



The role of the family in facilitating gang membership, criminality and exit

Summary of research undertaken for Catch22 by London Metropolitan University.

About the research

The picture emerging from the research is one of families with many challenges - challenges that are sometimes seen as contributing to, but rarely as the primary cause of a young person's gang involvement. A common theme was families struggling to retain control in the face of the pull of the streets and young people's search for independence. Denial of, or ignorance about young people's involvement in gangs was commonplace amongst the family members sampled. One of the reasons for this was the 'double life' led by gang-involved young people who took careful steps to hide their involvement from their families. When families were aware, the impact was added stress and worry. While families sometimes felt the benefits of a family member's gang association, in most cases, the shame, stress and worry outweighed these benefits. With all these factors at play, the family's influence on a relative's gang exit was seldom decisive. Once a young person had made the decision to leave, a supportive family was seen as essential in smoothing the way out.

Debates on the causes of, and responses to, serious youth violence and gang culture in the UK often point to the influence of the family. Despite this, there has been relatively little detailed research on the part families play in facilitating gang membership, criminality and exit, and what this means for effective interventions.

To help fill this gap, Catch22 commissioned research from Tara Young, Wendy Fitzgibbon and Daniel Silverstone at London Metropolitan University. **The research had three main strands:**

- a literature review, exploring the evidence for the family's influence on gang membership, criminality and exit
- qualitative research, involving semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 58 former and current gang members and relatives of those involved in gangs
- face-to-face and telephone interviews with 17 voluntary and statutory sector practitioners working with gang-involved young people and families.

The fieldwork spanned three sites: London, the West Midlands (Wolverhampton and Birmingham) and Scotland (Glasgow), capturing geographical, ethnic and cultural differences in gang membership. To ensure sufficient representation from girls and young women, the research drew on the experiences of 16 gang-affiliated girls and young women engaged through a parallel research project. The study used the Hallsworth and Young definition of a gang, also using the term 'on road' where this phrase was recognised more readily.¹

Questions explored through the research included:

- whether 'gang-associated' families shared common characteristics, for example in their size, structure or economic situation
- the relationship between gang members and their immediate family, and how this affected people's gang association
- how families were affected by having a relative who was gang-involved
- the role of the family (mainly parents and primary carers) in persuading or helping a family member to leave a gang
- strategies used by parents and carers to discourage gang involvement, and what led to families seeking help from outside agencies.

Key findings

This paper summarises key findings from the research, also drawing out the implications for policy and practice.

Do ‘gang-associated families’ have characteristic features?

Gang members in this study came from families of all shapes and sizes. For example although the majority grew up in families headed by a single parent, one in three had grown up in households with both biological parents present.

Regardless of their size or structure, the families involved in this study experienced a range of issues that preceded young people’s gang involvement. Features commonly described included poverty, over-crowding, family separation, bereavement, mental illness, family conflict, domestic violence, imprisonment, alcohol and substance misuse. Violence was a recurring theme. Gayle was one of many exposed to violence at home:

‘I used to watch my mum get hit. I’ve got older brothers who have got schizophrenia and they would lash out on my mum and beating my mum.’

Other respondents talked about fighting with, or being beaten by, their parents, having to care for younger siblings, and coping with no electricity and hardly any food in the house.

A significant proportion of interviewees described problematic relationships with parents and/or carers, linked in most cases to the other issues within the home. These findings chime with other research highlighting the increased risks of gang involvement where factors such as family violence, abuse and an inability to respond to children’s needs limit the development of strong and healthy parent-child relationships.ⁱⁱ

What effect do family relationships have on young people’s gang association?

While some of those interviewed acknowledged links between their family situations and their gang involvement, few held their families responsible and most saw other factors as having a greater bearing.

For those that made the link, having gang-involved relatives, fatherlessness, domestic violence, and pent-up anger caused by parental neglect or abuse were all seen as having contributed to young people’s gang involvement.

In 19 instances, at least one other relative was involved ‘on road’, and siblings were often instrumental in a young person’s gang involvement. Jennifer was one of a number of young women who put her gang association down to her brother’s prior involvement:

‘My brother is an elder member of a gang so that had a lot to do with it. We repped in our area and cuz of my brother I was immediately associated and I got involved.’

Christopher talked about how being without a father led him to seek validation from his peers, while Kai related his gang involvement to not having a male influence at home: **‘Boys need a man at home to show them how to be a man.’** The lack of a father figure was also highlighted as an issue by relatives of gang-involved young people, with several mothers noting that they lost control of their teenage boys as they reached adolescence. As one mother put it:

'I brought up the kids myself, but they do need a father ... he feels he has to handle his business as his dad doesn't do anything for him, taking into account that all our baby fathers are absent out of our lives.'

Andrula traced her story back to her father's alcoholism:

'He would always be arguing and drunk. I spent a lot of time outside on the estate [...] this led me into other things which I shouldn't have been getting into.'

Some practitioners felt strongly that families played a large part in facilitating gang membership, including through inadequate supervision or lack of boundary setting. This was compounded where a parent worked long hours and so was not around, and in a minority of cases, through active recruitment. Families were sometimes seen as being in denial or lacking awareness of their children's 'lived reality' outside the home, and others as tacitly colluding with young people's gang involvement. This local authority practitioner was one of several who talked about parental lack of knowledge:

'I think for a lot of the families it's this not really being aware of what is going on outside the context of the family, and aware of what their young children might - or young people might be getting up to. I think there's a lack of connectedness between the parents and the children as a result.'

However, other evidence suggests that the role of the family as a key driver of gang formation should not be overstated. Very few of the former or current gang members interviewed – principally those who had been exposed to extreme levels of domestic violence, neglect and abuse – saw their gang involvement as the direct result of their upbringing.

Among the interviewees there were gang-involved young people with no family history of violence, neglect or abuse and instances of siblings with very different life stories. Most of the young people and family members interviewed saw factors outside the family as having a greater influence on their gang association. Issues widely seen as more significant included growing up in a 'hostile' environment where gang membership, criminality and violence was normalised; negative experiences of (and frequently exclusion from) school; the pull of a peer subculture which emphasised the attractions of earning easy money; and the search for identity, independence and respect. Those interviewed also acknowledged their own role in decision-making. These explanations echo findings from a number of contemporary studies of gang formation which emphasise the interplay of social and individual influences alongside family factorsⁱⁱⁱ. Clifton summed up the calculation that he made:

'I made a conscious decision, I ain't got any money, I want money, my mum can't buy me this and that, and I want this, I gonna get it for myself'

while Mark described his search for independence:

'When you maybe reach 14 or 13 or 15, you just feel, "I'm free!" You just want to go out now, and you just want to enjoy, you just want to mingle with friends, whatever they're into you're just gonna get into it. It's only when you start growing up you realise what you've done when you're young.'

Alongside family factors, practitioners pointed to the impact of impoverished, deprived environments and the influence of peer groups: both were seen as adding to the risk of peripheral gang activity which could then develop into more significant involvement.

While examples were given of parents colluding and 'turning a blind eye', a more common picture is of respondents leading a double life and taking steps to hide their gang involvement while at home.

As Emily put it:

‘My mum don’t know the truth. I can tell my mum, “Yeah, I doing this”, but I will be doing something else.’

This finding is in line with conclusions drawn by Aldridge and others from their study of an anonymous English city. In that study also, gang-affiliated young people were found to adopt a different personality when with their parents and with their peers.^{iv}

Parents who did know the truth and who tried to intervene rarely succeeded. George recalled that:

‘I chose to go on the street. My mum and dad always tried to get me off the streets. She would come to parties, drag me out, I would be standing on the block, my man then would say “Your mum! Your mum!” I would run. She tried her best. I didn’t want to – I just wanted to be on road. Families can only do so much ... feels outside is a better place.’

How are family members affected by a relative’s gang association?

The impact of gang membership on other family members was more often negative than positive.

However, in England, unlike in Scotland, gang involvement was sometimes seen as bringing financial or material benefits, and some, albeit a minority, talked of enjoying the benefits of a criminal lifestyle. For example, the sister of a gang member described how:

‘He brought me a very nice gift. He brought me an iPad recently. I was thinking, he doesn’t work so where does he get this money from? I’m working and I can’t afford it, so where does he get it from? I chose not to ask. I can’t be bothered with argument. Just take it and be quiet. I don’t want no argument’

Practitioners gave examples of parents who struggled to ‘make ends meet’ turning a blind eye to what their children were doing because of the relief they felt from having more money coming into the house.

Being ‘on road’, and the status that went with this, was also seen by those involved as protecting other family members, with the risk of violence being perpetrated against family members downplayed.^v Studies of gang membership in both the US and UK suggest this is a common but false perception, since in practice gang membership increases gang and family members’ exposure to violent victimisation.^{vi} Practitioners felt the threat of violence was real. As Joshua’s account illustrates, even when not acted on the threat of violence remained:

‘If they can’t get you, and they know that they can’t get you they’re moving on to the next thing that’s closest to you, your family.’

Overwhelmingly, the picture that emerges from interviews with family members is one of ‘beleaguered families’ facing many issues, for whom having a child join a gang is an added problem and a major source of stress and worry. In Scotland, a mother commented ruefully that whilst her daughter had joined the army, her son became ensnared in the local criminal culture and was the one she worried about at night. Others spoke of the damaging effect of a family member’s criminal activity on relationships between siblings or with parents, and of the distress caused by gang-involved family members being arrested at home or coming home after being physically attacked.

Another common theme is parents’ feelings of powerlessness and sense of losing control as their children, particularly boys, approached adolescence, a challenge compounded in many cases by being a lone parent, struggling to make ends meet, peer pressure and the pull of the streets.

One mother summed up these feelings:

‘It is difficult for a lot of us mothers are just waiting for the phone call. Every weekend that comes we know or we expect to hear a phone call that somebody has been stabbed, somebody has been beaten up or somebody is dead.’

What influence do family members have over their relative’s gang exit?

Young people and practitioners alike talked of the challenges of leaving gangs, especially where young people had been actively involved for a number of years, and where there were few openings available through the legal economy.

When asked what motivated them to come ‘off road’, several respondents spoke about a critical moment in their life. For Nick, the trigger was seeing a friend arrested for stabbing someone. For Jorell and Fraser parenthood, and wanting to do right by their children was the catalyst for change, while for Christopher finding a girlfriend was a turning point. Others simply matured and became disillusioned with gang life, or tired of the stress of gang activity and the ‘drip drip’ effect of the constant fear and threat of violence.

Whatever their motivation, most respondents saw quitting as a decision they had to make for themselves, with few citing family influences as a deciding factor. However, especially once gang members had taken the decision to leave, family members (in particular mothers and sisters) were recognised by some respondents as playing an important facilitating role.

What strategies do parents and carers use to discourage gang involvement, and under what conditions do families seek help?

The strategies used by families to extricate young people from gangs met with varying success.

Moving, or sending the relative away to another area, was often seen by practitioners and family members as the only possible solution. For Callum, moving with his mother to another area was successful, since the distance prevented him from hanging round with other group members:

‘Ah jist cooldn’t be bothered goin doon their everyday; tae far.’

In contrast, the decision taken by Clifton’s mother to have him taken into care seemed to have backfired:

‘I’ve come out of there 10 times worse than when I went in.’

Where families did access services, their experience was mixed, with much criticism directed at the police. Significantly, families that succeeded in helping relatives leave gangs often did so through a combination of approaches. For example involving informal family help and reasserting boundaries with reaching out to criminal justice or social work interventions.

In one family, the mother moved herself and her son out of the area and made contact with a local charity, also paying for her son to enrol on a practical course which would lead to work. In another, the mother initially sent her son to live with his grandmother, then sought support from a local charity, finally sending her son to live with his sister in another part of the UK. This, combined with drug rehabilitation, ended his local gang affiliation.

Implications for policy and practice

Findings from this research chime with several recent trends in policy and practice, while also suggesting areas for further development:

- **Tailoring responses to local needs:** recent work under the banner of ‘Ending Gang and Youth Violence’ has recognised the need for localised approaches that reflect the variety within and between gangs, and gangs’ shifting nature over time. The research endorses this approach, with evidence of different experiences of gang involvement in London, Scotland and the West Midlands.
- **Considering the family as a whole:** findings from this research could be used to support the ‘Troubled Families’ approach of developing ‘whole family’ responses to inter-linked issues, rather than seeing young people’s gang involvement as an isolated problem. Based on this, we see a strong case for supporting beleaguered families with gang-involved young people as part of the Troubled Families programme, even where they fail the strict eligibility criteria.
- **Intervening early:** feedback from young people and families points to the benefits of intervening before a young person’s ‘on road’ lifestyle is established. Findings from this study lend support to existing programmes aimed at strengthening parenting skills in beleaguered families with an identified risk of gang involvement (even though this will not pick up the families of all of those who will become gang-involved), with particular emphasis on parenting in adolescence, or even earlier before risk is at its most significant.

Among areas for development:

- **Addressing the wider social context:** feedback from those interviewed highlights the need for wider action alongside work with families, ensuring that neighbourhoods and schools feel welcoming not ‘hostile’ and challenging attitudes that see violence as normal.
- **Winning trust and buy-in:** the study underlines the challenges involved in winning trust and buy-in from family members who may be complicit, in denial or unaware of their relative’s gang association; who may have had many negative encounters with agencies; and/or who resist suggestions of the family’s role in young people’s gang involvement. More work is needed on ways of breaking down these barriers.
- **Working with families to support gang exit:** where trust can be won, the study suggests that the path out of gangs can be assisted (if not triggered) by family members and agencies working together. In some cases this may well involve supporting gang members’ relocation.

Notes

ⁱHallsworth, S., and Young, T., (2004) ‘Getting Real About Gangs,’ *Criminal Justice Matters* 55: 68. ‘On road’ was seen as having fewer negative connotations.

ⁱⁱFinkelhor, D., Turner, H., Ormrod, R., Hamby, S., and Kracke, K (2009) ‘Children’s Exposure to Violence: A Comprehensive National Survey’ <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/227744.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱSee eg Vigil, J.D., (2003) ‘Urban Violence and Street Gangs’ *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol.32 pp 225-242; Smith, D.J., and Bradshaw, P., (2005) ‘Gang Membership and Teenage Offending’.

^{iv}Aldridge, J., Shute, J., Ralphs, R., and Medina, J., (2009) ‘Blame the Parents? Challenges for Parent-Focused Programmes for Families of Gang-Involved Young People’, *Children & Society*. National Children’s Bureau and Blackwell Publishing Limited.

^vsee Aldridge, J., et al, (2009) ‘Blame the Parents’; Decker, S., and Van Winkle, B., (1996) *Life in the Gang* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

^{vi}Fagan, G. (1999) *Gangs, Drugs and Neighbourhood Change* in Huff, C. R. (ed) *Gangs in America* (2nd edition) Sage Publications.



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