

# Addressing county lines: praxis for community safety practitioners

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – County lines involving the exploitation of vulnerable children and young people by gangs have been described as a bigger threat than the exploitation exposed by the Rotherham scandal (*The Times*, 27 November 2017). The purpose of this paper is to explain the contingencies and drivers informing gang identities in the irregular economy of drugs and make some suggestions to address these.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper discusses the social reality (ontology) of UK gangs in the UK and the different theories of knowledge about gangs (epistemologies) that can both help and hamper gangs' policy and practices. The paper is based on recent research and sets out strategic ideas for good community safety practice in order to develop multi-modal partnership interventions in gang-affected neighbourhoods. Recent policies are located within the broader political economy of crime, which raises questions of current policy direction to achieve safer neighbourhoods.

**Findings** – A critical realist approach to gangs (Pitts, 2016) assumes that unobservable structures (patterns of relations and roles) cause observable events (gang behaviour). This suggests a reality of gangs independent of theories about them. In this paradigm, the author's theories about the world are historically, socially and culturally situated and always partial. Not only do gangs change in space and time, but also so do the author's representations of them.

**Research limitations/implications** – Arguably, at this moment, the authors' best ideas about the underlying causal forces which precipitate gangs involve social structures which have push and pull factors acting in conjunction with culturally enmeshed individuals with limited choices. The pushes of social exclusionary factors such as institutional racism and unemployment act in consort with pull factors of excessive consumerism. However, the author's ideas about gangs are partial and fallible, and this demands a methodological pluralism that involves a range of stakeholders when researching and formulating appropriate interventions.

**Practical implications** – To address the impact of gang violence at the micro or neighbourhood level, Andell and Pitts (2009, 2013, 2017) developed an interactive model of action research which is inclusive of the experiences and knowledge of stakeholders. This knowledge can be valuable not only to build multi-modal strategies in gang-affected neighbourhoods, but can also be useful as a reflexive spur to provide feedback and direction on what works to reduce community harms. Earlier research experience (Andell and Pitts 2009, 2013, 2017) informs ideas that that single agency or "siloeed" approaches to problems associated with gangs and drug markets can cause confusion and mistrust for other stakeholders and that more integrated approaches are needed.

**Social implications** – In order to assist young people to attain their potential with the assistance of institutions, both micro and macro changes need to take place. The social capital of community networks needs to be enhanced and the redistributive potential of economic policy needs to be enacted. Therefore, policy is needed which is founded on the belief that research is capable of understanding the mechanisms that produce material and cultural domination, and this analysis, in conjunction with stakeholder knowledge, could lead to a realistic program for collective actions in both the micro and macro spheres that reduce relative deprivation and curb the cultural mores for excess.

**Originality/value** – The paper suggests a critical realist approach to gangs (Pitts, 2016) and assumes that unobservable structures (patterns of relations and roles) cause observable events (gang behaviour). This imputes a reality of gangs independent of theories about them. In this paradigm, the author's theories about the world are historical, socially and culturally situated and always partial. Not only do gangs change in space and time, but also so do the author's representations of them.

**Keywords** Critical realism, Action research, Reflexivity, Gangs, Moral economy, Partnerships, Community safety, County lines, Gang culture, Micro and macro social field, Gang policy, Gang interventions

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction: recent press and policy announcements

Concerns regarding the exploitation of vulnerable young people across the country have been reported in the national press:

Thousands of children used as drug mules by “county lines” gangs expanding into rural parts of UK. (*The Independent*, 2017)

County lines – a new form of modern-day slavery. (*The Times*, 2017)

Gangs are forcing vulnerable children to smuggle drugs across county lines. (*The Times*, 2017)

County lines gangs: how drug-running is fuelling knife crime. (*The Observer*, 9 March, 2019)

These reports are predicated by empirical research studies indicating real changes to drug dealing networks, now known as County lines (Windle and Briggs, 2015; Coomber, 2015; Disley and Liddle, 2016; Hallworth, 2016; Andell and Pitts, 2017, 2018; Jeanch and South, 2017; Whittaker, 2017; Coomber and Moyle, 2018).

Hallworth (2016) provides a useful description of “County Lines” which asserts that they can be understood as the migration of gangs from their home area into a new geographical setting, with the objective of establishing a new physical and organisational base, from which to transplant the values and business models of their gang.

The analysis undertaken by the NCA (2015, 2017a, b, c) assesses the risks from county lines as a national threat. In its “Intelligence assessment, county lines, gangs, and safeguarding”, NCA (2015) describes the way street gangs, exploit vulnerable younger adolescents in both the major cities and out of town locations and distribute narcotics across wide swathes of the country using vulnerable children and young people. In the “National briefing on county lines violence, exploitation and drug supply” (NCA, 2017a, b, c), it is suggested that county line drug dealing networks now affect most of the country.

In January 2016, “County Lines” became the priority of HM Government’s (2016) Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation programme. The programme offered peer partnership support to a total of 72 local authorities to support changes in the way that public services respond to gang and youth violence. Intending to further develop this partnership response, the Home Office recently (25 February 2018) launched a £13m Trusted Relationships Fund and doubled the Early Interventions fund from £11m to £22m (30 July 2018) to address sexual exploitation and violent gang crime. An additional £100m funding for additional policing has also been promised by the Treasury to tackle knife crime.

While new initiatives and resources are welcomed from the Government, questions remain regarding conceptualisation and analysis of current problems (Pitts, 2016). Subsequently, the scope and direction of partnership interventions at a local level can get confused (Crawford, 1997; Crawford and L’Hoiry, 2015), sometimes resulting in mis-targeting of interventions.

## What's in a name? Gang definitions

It is acknowledged that there are many groups of young people in the UK engaged in relatively harmless misbehaviour, and the term “gang” is sometimes over-used to describe them. Conceptualising the issues is important, and it is acknowledged that it is difficult to apply a static definition to a changing phenomenon.

Andell and Pitts (2017, 2018) consistently utilised the gang definition devised for Dying to Belong (CSJ, 2009) as:

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 a range of criminal activity and violence, (3) identify with or lay claim over territory, (4) have some form of identifying structural feature, and (5) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs. (Dying to Belong, 2009)

Andell and Pitts (2018) further suggest that we may be entering a phase of third-generation street gangs in which previous street gang members have transcended from street-based offending into local organised crime and the middle market drugs business.

In order to discern and analyse the issues that are viewed or experienced as harmful, theories of knowledge (epistemology) are applied to separate justified belief from opinion. Conceptualisation, collection and collation of data and analysis should assist the formulation and initial direction of appropriate interventions.

### Policy pendulums: denial and repression

Definitions and concepts of urban street gangs are important and arise from different theories of knowledge which lead to different assumptions and approaches. Approaches to gangs can be demarcated in terms of idealism, naive realism and critical realism (Matthews, 2013; Andell, 2015; Pitts, 2016).

Some criminological scholars have questioned the existence of gangs in the UK (Hallsworth and Young, 2008). Arguably, their analysis utilises mainly constructivist epistemologies which do not separate the observed reality of gangs from ideas about them. This type of analysis can lead to non-interventionist approaches, which do little to alleviate the strains experienced in relatively deprived neighbourhoods. Keen to avoid labelling, early policy statements from the Youth Justice Board (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2005) encompassed ideas of gang denial.

Early ideas denying the existence of gangs in the UK gave way to empirically evidenced gang intervention work through policy transfer from the USA. (Andell, 2015). These approaches are mainly informed by a statistical empirical research which could be termed naive realist (Matthews, 2013) as it could be argued that the observed behaviours of these studies fail to discern the causal powers which sit below the observable experience of gangs. Policy transfer of ideas about gangs from the USA have sometimes led to short-term repressive interventions rather than addressing root causes of gang formation and membership. For example, enforcement led “gang call-ins” (Kennedy, 2008), which fail to adequately involve communities, have resulted in accusations of racial profiling and coercion (Centre for Crime and Justice, 2015). A significant problem with this type of approach appears to be an over-generalisation of what constitutes a gang and who constitutes a gang member.

Matrices and risk tools are often utilised in identifying gang membership in the deployment of gang interventions. These assessment aids are used to numerically order risk factors. Often this is done remotely from the neighbourhoods in which the behaviours and attributes occur. Subsequently, the meanings which risk attributes carry are often mis-interpreted or absented, and therefore explanatory power is lost (Pitts, 2001; Matthews, 2013; Andell and Pitts, 2017), which can result in net widening and mis-targeted enforcement (CCCJ, 2015). It can be argued that this approach does little to build public confidence and can exacerbate problems in neighbourhoods (Edmonds *et al.*, 1995; Andell and Pitts, 2017). Therefore, a more meaningful approach needs to be developed in capturing data, assessing problems and devising interventions.

A critical realist approach to gangs (Pitts, 2016) assumes that observable gang behaviour is underpinned by sometimes invisible social relations. In this paradigm, theories about gangs are historically, socially and culturally situated and always partial. Arguably, at this moment, in time our best ideas about the underlying causal forces which precipitate gangs involve social structures which have push and pull factors acting in conjunction with culturally enmeshed individuals with limited choices. The pushes of social exclusionary factors such as institutional racism and unemployment act in consort with pull factors of excessive consumerism. These ideas are partial and fallible, and this demands a methodological pluralism which involves a range of stakeholders when researching and formulating appropriate interventions.

### Acting local and thinking global

Crime and disorder is often viewed as being symptomatic of wider social, cultural and economic change at both macro and micro levels (Young, 1999; Millie *et al.*, 2005). Andell and Pitts (2009, 2013, 2018) analysed local market changes in Class-A drugs in urban centres and more recently in a county town where county lines operate. They report shifts in the drugs business but question if these shifts simply represent a change in the business model of illicit drug distribution

or more profound changes in the prevalence, organisation and functions of street gangs outside the metropolitan cities.

The irregular economy of drugs has international dimensions which are historically bound to western colonial expansion and structural violence (Jankowiak and Bradburd, 2003). Following colonial expansion and the need for labour in “imperial homelands”, patterns of migration have intertwined with structural and social factors leading to threat, conflict and fear, which Decker *et al.* (2009) maintain is necessary for gang formation. They argue that present motives for migration are varied, and include for some seeking refuge from dangerous situations and, for others, economic reasons (Engbersen *et al.*, 2007; Van Wijk, 2006).

The arrival of new communities in the USA and Europe has often been met with threat and conflict, sometimes leading to gang formation or reliance on pre-existing gangs for protection or perceived progression. In light of these conflicts, the culture or the world view of these groups is critical. Decker *et al.* (2009) argue that these processes have important implications as they impact on the formation and transmission of gang culture. Currently, in the UK, a dimension of gang culture which the Metropolitan Police Commissioner has ambiguously associated with the spread of crime and violence is trap and drill music clips shared through social media. This has resulted in the police forcing such videos to be removed from social media sights. Cressida Dick argues:

Most particularly, in London we have gangs who make drill videos and in those videos, they taunt each other. They say what they're going to do to each other and specifically what they are going to do to who. (*Guardian*, 28 May, 2018)

Trap and drill music (arguably sub-genres of hip-hop) provide distinct cultural narratives which voice social and political concerns through lyrics and symbolism (Barron, 2013; Andell, 2015; Ilan, 2015). The range and depth of this “performance” forms a continuum from positive creative social contributions to negative expressions of gang life (Eubanks, 2017). In this continuum, overblown claims of violence can be made and it is difficult to discern the difference between the performative and the real. Critical realists may argue it matters little how overblown the communiqués appear as they are arguably an emergent reality, represented in video imagery and lyrics, but subject to underlying causal processes. Individuals act on partial knowledge, the linguistic codes they use to describe their thoughts and actions come from what is culturally available, and this, in turn, is subject to broader constraints (Archer, 2003).

Despite claims by fans that police crackdowns targeting drill music videos are unfair, YouTube has already deleted more than half of videos targeted by the Metropolitan Police. Pitts (2013) warns of the dangers from the legal system that arises from a naive content analysis of YouTube clips. He argues that such analysis can be undertaken in a decontextualised enforcement framework and used as evidence for “Bad Character” and “Joint Enterprise”.

Given their origins in the entertainment industry (Hagedorn, 2008), the styles and practices that gang members absorb from globalised “gangsta” culture, often mimetically transmitted through video clips, tend to be preposterous caricatures of human behaviour in which gang violence is exaggerated and looped between real and virtual worlds (Ferrel *et al.*, 2015). Andell and Pitts (2017) give an extreme example of “looped” violence from their field work. They describe young people affiliated to one rival gang surrounding an aspiring grime artist from another gang who is made to disrespect his own “ends” or turf as part of a public humiliation. He was then beaten and slashed with a knife. This incident was filmed and uploaded to social media, precipitating a series of escalating tit for tat confrontations involving gang elders. These included the discharge of a firearm in a hostel, a firebombing and shots fired into the house of a rival. It is fair to say that from the accounts above, the cautionary messages of over exaggerations and under estimations may be gleaned. Either way, the “performative” cultural phenomena of music and lyrics cannot be ignored in considering the practices and responses to gangs.

To address the impact of gang violence at the micro or neighbourhood level, Andell and Pitts (2009, 2013, 2017) developed an interactive model of action research which is inclusive of the experiences and knowledge of stakeholders. This knowledge can be valuable not only to build multi-modal strategies in gang-affected neighbourhoods but can be useful as a reflexive spur to provide feedback and direction to what works in reducing community harms. Earlier research

(Andell and Pitts, 2009, 2013, 2017) informed ideas that that single agency or “siloeed” approaches to problems associated with gangs and drug markets can cause confusion and mistrust for other stakeholders and that more integrated approaches are needed. Brand and Ollershaw (2009) (cited by Pitts, 2016) suggests:

- community involvement in the planning of interventions;
- community involvement in the delivery of interventions;
- expertise shared between agencies and communities;
- case management/provision personalised to individual offenders; and
- delivery of incentives to gang members to change offending behaviour.

Pitts (2016) further suggests that:

[...] abstracted, bureau-based, responses to the gang problem may improve the lot of some gang-involved individuals. However, they cannot anticipate gang violence and victimisation in order to make pre-emptive interventions. Nor can they respond to the, almost invariably unreported, victimisation of gang-involved and gang-affected girls and young women and their parents (Beckett *et al.*, 2013). In particular, they cannot mediate between potential adversaries in inter-gang violence which is the forum where most gang fatalities occur. In short, most safeguarding and criminal justice agencies are destined to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

It appears that embedding workers in gang-affected neighbourhoods is a key feature of an effective gang strategy (Spergel and Grossman, 1998; Braga *et al.*, 2001; Pitts, 2008a, b, c; Centre for Social Justice, 2009). This embeddedness can develop relationships of trust and subsequently out-reach and patch workers could then become the eyes and ears of a multi-agency approach. With sufficient trust, community-based services could be best placed to inform an assessment of gang problems in order to work with community groups. Community work interventions involve practices of social change, which attempt to confront and reshape the ways in which we enact power (Allen, 1999). In order to assist these transformations to take place, community groups should be given a voice on strategic multi-agency partnerships as equal stakeholders, to establish more balanced and effective community partnerships which offer effective resistance to gangs.

As well as local support, strategic partnerships also need regional and national support, which may include specialist intelligence and enforcement, substance misuse and housing and resettlement capacity. Additional supportive interventions have associated costs; therefore, consideration should be given to the macro political economy in which spending decisions are made.

## Relative deprivation and crime and the need for social inclusion

The New Economics Foundation (2017) report that that wealthy elites tend to accumulate political influence as well as resources. They suggest that economic inequality in the UK is at dangerously high levels:

[...] with the richest 1% of the population owning more wealth than the poorest 50% put together. Households in the bottom 10% of the population have on average a net income of £9,277, while the top 10% have net incomes over nine times that (£83,897). Most people who have power and resources also have a sense of entitlement to what (they think) they need to live a good life, and they can use their existing assets to make sure they get it – good schools and healthcare, decent homes, rewarding employment, a secure income. Beyond the comfortably well off, any such confidence is either very fragile, or absent altogether. Social justice cannot be achieved when that sense of security is so unevenly distributed.

With such insecurity disproportionately affecting 10 per cent of households in the poorest neighbourhoods, it is perhaps unsurprising that some young men feel social inclusion and economic opportunity through gang involvement (Whittaker *et al.*, 2017). Young (1999) explains that while aspirations are derived from inclusion in mainstream consumerist culture, the means of achieving these aspirations are attenuated by social exclusion, thus engendering an acute sense of status frustration. In the formation of a gangster identity, Young (1999) terms this a search for

“Respect and Reward”. Young (1999) points us towards social exclusion and the importance of a sense of being someone. He observes:

[...] the acute relative deprivation forged out of exclusion from the mainstream is compounded with a daily threat to identity: a disrespect, a sense of being a loser, of being nothing, of humiliation.

Winton (2014), citing Young’s analysis of social exclusion and crime, summates:

This, in turn, it is argued, leads to the formation of exaggerated identities of resistance, formed not through vertical oppositions (with the rich) but, rather, through the amplification of horizontal divisions (based on gender, ethnicity, territory, etc.).

Identities of resistance can be acutely demonstrated through membership of street gangs (Castelles, 1997; Hagedorn, 2007). Hagedorn (2007) argues that one of the characteristics of late modern life is the proliferation of armed young men involved in irregular economies. He points to the failures of the legitimate economy as a causal force which predicates the formation and sustainability of street gangs.

The development of street gangs and their involvement in the drugs business are reported as having pernicious and harmful consequences for vulnerable communities (Andell and Pitts, 2017) and also have a negative impact on the potential economic development and regeneration of the neighbourhoods in which they are located (Lupton, 2013). Therefore, it is imperative that solutions are found which address the structural and cultural drivers of gang identity.

Andell and Pitts (2009, 2013, 2017) propose cyclical interventions through an action research methodology which provides for real-time assessment and evaluation of problems and interventions and the building of social capital in communities.

### Capitalising on social capital

Social capital takes two forms, bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Mørch and Andersen (2012) distinguish between the social and societal functions of gangs. Gangs are “social” to the extent that their activities consist in ensuring mutual support in everyday life and maintaining social networks. In effect, they offer their members “bonding social capital” which enables them to “get by”. But “societal” gangs by providing “bridging social capital” (Putnam, 1995) offer young people with limited prospects in the conventional world a pathway to an ostensibly brighter future. In a situation of unavailable or unattainable legitimate opportunities, a Class-A drug dealing net-work may offer an entrée to a potentially lucrative career in the illicit economy (Harding, 2013).

However, “bridging social capital” can also be regarded as a bulwark against criminal involvement when it is utilised as a community resource that gives access to opportunities in learning and employment, which can lead to social improvement.

Bridging capital can be embedded through group processes of social pedagogy, which give a critical awareness of the systems and institutions that promote or hinder progress (Ginwright *et al.*, 2005).

Boek (2011) argues:

Policy and practice need to build on the situated activity of young people and not erode it. Enhancing young people’s existing social capital is achieved by building on their existing resourcefulness, strengthening their existing support networks, opening up new horizons and creating access to new resources within a strength perspective. Institutions need to enhance resiliency and positive risk taking, nurture trusting relationships with significant others and enhance young people’s outlook on life.

In order to assist young people fulfil their potential with the assistance of institutions, both micro and macro changes need to take place. The social capital of community networks needs to be enhanced and the redistributive potential of economic policy need to be enacted.

Sayer (2004) suggests that the economic cannot be understood in abstraction from the social and the cultural and therefore the reverse must also be true. He argues:

[...] markets and associated economic phenomena both depend on and influence moral/ethical sentiments, norms and behaviours and have ethical implications.

## Towards an ethical conclusion

The recent additional funds from the Government are a welcomed lifeline to assist and support some of our most vulnerable communities. Additional funding will go some of the way to offset the cuts to council funding for youth services, which has declined by almost two-thirds (62 per cent), from just over £1bn in 2008–2009 to £388 m in 2016–2017, with the harshest cuts occurring after 2010.

It can be argued that public sector spending and higher taxation for those who can afford it is a moral economic choice (Sayer, 2004). Raworth (2017) argues public sector spending is often dependent on economic growth as measured by the gross domestic product (GDP). However, despite recent growth, Palumbo (2013) argues that measurement of GDP:

[...] does not measure sustainable development, quality of life, human and social capital and well-being. Nor does GDP differentiate between activities that have a negative or positive impact on society and the environment.

Both macro and micro social spheres are intrinsically linked by the prevailing political economy which presently excludes and limits sustainable growth economically, culturally and socially for a minority (Savage, 2016) who have little alternative but to become “reluctant gangsters” (Pitts, 2008a, b, c) in drug dealing networks that blight our most vulnerable neighbourhoods (NCA, 2017a, b, c).

What may reduce the strain is research and policies that reach beyond cycles of unlimited aspiration and blocked opportunity in order to generate resourcefulness, support and access to resources and power. Sayer (2005) argues that economic processes are morally influenced and structured both internally as well as externally. He suggests that in addition to institutionalised moral economic norms, ongoing economic relationships are influenced by actors’ moral sentiments and decisions.

Therefore, policy is needed which is founded on the belief that research is capable of understanding the mechanisms that produce material and cultural domination. This analysis, in conjunction with stakeholder knowledge, could lead to a realistic program for collective actions in both the micro and macro spheres which reduces relative deprivation and curbs the cultural mores for excess.

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