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An introduction to gangs and serious youth violence in the United Kingdom

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**Gangs and Serious Youth Violence in the UK:**  
**An Introduction to the Special Issue**

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2018 was a watershed year for serious violence in the United Kingdom. After a decade of declines, homicide, knife and gun crime, and robbery began rising in 2014 and in 2018 reached their highest point for more than 10 years (HM Government, 2018). These increases were accompanied by a shift towards younger victims and perpetrators. For homicide in particular, the rise was driven almost exclusively by male-on-male cases rather than violence against women and girls (HM Government, 2018). As LaFree (1999: 148) famously wrote in the context of shifting violent crime rates in the United States, “the simple rapidity of the changes calls into question explanations based on fixed biological characteristics, deep-seated psychological characteristics, or slow-moving social characteristics”. Hence the need for a deeper dive into some of the more emergent changes in the violence landscape.

Whilst media attention is increasingly focused on knife crime in London, virtually every police force area in Britain has been affected. The West Midlands, which includes Birmingham, the second-most populous UK city after London, recorded the highest number of youth knife deaths in 40 years in 2018 (HM Government, 2018). Violence is a national issue. And as violence rises, detection rates of those response fall, undermining public trust and confidence in police to provide victims and families with the answers they deserve (FitzGerald, 2018). Hence why, in

April 2018, the Home Office published a new Serious Violence Strategy and ploughed £40 million into it (HM Government, 2018).

This is not the first time HM Government has pledged to tackle serious youth violence this decade. After the 2011 England riots were wrongly pinned on gangs (Densley and Mason, 2011), Prime Minister David Cameron (2011) made tackling them his “national priority”. A national Ending Gang and Youth Violence (see Disley and Liddle, 2016) strategy followed that was heavily criticised for failing to establish an evidence-based operational definition of a gang, for ignoring the academic state of knowledge on gangs and what works in gang intervention, and for wasting taxpayers’ money on initiatives that were neither clearly described nor comprehensively evaluated (Densley and Jones, 2016; Fraser et al., 2018; Shute and Medina, 2014; Smithson and Ralphs, 2016). Related interventions, such as civil gang injunctions, the application of “joint enterprise” doctrine to gang members, and The Metropolitan Police’s database or “Matrix” of gang suspects, were similarly criticised for the collective punishment and criminalisation of innocent young people (Amnesty International, 2018; Cottrell-Boyce, 2013; Williams and Clarke, 2016).

HM Government’s (2018, p.14) latest Strategy stresses that tackling gangs and youth violence is “not a law enforcement issue alone and it requires a multiple strand approach involving a range of partners across different sectors”. Prevention and early intervention are at the heart of this new action plan. After London experienced over 130 homicides in 2018, for example, the city’s Mayor Sadiq Khan called for a new public health approach predicated on multi-agency partnership working between police and social and statutory services, to bring together knowledge of people involved in serious violence (BBC, 2018). Based on similar models in Boston, Cincinnati, and other US cities (Braga et al., 2018), the Mayor sought to replicate Scotland’s Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV), which cut Glasgow’s murder rate dramatically

since 2008 (see Deuchar, 2013). However, repeated calls from senior politicians and police for a return to robust enforcement tactics like stop and search potentially undermine this message (Bradford, 2017).

The Serious Violence Strategy (HM Government, 2018) blames rising youth violence on “county lines” drugs gangs, who export systemic violence to new markets, and social media, which glamorizes gang life, escalates gang tensions, and normalizes weapon carrying. Critics argue the role of county lines and of social media has been overstated, or at very least oversimplified by policy makers, and instead point to toxic environments for children (created by austerity), fear of violent victimisation, and a lack of trust in government, at times linked to ineffective and discriminatory policing, as contributing factors (for a summary, see Brown et al., 2019). This special issue, published to coincide with the launch of the National Centre for Gang Research (NCGR) at the University of West London, adds the voices of academics who have spent years researching serious violence in the UK to this debate—otherwise dominated by policymakers and media commentators.

The NCGR, Western Europe’s first dedicated hub for gang research, aims to study youth violence and its causes and help provide advice and research to the discussion about violence and gangs on the UK’s streets. The articles in this special issue service this agenda by updating existing knowledge about the nature and extent of gangs and gang responses, knife crime, the dynamics of county lines drug dealing and related child criminal exploitation, and best practices in safeguarding young people and in violence prevention and intervention. This is a timely contribution, for nowhere is the conversation about gangs and youth violence more necessary, but at times more hostile, than the UK (see Hallsworth, 2013; Pitts, 2012). The academic *beef* about gangs between “Left Idealists” and “Left Realists” (see Andell, 2019; Harding, 2014), and the internecine

bickering back-and-forth over the past decade, has often been to the detriment of knowledge production. This collection hopes to draw a line under this work and usher in a new era of empirical UK gang scholarship.

### **Shift Happens: The Perils and Pitfalls of Studying UK Gangs and Youth Violence**

As Muncie (2014, p. 33) said, “America owns the street gang, while Britain has traditionally been the home of youth subcultures.” This one line succinctly captures the crux of the debate so far this century—the operative word being *traditionally*. Even if no gangs existed in Britain’s past (and some contest this too; see Davies, 2013), gangs can still exist Britain’s present. The subculture-gang division separated “them” (America) from “us” (Britain) (Campbell and Muncer, 1989), and for decades this became an *idée fixe*—a calcifying adjudication which tied the hands of UK scholars seeking to adapt to the “evolving” presentation of UK gangs (Densley, 2014; McLean, 2018; Whittaker et al., 2019).

Muncie’s dated assessment is constantly re-produced, rarely questioned. Hence why initial discussions on UK gangs frequently commence by citing interesting vignettes of early Twentieth Century social life (Downes, 1966) that speak of homogenous white working-class communities (not modern British multiculturalism); of class control and deference (not the fluidity of identity and status); of state intervention (not state absenteeism); of structured employment (not the gig-economy); and of a baronial press monopoly on news creation (not user-generated and public-mediated information). Such is a world quite distant from the “glocal” violent street worlds of today (van Hellemonst and Densley, 2019), where the boundaries between gangs and organised crime are blurred (McLean et al., 2019), criminal groups use smart phones and social media (e.g., Storrod and Densley, 2017), and gangs venture into exploitative county lines drug dealing outside

of traditional territorial boundaries (e.g., Coomber and Moyle, 2018; McLean et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019).

It is true that post-war Britain witnessed a plethora of resistant youth groups (Hall and Jefferson, 1976), but into this nostalgic world of fashion, music, and subcultural tribes, steps one of Huxley's (1870) "ugly facts"—in recent years, young men who see themselves and are seen by others as members of "gangs" have been killing each other with knives and firearms at unprecedented rates (HM Government, 2018). Sufficient to present a challenge to "normal science", this harsh reality has begun to overturn the stock of "old truths" still circulating in the UK academe (Kuhn, 1962). Shibboleths are difficult to set aside, but times have changed—the Mods and Rockers of a bygone era belong in newsreels and freshman sociology lectures. More than simply what is old is new again, the UK has experienced a true paradigm shift. Well, Shift Happens!

### **Preview of the Special Issue**

Given the intensity of the academic debate about gangs and serious youth violence, and the unprecedented levels of public and political concern about how best to intervene and prevent violence from escalating further, this special issue brings together some of the UK's leading and emerging scholars to share insights into the very latest research pertinent to these issues. The papers included in this collection address the role of street gangs in UK society and examine knife crime, the emergence of county lines drug dealing, child criminal exploitation, and other facilitators of violence. The utility of interventions such as police gang databases is assessed, so too are new harm reduction and contextual safeguarding strategies. Pathways to violence and desistance also are discussed, with an emphasis on mental health and wellbeing.

In the first article in this collection, co-editor James Densley and his colleague David Pyrooz draw attention to the wide-ranging controversy associated with Scotland Yard's database of purported gang members, termed the Gangs Matrix. They observe how technology has ushered in a new era of intelligence-led and "big data" policing, and police gang databases are part of this paradigmatic shift. Drawing on evidence and examples from a wide range of sources internationally—gang legislation, surveys of young people, police gang records, and research on gangs—Densley and Pyrooz put common validity and civil liberties critiques of gang databases like the Matrix to the test. They find merit in the civil liberties concerns and, to a lesser extent, claims that gang data are invalid and unreliable, but conclude that eliminating gang databases entirely could have the unintended consequence of making it more difficult to understand and respond to violence in communities. The authors offer a blueprint for improving gang databases by better codifying gang criteria, changing notification rules, contesting designations, and standardising sunset periods.

Co-editor and NCGR lead Simon Harding's contribution to the special issue draws on qualitative interviews with knife carriers and users in London. Harding finds that carrying a knife in public provides young men with a sense of authenticity within the ever-evolving social field of the gang, and that stabbing permits a release, both from the pressure associated with the potential for revenge or retaliation on the street, and the constant need to perform in front of peers to accumulate "street capital". For Harding, knife-enabled crime is normalised by the "habitus" of the street, where it is literally expected and validated; which explains in part why knife crime has become more frequent and more deadly in recent years.

County lines drug dealing is a new and rapidly evolving illicit drug supply model which sees urban drug dealers cross police borders to exploit provincial drug markets (Coomber and

Moyle, 2018). Two papers in this special issue examine county lines in detail. First, Chris Holligan, Robert McLean, and Richard McHugh explore the lived experience of county lines in Scotland, where little has been published about the subject, sharing new insights into this form of “venturing capitalism” as gained from field interviews with serious drug offenders. Second, James Windle, Leah Moyle, and Ross Coomber review the academic and official research on young people’s participation in county line drug dealing and identify critical knowledge gaps. They draw attention to the way in which the literature suggests that young people involved in county line networks are often “looked after” children or children known to social care or youth offending teams.

Once involved in county line drug dealing, Windle et al. argue that young people face a number of serious risks, including: arrest, sexual and physical violence, emotional abuse and absenteeism. Drawing upon their own empirical data, Windle and colleagues explore the evidence that suggests that many young people are initially drawn to county lines by financial and social incentives, yet experience more coercive control once embedded within these networks. Both county lines articles in this collection describe a blurring of the “victim” and “perpetrator” categories, and Windle and colleagues conclude by suggesting that while police, media, and political narratives currently frame young people as vulnerable victims of exploitation, in reality they are frequently met with the full force of the law.

Continuing with the issue of child victimisation, Jenny Lloyd and Carlene Firmin’s article draws attention to the way in which England’s child protection system is intended to safeguard young people at risk of significant harm. They argue that when young people are victimized in extra-familial settings they ultimately experience harms greater than or equal to those experienced in familial settings, thus have a right to the same statutory response from child protection services. Using data from referrals and assessments into children’s social care, Lloyd and Firmin explore



the extent to which this right is realised in practice. Drawing parallels with previous critiques of social work responses to child sexual exploitation, their work finds that to a certain extent “no-further-action” decisions, where they emerge, are aligned to the cultural and procedural parameters of social work and child protection practice. When the context in which abuse occurs is foregrounded in analysis of decision-making processes, however, the structural limitations of traditional child protection practices are illuminated, strengthening the case to adopt Contextual Safeguarding models.

An important element of the research into youth violence and its underlying causes is the focus on mental health, and yet research examining the mental health and emotions of gang members is currently in its infancy. Sarah Osman and Jane Wood present empirical insights into the way in which gang members and non-gang youth differ on anxiety, depression, psychological distress and self-conscious emotions, such as guilt and shame. Their study of young people aged 13 to 19 recruited from secondary institutions in London shows that gang members experience higher levels of psychological distress, rumination and lower levels of emotional wellbeing. Osman and Wood describe gang members as vulnerable offenders and call for gang intervention programmes focused more on the mental and emotional needs of youth.

Finally, co-editor Ross Deuchar’s paper picks up on the theme of mental wellness to explore the vital role of religion and spirituality in gang disengagement and violence desistance (see Deuchar, 2019). Deuchar shifts the focus from the UK to the Scandinavian context, presenting insights from life history interviews he conducted with a small sample of 17 male reforming gang members in Denmark who had become immersed in a holistic spiritual intervention programme that foregrounded meditation, yoga and dynamic breathing techniques. He illustrates the way in which engagement with the programme enabled the men to begin to perform broader versions of

masculinity, experience improved mental health and wellbeing, and develop a greater commitment to criminal desistance. Links with religious and spiritual engagement are discussed, and importantly the paper includes important implications for gang violence reduction in the UK context.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In his call for a more “public criminology”, Matthews (2016: 2) admonishes criminologists who turn out policy irrelevant work and “so what” criminology, noting “a great deal of criminological investigation is poorly conceived and researched ... theoretically weak, methodologically inadequate and has little or no policy relevance”. As practitioners and policy-makers continue to search for evidence-based solutions to the ever-escalating issue of violence within the UK, as Editors we hope that no reader comes away from this special collection saying, “so what”. Instead, we anticipate this edition will serve as a critical appraisal of the field and benchmark for future research and practice.

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