



Life Cycle

In their second article on gang culture in the UK, **Allen Davis** and **James Densley** reveal the short lifespan of gang membership, from 'babies' to 'elders', and suggest ways in which the cycle may be broken

As with any game, you have to be in it to win it. Youths on the street and in gangs can often identify exactly when and where a person first 'busted out onto the scene' and entered the tournament, in other words street gang life.

A landmark event, such as a provocative insult posted online, a schoolyard fight, or an impressive display of survival against the odds, marks a person's entrance onto the stage. Youths quite literally 'clock in'. This usually occurs around the time of the transition from primary to secondary school, which is not coincidental timing.

At such a time, long-established friendship groups are dismantled. Young people move from a small, safe, structured environment, where they are big fish in a small pond, to a large, open, and less personalised setting where age and size truly matters.

They come into contact with serious delinquents. They also start dealing with the biological changes of puberty and the tensions that all teenagers face between sexual and social maturity.

In last week's *Police Review* (PR, 19 August) we explained what drives young people to join

street gangs and how the 'ratings' work that keep them moving up the gang hierarchy. But how is the life cycle of a street gang member mapped out? This article provides an answer to this question.

Much as a chronological age-grading system built our education system and determines children's friendship patterns and access to significant adult figures, so too does it dictate gang structure. As a rough guide, children's gang awareness begins at age 10 or 11. Some of these boys will be running innocuous errands and acting as lookouts for the gang, these are 'babies'.

By age 12 to 13, many will have physically matured enough to start earning ratings through robberies and fighting ('tinies'). By age 14 or 15, those who have prospered will be employed on someone's 'drugs line', distributing narcotics as their 'younger'. These boys will continue robbing and fighting, but graduate to doing so in the name of the gang, and thus keeping the tinies and babies in line.

The 'elders', and within them the 'man dems' or 'generals', preside over all those below. Many are the equivalent of sixth form age; some are old enough to be in higher education. Despite this, they rarely have any formal qualifications. Instead, they have accumulated some informal qualifications, such as significant female attention, albeit in a narrow geographical area, a criminal record, and perhaps even a prison sentence.

Sands of time

From their 'clock-in' date, gang members have a finite amount of time to build their ratings in the game. Many more fail than succeed, yet youths on the street and in gangs typically remain positive about their chances to advance, in part because they look around and see other youths making no greater headway than they are.

By the time of their 21st birthday, however, subscription to the game gives way to the need to pay rent and put food on the table. This is a young man's game. If you are still engaged on the street in your 20s and have not yet made it into the big leagues, you become vulnerable to the up-and-coming boys who are looking to earn ratings at your expense.

If, by age 21, you are still hustling to make ends meet, hanging around on street corners with prepubescent teenagers, and living with your mother, you begin to lose your appeal.

Younger gang members, looking for role models, no longer respect you. Girls, looking for stable partners, no longer desire you. You are, in effect, past your 'best-before' date. As a comparison, what would be thought of a third-year university student who continues to hang out with GCSE students? Aside from the other risks of injury, imprisonment, and early death, life on the street and in gangs has a short expectancy.

Reputations on the street and in gangs are built up by pursuing certain courses of action, as discussed above, or destroyed by pursuing certain others, including studying hard and doing well in school.

Gang members desire instant celebrity, but it is fame awarded in a distinctively local setting. The world they live in is geographically small, restricted by invisible boundaries created by the many enemies they have made. The timescales they live by are incredibly short. Life on the street is life for the moment. Consequences do not mean much.

Implications for practice

Police officers need to understand the drivers for certain crimes and bear in mind that on the street, the motivation for robbery, for example, is not necessarily economic, but rather the pursuit of ratings and peer respect. Likewise, violence in response to innocuous slights and perceived disrespect is in fact rational in a world where your brand is what keeps you in the game and protects you.

Second, we must talk to young people. To do so effectively, we must understand their world and listen to what they are saying. Comprehending why those on the street act and react the way they do will inform the development of meaningful questions, which provoke meaningful answers. Communication is the key to gaining intelligence. Intelligence is the key to tackling gangs.

'We cannot arrest, stop and search, and imprison our way out of the problem'

Third, enforcement tactics must take the respect culture into consideration. A holistic approach to tackling gangs is needed because we cannot arrest, stop and search, and imprison our way out of the problem (especially if gang members get peer respect for going to prison).

Instead, we need a combination of community support for robust enforcement, parental

engagement (hand-in-hand with education and encouragement for parents), and encouraging tactical options that allow a young person to walk away from life on the street without losing face – such as antisocial behaviour order conditions of non-association, which provide a valid excuse for disengaging with gangs. We also need to deliver effective preventative educational messages to young people during that difficult transition from primary to secondary school, thus empowering them to make informed decisions about whether they want to subscribe to life on road.

In our opinion, girls are perhaps the most important people that need to hear these educational messages, because they have the power to make the biggest difference to the lives of the boys. We need to educate the girls about their role in this world, the risks they face and the dangers of gang-involved boys.

If the girls can be convinced that life on the street is a fickle and dangerous world full of contradictions, and that they are second-class citizens within it, the gang-involved boys will not get the plentiful supply of sex and adoration that makes such a world seem so attractive in the first place. ■

Insp Allen Davis is with the Met and is co-lead of Growing Against Gangs and Violence. Dr James Densley is an assistant professor at the School of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice at Metropolitan State University, Minneapolis, and a director of Growing Against Gangs and Violence. Dr Densley researched gangs while working at the University of Oxford.

WHAT IS A GANG?

Is it fair to speak of gangs in the UK? Or in doing so, do we provide benign peer groups with an exaggerated kudos or status, which formerly did not exist?

Such questions lie at the forefront of gang research, in part because a precise definition of gangs has thus far eluded academia. Indeed, even the most acclaimed gang definitions treat their variable attributes as invariable features and segregate gangs from organised crime groups, when in fact gangs are a species of a broader genus, organised crime 'gang'.

While we acknowledge that the term is value-laden and often employed carelessly to simultaneously describe 'associations of criminals' and 'criminal associations', gangs in our view remain an important unit of analysis, because they determine the range of life chances for youths in our most alienated communities. Of course, no two gangs are exactly alike in form or function. Gangs evolve. Gangs decline. But, most importantly, gangs exist. We know this be-

cause we have seen them. For these two articles we researched 12 London gangs and interviewed 69 gang members and 129 other key informants such as their friends, family, teachers and youth workers.

Our data enables us to conclude that gangs adhere to the following criteria:

- they are self-formed associations of peers that have adopted a common name and other discernible symbols of membership (such as colours of allegiance);
- they are comprised of individuals who recognise each other as being members of a gang;
- they are not fully open to the public and much of the information concerning their business remains confined within the group;
- discipline within the group is not defined by enforceable rules and regulations, and disputes cannot be settled by third-party rule of law; because
- they are involved in illegal activity.

Let the debate begin.