"I've been there, done that..." - A Study of Youth Gang Desistance.

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Abstract

This article, based on research conducted in Glasgow, Scotland, analyses the complex process of desistance from youth gangs. The discussion is multifaceted focussing on the agency of the young people themselves as well as on how relationships within their local community can have a role in replacing their previous identification as gang members. It explores what is meant by a youth gang, why some young people stop identifying with the youth gang and argues that the local community and broader society have a role in providing social recognition and identity-enhancement opportunities for these young people.

Introduction

The article commences with an examination of the literature on desistance, followed by consideration of gang desistance more specifically. The methodological approach adopted in the study is outlined, followed by an analysis of the findings. The three highlighted areas for discussion are – age; street based fighting and 'investment' as reasons for no further identification with the youth gang. The latter argues that the motivation to identify with the youth gang may be based on what one gets out of it. The article concludes by suggesting that young people who no longer self-identify with the youth gang adopt this position because they have substituted other ways to enhance and secure their sense of self-identity through the support and opportunities available through social and/or economic recognition.

Gang context

Gangs as a construction within society have experienced increased political, policy and media attention. British Prime Minister, David Cameron, in a statement in the aftermath of the London Riots (2011) held -

> It's time for something else too. A concerted, all-out war on gangs and gang culture. This isn't some side issue. It is a major criminal disease that has infected streets and estates across our country. Stamping out these gangs is a new national priority (Cameron, 2011).

This shows the forceful disassociation made by the Prime Minister between gangs and legitimate, law abiding citizens. The parlance of 'fighting' and 'disease' creates a stark adversarial narrative between the state and people who associate with gang behaviour. This national political perspective on gangs within the UK is mirrored in the local Glaswegian context with recent media reports suggesting:

> For years the violent gangs of Glasgow have terrorised their small neighbourhoods, brandishing machetes, axes, baseball bats, even croquet mallets in running, alcohol-fuelled battles, which often left rivals mutilated and dead. It gave Scotland's largest city the unwanted reputation as one of the most dangerous in Western Europe…They are being broken up and dispersed thanks to a full-frontal assault by the police, prosecutors and council officials (Carrell, 2011).

Gangs are clearly deemed to be negative entities that make the lives of law abiding citizens unbearable. There is a depiction of terrorised neighbourhoods, where gangs use extreme violence leaving people mutilated and murdered. The reports also highlight the confrontational relations between youth gangs and law enforcement agencies, with the latter adopting a 'full-frontal assault' on gangs. In addition, there is a clear policy priority established to eradicate gangs and apply tough sanctions against those seen to be involved in gang behaviours. Both statements use trenchant and aggressive language to show the robustness of the declared 'fight' and 'assault' on gang membership within the UK. If this is the case it is surely necessary to establish why some young people choose and others choose not, to remain involved in gang behaviour.

What is a youth gang?

Alongside the focus within politics and the media the world of academia has also shown an increasing interest in gangs and their dynamics within society. A number of studies have explained gang affiliation in relation to structural issues, such as shifting populations, industrialisation (Thrasher, 1927) and lack of employment (Hagedorn & Macon, 1988); others have suggested that membership is a rational choice based on the benefits gained (Jankowski, 1991, 2003). Some suggest that often young people are wrongly labelled as gang members (White, 1999) whilst other academics claim the term should not be used at all (Hallsworth & Young, 2008).

However, there is often a lack of clarity as to what a youth gang is, as Goldson states,

> It is quite extraordinary that despite the contemporary preoccupation with youth 'gangs' in the UK and elsewhere, the existing literature reveals little consensus about precisely what constitutes a 'gang', how and why 'gangs' originate and/or the purpose and function that 'gangs' are thought to serve.
>
> (Goldson, 2011: 9)

Many adopt the Eurogang definition - "A street gang is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity" (Gemert & Fleisher, 2005, p.12) whilst Densley (2013) suggests it is too indiscrimanatory. Hallsworth and Young argue that the gang label is applied to 'messy complexities' (2008, p.183) that resist coherent capture by a single definition. For them, the gang is not simply a descriptive label placed upon certain kind of social collectivity but is a call to arms:

> The term gang signifies not this or that group out there but a *monstrous Other*, an organized counter force confronting the good society…
>
> (Hallsworth & Young, 2008: 185)

Despite the inconsistencies White (2013: 2) asserts that the study of gangs is the study of 'real, existing problems' despite the definition, impact, origins and risk being open for

interpretation. Nevertheless, despite little cohesion in the uses of the term or even in opinion as to whether it should be used at all, the gang discourse is 'real in its effects' (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). In 2006 the Independent newspaper (2006) in Scotland reported that there were 170 gangs in Glasgow according to a list reportedly compiled by the Strathclyde Police. This figure was higher than London, despite the obvious population differences. Youth gangs are not a new phenomenon and have long been reported as synonymous with Glasgow (Davies, 2007a, 2007b). For clarity purposes, in both research areas there were groups of young people who were named, both by the young people themselves and by the broader community, as a youth gang. This grouping self-identified with a name which was often derived from the territory the gang was associated with. The members were willing to affirm and defend their territory through symbolic and physical means. Often this entity was referred to as a 'young team'; a Scottish construction used to describe youth gangs. It is often used after an area name; Ormeau Road Young Team is a fictional example of the construction often found. Although no unified opinion of its origin, the word team signifies solidarity, commitment and a collective identity. The term 'young team' is a central part of Glaswegian narrative when discussing any youth gang in a particular area and demonstrates the lengthy history of youth gang discourse within the Glaswegian context.

Kintrea, Bannister and Pickering (2011) also found territorial groups in Glasgow who assumed names adopted from places and who wrote 'tags' to signify their label. These groupings had a mixture of hard-core members and peripheral members, with the distinction between peripheral and non-members often difficult to ascertain. Moreover, they found young people in Glasgow felt the only way to 'escape' the territorial groupings was to move area or join the army (Kintrea et al, 2011: 63). Despite this, in Glasgow there was a weak or non-existent link from youth groupings to criminal gangs (Kintrea et al, 2011). This study will explore in more detail the multiple identities apparent for some of the participants and how for some, they no longer needed to associate with the youth gang despite still residing in the same area due to alternative and/or additional means of identity creation.

Desistance literature generally refers specifically to stopping crime. However, Hallsworth (2011) would argue that much of the criminal elements associated with gang behaviour is misplaced; Pitts (2011) would suggest it is a violent, threatening phenomenon which must be taken seriously, whilst for Densley (2013) violent behaviours and the existence of gangs are not mutually exclusive. In policy terms the UK government action plan (2008) on eradicating violent behaviour views gangs as a central producer of this behaviour and a serious public threat. Within this article it is recognised that the gang itself is a 'key explanatory variable' (Hallsworth, 2013: 42) and should not be viewed as a universally accepted phenomenon which can unambiguously explain all urban violence and crime. Nevertheless, this paper is derived from broader doctoral research which found that young people themselves identify a gang as an entity that is constructed partly due to the willingness to engage in fighting behaviours which are done to protect the identity of the young people, the youth gang and the territorial area more broadly. It is not a structured corporation (Hallsworth, 2013) nor can all young people who identify with the gang be classified as having the same trajectory in the complex process of engagement and identification. Nevertheless, those young people who do identify with gang behaviours are likely to engage with criminal activities in the form of fighting with, and for, the youth gang. Acts of violence in the form of street based fighting are thus interlinked with being a part of the gang. Although other criminal activities may be carried out by individual members, e.g. engaging in the illegal economy, this was not found to be a central determinant for gang involvement nor was it done under the auspices of the gang.

Within the broader context of a governmental focus on gang eradication, and the interventions that this gives rise to, this article draws some insights from the experience of the two communities that host a recognised youth gang. Together questioning why some of the young people interviewed no longer identified with gangs and indeed why some continued to do so; there is an analysis of the role that community members had to play in framing localised opportunities for young people to create alternative self-identities outside of the youth gang context.

Desistance

It is widely acknowledged that desistance cannot be solely categorised as a single pivotal turning point which prevents people from ever again being involved in crime or criminal activities, rather it is a period of lapse and possible relapse (Maruna, 2001). The theorising of identity theory in criminal desistance suggests a process of change stemming from a desire to live a different life, or have a different existence in the future (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009).

However, an individualistic approach to desistance negates the social and cultural context. The 'subjective-social model' (LeBel et al, 2008) suggests the dual need for a sense of subjective agency together with relevant social factors,

> …the subjective mindset is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for success after release from prison. Social events need to occur that support and encourage desistance. (LeBel et al, 2008: 139).

There is a need for both individual, agency based change, combined with and related to, social opportunities and social recognition (Barry, 2006) in order to lead to the sustainability of secondary desistance (Burnett, 2000; Burnett and McNeill, 2005). Primary desistance is recognised as an offence free period, while secondary is a change in the self-identity of an ex-offender. More recently there has been a move to include a tertiary level of desistance which includes social and judicial recognition (McNeill, 2014). Farrall and Bowling (1999) agree that there is interplay between individual decisions and the opportunities available that can facilitate or restrict those decisions. This asserts primary desistance is the shift in behaviour, secondary desistance is the shift in identity and additionally tertiary desistance is recognition from the community ('social rehabilitation'), by the law and by the state ('judicial rehabilitation') (McNeill, 2014).

Desistance in gangs

The literature on gang desistance is relatively sparse (Klein and Maxon, 2006) and is largely United States based, often positing a need to break ties with the gang completely (Cassell and Weinrath, 2011) in order to be seen as presenting secondary desistance (Burnett, 2000; Burnett and McNeill, 2005). Broader-based research on gangs and gang members however has been popular on academic, political and policy agendas. Much of this research finds that although youth gang membership tends to be short lived; those who are in gangs are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviours than non-gang associated youths (Hill et al, 2001 and Melde and Esbensen, 2012). For this reason alone it is important to research the phenomenon as to why young people may stop identifying with gang membership, the reasons for this and the individual and societal factors in this life change.

Decker and Lauritsen (2002), in their study with St. Louis former gang members, found that although some people left the gang precipitately others experienced a more 'gradual departure' (Decker and Lauitsen, 2002). Pyrooz, Decker and Webb (2010) suggest that gang desistance is a process the same as desistance from other criminal activities. The process (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011) for youth gang members may be simply that they 'fade out' (Del Carmen et al, 2009) of gang membership. Sweeten, Pyooz, and Piquero (2012) found that,

> …most gang members eventually transition into other social arenas, and that the social processes if the gang – that once consumed the routine activities, identity, attitudes, and behaviours of former gang members – diminish and are supplanted by new demands and social roles. (Sweeten et al, 2012: 3)

Leaving the gang may be a process of "de-identification" (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011) where the person no longer views themselves as a gang member. This may depend on the level of gang-embeddedness (Pyrooz, Sweeton and Piquero, 2013) where identification with the gang may still remain but disengagement from gang activities results in decreased levels of offending (Sweeten et al, 2012). As Sweeten et al (2012) note,

> There is nothing inherently criminal about being a gang member, but the group process that promote criminal behaviour are less likely to ensnare individuals weakly embedded in the gang (Sweeten et al, 2012: 23).

Melde and Esbensen (2012) agree with this analysis, suggesting that gang membership influences involvement in violent crime and delinquency. Conversely, Deane, Bracken and Morrisette (2007) found when studying an urban Aboriginal gang programme in Canada, desistance from crime did not necessarily mean leaving the gang completely. They concluded that being a part of the gang did not directly correlate with criminal activities given that the central focus of youth street gang membership was often not criminal. In turn the process of "knifing off" (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Maruna and Roy, 2007) may not be necessary from all members of the gang but rather from particular aspects often, uncritically, associated with gang membership. The social support and friendship offered by being part of the gang may actually facilitate transition away from certain behaviours whilst not losing the bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000; Putnam and Feldstein 2003) gained from being part of a gang. This intermediate area (Decker and Lauritsen, 2002) for ex-gang members who seek to maintain friendship relationships further highlights the need to question whether breaking all associations is necessary. Pyrooz, Decker and Webb (2010) suggest that where desistance is viewed as a process, then the ties of gang membership will decrease over time thus reducing the costs of loosening these ties. Nevertheless, '…declaring oneself as an "ex" gang member is not functionally the same thing as having no contact with former gang associates' (Pyrooz, Decker and Webb, 2010: 18).

Densley (2013) in one of the few gang studies which directly draws on British gang desistance agrees with this distinction noting,

> Desistance from crime, however, is not functionally the same thing as desistance from gangs. Day-to-day involvement diminishes but connections to gangs and contact with gang members remain, not least because gang lifestyle may be all a retiree has (p.137).

However, as will be analysed, for the young people in this study if engagement in the criminal elements related to the gang has stopped and identification as a gang member

ceased, then the naming of the relations was as friends, not as gang members. This is an important distinction in the individuals identity shift.

As Thrasher (1927), Densley (2013) notes the potential for general maturation from the gang either due to increased responsibilities in a different role, or because of an individual traumatic event. In a more structured sense Densley (2013) found 'retirees' who actively desist from crime and from lifestyle choices which are more likely to bring them into conflict with the police. The need to establish another form of identity creation was also seen as beneficial be this through employment or religion. These studies are not specifically on youth gangs and as such the desistance process may be more complicated, particularly given the weak or non-existent link from youth groupings to criminal gangs in the Glaswegian context (Kintrea et al, 2011).

For this study desistance is from youth gang behaviours that are seen as criminal; territorial fighting being a main definitional trait, but not necessarily the severing from friendship groupings. This differentiation is important in the formulation of policy strategies and programmes aimed at eradicating gang activities. The Scottish government in a report on troublesome youth groups (2010) found that desisting from gang membership, gang fighting and knife crime was often attributed to maturity and lifestyle changes. However, it failed to distinguish or analyse the relations with gang membership and rather suggests a correlation between an end to gang fighting and knife crime with young people ceasing gang membership. This may be, as discussed below, due to young people no longer identifying as a gang member if they end gang fighting and/or knife crime in the Glaswegian context. Maintaining links with people from the gang is not the core problem given that it can provide a friendship grouping, a support network and the sense of solidarity that many young people seek. What should be of more concern is if desisting from gang life is not an available option, and/or if gang fighting or violence is continued as being intrinsic to gang friendship. For the young people in this study they did not see themselves as still being gang members if they ceased these behaviours, despite potentially still having friendship ties with certain members. Thus when discussing desistance, the desisting process is from those behaviours which are criminal; socialising in a group of young people in itself is often criminalised but not, yet, a specific crime. Of course this gets more problematic if the legislation such as the Policing and Crime Bill 2009 and the specific gang related violence injunction is pursued with the criminalisation of young people for being deemed to be in a gang and socialising in a particular place. This potential disjuncture on a young person's self-identity and policing assumptions will be discussed in greater detail below.

Methodology & sites of engagement

The research adopted was iterative, a praxis of inductive and deductive, engaging in the hermeneutic circle (Moustakas, 1990), or more usefully the hermeneutic spiral. This refers to a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis (Moustakas, 1990). This process ensures a deep understanding and familiarisation with the collected data, linking analysis and constantly reviewing any tentative findings.

All data was drawn from two urban areas in Glasgow. To establish which two areas were to be analysed desk research on a number of areas and discussions with practitioners in youth work were conducted. An opportunistic approach using practitioner knowledge and contacts was adopted in gaining access to both sites of study which allowed room for comparison. In

both areas studied the number of people who were considered income deprived was well above the Scottish and Glaswegian average. Physically the areas differed. Area one was considerably smaller and dominated by large high rise flats. Area two, in contrast, was geographically larger and the housing was predominantly traditional sandstone tenements. Both areas were classified as being extremely deprived on a number of levels. The levels of income, employment, health, crime and housing deprivation were all listed as being the most severe within the broader Scottish context. The life experiences and narratives of young people's involvement in youth gangs and the desistance from this were also similar in both areas.

Drawing on previous youth work experience a range of engagement strategies were adopted, including detached street work, football coaching and participation in youth and community events. By spending time in the community rapport was built, facilitating engagement with participants prior to interviewing them. These engagements within the community and with local youth services provided the opportunity for direct contact with the local youth gang and provided space to build connections, explain the research and ask if there was scope for interviews and discussing the research in greater depth. Below is a list of all participants in the broader study,

Young People		Youth Workers		Church Worker		Community Residents		Statutory Agency		Community Police		**Total**	
15		6		1		12		1		2		**37**	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	**M**	**F**
13	2	2	4	1	0	3	9	1	0	2	0	**22**	**15**

Table 1 - Participants

Given that the broader doctoral study analysed the relationship between young people who did, or had, identified with gang membership and their local community, fifteen young people aged between 14-26years old in total were formally interviewed. The interview sample was supported by reflexive recordings kept whilst researching in the two areas for nearly a year and a half. Out of the fifteen young people, the two females never identified as being part of the gang although saw themselves as friends of gang members. This gender difference is extremely interesting but more research would need to be conducted to fully evaluate this area. The thirteen male participants all had or still did self-identify as youth gang members. For the majority multiple identities were apparent where they self-identified at particular points and times as being part of the youth gang which was often concretised when engaging in particular behaviours, which will be discussed in greater detail below. There were three young people who asserted that their identity was no longer affiliated in any way with the youth gang or gang behaviours, were well into the process of being recognised by others as not being active gang members and could be classed as secondary or tertiary (McNeil, 2014) desisters. The remaining eleven were involved at different stages of this process with some seeing the youth gang as their sole identity, others beginning the process of de-identification (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011) and still others self-identity was shifting but lack of social recognition and the process of labelling was hindering their transition. As this is a fluid process that does not occur in a uniform manner it is problematic to give further specific numbers and rather the views and stories of those involved in the study will be highlighted to further explore the process of desistance. In essence then while the youth gang is a real entity, recognised by others, the evidence suggests that its composition at any particular time may not necessarily chime with how members of the public and/or the authorities perceive it to be.

Although the focus of this paper is on youth gang members, the views and input of the broader community is also important given the analysis that the community have a role in assisting with desistance. The community residents' ages were not always ascertained but they varied from twenty seven to mid- seventies. The views of youth workers and local police add an additional layer of analysis and perspective on the youth gang and on the broader contribution towards the process of desistance.

Findings

'Age' – the community members response

The central focus of this article is on youth gangs, thus one would expect age to play a role within desistance from gang identification. For community members there was a clear analysis that age was the main criteria. Josie speaking of her brother's identification with the local gang said:

> I think possibly when he was a wee bit younger like, like a teenager when this was all happening quite a lot he would get involved but I would hope not now just for the simple fact that he was a wee bit older…
> *(Josie, community resident, female, area 2)*

Youth workers also felt the youth gang was clearly identifiable by age;

> …yes there is a young team and there seems to be a generational thing happening. There is a young team who are between the age of 19 and 25 I would say… But we also have another young team who are between the age of about 14 to 19/20 you know that sort of overlapping thing, so there are two groups of what they would put themselves in teams, they would call themselves that.
> *(Sharon, equalities worker, female, area 2)*

As did these police officers:

> They ranged from probably 12 into their early 20s.
> *(Police officer, male, area 1)*

> …it is certain ages, sort of up to the age of, I'm just kinda guessing, but kinda up to the age of late teens early twenties…
> *(Police officer, male, area 2)*

At face value this would suggest that community members feel young people simply grow out of the gang due to age; however, this is too simplistic a conclusion and young people do not subscribe to such a basic analysis. Rather, there is a more nuanced understanding required linking to the perceived 'stage' a young person is at, the recognition and capital afforded and thus the agency and capacity of 'knifing off' (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Maruna and Roy, 2007) from gang behaviours, more than gang relations.

Street based fighting

For the young people interviewed being a gang member was intrinsically linked with the ability or willingness to engage in street based fighting. John summed up the difference between gang members and friends:

> Aye a group of pals, no they don't fight with anybody so they're no a gang,
> that's the way I see it.
> *(John, 18, male, area 1)*

Those achieving secondary desistance no longer identified with the local gang due to their unwillingness to fight. In contrast others, such as Sammy and Lewis, were older in age but were still willing to be involved in gang fighting should they feel that either they or their area was under attack. Nevertheless, their willingness to engage in confrontation was not all encompassing, resulting in them dipping in and out of gang identification depending on the circumstances, demonstrating periods of lapse and relapse (Maruna, 2001).

> No, well, basically, I'm 24/25 but I still see myself as part of the young team
> 'cause if someone comes at me I'm not going to back down
> *(Sammy, 24, male, area 2)*

Sammy had moved from the area to remove the risk of engaging in gang activities but still at times socialised in the area demonstrating the friendship ties and difficulties faced. He also felt threatened due to his previous behaviours,

> I'm pretty scared they are going to stab me in the wrong place and they are going to take me out, cause I don't want my Ma to look at me on a slab, dead, know what I mean. My brother is in the jail as well and I don't want to cause her any more stress, and she is always greeting "you better get a grip of yourself" and I'm like that I will, I will...
> *(Sammy, 24, male, area 2)*

This highlights the desistance process. Engagement with the gang is not as clear cut as being in or out based on age but can be a fluid shifting identity process. Garot notes,

> …gang members have agency, and through that agency, they may invoke whether or not a membership category such as gangs is relevant in a given circumstance (Garot, 2007: 51).

This presupposes that others will accept this shift uncritically which is not always the case as will be described below. However, for some like Joe it was a clearer decision potentially based on his age and thus his gang-embeddedness (Pyrooz, Sweeton and Piquero, 2013),

> Fuckin' fed up wi' it.
> *(Joe, 14, male, area 1)*

Alongside demonstrating that gang affiliation and engagement in gang behaviours is a process (Pyrooz et al, 2010) the quandary identified by Sammy shows that it is difficult to cut gang ties whilst others still see you as being associated with a gang.

'Perceived Stage'

This highlights the difficulties faced by young people who may have stopped identifying with the gang and engaging in behaviours yet have not received recognition of this transition due to still being perceived as of gang age. For young people they are afforded

greater access to a range of different experiences and opportunities through 'growing up' as Lewis noted:

> …Everyone has grown up now but just if you see them in the town in the pub or in the dancing in the town obviously tumblers and bottles are going to get thrown about.
> *(Lewis, 25, male, area 2)*

'Growing up' alludes to both physical and symbolic maturation. Lewis can now drink in town and socialise in different spaces which impacts upon his identification with the youth gang. There is also a change in responsibility through this symbolic maturation. The place of socialisation is no longer framed by a small defined neighbourhood but has broadened geographically. Nevertheless, although there has been a move from actively seeking street fights with the intention of asserting both group and area identity, there might still be confrontation if "you see them." Once identified as a gang member with allegiances to a particular area the fighting may continue irrespective of location and due to the personal identity shift not being accepted by others or not recognised as meaningful; having an impact on sustaining this shift (tertiary desistance). The ability to socialise in different spaces and with different people was also highlighted by Willy:

> …what happens now, is see when were walking down the street, we are not wee guys anymore, we are in the pub, sometimes we are drinking with guys of our Da's ages but there is a respect there, and if we see them well say, "oh how you doing? Who do you fancy tonight?" *[referring to football]* and they'll be like that "oh fucking feel like we're going to get humped or whatever" there is a respect there, know but if we are fighting they know it is for a reason it is not as if we are just running about fighting for no reason. They know that we are no' all NEDs *[non-educated delinquent]* cause we have sat in their company and they know that we are good boys, but they obviously know if we're fighting, it's for a reason and we'll say to them afterwards, look they were trying to come at us know what I mean?
> *(Willy, 26, male, area 2)*

This suggests that when there is more access to space within the community - which arguably is related to the respect ascribed by others - there is less pressure to demonstrate, or reaffirm, individual or group identity by engaging in street fighting. While both Lewis and Willy suggested that there is still a certain imperative to protect personal identity, the impetus behind the related actions is deemed as being different. Analytically this would suggest a prevalent culture of violence. Both Decker and Van Winkle (1996) and Aldridge et al (2007) note the normalisation of violence among urban youth. However from the broader study it was found whilst there was a normalisation of fighting to protect and maintain an identity there was no evidence that random acts of violence or additional criminal activity on the part of the youth gang were normalised. Some community members discussed the constant real or perceived threat of violence and spoke of the need for young people to be able to protect themselves and those close to them. The community residents at times perpetuated and normalised urban violence as a method of protection which continues in relation to personal defence after street based gang violence is deemed age-inappropriate.

Although Thrasher (1927) suggested that it would be a minority of gang members who would remain in gang related criminal activities past a certain age, the findings here push the analysis further, holding that the real reason is not only physical maturation based on age, but alongside this symbolic maturation, rooted in new responsibilities, opportunities and/or new social roles (Sweeten et al, 2012). Barry (2006: 36), noted that,

> Social recognition can be a helpful concept in understanding desistance amongst young people in transition because it expresses the capacity and need that young people have for longer-term *reciprocal* relations of trust and responsibility within the wider society.

Respect and being ascribed new responsibilities within the wider community creates the circumstances for young people to stop engaging in actions linked to youth gang membership. However both respect and responsibilities may in themselves be age related, which can be categorised in legal terms, i.e. age of going to the pub, or socially, not being viewed as a 'NED'.

In a policy framework this would suggest the need to invest trust and responsibility in young people throughout their life as opposed to maintaining socially constructed age based parameters in which they can be viewed as active participants within society. Genuine participation in communities and societies may afford these young people alternative sources of identity as opposed to feeling the need to gain recognition and capital from violent behaviours related to gang membership.

Investment

Many of the young people concerned were in the process of balancing up their options and evaluating the pros and cons of still being involved in certain behaviours, or being aligned with the youth gang. For Lewis,

> I'm just out of fucking jail and I'm out on recall, if I even get caught for pissing in the street I need to go and do another 9 months so I'm trying to screw the nut and that is it.
> *(Lewis, 25, male, area 2)*

This demonstrates the transition process from primary to secondary desistance. Lewis focused on potential personal consequences rather than being concerned about affirming his personal identity to the neighbouring gang members. Sammy was worried about the impact his behaviours had on his mother; whilst Willy did not want to damage the reputation of being seen as "good boys" by others. This did not mean that their identification was conclusive; rather they all dipped in and out of the behaviour based on circumstances, often which were unpredictable. It was a process of engagement and desistance.

For Lewis and others, the investment in the gang is also an investment in the individual's own social identity. If promoting or investing in the gang's social identity is considered important to the individual gang member, as a means of enhancing agency or identity, then they may continue to invest in the promotion of the gang. If the investment is no longer providing agency and identity enhancement, then the investment will not continue.

For Dylan, the gang was never a place to gain identity or agency anymore,

> No, no I used to be man but it's just not for me the fighting and all that,
> wa'nae for me man
> *(Dylan, 18, male, area 2)*

For Willy the getting 'done', referring to being attacked, was a reason to stop fighting:

> I've been there done that, fucking...I've been done, so fuck that.

(Willy, 26, male, area 2)

John no longer identified with the gang because of new opportunities.

> … [L]ast November I stopped fighting when I was at my first college, doing the motor vehicle maintenance and then into my second year of it so 14/15, no 16 or so
> *(John, 18, male, area 1)*

John got an opportunity to realise himself in a different way which involved gaining more access and control over his life through education. His experience reflects the findings outlined by Barry (2006), who explains why some young people may stop engaging in certain behaviours:

> For those who stopped offending in their twenties, many had found opportunities to accumulate capital through means other than offending, opportunities which did not result in criminal justice system involvement, a lack of control or wider social disapproval (Barry, 2006: 136).

For Barry (2006, 2010) the accumulation of capital, derived through increased opportunities, can encourage some young people to refrain from criminal involvement, although there are others that this does not work for. She theorises that social recognition may be a way to understand why youth crime is often temporary. Social recognition is '…the attainment of a combination of accumulation and expenditure of social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital that is both durable and legitimated…' (Barry, 2006: 136).

The ability to gain and expend economic and cultural capital (Barry, 2006, 2010), or have access to distributive justice (Young, 2007) prevented gang membership for John. Although some participants did not have access to legitimate economic capital they still no longer identified with gang membership, demonstrating that community-based identity-enhancement and social acceptance was sufficient for them. Where people do not have the ability to gain and expend capital, or have not been granted symbolic maturation paths, it is more likely that they will continue to identify with the gang and engage in gang behaviours such as street fighting given a lack of other options for enhancing agency and identity.

Recognition of change

This is a key policy area that needs greater exploration. If a young person has shifted their own identity and now see themselves as an ex-gang member this new identity formation is often not acknowledged by the broader community or society. Al explained how though his personal identity had shifted; other people's views had not necessarily corresponded.

> We don't fight with anybody anymore but it's just were all together but people will look at us and say well that a gang aint they, know what I mean, like polis (police) look in their cameras and go…phew…oh there's a gang, know what I mean, but it's no like that, it's just a crowd of us.
> *(Al, 19, male, area 1)*

John was asked if others still see him as a gang member and replied:

> I think maybe adults do, the Mums 'n Da's still see them as if they are a gang…because they walk about in a group and they are…looking boys from…they're young and most of the

adults still see them as being in a gang but if they don't fight I don't see them as a gang I see them as a group of pals, I don't see them as a gang.
(John, 18, male, area 1)

Interestingly, Al was still viewed as an active gang member despite not personally identifying with the gang. In contrast John who previously identified as a gang member now talks about 'them' not 'us', potentially due to being recognised by others as no longer being a part of the gang. These two quotations clearly demonstrate the desistance process in action. The young people themselves know who is, or is not, affiliated with the gang because of their willingness or involvement in fighting, however parents, community residents, other youth gangs and the police may not be aware or simply overlook this identity shift for some young people.

This demonstrates despite the personal shifting identity process there is a need for this to be recognised by others. As Rattansi and Phoenix (2005) assert often much of the identity theorisation dichotomises identity and society as opposed to analysing how identities are formed and operate in differing social contexts. For Sammy, there is a need to use the gang identity when confronted and challenged whilst at the same time he no longer wants to engage with violent behaviours. This highlights the fluidity of youth identities (Furlong, 2013; Garot, 2007; Hall, Coffey and Willaimson, 1999; Rattansi and Phoenix, 2005) and the difficulty in maintaining an identity shift without the recognition and acceptance of others; particularly given, as McNeill (2014) argues,

> …identity is socially constructed and negotiated, securing long term change depends not just on how one sees oneself but also on how one is seen by others, and on how one sees one's place in society. Putting it more simply, desistance is a social process as much as a personal one.

The implications and benefits of individual behaviour change in addition to being affected by symbolic and physical maturation can be reflected by the perceptions of broader society. As Delaney (2013) notes 'the suspicion and labelling of people within and without gangs certainly complicates desistance' (p.138). It is often very difficult for young people to change their own perceived identity while they are still being treated and labelled as being gang members. Again McNeill (2014) asserts

> The central argument here is that no amount of personal change can secure desistance if change is not recognized by the community ('social rehabilitation'), by the law and by the state ('judicial rehabilitation').

Policy wise this means that the state and the community must be aware of this fluid identity process and to work with young people in accepting and facilitating their identity shift when they want to discard the gang identity and stop engagement in violent behaviours. This does not mean targeting groups of young people in deprived areas for socialising on the street on the assumption that they are gang members and on the postulation that they may be about to commit a criminal offence. Of course this is a difficult balance, but with investment in working with young people the complexities and intricacies of gang involvement could be discovered.

Conclusion

There is not one definitive answer as to why people either choose, or are afforded the opportunity, to stop identifying with youth gangs. The findings are twofold. Firstly, there is a change of personal focus based on a weighing up of investment opportunities and costs; and secondly, related to this, there is the changed context of potential greater social recognition, responsibility and access to economic and social opportunities. Although not apparent in every case, this change of focus and means of social recognition generally relates to the age of a person. There is an intrinsic interplay between primary desistance where the young person may no longer engage with any gang fighting due to either a shift in personal investment and/or social recognition resulting in secondary desistance where they no longer self-identify as a gang member. This however is only sustained by social and potentially judicial recognition to create tertiary desistance.

A young person may individually no longer engage in group based fighting and thus no longer self-identifies with being a member of the gang. If this is then compounded by the community, society, law enforcement agencies and educational and/or economic opportunities, as has been the case for John, then tertiary desistance is likely. They no longer see themselves as a part of the gang and yet still may, albeit to a lesser extent, have friendships with young people who still do engage in gang behaviours and identify with the gang. For others, they may not regularly engage in gang behaviours however their willingness to do so results in them identifying as a youth gang member. For yet others, their personal focus has changed as has their identification and yet the lack of recognition and opportunities available results in a limited capacity to sustain tertiary desistance.

Thus, the local community has a major role to play in providing social recognition and identity-enhancement opportunities to young people. Self-identification may not solely be an individualistic choice but part of the relationship between the individual young person and their broader community. If the community provides opportunities for individuals to mature, be this symbolically through differing forms of socialisation and identity-enhancement, then identification with the gang is no longer necessary. Both individual, agency based change, combined with, and related to, social opportunities and social recognition (Barry, 2006) are required to have an identity change which is sustained (Burnett, 2000; Burnett and McNeill, 2005; McNeill, 2014).

This clearly has implications for current understandings of youth gangs within the Glaswegian context and may be beneficial for understanding youth gangs more broadly. If young people see a key role in their gang identification as the protection of their gang and their territory, through symbolic and physical means, then it is the violence that needs to be addressed not gangs per se; but rather the detrimental gang behaviours. Moreover, the assumption that gang identification intrinsically links to a broader spectrum of criminal behaviours is problematic. For these young people it was found street based fighting was the main criminal offence linked directly to gang involvement. Thus the conflation that all young people who identify with youth gangs are inherently more criminal, outside of this particular offence, is too simplistic. Some young people may have multiple identities and draw on the reputation of their role within the gang to facilitate additional criminal activities; however, this is not intrinsically part of the gang formation or the case for every youth gang member.

This research highlights some key findings on the process of youth gang desistance. Many young people change their personal focus due to the changed context of potential greater social recognition, responsibility and access to economic and social opportunities. For policy

makers it is important to try and prevent the conflation of all youth groupings to be labelled and targeted as gangs. Further, there is a need for recognition from youth work practitioners, law enforcement agencies and the broader community as to when a young person has shifted to secondary desistance to prevent continual negative labelling and opportunity for identity shift recognition and tertiary desistance. In addition, the immediate community and broader societal structures have a role in providing genuine social and economic opportunities for young people to gain alternative sources of identity. This can be achieved through investment in youth based services, community intergenerational programmes and educational and employment opportunities.

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