

CHILDREN AFFECTED BY GANG ACTIVITY AND YOUTH VIOLENCE

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1. DEFINITION

Defining a gang is difficult, they tend to fall into three categories Peer Groups, Street Gangs and Organised Crime Groups. It can be common for groups of children and young people to gather together in public places to socialise. Although some Peer group gatherings can lead to increased antisocial behaviour and youth offending, these activities should not be confused with the serious violence of a street gang. A street gang can be described as a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of children who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is integral to the group's identity. A street gang will engage in criminal activity and violence and may lay claim over territory (not necessarily geographical but it can include an illegal economy territory). They have some form of identifying structure featuring a hierarchy usually based on age, physical strength, propensity to violence or older sibling rank. There may be certain rites involving antisocial or criminal behaviour or sex acts in order to become part of the gang. They are in conflict with other similar gangs

An organised criminal group is a group of individuals normally led by adults for whom involvement in crime is for personal gain (financial or otherwise). This involves serious and organised criminality by a hard core of violent gang members who exploit vulnerable young people and adults. This may also involve the movement and selling of drugs and money across the country, known as 'county lines' because it extends across county boundaries. Young men and women may be at risk of sexual exploitation in these groups. There is a distinction between organised crime groups and street gangs based on the level of criminality, organisation, planning and control, however, there are significant links between different levels of gangs. Activity can include street gangs involvement in drug dealing on behalf of organised criminal groups and the sexual abuse of girls by organised criminal groups.

Children may be involved in more than one 'gang', with some cross-border movement, and may not stay in a 'gang' for significant periods of time. Children rarely use the term 'gang', instead they used terms such as 'family', 'breddin', 'crews', 'cuz' (cousins), 'my boys/girls' or simply 'the people I grew up with'. The last statement is particularly relevant in North East Lincolnshire where young people rarely identify themselves as being part of a Gang. Safeguarding should focus on young people who are / vulnerable of making the transition to gang involvement as well as those already involved in gangs. Practitioners should be aware of particular risks to young people involved in gangs from violence and weapons; drugs and sexual exploitation.

2. RISKS

The risk or potential risk of harm to the child may be as a victim, a perpetrator or both - in relation to their peers or to a gang-involved adult in their household. Teenagers can be particularly vulnerable to recruitment into gangs and involvement in gang violence. This vulnerability may be exacerbated by risk factors in an individual's background, including violence in the family, involvement of siblings in gangs, poor educational attainment, or mental health problems.

A child who is affected by gang activity or serious youth violence can be at risk of Significant Harm through Physical, Sexual and Emotional Abuse. Girls may be particularly at risk of sexual exploitation.

Violence is a way for gang members to gain recognition and respect by asserting their power and authority in the street, with a large proportion of street crime perpetrated against members of other gangs or the relatives of gang members. In relation to the 'county lines' concerns violence is routinely used by adults within the gangs to control and discourage young people from leaving or to 'punish' them for perceived mistakes or wrong doings.

The specific risks for males and females may be quite different. There is a higher risk of sexual abuse for females and they are more likely to have been coerced into involvement with a gang through peer pressure than their male counterparts.

There is evidence of a high incidence of rape of girls who are involved with gangs. Some senior gang members pass their girlfriends around to lower ranking members and sometimes to the whole group at the same time. Very few rapes by gang members are reported.

Gang members often groom girls at school using drugs and alcohol, which act as disinhibitors and also create dependency, and encourage / coerce them to recruit other girls through school / social networks.

3. INDICATORS

- Child withdrawn from family;
- Sudden loss of interest in school or change in behaviour. Decline in attendance or academic achievement (although it should be noted that some gang members will maintain a good attendance record to avoid coming to notice);
- Being emotionally 'switched off', but also containing frustration / rage;
- Starting to use new or unknown slang words;
- Holding unexplained money or possessions;
- Staying out unusually late without reason, or breaking parental rules consistently;
- Sudden change in appearance - dressing in a particular style or 'uniform' similar to that of other young people they hang around with, including a particular colour;
- Dropping out of positive activities;
- New nickname;
- Unexplained physical injuries, and/or refusal to seek / receive medical treatment for injuries;
- Graffiti style 'tags' on possessions, school books, walls;
- Constantly talking about another young person who seems to have a lot of influence over them;
- Breaking off with old friends and hanging around with one group of people;
- Associating with known or suspected gang members, closeness to siblings or adults in the family who are gang members;
- Starting to adopt certain codes of group behaviour e.g. ways of talking and hand signs;
- Expressing aggressive or intimidating views towards other groups of young people, some of whom may have been friends in the past;
- Being scared when entering certain areas; and
- Concerned by the presence of unknown youths in their neighbourhoods.

An important feature of gang involvement is that, the more heavily a child is involved with a gang, the less likely they are to talk about it.

There are links between gang-involvement and young people going missing from home or care. Some of the factors which can draw gang-involved young people away from home or care into going missing can come through the drugs markets and 'drugs lines' activity, There may be gang-associated child sexual exploitation and relationships

which can be strong pull factors for girls. Exploitation is at the heart of this activity, with overt coercion taking place alongside the pull factors of money, status, affection and belonging.

In suspected cases of radicalisation, social workers and local authorities are under a duty to refer the case to the local Channel panel, which will then decide the correct, if any, intervention and support to be offered to that individual.

4. PROTECTION AND ACTION TO BE TAKEN / THE LOCAL PICTURE

Following a home office peer review in November 15 it has been established that North East Lincs does not primarily suffer with an urban street gang problem, however there are concerns surround the organised crime gangs operating within the area and the exploitation and recruitment of young people in the locality in the supply of drugs.

Any agency or practitioner who has concerns that a child may be at risk of harm as a consequence of gang activity should contact Children's Social Care or the police for the area in which the child is currently located. The Referrals Procedure should be followed. The Early Help Assessment may be crucial in the early identification of children and young people who need additional support due to risk of involvement in gang activity. Within North East Lincolnshire there is a strong multi-agency commitment to the identification, management and support of young people involved in or on the periphery of gang behaviour. Street based youth work teams, community Police Community Support Officers (PSCO's) and education all have a key role to play in the identification and recognition of the aforementioned indicators.

Support and interventions should be proportionate, rational and based on the child's needs identified during the assessment. North East Lincolnshire Council have been successful in securing Home Office funding to create and develop the GRAFT project. GRAFT are uniquely placed in the authority to provide appropriate and targeted levels of assessments and interventions to young people involved in or at risk of gang related behaviour.

A Child in Need Assessment should be led by a qualified social worker and evidence and information sharing across all relevant agencies will be key. GRAFT will again be key in information collection, collation and dissemination.

Practitioners should be aware that children who are Looked After by the Local Authority can be particularly vulnerable to becoming involved in gangs. There may be a need to review their Care Plan in light of the assessment and to provide additional support.

Sometimes if there is a possible "threat to life", it may result in the Police issuing an Osman Warning. In these circumstances this should trigger an automatic referral by the Police to Children's Social Care, (see the Referrals Procedure) the initiation of a Strategy Discussion and consideration of the need for immediate safeguarding action, unless to do so would place the child at greater risk.

In these cases, the decision not to refer should be actively reviewed to allow a referral to Children's Social Care to be made at an appropriate stage in order to protect the young person's safety.

Information and local knowledge about the specific gang should be shared, including the use, or suspected use, of weapons or drug dealing. There should also be consideration of possible risk to members of the child's family and other children in the community.

Children may be in fear of ending their contact with the gang because it might leave them vulnerable to reprisals from those former gang members and rival gang members who may see the young person as without protection. Professionals should offer young people in this situation support and multi-agency working will be key in achieving safety. Sometimes if there is a possible "threat to life", it may result in the Police issuing an Osman Warning. In these circumstances this should trigger an automatic referral by the Police to Children's Social Care, (see the Referrals Procedure) the initiation of a Strategy Discussion and consideration of the need for immediate safeguarding action, unless to do so would place the child at greater risk.

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Unless there are indications that parental involvement would risk further harm to the child, parents should be involved as early as possible where there are concerns about gang activity.

GANG INJUNCTIONS

“Gang injunctions offer local partners a way to intervene and to engage a young person aged 14-17 with positive activities, with the aim of preventing further involvement in gangs, violence and/or gang-related drug dealing activity”. (Home Office, June 2015)

The Serious Crime Act 2015) has amended the Crime and Security Act 2010 to extend this provision from 18 years and to include children and young people (14 -17 year olds). it also now covers drug dealing activity” as well as “violence” including the threat of violence. Applications should focus on gang related behaviour that may lead to violence and not other problematic antisocial behaviour.

In order to make a gang injunction, the court must be satisfied that the respondent has engaged in, encouraged or assisted gang-related violence or drug dealing activity. In addition, the court must then be satisfied that:

- The gang injunction is necessary to prevent the respondent from engaging in, encouraging or assisting gang-related violence or drug dealing activity; and/or
- The gang injunction is necessary to protect the respondent from gang related violence or drug taking activity.

5. ISSUES

Children involved in gangs are very likely to be previously known to other services for offending behaviour or school exclusion

Common issues faced by girls and young women affected by sexual violence by gangs include domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse, school exclusion and going missing from home.

Children may often be at the periphery of involvement for some time before they become active gang members.

Children may also follow older siblings into gang involvement. There are often opportunities for preventative work to be undertaken with children. YPSS will be key in identifying these potential young people.

6. FURTHER INFORMATION

Safeguarding Children and Young People who May be Affected by Gang Activity

Reducing Knife, Gun and Gang Crime

Girls and Gangs - The Centre for Social Justice, 2014 (research paper)

Ending Gang and Youth Violence Community Engagement 2014

Statutory Guidance Injunctions to Prevent Gang-Related Violence and Gang-Related Drug Dealing June 2015
Home Office

YOT Practitioner’s Guide: Injunctions to prevent gang related violence (Youth Justice Board July 2015)

Preventing Gang and Youth Violence: Spotting Signals of Risk and Supporting Children and Young People

Injunctions to Prevent Gang-Related Violence and Drug Dealing (Home Office) May 2016

NORTH EAST LINCOLNSHIRE SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP
**Injunctions to Prevent Gang-Related Violence and Gang-Related Drug Dealing A Practitioners' Guide Revised
Guidance May 2016**