

Drugs, gangs and organised crime

Whereas in the early part of the twenty-first century academics like Gordon (2000) and Hallsworth and Young (2004) produced typologies which aimed to clarify the differences between delinquent peer groups, street gangs and criminal business organisations, today the conceptual and practical focus has shifted from how we tell them apart to whether, and if so how, the one evolves into the other (Densley, 2013; Whittaker *et al.*, 2017; Andell and Pitts, 2018). This special edition of *Safer Communities* considers the changing nature of youth gangs and the implications of these changes for practitioners.

This switch in the “academic gaze” has been precipitated by a, sometimes grudging, acceptance by UK academics that street gangs really do exist (cf. Hallsworth and Young, 2004; Hallsworth, 2013; Gunter, 2017; Aldridge *et al.*, 2018), real changes in the way illicit drugs are distributed in the UK (cf. County Lines) and concerns about the criminal exploitation of vulnerable gang-involved children and young people (cf. Beckett *et al.*, 2013; Melrose and Pearce, 2013; Densley, 2013; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015; NCA, 2017).

But beyond this lie questions about whether, or to what extent, these shifts represent a significant evolutionary moment in the gang form and, possibly, its mutation into an organised crime group, or whether we are simply seeing an established model of illicit drug distribution played out on a broader canvas.

In “Addressing county lines: praxis for community safety practitioners” Paul Andell considers recent government gang policy against the backdrop of the worsening social and economic circumstances of the young people most likely to be drawn into the illicit drugs trade. He argues that economic intervention in impoverished neighbourhoods may hold the key to more effective intervention.

In “Grafting: ‘the boyz’ just doing business? Deviant entrepreneurship in street gangs” Robert Hesketh and Grace Robinson describe a business model of drug distribution dominated by organised crime groups that, effectively, employ young people to do the leg-work for them. This is not a description of a gang but rather an entrenched illicit business. The article illustrates how previous research, focussing largely upon London has failed to reflect the range of emergent models of Class A drug distribution in the UK.

In “The evolution of the English street gang” John Pitts addresses the question of how gangs evolve. Like Hesketh and Robinson he finds that existing models of gang evolution fail to reflect the diversity of gang forms, noting that while some gangs have morphed into what are, in effect, criminal business organisations, most are temporary and disorganised, akin in some ways to what Lewis Yablonsky (1966) describes as the “near group”; located on a continuum with the “mob” at one end and the structured “youth gang” at the other.

References

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