Foreword

The United Nations estimates that by 2020 half the world’s population will be living in urban slums of one sort or another. Moreover, they calculate that around half of the inhabitants will be aged under 15. This is a population whose problems in gaining access to legitimate opportunity will be exacerbated by burgeoning income polarization and the effective withdrawal of state services from the poorest. In these circumstances, it is probable that the gang phenomenon will not only grow, but become more deeply entrenched. As Elijah Anderson (1999) has written:

*In some of the most economically distressed and drug and crime-ridden pockets of the city, the rules of civil law have been severely weakened, and in their stead a ‘code of the streets’ often holds sway ... The code of the streets emerges where the influence of the police ends and personal responsibility for one’s safety is felt to begin, resulting in a kind of ‘people’s law’ based on street justice.* (p. 29)

However, the more conventional North American accounts of the origins of the youth gang, that suggest they are the product of the ‘social disorganisation’ of a culturally deficient urban underclass or a consequence of the globalization of ‘gangster rap’ don’t really get to grips with the complexity of the problem.

Moreover, much of the U.S. research locates the origins of the gang form in the migration of disadvantaged social, ethnic and religious groups to the host country and the consequent cultural dislocation they experience. This type of analysis does not dwell for long on the relationship between migration, the social and economic circumstances encountered by the migrant groups. However, in his chapter ‘From Little flowers’, about gangs in China, Harding points to the fact that it is the children of poor, sometimes disposed, rural workers who come to the major Chinese cities to find work who are becoming involved in gangs. Here it is not so much cultural dislocation as social exclusion and lack of access to legitimate opportunity that is propelling these young people into these new groupings.

Clearly, anybody writing about ‘gangs’ today would be unwise to ignore the huge body of research and scholarship devoted to the gang phenomenon by North American academics. However, the contributors to Global Perspectives on Youth Gang Behaviour, Violence, and Weapons Use, who are drawn from several different developed countries, have moved beyond the traditional accounts of the aetiology of gangs in order to analyse the contemporary constellation of social, economic and cultural forces which have either brought these groupings into being or caused them to change.

Dev Maitra’s account of an Exploratory Study of Prison Gangs in Contemporary British Society, for example, breaks new ground because while the prison gang is an established feature of imprisonment in the United States, it is only in the past few years that they have come to be recognised as a feature
of the UK penal system. This chapter has particular relevance at the moment as both research and the Prisons Inspectorate in the UK have revealed a sharp escalation in prison violence in the recent period. Indeed, in March 2013 the UK Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee (PPAC, 2013) indicated that spending cuts had increased the level of risk in prisons, noting that:

*We are concerned about safety and decency in some prisons and the fact that more prisoners are reporting that they do not feel safe. Assaults on staff, self-harm and escapes from contractor escorts have all increased. The agency should ensure that savings plans have regard to the potential impact on risks to standards of safety, decency and respect in prisons and in the community.*

Similarly, the contributions from Ukraine, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia illustrate significant cultural differences which underpin the presentations of gangs. The relationships with violence and weapons within gangs, and how this differs across the globe, are key issues for research and academia and it is considerable value that different perspectives have been assembled together for this book.

Whereas in both the UK and the USA it has become a ‘taken-for-granted’ that effective intervention with youth gangs should involve a pincer movement, with tough enforcement on the one side and educational, vocational, welfare and therapeutic intervention on the other. However, this collection suggests that a one-size-fits-all response which fails to address the deep rooted origins of the ‘gang phenomenon’ are unlikely to succeed.

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**REFERENCES**
