Chapter 48

“It’s a Vicious Game”: Youth Gangs, Street Violence, and Organised Crime in Modern Britain

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the activities and characteristics of street gangs and organised crime groups in contemporary British society. Although numerous studies exist which investigate youth delinquency and group violence in Britain, there is less research which specifically investigates contemporary British criminal gangs - carrying out such an exploration is the organising principle of this chapter. Through conducting qualitative research at an adult men’s prison in England and its surrounding area, this chapter attempts to articulate the experiences of prisoners and street-offenders on this subject. The results illustrate the entrenched role street gangs and organised crime groups hold in certain areas of England; not only are they seen as viable alternatives to gainful employment, but their activities are often sanctioned by the communities within which they are based. Subsequently, a high level of violence is normalised within such communities, including heightened levels of weapon usage by gang members, both within and outside prison.

CASE STUDIES

1. Rob1: A Case Study in Gang Activity

Rob is serving a lengthy custodial sentence at an adult prison in England. Although this is his first conviction for a serious offence, he has been to several prisons and young offenders’ institutions in the past. He is in his early twenties but says, “I feel like I’m 45”, blaming this exhaustion on his prolonged involvement in criminality. This has ranged from street gang activity to being involved with an organised crime group. Rob grew up on an English council estate which he refers to as being “one of three mad estates” in his area. He goes on to say that rival estates had to do “business” with one another out of necessity, and describes his particular estate in the following terms: “In mine, you’d be shouting your gang

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name; guys get shot on the estate, run over with cars, even. People got stabbed and died on the estate”. Rob started drug-dealing at the age of 14, and his rapidly escalating criminality had a detrimental effect on his family: “Like I said, with [gang name], they’ll go for your family. So when I was living with me Dad, his house got shot-up. So I got kicked out”.

Because Rob was from a particular area, beginning a criminal ‘career’ automatically led to his affiliation with that area’s organised crime group. By the age of 15, Rob was combining his street-based drug dealing with robberies; his gang would “get tooled up with machetes” to rob businesses – newsagents, off-licences, petrol stations. As well as financial gain, the robberies were done for his ‘rep’ – street reputation. This notion of street reputation permeated all aspects of criminal behaviour, with gang leaders continually putting pressure on Rob to ‘up his game’: “I was buying pure cocaine…and then doubling it up…[and soon] I became a middleman, where you’re a couple of rungs below the wholesalers. So you’re buying from the leaders, and you’ve got a few levels below you – the runners. I became a middleman quite young, ’cos I could sell. It’s a vicious game, all about making money and upping your rep.” However, Rob is emphatic in his desire to ‘go straight’ upon his release:

Drug dealing’s not a living: either the police catch you and you’re banged-up, or you end up dying. Your money’s never your own, you can’t prove your income, the police can pull you over whenever they want. I’d rather be a bum on the street or work in McDonalds than go back to dealing; I’d rather have a good night’s sleep than go back to that. Then in prison, you got to wake up being a gangster every day. Once I’m sentenced, I’ll serve my time, and then I’m done with it. I know what it is – I am it.

2. Dan: “It’s All about Family”

Dan is a persistent-offender, having served several prison sentences during his life; he is currently serving a short custodial sentence. Dan originates from a particular community, within which there are elements of organised criminal behaviour, as well as general violence and delinquency similar to that of street gangs. In fact, the specific cultural group Dan hails from is characterised by deep family ties, illustrated by his own introduction to crime by his father:

It starts from a young age: you’re listening to your dad when you’re about five years old; when you’re older, there’s questioning and explaining with your dad. And then there are scams: you sell someone a laptop case with bottles of water in it, swapping the laptop for water when they’re not looking. We was all about scams…we could buy and sell a lot of the other communities because you’ve always got family backup.

Dan’s opinions around the importance of family show that familial connections are the lynchpin of his community’s gang, even though he never uses the term ‘gang’ to describe his own cultural group. Although Dan states that “a grudge could be held over something silly…like [a household good]”, he continues by stating that individuals have to help fellow community members because “it’s all about family”. This leads to there being a sharp resistance from rival gangs to cause conflict with Dan and his associates:

Put it this way, people think we’re silly people; but we’re not silly people. If you fuck with us, we’ll fuck with you. And we’ve got a bigger crew than you. If you leave us alone, we’ll leave you alone. It’s only a