

#Girls and Gangs

GIRLS, GANGS AND THEIR ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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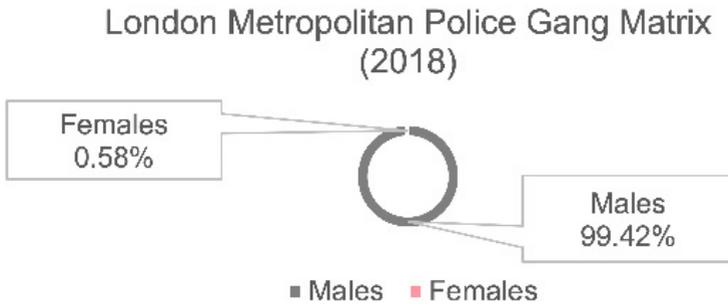
Executive Summary

Rarely a day goes by in the UK without the news cycle featuring at least one heart-breaking story of a young person suffering the consequence of gang violence in our major cities. Often, the victims are young boys and the weapon of choice is nearly always a knife. **Lost in the debate is the fact that most the strategies put forward are gendered and targeted at young males. The consideration of young women and girls associated with these men is often secondary for decision makers.** By ignoring them, they remain invisible to authorities and in turn services are not being commissioned to support them. This makes it easier for those who are exploiting them.

This Fellowship, awarded by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, resulted in five weeks of travelling across the USA to New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington DC, North Virginia and New Orleans. I met with NGOs, City Governments and criminal justice professionals. The project primarily looked at how criminal justice professionals interact with these women, as an acknowledgement that this is the area where there is most opportunity for change.

Identifying women and girls through the criminal justice system

The women and girls associated with gang members are invisible to services. **Firstly, because they do not want to be seen. Secondly, because of police culture.** There is a culture in the police to not acknowledge women and girls or their risk. This is evident in the USA and in the UK. This is serious **as intervention services are being commissioned based on flawed data** (see graph below). Los Angeles have at least 40% of their gang intervention and prevention services attended by females, demonstrating best practice on effectively targeting women and girls.



Working with women and girls affected by gangs

These young women do not consider themselves victims and therefore will not engage with services that are marketed as generalist ‘victim support’ services. Additionally, victims of domestic abuse whose perpetrator is a gang member will also face consequences for cooperating with authorities not only from their partner, but the gang. The fear that domestic abuse victims have about surveillance and stalking is further heightened when the perpetrator is in a gang. It feels like they have ‘eyes everywhere’. **These young women also do not fit the stereotype of the ‘ideal victim’.** They are uncooperative, may have criminal records and have additional barriers to accessing support if they are an ethnic minority.

Understanding the context of relationships between girls and gang members

While not universally true that young men and boys who are involved with gangs will be abusive in their relationships, the trauma they have experienced makes it more likely. Their behaviour in a relationship may mimic the toxic relationship he has with fellow gang members. The girls may have also had a difficult upbringing. Therefore, **they share significant trauma backgrounds. This combination can result in an intense and violent relationship.** These hard to reach women responded to 'self-love', self-esteem building workshops rather than traditional victim support services.

Techniques deployed to tackle gender-based violence associated with gang violence:

- **Credible messengers** who can relate to young people because they have lived experience, understand the choices facing that young person and look and speak like them. They are consciously recruited by the police and charities in the USA.
- **Female outreach staff.** If a gang intervention service is only male, for young women and girls these services have staff that look and sound like those who have exposed them to violence. This can alienate a whole cohort of vulnerable people from accessing support.
- **Meeting the other needs of the young person before attempting gang exit.** A multi-agency response which acknowledges that young people need to have health, education, employment and household issues resolved before they can attempt to put their life back on track.

There is no single solution to solve the issues facing girls associated with gangs but acknowledging that they exist is the first step. Stakeholders must work collaboratively to *'give neighbourhoods the opportunity to reclaim their community'*.

Identifying young women and girls through the criminal justice system

Police need to tackle the culture that results in women and girls associated with gangs not being acknowledged

During the research, the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) provided analysis from their gang database. They found that the average age of a male on the system was 17 years old, whereas the average age for a female was 20.

This reflects an issue with identifying women and girls. Officers hypothesised that in the past they may have stopped a car and thought that the female ‘was just a girlfriend’ and therefore did not warrant official acknowledgement and recording.

This is an issue particularly in the USA, where access to services is predominantly through the criminal justice system. But in the context of nearly a decade of austerity cuts to local government services, this is becoming truer in the UK. Police and Crime Commissioners are elected across England and Wales and they have the authority and budget to commission services for victims of crime but also intervention and prevention services. As local authorities face continuing budget cuts and higher costs associated with adult social care and children’s services, programmes in Early Help and prevention have been cut. Therefore, we are steadily heading toward a system where young people get access to support via the criminal justice system. Therefore, when women and girls are not identified, services are not commissioned to support them.



Source: NOPD, 2018

A gender audit of police gang databases should be undertaken to assess whether the practice is widespread.

In December 2018, The London Metropolitan police had over 3,000 people registered on their gang database. Yet of these, only 18 were women. The Mayor's Office of Policing and Crime (MOPAC) is the commissioning arm of the force, yet the data being used to make funding decisions suggests less than 1% of those involved or associated with gangs are female. This simply cannot be the case when we know that 90% of County Lines gangs are using females (Whittaker et al, 2018). It suggests that the Metropolitan police has the same issues with recognising women and girls as the NOPD.

But it does not have to be this way. The Director of the Gang Reduction and Youth Development for the Los Angeles Mayor's Office, shared data that demonstrated the gender split in their intervention and prevention services, both of which were 40% and above. This demonstrated a much better record at proactively working with young women and girls. There are differences in gang culture, population and demographics but they are working hard in communities to engage young women and girls to participate in their programmes.

Police should undertake regular and comprehensive domestic abuse training, to understand the dynamics of power and control in relationships

Another way young women and girls can be identified is through the prosecution of their partners, brothers or friends. The police often collect a large body of evidence during investigations into gang members, not all of which will be used in court. The evidence found through techniques such as mobile data extraction could expose an abusive relationship between a gang member and his partner(s), as the contents of messages and images from the phone are downloaded. However, as this is not something that the police or prosecutors are looking for it is rarely used for this purpose.

Training for police across the UK on how to identify abusive behaviours is mixed, with each police force commissioning different organisations to deliver training for frontline and call centre staff. There are different levels of training offered, with some police not receiving refresher training to reinforce their learning. For this type of technology to work in domestic abuse situations with gang members police would have to understand the dynamic of power and control in an abusive relationship and be looking out for it when tackling gang related violence. This is further complicated by the fact that many of the women and girls would not consider themselves victims and thus would be uncooperative.

Working with girls involved with gang members

“She is the victim out there that nobody cares about”

Challenge #1 : Co-operation

Those that work in the criminal justice or domestic abuse sector know that often the police are called by the victim, a concerned family member, friend or neighbour but cooperation is not guaranteed.

Services that aim to work with the cohort of women and girls experiencing domestic abuse perpetrated by a gang member should not advertise their interventions as ‘victim support’ but focus on the outcomes of the programme (e.g. Employment and housing opportunities, conflict resolution etc.)

Non-cooperation is due to several factors. Firstly, for girls involved with gang members, they often they do not describe themselves as victims and therefore are not cooperative with services that want to identify them as such. This is often due to a rejection of the ‘victimhood narrative’ which they do not identify with.

Additionally, services are sometimes offered on the condition that they share information about the gang. This approach misjudges the persons willingness to get support against the fear of gang reprisals for speaking with the authorities.

Those working with young women and girls associated with gangs should offer tailored programmes where goals are decided in partnership with the service user. Working with them, not doing to them.

Judge Videtta A. Brown, author of 'Gang Member Perpetrated Domestic Violence: A New Conversation' (2007). Spoke about her experiences in Baltimore with witness intimidation of women who have been cooperative with the police and the consequences for them and their families. Those who have worked in domestic abuse will be familiar with the all-consuming fear that victims experience due to their belief that their abuser is able to see everything they do, who they speak to and where they go. Often, this manipulation is a key tool for the abuser to maintain control over the victim's life, long after they have separated. In the modern age, this fear is not irrational, and technology has facilitated that stalking behaviour. For victims of abuse who go out with a gang member this fear is compounded. Not only are they intimidated by their partner, but by their partner's friends, family members and the gang. Now it is not just one person they need to be concerned about, but multiple people who have reputations for violence.

'The control melds to the commitment [to the gang]'

For those who were never fully participant in the gang, there is still the fear that 'they know too much' and are therefore a risk. Therefore, these young women and girls do not want to be seen, and they certainly won't be cooperative because speaking to the police is not worth the (violent) consequences.

Challenge #2 : Additional vulnerabilities faced by ethnic minorities

For girls from an ethnic minority group who are victims of abuse in their relationships with gang members, there are additional fears that their white counterparts do not have. This was especially evident USA, which has historic issues with racial minorities and statutory services. This is present not only in the police, but in child services, the court system and even some charities.

Numerous people argued that traditionally, domestic abuse services were designed to support an 'idealised' version of a domestic abuse victim. This victim, they argued, was white, middle class, educated and had no criminal record. Unfortunately, the women and girls affected by sexual exploitation, human trafficking and abuse from gang members often do not fit that mould. Therefore, specialist services and programmes needed to be developed to understand the needs of these women and the services that they require. This highlights the importance of designing services from a needs perspective rather than a 'one size fits all' approach.

An example of commissioning services based on need is the North Virginia Gang Taskforce. In the Counties, the women and girls involved with gangs were predominantly from El Salvador, therefore services for this cohort needed to be bilingual and understanding of the sensitivity in that community due to immigration action. For those women and girls, reporting their abuse would bring the police into their community and could result in deportations. This results in a reluctance to ask for help or engage in services once a need has been identified.

Challenge #3: Domestic violence in the context of community violence

'She is embarrassed that she is abused and doubly embarrassed because he is a gang member...then she becomes complicit in his crimes'

Those working on the frontline with young people affected by gang violence should use a trauma informed approach

While it is not universally true that young men and boys who are involved with gangs will be abusive in their relationship, the trauma they have experienced makes it more likely. Gang members essentially groom one another, they demand complete loyalty and create an atmosphere of fear whilst also giving one another rewards such as material gifts, friendship and protection. These relationships are toxic, but if a young man has been involved in a gang most of his childhood, this is how he has formed most of his attachments. Therefore, he can transfer this way of creating attachments to future relationships. To make things more complicated, the girls may have also had challenging childhoods. Therefore, they share significant trauma backgrounds. This combination can result in an intense and violent relationship.

Domestic abuse practitioners and Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVAs) should be able to access training on how to provide support for women and girls affected by gangs, in areas where there are high rates of community violence

Unfortunately, many domestic abuse services are not able to provide support to these young people. There are few charities in the UK which offer specific training on how to provide support to girls experiencing abuse perpetrated by a gang member. Brown (2007) argued that teenage victims of domestic abuse whose perpetrators are gang members are 'invisible and under-served'.

Frontline workers in gang intervention and youth violence should undertake training on the dynamics of power and control and the consequences of domestic abuse. Many of their service users will have been exposed to domestic abuse at some point in their lives and it will affect their attachments, mental health and wellbeing

Most of the young people that professionals would identify as ‘victims’ would not consider themselves so. They do not want to see themselves as victims, therefore they will not be accessing victims’ services. This makes it harder to keep them safe, as they don’t consider themselves being harmed but rather that they are living a ‘normal way of life’.

‘They think they deserve it’

The Alliance of Concerned Men in Washington DC has a female worker that runs programmes to work with women and girls in neighbourhoods affected by community violence. The programme lead advertises the programme to these women by describing it as ‘self-love’ rather than a domestic abuse intervention. This means that she gets people involved who would not consider themselves victims, often because the abuse is normalised in their community.

Self-esteem building was a key element of the North Virginia interventions, giving girls a ‘better picture of themselves’. They argued that some of the young people they work with believe that they deserve a bad life and have no hope. The programme gives young people the opportunity to hope for a better future for themselves.

Domestic abuse is also responsible for some of the irrational violence displayed by young people in the community. Children raised in abusive households learn to read people and pick up on non-verbal signs which can result in paranoia. What the average person would consider a normal thing to do could be perceived as a slight. Which in turn, can trigger a negative or violent response for the apparent disrespect shown. As such, in Los Angeles the community intervention advocates undertake domestic abuse awareness training, which is a 40-hour certification and ensures they know what to do if they suspect the person they are working with is a perpetrator or a victim of domestic abuse. They also have monthly training from an in-house trainer on gender, marriage and family counselling so that staff understand the dynamics in different households.

Challenge #4: Girls already in the criminal justice system

Another cohort of girls affected is those actively involved in gang activity. In the UK, this is increasingly through County Lines where they are sent out of their area to transport and sell drugs. Some County Lines gangs also use these young girls for sex trafficking in addition to selling drugs.

Girls in the criminal justice system are not the culturally accepted view of what it means to be a victim. These girls occupy a grey space between victim and perpetrator, where they may legitimately be responsible for a crime such as drug dealing or physical violence but are also being victimised within the gang through an abusive relationship or sexual violence.

Training for Social Workers on child sexual exploitation, County Lines, domestic violence and drug trafficking should be made available regularly.

With juveniles, one worker said that it was unfortunate that in the USA 'the focus is on the child's crime, not the child's capacity'. While we do not have the same punitive culture with young people here in the UK, we are predicted to see an increase in girls being involved with gang related activity (Whittaker et al, 2018) and girls in the care system are particularly vulnerable. Therefore, local areas must have up to date training available to frontline workers, so that they can identify behaviours that indicate participation in gangs. Additionally, criminal justice professionals must get to grips with the issue of girls in gangs, acknowledge their role and provide suitable pathways for interventions to take place.

Domestic abuse services should be commissioned based on a need analysis of the population. Specialist services should be included where necessary rather than generic services which often do not meet the needs of the most vulnerable people.

Effective techniques from the USA

‘They bring messages of hope to young people [because] they are upstanding members of the community now’

Organisations that deliver frontline services must make an active effort to recruit representative outreach staff from the communities that they are working in. Credible messengers are key.

It is crucial that those on the frontline delivering services that work with young men and women have authenticity. Those met with during the Fellowship, including the police, had carefully and intentionally selected men and women who would be able to reach out and connect to the young people they were working with. These people are credible messengers for the change they want to see in their communities.

A credible messenger can connect and work with a target group, authentically and credibly due to their background or experience. Often, those who are passionate about a subject have a personal experience that motivates them. Having someone who can speak passionately and authentically to vulnerable young people is fundamental to change behaviours. They also have personal experience of successfully leaving a gang and can counsel the young people through the process.

‘They show how things can be done differently’

Organisations that deliver frontline services for those affected by gangs should ensure they have female outreach staff. Young people are more likely to engage in a service where people look like them, if the team is male, females may be alienated and not seek support.

Safe Streets Baltimore, spoke about the power and influence of women in the community and their role in stopping violence. This was echoed by those working in Los Angeles, who had numerous female community intervention advocates across the city who were sometimes safer in a neighbourhood than their male counterparts. According to staff, this was especially true in Latino neighbourhoods which were controlled by the mafia. In these areas, men were prevented from working as they were perceived to be a threat. Additionally, both girls and boys were reportedly allowing themselves to be vulnerable in front of female outreach workers in a way they would not have done with men.

If the service is only male, then for the young women and girls, these services have staff that look and sound like those who have exposed them to violence. To address this, female workers should be employed not only because they can provide role modelling for young boys and men but also it prevents young women from being alienated from the service.

Clear pathways for support need to be made available for frontline workers to refer service users into. Local authorities should produce directories for internal use that includes an up to date list of services that are currently commissioned by the council. This will allow staff to signpost service users to programmes to meet all needs.

Tackling gang and gender-based violence will not be successful if only coming from a criminal justice perspective. All the programmes visited during the Fellowship (including police programmes), sought to understand the individual they were working with and diagnose the issues that were contributing to the person being involved in crime.

In Los Angeles, they explicitly do not refer to the service as gang intervention and prevention in the communities that they work in. Participation is always voluntary and young people are given help with the issues that are holding them back from living an 'honest life'.

This aligns with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs thesis, that for a person to reach their full potential other needs such as safety and physiological needs must be realised. For example, a young person who lives in a household with substance abuse and poverty may be motivated to deal drugs to pay for food and bills. In this case, the programme would work with the young person and their family to put them on the right track, not pressuring that person to stop their gang involvement until their other needs had been met and they were ready to have the conversation.

Stakeholders

Police



Police should not lose sight of the importance of **community** policing in areas with gang violence.

Police should continue to actively recruit people from a variety of different backgrounds. This means they can have **credible messengers** within the force, which will build trust and enable intelligence gathering.

Information sharing protocols should be established between schools, the police and local authority in areas where young people are at risk of being involved in gangs. The relay scheme has proven successful in providing support for children who live in a home with domestic abuse, the same principle applies. It results in effective and open information sharing which enables all stakeholders involved to identify and work with children who may be affected by gangs.

Schools



Training and resources on how to support both boys and girls to be made available for schools in areas where pupils are high risk of being affected by gangs. With **clear referral pathways** for teachers to refer young people to get support.

Charities



There should be an effort to coordinate charities in the UK that offer support to girls affected by gangs. This would enable the sharing of innovative practice and pull together an evidence base of best practice in the sector.

Charities that offer 'youth services' should ensure they are **marketing programmes designed for gang intervention in an inclusive manner** that encourages girls to participate.

Local government



Despite cuts from central government, **local authorities should not reduce the number of family focused interventions they provide in Early Help**. If the household remains dysfunctional after doing intensive work with a young person, they may relapse if the norms at home have not changed.

Politicians



Local and national politicians should take responsibility for coordinating community leaders and frontline services to tackle the issues of domestic abuse and community violence. They have the networks, authority and resource to galvanise change.

Conclusion

The role of girls in gangs is varied, there is no intervention that will universally work with this cohort of young women and girls. However, there are key techniques and tools that can be successfully applied to provide support for these girls and their abusive relationships.

The first step in tackling gender-based violence associated with gangs is to acknowledge that these women and girls exist. Services cannot continue to be commissioned as though gang violence is an issue that only impacts on one gender. These young men have sisters and girlfriends who are at risk and are currently invisible to services.

As local authorities continue to face budget cuts, responsibility for tackling youth violence will fall to the police and the communities themselves and will become more reactive rather than proactive. However, investment in the right areas can result in communities having the resources and tools to take back control and improve the lives of those in their area.

Relationships and trust are fundamental for changing behaviours and norms. Having credible messengers, who understand the lives of these women and girls is crucial. Many women are currently taking on this role in their community, without pay or resources.

Finally, agents from the FBI put it eloquently when they said that all the work that goes into tackling gang violence is 'giving a neighbourhood the opportunity to reclaim their community'. This is a recognition that no one agency can tackle this issue alone, it is a collaboration.

About the author



Samantha Jury-Dada is a 2018 Churchill Fellow and currently lives in Manchester. She has a BSc in Social Policy with Government from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Samantha's previous work includes being Report Editor of 'Stopping Distance: making stop and search work for London' a policy paper written by Baroness Doreen Lawrence and Dame Tessa Jowell. In 2015 she conducted research on the efficacy of police rape prevention campaigns.

She currently works for iMPower, a public sector consultancy. Her previous roles include working for SafeLives the national domestic abuse charity and in the Houses of Parliament as a Parliamentary Assistant to an MP. She also served as an elected Councillor in the London Borough of Southwark from 2016 – 2018, during this time she was also a school governor for a Central London secondary school and sixth form.

Twitter: @SJuryDada

Website: www.girlsandgangs.uk

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