

UK gang policy needs to avoid heavy handed suppression tactics. It should focus on preventing violence, tackling societal inequalities and offering exit opportunities to gang members through job creation.

In the aftermath of the riots in England last month, some politicians were quick to point fingers at gang 'leaders' as organisers of the riots. With gangs once again in the sights of policy-makers, [Juanjo Medina](#) argues rather than escalating increasingly suppressive tactics against gangs, more work needs to be done to understand why young people join gangs, and what might cause them to walk away from them.



The riots of earlier this summer have once more increased the policy and media focus on gangs. The claims made by key figures of the coalition government in the immediate aftermath claiming the role played by gang "leaders" in the organisation of the riots, once again made gang members the new folk devils of the new millennium. My initial reaction to these claims was one of scepticism. What we knew about gangs did not seem to suggest they had the capacity to organise events of such scale. Indeed, various subsequent analyses have led to members of the government minimising the extent of their initial claims. However, it is yet unclear as to the impact these events will have in the ongoing development of British gang policy, although I hope it diverges from some of the immediate responses to the riots.

Devising gang policy is not easy. Over half a century after Frederick Thrasher wrote his [seminal work](#), gang researchers still know little about what works from a policy perspective. This, many gang researchers argue, has a lot to do with the unwillingness of policy makers to fully commit to evidence-based policy and the corresponding need to evaluate gang interventions. We have had plenty of programs and interventions aimed at addressing this issue, but very few have been evaluated and the existing evidence still generates disagreement. Of course, we don't lack grandiloquent declarations of success from practitioners and some policy makers, but these declarations are based in unconvincing and/or anecdotal evidence. Thus, for the most part, researchers concede that at best we have evidence of only some "promising" interventions.

Worryingly, the little we know about effective practice is based on American research. The US, however, has very different societal arrangements and traditions of responding to gangs. As a result, it is not surprising that our research still encounters significant differences between the US and the UK (and Europe). European gangs tend to be less violent and present weaker or less consolidated structural arrangements and cultural identifiers (leaders, rules of conduct, etc). [Emerging work](#) that we are completing for the Nuffield Foundation suggests that the processes that relate gang membership to negative developmental outcomes may also work in slightly different ways in the US. The social and criminological context in which both gangs, and US policy makers respond to gangs, operate is also very different. All this suggests the need for a cautious and more experimental approach to whatever we try in the UK and also the need to take with a pinch of salt "lessons" from US experience.



Credit: Surian Soosay (Creative Commons)

It is important, however, not to forget certain similarities with the gang problem in the US and elsewhere:

- Gangs increase the individuals risk of offending, antisocial behaviour and drug use.
- Gangs tend to become a problem in communities that suffer from multiple deprivations and where young people feel alienated from the police.

- The constellation of risk factors that increase the odds of gang membership are very consistent across all the countries for which we have data.

Crime prevention and youth policy that takes gangs seriously should not be written off, as some have argued in Britain. It is true that gangs are not the only, or perhaps even the most relevant, factor to explain offending, but they do play a causal role. As such, our understanding of the factors associated with gang emergence and membership provides a useful platform for policy.

During the first years of the previous Labour government, policies aimed at reducing the level of [spatial polarisation](#) of inequality had some success, but the political commitment to these policies soon dissipated. Yet these are the sort of policies we need if we want to tackle the ecosystems in which gangs flourish. There is also an increasing belief that the sort of early intervention programs and voluntary family interventions that are considered “blueprints” for violence and crime prevention (functional family therapy, nurse visitation programs, etc) can and ought to be adapted and tested as tools within any gang strategy. Additionally, given that we know that nearly a third of gang members disengage from gangs thanks to the pull of good job opportunities, programs fostering job opportunities are also crucial.

Unfortunately, these possible policy directions require a considerable degree of political commitment, resources and patience, none of which seem in abundance at present. Instead, political gesturing in the UK oscillates between showing support for [potentially promising interventions](#), increasing the availability of those without real evidence behind them or those that are at odds with basic principles of intervention (e.g. coercive family interventions), and considerably enhancing existing suppressive law enforcement approaches.

Yet, one thing most gang researchers would agree on is that the focus on law enforcement and gang suppression tactics that has dominated 40 years of US practice is neither effective nor efficient. It is worth reminding ourselves that the spread of police gang units and other suppression tactics in the US were partially a panic response to the urban riots in American cities during the 1960s. If the riots of the past summer help to institutionalise similar policing tactics and structures in the UK, in a context of increasing inequality, we may find in a few decades a gang landscape with greater similarities to the US.

Yet, police gang units and “known” gang member databases were becoming more common in the UK even before the riots. And then, of course, we have [“gangbos”](#) that limit the freedom of movement and association of even potential victims. The body of research raises numerous questions about the validity, fairness and real usefulness of many of these responses. Aggressive policies of ‘stop and search’ and other police “harassment” approaches may be effective in the short term and may also contribute to gang member fatigue, but equally they foster ecological cultures of distance and mistrust between the police among young people, and are generally too indiscriminate.

Indeed, although we know gang membership increases individual risk of offending, over a third of “gang members” do not offend in any given year. Equally, our knowledge of gangs as networks suggests that it is almost impossible to produce a solid base for member identification as gang membership is very fluid and unstable. Our research suggests that the modal length of membership is one year, with a peak level of membership by age 15, that declines very significantly by age 19. It would thus be more productive to refocus on the ultimate goal of preventing violence and offering exit opportunities to gang members rather than risk stigmatisation and alienation through misplaced labelling and heavy handed suppression.