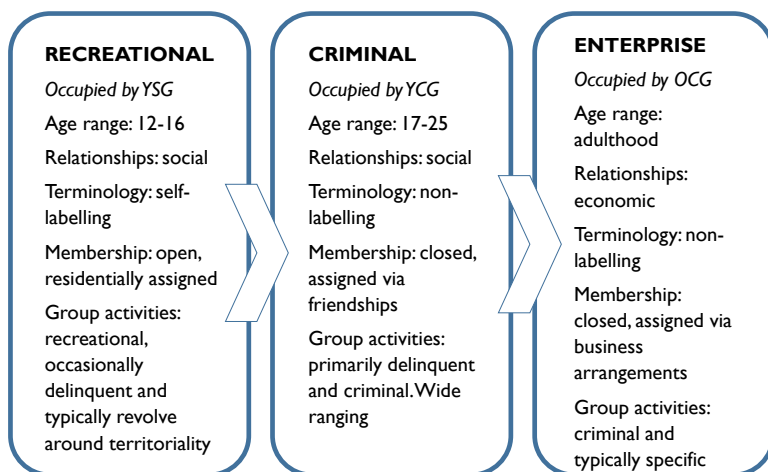


Figure I: An evolving gang model

Self-nominated gang members are placed under the umbrella term ‘*young street gang*’ (YSG), which describes ‘delinquent’ peer groups who often refer to themselves, or to the group as a whole, as ‘gang members’. These are recreational groups, who are typically tied to physical territory. YSGs can be split into two sub-units: the ‘outer layer’ and the ‘core’. The outer layer consists of local youths who affiliate with the core body but only minimally engage in any offending. They are the least ‘embedded’ (Pyrooz et al., 2014), and typically disengage from the group once they reach adulthood. The core body, by contrast, is the gang ‘mainstay’. Although they constitute a minority, core members are the most embedded in the gang, and they tend to become the most prolific offenders (see also VRU, 2011). They come to view crime as intrinsic to their own identity, and thus might be deemed ‘life-course persistent’ offenders (see e.g. Moffitt, 1993).

Young criminal gangs (YCGs) typically emerge from the core body of YSGs. Whilst they usually have social origins, criminality becomes an integral feature of their activity and it is used for

economic gain. Meanwhile, *organised crime groups* (OCGs) involve adult criminals who are involved in organised crime. They typically illegally govern or exert control over their sphere of activity.

Whilst all of these groups can be referred to as ‘gangs’, the way in which each should be addressed will differ. In this report, for the purpose of consistency, the typologies outlined above (and illustrated in Figure 1) will be applied.

Factors leading to gang membership and gang culture

The factors that influence people to form, join, and stay in gangs vary greatly. They often depend on the type of gangs to which people have the opportunity to be affiliated. Furthermore, the factors influencing female gang membership are often quite different to those influencing male membership (Deuchar et al., 2018). Studies by Batchelor (2009) and Thornberry et al. (2013) reveal that, whilst men tend to join gangs out of a desire for kinship, thrill-seeking, or peer status, women are more likely to join because of peer or partner relationships. Thus, the attraction of gang culture cannot be discussed as a cohesive phenomenon.

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In this section, the factors leading to gang membership and culture are discussed largely within the context of young men, and in relation to the three gang typologies outlined above.

Young street gang (YSG) membership

YSGs tend to comprise young, adolescent men, primarily from what could be called traditionally working-class communities.

Members usually congregate in public spaces. The reasons for joining, and factors influencing attraction to the gang, differ slightly according to which sub-unit ('core' or 'outer layer') individuals align themselves to, particularly as core offenders tend to progress towards other gang typologies as they age, mature, or acquire certain resources.

Ultimately, YSGs are recreational youth groups who come together to socialise with peers. These peers are usually of a similar age and live in the local neighbourhood. With shared backgrounds, history, and narratives, and usually a collective experience of a range of adverse childhood experiences, they come together as a means of searching for a surrogate family and projecting their potential vulnerabilities into acts of aggression and violence (Deuchar, 2009). In 1973, James Patrick's pioneering ethnographic study in Glasgow illustrated the way in which violence perpetrated by groups of young men often centred on street-oriented territorial disputes and was motivated by a desire for status and identity (Patrick, 1973).

More recent research has illustrated the way in which young people in inner-city communities in the UK are often intensely aware of subjective territorial boundaries that inhibit social interaction and mobility (Deuchar, 2009, 2013). This form of 'hyper place attachment' is typically driven by a lack of opportunities for employment, by social stigmatisation, and by oppression (Kintrea et al., 2008 p.68). For members of YSGs, a key motivation for violence is the desire to protect physical territory from perceived enemies (Kintrea et al., 2008; Deuchar, 2013). YSG members, in British contexts, are primarily motivated by solidarity, attachment to, and defence of local territories. They engage in street violence as a means of achieving a sense of empowerment, excitement, and status – and to help compensate for social inequality and a range of adverse childhood experiences (Deuchar, 2009). These gangs are not inherently criminal; they are loose, recreation-based peer groups, formed around shared identities, common interests, and shared territorial space.

As outlined above, YSGs generally consist of two sub-units:

- Core offenders, who tend to continue offending in later years, whether in gang format or not;
- Associated individuals, who affiliate with the gang for a variety of reasons, but whose offending behaviour is restricted to territorial violence and tends to be short-lived.

In examining the attractions of gang culture, it is important to distinguish between these sub-units, and to analyse them both independently. For associate members, the gang often provides bonding social capital, and the context for building a short-term sense of status and identity (Deuchar, 2009). However, some core members become motivated by the prospects of financial gain and progress to membership of YCGs.

Young criminal gang (YCG) membership

Unlike YSGs, members of YCGs do not self-identify as 'gang members'; rather, they tend to distance themselves from labels that imply territorial restraints, origins and/or restrictions. By the YCG stage, the imperative of earning and creating 'street capital' starts to wane, or is at least moderated, to be generated in other ways. Instead, interpersonal relationships that bring benefit and advancement are pursued (McLean et al., 2018). The need to avoid detection, to build a criminal reputation, to cultivate and seize criminal opportunities, and to be business-astute, necessitates such decisions and, in turn, influences overall group behaviour and criminal outcomes. YCGs are predominantly engaged in the bulk-buying and wholesale supply of illegal drugs; yet, in an effort to reduce risk, they typically begin to diversify their business and 'spread their wings' into other criminal ventures (McLean et al., 2018).

Maturity, external threats (e.g. from rivals or the police), financial commitments, and social changes – particularly within an era of welfare retrenchment – are all factors that influence engagement in YCGs. The transitioning of some YCG members into organised crime can, in turn, be influenced by ready access to criminal networks, via criminal family ties or peer groups, but also by

wider processes of globalisation, which offer access to previously inaccessible markets, commodities, and information. Within YCGs, criminal activities are often justified through the benefits of criminal learning, cynicism about the law, or via a collective acceptance of criminality as a means of obtaining a better life.

Maturity, external threats (e.g. from rivals or the police), financial commitments, and social changes – particularly within an era of welfare retrenchment – are all factors that influence engagement in YCGs [young criminal gangs].

YCGs typically remain non-hierarchical in structure, with no clear leadership or distinctive division of labour, and no overall focus on governance (Densley, 2013), although such traits can emerge as the gang evolves in complexity. YCGs, in many ways, capture Yablonsky's (1967) notion of the delinquent gang as a 'near group', situated between fluid gatherings of youths and those more deliberately structured groups that perceive gang membership as a means to achieving long-term monetary goals.

Organised crime group (OCG) membership

For those young men who, upon maturing into adulthood, progress from YCGs to OCGs, 'territory' is viewed as an abstract concept, offering endless opportunity for expansion of their authority into governance. Members become recognised as 'business men' on the estates in which they are based. They change their focus to 'managing' business and keeping it 'under the radar', typically utilising affirmative sanctions such as favouring and gifting, or negative sanctions such as bribing or coercion, to achieve their goals.

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Indeed, for members of OCGs, drug dealing proper tends to be the primary *modus operandi* (Densley et al., 2018). They are attracted to the lifestyle by economic motivations and the opportunity to gain power and financial ascendancy by governing the drugs market. Embeddedness within these criminal networks is often viewed as a means of progression into wider criminal activities, such as armed robbery, fraud, or debt collection.

Versatility in criminal activity is attributed to a combination of factors, including new associations, a growing criminal reputation, experimentation, boredom, and the fact that with physical and intellectual maturity comes the ability to compete with – and potentially displace – established criminals and criminal groupings (Densley et al., 2018). However, given the ascendancy of drug dealing within the business strategies of UK-based OCGs, it is important to consider the ways in which gang evolution processes have coincided with a growth in the availability of, and the demand for, illicit substances.

4

Operating in illicit markets

Drug markets

Globally, the illegal drugs trade is now a multibillion-dollar industry (Gootenberg, 2011). Aided significantly by complex global processes, the accessibility and demand for illegal drugs has expanded at an unprecedented rate, from which Britain is not immune. The growth of the UK's illegal drugs market has coincided with a decline in legitimate markets, following sudden, large-scale deindustrialisation and the inadequate provision of viable alternatives for many, traditionally working-class, communities (Wacquant, 2010; Rodger, 2008; Holligan, 2013). It is not that poverty necessarily leads to the growth of illegal markets, but rather that inadequate replacement of jobs or tradable commodities with 'worthwhile', 'legitimate', or 'accessible' opportunities can increase the likelihood that drugs, along with other illegal goods, will be sold as a tradable commodity instead (Levitt and Dubner, 2006).

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The proliferation of gangs can be seen as a consequence of this process, as more people seek to profit from peddling (also see Anderson, 1999; Miller, 2000; Levitt and Dubner, 2006). With market diversification in both supply and demand, and enhanced levels of competition against a backdrop of globalisation, distribution methods have been evolving. A '24-hour, dial-a-deal delivery to your front door' (McLean et al., 2019) culture has emerged, offering new points of entry into the drugs market. Gangs now place greater value on databases of (largely anonymous) contact numbers – which offer access to large numbers of customers via phones, Snapchat, or other apps

and electronic devices – rather than on cultivated networks of (personally known) established, repeat users (Densley, 2013).

Product diversification is also a feature of this evolution. For example, there is now an increased demand for anabolic androgen steroids, thanks to a huge rise of interest in bodybuilding and body image, and lower levels of police enforcement around these drugs, compared to substances such as heroin (Densley et al., 2018).

The UK Government has responded with a range of initiatives and strategies that aim to reduce drug supply and related gang activity. Similarly, the Scottish Government (2008, 2013, 2015) has introduced numerous initiatives and publications aimed at tackling Scotland's drug/gang problem. The NCA (2017) and the Scottish Government (2013) both highlight that gang activity and drug dealing tend to be more prevalent in the country's most economically disadvantaged communities. Thus, whilst being far from concrete evidence, it can be assumed that there is a likely correlation between gang activity and economic disadvantage, given the consistencies of experience across the UK.

Advances in technology, improved access to networks, the rise of the digital market, and improvements in transport and communication, have all contributed to a diversification of drug dealers and users. Gangs have proved to be remarkably successful in exploiting such commodities and circumstances. They are excellent facilitators for outsourcing, particularly given their wide membership, networks, and traditional ties to 'owning turf' or designated territories for gang operations.

In previous decades, gangs acted much like the 'shop floor' for drug sales – the point at which customers could purchase the commodity. However, as gangs have become more organised, so too has their level of involvement in supply chains. This has given rise to a new phenomenon known as 'county lines', where gangs operate at every level of the supply chain, whilst simultaneously distancing themselves from the products they sell (Robinson et al., 2018; McLean et al., 2019).

‘Going country’

The diversification and evolving nature of the drugs economy, the dealer, and the gang member is arguably nowhere better displayed than in this phenomenon of ‘county lines’. This is a term used to describe a growing practice, whereby OCGs, involved in illegal drug distribution and operating out of major cities (e.g. London, Liverpool and Glasgow), extend their supply lines to rural or small town locations across Britain.

‘County lines’ is a term used to describe a growing practice, whereby OCGs [organised crime groups], involved in illegal drug distribution and operating out of major cities (e.g. London, Liverpool and Glasgow), extend their supply lines to rural or small town locations across Britain.

The ‘county lines’ phenomenon has arisen due to the intense competition that OCGs now face, coupled with market saturation and demand shortages within traditional city ‘turf’. In search of new pastures, OCGs increasingly travel to remote rural communities, market towns, or coastal locations, to access new markets, avoid competition, and take advantage of a significantly smaller police presence (Robinson et al., 2018). Those involved refer to the process as ‘going cunch’ (into the country) or ‘going OT’ (out there). However, this practice has also given rise to new forms of exploitation (Robinson et al., 2018).

Whilst core OCG members remain in the city, they prefer to send out affiliates – some as young as 12 years old – who are hired as ‘runners’, ‘newbies’, or ‘recruits’, to ‘go OT’ and sell illicit drugs on their behalf. Supplies, weapons, accommodation, and other forms of support are sent ‘up the line’, to help ‘recruits’ establish a foothold and become embedded in distant communities.

Young people acting as dealers are by no means the only group to be exploited in doing the OCGs’ bidding, as drug users, indebted individuals, single female-headed households, and other vulnerable groups can also become embroiled. Some rent out

their homes as drug ‘storage units’, whilst others even have their homes taken over as a base of operations, from which dealers exchange drugs with customers. The latter is a practice known as ‘cuckooing’. There is even evidence that indebted individuals can have their possessions seized and auctioned, or be ‘put out to work’ in street prostitution (see Densley et al., 2018).

It is not surprising that tackling ‘county lines’ has now become a national priority, with the UK Government having launched a £3.6 million National County Lines Coordination Centre in 2018, run by experts from the NCA. The centre aims to identify threat levels, focus resources, target the most serious offenders, and work in alliance with partners involved in welfare, health, and education (see Robinson et al., 2018).

Evolution of crime

Whilst the country’s illegal drugs trade has proved to be a particularly lucrative sphere of activity, where gangs have excelled, it is by no means the only area in which gangs seek to ply their trade for profitable gain. Densley et al. (2018), Harding et al. (2018) and McLean et al. (2018) all highlight that whilst gang activity in Britain, at all levels, tends to be primarily focused on the illegal drugs market, to varying degrees, there is often an overlap with other areas of criminal activity, including money laundering, tax evasion, robbery, and the sex trade.

In addition, the activities in which gangs engage tend to relate to age, maturity, experience, and access to the relevant criminal networks and knowledge. Whilst the members of younger gang typologies primarily engage in violence, anti-social behaviour, and occasionally the social supply of drugs, they might also engage in theft and robbery. These latter activities – carried out for financial gain and profit – are largely sporadic and individually motivated, although they can be carried out in gang formation.

Criminal gangs are more likely to engage in all kinds of criminal activity, in order to experiment with what is successful and what is not. However, of the three gang typologies discussed above,

OCGs are the most likely to adopt a more professional approach to crime, typically specialising in one or two types. They also tend to blur the legal and illegal spheres of business. In addition, OCGs typically govern the activities of others – including law-abiding citizens as well as criminals – who operate or act within their spheres of influence. These gangs often play the role of 'middlemen', by passing on 'jobs' to other criminal outfits, for a percentage of the profit or to resolve disputes and tension. These, and other gang-related activities, relate to the positioning of members not only within the physical environment, but also in the digital sphere.

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5

Gangs, territory, and social media

Gangs and physical territory

Gangs have traditionally shared a strong bond with territory, whether they are YSGs, YCGs or OCGs. It is primarily the earlier formations (particularly YSGs) that share the greatest direct relationship with physical turf. Tension between turfs is often referred to as ‘postcode wars’, whereby individuals in certain areas – which do not necessarily correspond with postcode areas – bond through conflict with people in neighbouring areas.

In their early formation, YCGs also share strong relationships to turf. They may associate and form new relationships outside of their traditional turf, but strong ties, relationships, long-established friendships, and a sense of ‘knowing the area and people’, mean they often start out by operating within their original territory. YCGs often blur the physical/spatial spheres, becoming increasingly spatial in orientation, as they progress. As they become more criminally oriented, they begin to expand geographically, and start to focus less on physical territory and more on longer-term business ambitions.

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When young men start to transition into organised crime and adulthood, they tend to feel a need to take fewer risks, achieve a greater sense of stability, and enhance their professional profile. This is often accompanied by a corresponding shift from violent street activity towards more subtle forms of business-oriented practices – including fraud and money laundering, as well as drug dealing. However, violence is still occasionally required as

a means of instilling fear of retribution amongst rival criminals (Harding et al., 2018).

Gangs and social media

Storrod and Densley (2017) suggest that the increasing permeation of social media into people's daily lives plays an important role in shaping activity and behaviour. Whilst online activity has significant potential to enhance the quantity and quality of communication – within communities and across borders – it also raises serious challenges, particularly in relation to policing.

One of these challenges is the growing links between gang-related activity in the virtual world and the real world. Although gang-related activity long predates the advent of social media, international research has found that spikes in offline 'gang-related activity are increasingly linked to online activity (Irwin-Rogers, 2019). The internet appears to be generating new conflicts, as well as intensifying old ones (see Storrod and Densley, 2017).

Data from surveys, interviews, and analyses of web content confirm that gangs are online and regularly using social media as a tool for encouraging gang activity (Decker and Pyrooz, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2014). Gang members use the internet for a variety of reasons. Younger gang members (typically in YSGs or YCGs) might use social media to make incendiary remarks about rivals, to incite challenges, recruit, flaunt illegal commodities such as drugs or weapons, upload fight videos, watch gang-related music videos, or to generally promote gang culture (Decker and Pyrooz, 2011).

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Members of OCGs also use the internet to extend their criminal networks and activities, and even for recruitment or new ventures. However, unlike those in YSGs and YCGs, OCG members are less likely to use social media platforms to overtly 'slag off' or 'disrespect' rival outfits. Rather, social media is used almost exclusively for developing and improving gang business (see Storrod and Densley, 2017).

Exactly how social media is used to achieve such ends varies according to gang type, objectives, and the types of criminal activity undertaken. Yet, social media has clearly altered the way in which gang members perceive themselves and acquire and maintain membership, and their modes of operating, both online and in the real world.

Irwin-Rogers (2019) suggests that members of younger gangs are typically 'digital natives' who live much of their physical lives online, operating in virtual space. Digital activity is used to boost status and reputation. Gang members might, for example, carry out gang activity in real life, record it, and then upload the evidence for others to see. Thus, physical action is projected into the online community, where gang-related actions are viewed and commented upon, and status is gained.

Gang membership has traditionally been about status acquisition amongst peers. The internet allows this to happen much more widely and rapidly. Yet, the 'flip side' of such attention is that there is enhanced opportunity for rivals to 'diss' members' activities and to share 'real beatings' (i.e. physical attacks) of rivals via online platforms. Such actions add to vicarious victimisation, and retaliation and retribution will often be sought, resulting in escalating tensions.

For gangs that are more criminally inclined, the internet and advances in digital technology have enabled the continual monitoring of partners, activities, and recruits. Internet and mobile phone apps, such as GPS, Snapchat, and FaceTime, allow those higher up the criminal echelons to monitor the activities and movements of those who work on their behalf. 'County lines' is an example of this, whereby young people selling drugs in

distant locations can be monitored, drugs provided on a 24-hour dial-up service, and goods and products tracked through the Global Positioning System (GPS), with estimated arrival times provided for customers (Storrod and Densley, 2017).

With such a huge growth industry in relation to gang culture, challenging questions arise, around how to prevent offending and reoffending, and how to encourage gang disengagement and desistance. These issues are explored in the following chapter.

6

Prevention, exit strategies, and desistance

Prevention

Prevention is always the best cure, but the problem with prevention is that it can be hard to measure, given that a prevented action never occurred. One of the initial challenges in preventing gang activity is agreeing what is and what is not a gang. This has always proven difficult, and it influences subsequent intervention methods.

There is an increasing recognition that gang membership and associated violence and criminality often result from social inequality and lack of opportunity. Research suggests that adverse childhood experiences (Felliti et al., 1998) also play a role. The combined impact of childhood abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction can increase the likelihood of later participation in gang-related activity, violence, and crime.

In terms of prevention, it has been argued that it is important not only to prevent adverse childhood experiences from occurring in the first place, through the delivery of multi-agency, inter-professional support for children and young people, but also to reduce the negative impact of such experiences, by focusing on trauma-informed, compassionate intervention (Deuchar, 2018).

Exiting the gang and desistance

Whilst a large body of research addresses why youths and young adults join gangs, there have been fewer studies into why and how individuals leave gangs. Examining the reasons for disengaging from gangs, and the processes by which this occurs, is important because gang disengagement greatly reduces both the chances of future involvement in crime (Melde and Esbensen, 2013) and the potential for victimisation (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011), although individuals who retain some ties to their former gang

are likely to experience higher levels of victimisation than those who cut all ties (Pyrooz et al., 2014).

Within the nascent research on criminal desistance, researchers have begun to examine the process of gang disengagement, including the factors that hasten or hinder it. Some studies suggest that gang members often need to 'get jumped out' – whereby leaving members are assaulted by the wider group, as a way of recognising their departure. This is part of the 'blood in, blood out' principle of gang membership (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011, p.419). Whilst this may be common in some parts of the world (such as in the US), criminal desistance in the UK context is more often a gradual and 'drifting' process, which rarely involves a seamless transition, and is usually conditional on a range of triggers, turning points, and push/pull factors (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011; Deuchar, 2018).

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For gang members, pull factors tend to include taking on new responsibilities – such as getting a job or having children – or perhaps being encouraged by significant influential others to leave the gang. Meanwhile, push factors might include witnessing violent incidents or fatalities, becoming a victim of violence, or simply becoming tired of the lifestyle (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011; Deuchar, 2018).

McNeill and Maruna (2008) differentiate between primary and secondary desistance. Whilst *primary desistance* is seen to be characterised by a temporary lull in criminal activity, *secondary desistance* is viewed as more of a long-term process, which results in a change of personal identity that is conducive to a more conventional lifestyle (Deuchar, 2018). Either way, a centrally-recognised element in the process of desistance is the 'knifing off' of offenders from their immediate environment,

by introducing them to alternative institutional structures and routines (Laub and Sampson, 2003, p.145).

Some have argued that desistance is best understood within the context of supportive human relationships (McNeill, 2004; McNeill and Maruna, 2008). Maruna (2001) also highlights that the process of desisting from crime is often accompanied by an impulse towards regenerative care-giving, where offenders commit to 'making good', by drawing on a 'damaged past' and using it to protect the future interests of others (McNeill, 2004, p.432; see also Deuchar, 2018).

Ultimately, it is increasingly recognised that intervention strategies designed to enable gang members to desist should be designed in such a way that supports and complements the natural processes and 'hooks for change' that begin to push and pull them away from the gang lifestyle.

Case study: Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV), Scotland

In terms of the role of policing, the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) has been instrumental in promoting a public health approach to tackling gang-related violence in Scotland.

In 2008, the Scottish VRU established the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV). Based on similar models in Boston, Chicago and Cincinnati, in the US, the CIRV created a partnership between police, social services, education, housing and community safety services, and local communities, to deliver the clear message that ‘the violence must stop’ (VRU, 2011; Deuchar, 2013). This initiative was implemented in the East End and north of Glasgow, targeting approximately 1,000 young people (mainly boys and young men aged 12–19), who were consistently on the police radar for their involvement in gang violence.

Young offenders attended ‘call-in’ sessions in Glasgow Sheriff Court, and were warned that, if they continued to involve themselves in violence, then criminal justice repercussions would ensue. Alongside the message of enforcement was a softer message of empathy and the offer of support. Former offenders were asked to speak to young people about their own experiences of making positive changes in their lives, and the mothers of offenders appealed directly to gang members to make alternative life choices. These sessions ended with messages of hope, where a range of agencies aligned to the CIRV highlighted services and programmes that were available to any young men who agreed to change their lifestyles (Deuchar, 2013; Deuchar and Weide, 2018).

The initiative thus drew upon a range of existing services in Glasgow, together with new programmes that had been tailor-made to meet the needs of the young people, some of which benefited from targeted Scottish Government funding (VRU, 2011; Deuchar, 2013).

During the period of implementation, just short of 500 young offenders (predominantly young men) participated in ten ‘call-in’ sessions, and many went on to engage with follow-on services run by a range of statutory, voluntary, and third sector agencies. As a result, recorded levels of gang-related violence significantly decreased across targeted areas of Glasgow (VRU, 2011).

Approaches to prevention, diversion, and deterrence

Given the evidence outlined in this report, on gang evolution and gang typologies, it is clear that there needs to be a multi-pronged approach to targeting members of YCGs and OCGs, alongside supportive, desistance-centred interventions for minor offenders and members of YSGs, to prevent future criminalisation (Densley et al., 2018). In neighbourhoods with high numbers of reported incidents of young men engaging in street-level group offending and territorial violence, problem-oriented, community-centred policing approaches, involving inter-agency co-operation, are likely to be the most successful.

Mentoring interventions will generally focus on educating young people about the impact of violence and avaricious (albeit low-level) crime, whilst also actively diverting them away from the allure of the drug market as a by-product of gang evolution and criminal capital (Densley et al., 2018). However, where offending behaviour has already evolved into the social supply of drugs, policing interventions may need to focus more on deterring young men from becoming evermore deeply immersed in organised crime, by working with local partners and preventing drug trading from developing into enterprise and governance (Densley, 2013).

Finally, where patterns of gang activity have evidently become more organised – and where there are increased incidents of drug dealing proper, alongside (in some cases) crimes such as

money laundering or online fraud – this may indicate an increased presence of OCGs. In these circumstances, the emphasis will shift towards deterring OCG activity, by supporting private, public, and third sector organisations to protect themselves and one another, and by detecting and prosecuting those involved in organised crime (Densley et al., 2018).

Ultimately, whatever stage of evolution gangs have reached and whatever strategies police agencies initiate, a multi-agency approach, with a public health focus to the prevention of offending and reoffending, needs to be prioritised. Across the UK, agencies have begun to initiate conversations about ‘healing’, and to show greater compassion and concern, not only for victims but also for perpetrators caught up in a cycle of trauma, crisis, and criminality (Anderson, 2017; Deuchar, 2018). Policing of gangs, and the violence and criminality they initiate, is therefore not only contingent on effective enforcement, but also on addressing the root causes, in partnership with others, and supporting desistance through a focus on empathy and compassion.

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7

Conclusion

Part I above provides an interdisciplinary overview of the causes and evolving nature of gang culture and serious violence in Britain. It offers a typology of gangs as a means of explaining the diverse nature of gangs in British communities and the implications for 21st-century policing.

This analysis was used as the basis for discussions at the multi-sector Cumberland Lodge conference, 'Understanding and Policing Gangs', held in June 2019. The conference addressed four key questions:

- How effective are current policies and strategies for policing gangs and preventing the offending and reoffending that is associated with them?
- What does a 'public health' approach to tackling gangs and violence actually look like?
- What role do social media play in contemporary gang activity, and how should policymakers and the police prepare for anticipated developments?
- What predictions can be made in terms of how society might have changed by 2029, the impact this might have on the further evolution of gang culture, and the implications in terms of a ten-year strategy for policing and other cognate professions, in relation to gang prevention and violence reduction?

The outcomes of these discussions are summarised in Part II of this report, along with a series of recommendations for positive change.



2.

Key findings and recommendations for change

8

Introduction to Part II

The three-day Cumberland Lodge Police Conference on ‘Understanding and Policing Gangs’, in June 2019, brought together police officers at all levels, and members of the criminal justice system more broadly, with academics and researchers, non-governmental organisations, media representatives, policymakers, community practitioners. Delegates heard from experts in the field, participated in candid cross-sector discussions, and took part in collaborative break-out sessions, to share ideas and exchange views. These conversations were held under the Chatham House Rule, to encourage open dialogue and creative ‘blue-sky’ thinking.

Part II of this report presents principal reflections from these proceedings, to provide an overview of the key emerging themes. It also outlines a series of practical recommendations, to inspire positive action by practitioners and policymakers.

9

The attraction of gang culture

Capitalism and drug markets

Little more than a decade ago, gang discussion tended to centre around whether or not such groups existed in the UK. Gangs were essentially seen to be a US problem (McLean, 2019). This is no longer the case, with a steady increase of gang-related violence and gang activity in criminal networks in the UK (Densley et al., 2018). Gangs are by no means homogeneous, although discussions tend to centre upon either street-orientated gangs, or organised crime groups (OCGs). Whilst both engage in violence, the latter are also involved in the provision of illegal goods and/or services (McLean, 2019).

As discussed in Part I above, gangs do not exist in isolation, but are a response to structural and social inequalities (Deuchar, 2013). Lawler (2010) argues that contemporary 'western' societies operate in a period of 'advanced capitalism', in which an ideology of 'fame and fortune' defines the yardstick for success – and often gives little importance to how fame or fortune are achieved. Being a successful 'gangster', in some ways, can lead to the same outcome as being a successful businessman: both bring peer-group status and material wealth (Hagedorn, 2008). Gangs provide avenues for such success, particularly for marginalised populations. Structural, social, and wealth inequalities, along with increasing opportunities to tap into illegal networks in an era of globalisation, are seen to be driving forces for greater gang organisation and proliferation (Wacquant, 2010; Whittaker et al., 2019).

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Whilst the gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' continues to increase, young people find it increasingly difficult to achieve upward social mobility through established professional careers. For disenfranchised populations living in struggling communities, illegal or unregulated markets are an enticing alternative, offering an avenue into capitalist consumer society (Irwin-Rogers, 2019). Consequently, for some, the gang has become a vehicle for attaining success and obtaining material prosperity.

Gangs have become a lifestyle – a source of identity – and involvement can no longer be assumed to end after a phase of adolescence or young adulthood. This process is exacerbated within certain poor, ethnic minority, and immigrant communities, which have experienced a lack of investment or effort to support integration and upward social mobility (Harding, 2014).

Although a multitude of push/pull factors exists with regard to youth gang culture, the operations of markets for legal and illegal drugs are central to understanding gang culture today. Increased opportunities for young people to tap into globalised trade, the decline in perceptions of illegal drugs supply as amoral behaviour, and the gradual 'normalisation' of some drugs – such as cannabis – have coincided with a floundering in the 'war on drugs' (Irwin-Rogers, 2019). Political and public voices, thus, increasingly suggest that answers to the gang problem can be found in market regulation: essentially, a crippling of illegal criminal markets by placing control and regulation under state authority.

Counter-arguments, however, suggest that regulation has often failed to combat illegal markets (e.g., for counterfeit goods or cigarettes). Even the 'overlooking' of drug consumption and legalised prostitution, in Amsterdam, for example, has failed to stem violence and criminality. In Amsterdam this has been attributed to a number of factors, including drug tourism, and the city becoming a 'hotspot' for international criminals forming alliances. However, where drug harms, such as overdosing, are concerned, success stories from Portugal and Canada may serve as effective models.

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The expansion of online platforms

Within the political economy of advanced capitalism and supposedly self-regulating markets, the growth of online platforms is affecting gang behaviour. Although gangs tend to comprise a small cohort of core and periphery members, gang reach – over both physical and digital territory – can be extensive, and this can create fresh challenges for law enforcement. Gangs affect the lives of those who inhabit controlled territory, especially in disenfranchised communities. Furthermore, online platforms also contribute to the diversification of push/pull factors that are used to attract, entice, cohere and force individuals into gangs (Storrod and Densley, 2017).

The internet and the use of smartphones lead young people to live significant parts of their lives online, interconnecting their digital and analogue experiences, or offline and online worlds (Storrod and Densley, 2017). Gangs are not immune from this process: they have gradually become digitalised, by creating dedicated websites, uploading images that glorify gang culture (displaying weaponry, expensive goods, or money), and sharing video clips of fights or drug dealing. The projection of gang lifestyle and gang culture online can be particularly attractive for marginalised young people who experience a sense of exclusion from mainstream society.

Online platforms also enable gangs to generate greater levels of victimisation: issuing challenges, threats, and appraisals to members, rivals, associates – and even the wider public. The public nature of taunts can encourage targeted individuals or groups to retaliate, in order to save face. In particular, there has been growing concern over edited online material that portrays targeted individuals or groups, in fictional settings, being abused or humiliated. Short so-called 'vine' or 'drill' clips commonly

include slurs, to denigrate targets (Harding, 2014). In some cases, victims may have been attacked or robbed, with incidents recorded on the attacker's mobile phone and uploaded to the internet. This type of victimisation is by no means confined to gang members alone, and such taunting can quickly escalate and result in stabbings or shootings.

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10

Gang organisation and proliferation

‘County lines’ drug dealing

‘County lines’ refers to the practice by which urban criminal gangs, involved in the illicit supply of drugs, extend their supply lines to rural or more remote locations. This is typically tied to a single ‘deal line’ – often in the form of a burner phone – and the gang exploits young people to sell drugs. These fresh ‘recruits’ are often put up in the homes of vulnerable individuals, which the gang has taken over prior to their arrival. Single female-headed households are particularly appealing, because they tend to attract less police attention.

‘County lines’ epitomises the entanglement of gangs and drug supply, and has raised new challenges for police and practitioner services, highlighting the need for greater multi-agency co-operation. Since the decline of traditional industrial employment, illegal economic activities have expanded (NCA, 2017). The drugs market has become a global and lucrative phenomenon. In the UK, illegal drug supply is the most prevalent form of organised crime (NCA, 2017). Since gangs offer a tangible avenue for marginalised populations to express masculinity, gain status, and at times reap material benefits, they have become the ‘shop floor’ for drug distribution (Hagedorn, 2008).

Drug-dealing gangs often demonstrate great adaptability. As they mature they adopt business-like strategies, becoming increasingly resilient to law enforcement. Apprehending key members has become more difficult, since the exploitation of youth and vulnerable populations allows core members to distance themselves from the products they sell (McLean et al., 2019). ‘County lines’ has also been linked to increased levels of human trafficking, modern slavery, and knife crime. Furthermore, public funding cuts, affecting staff and resource, have intensified the challenges that the police face in seeking to stem gang proliferation.

Exploitation

'County lines' activity has led to greater levels of exploitation, particularly amongst vulnerable populations, including young people, elderly people, disabled people and those with experience of the care system. Exploitation is integral to 'county lines' drug dealing, and this illustrates the complex links between offending and victimisation.

Criminal child exploitation is a central feature of the 'county lines' model. Young people employed by gangs to 'go out there' are often forced or coerced to do so, via debt bondage. On most occasions, though, they see 'county lines' drug dealing as a 'way out' of marginalisation. Some young people share their proceeds with household and family members, even though they earn little with regard to the hours they work, the risks they take, or the shares taken by core members (McLean et al., 2019).

Other individuals are exploited by being forced to take out loans for the gang, which are rarely repaid. Others will store drugs, weapons, and other illegal goods on the gang's behalf, either as beneficiaries for little payment or in exchange for drug debts being wiped out.

A particularly vulnerable group are those whose homes have been taken over in the process known as 'cuckooing'. 'Cuckooed' individuals house gang recruits and have drugs sold from their homes, whilst putting themselves at serious risk of verbal, physical, or even sexual abuse by those residing in the property.

The gangs' ability to exploit individuals to such levels is aided by technology, transport links, the 'Darknet', and the monitoring of behaviour through social media. Those involved in 'county lines', both as victims and offenders, have usually undergone formal system contact (i.e., contact with services), prior to engagement in 'county lines' (see McLean et al., 2019). This complex victim/offender relationship complicates effective responses on the part of law enforcement.



Policing gangs

The public health model

Cuts to staffing and resources of frontline services, most notably the police, have rendered the tackling of gangs and youth crime increasingly difficult. Both the decentralisation and the centralisation of services have advantages and disadvantages. Are services too cumbersome or specific? Are local issues ignored or given too much weight? In any case, it is clear that efforts to tackle gang culture cannot be just a police matter: a new way of thinking is required, and the public health model (PHM) offers a more holistic approach.

The PHM is a preventative approach that, in this context, looks at crime or criminality from a broader perspective. It places social ills within a health paradigm, as opposed to a one of criminal justice. As a result, the criminal justice system plays a relatively limited role in addressing crime, whilst other services are more involved (Deuchar, 2013).

Whilst the PHM has been implemented in many different contexts, the city of Glasgow has perhaps led the way. Spearheaded by the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) was a pioneering approach to violence reduction. The CIRV, and the various VRU projects that have followed, have taken a focused approach to targeted populations that has brought measurable results in terms of significant reductions in gang activity and violence. They have emphasised multi-agency partnership, problem-solving, and focused deterrence – essentially by changing attitudes, not just amongst the targeted populations but also amongst the people who work in services that interact with those populations. Information-sharing amongst multiple agencies has been a key part of their approach, as has finding alternatives to custody (Deuchar, 2013).

Multi-agency partnerships and safeguarding

At the heart of the PHM – right at the operational level – are multi-agency partnerships. Whilst strands of this approach were implemented as early as the late 1990s, under Blair's Labour Government, multi-agency partnerships were generally centred around criminal justice. The services involved tended to play a secondary role in supporting the police – and, to a lesser extent, social services. Within the PHM, multi-agency partnership working is given a more equal footing, with public health as the central priority.

Despite being a key component of Tony Blair's 'Respect' agenda – which placed an emphasis on early intervention in tackling anti-social behaviour – multi-agency partnerships declined during the last decade, primarily due to funding cuts. However, recent political rhetoric suggests an imminent about-turn: with increasing concern about rising levels of youth violence in England and Wales, there has been a noticeable renewal of interest in PHM approaches.

Nonetheless, this growing recognition of the value of community-oriented and problem-oriented policing approaches is still hampered by funding cuts. As a result, early intervention efforts are suffering due to a combination of factors, including increased workloads and stretched resources, as well as a greater emphasis on key performance indicators (KPIs) as measurements of success. Increasingly, many of the public sector agencies that work with offenders have had to draw on support from voluntary services (Deuchar, 2013).

Multi-agency partnerships should be a central feature of any safeguarding strategy. The exploitative nature of activities such as 'county lines' drug dealing means that the complexity of the victim/offender nexus is increasingly complex, and more nuanced approaches are required.

Case study: Safeguarding strategies, South Wales

The police in South Wales have been particularly successful in implementing effective interventions within the public health model (PHM). In addressing 'county lines' gang activity, they have prioritised multi-agency partnership working and the safeguarding of individuals. The promotion of effective dialogue between partners is key.

The police have worked closely with frontline services to gain information from the ground that can be used to develop effective intervention strategies. Even before interventions begin (e.g. with the issuing of a warrant), the police ensure the safeguarding of those involved by contacting partners from social work, education, and health services, so that they can signpost young offenders to potential sources of support. This approach allows services to prepare effectively, prior to the execution of police warrants, thus reducing the risk of further criminal behaviour and irreversible damage. Partner services are involved from start to finish in these interventions, and local secondary schools are particularly important points of contact, since they interact daily with the young people involved.

12

Recommendations

Tackling gang culture and drug dealing

1. Re-evaluate UK drug policy

The current strategy for policing drug markets is ineffective. The ‘war on drugs’ and connected approaches have failed, at significant social and economic cost to the economy. Organised crime and the illegal drugs trade have grown at the same time. The drugs trade is a key – if not *the* key – driving factor in UK gang organisation and proliferation. Indeed, the majority of UK-based organised criminal groups are thought to be involved in the illicit supply of drugs. Drug markets need to be regulated, monitored, and brought under state control. Meanwhile, alternative systems are required, to help reduce drug harms: including the introduction of injection rooms for addicts, and the decriminalisation of small quantities of ‘personal possession’ for certain drug types.

2. Monitor online activity

Online platforms are being used as tools for promoting gang culture. The police need to increase efforts to monitor this gang-related activity online. Ultimately, however, substantial legal changes are required in order to allow the state to hold accountable international digital giants and relevant partners (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.) for uploaded material. Recent campaigns have resulted in the prohibition of material displaying self-harm activity, but the monitoring of potentially damaging material needs to be extended much further, given that gangs, and those involved in criminal networks more generally, still actively exploit legal loopholes to target vulnerable individuals and groups, to intimidate witnesses, and to import or supply illegal goods and services online. The police should allocate greater resource to developing dedicated units for tackling online criminality, framed by relevant legislation.

3. Move away from permanent school expulsion

Links between truancy, permanent school expulsion, and gangs are evident. Since minors engaged in 'county lines' activity are typically permanently excluded from education, their whereabouts and behaviour are less likely to be monitored. Schools should, therefore, be recognised as being at the front line in the fight against gang crime, and be given the resources to respond effectively, with support from relevant agencies. Educational programmes that raise awareness amongst young people about the risks associated with knife crime, criminal networks, and drug harms should also be mandatory.

People with less education have more limited career prospects, and hence young people who are expelled from school are more likely to resort to criminality as an economic alternative to legitimate employment. In this regard, as a society, we should move away from a model that simplistically rewards educational attainment over personal attributes.

4. Rethink criminal records

The links between gaining a criminal record, being required to undergo 'Enhanced Disclosure' checks by employers, and subsequent criminality are well documented. A criminal record significantly hinders employment opportunities, and the work that is offered to ex-offenders tends to be unskilled and low-paid. As a result, engagement in criminal activity may prove to be more enticing. Ex-offenders need to be given more support with returning to work. This might include removing the need for 'Enhanced Disclosure' checks where they are irrelevant to role requirements, or removing certain crimes from criminal records after spent durations. Incentives should be offered to encourage people to participate in rehabilitation programmes. These could include having 'no crime recorded' upon completion of a relevant programme (in the same way that driving-awareness courses are offered as an alternative to driving points, for certain road offences).

5. Engage with marginalised communities by improving cultural competency and providing positive role models

Young people in marginalised communities often lack relevant role models. As a consequence of alternative aspirations, individuals from similar class and ethnic backgrounds, who have undergone comparable experiences, can become involved in criminality together. Ethnic minority communities tend to suffer disproportionately from relevant inequalities. There is a need for greater cultural competency amongst those who deliver community services. This requires a 'bottom-up' approach, since inter-community differences can be profound. A 'one size fits all' approach is inappropriate. Whilst external agents need cultural competency to deal effectively with communities, support must come, first and foremost, from within. To engage effectively with young people involved in gangs, respected community figures should be employed to work alongside local authorities, helping to identify and support (potential) offenders – preferably before offending even begins. A small number of (often voluntary) agencies already seek to pre-empt offending, but this requires more state support and funding.

6. Consider the role of female gang members, associates, and their affiliations

Law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and even criminological research have traditionally been gender-biased in their approaches to crime. The role of women in criminal networks has often been overlooked, with female members generally assumed to either have passive roles or to be victims. Yet, not only do women play an active role in offending, but their contributions to gang culture can also be significant and highly effective. With regard to 'county lines' drug dealing, women are often recruited to sell drugs, since they are less likely to raise suspicion from law enforcement agencies, and less likely to be stopped and searched (particularly since male police officers tend to check men more frequently than women).

Effective engagement with the female family members of those involved in gang crime can also aid desistance interventions.

In Italy, for example, law enforcement officials have had success with targeting mothers in Mafia families, in an effort to persuade them to encourage their sons to break the cycle of intergenerational criminality and to pursue exit strategies. This is a useful model and approach for UK law enforcement and supporting agencies to consider.

7. Encourage holistic wellbeing and spiritual desistance

The role that wellbeing and spiritual initiatives can play in criminal desistance has been well documented in recent years. Scandinavian rehabilitation initiatives, such as 'Comeback Boxing' or 'Breath Smart', integrate wellbeing, spirituality, and mediation practices into their programmes, encouraging participants to find a sense of 'inner peace' through practised religion or other means (see Deuchar, 2018). These kinds of initiatives have proved to be successful in helping to equip offenders with a range of tools and techniques for promoting self-control in situations during which they might otherwise have engaged in offending behaviour. For example, the charitable organisation 'Homeboy Industries', in the US, promotes religious practice – in this case, Christianity – and it has proved to be successful in targeting some of the most persistent gang offenders.

A range of such services exists in the UK, including 'mindfulness' programmes that involve young people in group activities such as meditation or yoga. However, many of these are under-resourced and limited in scope, so further investment is needed. With the right support, secondary schools would be particularly well placed to implement holistic wellbeing initiatives, of the kind that have already been successful in a number of countries and regions in East Asia – for example, by engaging young people in the practice of Tai Chi.

Policing gangs

8. Adopt the public health model

The public health model (PHM) of intervention (see pages 49-51 above) offers a particularly effective approach for addressing problematic gang behaviour, and has proved to be successful in various contexts. It encourages crime prevention and a holistic multi-agency approach to addressing gang violence. In addition, it engages the police in adopting more 'supportive' and 'welfarist' strategies – often via dedicated gang units – which seek to address the root causes for offending, rather than dealing solely with outcomes. PHM approaches can also be backed by punitive measures.

Changing attitudes and cultural competency within the police and other services is vital for successful implementation of PHM initiatives. It is also important that members of ethnic minority communities – particularly those affected by gang crime – are involved in law enforcement activity, to help break down potential barriers, and to offer people alternative career pathways and lifestyles.

9. Improve multi-agency partnerships and services

Multi-agency partnerships are essential to tackling the issue of gangs holistically. To make these approaches more effective, successful referral models should be adopted. These identify first points of contact – in the public health model, this is usually GPs – for referrals. This single point of contact can be used by every individual who comes into contact with the relevant services.

Services often have strict criteria for referrals that can exclude some of those who are most in need of support and intervention. Another key barrier for young people's access to relevant services can be key performance indicators (KPIs) and targets that agencies are under pressure to meet. In such cases, whenever a young person's needs are not directly relevant to a set of KPIs, they run the risk of being excluded from the service.

Bureaucratic procedures can also create barriers to access. In probation services, for example, workers are often required to complete onerous paperwork to support rehabilitation schemes, but this can hamper efforts to provide necessary services to young people. Instead, the focus should be on the individual and their needs, as opposed to target-driven interventions.

10. Review funding allocations and mechanisms

Reduced state funding for public services, in recent years, has impacted significantly on the most marginalised populations and communities. Frontline services have been cut back; and reduced budgets for practitioner services and the police have limited their effectiveness. Furthermore, short-term funding allocations only provide scope for limited impact over set durations. There is a pressing need to review funding requirements for services that tackle gang crime holistically.

Within the context of multi-agency partnership arrangements, separate funding allocations for different agencies can also result in significant disparities between the levels of support that different partners can offer, impacting on the overall effectiveness of the intervention. Competitive funding bids can also pit services against one another and undermine service provision as a whole. Funders therefore need to be cognisant of the wider ramifications of their decisions on the multi-agency approach to gang crime, and ensure that allocations are even, transparent, and consistent.

II. Prioritise the clarification of roles and responsibilities

Competition for resources and funding has led to the fracturing of services, since agencies often find themselves competing with one another, rather than collaborating. This means that there is often a lack of ownership around which service takes primary responsibility for service users who are being supported by a variety of services at the same time (e.g. police, social work, probation, etc.). Services can also be fearful of taking primary responsibility for particularly challenging individuals, since this might affect future resources and funding allocation.

In many cases, gang members cross authority boundaries (e.g. police force boundaries) in their activities and access to support services, so this needs to be taken into account when co-ordinating interventions.

There is a need to identify clear responsibilities as to who supports individuals at different stages of their rehabilitation, to ensure that they know who their key point of contact is, to help clarify the process for the agencies involved, and, more broadly, to ensure the most efficient use of resource.

12. Recognise the importance of mental health and the impact of trauma

Poor mental health – particularly resulting from trauma – can play a significant role in anti-social behaviour, delinquency, and criminality. Despite increased recognition of the impacts of trauma and detrimental early childhood experience on mental health, a simplistic and often demeaning ‘blame culture’ continues to assign responsibility to individuals for their ‘problems’ and circumstances. Greater recognition of the impacts of trauma and the associated mental health challenges are required, both in theory *and* in practice. Trauma resulting from conflict or prolonged exposure to stress and danger can also have long-term and intergenerational impacts, which need to be recognised and addressed in any approach to policing gangs.

In addition, it must be recognised that police officers also regularly experience trauma themselves, given the often challenging situations they face in the course of their duties. As well as having a detrimental effect on their mental health, this can also affect their job performance and ability to respond to the impacts of trauma on gang members. Ensuring that police officers have adequate access to counselling and support is, therefore, crucial, not only for their personal wellbeing but also for effective policing interventions. This support could include recognised rest periods and regular psychological assessment or counselling sessions for officers who have attended particularly stressful incidents, both of which could be made mandatory practice to

help combat situations in which officers avoid getting involved with initiatives that might trigger symptoms of trauma.

13. Use ‘smart targeting’ and chase the proceeds of crime

‘Smart targeting’ refers to the strategic deployment of limited resources, to ensure the maximum efficiency of interventions. For example, in tackling the attraction of young people to street gangs, the earlier the intervention, the better. Wherever possible, young people should be engaged with *before* they become gang members. Community policing and service provision is particularly important in this respect, as it enables agencies to interact positively with those who might otherwise be vulnerable to gang recruitment. For example, community police officers could encourage young people to participate in sports events or youth clubs.

For embedded gang members, this kind of preventative intervention is less likely to be effective, and more punitive action may be appropriate. Smart targeting here could involve policing strategies to tackle specific areas of criminal activity that are associated with gang crime. For example, gang members who operate at the higher levels of criminality tend to avoid any direct handling of illegal *goods*, but they do handle the illegal *proceeds* of crime, which will often involve money laundering. Whilst some organised crime groups use specialised money laundering processes, which are harder to infiltrate, most tend to use less sophisticated means, which can be detected through accountancy checks. Since most mid-level gang members claim some form of welfare support, or are registered as unemployed or self-employed, the monitoring of financial records and accounts can be a particularly efficient means of smart targeting.

Contributors

The following is a list of the people who have contributed to the development of this report, by participating in the conference and consultation discussions convened at Cumberland Lodge in the months leading up to publication.

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