

Jeannie Mackie tries to wrap her head around the MoJ's latest piece of baffling research

Gangster clap trap



It is always good to know what one is dealing with. The Ministry of Justice has just published a research document *Understanding the psychology of gang violence: implications of designing effective violence interventions*. The purpose of the research is to help NOMS and other agencies to improve violence reduction interventions, and was carried out by 'desk research' (reading other publications) and 'field research' (interviewing prisoners with gang affiliations).

The subjects were identified by searching through an (unspecified) number of databases on violent gang-related offences in the greater London area. This included what must have been the Trident database – it focused on black gun crime, as well as another prioritising black on black crime. The researchers accepted, necessarily, that the sample they chose was biased towards London-based black gun crime, although there was no indication that was, in fact, the intended research field.

Out of the eventual participants only three self-classified as white. The definition used by the police to identify what a gang actually is was "a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who see themselves (and are recognised by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is intrinsic to identity and practice" – the subjects identified as suitable research material were classified as gang members or affiliates by the databases under that definition.

The second requirement for the sample was that they had at least one conviction for violent offences – possession of a weapon being classified as a violent offence. Some 150 prisoners were identified through this process. Just under half weren't suitable for one reason or another, including a somewhat puzzling nine per cent who "could not be located". Out of the remaining 77 potential subjects 39 people agreed to take part in the main study. All of those were,

according to police intelligence, high priority gang offenders.

The report doesn't say why people took part, or what they thought they might get out of it. No rewards or inducements were given, although presumably cooperating with an MoJ project would not do any harm to parole prospects. Whether or not that skewed what was said is, of course, impossible to answer.

The interviews were directed at finding out what the subjects themselves thought and believed about gangs, why they joined them, and what they needed to help them leave them.

The first issue thrown up was significant disagreement about what the interviewees themselves thought a gang was, and whether they were in one at all. Some (and it would be useful to know how many) interviewees in fact 'actively resisted' the label of gang member, and some of that group refused to carry on until the interviewer acknowledged this! One cannot tell whether this was an exercise in denial, or an indication that police databases can, possibly, be based on inaccurate intelligence.

Unsurprising results

The study tried to answer five research questions, from the very basic topic of what is a gang, to why people join, why they stay in one, how does one leave, and how does gang membership influence the use of violence. The answers held few surprises. Gang culture has been studied enough for basic grim understandings to emerge: that membership of a gang can provide status and a sense of identity to young men who otherwise have neither; that you are safer in a gang than outside one; that it gives a sense of connectedness to others.

A review of the existing research literature found that gang membership was linked with a host of variables – being male, adolescent, having absent role models, having family in a gang, needing protection, liking

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risks, need for respect and status, alienation and stress, living in a culture that strongly identifies success with material wealth – and living in a culture which holds negative attitudes to youth and migrants. That last variable was identified by the Building Bridges Project, a youth-led research project which spent two years asking questions about gangs and youth violence and reported in 2008.

What was surprising was that the MoJ project seems to have identified gang membership rather more with financial motives than with any other variable. As they described it, some participants saw gangs as assisting their survival in a hopeless world, some saw it as quick and easy money – specifically referred to as not being in response to social exclusion but coming from greed and impatience.

Some saw their activities as being part of big business – providing entrepreneurial skills to be proud of ("some" is the word used, as there is no statistical analysis). Other factors were as previously identified – the need for protection on the street, status and a sense of belonging found nowhere else. One unexpectedly poignant finding was that "few participants referred to gang involvement as having disrupted hopes or dreams held as a teenager". Hopes or dreams that is – not commodities. Over to the rest of us perhaps?

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