Part 4

Confrontational Behaviour
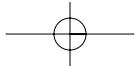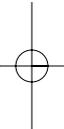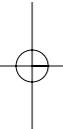
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Working with Gangs and Other Delinquent Groups

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Introduction

Until recently, gangs have been seen as a uniquely American problem. In recent years, however, gangs appear to have migrated across the Atlantic to a range of European societies, including the UK, where it now appears that they have taken root and flourished.

As gangs have not been considered a public enemy to the extent that they have in the USA, European societies do not possess any established anti-gang strategies or, indeed, industry to confront the risks posed by street collectives (Hallsworth, 2007). As fears about gangs have grown in countries such as the UK, driven forward, not least, by sensational reporting of alleged gangland killings, policymakers in the UK have, in recent years, been turning to the USA and its well-established gang suppression industry for inspiration.

In recent years in the UK, a range of anti-gang policies have been initiated that borrow heavily from the USA model. Among them are the formation of dedicated gang-busting units and the creation of dispersion zones where law enforcement personnel are conceded powers to forcibly disperse groups of young people congregating together. In its latest action plan to confront violent crime the UK, the government publicly identified gangs as public enemies and outlined yet more powers to suppress them (HM government, 2008). These included sanctioning the use of covert intelligence on gang members and creating dedicated policing operations with a mandate to crack down on gangs with the aim of suppressing them.

Given the sensational coverage gangs receive, it pays to rethink precisely how we might want to respond to problems posed by street collectives of various forms. Ought we to seek solutions to homegrown problems posed by youth collectives by looking towards the USA, with its large and well-established gang-suppression industry or is another order of intervention preferable and more desirable? If so, what might its features be? In this chapter, we address these questions.

Criminal Gangs or Street Collectives?

The way that a gang is defined in the USA has changed considerably in recent decades and this has affected how the state has responded to it.

One of the earliest attempts to understand gangs was the work conducted by Thrasher in the 1930s (Thrasher, 1936). Thrasher saw a gang as an 'interstitial entity' that formed spontaneously among young migrants in the burgeoning industrial city of Chicago. He did not view gangs as essentially criminal entities, though he did believe that they were 'integrated through conflict'.

In the 1970s, the way that gangs were perceived and defined began to change as their non-criminal dimensions began to diminish. The term 'gang' became criminalized and it is as a systematically criminal, not to say pathological, entity that it is now understood. This is particularly evident if we consider the widely accepted definition of a gang provided by Malcolm Klein in 1971.

> A juvenile gang is any denotable group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighbourhood (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighbourhood residents and/or enforcement agencies.

Though the debate about what constitutes a street gang still continues today, most practitioners and policymakers perceive gangs as pathological units that must be suppressed. Gang-affiliated members commit more crime, it is argued, than non-gang-affiliated members and, once in a gang, will engage in even more extreme criminality than would have been the case had they not joined (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Klien and Maxson, 2006; Thornberry, 2003).

Gangs, from this perspective, are the harbingers of social destruction. If you accept this thesis – and many certainly do – then the only solution to the problem is gang suppression, which, by and large (with considerable variation), is the dominant current response.

Punitive Responses to Gang Management – Do They Work?

The hallmarks of this intervention philosophy contain variations on the following themes. Gang researchers are employed by state bodies to map the gangs and assess the risk factors associated with them. Typically, this is accomplished using surveys. The knowledge produced is also tactical, in the sense that its function is to pave the way for suppression. This commences in different ways and with different levels of punitive response.

At the less punitive end, we find various education programmes such as GREAT (the Gang Resistance, Education and Training Programme) that attempt to dissuade people from being involved in gangs. This is considered to be 'primary prevention'.

As we move towards the more punitive dimensions of gang suppression, interventions include a range of punitive control programmes and organizations. Among

these there are the development of gang intelligence and control units, such as the LA Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH), which specialized in street gang suppression programmes.

The initiation of civil injunctions that target gang members and their activities has also become a popular anti-gang measure in several states. Variations can also be found here with regard to responses targeting individual gang members. They include making gang membership a mitigating factor in sentencing, removing the right to benefits for gang members, passing laws that prohibit gang members from congregating in particular areas, banning the wearing of gang insignia and colours.

Then we have the arrest and imprisonment of gang members for various felonies by dedicated prosecution units and, last but not least, dedicated gang-busting operations, often involving paramilitary police units, which have resulted in mass arrests of suspected gang members. An excellent example of this would be Operation Hammer, unleashed by the LAPD in South Central Los Angeles, which involved 1000 police officers in a couple of weekend operations (Davis, 1990).

Despite the huge investment that the USA's repressive response has devoted to gang suppression, the problem of the gang appears to have grown across the USA, *despite* falls in crime nationally over recent years.

While the evaluation literature on gang intervention programmes is principally concerned with the relative success or failure of various individual projects in suppressing or preventing gangs from forming, it also pays to consider the wider social impact of the anti-gang crusade on the communities in which the targeted gang members live. This means assessing social policy not in terms of studying how far the risks posed by gangs have been effectively reduced, but considering instead the social costs attendant on such repression by the state.

The costs are huge, among which must be included:

- the mass criminalization of young people
- the further racialization of the crime problem
- the wholesale assault on rights and civil liberties of individuals targeted through repressive tactics
- the mass incarceration of ethnic minority men in the expanding American Gulag
- the negative experiences of communities targeted by paramilitary policing
- the importance of the gang-suppression industry in helping to forge the 'deadly symbiosis' Luke Wacquant has charted between the ghetto and the penitentiary (Wacquant, 2004).

Benevolent Responses to Gang Management – can they work?

While we ought not to lose sight of the fact that there remain more benevolent attempts to work with gang members in the USA, it must be pointed out that these are very much outside the mainstream – they are not part of the general policy paradigm, which aspires to gang suppression. We need to be very careful about adopting the suppression model, which leads us to the very first of our intervention strategies – Beware American gang-suppression specialists bearing gifts. What might an alternative approach be? This is what we will now consider.

While street collectives come in a myriad of different shapes and sizes and the aetiology of urban violence has many causes (Hallsworth and Young, 2005), what we tend to find in the American gang-suppression industry is a filtering gaze that either focuses attention on ethnic street-based gangs alone or, alternatively, reduce the problem of urban violence to a problem of gangs.

This takes us to our second policy recommendation – be careful of gang talk and gang talkers, for the street and its violence will invariably escape the definitional straightjacket that they want to impose on it.

While we do not want to dispute that entities called gangs may be part of the problem of urban street-based violence, we contend that the problem of violence is not reducible to gangs alone and, consequently, seeking to confront the violence of the street by suppressing gangs is a misguided exercise. To begin with, gang members may commit crimes independently of those that are clearly gang-related (Jankowski, 1991). Much of the violence in an area may well be committed by individuals or duos not in gangs, while there are many who commit violence in peer groups that ought not to be labelled gangs. We need to see the gang as one part of the street puzzle and not concede to it an importance that it does not possess. In practice, that means making clear distinctions between what we may really want to term a gang and groups that are not gangs, such as organized crime groups and peer groups. It also means understanding that different collectives require interventions that recognize their differences and do not entail imposing blanket, indiscriminate gang-suppression interventions on them, such as curfews or street clearance operations. Rather than beginning with the gang as your unit of analysis, begin with the street, its violence, and only then see if it has anything to do with gangs. This is beguilingly easy to say in theory, we accept, but difficult to apply in social contexts where people often want to find gangs everywhere.

By defining the problem of violent street worlds as essentially one of gangs, the control agents and gang researchers too often resolve the inherently amorphous reality of street life by imposing a form on it that gives it a shape they can comprehend and, they believe, control. In effect, they apply the term 'gang' and it is as if, in one fell swoop, the muddy, messy reality of volatile street worlds is magically resolved. It is as if, once the gangs have been identified by reference to their risk factors, all that is left to do is reach for gang solutions that often have their origins and justifications in US literature and research. The trouble with this, however, is that, on the one hand, the reality of the street described in the language of administrative gang talk and, on the other, street life as it is are very different things. Far from clarifying street reality, it becomes misrepresented in the very language used to describe it.

As an example, control agents often express various roles of street life members in what remains a highly stereotypical vision of the gang. They refer to 'the leader', 'wanabees', 'a lieutenant', 'a foot solider' and so on. The trouble with this is that these are terms, although they might help us understand the nature of military organizations, do not capture the informal, amorphous nature of street life, which is much more fluid than these categories can ever capture. Likewise, when people deploy terms such as 'initiation ceremonies' and 'recruitment strategies' to define gang realities, they are concepts that, typically, emanate from the world of control agents and do not capture the reality of the street, which is elsewhere.

As we found in our interviews, those often identified as gang members by control agents did not accept that they were members of a gang, and did not talk about initiation rituals or recruitment strategies. That is not how they experience their gang realities.

Against this tendency to reification, we pose as a policy injunction the need to think carefully about what you are evoking when trying to articulate the world of the street in an attempt to define and control it. Are you capturing its life as its inhabitants live their gang realities or are you imposing on it a conceptual discourse that misrepresents precisely what it claims to represent.

As an alternative, we stress the importance of finding out how the people themselves define their own street reality. Listen to what they say and work back from that. The importance of this came through powerfully to us in the course of research we conducted into a poor, deprived, inner London borough, where we had been tasked with the mission to uncover the gang reality, we were told, was fuelling the violence within it (Hallsworth and Young, 2008).

We certainly did find evidence of things that approximated gangs, but, from talking to violent men, residents and control agents, we did not find them identifying the gang as the source of the problem of violence. The gangsters we interviewed spoke instead of living life 'on road' and had a clear-cut sense of what that involved and how they ended up there. Rather than attempt to reflect this back in the reified language of gang talk, we tried instead to explain and theorize the processes that led to people being 'on road'. In other words, we tried to frame our understanding of the violent street worlds that we were trying to uncover by listening without prejudice to those who were immersed in them. The policies we abstracted to confront violence were shaped by this interpretation.

In the 1960s, the authorities in the USA typically believed that the best way to confront gangs was to intervene benignly to change them. Gangs were considered transformable and youth workers were considered the right kind of people to help facilitate that change. This kind of intervention, however, was strongly criticized in an influential intervention by Malcolm Klein in 1971, who saw such practices as only helping to cement gang identity further. This he felt was counterproductive to the need to curtail the gang and prevent entry into it. Before we too take this path, though, we would question the wisdom behind this intervention. If you do not reason with gangs or groups in ways that respect they are a group, then what you are doing is simply leaving the way open for naked suppression.

We live in fragmenting and individualizing societies. The impact of free market principles on the self is to progressively atomize it. Given this, if youth show signs of collective efficacy by having the temerity to organize themselves with the goal of confronting the problems they encounter in the world around them, it is essential for us as practitioners to listen to and respect an alternative discourse. 'Take them as they come' constitutes our next policy recommendation.

Rather than approach street collectives, as most state-sponsored administrative researchers do, simply as a pathologic group that must be suppressed, instead, work with the group to find out what its members believe themselves to be and what they may represent.

If that sounds like idealism, then consider what happens when this approach is adopted. Consider the case of the pioneering work undertaken by David

Brotherton and Louis Barrios in the case of the Almighty Latin Kings and Queens Nation in New York (Brotherton and Barrios, 2004).

To all intents and purposes, the Latin Kings represented, to average white Americans, the quintessential, stereotypical vision of their worst nightmare. This was a large, armed, violent street gang, populated by Hispanics. It was a gang that had spread on a national and international scale and, it was alleged, heavily immersed in illegal drug distribution. It literally was considered the extreme edge of delinquency. In relation to the all-American way of life, the group was viewed as fit only for suppression, which is the policy that the state adopted.

Rejecting zero tolerance and the mass incarceration of ethnic outsiders, Brotherton and Barrios adopted an ethnographic approach and worked closely with the group. Rather than seeking to understand the group by reducing it to the impoverished language of risk variables, they sought to learn the life histories of the group members and the evolving history of the group itself. They approached the gang, in other words, as a cultural producing entity that needed to be understood.

By trying to humanize rather than demonize the Latin Kings, they sought to understand the gang's dynamics and position within American society. In so doing, they were able to highlight the many positive functions it served, while also retaining a realistic assessment of the violence its members were capable of.

As Brotherton and Barrios discovered, this was a group that was far more than a collection of violent outsiders. It also acted as a therapeutic community, not least by helping its members overcome the trauma of incarceration. The gang sought to provide a range of welfare services to its members and their families.

Rather than adopt the typical gang suppression fix, what Brotherton and Barrios sought to do was bridge the abyss between a criminalized group and the wider society that had excluded and criminalized it. As part of this approach, they organized a conference that bought together members from different gangs and practitioners and researchers as part of an attempt to find common ground.

More recently, they have been engaged in convening public meetings where local communities and gang members are given an opportunity to publicly debate issues that concern them. This is an American initiative that is outside of and opposed to the general fixation with suppression of such groups.

The idea that one might actually humanize stigmatized outsiders as part of a strategy of intervention is not something that typically informs efforts to control gangs. Nor too is the attempt beyond that of recognising street collectives as political actors who have a right to be involved in decisions that affect them. We offer however as another policy injunction: the need to work with and engage with street collectives as political actors in their own right.

Rather than lead such groups to accentuate their most negative features by sin-gle-mindedly conspiring in their destruction, we propose working with the many positive features that group life can bestow. As an example of where this approach can lead, consider the lesson of Barcelona and the arrival there in the 1990s of the Latin Kings and Queens.

To begin with, the authorities in the city positioned the group as a public enemy that had to be suppressed. That original perspective began to change, however in favour of seeking to work with the Latin Kings, considering them as a social movement in their own right. Far from seeking to criminalize the

group, they were recognized as a cultural movement by the local state and the state made money available to them to support their work.

More recently, a similar approach has been adapted to good effect in the case of Genoa, which has also witnessed an inward flux of Ecuadorian migrants who brought the Latin Kings with them. Far from casting them as social pariahs, through the pioneering efforts of dedicated researchers working at Genoa University and street-level practitioners, efforts were made to include the gang as a recognized social movement. Treating street collectives with respect, rather than as social pariahs, it could be observed, can go a long way.

If, as we observed above, the problem on the street is not one of gangs, then, self-evidently, it is important that we do not place anti-gang programmes at the centre of any intervention strategy. Even if the street collectives that exist are volatile and dangerous, it is important to resist the temptation to use punitive and suppressive solutions.

We conclude here by suggesting that practitioners work with what they have. If, for example, a group of youths commit a spate of street robberies, utilize the usual ordinances and practices law enforcement agencies have evolved to tackle this particular crime rather than generate new gang suppression instruments to tackle the problem. Suppress the crime, not the gang.

As we have seen, street life and violence within it operates in fast time. As violent street actors and the collectives to which they may be aligned often have no trust in the criminal law and evince a strong dislike and distrust of law enforcement agencies, the violence they do unfolds in street worlds that are often disconnected from formal society and its institutions. Reciprocal tit for tat reprisals may lead to a spiralling of violence. Given this situation, for an intervention effort to succeed, practitioners must be able to:

• provide a response in fast time, not in the ponderous slow time that bureaucratic organizations typically take to work
• build a bridge between the often separate worlds of the street and formal society.

Involving those who come from the street and hold the respect of street actors and street collectives is of fundamental importance if the trust necessary to make a difference is to be established.

Conclusion

We tend to live in societies today that, increasingly, seek to manage social problems by recourse to crime control. Not only have our societies become more punitive but they have also become far more exclusionary in the nature of the practices they adopt. The current American fixation with suppressing gangs illustrates this tendency neatly. Where once, in the 1960s (a more benevolent and hopeful age), gangs were thought of as entities that could be reasoned with and transformed through benevolent intervention, by the 1980s and since, as we have seen, they have been thought fit only to be suppressed. Despite the fact that the programmes Klien and Maxson (2006) evaluated failed, it has not prevented the establishment from coming back and suggesting more of the same. At no point at all have people stopped to think that an alternative

paradigm might be preferable. Despite the failure of suppression tactics, more and more European societies are turning to the USA for ways to confront what they believe and define as their growing gang problem.

Before we too wholeheartedly embrace gang talk and gang suppression, it is our contention that we really do need to think more carefully about the kind of society we are. From the survey that we have attempted here, we have tried to suggest that another order of intervention is necessary and tried to articulate what the foundations of an alternative progressive paradigm of intervention might look like when it comes to the business of engaging with street collectives.

KEY POINTS

- Don't reduce violent street worlds to a problem of gangs.
- Recognize that street collectives exist which are not gangs and do not try to treat them as if they are.
- Be careful about imposing on to the messy world of the street a language that misrepresents its nature.
- Work back from the testimonies of street actors and derive your interventions from them.
- Work with the groups as you find them and do not make oppression the beginning, middle and end of what constitutes your strategy.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Imagine that you want to build helpful relationships with members of a street collective. Discuss the approach that you would take and difficulties you think you might encounter.
2. Discuss what you think might be the advantages and disadvantages for a young person who is a member of a street collective.

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