



Article

Street gangs and coercive control: The gendered exploitation of young women and girls in county lines

Criminology & Criminal Justice

1–17

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/17488958211051513

journals.sagepub.com/home/crj



Tirion Elizabeth Havard 

London South Bank University, UK

James A Densley

Metropolitan State University, USA

Andrew Whittaker

London South Bank University, UK

Jane Wills

London South Bank University, UK

Abstract

This article explores young women and girls' participation in gangs and 'county lines' drug sales. Qualitative interviews and focus groups with criminal justice and social service professionals found that women and girls in gangs often are judged according to androcentric, stereotypical norms that deny gender-specific risks of exploitation. Gangs capitalise on the relative 'invisibility' of young women to advance their economic interests in county lines and stay below police radar. The research shows gangs maintain control over women and girls in both physical and digital spaces via a combination of threatened and actual (sexual) violence and a form of economic abuse known as debt bondage – tactics readily documented in the field of domestic abuse. This article argues that coercive control offers a new way of understanding and responding to these gendered experiences of gang life, with important implications for policy and practice.

Corresponding author:

Tirion Elizabeth Havard, School of Health and Social Care, London South Bank University, 103, Borough Road, London SE1 0AA, UK.

Email: havardt@lsbu.ac.uk

Keywords

Abuse, coercive control, county lines, exploitation, gangs, violence against women

Introduction

This study contributes to the growing literature on female gang involvement in Britain (e.g. Batchelor, 2009; Beckett et al., 2013; Deuchar et al., 2020; Firmin, 2011; Harding, 2014; Young, 2009; Young and Trickett, 2017) and the criminal exploitation of children and young people in ‘county lines’ drug sales (Harding, 2020; McLean et al., 2020; Spicer, 2021). In-depth interviews and focus groups with criminal justice and social service practitioners in London, England, revealed that an evolving county lines business model of drug distribution (Whittaker et al., 2018, 2020a) has facilitated the recruitment of girls and young women into gangs, exposing them to uniquely gendered risks of victimisation and ill treatment. Existing narrow, gendered constructions of gangs and gang membership, in turn, have obscured the violence and abuse perpetrated by gang-involved men against women. The theory of coercive control is offered as a way to make sense of interviewees’ accounts of this gender-based vulnerability, thus foregrounding the violence and abuse girls and young women experience and contextualising the roles and functions they play in gangs.

Young women and girls in gangs and county lines

The precise gender makeup of UK gangs is unclear (Centre for Social Justice, 2014; Haymoz and Gatti, 2010). London’s database of purported gang members (see Densley and Pyrooz, 2020) records females as only 0.6% of the population, perhaps because gangs are perceived by police as a mostly male preserve (London Assembly, 2019). Yet other sources using different definitions of gangs and gang membership, and different samples and methods, including school-based surveys, estimate that almost half of gang members are female (Alleyne and Wood, 2014; Auyong et al., 2018; Office of National Statistics (ONS), 2018).

The fact that gang research focuses mainly on men (and is written by men) means young women’s experiences in gangs have historically remained ‘hidden’ (Medina et al., 2012). Most of what we know about gender and gangs comes from the United States (see Decker et al., 2022; Panfil and Peterson, 2015), where research finds women tend to be involved in less serious violent offending than their male counterparts (Miller and Decker, 2001). However, women in gangs still face an increased risk of violent victimisation and intimate partner violence, including rape (Quinn et al., 2019; Wesche and Dickson-Gomez, 2019). This is partly because ‘street culture . . . promotes hyper masculinity, sexual conquest, sexual aggression, and sexual objectification of women’ (Valdez, 2007: 111).

Women in gangs were more likely to have experienced familial neglect or abuse than their male counterparts, or females not involved with gangs (De La Rue and Espelage, 2014). A recent study comparing and contrasting the experiences of female gang members in Los Angeles, the United States, and Glasgow, Scotland, found that women

entering gangs in ‘deficit’ owing to histories of domestic abuse, drug dependency and debt had radically different offending and victimisation trajectories than more networked women who entered the gang in ‘credit’, bringing social skill and professional agency and expertise to the group (Deuchar et al., 2020). Women in credit exercised far greater agency over their offending and, in most cases, enjoyed greater financial success in criminal endeavours.

The credit and deficit models shed new light on the growing trend for urban gangs to become more economically driven, focused on drug markets outside home cities in remote rural areas, market towns or coastal locations – known as ‘county lines’ (Harding, 2020; McLean et al., 2020; Spicer, 2021). In this context, young women and girls have been identified as providing alibis for male gang members, receiving/selling stolen goods and trafficking drugs and weapons (National Crime Agency 2018; Whittaker et al., 2018). But questions remain about their overall agency in crime because female offenders simultaneously experience intra-gang violence and exploitation (Robinson et al., 2019; Windle et al., 2020) tantamount to what the domestic abuse literature refers to as ‘coercive control’ (Crossman et al., 2016; Crossman and Hardesty, 2017; Hamberger et al., 2017; Havard and Lefevre, 2020; Stark, 2007).

Coercive control and vulnerability

This study is among the first to apply coercive control to the experience of young women and girls in gangs. Coercive control is recognised as an extension of ‘gendered inequality’ (Stark and Hester, 2019), built on a foundation of trust where the victim shares intimate experiences and information with the perpetrator, including personal dreams and fears (Hayes and Jefferies, 2016). Coercive control is different from other forms of abuse because this privileged information, shared in good faith, is then leveraged to exert influence or control over the victim (Bettinson and Bishop, 2015; Velonis, 2016).

Tactics including isolation from family and friends, economic abuse, intimidation, humiliation, physical and sexual violence (including threats) and technological abuse (Havard and Lefevre, 2020; Pence and Paymar, 1993; Stark, 2007) are used with negative consequences should the victim fail to comply (Dutton and Goodman, 2005). These are not isolated incidents but part of a wider motive to exert male power (Pence and Paymar, 1993). They are deliberate, pose a credible threat and cause fear (Pence and Paymar 1993; Stark, 2007), a fear based on what *could* happen (Arnold, 2009).

Although not explicitly called coercive control, examples of female victimisation in UK gangs, whether physical, sexual or emotional in nature, abound (Beckett et al., 2013; Berelowitz et al., 2013; Centre for Social Justice, 2014; Firmin, 2011, 2013; Khan et al., 2013; Pearce and Pitts, 2011; Vasquez et al., 2017). Studies have found young women being targeted by male gang members who create the impression of romantic relationships before subjecting them to violence (Densley et al., 2013). Similar tactics, known as the ‘lover boy’ method, are also used in human trafficking (Tóth, 2020).

One of the key issues in this work is how professionals approach vulnerability in relation to girls and young women involved in crime and the criminal justice system. Melrose (2013) highlights how the language of child sexual exploitation has been purposely framed to portray children as passive to avoid blaming abuse on those who are too young

to give consent. While this is a positive legislative change, professional perceptions that define girls and young women as 'vulnerable' have been challenged, particularly by young people themselves. For example, a study of girls in secure care found that they rejected professionals' perceptions of them as 'vulnerable' and felt that such descriptions were patronising and undermined their experiences (Ellis, 2018). Instead, the girls asserted that they were capable and independent, able to survive and flourish in times of adversity.

This study contributes to the dual literature on gangs and coercive control and to our understanding of responses to 'vulnerable' young women and girls by focusing on the views of frontline professionals who work with gangs, including gender specialists. This study was commissioned by a local authority in London because they felt that gang activity was evolving (Densley, 2013, 2014; Whittaker et al., 2018, 2020a, 2020b); This article draws specifically from the data related to young women. There have been several important studies with girls and young women (Auyong et al., 2018; De La Rue and Espelage, 2014), but because services have difficulties engaging them directly, their needs are not always identified and services are not commissioned to support them (Jury-Dada, 2018). This exploratory study originates out of the work of practitioners and sought to investigate what they understood and perceived to be the main issues for gang prevention work so that such work could be improved.

Method

The idea of the gang is heavily contested, largely on the grounds that it is a racialised and criminalising discourse, especially in the UK context (e.g. Hallsworth and Young, 2008). This study used a definition widely employed by practitioners that gangs are relatively durable, predominantly street-based groups of young people who (1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, (2) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence, (3) lay claim over territory, (4) have some identifying structural features and (5) are in conflict with other gangs (Centre for Social Justice, 2009: 48). This definition was shared with all interviewees to ensure perceptions were consistent. In recognition that gang membership was rarely an in/out dichotomy (even for 'former' or 'ex-gang members'), practitioners generally used the term 'gang member' when referring to youth who self-identified as gang members and 'gang-involved' when describing youth who were more marginally 'embedded' in gangs (Pyrooz et al., 2013). Girls and young women were more often described as gang-involved, which we recognise may reflect gender stereotypes where the female is subservient and the male dominant, a theme of this study.

Research design

The study had a two-stage multi-method design, with three distinct research methods. The first stage consisted of qualitative semi-structured interviews with professionals (n=21), including professionals from the police and criminal justice agencies (24%), local government agencies in the fields of community safety, early help and education (38%) and voluntary sector grassroots organisations (38%). Participants were recruited

to include key local and pan-London stakeholders. In this sample, 12 (57%) were female and 9 (43%) were male.

The participants worked with girls and young women across a range of services. At one end of the spectrum were universal service providers, such as the Metropolitan Police, who worked with the general population. At the other end were highly specialised services like voluntary agencies who worked exclusively with young women aged 11–18 years who had become gang-involved and were at risk of sexual exploitation. In the middle were children's social care services and other agencies who worked with children from a range of backgrounds and circumstances from birth to 18 years old.

The qualitative interviews were supplemented by a documentary analysis of historical data on specific gangs, spanning over a decade, including previous offences and local intelligence (see Whittaker et al., 2020a). These data were treated with caution and used to triangulate information from interview participants. The entire dataset was analysed at this first stage and preliminary findings were developed.

At the second stage, these findings were shared with two focus groups ($n=19$ and $n=18$) of key stakeholders from criminal justice agencies, local government agencies and voluntary sector grassroots organisations who were recruited through local gang partnerships. The aim of this stage was to ensure that the findings were credible and confirmable to local stakeholders who worked with street gangs and to check that we were not imposing external interpretations.

Data analysis

The focus groups were transcribed and the resulting heterogeneous data were analysed in NVivo 11 using the well-established reflexive thematic approach (see Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019). Initial coding was completed across the dataset and focused on what each participant explicitly said. Initial codes were then reviewed to identify broader themes and sub-themes and to explore the relationship between them. These themes were then scrutinised by the research team to ensure consistency within each theme and across the whole dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019).

Ethics

Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the ethics committee at London South Bank University (Approval Number HSCSEP/17/11). Participation in the study was voluntary and predicated on the active and informed consent of all research participants. Standard ethical principles were followed regarding informed consent, anonymity, conditional confidentiality, safety, right to withdrawal and data protection. The consolidated guidelines for reporting qualitative research were followed (Tong et al., 2014).

Findings

The findings from stage 1 and stage 2 of the research study are presented under the three thematic headings of 'invisibility', 'coercion' and 'control', which emerged from the data. Illustrative quotes relating to the experiences of girls and young women's involvement in gangs are presented to illustrate these themes.

Invisibility

Professionals reported that they felt girls and young women were becoming increasingly involved in gang activity:

There's lots of females getting involved now: that's a growing trend, definitely. (Participant 8, female statutory sector professional)

However, when this idea was explored further, there was also an acknowledgement that it was difficult to ascertain the true nature and extent of young women's involvement in gangs, in part because they were less visible on the streets and also because no agency was centrally or systematically tracking the prevalence of female gang involvement:

There's a silence around it as there is in most communities actually around gangs. . . . I suspect they (young women and girls) are being drawn in but we just don't know about it. (Participant 17, female voluntary sector professional)

If you drive round the hotspots in [area in London], in terms of gangs you will just see groups of boys, you won't see girls, so to try and map the girls and know their role is very difficult because we don't have that much contact with them. (Participant 14, female non-local statutory sector professional)

This lack of clarity made it difficult for practitioners to deal with the issues they faced in terms of the prevalence of the problem and the needs of young women and girls. It also played into a narrow understanding of the role of young women and girls in gangs among some (mostly male) interviewees:

We've had a number of well-documented instances over the last few years where girls have been used as . . . instigators or honey traps, so they, they will lure boys and become boyfriends, gang members, opposing gang members, lure them to somewhere and then they get attacked or stabbed. (Participant 9, male pan-London statutory professional)

Female practitioners who worked more with female clients, however, recognised that conventional language and labels positioned young women as *offenders* more than *victims*, which potentially obscured their vulnerability to male power and exploitation on the streets:

. . . a hook, so a recruiter for other young women, which I understand, but I find problematic in itself because it then strips that young woman of any perceived vulnerability and I think professionals stopped viewing her as vulnerable. . . ., it's quite hard for professionals to accept that someone can be both a potential harmer and being harmed themselves. (Participant 18, female voluntary sector professional)

Participant 18, who works directly with gang-involved females, was concerned that a traditional victim–perpetrator dichotomy informs practitioners' interpretations of young women's behaviour in gangs. Women were judged according to gender stereotypes and stigmatised according to myths around abuse, therefore only ever seen as either offenders or protagonists, she argued. Whenever gang interventions were informed by this

perspective, exploitation and abuse were overlooked and the gender-specific needs of girls and young women were not met.

Many young women and girls were viewed at risk of being manipulated into participating in gang life. This was because gangs had deliberately adopted a more entrepreneurial and exploitative operating model focused upon drug markets inside and outside of London, known as ‘county lines’:

We’ve got girls being used to bring drugs along county lines. (Participant 11, male statutory sector professional)

County lines are predicated on freedom of movement and association, and young people in gangs have adopted a philosophy that too much attention is ‘bad for business’ (Whittaker et al., 2020a). The perceived ability of girls and young women to fly under police radar played to the gang’s advantage, interviewees said.

Girls and young women living in the care of the Local Authority and/or with personal histories of trauma and (parental) abuse were especially vulnerable to gang involvement, interviewees said, owing to feelings of isolation and loneliness and routine activities that put them in contact with gang members. Some noted that for these reasons, gangs were actively recruiting from settings traditionally used for a managed transition to independent living for care leavers and homeless young people. Some of this recruitment was done on social media and at teenage ‘parties’ hosted by gang members:

[Gangs] use Snapchat to advertise these parties but it’s basically getting young women to come to a party where they essentially expect to get hit on (flirted with). These young women usually use alcohol and some drugs and things like that, but it almost seems like this cool thing to be at, it’s almost like a party where young women are just getting sexually exploited. (Participant 18, female voluntary sector professional)

Participant 18 was not blaming the victim in the above scenario, but rather highlighting how gang boys used drugs and alcohol at parties to facilitate exploitation – a tactic common among US college fraternities (Sanday, 1990).

Professionals further warned that gangs were exploiting a known blind spot for law enforcement, that is, the invisibility of young women and girls, by recruiting ‘clean skins’ – youth not known to statutory agencies – to do their work. The evolution of gangs in county lines had placed young women and girls from *any and all* backgrounds at risk, they argued, because gender was a proxy for invisibility and that feature alone made someone attractive to contemporary gangs:

There are a lot of young women who are in the care system but equally there are a lot of young women that are still living with a parent. . . . there’s young women going missing across the board. (Participant 17, female voluntary sector professional)

She’s a white woman who’s from a good family, so nobody will look at her and think she’s involved in anything. . . . She’s quite well presented for somebody who’s not working, i.e., hair, nails, you know, like how she presents herself, always taking cabs everywhere, you kind of question it. (Participant 5, female statutory sector professional)

Participant 5 was well-trained and recognised this woman's presentation as a clue to her exploitation, but much like how myths exist that domestic violence is 'cultural' or survivors are exclusively Black and Minority Ethnic women from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Casey, 2015), certain stereotypes about gangs and gang membership served to conceal the reality of coercive control, replicating the Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal, where victimisation was not taken seriously by criminal justice professionals (Casey, 2015).

Coercion

Prior research has shown that gang members are often strongly embedded within school networks, thus are well placed to influence others to join gangs (Gallupe and Gravel, 2017). Our research confirmed this. Males in gangs were actively targeting schools to recruit young women and girls, conspicuously displaying the kudos and financial rewards of gang life to coerce them into joining:

. . . often, we have young men hanging around the school gates at lunchtimes and they're talking to the girls and they're befriending them and it's that whole education piece about you might think he's a lovely guy and drive a nice car but, you know, there's always something more to him. (Participant 9, male statutory sector professional)

Coercive control abusers similarly groom their victims. By showing an interest in, or by feigning concern about, young women in their orbit, men foster dependency in their targets and an emotional commitment unfolds designed to facilitate the exploitation of certain social and emotional vulnerabilities later on (Bettinson and Bishop, 2015). One tactic gang members used was to isolate young women and girls from their family and friends and damage any existing relationships they had outside of the gang. For example, the demands the gang placed on a young person's time and attention put them in conflict with nongang friends and forced them to miss family obligations. Isolating young women and girls from their loved ones reduced their visibility in public further, thus increasing their vulnerability to exploitation:

They get them to completely ruin their relationships with their family, if the young person does have a family, because they're not always in care, . . . they're sometimes quite solid families that these young people are picked up from but they fracture, they fracture the family relationship so they completely identify with being a street level gang member rather than a son, a daughter, a schoolchild . . . (Participant 16, male police and criminal justice professional)

Smart phones and social media are fully integrated into the lives of young people, but in the hands of gang members, they can facilitate coercive control. Interviewees explained it was common for male gang members to enter into intimate social and sexual relationships with young women and then persuade or force their victims to film sexual acts or share nude photographs:

They [male gang members] will have relationships [with girls]. . . and they will film it so if the girls don't do what they say at a later date they will often threaten to disclose by social media footage of these girls performing sex acts. (Participant 16, male statutory sector professional)

Owing to its intrinsic potential for damage, this kompromat controlled by men became digital ‘collateral’ to hold young women hostage to the gang (Storrod and Densley, 2017). If intimate acts were ever shared online, moreover, young women and girls found themselves increasingly objectified, resulting in unwanted friend requests, unsolicited images and messages from strangers, and general harassment:

If it is a circulation of a video of a girl performing a sexual act or something like that, that can then draw more attention to that girl because it's been circulated to more males which effectively increases her risk even more. . . . And their [mobile] numbers being put on social media and then what happens is those young women receive copious phone calls, text messages and things from people they have no idea who they are, trying to get them to meet up with and trying to get them to do sexual things to them or someone else and things like that, so young women are kind of exposed on social media in that way. (Participant 19, female voluntary sector professional)

Re-victimisation further isolated these young women, interviewees argued, increasing the very feelings of fear, humiliation and vulnerability that pushed them towards the gang in the first place:

Girls being baited out, social media, I mean girls describe them as being exposed for being slags or skets but they're being exposed for rape and sexual violence. (Participant 18, female voluntary sector professional)

Control

Interviewees described a number of ways that young women involved in gangs become further embedded in them through drug dependency and a form of economic abuse called ‘debt bondage’. However, sexual violence, both real and perceived, was the most powerful weapon in the arsenal of the gang:

. . . multiple allegations of rape and sexual violence as well, like we don't know where necessarily and by whom, but I would assume that's part and parcel of this county lines activity or it happening before or after etc. (Participant, 19, female voluntary sector professional)

Gang members coerced young women and girls into misconduct performed in furtherance of the group and then held them individually responsible if the girls got caught or if contraband in their hands was stolen by rivals or confiscated by police. For example, practitioners described how police discovered four 14-year-old girls in possession of £3000 of crack cocaine during a raid on a ‘trap house’, a residence used to shelter drug users and provide a place for drug dealers to supply them. The drugs were located via intimate body searches on the girls. The gang sanctioned these girls for ‘losing’ their drugs and forced them to pay back their debt through sexual activity, selling more drugs and hiding firearms. Faced with a credible threat of further abuse and (sexual) violence, these girls were too afraid to cooperate with the authorities. This consolidated the coercive control of the gang because the four girls were dragged deeper and deeper into its activities until they were fully ‘owned’ by the group:

. . . it gives them [older gang members] grounds to then say to these four girls, well we own your backside now. They come from poverty, they are not going to be able to pluck three grand out of the sky and pay it off so they say you have to work off that debt, selling more drugs, hiding firearms, performing sexual acts when required, various other forms of control. If they refuse to do it their lives are threatened or their family's lives are threatened. (Participant 16, male statutory sector professional)

This was not an isolated incident. Another practitioner told us,

One young woman . . . owed a debt and was threatened by a gang member that she'd have to do a line-up with ten men if she didn't pay off the debt. (Participant 17, female voluntary sector professional)

However, in the course of our interviews, deflection away from an abuser's behaviour was surprisingly common. By painting the women and girls in gangs as sexually promiscuous, some interviewees inadvertently minimised the impact of male crimes, holding the women themselves partially responsible for their own abuse and exploitation, which could potentially enable male gang members to deny responsibility for their violence. In the domestic abuse literature (e.g. Hoyle, 2008), this denial is viewed as a risk indicator of future abuse.

Discussion

This article used the voices of practitioners from a range of services to bring a specific focus to the experiences of young women and girls in gangs. The findings challenge some of the stereotypical, androcentric perspectives on women in gangs that label them as either violent or sexually promiscuous (Young, 2009). Unlike boys, young women and girls have been narrowly defined in the literature around gangs, and their behaviours have been dichotomised into polarised roles that reflect sexist social norms. For example, the labelling of young women and girls as 'hooks' or 'honey traps' reflects societies' disapproval that they have contravened social expectations that women are sexually moral and pure (Koepke and Eyssel Bohner, 2014). Conversely, those who participate in violence violate stereotypes that women are inherently passive and gentle (Weare, 2013).

Practitioners warn that gang males are actively targeting young women and girls, so-called 'clean skins', and recruiting them into their criminal enterprise. Gangs have recognised the invisibility of young women and girls in the fields of crime and justice as being 'good for business', affording them the opportunity to travel across county lines relatively undetected. County lines operations facilitate ugly forms of coercion and exploitation (Home Office 2017). By creating the impression of a romantic relationship and then using smart phones and social media as tools for round-the-clock surveillance (Havard and Lefevre, 2020; Storrod and Densley, 2017), for example, men are able to force women into working on behalf of the gang.

The relative invisibility of young women has consequences beyond the gang. Because gangs are defined as inherently violent (e.g. Centre for Social Justice, 2009) and gang

members rarely qualify as the 'ideal' innocent victim, gang-involved women, like domestic abuse survivors, risk being stigmatised as somehow deserving of the violence they endure (e.g. Lloyd and Ramon, 2017), which means they stay invisible and under-served. Women stay silent because they fear retribution (after all, gangs are inherently violent) and because they may be culpable in the gang's crimes. Practitioners described in vivid detail young women's generalised fear of physical and sexual abuse, economic abuse through debt bondage and being exposed on social media for their 'promiscuity'. Male gang members used these tactics to force young women into gangs and crime in the first place, and then again as credible threats to keep young women oppressed, subservient and entrapped in the lifestyle.

The Home Office (2015) recognises rape, forcing a victim to take part in criminal activity, enforcing rules/activity which humiliates, degrades or dehumanises, and emotional/financial abuse as examples of coercive behaviour (p. 4). This accurately reflects the concerns expressed by professionals in this study. However, victim-blaming is a common theme when it comes to violence against women (Berns and Schweingruber, 2007; Peters, 2008; Tang and Cheung, 2002). The victim–perpetrator dichotomy (i.e. that women are either one or the other, but never both; see Hourmat, 2016) not only reinforces a gender power imbalance, but also obscures the plurality of gang violence and victimisation (Pyrooz et al., 2014). In this context, the needs of young women are not properly understood and front-line practitioners may overlook gendered experiences of gang-related coercive control. The dangers of this have already been seen in places like Rochdale and could readily be applied to other areas of exploitation, for example, human trafficking (Casey, 2015; Tóth, 2020).

Establishing best practices in reducing the exposure of girls and young women to gang-related harms, including coercive control, is an important priority – not least because the factors predisposing females to gang involvement are likely to be gender-specific (Centre for Social Justice, 2014; Khan et al., 2013). Many of the people discussed in this research were children, thus entitled to protection in their own right (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2014), but the temptation to focus on their criminality risks missing opportunities to identify their vulnerabilities and intervene in their criminal exploitation (Disley and Liddle, 2016; Firmin, 2011; House of Commons, 2015).

Recent legislation provides opportunities to address this. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 cites exploitation as a defence for victims of slavery (Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), 2018) and could take into account experiences of coercive control among those entrapped in County Lines. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 also holds coercive control at its centre and recognises abuse between those who are 'personally connected'. The opportunities this brings to protect young women in gangs aged 16 and over have not been considered in the literature before. Acting quickly through recognising coercive control within contexts outside of intimate or familial relationships could prevent the double victimisation (the suffering as a result of the exploitation itself and then from the institutional victimisation that follows within the Criminal Justice System) experienced by young women and girls in gangs (Villacampa and Torres, 2014).

Limitations

This study highlights the worrying emergence of girls and young women's exploitation, based on the views of professionals. Different viewpoints provide an important check on validity, but criminal justice professionals are not necessarily best-placed to speak to the lived reality of gangs, especially in light of the well-documented problems with 'gang talk' and the predatory gang intervention 'industry' (Densley, 2011; Hallsworth and Young, 2008). The data held by local agencies are also likely to be limited as subjects were increasingly reluctant to self-identify as gang members and were actively seeking to hide their activities. Nevertheless, the professionals were able to offer viewpoints about the experiences of young women. It must be asked from where did these views arise because they acknowledged the difficulties of engaging with young women and the (gender) stereotypes that surround and sadly inform that work.

We hope future research can give young women involved in gangs a voice and capture their experiences more directly. As Stark and Hester (2019) observe,

Researching children's strategies for coping with coercive control can be ethically fraught, not least if the enterprise is thought to imply children's complicity in their abuse or otherwise diminish the significance of their victimisation. But the results can prove invaluable to building the knowledge base on which strengths-based policy and practice depend. (p. 98)

We see a critical need for research examining women's agency (or lack thereof) in gang offending (e.g. Deuchar et al., 2020; Young and Trickett, 2017) and the different gendered pathways in and out of gang life. Our findings emphasise that young women experience exploitation in gangs, but it is clear from prior research that some occupy relatively powerful positions (e.g. Choak, 2018). Such complexity needs attention and will forever remain silent unless we critically engage in primary ethnographic work with their life trajectories and family histories and so on (e.g. Meloy et al., 2018).

Research that systematically compares and contrasts the lived experience of gangs and county lines for men and women within and outside London is another important avenue for future research. Owing to the integration of technology in county lines activities, further studies of women and gangs that focus explicitly on the Internet and social media also are encouraged (e.g. Storrod, 2021; Storrod and Densley, 2017; Van Damme and Carbello, 2020). So too are studies that embrace the diversity that exists at the intersections of gender, gender identity, race and class (Peterson and Panfil, 2017). Youth today have multiple identifications, meaning an exclusive focus on gender could ignore wider factors that may contribute to understanding gangs and county lines.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the relative invisibility of young women makes them not only more attractive to gangs who transport drugs and weapons across county lines but also more vulnerable to (at times technologically mediated forms of) coercive control. Traditional law enforcement-led responses to gangs and county lines that seek to seize assets and criminalise drug dealing activities may, in turn, criminalise vulnerable young

women and mask the coercive control they experience, potentially making it more difficult to address women's specific needs and risks of criminal exploitation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by the London Borough of Waltham Forest.

ORCID iD

Tirion Elizabeth Havard  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1444-9880>

References

- Alleyne E and Wood JL (2014) Gang involvement: Social and environmental factors. *Crime and Delinquency* 60: 547–568.
- Arnold G (2009) A battered women's movement perspective of coercive control. *Violence against Women* 15(12): 1432–1443.
- Auyong ZE, Smith S and Ferguson CJ (2018) Girls in gangs: Exploring risk in a British youth context. *Crime and Delinquency* 64: 1698–1717.
- Batchelor S (2009) Girls, gangs and violence: Assessing the evidence. *Probation Journal* 56: 399–414.
- Beckett H, Brodie I, Factor F, et al. (2013) *'It's Wrong-but You Get Used to It': A Qualitative Study of Gang-associated Sexual Violence towards, and Exploitation of, Young People in England*. Luton: University of Bedfordshire.
- Berelowitz S, Clifton J, Firmin C, et al. (2013) *'If Only Someone Had Listened: Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups*. London: Office of the Children's Commissioner.
- Berns N and Schweingruber D (2007) 'When you're involved, it's just different': Making sense of domestic violence. *Violence against Women* 13: 240–261.
- Bettinson V and Bishop C (2015) Is the creation of a discrete offence of coercive control necessary to combat domestic violence? *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* 66: 179–197.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3: 77–101.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2019) Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11: 589–597.
- Casey L (2015) *Report of an Inspection of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council*. London: Department for Communities and Local Government and Stationery.
- Centre for Social Justice (2009) *Dying to Belong: An In-depth Review of Street Gangs in Britain*. London: Centre for Social Justice.
- Centre for Social Justice (2014) *Girls and Gangs*. London: Centre for Social Justice.
- Choak C (2018) *Young women on road: Femininities, race and gangs in London*. PhD Thesis, School of Business and Law, University of East London, London.
- Crossman KA and Hardesty JL (2017) Placing coercive control at the center: What are the processes of coercive control and what makes control coercive? *Psychology of Violence* 7: 1–11.

- Crossman KA, Hardesty JL and Raffaelli M (2016) He could scare me without laying a hand on me. *Violence against Women* 22: 454–473.
- Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) (2018) County lines typology. Available at: https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:Ggnn2rrysmIJ:https://www.cps.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/legal_guidance/County-Lines-typology.docx+%&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk (accessed 14 January 2021).
- De La Rue L and Espelage DL (2014) Family and abuse characteristics of gang-involved, pressured-to-join, and non-gang-involved girls. *Psychology of Violence* 4: 253–265.
- Decker S, Pyrooz D and Densley J (2022) *On Gangs*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Densley J (2011) Ganging up on gangs: Why the gang intervention industry needs an intervention. *British Journal of Forensic Practice* 13: 12–23.
- Densley J (2013) *How Gangs Work*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Densley J (2014) It's gang life, but not as we know it: The evolution of gang business. *Crime and Delinquency* 60: 517–546.
- Densley J and Pyrooz D (2020) The matrix in context: Taking stock of police gang databases in London and beyond. *Youth Justice* 20: 11–30.
- Densley J, Davis A and Mason N (2013) Girls and gangs: Preventing multiple perpetrator rape. In: Horvath M and Woodhams J (eds) *Handbook on the Study of Multiple Perpetrator Rape*. London: Routledge, pp. 255–281.
- Deuchar R, Harding S, McLean R, et al. (2020) Deficit or credit? A comparative, qualitative study of gender agency and female gang membership in Los Angeles and Glasgow. *Crime and Delinquency* 66: 1087–1114.
- Disley E and Liddle M (2016) *Local perspectives in ending gang and youth violence areas: Perceptions of the nature of urban street gangs*. Research report 88. London: The Home Office.
- Dutton MA and Goodman LA (2005) Coercion in intimate partner violence: Toward a new conceptualization. *Sex Roles* 52: 743–756.
- Ellis K (2018) Contested vulnerability: A case study of girls in secure care. *Children and Youth Services Review* 88: 156–163.
- Firmin C (2011) *Female Voice in Violence: Final Report on the Impact of Serious Youth Violence and Criminal Gangs on Women and Girls across the Country*. London: Race on the Agenda.
- Firmin C (2013) Busting the gang rape myth: Girls' victimisation and agency in gang-associated sexual violence. In: Horvath M and Woodhams J (eds) *Handbook on the Study of Multiple Perpetrator Rape*. London: Routledge, pp. 97–115.
- Gallupe O and Gravel J (2017) Social network position of gang members in schools: Implications for recruitment and gang prevention. *Justice Quarterly* 35: 505–525.
- Hallsworth S and Young T (2008) Gang talk and gang talkers: A critique. *Crime, Media, Culture* 4: 175–195.
- Hamberger LK, Larsen SE and Lehrner A (2017) Coercive control in intimate partner violence. *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 37: 1–11.
- Harding S (2014) *The Street Casino*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Harding S (2020) *County Lines*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Havard TE and Lefevre M (2020) Beyond the power and control wheel: How abusive men manipulate mobile phone technologies to facilitate coercive control. *Journal of Gender-based Violence* 4: 223–239.
- Hayes S and Jefferies S (2016) Romantic terrorism? An auto-ethnographic analysis of gendered psychological and emotional tactics in domestic violence. *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 6(2): 38–61.

- Haymoz S and Gatti U (2010) Girl members of deviant youth groups, offending behaviour and victimisation: Results from the ISRD2 in Italy and Switzerland. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 16(3): 167–182.
- HM Inspectorate of Probation (2014) *Girls in the Criminal Justice System*. London: HM Inspectorate of Probation.
- Home Office (2015) *Control or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship: Statutory Guidance Framework*. London: Home Office.
- Home Office (2017) Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County lines guidance. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/626770/6_3505_HO_Child_exploitation_FINAL_web__2_.pdf (accessed 22 December 2020).
- Hourmat M (2016) Victim-perpetrator dichotomy in transitional justice. *Narrative and Conflict: Exploration in Theory and Practice* 4: 43–67.
- House of Commons (2015) *Home Affairs Committee Gangs and Youth Crime*. London: House of Commons.
- Hoyle C (2008) Will she be safe? A critical analysis of risk assessment in domestic violence cases. *Children and Youth Services Review* 30: 323–337.
- Jury-Dada S (2018) *#Girlsandgangs: Girls, Gangs and Their Abusive Relationships*. London: Winston Churchill Memorial Trust.
- Khan L, Brice H, Saunders A, et al. (2013) *A Need to Belong: What Leads Girls to Join Gangs? Risk Factors for Gang Affiliation*. London: Centre for Mental Health.
- Koepke S and Eyssel Bohner G (2014) ‘She deserved it’: Effects of sexism norms, type of violence, and victim’s pre-assault behaviour on blame attributions toward female victims and approval of the aggressor’s behavior. *Violence against Women* 20: 446–464.
- Lloyd M and Ramon S (2017) Smoke and mirrors: UK newspaper representations of intimate partner domestic violence. *Violence against Women* 23: 114–139.
- London Assembly (2019) Women and girls and the gangs violence matrix. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/numbersof-gangmembersbygender>
- McLean R, Robinson G and Densley J (2020) *County Lines*. Cham: Springer.
- Medina J, Ralphs R and Aldridge J (2012) Hidden behind the gunfire: Young women’s experiences of gang-related violence. *Violence against Women* 18: 653–661.
- Meloy M, Curtis K, Tucker S, et al. (2018) Surviving all the way to college: Pathways out of one of America’s most crime ridden cities. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36: 4277–4309.
- Melrose M (2013) Twenty-first century party people: Young people and sexual exploitation in the new millennium. *Child Abuse Review* 22: 155–168.
- Miller J and Decker SH (2001) Young women and gang violence: Gender, street offending, and violent victimization in gangs. *Justice Quarterly* 18: 115–140.
- National Crime Agency (2018) County lines drug supply, vulnerability and harm 2018. Available at: <file://nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk> (accessed 2 October 2021).
- Office of National Statistics (ONS) (2018) Distribution by Sex of Children Aged 10 to 15 Years who are Gang Members or Know a Gang Member. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/adhocs/009891crimesurveyforenglandandwalescsewestimatesofthedistributionbysexofchildrenaged10to15yearswhoaregangmembersorknowagangmemberearendingmarch2016toyearendingmarch2018> (accessed 22 December 2020).
- Panfil V and Peterson D (2015) Gender, sexuality, and gangs: (Re)envisioning diversity. In: Decker SH and Pyrooz DC (eds) *The Handbook of Gangs*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, pp. 208–234.

- Pearce JJ and Pitts J (2011) *Youth Gangs, Sexual Violence and Sexual Exploitation: A Scoping Exercise for the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England*. Luton: University of Bedfordshire.
- Pence E and Paymar M (1993) *Education Groups for Men Who Batter: The Duluth Model*. New York: Springer.
- Peters J (2008) Measuring myths about domestic violence: Development and initial validation of the domestic violence myth acceptance scale. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 16: 1–33.
- Peterson D and Panfil V (2017) Toward a multiracial feminist framework for understanding females' gang involvement. *Journal of Crime and Justice* 40: 337–357.
- Pyrooz DC, Moule RK and Decker SH (2014) The contribution of gang membership to the victim-offender overlap. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 51: 315–348.
- Pyrooz DC, Sweeten G and Piquero AR (2013) Continuity and change in gang membership and gang embeddedness. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 50: 239–271.
- Quinn K, Dickson-Gomez J, Broaddus M, et al. (2019) 'Running trains' and 'sexting-in': The functions of sex within adolescent gangs. *Youth and Society* 51: 151–169.
- Robinson G, McLean R and Densley J (2019) Working county lines: Child criminal exploitation and illicit drug dealing in Glasgow and Merseyside. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 63: 694–711.
- Sanday PR (1990) *Fraternity Gang Rape*. New York: NYU Press.
- Spicer J (2021) *Policing County Lines: Responses to Evolving Provincial Drug Markets*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stark E (2007) *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stark E and Hester M (2019) Coercive control: Update and review. *Violence against Women* 25: 81–104.
- Storrod ML (2021) *Digital Justice: Girls, Phones, & Juvenile Justice*. PhD Dissertation, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Available at: <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/65731/PDF/1/>
- Storrod ML and Densley J (2017) 'Going viral' and 'going country': The expressive and instrumental activities of street gangs on social media. *Journal of Youth Studies* 20: 677–696.
- Tang CS and Cheung FM (2002) Social construction of women violence in Chinese societies. *Violence against Women* 8: 968–996.
- Tong A, Sainsbury P and Craig J (2014) Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal of Qual Health Care* 19: 349–357.
- Tóth M (2020) Major 'lover boy' prostitution gang broken up by coalition of European law enforcement agencies. *Illicit Trade News Network*, 19 March. Available at: <https://www.illicit-trade.com/2020/03/major-lover-boy-prostitution-gang-broken-up-by-coalition-of-european-law-enforcement-agencies/> (accessed 22 December 2020).
- Valdez A (2007) *Mexican American Girls and Gang Violence: Beyond Risk*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Van Damme E and Carbello W (2020) Women and gangs in the digital media: A distorted image? In: Melde C and Weerman F (eds) *Gangs in the Era of Internet and Social Media*. Cham: Springer, pp. 61–80.
- Vasquez EA, Osinnowo K, Pina A, et al. (2017) The sexual objectification of girls and aggression towards them in gang and non-gang affiliated youth. *Psychology, Crime and Law* 23: 459–471.

- Velonis AJ (2016) “‘He never did anything you typically think of as abuse’”: Experiences with violence in controlling and non-controlling relationships in a non-agency sample of women. *Violence against Women* 22: 1031–1054.
- Villacampa C and Torres N (2014) Trafficked women in prison: The problem of double victimisation. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 21: 99–115.
- Weare S (2013) ‘The mad’, ‘the bad’, ‘the victim’: Gendered constructions of women who kill within in the criminal justice system. *Laws* 2: 337–361.
- Wesche R and Dickson-Gomez J (2019) Gender attitudes, sexual risk, intimate partner violence and coercive sex amongst adolescent gang members. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 64: 648–656.
- Whittaker A, Cheston L, Tyrell T, et al. (2018) *From Postcodes to Profits: Changes in Gang Activity in Waltham Forest*. London: LSBU. Available at: <https://openresearch.lsbu.ac.uk/item/86qq3>
- Whittaker A, Densley J and Moser KS (2020b) No two gangs are alike: The digital divide in street gangs’ differential adaptations to social media. *Computers in Human Behavior* 110: 106403.
- Whittaker A, Densley J, Cheston L, et al. (2020a) Reluctant gangsters revisited: The evolution of gangs from postcodes to profits. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 26(1): 1–22.
- Windle J, Moyle L and Coomber R (2020) Vulnerable kids going country: Children and young people’s involvement in county lines drug dealing. *Youth Justice* 20: 64–78.
- Young T (2009) Girls and gangs: ‘Shemale’ gangsters in the UK. *Youth Justice* 9: 224–238.
- Young T and Trickett L (2017) Gang girls: Agency, sexual identity and victimization ‘on road’. In: Gildart K, Gough-Yates A, Lincoln S, et al. (eds) *Youth Culture and Social Change*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 231–259.

Author biographies

Tirion Elizabeth Havard is Associate Professor of Social Work at London South Bank University. Her research focuses on Violence Against Women and Girls, specifically coercive control, technology and domestic abuse. She is co-author of the ‘Postcodes to Profit’ study.

James A Densley is Professor and Department Chair of Criminal Justice at Metropolitan State University, part of the Minnesota State system (USA). He is the author of six books, most recently, *On Gangs* (Temple University Press, 2022), and over 100 articles in leading journals, magazines and newspapers.

Andrew Whittaker is Professor and Co-lead of the Serious Violence research cluster at London South Bank University. He is co-author of the ‘Postcodes to Profit’ study, and his research focuses on gangs, preventing violence against young people and trauma-informed approaches.

Jane Wills is Professor of Health Promotion. Her work focuses across multidisciplinary public health and building the evidence base of effective interventions. It currently focuses on what works to improve public health literacy in relation to issues including COVID-19, stroke and obesity.