



# Review of 'Reluctant Gangsters: The Changing Face of Youth Crime'

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Review of  
*Reluctant Gangsters: The Changing Face of Youth Crime*  
Cullompton: Willan

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Judith Aldridge  
Senior Lecturer in Criminology  
School of Law  
University of Manchester  
Oxford Road  
Manchester M13 9PL  
Judith.Aldridge@manchester.ac.uk

With *Reluctant Gangsters*, John Pitts wades into the hotting-up British debate about youth gangs and youth crime. Without doubt, the last decade has witnessed intense media attention to youth gangs, whereby assaults on young people – sometimes with weapons – have increasingly been linked to an emergence of ‘gang culture’ in our cities. Journalistic certainty aside, where youth gangs are concerned, British academics have for decades remained sceptical. The reasons for this scepticism are numerous, and importantly, sound. Criminologists are justifiably alarmed by the state’s increasing intolerance of the activities of young people, sometimes leading to harshly punitive responses; does the use of the ‘gang’ label represent yet another opportunity to scapegoat, criminalise and further marginalise young people? Moreover, there is a tradition of British research since the 1960s that has focussed on youth formations, where delinquency has not always been the defining attribute motivating study, leading some to question the utility of this American ‘import concept’. And third – what is a ‘youth gang’, anyway? British researchers have often denied their existence because they do not find the structured and organised entities that they perceive American gangs to be, with street corner collectivities identified by British researchers instead described as youth cultures in synchronicity with their working class parent cultures (see Downes 1966). More recent contributors to the debates on British gangs (e.g. Aldridge, Medina et al. 2008; Hallsworth and Young 2008) veer from wary to downright fearful of the use of the gang label and its possible abuses. In contrast, Pitts acknowledges the history, but confidently casts aside the fears; and he refuses to hedge his bets. Are there American-style youth gangs in the UK? Has anything really changed in the UK as regards youth crime and violence? Are gangs on the increase? Pitts’s answer to all three questions is ‘yes’.

There are many praiseworthy aspects to Pitts’s book. His research is timely. There is no doubt that questions about youth gangs and their ostensible links to street violence will not stopped being asked, as witnessed by the media frenzy around gang-related stories, a profusion of gang-related government policy, and intervention and suppression techniques employed by police and other statutory agencies. Academic researchers armed with empirical evidence are essential to provide a balance against the abundant – and arguably sensationalist and fear-mongering – policies and interventions being touted without a sound empirical grounding in the UK context. For this reason alone, Pitts’s contribution is valuable.

In a particularly insightful chapter of the book ('Why Here? Why Now?'), Pitts insists on grounding within political economy the explanation for his observation that youth gangs in the UK are on the increase. In doing so, he eschews what he sees as the unhelpfully individualising explanations that locate the causes of gang joining in individual factors such as impulsivity, risk-seeking, and lack of attachment to school. Pitts charts a context of social, economic and cultural change in the post-industrial era: a growth in both absolute and relative deprivation and poverty; the move to a neo-liberalist welfare state in which reduced or withheld benefit payments become a punitive tool of government; the geographical concentration of disadvantage and crime on social housing estates; and rising youth unemployment – with all of these exerting their effects disproportionately on black youth. Although this chapter provides a helpful backcloth against which to assess his data, it is in relation to the interpretation of his data that I take issue.

Pitts identifies 'supergangs' in his London boroughs that are violent, involved organised crime and drug dealing, are clearly territorial, have links with 'higher echelon' organised crime, and have a hierarchical structure with role differentiation (e.g. retailers, soldiers, aspirants, 'wannabees'). Such specialised 'supergangs' as these appear to be the exception rather than the rule even in US-based research. Moreover, recent evidence suggests that youth gangs in the UK (and Europe generally), are less violent (Klein, Weerman et al. 2006) with a less pronounced institutional identity than those encountered in the US (Winfrey, Weitekamp et al. 2007).

So why are Pitts's conclusions about the nature of youth gangs out of step with those of other researchers, my own research team (Medina, Aldridge et al. 200X) included? It may be that there is so much variation amongst youth gangs in the UK, that regional differences can be profound. However, it seems from Pitts's (exceptionally, problematically) brief discussion of his methods, that in seeking out gangs 'in the field' of his research, he was guided by criminal justice definitions and identifications. Indeed, it seems that a gaze focussed through the criminal justice lens may be what consolidates the highly criminal and organised picture he paints of gangland London. Another possibility is that Pitts was too quick to accept, uncritically and at face value, the characterisation of these groups provided by his respondents. I am particularly wary of the connections he draws between youth gangs and organised criminal groups.

Nevertheless, there is much to impress in this book. The 'Living in Neo-Liberal Gangland' chapter usefully focuses in on gangs from the multi-perspective view of community residents, schools, youth workers, and criminal justice agencies. The 'Reluctant Gangsters' chapter demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the varying ways in which individuals within gangs are subject to group processes that foster cohesiveness amongst members. The final chapter 'If Every Child Mattered' demonstrates that Pitts brings incisive, political and moral analysis to his subject matter. His writing is passionate and engaging. The book is well worth reading.

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