

## **Dawes Unit**

Working with individuals, families, schools and communities and bringing together research, policy and practice in order to fill the gaps in our understanding of what we need to do to reduce the harm caused by gangs and gang-related crime.

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# Whole school approaches to tackling gang involvement

February 2013

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# Whole school approaches to tackling gang involvement



Currently most gang prevention and intervention work in schools is focused on short term group work programmes, with less attention paid to the wider school environment. However, research suggests that creating a positive 'school climate' and nurturing young people's sense of attachment and commitment to school can also have a powerful effect in protecting against gang involvement.

This paper argues that more attention should be paid to the role of school 'climate' and 'connectedness' in reducing the risks of gang involvement.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development as defined by Ofsted is closely related to school 'climate' and to young people's sense of school 'connectedness.'<sup>1</sup> Schools rated strongly on this aspect are therefore a useful place to look for examples of effective whole school approaches to prevent young people's gang involvement. The paper concludes by taking one such school as a case study.

## Risk and protective factors for gang involvement

Studies of the risk and protective factors associated with gang involvement commonly identify education as one of five key areas of influence alongside individual attributes, family factors, peer groups and community characteristics.<sup>2</sup> Within the sphere of education a number of different dimensions, explored below, have been found to be significant.

### ***Academic performance***

Low achievement in schools is consistently identified as a risk factor for gang involvement. American studies indicate that having to repeat a year at school, self-reported learning problems and performing poorly in standardised tests are strong predictors of gang membership.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, strong school performance has been found to be a significant protective factor, lowering the risk of gang involvement.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Exclusion***

UK and other studies highlight temporary and permanent exclusion from school as a further risk factor. For example, in their qualitative study *Youth Gangs in an English City*, Aldridge and colleagues found that many gang members 'had poor qualifications and left school early, through self-exclusion, unofficial exclusion (eg schools may urge parents to withdraw their child to avoid the stigma of enforced exclusion) and official exclusion. Leaving school was 'identified as a "critical moment" in gang involvement.<sup>5</sup> Interviews by Pitts with gang-involved and gang-affected young people in Lambeth and Waltham Forest paint a similar picture.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, research on gang-involved young people referred to a juvenile court in Durham, North Carolina found that nearly 8 out of 10 had been suspended, truanted, expelled or ceased attending school for other reasons.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Aspirations***

Low aspirations and expectations of success on the part of both students and parents, have been shown to heighten the risk of gang involvement. This finding emerges from qualitative studies such as Pitts's interviews with key informants in Waltham Forest and from large scale longitudinal studies conducted in Seattle, New York and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Equally, high expectations have been shown to protect against gang association.

### ***The school environment***

Risk factors which relate to the wider social environment of the school have tended to receive less attention than those which relate to an individual or their family background. This is possibly because to address them, whole school structures have to be considered, rather than individuals.

The importance of school 'connectedness' in promoting positive outcomes and reducing problem behaviours including gang involvement has, however, been explored in a number of studies in the USA and Australia. In a longitudinal study based in Australia, Bond and colleagues found that good school connectedness was associated with the best outcomes later on.<sup>9</sup> They defined connectedness as:

*'A commitment to school and a belief that school is important, but also includes student-teacher relationships, relationships with peers, opportunities to be involved, and feelings of belonging. Young people connected to school demonstrate a disposition towards learning, a capacity to work with others and therefore a capacity to function in a social institution'.<sup>10</sup>*

In their study of school-based interventions introduced in two longitudinal projects, Catalano and colleagues showed that different strategies used in schools could increase students' school connectedness or bonding. This in turn led not only to better academic outcomes, including higher grades and fewer drop-outs, but also to reductions in problems including gang involvement. Students with weaker school commitment and attachment at ages 10 and 11-years-old were identified as being twice as likely to join a gang in adolescence as peers who had stronger bonds with school.<sup>11</sup>

In their developmental study of gangs in Rochester, New York, Thornberry and colleagues also found that low commitment to school and weak attachment to teachers were both associated with a higher risk of subsequent gang involvement.<sup>12</sup>

In June 2003 a conference on school connectedness, convened in Wingspread, USA, brought together an interdisciplinary group of experts in this area. The *Wingspread Declaration on School Connections* that came out of this conference defines the critical requirements for students to feel connected as

- high academic expectations and rigour coupled with support for learning
- positive adult-student relationships
- safety: both physical and emotional.<sup>13</sup>

These elements are in turn all closely related to school climate, features of which have been identified by research as affecting the risks of gang involvement. While views differ on precisely what school climate consists of and how it can best be measured, it is commonly seen as relating to how people experience school, based on: how safe people feel (including how rules are applied); the quality of relationships across the school community (including the extent to which positive behaviour is modelled and reinforced); the approach taken to teaching and learning (including a culture of high expectations for all students); and the physical surroundings.<sup>14</sup> Reflecting some of these dimensions, schools where students perceive greater fairness and clarity of rules have been found to have less delinquent behaviour and student victimisation.<sup>15</sup> Feeling unsafe or fearful in school has also been found to be directly associated with participation in gangs.<sup>16</sup>

## Gang prevention and intervention work in schools

The most comprehensive assessment of work by UK schools to address gangs and gang culture is a 2009 study commissioned by the NASWUT.<sup>17</sup> Whilst noting the importance of school attendance, and the relevance of school policies and strategies for addressing poor behaviour and promoting equality of opportunity, this report views young people's gang involvement primarily as an issue whose impact schools need to 'manage' through partnership approaches and a mix of prevention, targeted education and enforcement measures. Promising practice identified included restorative justice models, peace treaties between community leaders and peer mentoring schemes. However, the report notes that 'school-based interventions targeted at reducing gang affiliation and crime are frequently education based' with a focus on 'emphasising the negative implications of involvement with gangs', adding that 'Few of these interventions have been formally evaluated, leading to a lack of research evidence as to what works.'

Education programmes and resources continue to be seen as the primary tool for school-based interventions to reduce the risk of gang involvement. These programmes tend to be brief interventions, using group work, arts and drama to change young people's attitudes. Examples from the UK and abroad include:

- **Gang Resistance Education and Training programme (GREAT):** first introduced in 1991 and now widely used across north and south America and elsewhere, GREAT is a model for many school-based education programmes. The core of the programme is a middle school component geared to young people aged 11 and 12-years-old. Made up of thirteen lessons, this looks at issues such as: communication and refusal skills, conflict resolution and anger management techniques. Curriculum-based and universal in its reach, the programme is taught by specially trained, uniformed police officers with the twin aims of helping young people (a) avoid gang membership, violence and criminal activity; and (b) develop a positive relationship with law enforcement. Initial evaluation found that, while the programme achieved some attitudinal changes, there were no significant differences between GREAT and non-GREAT students in levels of delinquency, violence or gang membership.<sup>18</sup> Based on these results the programme curriculum was revised, linking it more closely to known risk factors for gang involvement, and with more attention paid to locating the programme as part of a broader approach. While the longer-term effects have still to be assessed, findings from the follow-up evaluation show a 54% reduction in the odds of gang membership for students taking part in GREAT one year after programme completion, coupled with increases in pro-social attitudes.<sup>19</sup>
- **Growing against Gangs and Violence (GAGV):** inspired by the GREAT programme, and delivered in partnership with the Metropolitan Police, GAGV includes modules designed for year 6, 7 and 10 school age groups looking at issues such as the difference between friends and acquaintances and the myths and realities of gang membership. One specific programme, *Girls, gangs and consequences*, aims to raise awareness of the consequences of gender-based violence, and to challenge the glamorisation of gang-involved young men.<sup>20</sup>

- **'It's Not OK!' violence prevention education programme:** developed by the Ariel Trust and a range of local partners, *It's Not OK!* resources use multi-media technologies to deliver issue-based preventative education mapped against the national curriculum. The materials are designed to be delivered by teachers in mainstream education settings. One strand of this programme, *Terriers*, looks specifically at young people's attitudes to guns and gangs, with materials geared to both primary and secondary age ranges, while other packages cover issues including alcohol misuse, racial and homophobic violence and arson. Before and after surveys and assessments of the *Terriers* package showed positive changes in young people's attitudes to guns and gangs, coupled with improvements in behaviour, effort and some levels of attainment.<sup>21</sup> Replication of *It's Not OK!* is being funded as part of the Big Lottery Realising Ambition Programme.
  
- **Streetwise:** described as a gun, gang and knife crime prevention resource for young people aged 10-18-years-old, *Streetwise* is cited by the Home Office as an example of effective practice. The programme uses interactive media including arts, music, role play, and group work to demystify the appeal of street crime, develop young people's self-esteem and confidence and build skills in effective decision-making. Six manuals covering different themes support the programme's use in schools and other settings.<sup>22</sup>
  
- **The HEART programme:** this is an educational programme run in schools that aims to address the impact that gangs and serious youth violence have on girls and young women. The programme is focused on preventing sexual exploitation and intimate partner violence, working with young people at risk of, or involved with gangs. It offers a 12-session group work programme in addition to a year-long one-to-one mentoring programme.<sup>23</sup>

The evidence base for these programmes is still building. However, irrespective of their benefits, concentrating too much on programmes of this kind overlooks the wider contribution that schools can make to reducing the risks of gang involvement. Much more attention should be paid to whole school approaches that promote a positive school climate, build 'connectedness' to school and so create a protective environment for young people.

## The links between school climate and connectedness and spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Since January 2012 there has been a renewed emphasis within the Ofsted framework on the extent to which schools promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC). In order to be rated 'good' by Ofsted, schools must have strong provision in this area.<sup>24</sup>

Ofsted guidance on *Promoting and evaluating pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development* sets out the characteristics likely to be displayed by both pupils and schools where pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is effectively promoted, and also indicates what inspectors will look for in making their assessment.<sup>25</sup> The starting point is seen as being: 'the climate and values of a school ... whether it is welcoming, keen to help the visitor and proud of the achievement of those who work and learn there' and how far there is 'a drive for learning and respect for reflective responses.' Other pointers identified include:

- the values projected by staff, governors and pupils
- the relationships encouraged between pupils, and staff and between pupils
- the way staff address pupils and vice versa
- the way pupils address and care for each other
- the way disputes and dissent are addressed
- the quality of the physical environment
- the range of opportunities provided by the school outside the formal curriculum
- the relationships developed by the school with the wider community and
- the tone and content of material published by the school.

There is much commonality between the characteristics looked for as evidence of flourishing SMSC and factors that research suggests contribute to a positive 'school climate' and high degree of 'school connectedness'. By working on SMSC, schools can not only fulfil their statutory obligations, satisfy Ofsted requirements and improve academic outcomes: they can also create a school environment that helps protect pupils from the risks of gang involvement.

### **A case study: Pupil Parent Partnership**

Given the links between school climate and connectedness and SMSC, schools rated highly by Ofsted for their SMSC are a good place to look for examples of whole school approaches to reducing pupils' risk of gang involvement. One such example is Pupil Parent Partnership.

Now part of Catch22, Pupil Parent Partnership (PPP) has been operating in west London since 1994, providing full and part-time education and support for young people who are struggling at school, have been excluded from school, are in care, in trouble with the law or are newly arrived asylum seekers or refugees. PPP works with some of the most vulnerable young people, providing teaching and learning, vocational education, therapeutic support (one to one, group therapy, family therapy), advocacy and mentoring support, and is a good

example of an education provider which places attachment at the core of its pedagogy. The model is based on a foundation of three practices:

- reflexive practice: the ability to consider a variety of influences in decision making, including personal history
- non-oppressive practice: being able to approach all relationships with an awareness of possible prejudices
- multi-disciplinary practice: the ability to think and act professionally in a variety of disciplines.

The PPP framework directs and guides all of the work with young people. It is influenced by ideas such as attachment theory<sup>26</sup> and attunement theory.<sup>27</sup> These theories fundamentally emphasise the importance of nurture and relationships, including the teacher-learner relationship, for the healthy development of young people, and directly shape the delivery of services. Relationships are fostered in a range of ways, including through use of small educational and emotional development groups.

Many of the young people served by PPP often feel unsafe on the streets or even at home: part of the PPP model lies in ensuring that young people's basic needs are fulfilled, and a central part of this is allowing everyone to feel safe.

The model then emphasises the importance of human qualities, such as honesty, integrity, trust and resilience, all of which are critical to service delivery but are rarely an explicit focus in practitioner or policy-maker training. Substantial attention is also paid to teacher training, development and support, and to ensuring staff feel valued, contributing to staff resilience and their long-term retention.

Finally, the model recognises the importance of appropriate service delivery structures that respond to other contextual influences and ensure effective outcomes for vulnerable children and families. This involves working with statutory and voluntary sector partners to ensure that young people and families are supported, since the issues cannot be dealt with by any one organisation alone.

PPP has been recognised by Ofsted as strong in SMSC development and although the model is designed to work in a small alternative education setting, there are aspects which can be generalised. PPP creates an environment in which relationships can develop between students and staff and where students who may have had difficulties in school in the past are able to feel that they belong and are valued. This is a basis on which school can act as protective factor for a young person at risk of involvement in gangs.

## Key elements of the whole school approach

By taking a whole school approach that addresses school climate and connectedness, schools can provide a protective environment for young people that discourages gang involvement and other risky behaviours. Among their distinguishing features, schools working in this way are likely to be marked by:

- **strong relationships:** every student feels close to at least one supportive adult at school, whether a teacher, mentor, nurse or other member of staff.<sup>28</sup> In a mainstream environment, relationships are fostered through strong pastoral care systems, often with non-teaching pastoral care staff. Approaches are in place that foster good relationships between pupils inside and outside the classroom<sup>29</sup>
- **concern for pupils' physical and emotional safety, both in and out of school:** alongside strong pastoral care systems, this is likely to involve working with the police, youth offending teams, voluntary sector organisations and other statutory partners to manage information effectively. School staff will also be trained to recognise the signs and risk factors for gang involvement
- **transparent disciplinary systems:** rules are clear, seen as fair, and consistently applied
- **a supportive learning environment:** a range of approaches is used to respond to individual needs, with encouragement given to co-operative learning and an emphasis on improving learning outcomes for all students
- **effective staff support:** investment in on-going skills development and provision of support will contribute to staff feeling valued, build up staff resilience and help maintain stability, in turn assisting staff to create a protective environment for students.

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<sup>1</sup> Ofsted (2012) School Inspection Handbook

<sup>2</sup> Howell, J. (2010) 'Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs', *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

<sup>3</sup> Hill, K.G., James, C., Howell, J., Hawkins, D. and Battin-Pearson, S. (1999) 'Childhood risk factors for adolescent gang membership: Results from the Seattle Social Development Project', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*. Vol. 36: 300-322. See also 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; Resnick, M.D., Ireland, M., and Borowsky, I. (2004) 'Youth violence perpetration: What protects? What predicts? Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health' *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Vol. 35:424.e1–424.e10

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Aldridge, J. and Medina, J. (2008) *Youth Gangs in an English City: Social Exclusion, Drugs and Violence: Full Research Report* ESRC End of Award Report. Swindon

<sup>6</sup> Pitts, J. (2007) *Reluctant Gangsters: Youth Gangs in Waltham Forest*, University of Bedfordshire

<sup>7</sup> Weisel, D.L. and Howell, J.C. (2007) *Comprehensive Gang Assessment: A Report to the Durham Police Department and Durham County Sheriff's Office*. Durham, NC: Durham Police Department

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- <sup>10</sup> Ibid p 8
- <sup>11</sup> Catalano, R.F., Haggerty, K.P., Oesterle, S., Charles, B., Fleming, J. and Hawkins, D. (2004) 'The importance of bonding to school for healthy development: Findings from the Social Development Research Group'. *Journal of School Health*. Vol 74:7 p252– 61. See also: Bond, L., Butler, H., Thomas, L., Carlin, J., Glover, S., Bowes, G. and Patton, G. (2007) 'Social and school connectedness in early secondary school as predictors of late teenage substance use, mental health and academic outcomes' *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Vol. 40:357.e9-357.e18; Resnick, M.D., et al (2004) 'Youth violence perpetration: What protects? What predicts?'; Blum, R. (2005) 'A case for school connectedness' *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 62:7 p 16-20
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- <sup>20</sup> *Ending Gang and Youth Violence: A Cross-Government Report* (2011) Cm 8211 p17
- <sup>21</sup> It's not ok! Violence Prevention Education Programme, Summary and Terriers evaluations both available at <http://www.arieltrust.com/Resources>
- <sup>22</sup> <http://www.justice.gov.uk/youth-justice/effective-practice-library/streetwise-an-extensive-gun,-gang-and-knife-education-resource>
- <sup>23</sup> [http://www.met.police.uk/heart\\_programme/documents/heart\\_interim\\_evaluation.pdf](http://www.met.police.uk/heart_programme/documents/heart_interim_evaluation.pdf)
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