EVIDENCE DIGEST
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GANG AND YOUTH VIOLENCE PROGRAMMES

Evidence Digests present information on a particular area in an easily digestible form. They are designed to help facilitate conversations between youth organisations and funders so that both can share in an understanding of what the evidence tells us, and why and how it can be measured. This digest explains why evaluating programmes to address gang and youth violence is particularly challenging and suggests what can be done about it.

BACKGROUND & IMPORTANCE

GANG AND YOUTH VIOLENCE HAS RISEN IN RECENT DECADES, RAISING CONSIDERABLE INTEREST IN AND CONCERN ABOUT GANG CULTURE. It is an issue that made front page news in 2011 when thousands of young people rioted in London and other cities across England over four days, involving violent clashes with police and widespread looting, and causing damage that amounted to more than £300m. The research actually shows that gangs did not play a pivotal role, as was previously believed. In fact, many gangs across the country called a four-day inter-gang truce (The Guardian, 2011).

However, it is true to say that the majority of the rioters were young people, and that gang-involved young people are disproportionately involved in criminal activities, particularly those that are serious and violent (Fisher et al. 2008b). Therefore, while the number of gang-involved youth remains low, the impact they have and the costs their activities incur are substantial, as illustrated in a case study in the 2014 Mayor of London Gangs and Serious Youth Violence report (page 15).

DEFINITION

A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, engage in a range of criminal activity and violence, identify with or lay claim over territory, have some form of identifying structural feature, and are in conflict with other, similar, gangs (Centre for Social Justice, 2009).
EXISTING EVIDENCE

Project Oracle’s 2013 Synthesis Study (see Further Reading) compared findings from twelve London studies investigating the effectiveness of a variety of interventions to reduce gang and youth violence. Key findings revealed that:

- Only comprehensive, multi-agency cases could clearly demonstrate a link between interventions and reduced rates of gang activity and youth violence. However, it was unclear if only these interventions were having a substantive impact, or if their privileged access to sources of evidence on gang activity and youth offending meant they were the only ones able to show it.

- Programmes directed at specific indicators of gang activity and violence could demonstrate a positive impact on the attitudes of high-risk young people, but the impact of this on their behaviour was less certain. This may imply a subsequent reduction in their gang and violent activity but further evidence is required if a direct link is to be drawn.

A recent review by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) into interventions to prevent gang and youth violence suggests that skills-based and family-focused intervention types foster positive outcomes while also preventing negative ones. Mentoring programmes, community engagement and gang-specific approaches show some promise but evidence in these areas is still limited. However, the evidence consistently suggests that deterrence and discipline-focused approaches are ineffective and can even be harmful (O’Connor & Waddell, 2015).

EVIDENCE NEEDS

Project Oracle’s 2013 Synthesis Study (see Further Reading) compared findings from twelve London studies investigating the effectiveness of a variety of interventions to reduce gang and youth violence. Key findings revealed that:

A. **more robust evidence** to make it possible to attribute any reduction in youth violence directly to the relevant intervention, and;

B. **more robust evidence** that can draw causal links between key influential factors such as ‘soft outcomes’ (e.g. healthy peer relationships).

Two systematic reviews pointed to the same absence of robust evidence in 2008 and called for more rigorous primary research to guide gang programmes and policies (Fisher et al. 2008a, Fisher et al. 2008b). The only studies that came close to inclusion in these reviews were conducted in the United States.

In 2014, MOPAC commissioned Project Oracle to carry out evaluations of anti-youth violence services in three of London’s boroughs using the Youth Outcomes Framework – a practical evaluation tool, which is now available to all agencies wishing to contribute to the evidence base. It was MOPAC’s aim to not only generate more robust evidence on youth violence in London, but also to bring a degree of consistency to the data. With an improved understanding in these areas, commissioners will be in a better position to make evidence-informed decisions, ensuring that money is directed towards the most promising anti-youth violence services in the future.

CASE STUDY: ENFIELD GANGS ACTION GROUP

**OBJECTIVE**

To reduce the level of violence between gangs by improving understanding of gang issues and sharing information on gang membership and activity in Enfield.

**IMPLEMENTATION**

The programme was a multi-agency, comprehensive intervention with multiple phases. Its actions confronted all levels of gang involvement, combining suppression of gang activity through enforcement, intervening with high-risk peripheral gang members to deter them from becoming involved, and prevention of future gang activity through education of the wider youth population.

**OUTCOME**

General crime rates in designated hotspot areas fell during the intervention’s period (2009-10): GBH/Stabbing reduced by 68%, knife crime by 35%, and robbery by 27%.
EVALUATION CHALLENGES

Evaluation is far from an easy task, but those working to address gang and youth violence will know that monitoring and evaluating progress in this area is particularly challenging. The reasons for this can be summarised as follows:

1. **Ambiguity around what counts as gang-involvement:** It is often unclear whether or not a young person is a gang member. Some local authorities avoid the word “gang” altogether and use the term “youth crime” instead.

2. **Widespread lack of access to relevant data:** Access to police and other key youth crime data is extremely restricted and often out of reach for many organisations working in the sector.

3. **High risk of inaccurate data:**
   - **Surveys:** According to caseworkers, many young people involved in gang and youth violence lack a degree of self-awareness and therefore may give inaccurate responses to surveys. They may also feel too distrustful to be willing to provide honest responses.
   - **Caseworker assessments:** Relying on caseworker observations to monitor progress in gang and youth violence is at high risk of bias due to the subjective nature of this type of data collection.
   - **Administrative data:** The significant volume of police and intelligence data has its own validity issues and can be misleading when looked at in isolation. For example, just because a young person is taken off the gangs matrix (a list of the highest risk gang-involved young people who are monitored routinely), does not mean the issue has been resolved, as that individual may be in prison and could therefore reappear on the matrix once released.

4. **Lack of reliable and practical data collection tools for ‘soft’ outcomes:** It takes a comprehensive approach to help a young person exit their gang lifestyle, and this includes affecting changes in attitudes, ambitions, relationships, access to opportunities and other ‘soft’ outcomes. These outcomes are hard to measure and reliable tools are either not available or are often impractical for this population (e.g. involve too many questions).

5. **Unpredictability of the target population:** The nature of the young people involved in gang and youth crime means that collecting robust data may be extremely challenging. For example, a young person may disappear for a while, not turn up to appointments, get injured, arrested or imprisoned.

6. **Difficulty attributing outcomes to the programme:** Unless the evaluation can adequately prove how much of the observed outcome happens as a result of the programme, and not because of other factors (e.g. through a comparison group), the outcome cannot be confidently attributed to the programme. However, identifying a suitable comparison group, let alone collecting data from these young people, is a significant challenge due to a combination of the factors mentioned above.

7. **Difficulty achieving sufficiently large research cohorts:** Since the number of gang-involved youth in an area is usually very small, it can be extremely difficult involving enough of them in research to enable robust analyses and draw generalised conclusions.
At Project Oracle we would like to share practical recommendations from our experience in this field to encourage effective evaluation, so that together we can build towards filling in urgent gaps in the evidence base.

1. ‘Nailing’ attribution: Running a high-quality comparison group is key to establishing whether there is a causal relationship between the programme delivered and the youth outcomes observed. Therefore, all options should be considered: a) youth organisations should check if the Justice Data Lab can supply good comparison data; or b) commissioners should provide sufficient resource to identify and implement a live comparison group in a similar context.

2. Pragmatic data collection: In order to gather high-quality representative data, youth organisations should consider:
   
   A. Timing: Collect data from a young person when they are likely to give the most accurate information. For example, ask the young person to self-report their self-esteem in their third session with the caseworker when at least some basic trust has been established and he/she is more self-aware.

   B. Young person buy-in: Reassure the young person that their data will be handled confidentially and collected to ensure the service delivered to him/her is as helpful as possible.

   C. Reducing effort: Making data collection as effortless as possible is key to obtaining the young person’s agreement to provide information. Ensure that surveys are short and understandable (while remaining validated/reliable), and consider carrying them out via an iPad or Smartphone rather than on paper. These methods can also save valuable time on data entry.

3. Making criminal justice data available for research: We suggest the criminal justice system eases access to youth crime data for research purposes.

4. Creating ‘soft’ outcome data collection tools where necessary: We suggest the research community collaborates with programme delivery staff to design new relevant tools to measure the key ‘soft’ outcomes to reducing gang and youth violence. These need to be practical, short and use simple wording in order to be useful.

5. Cross-sector collaboration: Since comprehensive multi-agency programmes show the most promise in reducing gang and youth crime, it is crucial that different sectors are not only willing to work together on this issue, but also have practical processes in place to make this collaboration work. For instance, agencies should coordinate activity where possible and consider sharing anonymised data with each other.

6. Making data consistent in London: Relevant agencies should be willing to agree on a robust set of data and measurement tools to enable assembling their data into a coherent pan-London picture that helps commission effective youth crime services. MOPAC’s Youth Outcomes Framework is a useful tool to that effect.

CONTACT PROJECT ORACLE:
For further evaluation support or information about what we do, please contact us at www.project-oracle.com

FURTHER READING
• Please visit: