EUGANGS Research

Perspectives from Walsall and the Black Country

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EUGANGS Programme

Contents

Executive summary

EUGANGS is a trans-European project established to provide a study programme and qualification for workers who are affected by gangs and gang crime. This report is the result of the first stage of the project and aims to provide an understanding of gang-related issues in the Walsall area, how professionals in different organisations work with young people, and how they work together. It is complemented by a national report available on the EUGANGS website: www.eugangs.eu.

The report is based on:

- interviews with seven professionals from youth and police services
- analysis of website and newspaper content, as well as free to access official documents and statistics.

The main findings from the report are that:

- gangs are present in the Walsall area which to some extent meet the Centre for Social Justice definition of: seeing themselves as a discernable group, engaging in criminal activity and violence, laying claim over territory, being in conflict with other, similar gangs
- the picture is a complex one and the boundaries between criminal, delinquent and other teenage activity are not easily discernable. Likewise the distinction between when young people are engaged in one-off criminal acts or operating as part of a gang is also hard to gauge
- economic and social pulls for gang membership are considered to be the opportunities for making money, along with the sense of security being in a gang offers
- a range of factors are considered to lead to a young person feeling insecure and seeking security in a gang, including: violence and/or broken relationships in the home, lack of sense of achievement or belonging at school, abuse while in care, wider messages in society and the media about the value of a young person's ethnic or religious group, own mental health
- the victimisation of girls at the hands of gangs has been highlighted in the media and has contributed to a stereotype, but the role of girls and women in relation to gangs is multi-faceted and more complex. Female relatives can play a role in desistence, for example
- mass media can be unhelpful in the way it portrays youth crime, but locally have also taken decisions not to report particular crimes to avoid increasing social friction
- social media may help the organisation of gang activity, but access to pornography and violent games software from a young age are considered to be more pernicious in de-sensitising children and young people to abusive and criminal activity
- the use of social media has become a helpful tool for the police and other professionals to monitor and increase intelligence about gang-related activity
- of organised criminal gang activity in Walsall, sexual exploitation is an increasing problem, and far-right wing activity is also of particular concern
- in terms of youth gang formation and activity, police, youth workers and charities co-operate well to reduce impact and support young people onto more positive paths
- effective mentoring is considered a key tool in supporting young people away from gang activity
- while there are local strategic forums and planning, professionals feel a more consistent and inclusive approach to strategy and funding would enhance more effectively the contribution they have to make to reducing gang activity.

1. Introduction

This report was produced to support the development of a Europe-wide qualification and training programme for professionals working with young people in, or at risk of joining, gangs: EUGANGS (www.eugangs.eu). The project is being taken forward by partner organisations in Romania, Greece, Italy and the UK. At the outset each has provided a report for their national and local contexts, to identify a common core of themes to inform the training programme, as well as identifying context-specific differences. This is the contribution for Walsall and the Black Country.

The report is based on:

- interviews with seven professionals from youth and police services
- analysis of website and newspaper content, as well as free to access official documents and statistics.

The report reflects primarily the perspectives of professionals working with young people and adults engaged in gang activity, and in so doing provides a sketch of the current situation in Walsall. As far as possible the views and statements of fact made by the interviewees have been triangulated against documentary evidence, where available.

This report accompanies a national report, which provides an overview of national policy and theoretical explanations for gang-related phenomena, and follows the same structure as the national report for ease of cross reference. For a more in-depth political and theoretical analysis of the issues raised in this report, please refer to the national report. Similarly, the reports for Italy, Romania and Greece also follow a similar structure, and will be of interest for a trans-European perspective on youth delinquency and gang-related crime. All reports can be found at www.eugangs.eu.

The local EUGANGS project is being led by Walsall College, and the network therefore, in its early phase, has the majority of its links in the borough of Walsall. However, colleagues and organisations from other areas of the Black Country have joined the network and made valuable contributions to the research and programme design. This report reflects those contributions, shedding light on the wider situation geographically.

The completion of this report would not have been possible without the support and contributions of the Walsall EUGANGS consultation group. I would therefore like to thank:

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2. Definitional review - What is a gang?

There is a range of understandings of the nature of gangs and gang membership in Walsall. The word 'gang' is also a contested term. In its broadest sense it can be expanded to apply to any youth grouping:

> '*Groups of young people will naturally form together, whether it's a gang under a name or a group of young people who share similarities or belong to a postcode.*'

The statement makes the point that forming peer groups is a natural phenomenon, something we all do in childhood, teenage years and into adulthood. What distinguishes a gang from other youth groupings is the implication that its members are engaged at the least in delinquent, if not criminal activity.

The term 'gang' is an emotive one and carries political weight. For this reason it is in danger of being used by the local media to misrepresent incidents involving young people as gang-related, when in fact they are not.

Among those who work with young people, there also appears to be uncertainty about where the boundary lies between small scale youth delinquency and gang activity. These quotes from youth workers on what the police consider constitutes a gang illustrate the different interpretations and perceptions which make this such a contentious area:

> '*We should be looking at youngsters as individuals, and not looking at global factors* [ie involvement in gangs] *which is what the police focus seems to be.*'

> '*We work with girls who have been groomed and taken to shops, hotels and there are several men waiting for her. Whether the police see that as a gang,* [my understanding is that] *police see* [gangs] *as people involved in turf wars.*'

Another youth worker described gangs in broad terms: '*a group of people with a purpose, this can be legitimate, football or darts team, or related to crime, selling drugs*.'

For a member of the police, a gang is '*a group of like minded individuals who believe in the same ideology.*'

However, from the interviews, three distinct categories of gang emerged as existing in Walsall and the Black Country:

- youth gangs
- organised criminal gangs
- gangs with an extreme ideological focus.

2.1 Youth gangs

The issue with youth gangs is perceived to be more of a problem in areas of Birmingham, West Bromwich, Sandwell and Wolverhampton, than in Walsall and other parts of the Black Country. Gang related activity involving the use of guns, for example, is more pronounced in Birmingham and Wolverhampton than in Walsall. Part of the reason for this is successful police intervention with youth worker support at the nascent stage of gang development (see section 5.3). This is not to say, however, that violent, gang related crime is unknown in Walsall. Recent incidents include:

- a carjacking by a gang of four young men in their twenties, in which the car driver witnessed the gang carry out a machete attack on another man[1], and
- armed robbery[2].

Nevertheless, youth gangs have emerged in the Walsall area which approach the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) definition of a gang as 'a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who:

- see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group
- engage in criminal activity and violence
- lay claim over territory (not necessarily geographical but can include an illegal economy territory);
- are in conflict with other, similar, gangs.'[3]

However, the situation on the ground is more fluid and, while approximating, does not neatly fit this definition. For example, engagement in criminal activity and violence is likely to be occasional, and the criminal activity to consist of small scale drugs dealing.

A defining moment in the recognition in Walsall of gangs in the CSJ sense, was the death in 2013 of Ben Morutare[4]. Ben was a member of a gang which styled itself Pleckside Riders[5], albeit he was responding at the time before his death to mentoring and appeared to be disengaging. The night of his murder, he was attending a party with friends in Smethwick, when fighting broke out over a verbal exchange. The fighting spilled out into the streets, where Ben was stabbed in the thigh, and subsequently died. The death highlighted the fact that Walsall is indeed affected by gang violence, although the prominence given to the death in the media is also an indication that the number of youth gang related violence is low, in comparison with Birmingham, for example. The case also illustrates that gang activity is a regional issue, not confined to hotspots, but crossing administrative boundaries.

Other youth gangs known in the Walsall area include:

- Original Teenage Gangsters
- Palfrey Boys.

Beyond gangs approximating the CSJ definition, young people are more likely to group in what has been labelled 'recreational gangs', meeting in parks, listening to music, engaging in tagging (graffiti of identity symbols) and drug consumption. Here, there is an overlap between general youth culture and gang membership, where the boundary between the two is not even visible to those participating, '*some people know they are in a gang, others don't*'. The term 'recreational gang' also introduces a distinction between groups of young people engaged in anti-social behaviour, and those committing crimes such as physical violence and drug dealing.

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[1] www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2203191/Violent-Walsall-gang-carjacked-teenager-17-knifepoint-forced-act-getaway-driver-hour-long-terror-ride.html
[2] www.expressandstar.com/news/crime/2013/06/05/armed-gang-told-to-give-back-25000-or-stay-longer-in-prison
[3] www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/publications/dying-to-belong
[4] www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/local-news/six-men-jailed-over-fatal-6071308
[5] www.youtube.com/watch?v=BlLe-mQ8-OE

There is a general perception that gangs in the Black Country today are looser groupings than in previous generations. A 'freelance' culture has arisen where young people will engage in gang activity on an as required basis.

Young people will also group into 'gangs' in response to incidents happening to other youngsters in their area or postcode. Incidents which have led to gang formation and activity include attacks on individuals, and, in one case, a relationship developing between a boy from one area and a girl from another. Similarly, a policy of rehousing Kosovan migrants in the Chuckery area of Walsall led to a build up of tension and a street battle between different ethnic groups of youths.

2.2 Criminal gangs

While organised criminal gangs exist in Walsall, there is not felt to be a strong presence of the sort that leads to violent inter-gang rivalry for control of territory. As with youth gangs, the problem of organised criminal gangs in Wolverhampton is considered to be worse. Here gangs have been reported to be engaged in robbery, metal theft[6], drugs crime[7], and arranging sham marriages[8].

Nevertheless, an attempt has been made in recent years to establish a drugs racket by a Yardie gang from London in the Caldmore area of Walsall. The gang had identified Walsall as an area that was not controlled by any serious rival, and began to operate in the area. However, their activity was disrupted by police in a dawn raid on a single house, where 15 members were arrested, most of who were subsequently deported for not having valid visas.

Other organised criminal gang activity in Walsall includes fraud, such as car insurance claims rackets and adjusting car clocks[9], as well as an increasing problem of grooming and sexual exploitation of young females.

The evidence of girls being enticed or forced into performing sex acts by groups of men is now such that West Midlands Police are increasing their efforts to investigate and disrupt this activity. It is not clear how far groups of men involved in grooming and exchange of girls can be classed as gangs, certainly they do not fit the CSJ definition. However, where they are involved in drugs dealing too, a gang network is likely to exist.

2.3 Gangs with an extreme ideological focus

Ideological gangs are the hardest to find evidence for the existence of. There is little evidence to suggest the presence of gangs with extremist religious views in Walsall, for example.

On the other hand, police are aware of the existence of a significant far-right English Defence League (EDL) group in the borough. The group, however, generally keeps itself low profile, visible only via Infidel (EDL related) postings on the Walsall Football Club Facebook page, through chanting at football matches[10], and when a race-related crime is committed.

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[6] www.signal107.co.uk/news/local/black-country-organised-crime-gang-jailed
[7] www.expressandstar.com/news/crime/2013/09/24/gang-busters-280-police-officers-in-wolverhamptons-biggest-drugs-raid
[8] www.expressandstar.com/news/2014/05/08/11-await-sentencing-in-west-midlands-sham-marriage-racket
[9] www.walsall-people.co.uk/Gang-car-dealers-discover-t-turn-clock/story-20044414-detail/story.html
[10] www.expressandstar.com/news/crime/2013/07/10/edl-supporter-gets-order-for-walsall-demonstration-chanting

3. Social Structure

3.1 Economic and social factors

If deprivation is a risk factor for joining gangs, then Walsall has an above average likelihood of experiencing the problem, especially among its young people. In 2012, 6.4% of young people between the ages of 16 and 18 were identified as not in education, employment or training (NEET)[11]. In 2013, just over 10% of 18-24 year olds were on job seekers allowance, comparing unfavourably with a national average of 6.2%.

In some cases, youth workers see factors such as unemployment and low social status as contributing to gang-related activity. In this sense gangs are a symptom of social problems, rather than a cause. This contrasts with discourse in mainstream media, which often attributes problems in society to young people and ethnic groups. In this context the term 'gang' itself becomes a catch all for what is wrong with society. Gangs become the issue to be dealt with, diverting attention and resources away from more fundamental issues, such as housing, unemployment and exclusion.

Coming from the lower end of the prosperity scale as most gang members do, the divide between what they desire to obtain and their means for doing so is believed to be a factor in encouraging their recruitment into gangs. They see others around them doing very well out of illicit activity, and are attracted by it:

> *'These guys* [gang leaders] *have high value vehicles and that attracts young people to aspire to become something like that. Young people see some individuals wealthy from some activities and have aspirations from that.'*

> *'We've had young people engaged in selling drugs because they want to be able to provide for themselves and their family.'*

Seeking the security which gangs offer also plays an important role in decisions to join them. Where young people grow up in an area where a gang culture pervades, they are likely to seek gang membership for their own protection:

> *'They will band together for reasons of safety and having that reputation … if they are going to be targeted by other groups and gangs they may think twice because they will be able to look after themselves and there could be revenge.'*

At a broader, cultural level, young people might feel a more subtle threat to their ethnic or religious group, which may in turn explain a desire to join a gang for protection. This sense of threat may be caused by a variety of factors, including:

- world events, such as terrorist attacks or western military intervention in Muslim countries;
- discourse at the national level, for example against immigrants[12];
- local circumstances, such as high unemployment; demographic change; high visibility extremism, such as the 2012 EDL rally in Walsall[13]; or
- a developing understanding of historical subjugation of one's ethnic group:

> *'We need to look at the root causes of why young people get involved in criminal activity, for example young Muslims who become aware of torture carried out against their co-*

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[11] http://cms.walsall.gov.uk/walsall_jsna_refresh_draft_10.pdf
[12] www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pyYoL9ngtE
[13] www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-19773187

religionists can find that shameful and wanting to take action, [and can be encouraged to do so] *by individuals who take the Koran out of context.'*

In these cases, a sense of victimhood may be reinforced by current social circumstances, such as the skewed distribution of certain ethnic groups towards the poorer end of the social scale, or the lower end of achievement at school.

3.2 The role of mass, social media and games software

The main impact of the reporting on gang related and other criminal activity by the mass media is considered to be how it shapes public opinion about the nature of, and threat from, gangs and young people, in particular those from minority ethnic groups. For some, negative media reporting contributes to marginalisation of certain groups, creating a vicious circle of alienation.

The media is also felt to contribute to shaping young people's expectations of life, both materially and in terms of social standing:

> *'We live in an age where a lot of young people want fame, notoriety and wealth quick. We don't see a lot of messages about young people working hard and making their way in life.* [It is all about]*rich lists, fame, fortune who's got big cars … especially young people living in areas like here … how do we get that? When you see a rapper they have a gang of thirty people behind them – young people emulate this.'*

For professionals and communities, media reporting of incidents can be unhelpful, attributing notoriety to particular neighbourhoods and creating a worse image of the nature of crime and gang activity than is the reality on the ground. On the hand, editors in the local press have also made decisions not to publish if they feel this will contribute to social friction. There was a press blackout, for example, of a street fight in the Chuckery area of town between Asian and Albanian groups.

In terms of encouraging young people to join in gang activity, mass media is not felt to play a particularly important role:

> *'Young people don't watch something on television and think 'I'll join in with that'.*

Games software, on the other hand, is believed to have a pernicious effect on young people's developing moral framework, which can be a precursor to being prepared to accept abusive behaviour in a gang situation (see section 4.2). Youth workers mentioned software such as Ultra Violent Grand Theft Auto[14] and Call of Duty, which has an increased violence setting, as easily accessible to young children:

> *'My great concern is we have gone into primary schools. When I ask what games they play, a high percentage are playing Call of Duty already.'*

It is also felt that easy access to pornography on the internet, is also de-sensitising children from a young age:

> *'*[On Grand Theft Auto] *you can buy a prostitute. What was soft porn in the 80s is now the norm on MTV. Eight-, nine-, ten-year old girls want to be like Hannah Montana. We are working with girls and lads who think the only way to have sex is anally. Hard porn has become the norm.'*

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[14] www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzlIgKslRqo

Social media are also considered to help create the conditions for gangs to develop. Mobile technology has played a role in enabling young people to congregate with speed. News of the 2011 riots in Birmingham, for example, was communicated via mobile phones in seconds to young people in Walsall, contributing to convergence on the town centre. In addition, young people use channels such as Youtube to establish and build a reputation. This might be gang leaders and members themselves[15], or so called 'wannabes', children and young people imitating gang behaviour. After the death of Ben Morutare, for example, a Facebook group was set up by a young girl, who, along with her friends, posted pictures of themselves making Pleck Riders gang signals.

The interesting thing about social media from a crime control perspective is the use police in particular are able to make of it to monitor individuals and gangs. This has made an important contribution to disrupting criminal activity. After the riots in 2011, for example, some youngsters sought to establish notoriety and form gangs around them. By making their presence known via social media, however, police were able to identify and approach the individuals concerned.

3.3 The relevance of concepts of belonging, identity and social status to gang involvement and on going association

The notion of belonging is a complex one. On the one hand, young people are at an age when in any case they are testing boundaries, rejecting norms and seeking the exciting and the different. Gang activity offers opportunities for this. On the other hand, the need to belong is an essential emotion, and it is this which is for many young people the pull to join gangs. They offer structure and security as an alternative to sometimes chaotic home lives. In this way gang peer relationships are no different to those formed in other social groupings. The gang provides a network of support and protection, but there is also pressure to conform, which can in turn encourage further alienation from the norms and laws of mainstream society:

> *'Gangs provide security in numbers. If one young person is in a dispute with another, they will look for people to back them up, and then gang members encourage them to do things they wouldn't otherwise do.'*

The need to belong manifests itself also in the location of gang formation, conferring on the postcode and football club symbolic importance for the group people belong to. Living in a particular postcode sets the boundaries for what is permitted for young people in terms of relationships. Boys and girls who have 'crossed boundaries' to form relationships have been the cause of outbreaks of violence between groups of young people from their postcode area. Walsall Football Club also provides a locus of belonging, and has been made home by a significant EDL grouping, the Walsall Infidels[16].

The need to belong has also been identified as a reason why girls associate with gangs. The general discussion in the media about female involvement with gangs tends to centre around the issue of sexual exploitation. This is definitely a serious issue, as described in section 3.4, but there are also social and psychological reasons for why females associate with gangs:

> *'Females are often only seen as the victims of gangs, but it is important also to consider their role as change makers. Mothers, daughters, and sisters may not necessarily be part of the gang, but they are in a position to influence the behaviour of male relatives and boyfriends etc. Girls and women can play diverse roles. Belonging to a gang can be part of their self-*

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[15] www.youtube.com/watch?v=BlLe-mQ8-OE
[16] www.facebook.com/walsall.saddlers.1

image, they may seek membership to fit definitions of what it is to be feminine. There is a blurred line which the media does not represent but rather plays to stereotypes.'

For those gang members who have been imprisoned, the experience confirms the need to belong and conform to a social group. One ex-offender described the relief of going to prison and having a regime to conform to.

It is not uncommon for gang members once in prison to convert to or embrace extreme forms of religion. This might not only be because of the need to belong, but also that the religious group or mentor might provide protection. Moslems who embrace extreme forms of Islam can find themselves rejected by their former gang, and even the mainstream community. In the Heath Town area of Wolverhampton, for example, a group of black males, among them ex-prisoners, have created an impromptu place of prayer outside a house, as they are not accepted in local mosques.

3.4 The relationship between gangs and crime

Crime as a component of gang activity in Walsall includes supply and distribution of drugs, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, prostitution, incitement to violence (for example uploading inciteful material on social media), fraud (such as illegal adjusting of car clocks and fraudulent insurance claims), metal theft, and opportunistic theft.

Theft, drug dealing and fraud are part of a black economy, and offer business opportunities and access to income which many gang members would otherwise not achieve. One of the most difficult arguments youth workers and mentors have to make, especially to young people, is why it is better to take a legitimate route to earning money and career path, when income from drug dealing, for example, can be so lucrative:

> *'Engaging with gang activity provides a source of income. At about age 15 it is an attractive option. A young person doesn't think ahead.'*

Drug dealing is an activity which creates connections between gangs of different types. There is interaction between youth and criminal gangs, specifically at the point of drugs transactions. The situation has been described as resembling that in the film 'Layer Cake'[17], in which there is a pyramid of criminal activity, with a dealer at the top, running the operation like a business. This description of one drugs business by a youth worker illustrates the nature of such activity:

> *'There was a drugs racket in Walsall, a bookies near the bus station was a drugs seller. The brains who ran that was a woman in a mobility cart. Police had undercover officers gathering data. One morning they knew they could make prosecutions. One kid got five years and one two and a half years. They were in their late teens, early twenties. One moved south because he wanted to get out of Walsall. One chap came out a couple of years later.'*

Among youth gangs there is a prevalence of drugs exchange and consumption:

> *'In this area there are issues around drugs and the supply of drugs. We work with young people who are involved in the distribution of drugs – can be small amounts of cannabis – people don't want to say what they are dealing in, cannabis mostly.'*

However, given the prevalence of drugs consumption generally among young people, this may be rightly considered an issue of youth culture, rather than gang culture specifically.

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[17] www.imdb.com/title/tt0375912/plotsummary

Prostitution is also strongly related to organised crime, and in certain areas of Walsall drug dealing and prostitution operate cheek by jowl:

> 'Palfrey, Caldmore and Pleck have drugs and prostitution problems. It's a way of making good money and on your doorstop.'

Whereas police have developed a range of strategies for tackling prostitution and dedicated resources, the emphasis appears to be on disrupting activity at street level through arrests of sex workers and clients, rather than the pimp networks which organise the trade[18] [19]. In any case, little information was available on the nature of gangs who run prostitution operations for this report.

Sexual exploitation, on the other hand, is an area where the police are making a concerted effort to identify and deal with the ringleaders, possibly because there is a clearer delineation of perpetrator and victim in this activity. Youth workers consider the problem to be serious and on the increase throughout the Black Country:

> 'We work in Dudley as well as Walsall. We have girls who are internally trafficked by a gang. We work with girls who have been groomed and taken to shops, hotels and there are several men waiting for her.'

Crime in terms of gang-related violence does not appear to occur in any high profile way in Walsall. The death of Ben Morutare is considered to be a tragedy, but not a typical consequence of gang involvement. Otherwise, there seems to be a background level of violence, which does not attract a lot of attention:

> 'This year [gang violence] is remaining at the same level. When an incident happens or there is a gang fight [violence] increases and then decreases. It takes two influential youngsters from different areas to start a fight to spark a gang war.'

Another explanation for violence being contained is the prevention work carried out by local police and youth workers, often in collaboration. This takes place on a day-to-day basis, but has also effectively pre-empted the potential for large scale gang violence. During the riots of 2011[20], for example, police had secured the town centre before any violence could break out. Similarly, the British Muslim Youth Group did much to limit the potential for violence at the time of an EDL rally in 2012[21] by arranging an away day for 100 local young people on the day the rally took place.

3.5 The impact of family in the socialisation process of young people and social factors which shape the development of deviance

Families can be a pull as well as a push for a young person to engage with gangs. In the first place, there are many families which as a whole, or via significant members, are engaged in gang activity or lead a gang. Youth workers speak of young people who command respect among their peers because of the status of a relative:

> 'One of the uncles of one of the guys who is supposed to be in charge [of a recently formed gang] is well known in Walsall. He's one of those blokes where they say don't cross him he can bring trouble to your door.'

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[18] www.expressandstar.com/news/crime/2013/09/13/sex-worker-jailed-after-prostitution-crackdown-in-walsall
[19] www.walsalladvertiser.co.uk/Prostitute-sent-jail-campaign-sex-streets/story-19814957-detail/story.html
[20] www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14452097
[21] www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-21938609

Particular families might also have control over what happens on their housing estate, making decisions about the flow of resources, and functioning in a quasi-administrative role within particular communities:

> *'Every community has a certain family which is respected. They'll have a lot of friends and a particular way of making money. Every area has a dominant family which will get the best of aid that is coming into the area and they'll have control over how it is distributed, similar to what happens to foreign aid in Syria.'*

Family units might also be involved in organised crime:

> *'We have smaller family groups of people sometimes adults as well, associated with some sort of crime … people who run businesses in terms of car claims … more sophisticated criminals.'*

Secondly, family circumstances may be a trigger for a young person seeking out gang membership to meet social needs they are not getting at home. However, it should be emphasised this is a risk factor, and not a determinant. Also, it is not by any means the case that all young people who join gangs have bad family circumstances. One youth worker emphasised that there are other factors at play:

> *'Just because you are ok doesn't mean you won't want to be in a gang. It can depend on the culture you are brought up in.'*

Where circumstances at home are a push into gang lifestyles, these manifest themselves in a variety of ways. A main factor here is a lack of functioning relationships between young people and adults and others in the home. This may be because of poor parenting generally, or as a result of parental drug misuse or poor mental health. In some households, there may be a language barrier between the generations because children are not brought up developing full language skills in their heritage language:

> *'We've got one family … the mother suffers from mental health. Sometimes not having the appropriate skills to support their children* [is a factor in young people disengaging and joining gangs]. *There can be language difficulties … expressing feelings and emotions can be difficult …* [young people] *are confiding more with friends than with family members.'*

Family life marred by domestic violence is another risk factor, and for some youth workers this is a worsening issue. As well as wanting to remove themselves from violent situations at home, young people might also look to a gang to provide security:

> *'We have young people from fractured families, being with their peers is an escape from being at home. There can be issues of domestic violence at home and neglect, so a gang provides support.'*

In all cases, what young people seek in gang membership is a family life of sorts:

> *'Young people can find that gang members can do more for them than their own family and the gang becomes a kind of family.'*

The gang then becomes a substitute family, and this is reflected in the way gang members talk about each other and strive to reinforce their relationships with each other:

> *'They call each other 'fam'.* [They create] *pseudo families, they will say he's my cousin he's my family. They will go back 200 years to look for a family link.'*

Youth workers point out the impact of not having significant others engaging in a guiding and constructive way with a young person as they grow up. They do not develop the social skills necessary to get on and so in turn come into conflict with others who understand this merely to be an attitude problem.

In this respect, young people's experience at school and school's response to behaviour which does not adhere to social norms is key. Where schools are sensitive to individual starting points in terms of socialisation and learning at home, and provide interventions and support accordingly, it is possible to encourage engagement and a positive attitude to school. Otherwise young people's sense of failure and not fitting in can be compounded and the risk of engaging in delinquency increased. The need for positive relationships with adults is critical for developing self-esteem:

> *'If you are not being coached, for example, someone encourages you to look after yourself, you develop a bad sense of self. People are mutually dependent on each other.'*

For young people in care, the opportunities for developing necessary strong relationships with adults are greatly reduced, and, along with poor educational outcomes[22], this group is at greater risk of engaging in crime and imprisonment. One ex-offender described the situation in these terms:

> *'Although government statistics say 27% of inmates were in care, my experience is that half were, all had been abused.'*

Inmates from a care background are therefore particularly vulnerable in terms of establishing a social network in prison, and leaders within the prison population will seek them out to join their particular network, whether that be a criminal or radical religious group.

The linkages between gang membership and families, therefore, come back to the need to belong, discussed in section 3.3. However, the gang also meets other, more basic needs normally provided by a family:

> *'If you're doing it right, a gang gives you a sense of belonging, income and respect, food, shelter and warmth – consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs.'*

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[22] www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/264385/SFR50_2013_Text.pdf

4. Psychology and psychological approaches

4.1 Mental health and gang involvement

Mental health is an important related factor to gang involvement, either because young people with mental health conditions, such as autism, are particularly vulnerable and easily enticed into gang activity, or because the social and family circumstances which have pushed young people into gangs have also contributed to emotional stress and deteriorating mental health.

It is estimated around two thirds of referrals of young people to the police Prevent (Counter Terrorism Unit) programme have a mental health problem. In a recent high profile case, a 24-year old man from Wolverhampton, Christopher Phillips, was handed a one year prison sentence for inciting racial hatred[23]. Phillips, who had posted three videos on Youtube, including one where he was dressed in a Ku Klux Klan outfit, carrying out a mock hanging of a golliwog doll, suffered from Asperger Syndrome[24]. Although not typical, Phillips' case illustrates how some mental conditions can be a risk factor for gang involvement, and can manifest themselves in extreme behaviour.

The need to assess gang members for and address mental health problems can be overlooked because the focus is on the resultant behaviour. For example, drugs programmes might focus entirely on methods for reducing dependency, where the substance misuse may in fact be symptomatic of poor mental health. From this perspective, focussing attempts to wean individuals off drugs or alcohol can only be of temporary help if at all, if the fundamental condition or circumstances in which the young person is living is not addressed:

> *'I deliver training on substance misuse and focus on what the motivation is. For me it's about the carer's approach. Often the carer focuses on the symptom (eg drink) and thinks taking it away is solving the problem, but no one is looking at the real problem.'*

4.2 Adjusting the norms of acceptable behaviour

The world view and moral framework of gangs self-evidently differ from those of mainstream society, and so entering into a gang necessarily requires a change of behaviour on the part of the individual. A recent situation in Lichfield illustrates how young people can slip into deviant and even abusive behaviour as a gang develops. Having identified the growth disturbing behaviour among a group of young people, local police invited in a youth charity from Walsall to provide advice:

> *'The concern to the police was that the young people involved were starting to push the boundaries more, they were doing initiations.'*

These initiations consisted of activities which demonstrated extreme departures from pro-social behaviour, and which the young people involved for the most part had not been involved in before. These included standing still in order to be kicked by other members of the gang, having a female perform sex acts in public, and smashing police car windows. The activity was brought to an end when police identified the young people involved and spoke directly with their parents, informing them that arrests would be made if they continued, '*schools were informed, kids got scared, and parents clamped down.*'

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[23] www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/man-jailed-12-months-stirring-6481580
[24] www.autism.org.uk/about-autism/autism-and-asperger-syndrome-an-introduction/what-is-asperger-syndrome.aspx

In addition, individuals might be attracted to join a gang or extremist group because it helps them justify their behaviour, in particular where this involves exerting power over others. The case of Christopher Phillips described in section 4.1 is one such instance of this, and this may also explain the attraction to extreme forms of religion in some cases:

> 'Subscribing to an extreme version of Islam makes it ok to commit a crime if it's against kafir, for example, treating women as second class citizens.'

4.3 Desistance and associated interventions

Disengaging young people from gangs and delinquent behaviour is not an easy process. Professionals emphasise the need for the individual to be ready to move on before any intervention can be expected to have an impact:

> 'To engage young people onto more positive ways forward, they must be ready to make the move. Mentors can work in this context, but this is a necessary precondition.'

Indeed, if the conditions were not right, mentoring could be problematic on the grounds that an ex-gang member discussing their experiences could come across as glamorous to a young audience. The reason timing and readiness to move on is so important is because it is down to the individual to remove themselves from the gang environment and culture, they cannot be coerced or cajoled into doing so:

> 'In order to get young people out of a gang lifestyle there needs to be a strategy to provide an exit, to show a way out, not just an opportunity. For example, young people who I helped out worked with me but did it in their own time and with their own effort'

Mentoring is a favoured method for helping gang members disengage, and one by which professionals put most store. For the Prevent programme, for example, mentoring is the key intervention for helping people to desist from extremist discourse and actions. The service recruits nationally accredited mentors via the Home Office, including:

- those with previous experience as members of the EDL and British National Party (BNP)
- football fans
- moderate religious leaders whose familiarity with the Koran enables them to challenge extremist views and explore the actual text of the Koran with young people.

The focus on the Prevent programme is to 'challenge rhetoric':

> 'These are the most effective approaches. A lot of individuals haven't got a full picture and so being able to challenge them works. It is about giving people confidence to challenge religious ideology.'

In general, effective mentoring is understood to require, among other things:

- the individual to be ready to move away from gang activity
- credibility on the part of the mentor – someone who has 'been there'
- focussing the individual on their longer term future
- the mentor to identify and discuss the individual's positive behaviour
- the mentor to be skilled in questioning which prompts the individual to work through their own way forward
- the mentor only to discuss their experience when it is relevant to what the individual has to say.

Speaking with the individual away from the rest of their peer group is also important in order to make a connection through an alternative, more positive discourse. This example illustrates how mentoring on the street has worked in practice:

> 'We were speaking with a group of young people at the bus station about getting into work. Most of them were currently robbing and tatting[25]. When I spoke with one lad on his own, a father to be, away from the group, it was easier. He felt less need to show bravado. I asked him if he would want his child in a gang like that, he was shocked at the suggestion and didn't want that for his child.'

When family relationships are at stake, making simple connections with other family members can also be effective:

> 'There was a young person who hung around with the McFlurry Crew. Because I know him I said I would have a word with his dad.'

Police too have also had an impact when they have approached and engaged with parents, as in the Lichfield example described in section 4.2. However, it is the fact that youth workers very often come from the communities they are working in which gives them an added advantage in making family connections:

> 'We work well because we are local. I grew up in Walsall and I either know the young people themselves or I know their relatives.'

Collaboration between schools and voluntary services has seen youth workers go into the classroom to lead personal, social and health education (PSHE) sessions. The Street Teams Aware Project, for example, has proved to be very popular among pupils and staff. The programme consists of sessions on crime and punishment, drugs awareness and peer pressure:

> 'In the 'too much pressure' session we hit hard about the objectification of women and pornography. I would say 90% of kids on our project were users of pornography. 'Too much pressure' and 'crime and punishment' were the two most enjoyed sessions. Students were most impressed by the consequences of violent crime. We went into gaming habits and discussed Grand Theft Auto.'

Several initiatives have sought to strengthen relationships between generations and within communities through projects designed to engage young people in positive activities. These include:

- the organisation of football competitions by police officers
- the Fishing Academy[26], set up to engage young people 'on the periphery of crime and anti-social behaviour' through angling
- a litter / environmental campaign in Sandwell[27].

A targeted project to reduce tension between two postcode gangs was undertaken by the British Muslim Youth Group. Youth workers organised a residential in a youth hostel for young people from Delves and Caldmore who had been in conflict with each other. Over the course of a week, the young people participated together in a variety of activities and learned to work in teams with others from outside of their area:

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[25] collecting metal

[26] www.thefishingacademy.co.uk/History.html

[27] www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/getattachment/d26fbba6-0911-4d51-b2ac-b51ff1e1411d/Tipton-Litter-Watch,-Sandwell---Pride-in-Place--Ta.aspx

'When you bring them together they find they have more in common than not. Some of the viewpoints were challenged and some of those lads who may have had beef were friends afterwards. More stuff like that could work.'

On a more formal level, Sandwell LA has trailed call-ins as a way of reducing criminal behaviour. Based on a model developed in Cincinatti and piloted in this country in Enfield[28], a call-in is a meeting organised with gang members who have committed a crime, led by a judge (or in the case of Sandwell, the service manager for Targeted Youth Support) and attended by professionals from different services and people affected by gang behaviour. The purpose of the meeting is to make concrete for the offender the consequences of their criminal behaviour and advise them on the support they can access.

Youth workers also feel their contribution in advocacy of young people is very important for helping them back onto a constructive path. Youth workers' experience, and detailed understanding of an individual's circumstances, state of health and personal attributes, puts them in a strong position to help other professionals, in legal services and education for example, to make more informed and appropriate decisions:

'When you work as an advocate for young people who have committed a crime you have to help judges and magistrates justify not passing a prison sentence [when it is avoidable, and can do more harm than good].'

The effectiveness of interventions depends on the time and resources made available. For young people whose delinquent behaviour is deep-rooted, it requires professionals to be prepared to work with the individual for an extended period:

'As far as interventions are concerned, a twelve week intervention could possibly help an 'at-risk' young person, but is not enough for an individual who is deeply entrenched [in gang culture]*.'*

This obviously has implications for funding services and strategic planning. When these are not consistently in place, providing a stable framework for youth work, this leads to intermittent intervention delivery. The residential for rival gangs, for example, turned out in the end to be a one off:

'The funding was there at that time to deliver that year. There were government cuts. We couldn't keep that going.'

This issue is explored in more detail in section 5.3.

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[28] www.enfield.gov.uk/news/article/576/call-in_gang_clampdown_works-new_data_shows

5. Policy into practice at a local level

5.1 Agencies involved in local delivery

The different organisations involved locally in addressing the gangs / youth delinquency problem fall into two groups: statutory and non-statutory organisations. Statutory organisations include those with a specific remit to address crime and youth delinquency, ie the local authorities, police, and those statutory organisations which have an interest in co-operating in policy implementation and addressing the problem, such as local schools and colleges. Non-statutory bodies include a wide range of voluntary and charity organisations dedicated to supporting young people, foster care agencies, and other organisations with a wider remit than youth support and crime prevention, but with an interest in safe communities, such as housing associations. A list of agencies involved locally is provided in the table opposite.

Organisation	Description	Web address
Integrated Young People's Support Services (IYPSS)	Run by Walsall Council, and consists of several divisions including Targeted Youth Support, Youth Justice and Positive Activities	http://webwalsall.com/childrens-services/workforce/integrated-young-people-support-service/
Sandwell Youth Offending Team	a multi-agency team of professionals from children's, health, police and probation services working with young people who offend or at risk of offending	http://www.sandwell.gov.uk/info/200208/crime_prevention_and_emergencies/649/youth_offending
West Midlands Police	Targets gang activity through the Intervention Team, Prevent (Counter Terrorism Unit), and child exploitation and human trafficking operations	http://www.west-midlands.police.uk/
Walsall Housing Group (WHG)	Among services for tenant WHG provides services for community development and tackling anti-social behaviour	http://www.whg.uk.com/main.cfm
Street Teams	A youth charity operating in Walsall and Dudley supporting young people who are the victims of sexual exploitation	http://street-teams.org
British Muslim Youth Group	A voluntary organisation run by a probation officer, established to encourage young people to engage in positive activities such as sport and residentials	
The Fishing Academy	A charity run by a local police officer to engage young people in positive activities	www.thefishingacademy.co.uk
Worth Unilimited	A Christian charity, provides a range of youth services, including detached youth work on local estates, in school workshops and residentials	http://www.worthunlimited.co.uk/westmidlands.html#walsall
Foster Care Associates	An international company with offices in Tipton, provides advice and ongoing support for families who foster and foster children	http://www.thefca.co.uk/
NACRO	A national charity dedicated to crime reduction, in Walsall runs the Positive Activities for Young People Programme	www.nacro.org.uk
Schools	A range of support and parent liaison activities, including an attendance Intervention officer (Joseph Leckie)	http://cms.walsall.gov.uk/de/education_directory_october13.pdf
Training organisations	Provide training opportunities for young people and adults, with a specific remit to support people out of the mainstream - NOVA, Rathbone, Steps to Work and Juniper Training all operate locally	www.novatraining.co.uk www.rathbone.org www.stepstowork.co.uk www.junipertraining.co.uk
New Leaf Pupil Referral Unit	Facility for students with significant behavioural, emotional and social difficulties who have been permanently excluded from school	
Prospects	Offers careers advice and training services	www.connexionswalsall.co.uk

The list is far from exhaustive, but gives an idea of the range of services working to engage young people away from offending and gang lifestyles.

5.2 Creating coherent policy and delivery locally

Walsall Local Authority, as every other authority, develops policy on a range of well-being issues, including youth delinquency and gang activity, through the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA). With regards to young people, for example, the 2013 JSNA set prevention as a key focus, which:

> 'should be related to high quality education and training aimed at increasing the number of young people succeeding in education, thereby reducing the number who are disaffected'[29]

The body with responsibility for implementing the outcomes of the JSNA and for co-ordinating policy to tackle gangs (among other issues) locally is the Walsall Partnership[30]. The Partnership consists of six Area Partnerships (APs), which cover the borough. The purpose of the Area Partnerships is to:

> 'resolve the issues of most concern to communities by bringing delivery agencies, such as the police, the Council, NHS Walsall and Walsall Housing Group together with local people, to properly understand the problem and then take appropriate action.'

On the basis of local consultation the Area Partnerships draft community plans[31], setting out actions, and then evaluate impact.

In addition to the Area Partnerships, there is the Walsall Safeguarding Children Board (a statutory body existing in all English local authorities). If APs exist to plan and pro-actively to anticipate and tackle issues as they arise, Walsall Safeguarding Children Board deals with minimising the impact of abuse and criminal activity on young victims.

5.3 How policy is experienced at local level

There is a large degree of collaboration between agencies, and between agencies and communities, which result in a variety of creative and effective interventions to disrupt gang activity and violence. Through this collaboration, professionals from across organisations have developed positive working relationships and complementary practice. The police in Walsall, in particular, are very well networked with key youth workers and co-ordinate their work accordingly. However, circumstances at the strategic level can have a disruptive affect on the smooth running of services which address the gang issue. Uncertain and sporadic streaming of funding is a particular concern, as is the related issue of changing priorities and competing demands for the attention of key decision makers in the local authority. In addition, changes to the law centrally is felt to be removing the flexibility needed in individual cases to support gang members back onto a positive path.

The Targeted Youth Support team in Walsall has good working relationships with the police, community police support officers and park managers. These professionals work together to work with young people who are referred to them by the Youth Justice Board because they have been issued with anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs). On the one hand this has had the effect of changing the way young people regard youth workers:

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[29] http://cms.walsall.gov.uk/walsall_jsna_refresh_draft_10.pdf
[30] http://walsallpartnership.org.uk
[31] http://walsallpartnership.org.uk/walsall-partnership/area-community-plans-2/

> *'We are being seen as more authoritative these days because of the responsibilities to reduce anti-social behaviour. We speak to young people because they have been targeted for anti-social behaviour and they know that's why we are there.'*

On the other hand this targeted working has had a positive impact on the reduction of anti-social behaviour being committed[32].

Referral, as it happens for example with Targeted Youth Support and Prevent, is felt to be a key mechanism for ensuring the appropriate help and support is provided to young people, based on their individual needs, and in a timely way. Youth workers would like to see smarter, consistent approaches to referral and assessment occurring across the piece:

> *'There should be an emphasis on referral and assessment, and intervention and practice based on these. For example, if the problem is extremism in schools, we should be looking at misinformation students are getting from the internet* [and challenging that].

On the whole, the Area Partnerships in Walsall are felt to work well. They provide a focus which guides the way professionals work, as well as the means for contributing to decision-making on priorities. For some youth workers the AP is the main forum they have to co-ordinate their work with other agencies. However, one drawback is that APs tend to focus on their geographical area only, missing the opportunity to create a bigger picture. There is a lack of intelligence sharing across APs, which can be a particular hindrance when youth workers are tackling postcode gang incidents, for example. It is felt that they could contribute considerably more to controlling gang activity if there was a system whereby intelligence was pooled and shared across all six Partnerships, to provide a wider context for understanding local work.

With regard to strategic planning, not all youth service organisations feel they are included in the process, and often inclusion in strategic discussions is a matter of the connections you have:

> *'It's who you know whether we get support. As a voluntary agency it has taken time to be recognised. We sit on local operational and strategic reports. We are plugged in and that is massively important.'*

Among charities in particular, there is a sense that they can be detached from forward planning processes, and are more likely to be called upon once a problem has occurred or is immanent. Voluntary groups feel their expertise could be exploited more by being involved in local policy making, as well as planning the implementation of national and local policy. This, coupled with intermittent funding, can lead to a sense of frustration that hard work done on the ground is not accumulating to a consistent approach to tackling youth delinquency and crime:

> *'All we ever seem to do is fire fight. We lost our prevention funding three years ago, when we had riots in 2011. It all went quiet. The onus is back on the schools* [who are now asked] *what have you done about knives?'*

> *'You have to have a long term vision. We are talking generational stuff now. We should aim to break a cycle. A generation which has seen a lot of prevention stuff, they have to educate the next generation. Don't throw a lot of money at it and take it away.*

Some youth work agencies also feel there can be political inertia or even unwillingness to face up to the scale and nature of problems locally:

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[32] www.walsalladvertiser.co.uk/Council-thanks-work-youth-support-anti-social/story-20856968-detail/story.html

> *'Another key thing is early identification of potential gang members. I think people are blinkered to the fact this happens locally.'*

Increased consultation with all stakeholders, it is felt, could lead to a more efficient targeting of resources beyond what is already being achieved. Lack of awareness of the importance of postcode rivalry at the planning stage, for example, led to a £5.5 million youth and training centre located in the Blakenall area of Walsall being underused. It was difficult to encourage young people from outside of Blakenall to travel there and take advantage of the facility:

> *'The whole thing was postcode-related. When we're talking about gangs, if a group of kids live on the Beechdale they won't hang around in Caldmore.'*

Finally, many youth workers also express concern over increasing control centrally over judicial decisions, which is reducing the scope of response to gang-related activity. Recent law making, such as the introduction of the concept of Joint Enterprise, and calls to increase mandatory sentencing on knife possession, are felt to be closing down opportunities for youth workers to steer young people through and out of a criminal phase in their lives.

> *'The criminal justice system is structured in a way there is a risk of young people* [being drawn into criminality unnecessarily]*, for example being sentenced to five years imprisonment for carrying a knife, or under-18s being used to carry weapons as mandatory sentencing only applies to over 18s.'*

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