

YOUTH GANGS IN THE UK: MYTH OR REALITY?

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Abstract

The emergence of youth gangs in the UK in recent years has resulted in heightened media attention of the group, with sensationalised headlines appearing in newspapers relating to violent gang crimes which have led to the deaths of many young people. This has resulted in the fear of groups of young people within communities, as well as a multitude of government responses.

The aim of this dissertation was to identify the myths and realities surrounding the emergence of youth gangs in the UK in order to determine whether the media is fuelling a moral panic which in turn has led to inappropriate responses by the government. A literary based approach was utilised for this research in order to ascertain whether it is appropriate to apply the wide range of US literature to the UK situation. The research focuses on the varying definitions of youth gangs, followed by an analysis of both US and UK subcultural explanations of the emergence of gangs and finally a look at how media moral panics influence government initiatives.

The research concludes that youth gangs do exist in the UK, however, due to gaps in research and a lack of reliable empirical evidence, along with the influence of the media's involvement; it is found that government responses are failing to address the needs of youths involved in gangs. Recommendations are also made, suggesting further areas for research as well as improvements which could be made to government policy and initiatives.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Although youth gangs have existed throughout history, there is little research in the UK which explains their current nature. The earliest research was conducted by Thrasher who 'wrote about the Chicago slums of the 1920's, and his work marks the beginning of sociologically orientated interest in gangs' (Morash, 1983:309). This then generated interest into further studies of gangs in the USA incorporating the early ideas of Merton (1938) and Cohen (1955), relating to class differences and strain and the 'issues of power and struggle' (Baldwin et al, 1999:316). Subcultural explanations 'all share a common perception that certain social groups have value and attitudes that enable or encourage delinquency' (Hopkins Burke, 2005:105), as well as a common 'desire for status, respect, material wealth and sense of belonging' (The Centre for Social Justice, 2009:35). The emphasis of the link between youth subcultures and delinquency, as a result of strain in society, can be seen throughout history when looking at groups such as the Teddy Boys, Mods and Rockers, and Skinheads, and this research can now be applied in modern society when trying to explain the emergence of youth gangs. 'At present, the cultural meanings constructed around 'youth' are negative, with its image of an older (male) person and arguably, 'youths hanging about', representing 'the universal symbol of disorder' (Burney, 2002 cited in Easton and Piper, 2005:243).

Hallsworth and Young (2008:176) highlight that 'the gang was for the first time explicitly linked to the problem of urban violence and rising weapon use in the UK' following a Home Office report in 2008, which was published as a result of a rise in gang related incidents, which were the focus of much media attention. The Centre for Social Justice (2009:19) went on to state that 'media coverage has, at times, been suggestive of an epidemic in gang-related youth violence', with sensationalised headlines and television documentaries relating to gang violence and deaths, as well as the emergence of girl gangs in the UK, suggesting that the problem is similar to that in the USA, where the common perception is that these groups 'are armed, dangerous and prepared to kill' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008:176). Each time a youth is killed 'as a consequence of street violence, especially when it involves knives or guns, questions are raised in the media as to whether the incident was linked to gangs' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008:181). However, it is argued that much of the media reports in the UK are not backed by empirical evidence of a large scale problem.

This dissertation examines the myths and realities surrounding the relatively new phenomena of youth gangs in the UK, with particular reference to statistical evidence and media reports of the existence of gangs in order to ascertain whether they provide an accurate representation of the problem. There is little research into the gang problem in the UK which has led to the vast amount of research from the USA being applied to the UK situation. By investigating the true nature of youth gangs in this country, this research aimed to discover if the problem is a national issue requiring a multi agency response, and whether it warrants the application of research relating to the gang problem in the USA. To address these aims, secondary sources and web based documents were utilised in order to enable conclusions and recommendations to be made, identifying gaps in knowledge which may inspire other researchers into ideas for further research. Key areas of focus for this dissertation were the analysis of different definitions of youth gangs, the use of various subcultural theories in order to explain the emergence of youth gangs and the effect of the media in influencing public perceptions and government response, as well the effect this has on official statistics.

Chapter 2 discusses the methodology chosen for this research, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of using both primary and secondary sources, along with the reasons why

secondary research was the preferred method due to the problems which would have arisen if primary research had been conducted.

Chapter 3 examines the problems which arise from the many different variations of gang definitions. Firstly the use of US definitions will be addressed to see if they can ever be applicable to the UK. This will then lead on to a look at definitions which try to differentiate between groups of young people hanging around and criminal gangs. The focus then shifts on to what constitutes a youth gang, before finally evaluating the problems with applying the terms and how this can affect policy and research.

Chapter 4 then goes on to explain the emergence of youth gangs in the UK using past and contemporary subcultural explanations. The chapter opens by discussing the relevance of the early theories of Albert Cohen (1955) and Robert Merton (1938), which shapes many of the later arguments discussed in the chapter. An exploration of the key issues of illegitimate opportunities, masculine identity, education and work, and style as a form of resistance will also be addressed in order to discover what the gang subculture may have to offer young people in contemporary society. A look at whether these theories relate to the 'modern gang' will then be examined in order to identify the realities of youth gang culture today.

Chapter 5 focuses on media representations of youth gangs in this country to determine whether the media is exaggerating gang crime, with reference to moral panic theory. This then leads on to an evaluation of the effects moral panics have on the individuals and groups involved, the influence it has on police and public reactions, and finally how the media directly influences government responses.

Finally, the conclusions and recommendations chapter summarises the main findings and conclusions of the dissertation, identifying whether the aims of the research have been met. This then allows for a selection of recommendations to be made with regards to further areas of research and implications for future government responses.

Chapter 2: Methodology

In order to address the aims of this dissertation secondary sources have been utilised within a library and internet based approach. These sources include: official statistics, academic texts, journal articles, internet and various media sources. It was not necessary to collect primary data in order to meet the aims and objectives of the dissertation; instead the use of secondary sources has provided sufficient information to enable current issues surrounding youth gangs to be addressed. It would have been ideal to conduct primary research due to the lack of published material based on youth gangs in the UK; however this would have been too ambitious for an undergraduate dissertation. Ethical issues and the process of collecting data would have proved to be time consuming, causing the project to be rushed in order to meet the deadline and thus leading to results which may have lacked quality. Despite this, conclusions can still be drawn from this research which will provide ideas for further investigation by those with more time and experience.

As the research focuses on youths, there are problems with access without first acquiring ethical approval and this may have taken a considerable amount of time. The British Society of Criminology's Code of Ethics (2006) advises that researchers 'consider carefully the possibility that the research experience may be a disturbing one, particularly for those who are vulnerable by virtue of factors such as age'. Due to the nature of some youth gangs in the UK who may have witnessed, participated or been affected by violent attacks, this could have proved to be a sensitive area for them thus requiring the researcher to assess implications of harm to participants. Furthermore, Shipman (1997:33) states that to 'understand the young requires methods that involve the researcher with groups who often resent intrusion' and this would have resulted in some reluctance to participate, therefore leading to results after data collection being unrepresentative.

Alongside this are issues with health and safety when researching subjects who may have a history of violent behaviour and the Ethical Guidelines published by the Social Research Association (2003) state that 'social researchers have a moral obligation to attempt to minimise the risk of physical and/or mental harm to themselves', along with the dissertation supervisor and university who also share this responsibility. The decision to not conduct primary data collection was based on these ethical and safety issues, therefore the alternative option was to use secondary resources which have already been collected by other researchers, in order to complete the dissertation.

Conducting secondary research instead of carrying out primary data collection is advantageous as it is cheaper, researcher bias is reduced, and it is less time consuming due to library and web based documents being readily available, allowing more time for interpreting information. Noaks and Wincup (2004) state that using documents for research can help to recognise changes and similarities over time, with books in particular providing historical background as well as current issues and debates. Furthermore, recent journal articles are essential in providing more up-to-date information than books. 'Academic journals and commercial publishers generally have their material refereed by experts in the field' (Denscombe, 2003:213) and this improves trust in quality and credibility. For this dissertation media reports will also be assessed in order to see if they are a true representation of youth crime in the UK, as it is argued that 'the majority of the public still derive their image of crime from mass media accounts' (Noaks and Wincup, 2004:113), thus shaping public views and attitudes towards the youth of today.

Alongside the advantages of relying solely on secondary research, lie the disadvantages, which highlight areas of caution when selecting documents to examine and this has been

taken into consideration throughout the research process. When assessing 'the quality of documents, Scott (1990) suggests that four criteria be considered': authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning (cited in Newburn, 2007:35). When looking at the mass media there can be authenticity problems if the author is unknown, as there is no way to ascertain whether it was 'written by someone in a position to provide an accurate version' (Bryman, 2008:525) of the issue. This is especially the case for tabloid papers such as The Sun and the Daily Mail, and so when searching for relevant newspaper reports relating to youth gangs it was realised that not all articles are reliable sources.

There are also problems with internet sources as many websites contain 'out-of-date poor quality material' (Denscombe, 2003:58), as well as further issues of authenticity and credibility, as the creator of a website may be unknown. They also may be created with a particular audience or sales point in mind, for example government websites publish documents which are possibly biased. Although bias may be apparent in many documents due to the authors/publishers stance on the topic, it may also be possible for the reader to misinterpret a document in order to find answers to the questions they are searching for, therefore care has to be taken when analysing the meaning of a source. Finally, when looking at government and official statistics relating to youth crime and youth gangs, the credibility has to be questioned due to the 'dark figure' created by crimes which have gone unreported and unrecorded. It has been 'estimated that recorded crime may be as little as one-fifth of 'actual' crime' (Denscombe, 2003:218), and so 'official statistics cannot always be taken as 'objective facts'' (Denscombe, 2003:217).

Despite the problems which can arise when conducting secondary research, due to the nature of the topic of this dissertation and the time given to conduct research, this method was the most appropriate. When selecting and using documents throughout the research process, their quality was assessed according to Scott's criteria in order to overcome any problems.

Chapter 3: Defining Youth Gangs

There is not one single definition of the term 'gang' even though it 'is used universally by researchers, police, social workers, media and the general public' (Schneider and Tilley, 2004: xviii). 'The systematic study of youth gangs... began in the United States in the early part of the 20th century' (Pitts, 2007:8), however researchers have failed 'to achieve agreement on a uniform definition' (Klein et al, 2006:418), and this is reflected by the inconsistent application of various definitions by criminal justice agencies across each state in the USA. A definition by Walter B Miller (1982) has been found to be the most influential in the USA and identifies a gang as:

'a group of recurrently associating individuals with identifiable leadership and internal organisation, identifying with or claiming control over territory in the community, and engaging either individually or collectively in violent or other forms of illegal behaviour' (cited in Pitts, 2007:10).

Due to little research in the UK 'the understandings people bring to bear when the gang menace is evoked has, by default, been saturated with references acquired from the American context where it has been extensively studied' (Hallsworth and Young, 2004:12). This has resulted in American gang stereotypes and definitions being applied to the UK. However, Marshall et al (2005:6) argue that there is 'little evidence to suggest that there are... US-style gangs in the UK' and Hallsworth and Young (2004: 13) also argue that there is 'little evidence to suggest that such collectives are characterised by the forms of ritual traditionally associated with the American gang'. Therefore, the UK and USA should not be compared due to variations in time and place, and for this reason it is argued that there is a need for the use of different definitions to be applied (Hallsworth and Young, 2008).

The problem with using the term 'gang'

Alongside problems with defining gangs, the 'use of the word 'gang' may lead to events which may not be gang-related' being defined as such (Marshall et al, 2005:7). The Greater Vancouver Gang study identified groups who were labelled by the police as a 'gang' even though they did not consider themselves this way (Gordon, 2000). Furthermore, Bullock and Tilley (2002:23) argue that 'almost all who belong to informal groups might be deemed to be 'gang' members' even if they are not criminal, despite historical studies such as Willmott's (1966) survey in East London, showing that 'it is usual for youths of eighteen to go around in small groups' (Farrington and West, 1977:60).

The media and police are likely to give delinquent groups a gang name (Gordon, 2000) and this along with the use of the 'the word 'gang' conjures up stereotypical images' (Marshall et al, 2005:7), therefore both researchers and agencies need to be careful not to label groups hanging around, as potential criminals (Hallsworth and Young, 2004). Peer groups with low level delinquency are quite common, with shared characteristics such as 'a gang name and recognised symbols, identifiable leadership, a geographic territory, a regular meeting pattern and collective actions to carry out illegal activities' (Howell, 1997 cited in Bullock and Tilley, 2002:23), factors which would all fit into Walter B Millers influential definition. To avoid this problem, some researchers such as Klein et al (2006) prefer to not use the term gang to describe these peer groups but instead describe them as 'troublesome youth groups'. The Home Office also steer away from using the term 'gang' and instead use the term 'delinquent youth group' in their reports in order to avoid 'the stigmatising potential of the gang label' (Sharp et al, 2006:1). This term is taken from the Eurogang Network, which describes a 'delinquent youth group' as youths:

‘Who spend time in groups of three or more ... [which] ... has existed for three months or more ... [and has] engaged in delinquency or criminal behaviour together in [the] last 12 months. [Also] the group has at least one structural feature (a name, an area or a leader)’ (Pitts, 2007:10).

What constitutes a youth gang?

As well as problems with defining and applying the term ‘gang’ there are also issues with ‘defining what constitutes a gang’ (Hallsworth and Young, 2008:178), as the application of the term may not apply to all groups. Hallsworth and Young (ibid) state that ‘there is little consensus on what groups are gangs and this remains the subject of ongoing debate’. They describe ‘3 levels of delinquent collective’ (Marshall et al, 2005:6):

- 1) Peer groups - are the most common, involved in petty but unorganised crime.
- 2) Gangs - who are more likely ‘to use deadly violence’ and defend their territory than other street groups (Sanders, 1994 cited in Bennett and Holloway, 2004:306).
- 3) Organised Criminal Groups - who operate blackmarkets, where individuals view ‘crime [as] their ‘occupation’’ (Marshall et al, 2005:6) and where youths may operate as part of the adult organised groups (Stelfox, 1998).

The Eurogang definition further helps to separate street gangs from other types of gangs which are more organized or have mainly adult members and also from those youth groups who do not commit crime (Klein et al, 2006). The Eurogang Network, which consists of European and American researchers, has been able to agree on a consensus definition for street gangs. They state that ‘a street gang... is any durable, street-orientated youth group whose own identity includes involvement in illegal activity’ (Klein et al, 2006:418). This wide definition has been influential in UK research as it eliminates other characteristics which would restrict the definition, by instead describing these other characteristics, for example gender, symbols and gang names, as ‘descriptor variables’, (Klein et al, 2006:419).

Research and policy implications

Definitions are used to identify gangs and due to there being no fixed definition there are implications ‘on the measurability of the gang’ (Hallsworth and Young, 2008:178). Bullock and Tilley (2002) argue that there is no way of knowing the full scale of the problem without a universal definition. ‘Social science research is predicated on the practice of employing definitions that allow for replication and independent assessment of any set of research findings’ (Esbensen et al, 2001:105). However, multiple definitions allow ‘one agency to maintain an account of a problem even when data held by another agency may refute it’ (Schneider and Tilley, 2004: xix).

Peter Stelfox (1998) found it difficult to find a ‘generally agreed definition of a gang which was applicable to the UK situation’ (Pitts, 2007:13). He decided on a broad definition to suit the aims of his research, stating that a gang is ‘any group which uses violence or the threat or fear of violence to further a criminal purpose, but excluding football hooligans or terrorists’ (Stelfox, 1998:398). Using this definition Stelfox (1998) found a national total of 72 gangs in the UK. In contrast, those using alternative definitions, for example the Metropolitan Police (2006, cited in Pitts, 2007:14), ‘identified 169 youth gangs in London alone’, and Hallsworth and Young’s (2008:179) findings state that ‘gang membership in the UK is no more than 3-7 percent of the youthful population’. This highlights the difficulties that will arise when trying to identify youth gangs using different definitions. Furthermore, initiatives such as the Tackling Gangs Action Programme (Home Office, 2008) use Hallsworth and Young’s (2004) definition of peer groups, street gangs and organised crime groups, as a guidance for each local partnership to come to their own agreed definition, which shows definitions are still varied nationally.

There is also an emphasis of involvement in crime in most gang definitions, therefore research relies heavily on police data to identify patterns of crime, or 'intelligence files are used to identify who belongs to specific gangs so that qualitative interviews can be conducted', and this has implications for research findings (Schneider and Tilley, 2004:xix). 'It has been argued that a certain amount of self-definition is perhaps the best method of overcoming the problem of accurately defining gang membership' (Bennett and Holloway, 2004:310), however, self report studies lead to problems for those individuals who may not believe they are in a gang or may not believe in the gang term but feel they are labelled that way (Marshall et al, 2005). Of the '334 youths who admitted going around in a group' in the Cambridge Study, only 20 admitted that they belonged to a gang as 'there was difficulty in deciding what to count as a gang, and some reluctance on the part of the youths to label their associations as gangs' (Farrington and West, 1977:61).

Identifying the true extent of the problem

Due to the substantial amount of problems which occur through the use of different definitions, it seems to be appropriate for the UK to have its own definition of youth gangs and not an application of a US definition in order for research to be valid and reliable. This will prevent the risk of stigmatising and stereotyping non-delinquent groups who are often described as gangs. 'Resource allocation and public concern... are largely shaped by reports of the magnitude of the problem' (Esbensen et al, 2001:106), therefore one definition 'may avoid the danger of overstating the existence of gangs' (Schneider and Tilley, 2004: xix), thus reducing media interest and creating more reliable statistics. It is also argued that current definitions are 'not useful for purposes of policy and program development' (Spergel, 1995:19), and so by reducing the liberal use of the term 'gang' and creating a single definition which can be used by all agencies across the UK, this may change the focus of policy in order to tackle the problems of violence and crime instead.

Chapter 4: Explaining the emergence of Youth Gangs in the UK

The origins of 'gang' research

As with early definitions of youth gangs, early subcultural research is also based on studies of American gangs, more specifically the traditional ideas of Merton (1938, cited in, Hopkins Burke 2008:135), who developed the theory of anomie based on money and the economy, where 'people would generally like to be materially successful' but 'the means to achieve that goal is limited by the position of individuals in the social structure', leading to strain. Albert Cohen (1955) went on to develop these ideas further but instead referred to a class struggle using the term 'status frustration' rather than anomie. Cohen (1955:73) argued that 'the delinquent subculture is mostly to be found in the working class', as a solution to problems of status and class differences. These subcultures which he described as 'gangs' shared their own set of values which opposed mainstream society, and each individual would try to achieve status and acceptance within the group instead of being judged by 'the norms and values of the middle class' (Hopkins Burke, 2005:106). These theories of anomie and status frustration, which reflected the effects of structural and class differences in society, 'subsequently provided a platform for the development of subcultural theories of delinquent and criminal behaviour' (Muncie, 2009:109).

At the time Cohen was writing, gangs did not exist in the UK, however it could now be useful when explaining the emergence of gangs and other subcultures in contemporary society in terms of status frustration, as there are clear class divisions. Subcultural explanations which have been influenced by research in the US can be used to explain the emergence of youth gangs in the UK and why these groups are deviant. However, many researchers argue that these theories do not apply to the UK situation as there is no evidence of a gang problem (Muncie, 2009).

What solutions do youth gangs and subcultures offer?

Thrasher (1927, cited in Muncie, 2009:32) stated that 'the gang provides an alternative refuge and source of belonging and support in otherwise socially disorganized' communities. The structure of society and class differences leads working class youths to develop their own cultural solution to their perceived problems. 'For Parsons, youth culture emphasized values of hedonism, leisure, consumption and irresponsibility, rather than productive work' (Muncie, 2009:190), with its main function allowing 'young people (to) break away from dependence on their families and develop a level of autonomy' (ibid). However, along with this lie many dysfunctions, such as delinquency and the creation of a different set of values which are against mainstream society. The importance of social class, as emphasised by Merton and Cohen, 'is that it determines through the mechanism of a sub-culture the social norms, attitudes, and responses of the individual' (Morris, 1957:165). These responses can be divided into four key areas which have been the main focus of subcultural research:

1. Illegitimate opportunities

Cloward and Ohlin argued that anomie and status frustration did 'not fully account for deviant or conforming behaviour' (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960:15). They agreed that gangs were usually from lower classes, but instead delinquency was due to having no legitimate opportunities which led them to 'actively seek out and join with others who face the same problems' in order to develop a solution, which would involve looking for illegitimate opportunities (Hopkins Burke, 2005:108). Furthermore, Sykes and Matza (1957) identified 'techniques of neutralisation', which lead youths to 'drift back and forth between legitimate and illegitimate behaviour' (Hopkins Burke, 2008:139) and it is a result of learning 'these techniques that the juvenile becomes delinquent' (Sykes and Matza, 1957:667).

Other early UK researchers such as Mays (1954) support Sykes and Matza's argument that delinquency is learnt. Mays (1954) argued that delinquency is a combination of different socialisation, illegitimate opportunities and attitudes. Although it is not 'a conscious rebellion against middle class values' it is 'a different socialisation, which at times is contrary to the legal rules' (Hopkins Burke, 2008:140). Residential areas share values and these are passed on to new residents and children, therefore working class youths learn to look for opportunities even if they are illegitimate. The working class tend to be 'socialised by 'family, peer group and street acquaintances' (ibid) in comparison to middle class children who are socialised by their family alone. As working class youths are likely to spend most of their spare time on the streets they have a 'less ordered and regulated upbringing' (ibid), whereas middle class behaviour 'is so organised that departure from established norms is far less likely to bring the non-conformist into collision with the criminal law' (Morris, 1957:167). Overall, due to socialisation, groups such as youth gangs develop solutions to the problems relating to class, economic activity and negative status (Burke and Sunley, 1998).

2. Masculine identity

Parsons (1937, cited in Hopkins Burke, 2005:105) theory of a 'masculine identity crisis', which he viewed as 'particularly problematic for the male child who encounters strong cultural expectations that he adopt a masculine role', also formed the basis for much gang research in America. Miller (1958, cited in Morash, 1983) 'concluded that in the lower classes there is stress on gang membership as an affirmation of masculinity in areas where female-headed households predominate'. 'At the level of subculture what we find is masculinity at play where being seen to be 'hard' is celebrated and where being able to deploy violence as a competence commands respect' (Hallsworth and Young, 2004:13). The 'maintenance of a manly image was found to be most important in the subculture' (Hopkins Burke, 2005:117) and this is reflected in the use of violence and 'turf wars' by gang members defending their territory, where it is argued that due to masculinity it would not look good to walk away in confrontational situations (Curtis, 1975).

3. Education and work

Radical deviant subcultural theories devised by researchers based at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS), developed the earlier subcultural theories relating to class and the economy. Brake (1980: vii) argued that 'subcultures arise as attempts to resolve collectively experienced problems arising from contradictions in the social structure' and as a response 'to the perceived economic problems of distinct groups' (Hopkins Burke, 2005:119) at particular points in time. Research in the US has shown that street gangs in contemporary society have lower educational levels and are more likely to form in areas where youths are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Gordon, 2000). This has also been found to be true in the UK where as a result of class differences working class youths feel that schools do not offer anything for them, believing that they 'are disadvantaged in a school system which is founded on middle-class values', this in turn 'leads to failure, loss of self esteem, and resentment' (Cohen, cited in Hobbs, 1997:806). In his study of working class kids, Paul Willis (1977) identified a counter-school culture which he referred to as the 'lads' and 'ear'oles'. The 'lads' were working class kids who were preparing for mundane work, who had accepted their lower status in society and thus rejected school. Additionally, studies by Downes (1966) and Wilmott (1966) revealed that due to boredom and lack of success at school, working class youths look for fun whilst 'hanging around' on the streets. Paul Corrigan (1979) also found that school boys would pass time by messing around and getting into trouble. These early ideas are supported by more contemporary research, where it is argued that 'to avoid boredom, young people circumvent it by reconstructing their street worlds in dramatic ways' (Hallsworth and Young, 2004:13), for example, youths may commit

petty crime for fun and excitement. Following underachievement at school and work Pitts (2008) argues that youths instead build their respect and achieve status on the street, which builds upon the early ideas of Cohen and Merton. This status and respect may be achieved through gang membership and its related behaviours including drug dealing, violent behaviour and defending territory.

4. Style as a form of resistance

Other research by the BCCCS identifies spectacular youth subcultures, which use styles such as dress, lifestyle and music in order to separate their identity from the mainstream. These groups arise during times of economic crisis as a 'form of resistance to subordination' (Burke and Sunley, 1998:41). 'Groups or classes which do not stand at the apex of power... find ways of expressing and realising in their culture the subordinate position' (Clarke et al, 1975:12), with a style which is meaningful to them. For example: Teddy Boys who 'were the first group whose style was self-created' (Cohen, 2002:154), Mods and Rockers who were influenced by a style of music, and more recently drug and gang cultures. However, it is argued that these groups have irrational targets and by continuing to work in dead end jobs or being unemployed highlights the fact that this 'is not a successful solution' (Burke and Sunley, 1998:41) to the perceived problems of the group. Furthermore, it is also argued, that 'different interpretations can be offered of the meaning of any subculture' and 'such readings or interpretations tend to neglect the meaning of the subculture for its participants' (Baldwin et al, 1999:317).

Overall these explanations as to why young people form subcultures and youth gangs do seem to provide a contribution when trying to explain the emergence of youth gangs in the UK in terms of strain, masculinity and resistance, with early U.S. and U.K theories utilising Cohen and Merton's ideas of status frustration and class differences by arguing that they lead working class youths to rebel against middle class values. However, much of the research which is based on these early theories has failed 'to explain why it is that some members of delinquent subcultures eventually become law abiding even when their social class position is fixed' (Hopkins Burke, 2008:137) and therefore has been criticised for being 'both class- and gender-biased' (Muncie, 2009:110), with feminist researchers arguing that explanations are too male centred as they are 'primarily interested in understanding the more dramatic or exciting offending of (predominantly lower-class) boys and young men' (Batchelor, 2009:401).

The 'modern gang'

Research by The Centre for Social Justice (2009:80), states that the 'modern gang' unlike subcultures in the past, is not just a stage that will pass and that they are not simply based on style or musical preference. Instead, they incorporate some of the earlier explanations to argue that 'street gangs are the products of deprivation and marginalisation' (The Centre for Social Justice, 2009:147), with supporting research highlighting 'the areas with the highest prevalence of gangs... (as) ...the areas with some of the highest (youth) unemployment' (The Centre for Social Justice, 2009:83). This is further supported by research conclusions of Left Realists who claim the formation of the underclass as the reason to why deviant subcultures form. Wilson (1991) explains that as the working class and middle class in the 1970's moved away from inner-city neighbourhoods to suburbs, the unemployed were left behind. In the USA this was mainly black communities with no job opportunities or good schools and poor living conditions. Living in extreme poverty, they became socially excluded. They were to be described as the underclass and their 'behaviours were unique adaptations to the restricted opportunities of the disadvantaged' and not due to a different set of values (Clark, 1965 cited in Wilson, 1991). This explanation can be applied to the UK where it is argued that in

contemporary society, due to a lack of available jobs, the working class has now fragmented and created the underclass, formed by those excluded from the labour market. The underclass 'highlights structural causes of poverty and dependence on public welfare provision' (Westergaard, 1995:149). When 'left to their own devices without controls and rewards of the labour market' (Hopkins Burke, 2008:156) the young members of the underclass develop a deviant 'subcultural solution' (ibid) whereby they create their own values and attitudes.

'Young people from dysfunctional families who live in deprived areas of high unemployment, crime and violence and who are marginalised from mainstream society can potentially find' opportunity, status and wealth through joining a gang (The Centre for Social Justice, 2009:35).

This 'search for respect, status and money' inevitably leads to crime and violence (The Centre for Social Justice, 2009:58) due to participation in the drugs market, defending territory and sharing their own value system. However, not all of the unemployed become criminal, 'people can be unemployed for many years, surviving on very limited income while remaining law-abiding citizens' (Hopkins Burke, 2005:228) but evidence does show 'correlation between gangs, gang violence and the development of the underclass' (Burke and Sunley, 1998:37).

Youth gangs, subcultures or just kids hanging around?

In the past, British:

'youth subculture has come to denote a national social movement of teenagers and young people who share a common set of values, interests and tacit ideology but not necessarily dependant on face-to-face interaction with other members or with any rigid criteria of entry, membership or obligation' (Campbell et al, 1982:79).

Whereas, in contemporary society, gang culture is generally 'characterised by criminality, durability, territoriality, structure and.... conflict' (Pitts, 2008:16), with research suggesting that gang members tend to be 'associated with greater participation in criminal activity' (Sharp et al, 2006:5), with drug dealing being a significant part of gang activity. However, not all groups are delinquent or fit in with these general explanations of gangs.

Previous research, of which much subcultural theory is based 'discovered the existence of... 'street corner groups'' in the UK, rather than the gangs of the American inner city' (Hobbs, 1997:807), and Morash (1983) stated that gangs and street corner groups are often mistaken. Boys are often in each other's company on the streets in cafes or on parks (Willmott, 1966) and show no formal structure or leadership. In their report of the Cambridge study which involved 389 boys at the age of eighteen, Farrington and West (1977:61) found that only 20 youths admitted gang membership operating 'in a definite area or centred around a particular club or cafe'. They argued that 'it is usual for youths of eighteen to go around in small groups' (Farrington and West, 1977:60) and as a result of this they were likely to commit petty crimes, as 'going around on occasions in a group of four or more male friends was a habit significantly more prevalent among delinquent than among non-delinquent groups' (ibid). Patrick's (1973, cited in Muncie, 2009:33) research in Glasgow claimed to identify American style gangs but 'they (also) had little internal structure and failed to persist overtime' and this lack of durability may highlight that this is just part of the transition from childhood to adulthood (Burke and Sunley, 1998).

However, it is also argued that it is difficult to apply these past explanations to modern phenomena as: 'culture is dynamic not static, it is constantly incorporating new elements and discarding the old, and for this reason it can be difficult at any given time to pin down exactly what 'gang' or 'street' culture actually is' (Pitts, 2008:85). Furthermore, contemporary

research such as that of cultural criminologists, state that ‘much of what we label criminal behaviour is at the same time subcultural behaviour’ (Ferrell, 2003:500). Despite this, the Youth Justice Board (2007, cited in Pitts, 2008:16) state that ‘the gang is, essentially, just another kind of peer group; that group offending is a common form of youth crime; (and) that many non-offending young people adopt a gangster ‘style’, agreeing with earlier research.

Chapter 5: Media Representations of Youth Gangs

Despite the lack of consensus on a single definition of a youth gang, along with the difficulties in trying to explain their emergence in contemporary society, the problem of youth gangs in the UK is a recurrent feature in the media. 'Crime narratives and representations are, and have always been, a prominent part of the content of all mass media' (Reiner, 2007:305), with sources such as newspapers and television documentaries playing 'a central role in creating public perceptions of crime and therefore influencing their perceptions about the extent of crime and the risk of suffering it' (Treadwell, 2006:77). Following the murder of Rhys Jones in 2007, an innocent victim who was caught in the crossfire of gang rivalry, 'the heightened media attention regarding the rise in inner city youth gang culture, involving the increased use of guns and knives, suggest that Britain is a 'society under siege' by 'out of control' young people' (Grattan, 2009) with 'a 'perception that guns' are readily obtainable'(The Centre for Social Justice, 2009:63) as groups fight over territory. These claims are supported by various headlines featured in both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, such as 'LA gangs take over UK streets' (The Sun, 2010), and 'Youth gangs triple child murder rate' (The Telegraph, 2008b), which followed a dramatic increase of gang related fatalities in London during 2008 where '23 young people were stabbed to death' over a period of twelve months (Panorama, 2008 cited in The Centre for Social Justice, 2009:64). News reports also highlight concerns within schools, with teachers being 'urged to watch for gangs' (The Mirror, 2010) due to fears that young people are carrying weapons in school and older youths recruiting children into gangs at the school gates (BBC News, 2008b).

In recent years there has also been a focus on female gang members in the media, with violent young females being 'presented as a new and growing social problem' (Batchelor, 2009:408). Girls are being portrayed as similar to boys in terms of fighting 'to defend themselves' (Batchelor, 2009:400) with media reports claiming that 'young women now head up groups of anti-social youth and commit crimes such as robbery, rape and murder' (Young, 2009). Furthermore, Batchelor (2009:400) argues that girls who are involved with predominately male gangs 'can be sexually exploited' and are also used to hide drugs and weapons. However, due to their being little gang research on the whole in the UK, research into the phenomena of the girl gang in the UK is also very limited, therefore it is difficult to identify the true extent of the problem. 'Reviews of crime statistics show that compared to male offending female violence is a relatively rare occurrence' (Young, 2009:224), and any increases in female violence may not always be gang related, therefore, Young (2009) argues that much of the medias representations are just assumptions backed by no evidence.

In general, statistical evidence suggests that the media's portrayal of a nationwide gang problem is in fact untrue and it is argued that whilst the 'media may have been highlighting brutal knife slayings, the reality for most parts of England and Wales is completely different' (BBC News, 2008a). Although the major cities of London, Manchester, West Midlands and Merseyside, show firearm offences 'well above the average for England and Wales' (Murphy, 2008:4) and findings from a Home Office survey reveal that 'gang members are far more likely to possess weapons and guns' (Murphy, 2008:6), there is no evidence to suggest that any rises in gun or knife offences are gang related. Crime rates overall are falling, and 'statistics show that nationally, the number of teenage violent deaths remains stable' (Wood, 2010:98). Furthermore, 'there is no requirement for police to record group involvement of any sort when entering details on the main data systems' (The Centre for Social Justice, 2009:51), therefore any statistical evidence quoted by the media, researchers and politicians is usually based on violent crime data rather than specific data on gang crime.

Statistics, however, cannot always be taken at face value due to issues of reliability as a result of underreporting, with a report by The Times (2010) highlighting that 'knife crime statistics were likely to underplay the true extent of the problem, with many incidents never reported to the police'. Critical criminologists state that 'crime rates are far from being a perfect measure of the actual amount of criminality in society- being more a measure of police activity- and thus can create a misleading image of horrific rises in certain types of crime' (Hopkins Burke, 2005:174). As a result of the public and political interest fuelled by the media there is more of a focus on violent crimes by youths and improved enforcement in this area is reflected in rises in violent crime (The Telegraph, 2008a), with research by The Centre for Social Justice (2009:68) arguing that 'police data merely reflects who is caught'. For example, common media representations of gang members being young black males may result in increased stop and search of black youths, leading to more arrests and therefore a statistical rise in disproportionately black violent youths.

Brand and Ollerearnshaw (2008:7) also argue that due to different definitions of what constitutes a gang, variations in statistics 'could be used to prove almost any view on gangs'. This problem is highlighted in research by The Centre for Social Justice (2009) which found that, 'Leicester, due to its close proximity to Birmingham and Nottingham, was seeing the development of gangs, with one major gang but around 20 'crews''. As 'crews' did not fit in with their definition of a 'gang' the study went on to say that 'their presence is indicative of a wider trend in which young people are forming delinquent youth groups and engaging in anti-social behaviour and violence' (The Centre for Social Justice, 2009:58). However, if further research was to be conducted by researchers using a different definition, their conclusions may have shown that these 'crews' were in fact gangs, which further establishes the need for a single definition of youth gangs to be used nationally, as discussed in chapter three.

The effects of the media

Sensationalised stories of youth gangs in the UK, which appear in the media and are backed by little statistical evidence, suggest that a moral panic is occurring. Moral panic theory was first developed by Stanley Cohen in his 1970s case study of the Mods and Rockers, and is still very influential today. Cohen explained that 'societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests' (Cohen, 2002:1) and they 'occur when the mass media take a reasonably ordinary event and present it as an extraordinary occurrence' (Jewkes, 2004:67). Newburn (2007:88) argues that 'all media appear to exaggerate the extent of violent crime in Britain' and this is due to the newsworthiness of crime narratives and the need to sell papers.

Treadwell (2006:85) states that there is evidence to suggest that 'each generation has its dangerous young waiting to be discovered'. Throughout history 'a sequence of moral panics about 'depraved youth' has been a dominant and recurring feature of media representations of young people' (Muncie, 2009:9) including the Mods and Rockers as described by Cohen in the seventies, the Skinheads of the eighties and more recently 'Hoodies' and violent gangs. Following on from this, researchers such as Hallsworth and Young support moral panic theory, stating 'that the 'urban delinquent gang' has been 'sensationalised to absurdity by tabloids and by documentary-makers hell bent on suggesting that Britain's fair streets are being overrun with feral gangs' (Hallsworth and Young, 2004, cited in White, 2004:41).

Left realists argue that 'crime and the fear of crime should be taken seriously and not dismissed as just an expression of media overreaction or panic' (Hopkins Burke, 2005:149). However, the constant over-reporting of gangs and negative representations of youths can

have adverse effects due to labelling, deviancy amplification, and the glamorisation of violent crime and weapons and it is argued that media coverage 'is (a) fuelling hysteria amongst the general population, (b) adding to young people's fear and therefore willingness to carry a weapon, and (c) encouraging gangs to behave violently to get in the papers' (The Centre for Social Justice, 2009:68), therefore causing youths to become criminal as they may feel that it is 'cool' to be involved.

In a report for the Home Office, Brooke Kinsella (the sister of Ben Kinsella who was stabbed to death in 2008 by a gang of youths) found that young people felt 'they are portrayed negatively by the media and branded as if they are all criminals or trouble-makers' (Kinsella, 2011:2) with positive representations of young people in the news being very rare. Furthermore, 'volatile peer groups' who 'engage in an array of delinquent behaviours, including violence' but do not fit definitions of what constitutes a gang, are still often labelled as such (Hallsworth and Young, 2008:181). Labelling theories 'propose that no behaviour is inherently deviant or criminal, but only comes to be considered so when others confer this label upon the act' (Hopkins Burke, 2005:12), with the media having a major influence on the labelling of acts as deviant. This can then lead to what Merton described as a self fulfilling prophecy, where 'a false definition of a situation... (evokes) a new behaviour that makes the original false assumption come true' (Hopkins Burke, 2005:147).

Following on from this, deviancy amplification can be used to describe labelling theory at a group level. Where there is 'less tolerance... to an act of deviance... similar acts will be defined as deviant' (Hopkins Burke, 2005:148). The media will exaggerate the problem 'in order to make local events seem ones of pressing national concern' leading 'to further marginalisation and stigmatisation of deviants which in turn leads to more demands for police action and so on into a deviancy amplification spiral' (Hopkins Burke, 2005:149). This then not only directly affects the group being labelled but also increases public concern, police surveillance of the group, and also government policy and initiatives, thus confirming the original reaction (Hopkins Burke, 2005). The media places pressure on the government whereby 'being seen to be 'tough on crime', politicians are assured of favourable coverage in the majority of the British press' (Jewkes, 2004:72), therefore by publicly opposing the deviant behaviour 'it may be that some politicians and opinion leaders are simply seeking to gain political favour (Jewkes, 2004:71).

As the deviancy amplification spiral suggests, the media, police and the government are all linked, with policy and interventions reflecting media responses. Although Home Office figures show an overall fall in violent crime, 'the focus on violent crime and in particular gang-related crime or crime with knives or guns, means that this will remain at the top of the community safety agenda' (Local Government, 2011) with their also being 'a growing sense among the public' for the 'need to combat this disturbing trend' (Brand and Ollerearnshaw, 2008:6).

Government Responses

As a response to high profile murder cases such as: Stephen Lawrence who was stabbed to death in 1993 by a gang of white youths, Jamie Robe who was beaten to death in 1997 and Damilola Taylor who was murdered, again by a gang a youths, in 2000; various police research projects such as Operation Cruise and Operation Chrome were set up in order to develop further insight into gang related behaviour in London and Manchester (White, 2004), despite there being no conclusive evidence to suggest that the murders were gang related, other than the fact that they were committed by more than one person. Later, the more detailed Tackling Gangs Action Programme (Murphy, 2008) was set up with the aims 'to

build on existing work to reduce serious violence, particularly the use of firearms, perpetrated by young people as part of gang-related activity, initially in four target cities but ultimately across the whole of England and Wales' (Murphy, 2008:2). However, the programme was only in effect for six months, but did provide a published guide for local authorities with a focus on 'preventing gang membership', 'devising strategies' and 'targeting gang members' which is still currently applicable (Home Office, 2008:7). More recent developments have included the re-introduction of the 300 year old Joint Enterprise law which allows for courts to find gang members guilty by association:

'The principle underlying the notion of Joint Enterprise is that when a gang assaults or murders a victim, even those members who do not physically participate or strike the fatal blow, but simply lend encouragement and approval to the crime, are as guilty as the chief perpetrator and will receive similar prison sentences' (The Telegraph, 2009).

Additionally, this year 'the Home Office has committed £18m of funding for 2011-2013' (Home Office, 2011b) with a focus on 'London, Manchester and the West Midlands', in order to tackle the problem of youth violence. Part of the funding is also dedicated to local community programmes nationwide to prevent knife and gang violence (ibid). The Government is also currently piloting gang injunctions in England and Wales for 14-17 year olds. Gang injunctions also referred to as GANGBO'S were introduced at the start of 2011 as a result of 'appeals from councils for help' (BBC News, 2011). They are similar to ASBO's in terms of imposing restrictions on individuals preventing them from being in certain areas, wearing 'gang' colours or 'from walking aggressive dogs' (ibid) and they aim 'to prevent a person from engaging in, encouraging or assisting gang-related violence and may also serve to protect them from gang-related violence' (Home Office, 2011a).

Despite the vast array of government intervention in order to try and tackle gang related crime it is argued that the 'police, prisons and probation services are failing to tackle the growing dangers of young people getting involved in gangs' (The Guardian, 2010a) and there is a call for a national strategy to be put in place. Although statistics show that the problem is not as serious as the media makes it out to be, The Gangs of London website created by those living in affected areas of London, along with the help of gang members, highlights a substantial number of gangs in London on interactive maps. The site went live in 2004, followed by the creation of a forum in 2006 which allowed for contributions by those affected by gangs in London. 'By the middle of 2006 information on 201 gangs was listed on the website' (Gangs of London Community, 2011b). They suggest that contrary to media representations, not all violence is gang related and not all gangs are criminal, going on to highlight flaws in 'the work of the metropolitan police and academics' (ibid). Furthermore, they state that government interventions need to address the underlying issues of gang members (Gangs of London Community, 2011a).

More specifically, gang injunctions have been criticised for not tackling prevention and criminalising individuals (BBC News, 2011) and 'the application of the joint enterprise law has drawn criticism from some legal and policing circles who worry that it is' an unfair law which is 'being too widely applied' (BBC Panorama, 2009). Brand and Ollerearnshaw (2008:4) argue that targeting youth crime in general does 'little to address the underlying drivers of gangs and their criminality' and by not taking into account other risk factors interventions are failing to 'address the 'needs' of vulnerable youth' (Brand and Ollerearnshaw, 2008:9). With strong similarities to the classic early subcultural theories of Cohen and Merton, it is argued that 'in a gang, an under-educated young man finds friendship, family, possibilities for entrepreneurial activity and the bravado to commit horrific acts' (The Guardian, 2010b), therefore without early intervention the appeal of joining a gang

will always be there. Overall, Wood (2010:97) states that media portrayal of youth gangs in the UK 'leads to a punitive and misguided political climate which may ultimately fail the very teenagers it aims to reach'.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of this dissertation was to uncover the myths and realities surrounding youth gangs in the UK in order to discover whether they exist to the extent at which the media implies. In general, it was found that youth gangs do exist in the UK, but due to lack of research and flaws in statistical data, it is difficult to identify the true extent of the problem, therefore sensationalised media reports are based on little empirical evidence.

After an analysis of the different variations of definitions which can be applied by agencies and researchers, it was found that although they highlight a common set of gang characteristics, there were inconsistencies with both US and British definitions, leading to groups being wrongly labelled as criminal by the police and the media. To avoid this, the Home Office (2002, 2008) and Eurogang Network steer away from using the term gang. However, as these agencies are still using different definitions, research results show findings which differ in relation to the amount of gangs in existence. Other researchers such as Marshall et al (2005) use self report studies as their method to identify gangs but due to some reluctance from individuals to identify with the term gang and its label, the research remains unreliable at showing the true nature of the gang problem.

In relation to this, chapter four went on to look at the different explanations of the emergence of youth gangs with reference to subcultural theory. These explanations highlight the reasons why gang members become deviant with reference to violence and defending territory, which are key components of many of the gang definitions. Classic theories of gangs which originated in the US (Merton, 1938; Cohen, 1955) show the importance of social class and the economy and this was found to be the underlying causes of much of the problems faced by deviant subcultures in the past. Furthermore, theories of the 'modern gang' incorporate earlier theories of subculture in order to link lower class and unemployment with the creation of the underclass, which Left Realists argue is the main reason for the development of delinquent subcultures. US explanations of the underclass have been found to be relevant to the contemporary UK situation, however, due to the changing nature of society and culture and its fragmentation, it is difficult to explain what a gang is and how it has formed (Pitts, 2008), and so much of the subcultural explanations are not relevant in contemporary society.

The final area of focus discussed in chapter five, identified that youths have been targets of moral panics throughout history. The media seems to exaggerate violent crime in general, thus shaping public perceptions and this is reflected in the reporting of youths involved in gun, knife and gang crime. Although statistics show that there are problems in larger cities such as Manchester and London, there is no evidence to suggest that it is a national problem. However, problems with statistics have also been identified, and due to there being multiple definitions of youth gangs in use, there is difficulty in generalising findings, therefore the true nature of the gang problem cannot be identified.

It is clear that statistics are socially constructed due to under reporting of gang related crimes and issues with police recording. Reliable statistics may show that the problem of youth gangs is not as large as the media portrays it to be. With media reports fuelling a moral panic, this can have negative effects on the youths. This includes labelling, deviancy amplification and the glamorising of gang membership, encouraging youths to choose this path. It can also have an effect on community and government responses where it is found that due to the involvement of the media, agencies such as education, police and probation are failing to tackle the needs of these groups.

Recommendations

As a result of the conclusions of this dissertation several recommendations can be made for areas of further research and government responses.

Overall more research is needed in relation to youth gangs in the UK. The application of US definitions was found to be not applicable in the UK; therefore there is a need for one definition to be created which can be used nationally by all agencies and researchers, as at present research almost certainly produces different findings when different definitions are applied. As subcultural theory shows, the problem of the youth gangs arises in lower classes and the unemployed, who are searching for solutions to their perceived problems. However, not all of those who fall into these categories turn to gang membership and not all gangs are delinquent, therefore there is a need to establish within a definition what a gang is and how it differs from delinquent peer groups who hang around on the street in order for policy to be effective.

Furthermore, there is a need for the police to introduce the recording of group crime in its own category in order to provide a set of gang related crime statistics for analysis, rather than focusing on knife and gun statistics. This will then provide more reliable statistics and more informed media reports which in turn will produce better government responses based on the realities of the problem in this country as well as a more effective allocation of police resources.

The Home Office Tackling Gangs Action Programme (2008) was the first move towards a national strategy; however this was only in effect for six months. At present there is no national strategy in place to tackle the underlying issues of youths who turn to gangs, with initiatives focusing more on preventing crime rather than preventing gang membership. Early intervention programmes in schools which highlight the severe consequences of being involved in a gang may reduce the impact of youth gang violence on families and the community. This also needs to identify that females may become members of gangs, therefore a move from the stereotypical violent male gang member needs to be addressed in new initiatives.

Finally, as much of the literature on youth gangs is based on outdated theories from both US and UK research, there is a need to develop more contemporary theories on youth gangs in modern society in order to identify relevant explanations for their emergence and eliminate some of the common stereotypes used by the media.

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