Gangs, Youth Violence and Crime

Project Oracle synthesis study 03/13
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The author would like to thank Dr Jyoti Belur of UCL for her contribution to the data collection and analysis of this study.
Glossary of key terms

**Context** – the external factors which influence how individuals participate in or organise and carry out an intervention. The context affects the availability or resources and the opportunities for a project to be carried out. For example, the arrangement of key institutions for young people, such as schools, colleges, police, young offender institutions, etc. can facilitate the building of network. Interventions and their participants are embedded in social contexts characterised by dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, material inequality, racial and ethnic diversity, and perhaps gang tensions and violence.

**Evidence** – the range of available robust and reliable information which demonstrates the impact of a policy, public service or programme.

**Indicator** – a measurable characteristic or process which reflects (indicates) that change has occurred.

**Intervention** – a planned action which aims to bring about positive change. This may aim to improve social inclusion, empowerment and equality, such as in social work. The term intervention refers to person-centred approaches which aim to change behaviour, attitudes, and so on.

**Methodology** – the rules, assumptions and data analysis methods which outline an approach to research or analysis. This is different to a research or evaluation method, which is a tool for collecting and analysing data.

**Outcomes** – the end result of a process is its outcome. The outcomes of a policy, a project or an intervention are the changes that it has caused, or is aiming to cause. This is not the same as an output, which refers to the products offered by a policy, a project or an intervention.

**Participant** – an individual who engages with an intervention which is aimed at bringing about change for them, such as in their behaviour or attitudes.

**Programme** – an on-going series of activities to affect an issue or problem. Whereas a project has a defined beginning and end, a programme may be more open-ended: an overarching programme can be composed of various projects.
**Key Insights**

### Why gangs and youth violence?

Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s an increasing interest in and concern about British gangs responded to a growth in their presence and increasing violence. Then, in August 2011 youth violence was thrust onto the British front pages and television screens with riots taking place in parts of London and elsewhere.

This continued salience of gangs and youth-related violence means that it is important to ask what is known about the effectiveness of interventions and whether it is possible to outline what works.

### What evidence is there?

This synthesis study examined twelve programme evaluations aimed at reducing gang and youth violence in the London area. However, not all programmes and evaluations were comparable.

**Comprehensive** programmes brought together a range of initiatives to achieve multiple objectives such as mapping gang activity, targeting responses, promoting non-violent and non-criminal lifestyles, improving employment opportunities and punishing crime recorded positive impacts on gang membership and violence. They demonstrated a change in the behaviour of gang members and individuals at risk of gang-related and violent activity in declining rates of offending and violent activity.

**Specific** programmes aimed to contribute to a reduction in gang activity and youth violence by confronting a particular characteristic also signalled positive outcomes in terms of attitude changes. However, their evidence assumed behavioural change would result from attitude change rather than demonstrating if it had.

The majority of the evaluations measured attitudinal changes in young people as an indicator of their likelihood to take part in gang activity and violence, and only two measured an impact on their behaviour.

### So can we say what works?

Based on the available evidence for this synthesis study the strongest indication of an effect on young people’s participation in gang activity and violence in London comes from targeted comprehensive, multi-agency programmes.

But, it also finds that programmes directed at specific indicators of gang activity and violence can demonstrate a positive impact on the attitudes of high risk young people, although the impact of this on behaviour is less certain. A subsequent reduction in gang and violent activity may result, but further evidence is required if a direct link is to be drawn.

Firm conclusions are difficult to draw due to the idiosyncrasies of the available evidence: whilst only comprehensive, multi-agency cases have clearly demonstrated a link between interventions and reduced rates of gang activity and youth violence, this may be due to a privileged access to sources of evidence on gang activity and youth offending.

In response this study advocates a broadening of the evidence base. More evidence which can draw a link between interventions and levels of youth gang activity and violence may enable providers to recognise the direct impact of their work on gangs and youth violence in London.

The Project Oracle evidence hub is one way that useful and relevant evidence can be more effectively gathered.
Introduction

Gangs and youth violence have been among the most debated and publicly salient issues in contemporary Britain. It has also been an area which has witnessed an explosion of research, policymaking and funding of policy interventions. As a result it is important to ask what is known about the effectiveness of interventions and whether it is possible to outline what works.

Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s the increasing interest in and concern about British gangs responded to a growth in their presence and increasing violence. The response was a range of research projects, policy papers and government initiatives to bring down these numbers.

These drew a picture of gangs and youth violence as one multi-faceted problem to be addressed through targeted, multi-agency programmes (see for example Brand and Ollerearnshaw 2008, The Centre for Social Justice 2009). And indeed they appeared to have positive results as national youth homicide and assault levels dropped considerably (HM Government 2011: 15).

However, in August 2011 youth violence was thrust onto the British front pages and television screens with the riots that took place in parts of London and elsewhere.

As part of this continued salience of gangs and youth-related violence, the Home Secretary, Theresa May MP, stated clearly that:

,’For too long, government action has not been as effective as it should be at stemming the violence. We need a long-term, evidence-based programme to get a proper grip on gang and youth violence.’

(HM Government 2011: 3)

This synthesis study contributes to the evidence base by examining what conclusions can be drawn about the impact of intervention programmes on gang and youth violence in London. Of course, it should be remembered that not all gang members are youths or children and that the majority of gang members do not offend. The study does not, however, directly examine a population of gang members and violent youths in London, but rather asks what is known about the effectiveness of London-based interventions which claim to have the objective of reducing gang and youth violence.

The study signals different types of evaluation evidence that are available in London, and draws out from them the strongest possible understanding of what programmes have had a positive impact on levels of gang and youth violence in the capital. It does so through a synthesis of available evaluations of interventions, contributing to building a source of evidence that can inform practitioners and commissioners of interventions what is known and what steps can be taken. It also presents opportunities for the future in order to improve the evidence-base and so contribute to improving policy outcomes.
Project Oracle Synthesis Studies: Aims and Approach

The Project Oracle synthesis reports aim to create a better understanding of what works in youth policy. They each bring together, assess and analyse the available evidence on a particular issue. Together the studies build a library of synthesised evidence to aid providers and funders in designing and commissioning projects that have a greater likelihood of succeeding (Cartwright and Hardie 2012).

Synthesis study aims:

1. To identify which projects work, for whom and under what conditions
   *Focus on evaluations of previous interventions to draw broad conclusions regarding how intervention mechanisms influence outcomes in different contexts.*

2. To assess the type and quality of evaluation data currently available
   *Analyze the evaluations being conducted in terms of their underlying theory, methodological approach and data collection strategies.*
   *Outline indicators of positive and negative outcomes.*
   *Identify gaps and shortcomings in the evidence base for future work.*

The examination of ‘what works’ is approached here from the perspective of realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilly 1997). The realist approach is based on the recognition that social systems are open, fluid, constantly evolving and contribute to a complex social reality. Interventions proceed within a context to produce intended or unintended outcomes (Pawson 2006; Pawson and Tilley 2009). A realist synthesis of evidence involves investigating how social programmes work and this demands a focus on the mechanisms that underpin interventions and the way that these evolve in specific contextual settings. The objective of such a focus is to bring out the causal links which explain how certain factors, processes and implementation strategies lead to specific outcomes.

A realist approach to synthesis

1. Identifies an underlying theory of change
   *Do the interventions aim to achieve change through an approach which is theoretically grounded?*

2. Examines interventions in their context
   *Do interventions have the same impact on all participant groups in all places? Which institutional and social contexts facilitate positive outcomes?*

3. Is aware of interventions and contexts being open and changeable
   *Do intervention providers borrow from or compete with each other? Do positive or negative outcomes create or restrict opportunities for future programmes? Can synthesis studies facilitate knowledge exchange among intervention providers and commissioners?*
The Study: Gangs and Youth Violence in London

The principal aim of this synthesis study is to outline what is known about the effectiveness of gang-focused interventions in London. Furthermore, the study is also aimed at informing practitioners and commissioners of interventions to guide practical decision-making in both designing programme delivery and commissioning evidence based projects. Keeping the outline of a realist approach in mind, to reach these aims requires addressing the following (these stages will be separated across separate sections in the following pages):

1) Assess the type and quality of evaluation evidence that is available.
2) Map and categorise the interventions which have aimed at reducing gang and youth violence in London since 2008.
   - Intervention participants
   - Intervention types
   - Contexts and resources
3) Identify and assess the evidence of outcomes in the evaluation literature.
   - What evidence is available?
   - Which outcomes are measured?
   - Identify gaps and shortcomings in the available evidence.
4) Draw out linkages between intervention types and outcomes
   - Does who the intervention is targeted at affect outcomes?
   - Which processes and mechanisms contribute to positive outcomes?
5) Recommend good practices guidance for evaluating the range of policies, programmes and projects targeted at reducing youth violence.

Our synthesis model:
In the British research and policy literature definitions abound as to what gangs are and why they exist, with the implication that responses aimed at reducing their presence and activity are shaped in different ways.

In 2004 the Eurogang international project defined gangs as ‘any durable street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal acts is part of their identity’ (Eurogang 2004: 1). But this has been criticised for being too open a definition to provide targeted policy interventions (Pearce and Pitts 2011: 12).

This was followed in 2006 by a Home Office definition which claimed that gangs were

Young people [who] spend time in groups of three or more. The group spends a lot of time in public places. The group has existed for 3 months or more. The group has engaged in delinquency or criminal behaviour together in the last 12 months. The group has at least one structural feature (a name, an area or a leader)

(Home Office 2008: 23)

However, this swing to a precise definition offered a distinct problem of being too specific to capture the evolving, shifting and fuzzy nature of gang activity and gang membership.

The current policy environment has adopted the definition put forward in the report Dying to Belong by The Centre for Social Justice in 2009. This projects gangs as a multi-faceted social problem composed of five key points:

[Gangs are] a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who
1) See themselves and are seen by others as a discernible group
2) Engage in criminal activity and violence
3) Identify with or lay claim over territory
4) Have an identifying structural feature
5) Are in conflict with other, similar gangs

(The Centre for Social Justice 2009: 21)

This same definition has been adopted by the British Government and has shaped national policy initiatives on gangs (HM Government 2011: 17). These reports and much academic research on gangs have highlighted a combination of individual and family-focused variables, as well as context-related drivers of gang membership and youth violence, such as poor housing, material poverty and a lack of employment (Brand and Ollereanshaw 2008, Pitts 2008, 2009, Williamson 2009, see summary diagram on the following page).

The response has been a call for multi-agency and combined short-, medium- and long-term programmes to confront the different aspects of gang membership and activity (Brand and Ollereanshaw 2008, HM Government 2011, The Centre for Social Justice 2009). From this has come a national policy approach which can be described as comprehensive due to the way it brings together elements of general youth work-based practice (e.g. education, employment, community building) with more focused youth-crime based practice (e.g. crime preventions and punishment). Resources are targeted at individuals and families signalled as at risk of gang membership and activity as well as into macro-level initiatives aimed at reducing gang-related youth violence and killing.
Summary of the research and policy framework on gangs and youth violence:

**Problem:**
Gang membership and youth violence

**Causes**

- Individual variables: (broken family, violent home, attitude and values, educational failure)
- Meso-level variables: (peer-group, identity)
- Macro-level variables: (context, material deprivation, unemployment)

**Interventions:**

- Targeted: resources aimed at individuals and/or geographic areas assessed as most ‘at risk’
- Comprehensive: multiple objectives to confront symptoms and causes
- Multi-agency: Police, youth offender teams, schools, hospitals, youth workers, community organisations, third sector
Selecting the Evidence: Eligibility Criteria

A synthesis study is a meta-analysis of the available evidence: it evaluates and summarises previous evaluations, rather than examining the detail of specific projects.

The synthesis study framework outlined for this study is open to diverse forms of evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, that can be drawn together to help understand what influences intervention outcomes. We drew upon a wide range of potential sources, not limited to academic research papers. In order to cast a broad net we did not restrict the review to evaluations that used particular designs (e.g. Randomised Control Trials or some form of quasi-experimental methods) and included some of the evaluations that would not generally be considered in other types of systematic review or meta-analysis. The caveats to be aware of when using such sources will be noted on the later pages.

The study gathered material on evaluated programmes that specified a reduction in gang-related youth violence as one of their objectives, were based in London and the evaluations of which were written following 2008 and in English. The evaluations had to include evidence of programme outcomes.

The search strategy focused on locating published and unpublished literature relating to youth programmes to reduce violence. Three inter-related approaches were used:

1. **Searches of databases of published articles**, including: Google scholar, ASSIA (Applied Social Sciences Index); British Education Link; IBSS; PsychInfo; Metalib; Swetswise and JSTOR.

2. **Examining online material and ‘grey’ literature of specific youth programme providers**. Domain experts in the area of evaluation studies were personally contacted to solicit unpublished studies and websites of specific organisations and commissioning bodies were trawled for online evaluation reports.

3. **Project Oracle’s outreach networks were activated in soliciting evidence submissions**. Whilst many providers engaged with Project Oracle currently have a low level of evaluation evidence, this is set to expand and will provide an important resource for similar studies in the future.

Key words and descriptors for search engines were added according to the conventions of each specific database used. The key words used for the database searches were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Database</th>
<th>Search terms</th>
<th>Raw search hits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Google</td>
<td>youth intervention &quot;evaluation study” gangs London</td>
<td>35,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Scholar</td>
<td>youth intervention “evaluation study” gangs London</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSTOR</td>
<td>gangs AND youth AND intervention AND evaluation AND London</td>
<td>448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRoQuest</td>
<td>Evaluation AND youth</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PsychInfo</td>
<td>intervention AND evaluation AND youth</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swetswise</td>
<td>youth AND “evaluation study”</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalib</td>
<td>youth evaluation study gangs intervention</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Studies that did not explicitly address gangs and youth violence were excluded, as were evaluations of projects not based in London. Promotional material and satisfaction surveys which did not refer to evidence of programme outcomes were also excluded. Despite there being an enormous research and policy literature on gangs, relatively little of this evaluates specific interventions in London. This body of evaluations can provide an avenue for future research and cross-city comparisons.

A total of twelve evaluation studies reporting on eleven programmes aimed at gang activity and violence in London were included in the study.

The analysis of each study composed of categorising their programme objective, targeted participants, underlying theory and implementation mechanisms. Support factors contributing to the success or otherwise of outcomes were also identified wherever possible. Finally, each individual report was analysed for reported success and/or failure, as well as the type of evaluation conducted.

**Programmes included in the synthesis:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme title</th>
<th>Evaluation reports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Resolution UnCut</td>
<td>Bourne, V. (January 2011) <em>Working With Men: Conflict Evaluation Study</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart</td>
<td>Analytica Consulting and Catch 22 (2013) <em>the Heart Programme Final Evaluation Report</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Violence Prevention Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital</td>
<td>Bunn, Amanda; Demarco, Jeffrey; Boon, Laura; Ilan-Clarke, Yael; Bifulco, Antonia (2012) <em>Evaluation of the youth violence prevention project at Guy’s and St Thomas’ Hospital London</em>, Kingston University London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwark Anti-Violence Unit</td>
<td>Southwark Anti Violence Unit (2013) <em>12 month report (May 2012-April 2013)</em>, Safe Southwark Partnership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mapping Interventions in London – Participants

The intervention participants for each project were those who were recruited to take part. They were recruited in different ways, and recruitment strategies influenced the type of person who was targeted. The intervention could therefore adopt different dynamics and have varying outcomes according to their participants.

Interventions can be placed in two broad categories according to the participants that they engage with and the way that they reach them.

**Targeted interventions:** participants are selected or referred to the programme according to whether they meet certain criteria which signals them as at risk of gang membership and violent activity. Since the last Labour government it has been noted that there has been a push towards the targeting of youth support services at so-called ‘hard-to-reach’ families who are considered problematic due to their disadvantage, poverty and deprivation (Pitts 2012, Solomon and Blyth 2009).

**General or universal interventions:** programmes take place in an open setting and aim to engage as wide a range of young people as possible, not necessarily due to their likelihood of being a gang member or violent individual. This is a holistic approach which claims that some of those in need are do not fit into technical categories of risk assessment (Williamson 2009).

All eleven of the evaluated interventions in London were targeted. By targeting participants, it was considered that providers could focus resources directly and more efficiently on those most likely to be involved in gangs and youth violence. This has been a key driver of the push for a clear definition of gangs in the research and policy literature outlined above: targeting requires a shared understanding of what it is that interventions are aiming at (for reviews which emphasise the importance of being able to target interventions, see Decker et al 2012 and Pitts 2012).

In the interventions in London, targeting occurred either directly at specific individuals who already had a known criminal profile or were closely related to someone with a known profile, or indirectly through the establishment of programmes in known hotspots of gang activity.

Programmes employed a combination of methods to target participants, including referrals from schools, police records of criminal activity of certain individuals or in a geographic area, hospital records of harm caused by gang violence, assessment of individuals’ area of residence and family background, trawling social media and online material such as youtube videos, assessment of risk level reflected in young person’s attitudes and peer-referral: previous participants incorporate people that they know.
Mapping Interventions in London – Programme types

The processes and mechanisms of the programmes varied greatly from one to another. However, all of them expressed a notion of how their intervention would result in a reduction in gang activity and youth violence amongst their target population.

As noted above, the research and policy literature emphasises the way that gang membership and youth violence are multi-faceted social issues. In the research literature distinct steps have been suggested in order to plan effective interventions.

Three-step interventions (referenced in Hodgkinson et al 2009):
Psychological, contextual and criminal justice dimensions (Goldstein and Huff 1993)
Prevention, intervention and suppression dimensions (Bilchik 1999)

Multi-systemic therapy (referenced in The Brandon Centre 2013):
Young people's difficulties are multi-causal: effective interventions address multiple sources of influence in the young person (values and attitudes, social skills) but also in their context (the family, school, peer group and neighbourhood)

Interventions of the type which aim at impacting more than one symptom or cause of gang activity and youth violence can be described as comprehensive. In contrast, interventions focusing on a particular symptom or cause can be defined as specific.

The programmes examined for this study are predominantly specific in focus. They aim to contribute to a reduction in gang activity and youth violence by confronting a particular characteristic. The dominant theory of change in these interventions claimed that a change to individuals' attitudes towards crime or violence would result in a change in their behaviour, thus reducing criminal and violent activity.

In six out of seven of the targeted specific programmes in London, implementation has been embedded within a school or hospital. This provides a beneficial context in which the space for activities, knowledge about participant background and contact with families are readily available (see case study: Safer Children).

The comprehensive programmes involve multiple agencies in networks for sharing resources and information. They bring together a range of initiatives to attempt to map gang activity, target responses, promote non-violent and non-criminal lifestyles and punish crime. These programmes adopt a theory of change which views attitude change as part of a wider range of necessary steps to take to bring about positive outcomes.
Gangs and youth violence

The targeted comprehensive programmes found in London put the multi-agency or multi-systemic models called for in national policy into practice. However, to do this requires a context of active collaboration among actors and access to resources such as funding and knowledge in order to implement interventions (see case study: Enfield Gangs Action Group).

In summary, both comprehensive and specific-type programmes reported positive outcomes. However, as will be discussed below, their different theories of change influenced the way that impact was measured, with the implication that it is not possible to compare and contrast outcomes effectively enough to be sure of which works best.

Case Study: Safer Children

Objective
To reduce youth crime and violence by empowering parents/carers and positively changing children’s attitudes. Targets are children and families, through schools and social services, who are particularly vulnerable in neighbourhoods where gangs, gang crime and violence are prevalent.

Implementation
This is a specific programme which works between home and school on the single dominant goal of improving family life. It does so through a combination of classroom education, workshops and information sessions for parents.

Outcome:
An evaluation survey found that prior to participating on the course 27% of the children agreed that being in a gang or carrying a knife made them safer, and after the course only 1% agreed.

Case Study: Enfield Gangs Action Group

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

Implementation
The programme was a multi-agency comprehensive intervention with multiple phases. These actions confronted all levels of gang involvement, combining suppression of current 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 over the interventions period (2009-10): GBH/Stabbing reduced by 68%, knife crime by 35%, robbery by 27%. 
Measuring Intervention Effects

The evaluations of interventions which were analysed for this study vary in their measurement of outcomes and the ways that they collect and process evidence. This raises problems concerning (a) how to compare outcomes of different programmes, and (b) whether we are able to draw general conclusions.

These shortcomings could be addressed through use of more defined models of programme evaluation, more consistent measurement over time and shared criteria of outcome evidence across cases. Of course, this does not imply use of the same methods in every case, but rather explicitly stating how data is collected and an awareness of what that data can and cannot explain in terms of outcomes.

The types of evidence collected to judge programme outcomes can be grouped in four ways (as can be seen in the table below). Ten evaluation reports brought together more than one evidence type, whereas one contained only anecdotal evidence of outcomes.

The most common evidence has been information about the participants themselves. In nine out of ten cases this was gathered before and after the intervention in order to observe changes as a result of participation. This mode of evaluation could be easily tied into a programme as a pre-intervention assessment of participant risk and a post-intervention assessment of participant change.

Two evaluations compare gang and youth violence rates in an area following an intervention with general trends and two compare with control groups of individuals who are similar to the intervention participants. These comparisons enable the evaluations to make an approximation of the impact of their programmes on patterns of gang activity and on individual’s attitudes towards criminal and violent behaviour, respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence type</th>
<th>Anecdotal</th>
<th>Participant data</th>
<th>Control group</th>
<th>General trend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations (total)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overview of gang and youth violence in London evidence

These methods have benefits and shortcomings. In particular, none of the evaluations allows for a causal relationship to be drawn between the intervention and an outcome, but many can illustrate patterns of correlation which allow conclusions to be drawn. Anecdotal perceptions and participant data are problematic because they vary greatly from one programme to another and are not always consistently recorded. This makes it difficult to compare across programmes or recognise which specific factors have caused which outcomes. Comparing with general crime trends provides a way of corroborating the programme’s effect in comparison with broader patterns, but poses a problem because it does not control the multiple other factors which may have also had an impact, such as employment levels, education provision, material inequality, etc. The use of control groups can resolve these issues, but the evaluations which did so presented evidence from such small groups that would be difficult to arrive at general conclusions from them. Consequently, it is not possible to strongly conclude whether an outcome was caused by a specific programme or broader social dynamics.
Assessing Outcomes

As noted above, this study is concerned with interventions which have as their declared objective a reduction in gang and youth violence in London. All of the evaluations report positive outcomes to their interventions, yet most of them do so through measurement of individuals’ attitudes as a proxy indicator of their involvement in violence, rather than examining levels of gang activity and youth violence.

The outcome measurements can be grouped into two categories:  

1) **Attitudinal change** (see case study: Heart)  
   Seven out of ten evaluations measured the attitudes of young people before and after participation on an intervention programme. This was measured through questionnaires which have been a recognised way of measuring attitudes in psychology research. Attitudes are accepted as a proxy for behaviour in these measurements, and the consequence of changes in attitudes is assumed to be a change in criminal and violent activity.

2) **Behaviour change** (see case study: Southwark Anti-Violence Unit)  
   Three out of ten evaluations measured a change in the behaviour of gang members and individuals at risk of gang-related and violent activity. This evidence consisted of a comparison of offending rates of participants before and after an intervention, which in two cases were also compared to broader offending rates. One of these evaluations also recognised having a sample which is too small to enable conclusions to be drawn.

Understood in this way, only two of the evaluations offer strong evidence drawing an explicit link between their interventions and a direct and positive effect on gang activity and youth violence. These are both comprehensive, multi-agency programmes directed by the administration of two London boroughs. We can cautiously suggest two possible explanations for this:

- Comprehensive multi-agency intervention programmes are likely to record a positive impact on gang activity and youth violence because they address the broad contextual causes of gang activity as well as the symptoms displayed by individuals and have a wide access to the resources, expertise and knowledge which are necessary to carry out consistent and effectively targeted interventions.

- Comprehensive multi-agency intervention programmes are better equipped to record their impact on gang activity and youth violence because they involve agencies with ready access to evidence of criminal activity and gang membership, such as the Metropolitan Police Service.

A richer evidence base and further analysis is required to uncover the links between interventions, actors, resources and outcomes. Unfortunately, idiosyncrasies of the available evidence mean that it is not possible for this synthesis study to strongly conclude which interventions give better outcomes. These idiosyncrasies mirror a similar concern found in the international research literature on gangs, namely that there is considerably greater focus on individual gang members or at risk young people than on macro-level, contextual causes of gang activity and youth violence, with even less being known about the group processes, identities and peer relationships within gangs (Decker et al 2012: 2).

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1 One evaluation with only anecdotal evidence has been excluded from this section due to the weakness of its conclusions and the incomparability of its evidence to the other studies.
Case Study: Southwark Anti-Violence Unit

**Objective**
To reduce serious youth violence by using existing resources in a more focused way to enable young people to move away from gang activity and make positive lifestyle choices

**Evaluation method**
A Home Office peer review as part of ending gangs and youth violence had access to data collected during the programme from the varied agencies involved in implementation

**Evidence of Outcomes**
- **Cohort measurements:**
  - 46% of clients have not been arrested or convicted of an offence since engaging with SAVU (reduced from 100% in 12 month period before programme)
- **Borough-wide measurements:**
  - Reductions in rates of most serious violence (4%), youth violence (18%) and serious youth violence (7%)

Case Study: Heart - Healthy Relationships Training

**Objective**
To reduce the risk of young women committing or being subject to serious violence, particularly gang-related and sexual violence

**Evaluation method**
The programme assessed how participants developed over their period of involvement through a psychological test. The test is based on a diagram of an 8-point star on which each point is labelled with a different topic from healthy relationships to self-respect and committing crime. The person has to rank their autonomy and capability to make decisions on each of these topics.

**Evidence of Outcomes**
Significant changes were recorded in young people’s self-assessment over the course of the programme on the topics: healthy relationships, self-respect, wellbeing, dealing with others, thinking about people’s feelings, having sex

**Shortcomings:**
The evaluation only measures correlations between attitude change and programme participation. It does not show whether these changed attitudes are matched with behavioural changes such as leaving a gang or deciding not to commit a crime
Conclusions

Can we say what works?

According to the available evidence for this synthesis study it can be suggested that the strongest indication of a direct effect on gangs and youth violence in London comes from targeted comprehensive, multi-agency programmes.

However, the characteristics of the available evidence make attempts to draw any strong conclusions problematic. Two caveats should be noted:

1. It is not possible to conclude whether targeted programmes are more effective than general ones because all of the evaluated programmes involve participants who are specifically targeted. This lack of variation means that it is not possible to compare across interventions.

2. Secondly it is not possible to strongly conclude whether comprehensive or specific programmes give better outcomes because the available evaluations measure different effects: whilst comprehensive programmes record changes in the criminal and violent behaviour of young people, specific programmes have taken young people’s attitudes as a proxy for their behaviour.

So can we draw any conclusions?

Two qualified conclusions can (cautiously) be made about gang-focused interventions in London:

1. Only comprehensive, multi-agency cases have clearly demonstrated a link between interventions and reduced rates of gang activity and youth violence, although it is not clear whether this is due to the intervention itself or their privileged access to sources of evidence on gang activity and youth offending.

2. Programmes directed at specific indicators of gang activity and violence can demonstrate a positive impact on the attitudes of high risk young people, but the impact of this on behaviour is 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.

In response this study advocates a widening of evidence types and greater access to data for providers in order to be able to evaluate more precisely the direct impact of interventions on gangs and youth violence in London.
References


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Gangs and youth violence

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