Peer groups, street gangs and organised crime in the narratives of adolescent male offenders

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore how young people who offend with others define delinquent and criminal groups and consider the social risk factors associated with gang membership and criminal exploitation.

Design/methodology/approach – The sample consisted of 15 young people who were purposively sampled from a group of 14- to 17-year-old males who had been identified as at risk of gang involvement and referred to a community-based programme. Using a social identity framework, a thematic analysis was undertaken to investigate how the participants viewed their role in offending as part of a group.

Findings – The participants identified peer groups, street gangs and the involvement of adult criminals as distinct categories of offending groups. Unlike prior models for gang involvement, some members of the sample were involved in multiple groups to perform different categories of crime. Importantly, participants displayed an awareness of exploitation and described successful exit strategies from criminal groups.

Research limitations/implications – Understanding how young people who are involved in delinquent behaviour and offending define gang and group offending.

Practical implications – The implications for gang and group offending prevention and intervention programmes are discussed.

Originality/value – The literature on child criminal exploitation and UK drug markets is in its infancy. This paper offers further evidence for the processes of joining and leaving delinquent and criminal groups.

Keywords Qualitative research, County lines, Child criminal exploitation, Delinquent peer groups, OCGs, Street gangs

Paper type Research paper

Background

Criminal groups

The UK Government has recognised the role of gangs in a violent offending and criminal enterprise (HM Government, 2011, 2016). The vulnerability of young people to criminal exploitation by gangs and their involvement in the sale and trafficking of drugs is also acknowledged (HM Government, 2016; Windle et al., 2020). This change in strategy (HM Government, 2006) was centred around the relatively new and expanding phenomenon of “county lines”; the expansion of the drugs market beyond urban centres to provincial UK regions (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Densley et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019). However, it remains the case that one of the most contentious and troublesome issues in the field of gang research is how to define a gang (Bennett and Holloway, 2004; Curry, 2015; Klein, 2001; Pitts, 2008), and importantly what differentiates gangs from other delinquent networks (Esbensen et al., 2001; Goldman, et al., 2014; Klein, 2001; Wood and Alleyne, 2010). Ball and Curry (1995) suggested that gang researchers would do better to focus on the...
“abstract, formal characteristics of the phenomenon” rather than seeking an absolute definition. This is particularly important for gang research in the UK, where it is widely acknowledged that there are notable differences in the composition gangs compared to the USA (Bennett and Holloway, 2004; Curry, 2015).

A key issue is that gang structures and features vary considerably, making it difficult to identify gang members (Klein and Maxson, 2006; Pyrooz et al., 2013). The wearing of identifiable clothing or “colours” and the use of group-specific signs have been included in some gang definitions, for example, the US National Institute of Justice Federal Definition and the US National Gang Centre (Curry et al., 2014; Klein and Maxson, 2006). However, not all definitions include these features (Matsuda et al., 2013). The Eurogang Project provided a more general and inclusive definition of a gang as a “durable street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Klein and Maxson, 2006; Weerman et al., 2009). However, one UK-based study found that very few gangs had a strong street presence, largely because young people spend considerable time indoors (Aldridge et al., 2012). Another key issue to emerge from this study was that the concept of “group identity” was problematic and difficult to define.

More broadly, UK gang definitions have been influenced by academic and political responses to the problem in the US, with an emphasis on four key characteristics “crime, durability, territoriality and structure” (Pitts, 2008). In response to the variance in the composition of gangs and delinquent groups, a number of typologies have been proposed. Two of these typologies include a category of “wannabe” who differ from street gangs and criminal enterprises in their lack of structure and organisation (Pitts, 2008; Klein, 2001), on the other hand, recognised different categories of a gang, differentiated by size, longevity, territory and criminal activity. The authors of a UK-based study distinguished three separate categories of the criminal group: Peer groups, which are unorganised but share a common space and history, without a focus on criminality. Gangs, which they defined as an identifiable and relatively stable but unorganised group of young people with criminal behaviour forming an integral part of their identity. Finally, organised crime groups, who are professionally involved in illegal trade (Hallsworth and Young, 2004).

Other researchers see these categories as part of a process to explain the pathway to gang involvement (Densley, 2012, 2014). Recreational, delinquent groups who are associated to gangs through friends and family ties; the formation of crime gangs, when criminal identity becomes an important group feature; enterprise, when crime becomes instrumental rather than expressive; and extra-legal government, describing the main drug suppliers (Densley, 2014). Previous studies (Densley, 2012; Whittaker et al., 2018) have shown a hierarchy of involvement with an “inner circle” of adults, typically guided by one individual and rarely seen by those who are lower in the hierarchy. The “elders”, who consist of late adolescents and young adults, are responsible for running the enterprises at street level. Finally, the “youngers” who are aged between 12 to 16 years of age.

Additional complexity is that even within the same gang, roles and the level of embeddedness vary for individuals and can change over time (Ashton et al., 2018; Dmitrieva et al., 2014; Pyrooz et al., 2013; Wood and Alleyne, 2010). In general, research has demonstrated that gang membership is associated with increased offending, violence and cannabis use (Battin et al., 1998; Bennett and Holloway, 2004). Additionally, gang members are exposed to heightened social and psychological risks both during and post involvement, (Ashton et al., 2020; Decker and Lauritsen, 2002; Sweeten et al., 2013). These findings have implications for the design of gang interventions and the monitoring of those who have left a gang.

McLean’s (2017) evolving gang model in Scotland identified three levels of involvement or embeddedness for gang membership. The first represents the “young street gang”, which the author describes as a recreational stage and manifests as delinquent rather than
criminal behaviour amongst peers. This group can also be involved in the sale of drugs to local networks and peers (Holligan et al., 2020). Some young people progress to membership of a “young crime gang”, which consists of territorial core members for the street gang for whom offending becomes a central part of the group identity. Finally, the “serious organised crime group” involves adult membership and a shift from the focus of protecting a territory to increased financial rewards. Importantly, the author references individual differences, which determine whether a young person progresses to the next stage of the model; however, these are not discussed in any detail. The profile and role of the individual in the gang are often neglected (Wood and Alleyne, 2010). Certain individuals present a higher risk of involvement on account of specific psychological and social risk factors.

Risk factors

Social risk factors that are associated with gang membership and exploitation include family, school, peers and neighbourhood (Densley, 2012; Hesketh, 2018; Spicer, 2020). The impact of early adverse childhood experiences, parental violence and drugs, behavioural disorders and social deprivation are also acknowledged as risks; school exclusion and repeat hospital visits for violent victimisation are recognised as indicators (Cottrell-Boyce, 2013; HM Government, 2011). Family members can act as either a risk or protective factor for gang involvement, directly through membership but equally through parenting style and supervision (Aldridge et al., 2012). Gang membership is also associated with negative psychological traits, such as higher levels of mood disorders, rumination (Frisby-Osman and Wood, 2020), lack of impulse control and higher levels of psychopathy (Ashton et al., 2020).

Prior studies have cited the lack of access to legitimate economies as a key driver for gang membership and victimisation through criminal exploitation (Andell, 2019; Densley, 2013; Hesketh and Robinson, 2019; Irwin-Rogers, 2019). UK studies have demonstrated that there has been a shift of focus from territory to the marketplace and an awareness among young people who are gang-affiliated that there is a need to conceal their identity rather than advertising it through the wearing of colours (Whittaker, 2018).

As noted, the current UK Government strategy recognises the exploitation of children and young people by adult gangs. The grooming process for child criminal exploitation involves three separate elements: Incentives in the form of designer goods, physical violence and debt bondage (Hesketh and Robinson, 2019). Young people who have been involved with adult criminals consistently report suffering from intimidation and emotional abuse (Moyle, 2019; Storrod and Densley, 2017; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015). Criminals prey on a perceived lack of opportunity offering an alternative and lucrative lifestyle (Irwin-Rogers, 2019). They also exploit the desire for excitement by recounting stories of their violent exploits to increase their credibility amongst potential recruits (Whittaker et al., 2018). Social media is an instrument for recruiting and retaining young people’s involvement in criminal enterprises and is dominated by images of money and status (Irwin-Rogers, 2019). A recent study in Waltham Forest London reported adult gang members using tracking technology on phones to monitor the movements of younger people who were selling drugs (Whittaker et al., 2018). It is not only young people who are already involved in low levels of criminality but also drug dealing who are at risk from adult offenders. Interviews with those involved in county lines indicated that adult criminals approach young people who have no criminal record (Hesketh and Robinson, 2019).

Research on child criminal exploitation and county lines is still in its infancy (Windle et al., 2018). Practitioners and professionals are given a much greater voice in many of the recent studies, which have very small numbers of young people who are directly involved, (Robinson, McClean, Densley, 2019; Whittaker et al., 2018). Furthermore, the study of gangs has been dominated by sociological approaches to explain the phenomenon (Wood and Alleyne, 2010).
Researchers have also suggested that a combination of quantitative and qualitative research would enhance our understanding of youth gangs (Hughes, 2005; Wood, 2014).

**Aims**

The study has the following objectives: To explore how young people define gang and group offending; to investigate social risk factors associated with young people who are criminally exploited.

**Methodology**

**Sample and procedure**

15 Participants were purposively sampled from a group of 14 to 18-year-old males who had been referred to a community-based programme for violent offending or gang involvement in Northern England. To be included in this study participants were required to have reported offending in the presence of at least one other person. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Health, Social Care & Medicine Ethics Committee at Edge Hill University. Researchers explained the project to youth workers at the host organisation and provided information sheets for potential participants. If the participant was under 16 years of age consent from their parent/carer was required before approaching the young person. The youth worker and researcher ran through the information sheet and consent form with the young person and reminded each of the participants that the involvement in the project was voluntary. Participants were also reminded when signing the consent form and again before the interview that declarations of homicide, sexual offences and terrorism would be reported to the authorities.

**Method**

The research used semi-structured interviews in which the participant was asked to describe a delinquent or criminal act that occurred in the presence of at least one other person. In particular, they were asked to recall what they were doing and feeling before, during and after the event. Environment and situation are influenced by individual perspectives (Presser, 2009). In this regard, exploring the personal interpretation of a crime and its significance to the perpetrator present an important opportunity (Ferrell, 1999). The interviews were on average 60 minutes and were audio-recorded; they were later transcribed verbatim and anonymised to protect the participants’ identities.

**Data analysis**

Using a social identity framework, a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was undertaken to investigate the participant’s point of view. We chose an interpretative approach to reconstruct the “implicit theories” (Ross, 1989) of the participants in social science research, which can emerge through semi-structured interviewing. According to Charmaz’s (2006), we adopted a constructivist perspective, which valorises the researcher’s role as a “co-constructor of meaning” who tries to avoid constraining the participants’ answers within predefined categories (Bussu et al., 2016). The coding and analysis were carried out by two researchers using ATLAS.ti, but throughout the coding process there was continuous feedback from the whole research team (internal coding).

The research team adopted a rigorous approach to coding and analysis and avoiding, at the same time, the loss of valuable information. The coding and analysis were carried out by two researchers (internal coding). Using ATLAS.ti codification carried out on three levels (open code; axial coding; selective coding) to reach a definition of main code (core category) of the primary documents uploaded in the hermeneutic unit (HU). The HU
provides the data structure for each project in ATLAS.ti and includes all data collected by interviews.

To examine the main findings, ATLAS.ti networks were used. Every code in each network included two numbers: the first number represented the frequency of a given code within the interviews recorded; the second number referred to the number of direct associations. In all networks are provided quotations linked to a given code that represents the segment from the document codified. Furthermore, in the results session are provided relevant participant extracts by tables.

The interpretation process was iterative and progressive and often “went back” to reflect on various conceptual issues to unveil new and significant aspects (Bussu et al., 2016). Finally, to ensure a robust methodology, Seale’s (1999) research quality criteria was also respected (Appendix) with theme saturation point (Walker et al., 2016) reached after 15 semi-structured interviews.

Findings

A macro analysis of the data identified 2 key themes that were clearly evident across the corpus of data emerged from the interviews: definitions of different offending groups according to the young people in the sample and the identification of criminogenic social risk factors. Our HU of ATLAS.ti as described in the methodology section provided 18 families, 288 codes and 45 memos. Below is a synthesis of the core of data by a network.

Definitions of offending groups

Table 1 shows the category of crime narrative or narratives that the participants shared with the researchers. A range of income-generating, violent and thrill-seeking activities were found. The second column indicates whether participants self-identified as being involved in a delinquent peer group, street gang or OCG and the third column reveals whether the young person committed their narrative offence in the presence of an older offender. The second phase of interviews demonstrated that we had researched the saturation of responses in terms of involvement of peers and older criminals.

Participants differentiated three classifications of delinquent/criminal groups, as illustrated in network 1: organised crime groups (OCGs), street gangs and peer groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime narrative(s)</th>
<th>Group membership</th>
<th>Older offender involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possession with intent to supply Class A drugs</td>
<td>OCG</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary abandoned building and theft</td>
<td>Peer</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft of a motorbike</td>
<td>Peer</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possession Class B drugs</td>
<td>Peer</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal damage</td>
<td>Peer</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang fight; robbery and assault</td>
<td>OCG and street gang</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoplifting</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary abandoned building and criminal damage</td>
<td>Peer</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving in a stolen car</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>Street gang</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>Street gang</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery and possession of a class B drug</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal damage and throwing fireworks</td>
<td>Peer</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaking into a building site</td>
<td>Peer</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arson and carjacking</td>
<td>OCG</td>
<td>No for arson yes for carjacking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *In the narrative crime
Organised crime groups

A significant and frequently used narrative related to the definition of an Organised Crime Group (code OCG 14 quotations, Figure 1). Participants sometimes defined OCGs by distinguishing them from other criminal groups, for example, they are not a “pop-up gang” with a group of mates (see Table 2, Q1). Their structure was referenced by Participant 1, who initially believed he had a future working with the organisation (Table 2, Q2). However, he also spoke about being physically abused and conditioned (Table 2, Q3). Participants 12 (Figure 1, quotation 12:47) and 6 (Table 2, Q4) referenced elders (“older people”); the latter distinguished elder involvement from his association with a street-level gang, describing himself as a victim of grooming, a process that was referenced 4 times by participants (Figure 1). In addition to being associated with criminality through family connections, participant 6 believed that the adults identified him as vulnerable because he had been selling cannabis with friends to fund his own habit and described how they enticed him with the promise of money and gifts (Table 2, Q4). He also described how the adults in the OCG incriminated him, by passing him firearms and ammunition to walk around with.

Some participants highlighted how difficult it had been to disengage from an OCG (code OCG: impossible leaving and change 2 quotations). For participant 15 leaving was associated with disrespecting the group (Figure 1, quotation 15.44). However, a related concept to emerge from the data was OCG and turning point (8 quotations), which was ostensibly the start of a process of desistance from the criminal group. Participant 1 (Table 2, Q2) reflected that he did not trust the OCG members and wondered if they had in fact set him up to be arrested. Participant 6 said that he decided to leave the OCG within 1 to 2 years because his 13-year-old girlfriend became pregnant and that he no longer wanted to engage in risky criminal behaviour. Initially, he stayed at home but then told the group that he no longer wanted to be involved because of his new relationship. After threatening him and his family, the young person pointed out to the adults that he would be equally culpable if he went to the police because of the violent acts he had committed. After following the code of the group and not going to the police he described how the adults as still acknowledge and respect him with recognition and to a degree affection. Participant 2 (Figure 1, quotation 2.20) reflected that becoming involved with a criminal group and the associated activities was a mistake, he, therefore, wanted to engage with a programme and change his life.

Figure 1  Network 1: definitions of the type of criminal groups
Street gangs

A significant and frequently used narrative related to the definition of a Street Gang (code street gang definition, 18 quotations, Figure 1). Participant 1 associated street gangs with a group of friends roaming the streets, looking for opportunities to commit violence and criminal damage, using the term “pop-up gang” (Table 3, Q5). The members of a street gang were described as people who go out fighting with guns and knives selling drugs (Figure 1, quotation 13.33; 12.40). They were distinguished from OCGs because they were not “strong criminals” committing “big robberies” (Figure 1, quotation 14.28), nor do street gangs exist to make “serious fucking money” (Table 3, Q5). This sentiment was repeated by participant 15, who described street gang members as “kids”, “little scruffs” and “street robbers” (Table 3, Q6). Participant 14 also referenced opportunistic street robberies for phones and explained that some young people did this because they were living in poverty (Figure 1, quotation 14:28 and 14.31). Fighting, carrying weapons and selling drugs was also connected to being in a gang (Figure 1, quotation 13.33). These activities could be both planned and opportunistic.

The number of people in a street gang varied between “10–15” (Figure 1, quotation 14.28) to “hundreds” (Table 3, Q7). The discrepancy may relate to different activities, with lower numbers of a group going out to commit a robbery and larger numbers attending a gang fight; 4 of the participants made reference to having been involved in a large gang fight in a
local park the previous year. What distinguished the street gang from OCGs was familiarity. Members came from the same “postcode” or “estate” (Figure 1, quotations 12.40 and 14.28) and were described as “group of people you chill with or a gang” (Table 3, Q8).

A number of participants were keen to distinguish between their group and American gangs (Table 3, Q14), although participant 10 reported that his gang “used to throw up signs and that” (Table 3, Q7). None of the young people wore gang colours, but participant 14 made reference to the dark clothes that street gang members wore when they went out to commit robberies (Figure 1, quotation 14.28). Participant 6 distinguished between “gangsters” and “kids” who make money from selling drugs and who rap; a reference to the increased number of gang music videos online (Table 3, Q9).

**Peer groups**

Another significant and frequently used narrative was related to the definition of a Peer Group (code Peer group/Group 15 quotations, 3 nodes, Figure 1). Peer groups were associated with delinquency. In this regard, participant 6 defined youth peer groups as “chasing people off places and going mad at the people in places” (Table 4, Q10). Peers shared a sense of reciprocal solidarity and support from other peer group members, but with a degree of social pressure involved (Table 4, Q11, Q12). A key difference between co-offending peers and street gang members was trust. Participant 10 said that as leaving a gang if he wanted to “start something me and my 10 close mates we all do it together because that’s how I know I can trust them” (Figure 1, quote 10:18).

Another interesting concept was outgroup (code Outgroup, 6 quotations, Figure 1), used to describe people who were outside of the immediate network of the young person, useful sometimes for business. This could involve postcode rivalry or locals who were described as the “weirdos” or the “local pisshead”. Furthermore, in the case of participant number 6 who broke into an abandoned building, he described a “random guy” who informed the group of the abandoned pool hall. This adds a new element of involvement, “outside of peers or criminal groups” – a local person from an out-group who alerted the young people of the opportunity to act. Finally, it emerged that for our participants street gang was considered different from peer group and outgroup (Table 4, Q13 and Q14).

**Social risk factors for young people**

Participants identified a number of social risk factors (Figure 2) in particular relating to different groups who are young “crime facilitation” and specifically: “older criminal” (code

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ref.</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>“Yeah, it wasn’t more or less like a gang activity – gang activities are more or less like, with me, are, like, chasing people off places and that and, like, going mad at people in places and then when we were younger, it was more or less pissing about in public places, acting like a little bastard and you were getting security chasing you and you used to buzz off it, people like – ‘Oh yeah, getting a chase with security’”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>“I thought it was more or less shock, ‘cause I was like, ‘Why do they need me there?’ and they were just like, ‘Well, you need you to come. You need to come, you need to back your boys and that.’ I was like, right, I’ll just come to make sure none of my, like, closer mates is getting, like, hurt and then it just, when we got there like I say, I was expecting, like, 10 people. There was too many, basically”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>“If I hadn’t done anything, I probably would have got laughed at by all the people I was with”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>“I don’t know, you could say I’m in it but I’m not in one really ‘cause we don’t class ourselves as a gang, we class ourselves as a . . . not like a community, like an area”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>“It’s just being part of a gang in how they put it like we don’t go out shooting people like what you see in America and that, we’re just mates that have got each other’s backs, innit”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
older people influence, 17 quotations) “peer group” (code peer group, 15 quotations); family facilitation (code family facilitation, 11 quotations).

Some young people also described being manipulated or coerced into criminal behaviour by peers (code peer involvement, 10 quotations). Participant 6, for example, described being pressurised by his peers to go to a gang fight, eventually agreeing to take part he said, “I’ll come but I’m doing nothing”. Participant 10 also described social pressure from his peers (Figure 2, quotation 10.14). He did but for the offence his anger instigated it. Finally, participant 1 described peer involvement in wider adult criminal exploitation (Table 5, Q15).

When older people were referred to by the participants, it was typically in the context of adult criminals who were sometimes friends but not family members. Older people were described as manipulative and persuasive (code older people influence, quotations 1.63; 15.33; 15.41; 10.31 Figure 2) and on reflection, several participants voiced a negative perception of them (code older people negative perception, 4 quotations, Figure 2).

Developing young offender self-awareness of adult criminal manipulation could be an important aspect in youth offending behaviour programmes. Another important preventive aspect, that participants highlighted was of “lack solidarity” amongst group members (codes peer group 15 quotations and peer: amongst peers, there are no solidarity, 4 quotations). A number of the participants described leaving their co-offenders; participant 2 ensured that his accomplice was in possession of the stolen items so that he would not be arrested; participant 5 reported “well obviously I went home, I didn’t want to get caught”; and participant 6 said that he fled from the gang fight as soon as he saw the police arriving.

Adult criminals who were related to the young people formed a separate network. In effect, another important risk factor is the “family crime facilitation” (code network family facilitation, 11 quotations; code adult network crime facilitation, 3 quotations). Participant 6 was aware of his family’s involvement with crime and cited the normalisation of serious crime in the family (Table 5, Q16 and Table 2, Q1). Participants 1 and 6 described being exploited by an organised crime group/gang and were now conscious of this process (code criminal exploitation, 4 quotations, Table 5, Q17). In the case of participant 6, he reported a conversation with his father, who was an organised crime group member, telling his son that
OCGs exploit children. Criminal skill training by both adults and peers was mentioned (“training and peer testing”) (code training tested by criminals, 4 quotations). Training as part of a grooming process by OCG members was described by 2 participants (Figure 2, quote 1.58 and Table 5, Q17).

Finally, a key risk factor for offending was a deprived living context (code background: deprived area 1 quotation, see Figure 2 and Table 5, Q18). Social deprivation and lack of opportunity were referenced by participant 1 (Figure 2, quotation 1.76). In addition to a family, participant 6 also mentioned his postcode as an environmental risk: “we did not have a choice” and the way in which he was raised “brought up like a little poor scruff on the streets”. He also spoke about wider social influences: “rappers [...] money, birds and like fit girls on videos”.

**Discussion**

Both street gangs and peer groups were described as people from the same housing estate or postcode and many of the participants rejected the idea of a street gang, preferring to describe themselves and others as groups of friends. One key difference between gangs and groups of friends was that friends were loyal to each other and could be trusted, as described by participant 10. A problem with the current street gang models and definitions are that many peer groups, which are identified as the first stage in a number of gang models (Densley, 2012, 2014; Hallsworth and Young, 2004; McLean, 2017), commit criminal offences when they are together. It was the category of offence committed by our sample that differed from those who were involved in street gangs. Peer groups often sought thrill-seeking activities (Table 1) such as breaking into abandoned buildings which then led to criminal damage and theft in two cases that were described by our participants. Those who stated that they were in a street gang distinguished themselves on account of planned acts of violence in the form of fighting, assault or robbery. Furthermore, neither the street gangs nor peer groups that were described existed solely to commit the crime, rather criminal involvement was part of shared normality of existence. This finding corresponds with that of Aldridge et al. (2012), who questioned the validity of...
the concept of illegal activity “group identity” (Klein and Maxson, 2006; Weerman et al., 2009). None of the samples suggested that they fitted into the “wannabe” category (Pitts, 2008). We found quite the opposite, young people who were involved in violent income-generating crimes denied that this was part of a street gang. The motivation for the delinquent acts committed by peers was fun, even when these were violent.

The Hallsworth and Young (2004) model did not fit what was described by our participants, which possibly reflects developments in social media, organised crime and the drug market (Whittaker et al., 2018). Nor were the street gangs and delinquent peer groups notably different in size or criminality (Klein, 2001). Rather than describing a progression from one level of group offending to another (Densley, 2012, 2014; McLean, 2017), young people could belong to different groups for distinct activities. There were also those who belonged to a delinquent peer group, whose purpose was to “chill” and take part in thrill-seeking activities, who showed no signs of progressing to violent or income-generating crimes; these were often the most successfully engaging with prevention programmes.

Densley (2012, 2014) suggested that a shift from expressive to instrumental marked the evolution from street gang to OCG. However, our participants made the distinction between delinquent and income-generating activities for street gang members. Street or “pop up” gangs were described as groups who sold drugs and took part in both planned and opportunistic street robberies and violent acts. Numbers of the group varied, depending on the act. Robberies were committed by 2 or 3 individuals, but much larger numbers were required for gang fights. Furthermore, participant 15 was involved with both a street-level gang and an OCG. He described 2 offences, the first was the burning down of an abandoned house, which the group noticed while out riding on off-road bikes; this offence was committed opportunistically and was for fun. The second offence was a carjacking which brought money to and affirmation from an adult member of an OCG. This example demonstrates that crime motivation is as relevant as group membership and suggests that individuals can belong to more than one delinquent and/or criminal group at any one time. These findings question whether projected levels of group membership are compatible with models from other parts of the UK (McLean, 2017). Another local difference was regarding the use of social media to entice and exploit young people into gangs (Irwin-Rogers, 2019; Whittaker et al., 2018). Although the use of messaging services to plan meet-ups and gatherings were reported by those who considered themselves a street gang, participant 6 suggested that those who rap on social media were just “kids”. As in other parts of the UK (Whittaker et al., 2018), street gang members did not wear “colours” but those who were involved in robberies and fighting did describe wearing dark clothes to avoid detection. Street gang and OCG members were keen to differentiate themselves from US gangs, even though violence, drug selling and weapon carrying were identified by the sample as core activities on both continents. The only exception was a participant 10, who described “throwing up signs”.

In accordance with prior research, OCG was the most clearly defined group with a focus on “serious” money-making (McLean, 2017), use of firearms, the involvement of “elders” in a clear hierarchy with an inner circle at the top (Densley, 2012; Whittaker et al., 2018). Of the three participants who reported having been directly involved with OCGs, 1 desisted because he was arrested by the police; 1 decided to distance himself from the group because of a new relationship and the remaining participant was still heavily involved. Those who had left recognised that they not only had been exploited; as in previous studies they cited trauma through physical and emotional abuse violence (Moyle, 2019; Storrod and Densley, 2017; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015) but also were affected by what they had witnessed and done. A subsequent interview with a young person who had been solicited as part of a county lines operation in an area known for the trade of counterfeit goods was also arrested and had left the group. Unlike the other participants, he had no prior criminal
involvement or record, indicating that adult criminals exploit a range of young people (Hesketh and Robinson, 2019) and are predatory.

Importantly, all participants who had ceased working with an OCG reported that as long as they agreed not to break the group code by identifying those who had been involved, they were permitted to break away without further consequences. This is an important finding for supporting young people who are involved with adult gang members and OCGs because it suggests that there is a legitimate way out. This contradicts previous research (Whittaker et al., 2018); however, the ability to leave is determined by an individual’s perceptions.

Participant 15, who obtained social status and financial rewards from his involvement referred to those who were not faithful to the group as “rats” and “snakes”. For him, leaving was not an option that he had considered; he was proud to be a member of the group and to have obtained credibility through his recent carjacking. Participant 6, on the other hand, had reassured the group that he would incriminate himself if he reported others to the police, still had respect from the elders whenever they saw him.

One common denominator between all three categories that were described by the sample was the recognition of outgroup members, in the form of rival postcodes or estates by street gang members or individuals who were described as “weirdos” for those who were part of a thrill-seeking peer group. The role that social psychology could play to inform gang research and interventions has been recognised but is still to be fully used (Wood and Alleyne, 2010). Our findings suggest that a broader approach to understanding the reasons for delinquent and criminal behaviour would be more helpful than labelling them as gang-involved (Ball and Curry, 1995). Furthermore, understanding the offending categories and motivations are also critical to understanding the role of the group in a young person’s life and in identifying the most effective intervention.

Those participants who had been exploited by adult criminals reported trouble sleeping and the use of cannabis to self-medicate, supporting research that has identified the heightened risk for those who have been involved with adult gang members and OCGs (Bennett and Holloway, 2004). Social deprivation and lack of opportunity were cited by the participants as a reason for street gang membership, which accords with a number of prior studies (Andell, 2019; Densley, 2013; Hesketh and Robinson, 2019; Irwin-Rogers, 2019) and would suggest that interventions should include realistic alternatives and legitimate opportunities. All members of the sample came from similar neighbourhoods, with high crime rates and social deprivation; they also attended similar schools and a number of those interviewed had been moved around the education system because of their behaviour. However, not all participants had experienced gang membership and even some of those who had been involved with OCGs had now desisted.

Limitations

It must be acknowledged that sample size (15 participants) is relatively small and it consists entirely of men. However, the data saturation of our study was reached after 15 semi-structured interviews. Regional differences to existing models were also noted in the results.

Conclusion

The narratives analysed enable a clearer understanding of the personal and collective definition of criminal groups and gangs by young people who are directly involved. Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature gap on “child criminal exploitation and county lines” from young peoples’ perspectives. According to other researchers (Hughes, 2005; Wood, 2014), qualitative research can enhance our understanding of youth gangs and inform new strategies to work with young people who have been criminally exploited.
In this regard, the findings present clear research areas for future expansion in qualitative research on progression from delinquent peer group to street gang membership and county lines.

We have identified three main directions for future research that will provide much-needed information and hopefully generate additional theoretical and empirical research to inform practice:

- **Criminal groups identity and definitions**: Participants presented clear definitions of peer groups, street gangs and organised crime groups. Our findings suggest that it could be more profitable to explore what motivates individual young people to commit crimes rather than simply labelling them as gang members. A clearer understanding of their personal and collective offending group definitions, motivations and group roles could help practitioners to tailor effective and appropriate interventions. This finding could inform the focus of offending behaviour programmes and the management of young offenders. It suggests that generic gang interventions are unlikely to be effective.

- **Young offender “grooming self-perception”**: From the narratives emerged relevant information about victims of grooming and the grooming process. Some participants described themselves as victims of grooming by adult criminal “older”. They were conscious of “identification strategies” adopted by adult gang members and coercive techniques used by family connections and/or peers. Furthermore, young people described how communication by social media was used to apply pressure to take part in criminal activities. This is an important element that practitioners need to consider, in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, how criminal groups are taking advantage of this pandemic and how it has impacted on crime and illegal economies. Informing young people before they are at risk and enabling them to identify coercive behaviour and criminal exploitation should be introduced in schools before the onset of adolescence. It is also essential that practitioners working with young people who have been excluded from school actively seek to counteract the risk of criminal grooming.

**Strategies to support young offenders who are victims of grooming**: All participants who had left an organised crime group reported that as long as they agreed not to break the group code by identifying those who had been involved, they were permitted to break away without further consequences. This “legitimate way out” is an important aspect that professionals and practitioners need to take in consideration to prevent young offenders in consolidating their criminal careers. For example, designing gang interventions and individual therapeutic support and ensuring that there is support for young offenders who have left a gang. It is also essential that youth workers and youth offending teams recognise that leaving a gang is, in fact, the norm and that with support the majority of young people can and will cease to be involved with deviant groups.

**References**


Appendix

Methodological appendix

- **Credibility** (*internal validity*): Members validation where the participants assess how much they can relate to the researchers construct of the phenomenon. We have asked participants feedback on researcher interpretation during the interview.

- **Transferability** (*external validity*): We have provided a description of the method and along with detailed information on all the research process.

- **Dependability**: All the research stages and methods were documented to allow an assessment of the propriety of the whole procedure. A description of the methods was provided.

- **Authenticity**: The participants have developed a greater understanding of the phenomenon explored during the interview.

- **Confirmability**: The research team shared the methodology, coded and interpreted the information (*internal confirmability*). The research is replicable (*external confirmability*). The interpretation of data was shared by the team.

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