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## **'It's a no-win scenario, either the police or the gang will get you' Young people and organised crime – vulnerable or criminal?**

### **Abstract**

*The Serious and Organised Crime Strategy (2013) for England and Wales made a commitment to develop preventative educational resources for use with young people on the topic of organised crime. This paper presents findings from a UK Home Office funded project which was aimed at developing and subsequently evaluating these resources, and explores their wider implications for youth crime prevention policy within the UK and internationally. Based on interviews with youth practitioners and young people, the project found that many young people with vulnerabilities (such as learning difficulties) were in turn vulnerable to exploitation by criminal groups; that the reasons for young people becoming involved in organised crime were complex including a desire to provide for their families in a climate of austerity and unemployment; and that positive relationships with professionals and long-term support were significant for youth crime prevention.*

Key words: youth crime; youth justice; organised crime; serious crime; prevention; gangs; vulnerability.

### **Introduction**

In this article, I outline findings from a research project on young people's involvement in organised crime. The project was commissioned by the UK Home Office to respond to the Serious and Organised Crime Strategy's (2013) commitment to develop educational resources about young people and organised crime (see section 5.14 of the Strategy). My role in the project was to facilitate consultations with young people and practitioners, support the development of the educational resources and conduct an evaluation of the associated toolkit.<sup>i</sup> This article does not represent the official view of the Home Office, but draws on my own analysis of the data collected, and is not

focusing on the toolkit itself but on some of the key themes that emerged from the research with practitioners and young people and their implications for policy. These consultation and evaluation activities offer a contribution towards some much needed research on the topic of young people and organised crime, particularly in a UK context. The consultations employed qualitative methods and the evaluation involved mixed methods (described in more detail in part 2 below). The themes outlined here are primarily from the consultation activities with reference to the evaluation where it builds on these themes.

The article is divided into two main sections. In the first, I explore international academic and policy literature that is relevant to young people, organised crime and youth crime prevention. This includes the challenges in defining organised crime, what research tells us about the scope of young people's involvement and their motivations, and a critical review of policy approaches to tackling the problem of organised crime. In the second half, I outline the methodology and discuss key themes arising from the research with practitioners and young people. I argue that young people's involvement in organised crime is complex and not as simple as making a conscious choice to become involved. In particular, I demonstrate that young people are vulnerable to exploitation by organised criminal groups and that factors such as their sense of responsibility towards their families and lack of alternative employment, may add to the risk factors that make them vulnerable. The paper concludes with a review of the policy implications.

## **Part 1: Definitions, Research and Policy Contexts**

### *Definitional challenges*

One of the main challenges in understanding the causes of organised crime and evolving policies for prevention, lies in the very definition of organised crime itself. A review of the literature highlights

major variations within and between policy-maker and academic usage of the term, and a degree of conceptual blurring between 'organised crime' and 'gangs'.

Organised crime is defined in the Home Office's Serious and Organised Crime Strategy as 'serious crime planned, coordinated and conducted by people working together on a continuing basis. Their motivation is often, but not always, financial gain' (Home Office, 2013: 14). However, in the same document, serious crime is defined as 'crime, which may not always be "organised" but requires a national response, notably many aspects of fraud and child sexual exploitation' (Home Office, 2013: 13). Consequently there is some overlap: organised crime is also serious crime, but serious crime, is not always organised. Child sexual exploitation, for example is understood as serious but not necessarily organised. The interpretation in the Strategy is that organised crime involves larger networks than something that operates at just the local level, and that it involves a number of layers around the organised criminal group at the centre and is usually national and often international in reach. Therefore, organised crime as defined by the strategy is distinct from 'gangs' as we know them at the local level (Home Office, 2013). A gang is not, in itself, an organised criminal group as per the Home Office definition. This definition does, however, recognise that existing gangs may be utilised by organised criminal groups, for example, to distribute drugs within a local area.

Academic research, has challenged the policy definition of organised crime as highly organised and carefully structured by a 'mafia' type group at the centre. Hobbs (2013), for example, suggests that the networks are 'messier' with less of a clear hierarchy than popular definitions suggest and that the perpetrators have been over-glamorised. Based on ethnographic research in East London, Hobbs suggests that what we typically view as *organised* crime is usually more opportunistic than the term suggests. Similarly, Hopkins et al (2012) suggest the term is ambiguous and has generally been used to create categories around structures of association (*who* is part of the group) and to a lesser extent structures of activity (*what* they are engaging in).

Arguably, it is difficult to establish what constitutes organised crime and how it presents itself, due to the 'moral panics' and false assumptions that exist and are communicated by the media, politicians and other commentators (Woodiwiss and Hobbs, 2009).

Von Lampe (2016) recognises that there is no consensual definition or understanding even among academics. As such, there are varying forms of crime included in academic discussion of organised crime but with some overlapping themes and interpretations. He suggests that definitions of organised crime have drawn on three main categories: the type of criminal activity; the particular criminal structure or organisation; or on organised crime as a form of illegal governance (von Lampe, 2016: 27). Within these categories there are different interpretations and understandings. In terms of activity, there are different conceptions of what forms of activity are, in fact, organised crime and the level of continuity or sophistication of these activities. The understandings of organised crime that centre on the group or structure differ according to how large or organised a group needs to be to constitute organised crime. The forms of illegal governance that have been understood as organised crime vary according to their motivations; for example, whether they are financial or political. Von Lampe proposes a conceptual framework for understanding organised crime that incorporates all three categories and the various interpretations that exist within these, rather than attempting to find consensus on one specific definition.

The definitional challenges outlined above become further complicated when reviewing the literature on gangs. As with organised crime, it is difficult to find a consensual definition of 'the gang' and some academics suggest that the 'gang problem' has been over-stated with numbers over-inflated (Hallsworth and Young, 2011; Muncie, 2015). Similarly, academic research suggests that there is also no definitive answer as to how far gangs overlap with organised crime groups. Pitts (2017) suggests that different forms of gang exist in the UK, some of which do involve organised crime. However, there is a lack of conclusive research determining whether youth gangs might

evolve into adult organised crime groups. Muncie (2015) argues there is little evidence to suggest that they do – with youth gangs being fairly loose, unstable and temporary overall. Indeed, he claims that in both the UK and the US, those gangs which might be more aligned with organised crime and those that engage in ‘serious violence and threats to assert control locally’, are adult gangs rather than juvenile ones (Muncie 2015: 35). Densley (2014), however, argues, that gang crime is increasingly morphing into organised crime, becoming more structured and developing illegal business-like enterprises. He suggests this is happening less so in London than other areas of the UK. It has been recognised that gangs appear more structured and business-like in the US than in the UK (see Muncie’s 2015 overview). However, there are questions over whether even these American gangs are structured and continuous enough to constitute organised crime (Decker et al, 1998; Muncie, 2015).

Hallsworth and Young (2011) outline a model of ‘street collectives’ that distinguishes the ‘gang’ from organised criminal groups. They divide street collectives into three main groups, these being; peer groups, gangs, and organised crime groups. In doing so, they emphasise the differences between these collectives demonstrating that groups may be mislabelled as gangs when they are, in fact, either a non-criminal gathering of peers or more organised criminal groups. They distinguish particularly ‘between the more organized and professional elite of criminals (the “core” of the criminal underworld) who by and large have an “off-road” presence, from the far more volatile “on road” presence that gangs which occupy the periphery of this underworld typically exhibit’ (Hallsworth and Young, 2011: 19). This emphasises that gangs may be on the peripheries of organised crime groups but are distinguishable from them.

*Who becomes involved in organised crime and why*

Whilst there is scarce literature on organised crime and young people in the UK, a research study commissioned by the Home Office on criminal careers in organised crime does offer some useful statistics on a range of demographic factors including age (Francis et al, 2013). As with Muncie's research outlined above, this study showed that young people were not highly engaged with organised crime. In fact, organised crime offenders were found to be older than general offenders with the average age at which the 'inclusion offence' was committed for the specific category of organised crime being 32 years old (Francis et al, 2013). Only 1% of organised crime offenders were under 18 years of age (compared with 19% for general crime) (ibid.). However, it should be noted here that the methodology for Francis et al's (2013) study applied strict rules in terms of which offences needed to be committed for the person to be considered an organised crime offender. The research focused on 'criminal careers' in organised crime and was thus concerned with those for whom engagement is long-term and not temporary.

Given the varying definitions and understandings of organised crime, there are also a wide range of arguments about why people become involved and the extent to which the structure and purposes of particular organisations may have a role to play in understanding the reasons for, and nature of, belonging. For Von Lampe (2016) these might include whether factors such as profit-making or violence are essential features of the organised criminal activity, as well as the extent to which, organised criminal groups engage people through fear and manipulation or through the promise of social, financial or other benefits.

Hopkins et al (2012) suggest that the links between organised crime and fatal violence in the UK have largely been over-stated. They argue that fatal violence is more a feature of organised crime in other countries such as Mexico and the USA, than it is in the UK. Corsino (2013) found that for Italian organised crime groups in Chicago, the opportunities provided by social networks and social capital were more efficient than violence in keeping people engaged. The literature on gangs also highlights the importance of social networks as key motivating factors. For example, a study by Joseph (2017),

emphasises the role of relationships in young people becoming involved in gangs, with 'close friendships' as significant in young people's exposure to gangs and their social proximity to gang activity a key factor. He also found that young people's involvement with gangs was motivated more by the social capital that the gang provides rather than simply economic benefits, especially where they face social or educational exclusion more widely. This is supported by White and Cunneen (2015) who also recognise that young people facing institutional exclusion may seek identity and belonging in gangs and that a social motivation to become involved exists alongside an economic one.

In the Netherlands, however, Kleemans (2012) found that a combination of social relations with violence and manipulation (as opposed to economic factors) supported people's involvement in organised crime. Within the UK, a recent report by the National Crime Agency (NCA) has highlighted that 'in some cases, individuals will have been groomed, exploited or coerced into [organised crime] as a means of re-paying a debt or supporting friends and family' (NCA, 2015: 8). And research by Sturrock and Holmes (2015), into the links between missing children and gang involvement emphasises the vulnerability of these young people and that, as such, they become key targets for exploitation by gangs and criminal groups. In sum, reasons for young people's involvement in organised crime are complex and contested and cannot be understood simply as a conscious choice to become engaged.

### *Policy approaches to tackling youth involvement in organised crime: a critique*

Turning to policy, the development of the Serious and Organised Crime Strategy (2013) was prompted by the National Security Strategy published in 2010. Serious and Organised Crime policy has been structured to mimic preceding Counter Terrorism policy. This is observed firstly through the division of the 2013 Strategy into the same four areas as the previous Counter Terrorism



Strategy, the '4 Ps': Prepare, Pursue, Prevent and Protect. The government also modelled its later guidance for the development of 'local profiles' of organised crime on the preceding Counter Terrorism local profiles documentation (Home Office, 2014a).

Within the policy relating to organised crime there is no specific strategy relating to young people though there are some particular commitments within the overall strategy such as protecting young women from FGM and developing educational tools to prevent young people's involvement with organised crime (Home Office, 2013). Serious and organised crime policy does acknowledge that vulnerability to exploitation and grooming is a factor in people's involvement with organised crime.

*Some individuals are knowingly drawn into criminality; others, such as victims of Modern Slavery, can be unwittingly seduced and groomed and then exploited. These factors, left unabated, enable the 'stock' of serious and organised criminals to be replenished or backfilled despite police and law enforcement disruptions. (Home Office, 2015a: 7)*

The UK's National Crime Agency (NCA) also recognises the role of grooming, exploitation and coercion in individuals being drawn into organised crime (NCA, 2015). Whilst this vulnerability is recognised and Prevent is a key area of the Serious and Organised Crime Strategy, the priorities and interventions that follow have largely focused on pursuance with the key priorities being the disruption of organised crime activities, the reduction of organised crime offenders with a focus on prosecution, and ensuring the legal powers are in place for such (Home Office, 2013; 2014b). Home Office research has indicated that organised crime costs the UK £24 billion per year and reducing this cost is identified as a clear priority (Mills et al, 2013).

Whilst organised crime policy does not have a key focus on young people, there is plethora of policy documentation on gang involvement and youth violence. The government's current key priorities for 'ending gang violence and exploitation' include:

- *Tackle county lines – the exploitation of vulnerable people by a hard core of gang members to sell drugs*
- *Protect vulnerable locations – places where vulnerable young people can be targeted, including pupil referral units and residential children’s care homes*
- *Reduce violence and knife crime – including improving the way national and local partners use tools and powers*
- *Safeguard gang-associated women and girls – including strengthening local practices*
- *Promote early intervention – using evidence from the Early Intervention Foundation to identify and support vulnerable children and young people (including identifying mental health problems)*
- *Promote meaningful alternatives to gangs such as education, training and employment*

(Home Office, 2016: 2-5)

Whilst these priorities clearly recognise young people’s vulnerability to exploitation, many of the significant interventions remain largely punitive. Even within these supportive-seeming priorities responses include, for example, under the final priority above, reductions in the threshold for ‘persistence absence’ from school (Home Office, 2016: 6). Similarly, the significant government intervention of ‘gang injunctions’ is acknowledged as being for *protection from* as well as *prevention of* gang-related violence. However, they are a predominantly punitive tool that places prohibitions on the young person, with custodial sentences the likely outcome of breaking these orders (Home Office, 2015b).

The research literature on young people and organised crime, highlighted above, would suggest that policy-makers need to engage with the complexities that underpin involvement in such crime, and take a critical approach to the notion of ‘choice’ in the context of structural disadvantage and individual vulnerability. As Sturrock and Holmes (2015) in their research on the links between missing children and gang involvement, have stated:

*A]dolescent-specific risks ....need new approaches in terms of safeguarding, interventions and social care. Children and young people who experience these risks are too often criminalised rather than receiving a safeguarding response, and the risk-taking behaviour that is an inherent part of adolescent development is interpreted as a 'choice' with young people 'putting themselves in harm's way'. It is essential that criminal justice, gangs and children's social care services do not work in silos but work in partnership to provide the most effective response. (Sturrock and Holmes, 2015: 6)*

However, critical policy research has shown that moral panics, myths and lack of consistent agreement around organised crime and gangs specifically, has affected policy and practice interventions with young people (Hallsworth and Young, 2011; Joseph, 2017). A key theme in this literature is that policy-makers in the UK (and England in particular) have tended to over-simplify and hence distort the problem of young people and crime, with negative consequences for the types of intervention that have been promulgated and resourced. This is seen in the policy responses discussed above which, whilst recognising vulnerability to coercion, focus dominantly on punitive interventions.

Joseph (2017), for example critiques what he perceives as a 'one size fits all' approach to prevention work around gangs in London. He argues that prevention work needs to take account of individual and cultural factors, rather than assuming a pre-packaged intervention can be created. He argues that attempts to create an official definition of the 'gang' by academics and policy-makers in the UK have exacerbated the problems of a homogenous approach to practice that has led to misplaced interventions (Joseph, 2017).

Pitt's work (2011) adds important insights to this debate. He argues that both popular and policy discourse on youth crime has been framed by a 'culture of entitlement' which has served to distort understanding of young people's involvement in offending and been used to justify more punitive responses. According to Pitts, this 'culture of entitlement' discourse is levelled only at the working

classes and is contrasted with a 'culture of merit'. The discourse of entitlement ignores inequalities and suggests any differences in levels of success between different groups of young people is due to moral rather than structural differences. Therefore, young people's involvement in crime is seen as stemming from an immoral sense of greed and an entitlement to have what they want. Pitts highlights how this discourse shaped the dominant response to the English riots of summer 2011. For example, David Cameron, the then Prime Minister, stated in a speech immediately following the events:

*Irresponsibility. Selfishness. Behaving as if your choices have no consequences. Children without fathers. Schools without discipline. Reward without effort. Crime without punishment. Rights without responsibilities. Communities without control. Some of the worst aspects of human nature tolerated, indulged – sometimes even incentivised – by a state and its agencies that in parts have become literally de-moralised.* (Cameron, 2011 cf. Pitts, 2011: 82)

Lightowlers (2015), similarly, suggests that the response to the riots took the view of the young perpetrators as simply morally depraved whilst ignoring the inequalities and deprivation they faced during a time of austerity following the fiscal crisis. Fundamentally, approaches to youth involvement in organised crime and its prevention need to recognise the complex needs of young offenders rather than viewing them as simply criminal.

There has been a dominant focus on the threat of penal consequences in youth crime prevention both in the UK and more widely. However, the effectiveness of this approach is being increasingly questioned and this critique offers some insight into the problems with the policy responses to youth gangs and organised crime in the UK. Darke (2011), for example, argues that a 'prevent as enforcement' approach has been over-used in youth justice and is ineffective. The 'law and order'

discourse that focuses on the crime and not the vulnerabilities of the perpetrator is also critiqued by Hughes (2011). In research comparing the approaches to youth crime and anti-social behaviour prevention in England with that in Victoria, Australia, Hughes found that the two localities have very different models. The 'law and order' discourse dominates in English policy and practice, focusing on the crime and its penal consequences, whereas in Victoria, the young person and their needs is the focus (ibid.). Hughes concluded that the approach in Victoria is more effective at preventing crime. Arthur (2010) has also found that approaches to Youth Justice in Ireland and England disregard young people's needs whereas the Scottish approach is more focused on the welfare needs of the young people. Case and Haines (2015) advocate for a 'Children First, Offenders Second' approach to Youth Justice work. Whilst their discussion is more related to response than prevention, working with young people after an offence is committed, their Positive Youth Justice model is worthy of note here and has clear implications for a more progressive approach to the prevention of young people's engagement with organised crime. Case and Haines argue that young offenders need to be recognised as children and not treated as 'mini adults'. They refer to this tendency in youth justice to view the response to youth crime through an adult lens as the 'neoliberal responsabilisation' of young people. These approaches that focus on young people's needs and vulnerabilities could offer effective solutions to dealing with young people's involvement with gangs and preventing their engagement with organised crime by offering more supportive interventions that current responses such as gang injunctions as discussed above.

As part of a more progressive approach to young people's engagement with organised crime, a focus on using positive relationships may be essential, especially as policies such as gang injunctions cut young people off from their social circles and even their families. The literature suggests that positive relationships are important in both the prevention and response to youth crime. Creaney (2014) advocates for a 'relationship-based practice' in Youth Justice that uses positive relationships

between the professional and the young person as a tool for change. This is supported by Drake et al (2014) who also argue that effective practitioner-young person relationships are crucial to the effectiveness of interventions, as well as by Lemmon's (2008) research in Australia, which suggested that young people at risk of engaging in crime need long-term support rather than short-term interventions for prevention to be effective.

### *Summary*

Overall, the literature explored suggests that an approach to crime prevention through enforcement and a focus on penal consequences is ineffective. It reveals that current interventions, particularly in the UK, have been based on some problematic and distorted assumptions about, for example, why young people engage with crime and how easily terms such as 'organised crime' and 'gangs' can be subject to universal and over-simplistic definition. It has also found that relationships and support are considered essential to Youth Justice and crime prevention if it is to be effective. As the literature reveals that the focus of interventions has been misplaced, it is arguable that young people need to be consulted as to what interventions would have impact. This reinforces the need for more research around young people and organised crime. Case (2006) argues that the qualitative accounts of young people should be sought in defining the risk factors for their engagement with crime. This justifies the importance of the study outlined in this paper which goes some way to gather the qualitative accounts of young people and practitioners who work with them so that preventative interventions can be authentic and effective.

## **Part 2: The Home Office Project and key findings**

### *Aims and Methods*

The purpose of the research carried out with practitioners and young people in England was to support the development of the educational resources that the Home Office had committed to create in the Serious and Organised Crime Strategy. It was conducted in three main stages; consultative, developmental and evaluative.

The consultative stage involved both practitioners and young people. Two semi-structured day-long workshops were conducted with practitioners who work with young people in a range of sectors including youth work, youth offending, education, secure institutions, probation, police and social work. One workshop took place in London and the other in Liverpool. Forty-two practitioners attended these workshops. They involved activities designed to gain the practitioners' qualitative feedback on their knowledge and experience of young people's involvement with organised crime. These were run as workshops rather than focus groups due to the high numbers of participants in the sessions and the activities allowed for smaller sub-group discussions.

Three unstructured focus groups were conducted with young people in London. One group was approached via an open access youth club session, another via their youth offending worker and the other through a targeted youth club session for young people considered to be 'at risk' of educational or social exclusion. Through these groups, 19 young people were consulted. The sample of young people therefore included both young people in the primary target group for the preventative resource and those who had already offended.

The developmental stage of the research drew primarily on an advisory group of seven practitioners who commented on various edits of the resource, as well as consulting with the young people to whom they had access. The evaluation of the final toolkit involved: two surveys sent to practitioners to look at and/or trial the toolkit; four focus groups with practitioners in London and Greater Manchester; and four observed sessions of youth practitioners using the resource with young people in Greater Manchester and London. One hundred and forty three practitioners took part in the evaluation and the toolkit was trialled with two hundred and sixty young people.

. This research was conducted in accordance the ethical protocols of the British Society of Criminology. In particular, it was made clear to all young people that there was no obligation to participate and that, should they take part, their confidentiality would be respected.

The discussion in this article draws on the qualitative themes from the consultative stage of the research to explore young people's and practitioners' perceptions of young people's involvement in organised crime. It also draws on the qualitative elements of the evaluative phase where there is further evidence of the themes. There are some challenges in drawing academic conclusions from an applied project. However, due to the lack of empirical research on the topic of young people and organised crime in the UK, this study goes some way to illuminating the key factors and impacts, to be built on with further research.

### **Research Themes**

As stated earlier, the Serious and Organised Crime Strategy (2013) is divided into four sections; Protect, Prevent, Pursue, and Prepare. The commitment to develop educational resources is located under the 'Prevent' section of the Strategy. Therefore, the project to develop educational resources and the associated research began from this starting-point. During the consultations, 'drug running' was identified as the most prevalent link to serious and organised crime for the young people that practitioners have contact with. Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) was also discussed but was considered to be less prevalent. As the commitment to develop educational resources had been framed as a 'Prevent' issue rather than a Protect issue, it was decided that 'drug running' was the most appropriate focus for the toolkit. However, it emerged throughout the research with practitioners and young people, that the distinction made in the Strategy between 'Prevent' and 'Protect' was too simplistic and that young people's involvement with organised crime was far more complex than such crude distinctions allowed for. Four key themes emerged from the research:

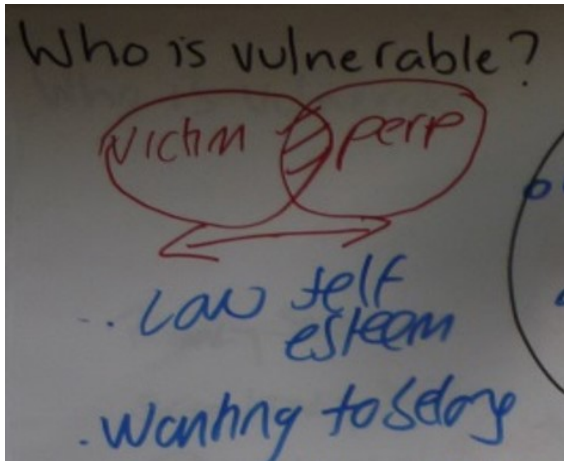


1. The role of grooming/exploitation
2. Opportunity vs. austerity
3. Protecting family
4. Supportive interventions from trusted professionals

I explore each of these in turn below.

### ***Theme 1: The role of grooming/exploitation***

A key message from young people and practitioners involved with the project was that when young people become engaged with activities that are on the fringe of organised crime, they are often unaware of the full extent of what they are becoming involved with. In particular, young people who become involved with 'drug running' do not tend to know whether or not it is linked to an organised criminal group (OCG). Practitioners, particularly police, and young people said that the young person would not have met or be aware of the organised crime offenders at the centre of the OCG but would be recruited by someone local, often who they see as friend. This 'friend' would have spent a substantial amount of time grooming the young person so that by the time they are urged to become involved with the organised criminal activity they would see it as helping them out or often 'owing them a favour'. One youth worker stated 'those above you don't want to put themselves at risk so they pass it to runner. The runner may not always see it this way'. Practitioners illustrated this blurred line between victim and perpetrator in the consultation workshops:



**Figure 1 – ‘victim/perpetrator’ flipchart extract from practitioner consultation workshop in London**

During the consultations with young people, a thirteen year old female described a situation in which an older male known to her within her community had asked that she ‘walk with me like you’re my sister for a minute’. This was not a request she felt she could refuse and it was only afterwards that she realised she was acting as a form of protection, to minimise him looking suspicious to the police who were further down the road. For this young woman there was no big choice or dilemma to respond to and the example demonstrates the subtle way in which a young person can first become involved with drug running. Another example emerged during the evaluation phase of the project when a youth worker working in an area of Manchester known to have high levels of organised crime explained how in their local community, a struggling single mother had been given a new sofa by someone whom she saw as a family friend. Following receipt of the gift, this man had then told her he needed her son to do some work for him. Young people from the youth offending group in the consultative phase also spoke about how, by the time they became involved in drug running, the person who recruited them had often given them free gifts over a period of time such as takeaways and second hand smartphones. During a focus group as part of the evaluation phase, teachers at a school for young people with special educational needs explained that young people with learning difficulties have problems in discerning what a real

friendship is and were particularly vulnerable to exploitation. The teachers relayed many concrete situations where this had happened, suggesting that young people with particular vulnerabilities are deliberately targeted. One teacher gave the example of a how young person with special educational needs was groomed into gang involvement then punished when he tried to disengage:

*He got drawn into a dead end by his so called mates. The gang was waiting for him and beat him badly because he wouldn't do what they asked. (Teacher, north-west England)*

The young people in the youth offending group who had been involved with drug running linked to a wider network stated that getting out was not easy., with a majority of the group saying that they would need to move away from the area. One young person suggested that even this would not be enough especially if you still had 'debt' and that safety payments and 'looking over your shoulder' would be essential. The group discussed how getting into debt was something they were potentially set up for by those higher up the criminal chain so that they were trapped. They recognised the futility of being trapped in this way. One young man in the youth offenders group explained how being in debt to the people above him had stopped him from being able to disengage from drug running after it began to have a negative impact on his family. A young person during the evaluation sessions stated 'It's a no-win scenario, either the police or the gang will get you'. This was reinforced by a police officer in the consultations with practitioners who was aware of situations in which 'runners' were robbed by people within the wider OCG networks in order to keep them indebted to the group

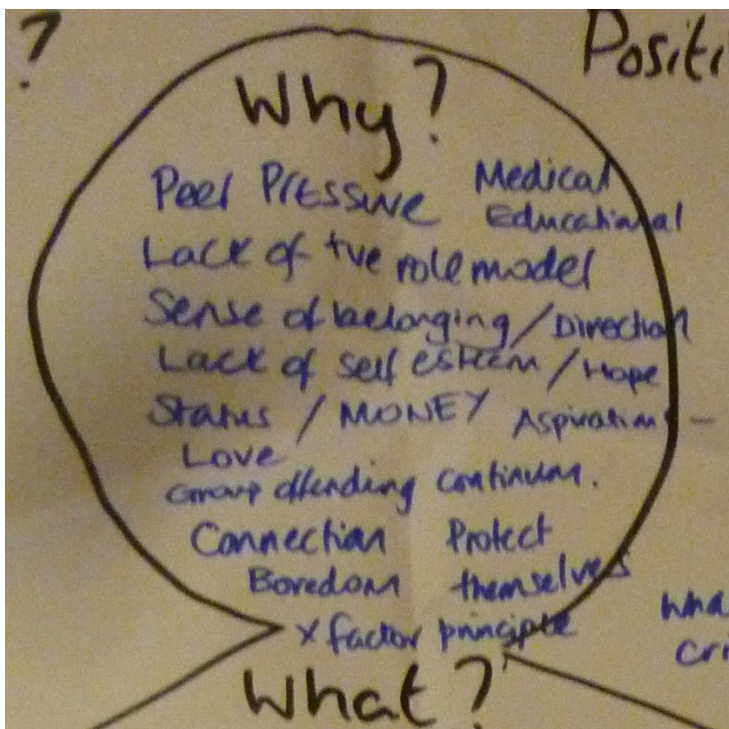
The practitioners who were supporting young people recognised the power of peer influence and grooming but felt that older young people might be role models as well as negative influences. They were able to use this in their preventative interventions by facilitating activities and discussions where older, respected young people from the same area spoke to the younger people.

*You've got a lot of them who want to impress [young person X] because he's got a reputation. But he's a lot more mature now, he knows he doesn't want that. If he says something they listen. (Youth worker, London)*

The practitioners identified this relatability and real-life experience of such role models as significant.

### **Theme 2: Opportunity vs. Austerity**

Whilst recognising that young people were vulnerable to exploitation as outlined above, the practitioners in the consultation workshops suggested the following motivating factors for young people's involvement in organised crime: money, social status, sense of belonging, power, dignity and protection. They also recognised that in the current economic context there is a lack of alternative opportunities for some young people.



**Figure 2 'why young people become involved' flipchart extract from practitioner consultation workshop in Liverpool**

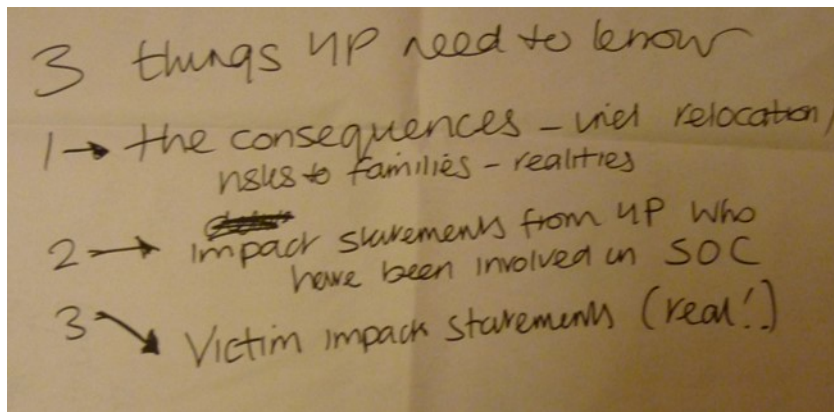
Similarly, the young people from the youth offenders group cited peer pressure, boredom, desire for independence and lack of opportunity, aspirations and self-belief as their reasons for becoming involved with crime. Status in the local area was cited by the young people's consultation groups as a lure into becoming involved. As well as money, other material incentives such as access to the latest smartphones were seen as linked to involvement. It was felt across all the consultation groups that the idea of quick, easy money was attractive – especially in a context where the possibility of employment feels elusive. This also emerged in the evaluation where one practitioner stated:

*The biggest practice challenge is how to offer young people in deprived areas with few support networks real alternatives to 'making a bit of money from running' and then supporting young people to walk away from criminal activity when they have so little to lose, especially if they already have or are likely to gain a criminal record. (Practitioner, evaluation survey)*

The young people from the youth offenders group also expressed frustration at the government and other institutions suggesting that getting involved was, at least to a small extent, a way of 'kicking back at the system'.

***Theme 3: Protecting family***

Both young people and practitioners emphasised that young people who become engaged with activities such as 'drug running' often do so, not just to make money for themselves, but also to provide for their families. Practitioners in the consultation workshops said that young people knowing the potential impact of engaging with organised crime on their family would act as a more powerful deterrent than the threat of penal consequences.



**Figure 3 – ‘what young people need to know’ flipchart extract from practitioner consultation workshop in London**

A police officer suggested having younger siblings taken into care was often a reason for young people to want to change. This was reinforced by the evaluation phase of the project. For example, one practitioner fed back via the targeted evaluation survey that ‘Young people found the film quite realistic and said it made them think about the impact of serious crime and mentioned especially the impact on their families’. It was also recognised by the practitioners that the young people have to continue living and surviving in their home context between practitioner meetings and interventions which may not immediately address material or other needs:

*You go to a meeting where all the agencies get together, people say things, you meet a month later and nothing has changed, a lot can happen in a month, a child has got a lot to live with and put up with in that time. (Youth worker, north-west England)*

Most of the young men in the young offenders group stated that their own involvement with drug running was, at least in part, motivated by a desire to protect and provide for their families, particularly their mother and younger siblings, and that they felt a responsibility to bring money into the family home. The impact on family was cited across the consultation groups as a key motivating factor to want to become uninvolved with organised crime. For example, when discussing what would enable preventative resources to have a real impact, young people suggested seeing family

members injured or killed would be a deterrent. This reflected a discussion they had of other videos and resources relating to crime that had affected them, with the most 'shocking' being deemed the most 'impactful'. As with the practitioners, they emphasised that a focus on the consequences of involvement with crime on their families was more powerful than the vast number of preventative resources and interventions that focus on penal consequences. One young man in the young offenders group said that seeing his younger brother become involved in drug running was a critical moment for him wanting to disengage. One young woman explained that having a baby had been the key factor in her own desire to change.

#### ***Theme 4: Supportive interventions from trusted professionals***

The most concrete suggestions from young people for what someone might be able to leave their involvement with organised crime for were employment or education opportunities, although they recognised a need for support to achieve this outcome. One young ex offender was keen to emphasise that drug running required sales skills which could be transferable and that selling on a street-market was a good next step. The young people in one consultation group discussed being supported to access NVQ or other vocational qualifications at college as reducing the risk of them engaging with crime. The young people from the young offenders group also highlighted the benefits of becoming involved in other pro-social activities and particularly highlighted a music project their youth offending worker had set up. The young people were very enthusiastic about this project as something to do, a way to express themselves and as a means of building confidence and aspirations. The practitioners recognised a need for interventions that support young people to reflect and think critically about their futures. One youth worker stated:

*That young man has got a lot of experience of all that, there's a bit of reflection for him there. His cousins have a got a reputation, and he's got to decide whether to live up to it or walk away from it. (Youth worker, London)*

Practitioners in the consultation workshops appeared to view themselves as positive role models for young people and youth workers and teachers were the professionals they particularly identified as role models. They also recognised the role that less formal role models play citing family in particular but even, in one case, the local barber.

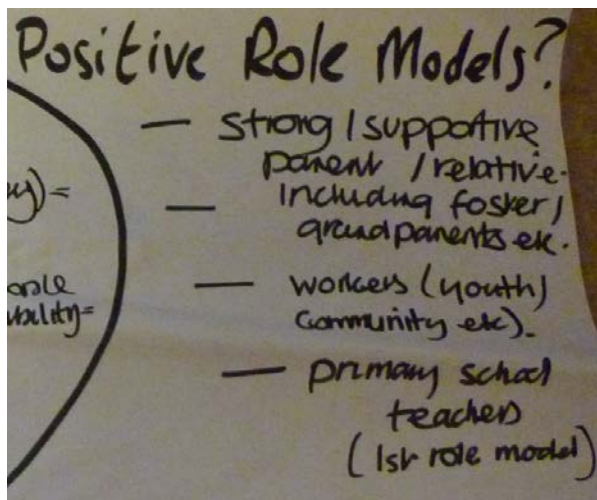


Figure 4 – ‘role models’ flipchart extract from practitioner consultation workshop in London

The young people identified the support of a professional that appears to be ‘on their side’ as an important factor to getting out of involvement in crime. The young people in the young offenders group unanimously praised the impact of their youth offending worker (a qualified youth worker on a two-year secondment from the Local Government’s Youth Service) as helping them to change. A young woman with a baby cited her relationship with her youth worker as a key support in changing her life. However, it was becoming a mother that was her key motivation to change. Overall, it appeared that the combination of a ‘critical moment’, the appropriate professional support and the presence of a positive alternative was the most likely situation in which a young person would pursue a pathway out of organised crime.



## **Implications of the findings**

As outlined earlier, only 1% of the UK's organised crime offenders were found to be under 18 by Francis et al (2013). Therefore, it could be questioned why there is a policy focus on them in relation to organised crime at all; and why preventative resources were deemed necessary. However, as discussed earlier, the methodology of Francis et al's study was such that young people engaging with fringe activities would not classify as organised criminals. Lower level activities such as 'drug running', identified in our consultations as the main method of engagement by young people would not fit the definition. It appears, thus, that young people are unlikely to be 'career criminals' (or the senior perpetrators) within organised criminal networks. However, both the international literature explored, and the research findings from England presented in this paper, support the argument that they may be vulnerable to exploitation by such groups.

As such, a key implication of the consultations was the need to recognise the blurred line between the young person as criminal or as exploited, and for interventions to view prevention of crime and protection or safeguarding of young people as overlapping. This also supports the findings from the literature of young people as vulnerable to exploitation (Arthur, 2010; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015; Joseph, 2017). The research in this project also supports the view of the literature that positive, long-term relationships with professionals are key to young people's disengagement from crime (Creaney, 2014; Lemmon, 2008, Drake et al, 2014).

The consultation themes also emphasise that young people's involvement in crime is more complex than simply out of a sense of entitlement (as also argued by Pitts, 2011) and have implications for crime prevention more widely, beyond simply organised crime and beyond the English context. The young people in the study informing this paper did not cite selfish reasons for engagement with crime but a desire, even a need, to help out their families by providing extra money. This was

couched in the sense that there were few alternative opportunities available with legitimate employment seeming elusive.

The findings support the critique of 'prevent as enforcement' interventions that has emerged in the UK and Australia (Darke, 2011; Hughes, 2011), as they justify a focus not on penal consequences but on the impact on the young person's family. This shift from a dominant emphasis on punishment to one on family consequences might have a powerful impact on the effectiveness of youth crime interventions in various contexts. Indeed, the evaluation of the educational toolkit that stemmed from this project praised the impact of a key focus on family as highly effective. As such, a question remains as to whether interventions based on restorative justice or mediation with victims are as powerful as drawing on young people's empathy for their own family. New interventions based on family will also have limitations for use with some young people, particularly those who are in the care of the authorities.

New preventative interventions need to involve a range of agencies working in partnership with an overall focus on safeguarding, as identified by Sturrock and Holmes (2015). They should focus on relationship-based practice with the opportunity for long-term support from a key worker for young people who are vulnerable to involvement with crime (Creaney, 2014). Most crucially, they need to be more supportive than punitive and to recognise young people's vulnerabilities. The Positive Youth Justice approach (Case and Haines, 2015) offers a model that draws on these elements and that could be translated from a post-offending to a preventative intervention. Young people's voices need to inform and guide these interventions in order for them to be relevant and effective (Case, 2006). In the research outlined in this paper, this positive preventative approach was seen in the opportunity for some young people to receive ongoing key worker support from their YOT or youth worker, through both individual mentoring and positive group work activities (such as the creation, recording and performance of a 'rap' album). These supportive activities allowed young people to discuss and express their feelings as well as to develop a positive vision for their futures.

## **Conclusion**

Case (2006) has argued that young people need to be consulted in defining the risk factors for their involvement with crime. This study goes some way towards this and its key themes represent people's authentic experiences in relation to young people and organised crime. The study emphasises that young people are vulnerable rather than simply criminal. Their involvement in organised crime is often preceded by grooming or exploitation rather than being a clear-cut choice to engage. It also found that communicating the impact of young people's involvement on their family is likely to be a more powerful deterrent than focusing on penal consequences. Lastly, the findings highlight that young people need positive long-term support as part of preventative interventions. These findings have a number of implications for the development of youth crime prevention practice that are relevant to the English context and beyond. In particular, preventative interventions should not add to the 'enforcement as prevention' discourse through highlighting penal consequences. Instead they should recognise the blurred line between young people as perpetrators and as exploited and highlight the impacts on their family who they often seek to protect and provide for. Interventions need to be based on positive relationships with professionals and provide support for young people's needs and vulnerabilities. There is, however, a clear need for further empirical research on young people and organised crime in the UK and more widely as there is a dearth.

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