

Briefing: youth work and gangs

This briefing examines the nature of gangs – and the response that youth workers can make. It is an outcome of exploration by workers and others involved in the Rank Foundation's youth work network.

Gangs have been a focus for British youth work for a century and more. In the 1890s, for example, new types of urban gangs appeared with their own styles and language. Often with colourful names – Peaky Blinders (Birmingham), the Bowry Boys (east London) and the Bengal Tiger (Manchester) – these groups, the way they dressed, and the things they got up to, sparked a series of stories in the press. There was concern about the level of violence involved and the threat to order posed. For the first time newspapers made the familiar link between dress and delinquency.

Many of those working among young people at the time understood that all was not what it seemed in the press. They knew that there were very different types of gangs – some simply the product of youthful high spirits, others having a base in deep-seated social problems. Furthermore, through listening to young people and looking at what was going on, early workers like Charles Russell saw that involvement could both bring fun and a sense of belonging; and that it could also be damaging for individual young people, their families and local communities.

Over the intervening years there have been periodic panics about gangs – and we are in the midst of one now. Media attention on gun and knife crime (especially that directed at, or committed by, young people) has highlighted possible links with gang membership and organized crime. However, there is still a lot of confusion. What is a gang? What is the impact of membership of gangs? In this short briefing paper we look at some of these issues – and the nature of the youth work response – especially in terms of how it has developed within the Rank youth work network.

What is a gang?

When we look at how the word 'gang' is used it is often just another way of referring to a group of friends – people who hang around and do things together. Historically, the term was associated with work – often being applied to a group of workers e.g. a gang of labourers. However, when gangs become a focus of media and research attention they tend to be:

1. Structured around criminal activity.
2. 'Street-oriented'.
3. Linked with particular areas or territories.
4. Fairly structured and organized – often with a fairly stable membership.

5. Made up of young people (commonly between the ages of 8 and 25 years).

It is this sort of gang that we focus on in this briefing.

Traditionally, such gangs were male – and often developed along lines of 'race' and ethnicity. Gang membership and territory may also be marked by the use of different signs: tags, colours, clothing and so on.

More recently workers and researchers have noted the involvement of young women and the development of some 'girls only' gangs. Workers are also commenting on the growing numbers of children involved in gangs; and the way in which they appear to have become more 'racially' mixed in some areas.

Gangs of this kind are not widespread in Britain (especially when compared to the United States). However, they are a particular problem in a number of areas in which Rank network agencies work.

Why do young people join gangs?

Young people join gangs for a number of reasons. Some feel pressured and seek protection. They want to avoid getting into difficulties around their neighbourhood. Others look for a sense of belonging and identity; a structure; and an environment in which relationships can be formed. Furthermore, gang membership can also offer a source of income – a way of making money where other avenues seem closed.

These are attractive things in neighbourhoods where young people feel (and are) marginalized – and where family and social structures are under strain. Part of this strain flows directly from growing inequalities in wealth (with significant numbers of people feeling that they will never have a decent share in the wealth of the country). A further factor is that many young people believe that it is very difficult to get out of the situation they are in. This is not just that they may lack a vision of what is possible. Social mobility appears to have declined. Today, more than for many years, young people's futures are strongly determined by their background and upbringing. In addition, physical mobility may well be restricted – with workers reporting that many young people in more troubled neighbourhoods are scared about going outside their areas.

The impact of gangs

While membership of gangs can bring significant short-run benefits in terms of identity and income, there are major downsides for the individuals involved – as many workers and ex-members report. First, and rather obviously, it makes them targets for attack by other gangs. As well as being perpetrators of crime they can quickly become victims. Second, and equally obvious, their involvement in criminal activity attracts the attention of police and the justice system. As a result there is much greater likelihood of their finding themselves in prison – and hence being further marginalized and disadvantaged. Third, gang involvement alters people's life chances –

especially if they are active for a number of years. Life around gangs starts to define people in terms of criminal activity, and the behaviour expected of them. It also cuts them off from other networks and activities that could make them less marginalized.

We also know that membership of, or hanging about with, gangs can have a very negative effect on families. This might flow from changes in behaviour because of an increased usage of alcohol and street drugs. However, it could come from fear for their own safety; damage and harassment; or having to deal with the injury or death of the family member involved in a gang.

Gang activity can sometimes benefit a neighbourhood – bringing money from criminal activity into the local economy. However, it has an overwhelmingly negative impact. It creates an unsafe and depressing environment – not just for children and young people – but also for other members of the community. People worry about intimidation, vandalism and the quality of community life. More seriously they are concerned about the direct threat of violence and the dangers facing local children.

The youth work response

Youth workers and agencies within the Rank Foundation youth work network classically offer five things:

Sanctuary. Workers offer a safe space away from the pressures of street life, the local neighbourhood and the family. One of the things most valued by young people is the extent to which they provide a second home: a place where young people are valued, respected and have choice. This appeals both to those around gangs and those who are not.

Relationship, structure and community. These organizations and groups create environments where friendships and relationships of different kinds can grow. In particular, they offer contact with, and support from, adults who care and respect them. They are settings where young people can learn how to take their place in community.

Role-models. The workers, helpers and many of the young people involved in the projects provide concrete examples of people taking another path – one that opens up other opportunities. As such they offer a 'light at the end of the tunnel'.

New experiences and opportunities for personal development. Projects within the network offer a range of activities and opportunities that help those involved to look beyond their immediate environment and to think about their lives. These range from trips to theatres and museums through to sailing on tall ships and going on study visits to other countries. Emphasis is placed upon finding the right moments to help people to reflect upon their experiences and to think about where they could be headed.

Developing skills and making change. Last, but not least, many of the projects involved in the network help people to develop particular skills, and support them while looking for work and undertaking further training. A number

have initiatives that help people to set up their own businesses and enterprises.

Five important things need to be said about this work:

It takes place in the context of work with other young people in the neighbourhood. It is part of open provision that seeks to be inclusive and not isolate one group from another.

Many of the young people attracted to these opportunities are either on the edges of gangs or live in areas where they could easily be drawn in gang activity. Some have been heavily involved. All *choose* to be involved and this makes different sorts of work possible.

It looks to diversion and prevention as well as to working with those already involved in gangs.

Agencies have not been constrained by targeted funding; they have had the resources to respond flexibly.

These projects are working over the long-term and flow from groups and organizations that are part of, and committed to, the local community. They are, thus, able to develop relationships that many other agencies approaches cannot.

Mark K. Smith

Further reading

Hirsch, B. J. (2005) *A Place to Call Home. After-school programs for urban youth*. New York: Teachers College Press. Excellent study of work in some American clubs.

Margo, J., Dixon, M., Pearce, N. and Reed, H. (2006) *Freedom's Orphans: Raising youth in a changing world* London: Institute for Public Policy Research. Overview of the issues facing young people – and the policy challenges.

Savage, J. (2007) *Teenage. The creation of youth 1875-1945*. London: Chatto and Windus. Fascinating and readable account of the development of 'youth'.

Thornberry, T. P., Krohn, M. D., Lizotte, A. J., Smith, C. A., and Tobin, K. (2003). *Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. Useful American overview.

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