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# Knife crime, gang culture and ‘youth crisis’

**Stephen Lambert**

**G**ang culture or youth violence is not a new thing. Organised gangs in London, Brighton and Birmingham were a feature of the inter-war period, with their roots going back to the 19th century.

In the 1990s, new forms of criminal youth gangs began to appear in London and Manchester, according to the sociologists Bennett and Holloway. In one of the major studies of gang culture in the UK, the authors analysed data from interviews with almost 5,000 arrestees across the country. 15 per cent had current or past experiences as gang members. From this study alone it was estimated that there could be 20,000 active gang members in Britain aged 18 or over.

But, as the authors recognised, this could be mere speculation, as no major detailed study into gang culture had been conducted till the publication of John Pitts’s important book *Reluctant Gangsters* in 2015.

According to Bennett and Holloway, these street gangs are

younger, violent, armed, organised and heavily involved in the drugs trade. In London up to July 2018 there were 6,290 victims of serious youth violence, with 1,749 under-25s stabbed. According to the Metropolitan Police, gang activity has soared by 25 per cent.

Some parts of the capital are seeing ‘an epidemic of knife crime’. There’s been a 53 per cent increase in the number of young people using knives for robberies, homicides and assaults between 2016 and 2018, while the number of those under 16 treated for stab wounds by the NHS more than doubled from 2014. 17 teenagers were killed with knives in London in 2015 in gang-related murders, up from eight in 2008.

Meanwhile, the total number of lethal guns discharges rose to 302 in the year to August 2016, up 42 per cent in one year. And the disturbing use of acid to attack moped riders is on the up too in parts of London. To date 70 youngsters have been killed with knives in London alone in the last twelve months.

But, as the experts have noted, even in cities where gangs and increased knife crime have taken hold, they are confined to particular neighbourhoods where deprivation is combined with social exclusion. John Pitts in *Reluctant Gangsters* notes gangs are dominated by young men and boys, some as young as eleven, mostly from disadvantaged areas.

Often there are familial links, perpetuated by a hierarchical structure, and young men join gangs for a sense of belonging and identity. Most are territorial, and in some parts of south London there’s an ethnic dimension too.

Members are heavily involved in drug use and dealing. Most have been excluded from school. Few, if any, have any basic qualifications like GCSE passes or job-related skills.

While some criminologists believe that gang culture stems from social class inequality, poverty and austerity, the educationalist Tony Sewell takes the view that gangs are almost like surrogate families, a

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replacement for traditional family structures, where disaffected youngsters seek and gain an identity. For Sewell many inner-city London gang members are growing up in 'fatherless families'.

Whatever the explanation, what's going on in London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester is a serious cause for concern. This led to the Home Office publishing a paper, *Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation*, proposing a route out of gang life and to reduce the level of serious youth violence on our streets.

Newcastle hasn't been afflicted by the type of violent knife and drug-related crime experienced in other core cities. As the Safe Newcastle Partnership notes, the level of gun violence is comparatively low. There's a big difference between groups of youths hanging about the city centre, sometimes committing a low level of crime and anti-social behaviour, and the 'real' criminal gangs carrying knives seen in other places. Newcastle is compact and small. It's hard to form territorial gangs. Another view is cultural. Our strong local identity, social cohesion and long-established, strong 'modified extended families' exercise informal social control, and the absence of deprived neighbourhoods next to exclusive retail outlets may have helped to stem the emergence of gang culture.

#### Bullet

Of course, there's no single magic bullet to resolve the problem of knife crime or gang violence in the rest of the UK. On a national level, government is beginning to address the problem of youth violence in London by doubling its 'early intervention scheme' to £22m, by adopting a 'public health approach' and tackling the drugs market.

More needs to be done. A full scale assault on social and ethnic inequalities in jobs, income, housing and education, coupled with an aim for full employment based on quality meaningful apprenticeships, especially for youngsters living in the most disadvantaged 'wards' who make up eight out of ten NEETs, is one way forward. FE has a key role to play in meeting the needs of disaffected youth. A National Youth Service, alongside the development of boxing clubs (for boys and girls), for some disenfranchised youngsters, is a sure way to counter the emergence of a gang culture, a criminal under-class or potential social disorder on the streets.

But we also need a revolution in our thinking on the relationship

between society and citizen. A well-resourced neighbourhood police force needs to engage better with youth living in the most deprived neighbourhoods. And finally, schools and colleges must help their students understand the dangers of knives through compulsory citizenship classes from the age of 11.

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