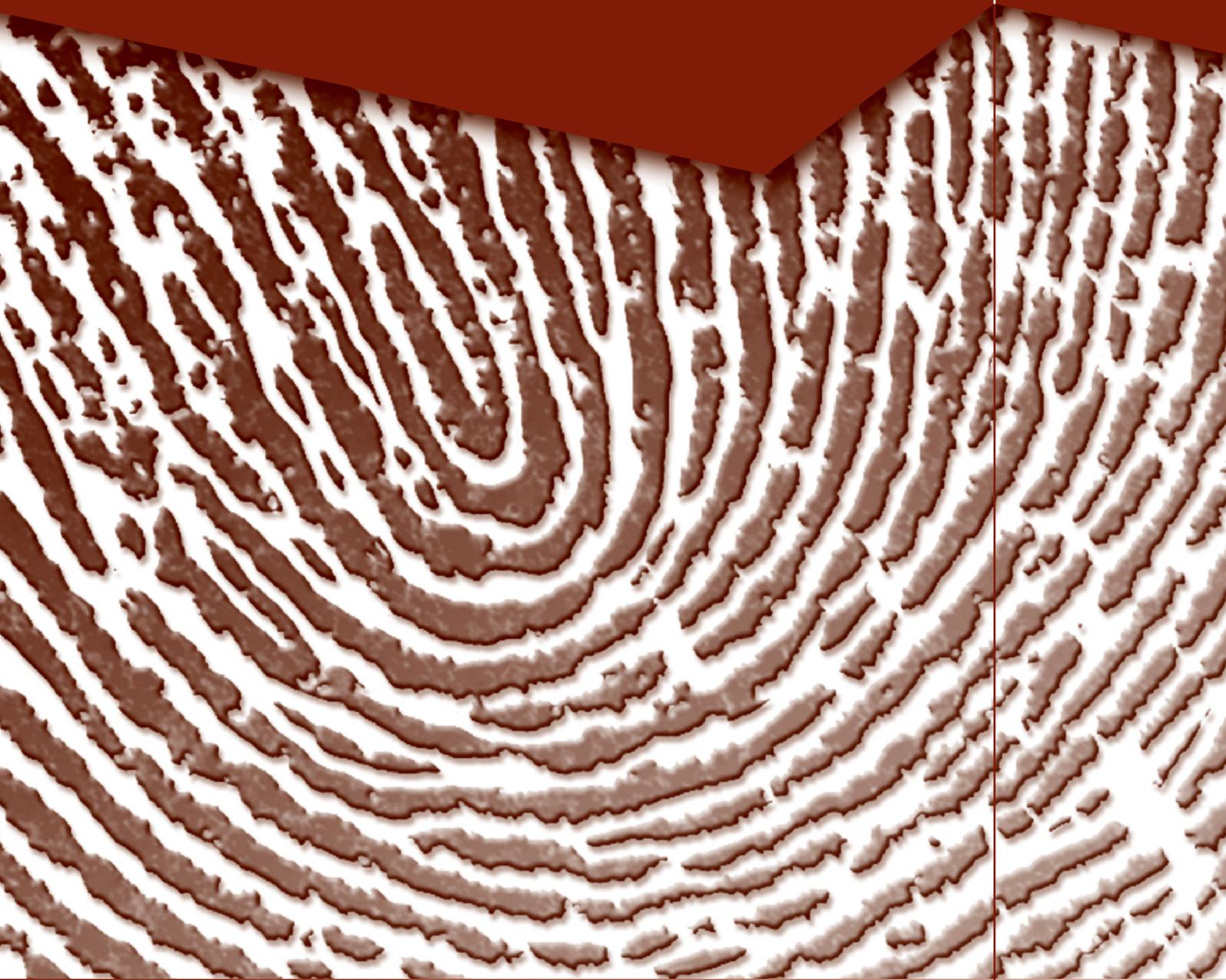


(Re)thinking 'Gangs'



Claire Alexander

RUNNYMEDE



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Foreword

At a time when we are constantly exposed to watching and reading accounts of violent crime fuelled by gangs and knife and gun culture, this report usefully draws our attention to understanding the consequences of 'thinking gangs'. It is also a powerful contribution to the ongoing debate on the over-representation of black and minority ethnic groups in the criminal justice system. The information on gangs compiled in this report is therefore both timely and relevant. Dr Alexander asserts that not only has the term 'gang' been mis-conceptualized and misused by the media, politicians and policy makers, but it has also, over a period of time, invoked and reinforced its association with 'race', young people and particularly with the black (African-Caribbean) community.

In scrutinizing the discourse on 'gangs' in media reports and speeches made by politicians, the author demonstrates that the racialization of gun and knife-enabled crime is the consequence of casual labelling. Referring to a speech by Tony Blair in February 2007, in which he uses words 'black kids', 'gangs', 'criminal cultures' and 'the black community', the author shows how it effectively 'serves to collectivize the problem as one specific to, arising from and potentially encompassing, the black community as a whole'.

Media attention to youth crime has driven varied responses and initiatives from the government, including the Tackling Gangs Action Programme, the decision to increase police action to target gangs and the Home Secretary's desire to expand the use of civil injunctions to control behaviour. But these responses will prove ineffective and unrealistic. Targeting gangs and using civil injunctions will perpetuate the problem by drawing more young black people into the justice system. This is happening while the over-representation of young black people in the criminal justice system and experiences of disadvantage and discrimination in other areas remains to be addressed.

For families who have either lost a loved one to gang-related violence or whose children are at its sharp end, the idea of a 'gang' is certainly not mythical. Tragic losses encompass a variety of fears and the frustrations of living in deprived housing estates with limited educational and economic opportunities. Violent youth crime may have increased in the last few years but the attention it now elicits in the media is unprecedented. Reports of murder are disturbing but sensationalist coverage can also cause damage. Media sensationalism contributes both to disproportionate fear of crime and the problem of over-representation of young black people in the criminal justice system.

An important contribution of this report lies in how it challenges entrenched stereotypes. It demonstrates how the media and politicians racially stereotype when using the word gangs. In Dr Alexander's words, 'this results in the potential ascription of "gang" labels to all groups of BME young men, while defining out acts of group based violence or criminal activity by majority/white youth'. The problem of youth violence exists across community and gender divides and affects the lives of all young people. There are better ways of dealing with it: involving young people from under-privileged groups in positive activities from an early age, supporting parents with limited resources and supervising and supporting young offenders caught up in the criminal justice system.

This report from the Runnymede *Perspectives* series presents useful information that will assist policy makers, practitioners and all interested parties to appreciate how the word 'gang' misleads and its use creates the very problem it intends to describe.

Neena Samota
Policy and Research Manager
Nacro
June 2008

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Claire Alexander

'Images matter... Given the failure to describe the individually lived realities of gang social life, gang research... is essentially an argument over the correct description of a ghost'

(Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004)

'the harder researchers look, the bigger the gang problem becomes'

(Hobbs, 1997)

Introduction

In response to the increasing number of teenage murders in London and elsewhere in the past two years, the attention of the media, politicians, policy makers and institutions working with young people have focused on 'the gang' as a key feature of contemporary urban youth identities, and as an emergent social crisis. Sir Ian Blair recently told the London Assembly that 'these awful deaths are the second most difficult issue that London faces behind terrorism' (*The London Paper*, 3 January 2008), while in May last year a report from the Metropolitan Police claimed to have identified 171 active youth 'gangs' in London alone.¹

and thorny questions of how youth violence or conflict can be mapped onto a broader social, economic, political and cultural context – and what the role and responsibilities of wider society might be in this issue – do not even get raised. 'The gang' is, it seems, an explanation sufficient in and of itself. While academics and some leading youth organizations have remained cautious about the existence and role of 'gangs' in Britain, 'the gang' has developed a public life independent of any empirical foundation or conceptual exploration – full of its own sound and fury, but signifying very little.

This paper is an attempt to take a step back from the current furore, and to reflect on what 'the gang' is and what the consequences are of 'thinking gangs' in this particular moment. It is absolutely not an attempt to minimize, trivialize or dismiss the central issue around the increase in violence amongst young people – 27 dead young people in London alone in 2007 is a clear and tragic testament to the fact that something is going on, and going wrong – but it is to raise critical (in

we actually know very little about 'gangs' in the UK.

Nevertheless, despite – or perhaps because of – the heightened profile of 'the gang', it remains true that we actually know very little about 'gangs' in the UK: about how 'a gang' might be defined or understood, about what being in 'a gang' means, even whether there are 'gangs' in any accepted sociological or criminological sense at all. We know still less about how 'the gang' links to levels of youth violence, the incidence of knife or gun crime, organized crime or, indeed, to more mundane practices of youth experience and identity. The invocation of 'gang life' and 'gang culture' often means that complex

'the gang' has developed a public life independent of any empirical foundation or conceptual exploration – full of its own sound and fury, but signifying very little.

both the sense of urgent and analytical) questions about how these events have been understood and whether the obsession with 'the gang' serves to

¹ MPS response to Guns, Gangs and Knives in London, 5 May 2007 (www.mpa.gov.uk/committees/cop/2007/070503/05.htm)

illuminate or obscure them. The paper works in three main parts: firstly to think about the ways in which ‘the gang’ has been portrayed (or, perhaps more accurately, constructed), both in the media and by politicians and policy makers; secondly, to consider what ‘a gang’ is, drawing on sociological and criminological research in the US and UK, and to reflect on the different traditions around understanding youth deviance underpinning these approaches; thirdly, to highlight and unpack some of the unspoken (and increasingly spoken) assumptions in the invocation of the ‘the gang’ and explore some of the consequences of thinking youth violence through this lens.

Section I: Constructing ‘The Gang’

In the early hours of 1 January 2008, on his way home from New Year celebrations with friends, Henry Bolombi was stabbed to death on a street in Edmonton, London. Henry was 18 years old and has the dubious distinction of being London’s first stabbing victim of 2008, one in a growing number of young people in London, and across the UK, to die in knife or gun related attacks in recent years. Henry was reported as having ‘fled war torn Congo in search of a safer life in Britain’ (*The London Paper*, 3 January 2008), but apparently fell victim to what the *Daily Mail* has heralded as ‘a vicious “postcode war” between rival London gangs’ (*Daily Mail*, 2 January 2008). Henry himself, the *Daily Mail* announced ominously, was also known by his ‘gang name’ ‘Black H’, had a series of convictions for robbery and assault using a knife and was the leader of a ‘gang’ labelled variously in the press as ‘the Cage Boys’, ‘the Africa Boys’ (*Evening Standard*, 31 December 2007) or ‘123’ (*Daily Mail*, 22 January 2008). While the police were reported as ‘keeping an open mind regarding a motive at present’ (*inthenews.co.uk*, 4 January 2008), the *Daily Mail* was quick to place the death as part of ‘The knife and gun crime wave... thought to be centred around rival teenage gangs fighting for territory resulting in deadly acts of violence’ (*Daily Mail*, 2 January 2008).

Henry’s story has become a depressingly familiar one in the past two years, with the reports rehearsing the same images and sentiments – a young man held by some as a son, friend, pupil, churchgoer, with a future full of now stolen possibilities, and by others (the majority) as caught in a web of violence and retribution of his own making, a product of the urban nightmare, in

which faceless young men murder each other for sport, and where street memorials and website tributes testify to their expendability. The *Daily Mail* recently claimed (*Daily Mail*, 16 January 2008) that five children are stabbed or shot in London every day² and that ‘Many were victims of gang violence’. In London in 2007, there were 27 teenagers murdered, with more scattered across the country – most notoriously the shooting of 11 year old Rhys Jones in Liverpool in August.

‘The gang’ stands at the heart of these events – it serves as a circular and self-fulfilling cause and explanation: Henry Bolombi was murdered by a ‘gang’, because he was a ‘gang member’ and because this is what ‘gangs’ do (and by so doing define their ‘gang’ status by default). Only two days after Henry’s death, and in contrast to the investigating police’s apparently ‘open mind’ approach, Sir Ian Blair was reported as stating ‘We need to find out what makes people feel safer in a gang than out of one’ (*London Paper*, 3 January 2008). ‘The gang’ becomes the baseline for understanding the recent spate of youth murders – the perpetrators are almost always described as ‘a gang’ and in many cases the victims themselves are assumed to be members of ‘a gang’ or at least participants in a seemingly ubiquitous, if ill-defined, ‘gang culture’ (Sveinsson, 2008). When 15 year old Alex Mulumba was killed in March 2006, the *Daily Mail* wrote that Alex, ‘far from being innocent... was another victim of the destructive gang culture in Britain’s inner cities’ (26 June 2006, my emphasis). The article titled ‘The Life and Death of a Gangsta’, continued that Alex (aka ‘Tiny Alien’) had a ‘secret life’ as part of ‘gang set up... by half a dozen black boys from a south London Estate’ known as the ‘Man Dem Crew’:

Brought up on an unrelenting diet of ‘gangsta rap’ music and violent video games, they tried their hardest to dress the part and talk the talk....Often lacking positive role models at home and adrift in a subculture built around instant gratification through sex, drugs and crime.

Press reports throughout 2007 point to websites, ‘tags’, musical taste and memorials to ‘fallen souljas’ (as with 15 year old Billy Cox, shot in

² According to the *Daily Mail*, the official figures for the period from 1 April to 30 November 2007 showed that 1273 individuals aged under 20 were victims of knife or gun attacks. Camille Batmanghelidj of Kids Company is also quoted as stating ‘In fact, the figures are higher than this because there is under reporting of attacks... the real statistics are not coming out’.

February 2007) as signs of 'gang' association.³ After the murder of Michael Dosunmu (also aged 15 and also killed in February 2007), the *Daily Mail* wrote of 'Guns as accessories... gangs that take the place of families (*Daily Mail*, 16 February 2007) and pointed to a 'breed of savage young men who are capable of horrific violence unfettered by the most basic concepts of morality'. This was despite the fact that neither Billy Cox nor Michael Dosunmu (nor indeed any of the high profile teen-on-teen murders of 2007) had any 'gang' affiliations, even within the very broad parameters of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) definition. Rather it seems that simply being a young, male and minority ethnic victim is sufficient in and of itself to warrant the label 'gang related'.

gun crime, with the government announcing a 'Three point plan' to tackle gun and gang crime, focusing on policing, courts and community prevention (*Daily Mail*, 22 February 2007). Politicians from across the political spectrum have called for policy amendments ranging from David Cameron's swiftly recanted 'Hug a Hoodie' campaign to tougher sentencing for gun crime (*Daily Express*, 18 February 2007) and 'gang related' activity (*The Times*, 23 February 2007),⁴ from the regulation of YouTube (*Guardian*, 26 August 2007) to the banning of American hip-hop artists from touring the UK, from the establishment of witness protection schemes for witnesses to 'gang' crime and intimidation (*Daily Telegraph*, 20 September 2007) to the establishment of 'safe houses' for those escaping 'gangs' (*Daily Express*, 15 June 2007).

'The gang' provides a potent shortcut to understanding youth conflict, offering Hollywood style images of urban chaos and random violence, threatening to spill out from inner city ghettos, in the place of more complex explanations exploring the realities of this phenomenon.

In September last year, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith announced the establishment of a £1million 'Tackling Gangs Action Programme' (Home Office, 2007) which establishes a dedicated national 'gang' unit focused on gang 'hotspots' – London, Greater Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham – and targeting gun crime. Tellingly, the same month, Children's Minister Ed Balls and London Mayor Ken Livingstone announced a £60 million investment in London's youth services

'The gang', then, provides a potent shortcut to understanding youth conflict, offering Hollywood style images of urban chaos and random violence, threatening to spill out from inner city ghettos, in the place of more complex explanations exploring the realities of this phenomenon and the social, economic, political and cultural conditions of its emergence. While the appeal to the new, the graphic and the sensational might perhaps be expected of the press, rather more worrying is the way in which these ghetto fantasies and stop-the-press 'explanations' have been picked up and circulated by politicians and institutions, and made the basis for policy determined seemingly more by a knee-jerk desire to be seen to be doing something rather than by a commitment to implementing a meaningful, measured and, above all, effective response. In 2007, both Tony Blair (in February) and then Gordon Brown (in August) convened 'emergency summits' around gangs and

aimed at teenagers 'at risk of sliding into anti-social behaviour and gang activity', an initiative touted by Ed Balls as 'the biggest investment in youth services for a generation' (*Guardian*, 20 September 2007).

In May 2007, the Metropolitan Police Service published a 'Response to Guns, Gangs and Knives in London' (and the apparent inseparability of these three elements is itself revealing), which identified 171 active 'gangs' in London,⁵ linked to a 'wide range of criminal offences'.⁶ The press reported a sharp increase in police activity, with the *Daily Mail* reporting in February 2007, that in response to the murders of James Andre Smarrt-Ford, Michael Dosunmu and Billy Cox, 'Scotland Yard... launched a huge crackdown on teenage gun violence with armed units, mounted patrols and covert teams flooding the streets of South London' (*Daily Mail*, 16 February 2007).

3 The *Daily Express* (16 February 2007) wrote of Billy 'Friends paying tribute to him yesterday referred to him as a "fallen soldier"'. The *Daily Mail* (14 February 2007) noted that Billy 'was drawn into the ruthless gang culture that plagues South London'.

4 The *Times* headline on 23 February 2007 read 'Gang members face longer in jail to halt rise of urban child soldiers'.

5 From <http://www.mpa.gov.uk/committees/cop/2007/070503/05.htm>

6 The Report notes that 'Of the five main offence types (burglary, criminal damage, robbery, theft and handling, and violence against the person), robbery has seen the greatest increase'.

In March, Manchester police ‘carried out dawn raids on 21 houses...in a major crackdown on gun crime’ (*Daily Mail*, 1 March 2007), while in June, the *Daily Mail* reported again on ‘Police hit squads to tackle teen gangs’ (*Daily Mail*, 28 June 2007), with the launch of ‘Operation Curb’ targeting ‘gangs’ and violent offenders across London. In Merseyside, ‘Armed officers in full bullet-proof armour have been speaking to schoolchildren aged between five and seven in special assemblies to warn them against becoming involved in gangs and gun crime’ (*Guardian*, 6 March 2007). Merseyside’s Chief Constable Bernard Hogan Howe has proposed evicting families of young people involved with gun crime (*Daily Telegraph*, 27 February 2007), and Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair has argued that younger siblings of ‘gang’ members should be placed on the child protection register (*Daily Telegraph*, 5 May 2007; *Guardian*, 3 May 2007).⁷ Police and politicians alike have called for the return of ‘traditional policing’ (*Daily Express*, 18 February 2007 and 12 April 2007), and with the debate over the relaxation and extension of the controversial stop and search laws in the early months of 2008, it seems this issue is back on the political agenda (*Guardian*, 31 January 2008).

‘Armed officers in full bullet-proof armour have been speaking to schoolchildren aged between five and seven in special assemblies to warn them against becoming involved in gangs and gun crime’.

The role of the police in defining ‘the gang problem’, and in providing a response to it, is a telling one.⁸ Ahead of the public and political furore of 2007, the Metropolitan Police set up the Violent Crime Directorate in 2006 to deal with guns and ‘gangs’, while Manchester’s ‘Operation Xcalibre’, has been operating for four years combining community outreach initiatives with ‘hard’ policing tactics (*Daily Telegraph*, 11 August 2007). Research and reports from police sources have been central in defining what a ‘gang’ is and what the external, recognizable features of ‘gangs’ are. A Home Office report on ‘Shootings, Gangs and Violent Incidents in Manchester’ (Bullock and

Tilley, 2002), which explored the development of gang and gun crime reduction strategies in the city, defines ‘gangs’ as ‘relatively enduring identifiable groups of young people who see themselves as members of those groups, and who commit crime as part of that membership’ (Bullock and Tilley, 2002: 23). The Metropolitan Police (2007) have defined a ‘gang’ as ‘a relatively durable, predominantly street based group of people who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is integral to the group’s identity’. However, both reports note the boundaries of what constitutes ‘a gang’ is often blurred, with the MPS noting the ‘inconsistency on interpretation’ between peer groups, gangs and criminal networks. Bullock and Tilley note ‘The definition of gangs is problematic... In one sense almost all who belong to informal groups might be deemed to be “gang” members, although few of these would include crime as a major focus of activity. Most adolescents, in particular, belong to peer groups’ (Bullock and Tilley, 2002: 23). Both reports note the vast variation in affiliation, criminal activities and ‘cultural makeup’ (MPS, 2007) that this broader categorization encompasses, in which potentially any group of young people could be seen as ‘a gang’. Significantly, although both reports share a similar definition of ‘a gang’, the Greater Manchester police identify only four ‘gangs’, with a collective membership of less than 200, while the MPS have identified 171 ‘gangs’, with over a quarter having 21-50 ‘members’ and an additional 18% having over 50 ‘members’.

There are, however, some shared characteristics which define ‘gang’ membership from the police perspective: both reports agree that ‘gangs’ are an almost exclusively male terrain (90% in London and 89% in Manchester), with women playing secondary and supporting roles;¹⁰ that they are made up of predominantly young men, and that the age of membership is decreasing;¹¹ and that ‘gangs’ are predominantly drawn from minority ethnic – particularly African Caribbean – communities. Bullock and Tilley

⁷ The *Daily Telegraph* adds, rather chillingly, that these proposals were ‘welcomed’ by The Children’s Society.

⁸ Stan Cohen has argued in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Cohen, 1980) that ‘As society’s officially designated agents of civil power, the police play a crucial role in the labelling process’ (p. 91).

⁹ These are the Gooch, Doddington, Pitt Bull Crew and Longsight Crew (Bullock and Tilley, 2002: 23)

¹⁰ The MPS report identifies three female ‘gangs’ in London, but notes ‘female gangs may not follow the same structure as male gangs and therefore are not identified in the same way’.

¹¹ The MPS note that the peak age for ‘gang’ victims and offenders in 2004 was 24, and by 2006 this had decreased to 19, with ‘a substantial number of individuals being much younger than this’. The Manchester 2002 report noted that ‘The age profiles of the gangs vary. Newer gangs tend to be comprised of younger members’ (Bullock and Tilley, 2002: 27), but also that the average age of gun crime victims was 20 and of likely offenders was 21 (Bullock and Tilley, 2002: 19).

note that in Manchester 79% of known 'gang' members were African-Caribbean or mixed race,¹² while the MPS estimate that 50% of the identified 'gangs' in London are from the African-Caribbean community.¹³ In Manchester the 'non-white population' had 'substantially higher rates of serious crime' than whites (Bullock and Tilley, 2002: 14)¹⁴ while the MPS reports that 75% of all victims of firearm homicides and 79% of suspects come from the African-Caribbean community, with so-called 'Trident murders' under the age of 20 increasing from 31 in 2003 to 79 in 2006 (an increase from 16% to 31% of all victims).¹⁵ The MPS also points to the pivotal role of immigration, with 'emerging gangs from new communities... [whose] young people appear to have a disproportionate negative impact on their peer groups' (MPS, 2007).

It is this latter aspect – the association of 'gangs' with ethnic minority (predominantly black) young people and communities – that has come to dominate the popular press, political and policy response in the past 18 months.¹⁶ In February 2007, Tony Blair was quoted as claiming 'It is about a specific problem within a *specific criminal culture* to do with guns and gangs' (*Daily Mail*, 18 February 2007, my emphasis). By April, *which* 'specific culture' he was talking about was made explicit, 'The black community – the vast majority of whom in these communities are decent, law-abiding people horrified at what is happening – need to be mobilized in denunciation of this gang culture that is killing innocent young black kids. But *we won't stop this by pretending it isn't young black kids doing it*' (*Daily Express*, 11 April 2007, my emphasis).¹⁷ Although previously acknowledging that 'In truth, most young people

are perfectly decent and law-abiding, more likely to be the victims than perpetrators of crime.... Most young black boys are not involved in knife and gun gangs' (ibid), Blair's slippage between 'black kids', 'gangs', 'criminal cultures' and 'the black community' serves to collectivize the

The collectivisation (or *communitisation*) of this 'specific criminal culture' is one problem; another is the way in which the 'gang' as myth has been (mis)read as reality; a third is the speed at which the 'gang' has moved from mythmaking to policy making.

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The collectivization (or communitization) of this 'specific criminal culture' is one problem; another is the way in which the 'gang' as myth has been (mis)read as reality; a third is the speed at which the 'gang' has moved from mythmaking to policy making. Of course, the conflation of 'gangs', crime, errant masculinities and black cultures is a potent image, one replete with all the certainties of what passes for 'commonsense'. Over the past year in particular, 'the gang' has dominated the media, political and popular imagination, fusing notions of 'feral' masculinities and youth in crisis with the threat of implosive cultures against the backdrop of urban alienation and incipient warfare. The *Sun* newspaper has recently launched a 'Nail the Thugs' campaign (*Sun*, 21 January 2008), in which former headteacher Stuart Newton ascribes the 'phased massacre of fifty young people on the streets of Britain in 2007' to 'the downward spiral of Britain, the impotent police, the complacent politicians and *the end-of-civilisation-as-we-know-it*' (my emphasis) in the face of the 'feral youths on our streets'.

'The gang' has become, in fact, a contemporary urban legend. However, this doesn't make it either right or helpful in understanding what is actually going on, or how the problems of youth violence might be addressed. Indeed, in May 2007 a report from the Youth Justice Board warned against the use of the term 'gang' for precisely this reason:

12 Sixteen per cent are white, 4% Asian and 1% 'Oriental' background (Bullock and Tilley, 2002: 25). Importantly, 7 out of 8 identified 'gang' members were born in Greater Manchester, and only 1 in 40 born outside the UK. Interestingly the report notes, in passing, that crime 'firms' in Manchester, which are 'more organised, more instrumental and more specifically focused on crime' tended to be 'white, older and less visible in public places' (Bullock and Tilley, 2002: 27). The difference in terminology is significant.

13 There is some lack of clarity in this figure as to whether this refers just to African-Caribbeans or also African groups

14 Ethnic minorities were five times more likely to be victims of murder and attempted murder, and twice as likely to be seriously wounded, as white people. There were over three times the number of crimes involving firearms for BME communities than white communities, and over three times as many BME victims of crimes involving firearms.

15 Twenty-three per cent of victims and 42% of those accused of knife enabled crime are African-Caribbean (MPA, 2007).

16 For example, 'Black Kids to Blame for Knife and Gun Murders, says Blair' (*Daily Express*, 12 April 2007).

17 <http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/page11472.asp>

Recently there has been a noticeable trend towards referring to groups of young people *indiscriminately* as gangs. This is not appropriate and it could exacerbate the extent and seriousness of group-related offending or *create problems where none previously existed....* Most young people involved in group offending do not belong to gangs – even if others label them in this way (quoted in *Daily Express*, 23 May 2007, my emphasis).

The Gang (Thrasher, 1927), which drew on census and court data, observations, personal documents and interviews, in its exploration of 1313 identified juvenile ‘gangs’ in Chicago’s ‘Poverty Belt’ and has proved foundational for subsequent generations of ‘gang’ research. Like Puffer, Thrasher understood ‘the gang’ primarily as a ‘play group’ which provided an important source of social support in the transitional

period between childhood and adulthood, particularly in environments characterized by socio-economic marginalization and social disorganization. Rather than standing in opposition to family and community, early studies saw ‘the gang’ as providing a supportive social structure based on clearly defined roles and mutual obligations rooted within the community itself (Whyte, 1943). Suttles thus argued in *The Social Order of the Slum* (Suttles,

1968: 172–3) that ‘gangs’ worked as a community defence mechanism and were ‘hardly the unruly and unreachable youths that we are led to expect.... The street corner groups not only make their members known to the rest of the neighbourhood, but create a network of personal acquaintances that augment those already in existence’.

The key features of these classic approaches to ‘the gang’ are:

- A form of social organization associated with processes of urban migration
- Arising in areas of weak social organization and authority
- Excluded from full participation in mainstream society
- Formed through competition for control over territory
- An internal structure and loyalty reinforced through conflict
- Hierarchically organized with clearly defined roles
- A locus for identity production/solidarity

In the context of the current discussion, two key points are worth emphasizing. The first is the association of ‘gangs’ with immigrant communities, and with the social disorganization inherent in such transitional and marginalized social settings. ‘Gangs’ are thus seen as part of a series of transitions – from ‘immigrant’ to ‘native’, from youth to adulthood, from outsider to the mainstream social order. They are also, relatedly,

‘The gang’ has become, in fact, a contemporary urban legend. However, this doesn’t make it either right or helpful in understanding what is actually going on, or how the problems of youth violence might be addressed.

Section II: What’s in a Name? ‘The Gang’ in Social Theory

‘The gang’ has, of course, been part of the British imagination of ‘the city’ for centuries – as long, perhaps, as there have been streets and feckless young men to gather in them. As long ago as the 1600s, there were reports of young men who ‘found amusement in breaking windows, demolishing taverns, assaulting the watch’ (Pearson, 1983, cited in Hobbs, 1997: 803), while East End ‘gangs’ were a potent focus of Victorian fears over the ‘dangerous classes’. The surveillance and control of young men in public spaces has kept pace with these fears, with the establishment of vagrancy laws proving a telling precursor to today’s SUS legislation. The academic and empirical exploration of ‘the gang’ is, however, primarily a phenomenon of the 20th century, and of the North American city. Although ‘gangs’ have been identified and researched across the globe, the dominant arena for research on ‘gangs’ remains the United States, and it is from this long established history of research that the key definitional features of ‘the gang’ emerge.

The ‘Classic Gang’

Sociological research on ‘gangs’ finds its roots in the work of the Chicago School in early 20th century America. The earliest academic definition of ‘the gang’ was Puffer, who in 1912 placed ‘the gang’ as ‘one of three primary groups... the family, the neighbourhood, and the play group’ (cited in Hobbs, 1997: 803). The most famous of these early studies is Thrasher’s study

inseparable from notions of poverty, social breakdown and cultural conflict in ethnically mixed urban contexts. However, it is important to stress that, although often ethnically rooted and organized, in these early studies, 'the gang' was not associated with a specific *racial* group. For example, just over 7 per cent of Thrasher's 'gangs' were black and conflict was largely between white ethnic immigrant groups. The second key point is the comparatively broad range of groups and activities that fall within the remit of 'the gang' and the placing of 'the gang' as an issue of (male) youth identity rather than criminality or violence. Thrasher's 'gangs', for example, encompassed a range of youth formations including sports clubs as well as groups of violent street criminals.

The 'Modern Gang'

From the 1950s and 1960s, however, 'gang studies' became a distinct field and 'the gang' itself has been reshaped and redefined. What we can perhaps think of as 'the modern gang' is closely tied to the emergence of criminology, which shifted 'gang' research away from the sociology of youth and has placed criminal activity and violent conflict as essential elements of 'gang' development and definition. Studies such as Cloward and Ohlin's *Delinquency and Opportunity* (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960) and Cohen's *Delinquent Boys* (Cohen, 1955) saw 'gangs' as groups of individuals who come together around a set of deviant values and lifestyles in which violence and crime are central. These studies saw 'gangs' as a reaction to the failure to accommodate middle-class norms and values – what is known as 'strain theory'. This failure is compounded by the blocking of opportunities for marginalized young men to achieve mainstream success and recognition, leading them to retreat to an exaggerated performance of masculine strength signalled through violence. Yablonsky's influential study of *The Violent Gang* (Yablonsky, 1962) thus saw 'gangs' as an alternative family where delinquent and criminal careers are nurtured, and where 'gang' membership becomes conflictual with family and community norms.¹⁸

Cloward and Ohlin's seminal study *Delinquency and Opportunity* (1960) also argued that rather than a temporary feature of transitional migrant groups, 'gangs' took different

shapes in different kinds of neighbourhoods. They drew a distinction between 'organized slums' which produced highly structured and instrumental 'criminal gangs' and 'disorganized slums' which produced the more archetypal 'street gangs' centred on violence. Pitts has recently argued (2007) that this distinction can be read through 'race' with white immigrant communities inhabiting 'organized slums' while black and Hispanic communities are the inhabitants of the 'disorganized slums' and, in consequence, the inheritors of the modern 'street gang'. The notion of the 'disorganized slum' chimed with contemporary concerns about the entrenched processes of social disadvantage amongst African American and Hispanic communities in US cities and underscored the recognition that – for some at least – the melting pot had proved illusory (Glazer and Moynihan, 1963). Emerging theories of the American underclass thus argued that social marginalization was more than a simple transitory phase in the social ecology of the city or the nation, and this was linked to ideas of embedded cultural forms – what Oscar Lewis termed in his study of Puerto Rican communities 'a culture of poverty' (1966).

The 'modern gang' develops the definition of the 'classic gang' in four key ways:

- 1) The 'modern gang' centralizes criminality and violent conflict;
- 2) The 'modern gang' is seen as a *permanent* feature of specific marginalized communities;
- 3) 'Modern gang studies' have been focused on racial rather than ethnic difference particularly in Hispanic and African American communities;
- 4) The 'modern gang' is located within an underclass position in which 'culture' rather than social structure is seen as the primary explanation.

The 'Criminal Gang'

The studies mentioned above, however, were largely theoretical in nature, and since the 1970s there has been a proliferation of both quantitative and qualitative empirical studies that have explored the diversity of 'gang' life and experience. This is partly due to the perception of 'gangs' as a major and growing social problem, and also to the apparently increasing involvement of 'gangs' in organized crime, particularly around drugs (Klein, 1995). 'Gangs' have, then, become a primary focus of criminal justice policy and

¹⁸ However, Yablonsky also saw 'gangs' as 'near groups', and laid stress on the impermanence and fluidity of 'gang' formation and membership.

social control, with the expansion of ‘gang’ task forces across major US cities. From the 1980s onwards, these crime-oriented and policy-led approaches have tended to harden the edges of ‘the gang’ and laid stress on internal hierarchies and external boundaries, linked particularly to territorial control of drugs (especially crack cocaine) markets. ‘Street gangs’ have been increasingly understood as professionalized criminal enterprises located within an underclass alternative economy (Bourgois, 1996; Venkatesh, 2000, 2008), with links to prison gang cultures (Moore, 1978).¹⁹ The FBI, for example, has redefined the ‘gang’ focus exclusively to ‘Violent Street Gang/Drug Enterprise’, and notes ‘From the FBI’s perspective a gang is a group of individuals involved in continuing criminal activity. A gang *does not* have to have similar clothing (colors), tattoos, hand signs, initiation rituals, or even have a specific name’ (in Decker 2007: 389, original emphasis). ‘Race’ remains a defining characteristic, however, with Decker asserting ‘Males, inner city residents and Hispanics and African Americans are disproportionately involved in gang violence, both as victims and perpetrators’ (Decker, 2007: 398).

The ratcheting up of ‘the gang’ in studies of this period sees the blurring of boundaries between youth groups, street ‘gangs’ and organized crime that has become all too common,²⁰ carrying with it the increase in levels of violence, use of firearms and drugs. In the public and media perception particularly, as Decker argues ‘when the term “gangs” is mentioned... the context typically includes a violent event’ (Decker, 2007: 388). At the same time, ‘gang studies’ have become increasingly narrow in focus, excluding other forms of (white) youth identity and culture – as for example with football ‘firms’, fraternities, mobs, clubs, skinheads or motorcycle ‘gangs’ – while promoting its crime-centred version of black youth culture. Katz and Jackson-Jacobs thus note that ‘gang studies’ results in ‘staining the group as a whole with an image of deviance’ (Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004: 103) and provides ‘a dominant image in what outsiders imagine about the population that gangs are taken to represent’ (ibid). In other words, ‘the gang’ stands for the individual, community, the ethnicity, the culture, the race.

19 Conversely, others have argued that the loose structure of ‘street gangs’ renders them unable to compete within major drugs markets (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996).

20 In the UK context, Pitts’ (2007) study of ‘Reluctant Gangsters’ is a good example of this blurring.

The ‘Mythical Gang’

Nevertheless, the burgeoning empirical studies of ‘gangs’, both in the United States and across the globe, have pointed to the wide variety in how ‘gangs’ are formed and lived, and have contested any clear meaning to the term. Some researchers have argued that it is this breadth and complexity that is the primary significance of ‘the gang’, while others have argued that this renders the concept useless as an explanatory framework. Others still have argued for a recognition of ‘the gang’ as a myth or fiction, generated by the media, institutions of social control and ‘the gangs’ themselves. Katz and Jackson-Jacobs thus describe ‘the criminologist’s gang’ as ‘mythical matters from the start’ (Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004: 115), while Klein has argued that the concept of ‘gangs’ has been shaped by media fantasies such as ‘West Side Story’ and ‘Colors’ (Klein, 2001). Howell has similarly pointed to the role of the media in creating a series of misrepresentations and distortions about ‘gangs’, including that:

- ‘Gangs’ are a monolithic phenomenon;
- ‘Gang’ members are male and from ethnic or racial minorities;
- ‘Gangs’ are an urban problem that are spreading across the country;
- ‘Gangs’ are hierarchical organizations with established leaders and clear rules;
- Violence is a pervasive part of ‘gang’ culture (Howell, 2007: 40).

Katz and Jackson-Jacobs similarly note that ‘mythmaking is one of the central activities of males in gangs... The central myth is that the gang exists’.

The ‘reality’ of the American ‘gang’ is often both much more complex and mundane: Howell argues that the majority of ‘gangs’ are informal, disorganised and transient, diverse in form and activities, found in a range of locations and with a gendered and racial/ethnic composition that accordingly varies widely.²¹ He notes further that ‘gangs themselves create myths’ (Howell, 2007: 39), most particularly around what has

21 Howell notes: ‘gang members are predominantly white in white communities and mainly African-American in predominantly African-American communities. Women account for 25-50% of “gang members” in certain locations’. (Howell, 2007: 43)

been termed 'Big Gang Theory', in which 'gang members' exaggerate their strength, numbers and cohesion either for self-defence or to enhance their reputation: Katz and Jackson-Jacobs similarly note that 'mythmaking is one of the central activities of males in gangs... The central myth is that the gang exists' (Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004: 92).

The 'Transatlantic Gang'

Despite widely recognized problems in the definition, understanding and measurement of 'gangs', the mythical American 'gang' has travelled across the Atlantic largely intact, and arrived fully formed on the streets of Britain's cities - or at least in the imaginations of the press, politicians and policy makers. Len Duvall, Chair of the Metropolitan Police Association was recently reported as stating that 'there has been an "Americanization" on London's streets which has seen more gangs carrying knives and fights over postcode rivalries' (*The London Paper*, 3 January 2007). It might be more accurate to argue, however, that the current furore reflects more an increasing Americanization of the *understanding of the phenomenon*, and the institutional response, rather than of the phenomenon itself. Certainly the mythic elements in the construction of 'the gang' in the UK discussed above are clearly apparent: the focus on bounded, organized and hierarchical entities, the links with urban, ethnic minority/immigrant young men, the prevalence of crime and violence. A recent report by Lambeth council, for example, has claimed that the 'Peel Dem Crew' in Brixton has 2500 members, with a hierarchical structure and membership involved with drug dealing and street robberies. *The London Paper* (14 February 2008) noted that 'The "PDC" has been one of London's most feared gangs since it was set up in the 1990s and Lee Jasper, former aide to the London Mayor, once described the group as "as tough to crack as the IRA"'.

whose definition of 'the gang' formed the basis of the MPS report (which discovered 171 'gangs' in London on this basis) have stated strongly that there is no evidence 'to support the idea that the UK is home to US style gangs' (Hallsworth and Young, 2004: 12-13). Similarly, Marshall and colleagues, in their review of current research on 'gangs' and guns note that 'there is little evidence to suggest that there are many US-style gangs in the UK' (Marshall et al., 2005: 6) and argue 'with such ambiguity surrounding "gangs" and continuing problems of definition, a solution might be to abandon the use of the term and focus instead on the problem [of] behaviour... The word 'gang' conjures up stereotypical images that are misleading at best, and destructive at worst' (ibid: 7). They point to two main, and related, concerns: one is the application of the term to any group of young men perceived as threatening, and the second is the racialization of this threat, 'the stereotypic image portrayed by the media is one of organized groups of violent offenders (mostly of Black African-Caribbean descent) brandishing guns, dealing drugs and constantly involved in bloody inter-gang conflicts' (ibid: 6). The picture is, unsurprisingly, more complex, with Marshall and colleagues pointing to findings that both White British and Black Caribbean young men are more likely than Black African or South Asian youth to claim 'gang' membership (Marshall et al., 2005) while Bennett and Holloway note that 'gang' involvement in Manchester varied in ethnic composition across areas (Bennett and Holloway, 2004: 307). The latter argue, based on data from the New English and Welsh Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (NEW-ADAM) programme, covering 1999-2002, that 'gang members' in England and Wales are typically male, aged under 25 years and white.²²

The Americanization of youth identity is itself not a new phenomenon: post-war studies of white working class youth in Britain have pointed to the 'borrowed cultural imperialism' (Cohen, 1980: 20) of American popular culture that marked the arrival of youth subcultural forms such as the Teddy Boys, the Mods and Rockers, which each sparked their own moral panics. This

Americanization amounted often to little more than 'drape suits, picture ties and an American slouch', in Hoggart's memorable phrase (Hoggart, 1957, cited in Hobbs, 2006: 120), while as Hobbs

'there is little evidence to suggest that there are many US-style gangs in the UK'.

Most academic research into 'gangs' in Britain has, however, remained more cautious about this supposedly new phenomenon, and critical of the unthinking importation of the American 'gang' model to such a different national, historical and geographical space. Even Hallsworth and Young,

²² See Also Pitts, 2007: 'gang memberships is ultimately determined by the social predicament of gang members rather than their race or ethnicity'.

There are 4 crucial issues:

- 1) There is considerable confusion over what constitutes 'a gang' and what experiences, activities and identities this label encompasses.
- 2) 'The gang' carries with it a series of moral, institutional and political judgements about the nature of group identity.
- 3) Contrary to the evidence, the history of the term has linked 'gangs' with black, minority ethnic and immigrant young men.
- 4) This results in the potential ascription of 'gang' labels to all groups of BME young men, while defining out acts of group based violence or criminal activity by majority/white youth.

were exclusively white.²⁴ The majority of other empirical work on youth deviance is located in sociology and cultural studies and focuses on subcultural identity, particularly around class; however, such groupings, while they may share some of the external features of 'gangs' (i.e. collective identity expressed through dress, language, music, etc) do not constitute 'gangs' in themselves - although, perhaps, they are often mistaken for them. This is particularly the case with minority ethnic cultural forms and identities, in which black cultures are associated with deviance, criminality and threat (Gilroy, 1987; Alexander, 1996, 2000). My own work on *The Asian Gang* (Alexander, 2000) suggests that too often groups of young Black and Asian men are seen as 'gangs', criminalized and then dealt with on this basis, by the police, in schools, in their communities and on the street.

So, what's in a name? For me, there are four crucial issues:

has commented that although British youth 'attempted to adapt teenage culture that had originated in Memphis, Brooklyn and California, to church hall dances, chip shops and damp back alleys, Sharks and Jets it clearly was not' (Hobbs, 2006: 119). Downes' classic empirical study of East End youth deviance, *The Delinquent Solution* (Downes, 1966), noted that rather than 'gangs', white working class youth were 'street corner groups' enacting acts of 'mundane delinquency' (Hobbs, 2006: 117) rooted in the frustrations of educational and occupational limitations, and simple boredom. It is worth reflecting that the space of Downes' research (London's East End) is one of those most closely associated today with 'gang' conflict and violence, though the 'street corner groups' are now marked through racial, ethnic and religious difference rather than class.

Interestingly, the one study that does echo American work on 'gangs' is Patrick's controversial study (1973) *A Glasgow Gang Observed*, which noted a cross-generational tradition of 'gang' formation and territorially based collective violence based on housing estates and entrenched conditions of social deprivation.²³ Inevitably, given the location, these 'gangs'

- 1) In both the US and UK, there is considerable confusion over what constitutes 'a gang' and what experiences, activities and identities this label encompasses. This is underpinned in the UK situation by a lack of in depth and sustained empirical research. Nevertheless, in the current setting, the American version of 'the gang' has been imported into the UK, and carries with it a set of embedded meanings and values.
- 2) Thus, rather than a neutral social descriptor, 'the gang' carries with it a series of moral, institutional and political judgements about the nature of group identity, particularly in association with crime and violence. It also blurs the distinction between youth, street gangs and organized crime.
- 3) Contrary to the evidence, the history of the term has linked 'gangs' with black, minority ethnic and immigrant young men who are seen as locked inescapably into cycles of deprivation and alienation based on cultural disadvantage ('cultures of poverty').
- 4) This results in the potential ascription of 'gang' labels to *all* groups of BME young

²³ Patrick's study has been criticized for having given too much credence to local myths of 'gang' violence from 'gang members'.

²⁴ A Dispatches documentary on 'gangs' in early 2008 drew interesting comparisons between 'black gangs' of South London and 'white gangs' in Glasgow, where comparable levels of serious violence and injury were to be found. It is worth noting that these Glasgow 'gangs' have not formed part of the current media and policy debates.

men, while *defining out* acts of group-based violence or criminal activity by majority/white youth. This act of boundary marking then serves to reinforce the association of 'gangs' with 'race' and ethnicity, and has an additional spatial dimension, linking 'race' and violence with particular inner-city/urban areas.²⁵ This has serious implications for issues of policy and social control (for example, around stop and search).

Section III: The Problem of 'The Gang'

As should by now be clear, the concept of 'the gang' is one marked more by disagreement and debate than by clarity and consensus, even in its North American birthplace. Its boundaries are fluid and slippery, its membership uncertain, its activities opaque, its history marked more by convenient fictions of urban masculinities and race than by empirical insight. Nevertheless, 'the gang' continues to exercise a powerful hold on our imagination, and carries with it a seductive set of associations around (inner) city life and the ghetto fabulous/threatening 'Other' that has proved remarkably resilient to the mass of contradictory evidence. One possible explanation for this enduring fascination is the way in which 'the gang' works as a symbol for a broad range of social tensions and concerns, and provides a convenient, identifiable and familiar scapegoat. It is illuminating here to compare the current discussion of 'the gang' with the construction of the moral panic around 'mugging' that dominated the 1970s, and rehearsed similar ideas of race, masculinity and crime. Hall et al.'s classic study, *Policing the Crisis* (published exactly 30 years ago) explored the ways in which the notion

of 'mugging' was imported into the UK from America with a set of embedded meanings around inner city deprivation, racial conflict and incipient social unrest; a 'whole referential context' which travelled with the term to Britain, framing the public fear, moral outrage and policy response through notions of 'race', masculinity and youth. 'Mugging' then worked as a code for 'black crime' and for the unwanted presence of black/immigrant communities (Hall et al., 1978; Gilroy, 1987) – very much, indeed, as 'the gang' does today.

I would argue then that rather than having a 'gang' problem in any empirical sense, what we are faced with is the problem of thinking 'the gang'. By this, I mean not only that we are unsure what we mean by 'the gang', but that using 'the gang' to a large extent does our thinking for us, or even prevents us thinking about the nature of the problem we have. In this final section, then, I want to reflect on 'the problem of the gang' – i.e. I want to explore the consequences of thinking 'the gang' using the framework discussed in Section II and linking it specifically to the current media, political and policy representations of 'the gang' outlined in Section I. There are three aspects of this 'problem' I want to explore here: 1) the problem of 'race'; 2) the problem of history, and 3) the problem of 'culture'.

using 'the gang' to a large extent does our thinking for us, or even prevents us thinking about the nature of the problem we have.

The Problem of 'Race'

One of the key consequences of thinking 'the gang' in its current, Americanized form is the association with 'race', most particularly the correlation between 'the gang' and Black (African-Caribbean) communities. The construction of 'the gang' in the press and by politicians and policy makers has made this link explicit, from Tony Blair's evocation of 'the black community', to the MPS's assertion of the prevalence of 'black' gangs and the association of youth violence with so-called 'Trident murders'.

The definition of 'the gang problem' as primarily one of 'race' was reiterated by a spokesman for the CRE after Blair's comments: 'Action needs to be taken now to prevent the

'The gang' continues to exercise a powerful hold on our imagination, and carries with it a seductive set of associations around (inner) city life and the ghetto fabulous/threatening 'Other' that has proved remarkably resilient to the mass of contradictory evidence.'

²⁵ The choice of urban targets for the new gangs task force, based on 'gang' and gun crime 'hotspots' is revealing – London, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham (Home Office, 10 September 2007). The racialization of young (black or white) people living in urban/inner city spaces is a key dimension of thinking 'gangs'.

needless deaths of more young black boys. Unfortunately, it comes as no surprise that some young black men are becoming involved in gang cultures and criminal activities... As a society we are failing young black kids' (*Daily Telegraph*, 13 April 2007).

There are a number of problems inherent in the construction of 'the gang' through the image of black youth. Firstly, the correlation of 'gang cultures and criminal activities' with 'young black boys' serves to collectively implicate and criminalize all 'young black boys' and, by extension, the broader 'black community'. Secondly, the reduction of the problem to this one group belies the far more complex picture of youth deviance and violence that has emerged – for example, the London murder victims (and perpetrators) of 2007 came from a range of communities, including White, Asian, and Turkish, and included young women as well as young men. Thirdly, the focus on 'race' as the primary signifier homogenizes 'the black community', erasing differences between and within African, Caribbean and Black British experiences and positions, and eliding any distinction between new migrant and long established communities. Consequently, what seems to bind these disparate groups together is a biological and phenotypical identification – the 'fact of blackness' to use Fanon's (1967/1986) powerful term – and this serves to naturalize and transfix through biology what begs to be understood socially and historically.

A related issue is the linking of 'the gang' to broader contemporary concerns around immigration and asylum. As noted above, the MPS report drew specific attention to the challenges posed by 'immigrant' youth gangs, while stories linking 'asylum seeker gangs', 'immigrant gangs' and organized crime have been common in the tabloid press.²⁶ As argued above, 'the gang' is classically understood as arising out of transitional immigrant communities, a stage on the way to becoming citizens, and the focus on 'immigrant' youth gangs chimes very neatly with the current government and policy obsession with segregation, integration and community cohesion. Indeed, it might be argued that 'the gang' is a parody of 'cohesive community' – the embodiment of the multicultural nation in crisis. However, by conflating issues of immigration with the fixed certainties of 'race', and the spectre of 'difference', the danger is that 'the gang' – and by

26 For example, the *Daily Express* reported on 22 April 2007 on '40 immigrant gangs taking over UK's crime'.

extension, 'the black community' – is positioned as permanently outside of, and opposed to, the broader national community²⁷ (Alexander, 2007; Gilroy, 1987), along with the rights and protections of citizenship.²⁸

The Problem of History

A second problem with the current debate is the insistence on the *newness* of the phenomenon, particularly its 'Americanized' dimensions – the 'postcode wars', the rise of gun and knife violence, the scale and spread of 'gang culture', the association with 'new' (for which read black and immigrant) communities. There are three broad concerns around the absence of an historical perspective on 'the gang'.

Firstly, the focus on 'the new' erases continuities with a longer, and very British, history of (white) youth identities and their associated moral panics. This in turn reinscribes the association with racial difference, thereby isolating 'the gang' from a broader social, cultural and historical context in which youth identities take shape.

Secondly, the current debate fails to locate 'the gang' in a longer post-war historical context around black folk devils,²⁹ and in particular the association of black young men with crime, violence and danger (Alexander, 1996, 2000; CCCS, 1982; Gilroy, 1987). For example, *Policing the Crisis* (Hall, 1978) unpacked the same stereotypes of black cultures of poverty, pathologized families, identity crisis, crime and hyper-masculinity, as have emerged in the recent debates, if now updated with a hi-gloss American cultural veneer. What people are saying about 'gangs' today was said about muggers in the 1970s, rioters in the 1980s and 'Yardies' in the 1990s, and these stereotypes have been consistently revealed to be more about fantasy than reality – or as Paul Gilroy has termed it 'the myth of black criminality' (Gilroy, 1987). The current construction of 'the gang' is, of course, disingenuously building on these commonsense 'knowledges' about black youth and crime in a way that allows 'the gang' to be read as raced, and enables us to decode references to 'specific criminal cultures', 'the inner city', 'immigrant'

27 The *Daily Express* commented on 24 August 2007, after the shooting of Rhys Jones, 'This country has never been invaded, but now, truly, the army of the enemy is within. We are at war'.

28 For example, the *Sun* newspaper wrote on 10 May 2007 in an article titled 'Slam door on youths from warlord cultures' that Britain should 'Close the door to youngsters from these countries. Our streets and our people would be safer. Surely that's all that matters?'.

29 Cohen (1980: 10) defines folk devils as 'distinguishable social types... visible reminders of what we should not be'.

or 'urban youth' in ways that are highly racially targeted. However, placing 'the gang' within the longer history of black folk devils also allows us to refocus on the mythic elements of 'the gang' and to explore the broader social, economic and political contexts in which these discourses take shape and assume the status of 'truth'.

explanations of 'the gang' say more about the construction of racial/cultural difference, defined against the norm of (white) Britishness, than about 'the gang' itself.

Thirdly, the current focus erases the recent historical image of 'the gang', which through the 1990s developed primarily in relation to Asian, and particularly Muslim, young men (Alexander, 2000). It is revealing to reflect on the reasons given at this time for 'Asian gang' membership: that Asian youth came from backward cultures at odds with the needs of modern life, that their parental cultures were too oppressive, that their family structures were too patriarchal, that they were insufficiently masculine: in other words, the direct opposite of the explanations of 'gangs' on offer today. Of course, there are some similarities – the focus on deviant cultures, identity crisis, cultures of poverty, on the attractions of violence, crime and drugs to compensate for a failed masculinity – but it is interesting to speculate that explanations of 'the gang' say more about the construction of racial/cultural difference, defined against the norm of (white) Britishness, than about 'the gang' itself. This is perhaps why 'white' 'gangs' have not formed a central part of the current media and policy debates, since this would focus on (structural) similarity rather than (cultural/racial) difference.³⁰

The Problem of 'Culture'

The third problem is the reliance on 'culture' as a primary explanation for 'the gang' and 'gang violence'. Culture here is broadly understood in two ways; as marking ethnicity and difference (Alleyne, 2002; Sveinsson, 2008) or as attached to youth subcultures of deviance. The notion

of 'gang culture' uses these two formulations interchangeably, particularly in relation to 'black culture', with the blame distributed evenly between the failures of the family and community, and the attraction to hip-hop. For example, in August 2007, Jack Straw was reported as blaming 'violence and crime among young

black men on the fact that many grow up in homes without fathers... widespread educational failure among black boys and their attraction towards gangs which was caused not by poverty but a "cultural problem"' (*Daily Mail*, 21 August 2007).

Former Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith wrote in the *Daily Mail*, 'An underclass now exists and at its heart, gang culture prevails.... For too many the gang leader becomes their inspiration, assuming the role of a father figure but with a brutal code based on savage and violent discipline. In the midst of this sits rap music, celebrating and exciting the same values' (23 August 2007). Both Straw and Duncan Smith's comments were made after the release of the Reach Report (DCLG, 2007), on 'raising the aspirations and attainment of Black boys and young Black men', which argued – amongst many other points, most of which were lost in the media coverage (Sveinsson, 2008) – that there was a 'need for more Black male role models and more positive images of Black men' to counter peer pressure leading to 'gang activity'.³¹ The appeal to 'culture' has five consequences:

- 1) There is a collapse between the categories of 'culture' and those of 'race': this serves not only to homogenise a range of different ethnic groups, origins, migration histories, family circumstances and personal histories, but also to reduce everyone to a baseline of black identity constructed around a stereotype of 'the black family', which is actually itself a (discredited) stereotype of the African Caribbean family.
- 2) 'Black culture' is also conflated with commodified popular cultural forms, which is seen as spreading out from the inner city to white suburban youth (Sveinsson, 2008), such as Ben Hitchcock, and so incorporates even discrepant experiences into the remit of 'the gang' as a racialized construct. For example, John Pitts in his recent study of

³⁰ It is significant that where 'gang members' are white (as, for example, in the attacks on Rhys Jones or Ben Hitchcock) they are seen to have been 'tainted' by black cultures, particularly so-called 'gangsta rap' (c.f. Pitt, 2007, discussed below)

³¹ The *Daily Mail's* version of the report was 'Black Boys must be encouraged to stop idolising rap stars and footballers if they are to be steered away from the gang and gun culture' (10 August 2007).

Walthamstow, 'Reluctant Gangsters' (Pitts, 2007), acknowledges that 'gangs' were more estate- than ethnicity-based,³² but comments 'Whatever their ethnic origin... gang members assume the style and manner dictated by popular, globalized, ostensibly "Black" street culture'.

- 3) As the Duncan Smith quote makes clear, 'culture' intersects in these debates with the notion of 'the underclass' which, like 'the gang', draws on an imported Americanized version of entrenched poverty linked to black 'cultures of poverty'. Although 'the underclass' in the UK context has been traditionally linked to white marginality, since the mid-1980s the concept has been understood as primarily a property of minority communities, particularly Muslims, and arising from intransigent or anachronistic cultural values and forms, linked to the idea of 'parallel lives' (Alexander, 2004, 2007). This means that there is no engagement with the broader context of social inequality or marginalization, and has the added advantage of placing the blame for any problems on black communities themselves. As Tony Blair commented 'It is not a general social disorder but specific groups of people who... are deciding not to abide by the same code of conduct as the rest of us' (*Daily Express*, 12 April 2007).
- 4) The collectivization that occurs due to the evocation of culture as a shared 'way of life' also obscures the need to understand the role and responsibility of the individual, and the particular, in acts of violence, crime or conflict. My own research (Alexander, 2005) suggests that the appeal to 'gang culture' substitutes for an analysis of both the specific circumstances and broader context of violence, working to place these incidents as at once self explanatory and outside of understanding – 'gang culture' becomes a circular and self-fulfilling reason.
- 5) The criminalization of black 'cultures' also links to the history of social control of black cultural expressions and leisure spaces. The racialization of 'the gang' has been used to legitimate strong forms of intervention into black communities, whether on the street (with the reinvigoration of SUS procedures),

or in schools, clubs, on transport or, indeed, into the private sphere of the family itself. There are interesting parallels to be drawn here, as elsewhere, with the increased surveillance and control of South Asian/Muslim communities and, indeed, Sir Ian Blair's earlier comment drawing together 'gangs' and 'terrorism' takes on a sinister resonance in this context.

the rush to label 'the gang problem' and to devise a range of interventions on this basis is in danger of creating the very circumstances it seeks to challenge.

Section IV: Rethinking 'The Gang' in Policy and Practice

I would argue, then, that 'the gang' in its current definition and usage works more to obscure understandings of youth identities and conflict than illuminate them. 'The gang' offers a seemingly neat, and outwardly compelling, diagnosis and comes with a ready-made set of strategies to tackle the problem – a problem which it is by no means certain we actually have. However, the rush to label 'the gang problem' and to devise a range of interventions on this basis is in danger of creating the very circumstances it seeks to challenge – as has happened in the American situation, where social intervention programmes have often promoted 'gang' cohesion and proliferation (Klein, 1995). While not wishing to minimize the concerns around youth violence in Britain, I would argue that there is an urgent need to rethink what we mean by 'the gang', what work 'the gang' is doing for us and whether, in fact, 'the gang' is getting in the way of any effective response. While the debate continues to rage in the media, and policy makers and institutions seem hell bent on making 'the gang' a reality in policy and practice, I would offer the following suggestions on rethinking 'the gang':

- 1) The concept of 'the gang' is highly contested both in its definition and its application. Labelling 'the gang' runs the risk of attributing coherence and identity to often fluid and transitional youth group formations, and places issues of crime and violence at the centre. This blurs the

³² Pitt notes that in the Pan-London Gang Profile 48% of 'gangs' were 'black and 21% 'Asian'.

boundaries between general youth activities, mundane deviance, crime and organized crime and runs the risk of criminalizing all young men in urban, public spaces. While the 'gang' label may be appropriate in a few very specific cases, given the difficulty in agreeing definition and usage, it would be better to abandon this term completely. Certainly, given its highly contested definitional boundaries, 'the gang' should not provide a basis for welfare intervention, legal categorization or punitive sentencing.

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- 2) 'The gang' has developed in the American context with a specific focus on immigrant and ethnic minority young men, a usage that has been replicated in the current UK debate. This reinscribes the association of race, masculinity and crime and potentially results in the criminalization of all BME young men. There needs to be a decoupling of 'the gang' from ideas of racial and ethnic difference and specific 'inner city' locations. The focus should be on issues of youth crime or violence wherever they appear, so that conflict involving BME/'inner city' youth is not 'defined in' to 'the gang' and conflict involving white/suburban/ex-urban youth is not 'defined out'. This also has clear implications for issues of social intervention and social control.
- 3) Similarly, there needs to be a shift away from the discussion of 'culture' towards a recognition of the broader processes of social

exclusion and marginalization at work in precipitating youth deviance or conflict. This would move away from a simple 'blame the victim' approach, avoid the criminalization of specific communities and allow for the examination of individual acts of violence in context.

- 4) The representation of 'the gang' in the present debate has relied on a mixture of speculation, statistical reports by institutions with a specific remit on crime, and hit-and-run journalistic accounts. There is very little sustained qualitative work into 'gangs' in Britain, while sociological accounts of youth cultures and identities have been excluded from the discussions. There is an urgent need for more intensive and long term empirical investigation into youth identities and violence that takes as its focus the mundane encounters of everyday life and conflict.
- 5) Intervention into youth conflict needs to be made on the basis of empirically grounded and local understanding and expertise. While the investment in youth services is to be welcomed, there are dangers in the current focus on 'gangs' that may have serious repercussions for those working with young people in the statutory and voluntary sector. Youth initiatives should avoid the labelling and criminalization of young people as 'gang members', and resist the linking of state funded youth initiatives to 'gang prevention' agenda. In addition, the current context poses an urgent challenge to those working with young people to think outside the narrow (and potentially self fulfilling) parameters of 'gang' life that political and funding imperatives determine, to address the real needs of young people in our cities and across our communities, not just those who fit the image of 'the gangster'.

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