



‘In It From the Beginning’: How Do Young Men and Boys Explain Their Entry Into Criminal Gangs?

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Abstract

This article reports on a qualitative study exploring the intersection of mental health, exclusion from school and entry into criminal gangs. It seeks to strengthen the young person’s perspective in the literature. It examines social and psychological mechanisms implicated in the process of joining and staying in gangs. Young people who have experienced exclusion from multiple services reported that, cash earned through illicit drug deals was a key driver to gang membership, enabling them to achieve independence and status. This appeared, at times, more central to their accounts than the search for belonging often cited as a motivator for gang membership.

Keywords

criminal gangs, deviant entrepreneurship, edge work, interpretative methodology, male identity, mental health, qualitative research

Introduction and Background

There has been intense academic and political discussion over the definition of ‘gangs’, their prevalence in the United Kingdom and how they differ from US counterparts (Densley et al., 2020). Despite the ongoing debate, there is a growing acknowledgement that, while the term remains contested, earlier views of UK gangs as merely “oppositional subcultures” or “resistant youth groups” need to be reconsidered (Aldridge et al., 2008).

Those seen to be at risk of gang membership tend to be young people who either remove themselves or have been removed from school and other community-based formal networks and are therefore harder for researchers and professional stakeholders to reach. For this reason, their voice is often hard to access. Young people involved in gangs

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are likely to have faced a range of adverse life events (Wake, 2020) and their resulting vulnerability makes this group particularly susceptible to coercive behaviours from gang leaders, who offer the promise of financial rewards and a sense of belonging.

Data on the numbers of young people in England in violent gangs are inconsistent due to differences in definition and monitoring procedures (Children's Commissioner, 2021). In 2019, an estimated 27,000 young people in England were identified as gang members (CCE, 2019). Gang involvement is associated with physical and sexual violence and abuse (both victimisation and perpetration), poor emotional well-being and adverse educational and social outcomes (The Children's Society, 2019). The Children's Commissioner (2021) has concluded that local authorities do not have a sufficient grip on what drives young people into gangs or a cogent strategy to address these risks (Dempsey, 2021). While quantitative research is useful in identifying factors associated with gang membership, on its own it does not describe the processes and mechanisms underlying the transition into gangs. This qualitative research sets out to add to the growing body of literature which seeks to strengthen the voice and perspective of marginalised young people, detailing mechanisms leading to involvement in criminal gangs.

In the next section, we offer an overview of contemporary gang literature – particularly qualitative literature that offers insight into putative mechanisms leading to gang involvement.

The structure and form of contemporary UK youth gangs

Definitions of what constitutes a gang vary widely and the term can be problematic in its tendency to assume youth groups are criminal, particularly for certain racialised communities (Taylor, 2023). Use of the term has been widely criticised for its role in racial profiling, particularly in perpetuating anti-Blackness and Islamophobia (Williams and Clarke, 2016) and for concerns that judgements of gang membership may lead to punitive policy outcomes (Hallsworth and Young, 2004). However, despite being contested the term 'gang' is widely used in the press, by criminal justice system and to different degrees by those to whom the label is attributed. The Centre for Social Justice (2009: 48) provides a putative framework, suggesting a youth gang is a relatively durable, predominantly street based group of young people who:

- See themselves and are seen by others as a discernible group;
- Engage in criminal activity and violence;
- Identify with or lay claim over territory;
- Have an identifying structural feature;
- Are in conflict with other, similar gangs.

Yet, the extent to which a gang has clear structure and hierarchy is contested with some commentators describing gangs as loose social networks with little recognisable social hierarchy (Aldridge et al., 2008; Windle and Briggs, 2015). In such groupings members act more as individual entrepreneurs or sub-contractors with the selling of drugs a central focus. Others have observed clear hierarchies with participants assigned roles determined by age, status and experience (Harding, 2020a).

Defining the term ‘gang’ is complicated by the constantly changing form of UK street gangs (Densley et al., 2020; Harding, 2020a; Pitts, 2020). Over the past two decades, the model of UK gangs has evolved alongside social, economic and policy changes. In the early 2000s, gangs were often defined by ‘postcode’ or territorial control, marked by violence and dominance over specific areas (Hallsworth and Young, 2004). Recently, there has been a growth in more decentralised, network-based models, particularly with the rise of ‘County Lines’. These groups use young, vulnerable runners to transport drugs from urban centres to smaller towns and rural areas, expanding markets and avoiding police scrutiny (Harding, 2020a). Despite the broad ambitions of these new gang configurations to remain less visible and reduce competition, gang-related violence continues to blight neighbourhoods, particularly in deprived urban areas (Pitts, 2021).

Risk factors for gang involvement

Factors pre-disposing young people towards gang involvement are complex and encompass: adverse child experiences (family breakdown, poverty, drug abuse, migration, convicted parents); peer group influences; school (exclusion and poor achievement); individual characteristics (behavioural disorders, low empathy and high daring) and community conditions (high levels of deprivation and criminality) (Farrington et al., 2016; Howell, 2011; Wake, 2020).

This study focuses in particular on the intersections of mental health, school exclusion and involvement in gangs.

School exclusion. Where young people have been excluded from mainstream school and sent to pupil referral units (PRUs,) the danger of gang recruitment is higher, indeed PRUs have been identified as ‘fertile ground’ for grooming young people into gangs (CCE, 2019). The majority of gang members either self-exclude (truant) or have been officially excluded from school and are likely to be spending large amounts of time unsupervised on the streets (Young et al., 2007). School exclusion leads to social exclusion which can leave young people with little social support, driving them to find alternative sources of belonging (Home Office, 2018; Young et al., 2007).

Mental health. Linking gang involvement with mental health conditions is complicated by the definitional challenges encountered with both terms. The concept of mental health covers a huge spectrum of clinical, behavioural and psychological problems – making it difficult to compare and aggregate relevant research. Gang-related research refers either singly or in various combinations to: personality traits; internalised beliefs and perceptions such as self-esteem or moral disengagement; behavioural problems (conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, psychopathic traits, emotional dysregulation) as well as clinical symptoms such as depression and anxiety (Osman and Wood, 2018). While in terms of empirical research, it is useful to agree a common definition, this research study is interested primarily in young people’s perceptions of how they feel emotionally and how they describe their own mental health.

Gang-associated children were found to be 77 per cent more likely to have an unidentified mental health need than other children assessed by children's services and twice as likely to self-harm (CCE, 2019). There is strong evidence from systematic reviews highlighting the impact of interpersonal skills (anti-social behaviour; difficulties in perspective taking; lack of responsibility and weak pro-social bonds) on both gang involvement and violence (Raby and Jones, 2016; Ullman et al., 2024). In addition, there are links between gang membership and psychological difficulties – particularly low self-esteem. While associations were found with a range of mental health symptoms (post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD], anxiety and depression), causal direction was unclear. Osman and Wood (2018) examine literature linking gang membership, mental illness and negative emotionality and conclude that gang members may be at increased risk of mental illness and negative emotion, such as anger and rumination. However, understanding of the mechanism linking this to gang membership remains limited. The relationship, between mental health and gang membership is believed to be bi-directional (Hughes et al., 2015). Poor mental health makes young people more vulnerable to joining gangs, while being a gang member can have an adverse effect on mental well-being.

Why do young people join gangs?

Mechanisms attributed to the joining of gangs vary depending on the conceptual lens of the commentator. The view held by many in the last century was that gang membership was a reaction to a delinquent or criminal character, tending to demonise marginalised young people. This view has, to some extent, been surpassed by more nuanced understandings of social, economic and individual level factors which conspire to create unique contexts for each individual (Gunter, 2017). These different ecological perspectives result in different individual assessments of the pros and cons of gang membership. Deuchar (2009) highlights how young people, failed by the education system, family dysfunction, deprivation or unemployment may turn to gangs in the search for power, excitement, financial incentive and status. The role of personal agency is emphasised by Densley et al. (2020) who maintains gang membership offers a rational choice to counter and manage the harsh realities of ever day life. Innovative behaviour, exhibited within gang structures, is rewarded through economic benefits as well as a sense of belonging and status.

Harding (2020b) equates the street gang and the rules governing its membership to a 'game' – where the actors within it follow rules to achieve status, protection and security. The game is played out in a social field (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) with a clear structure and boundaries within which 'street capital' can be built by demonstrations of loyalty, status and authenticity. A validation of authenticity is achieved through carrying weapons and acts of violence against the opposition. According to this paradigm knife-carrying becomes '*not just common sense but an adaptive logical response to social field threats*' (Harding, 2020b: 44).

Fear plays a central part in this model, Individuals low in sources of traditional security, feeling the absence of authority figures, experience an enhanced sense of danger and uncertainty, therefore reinforcing their sense of anomie and the need for protection from within the gang. Displays of macho authenticity, identified by Harding (2020a), link to

Levell's (2022a) discussions of critical masculinities. Here masculinity is not an inherent trait but a social construct influenced by cultural, social and economic contexts. In gang environments, young men often adopt hyper-masculine behaviours as a way to gain status, respect and protection in spaces where traditional routes to power (e.g. employment, education) may be inaccessible due to structural and individual barriers. Critical masculinities theory, informed by Levell's (2022a) work, highlights how gang involvement becomes a performance of toughness, dominance and emotional suppression.

Multi-disciplinary and life-course theories. A life-course approach (Thornberry et al., 2003) to studying gangs highlights how factor such as, local context, school, peer influences and individual traits may either protect against or facilitate gang involvement. Those with positive social and emotional experiences, gained through family relationships or school success, are more likely to make safer decisions (Raby and Jones, 2016). In contrast, individuals lacking close family bonds, secure homes and nurturing environments may view gang involvement as a positive option, drawn-in by the potential for short-term economic and social gains.

Wood and Alleyne (2010) argue that no single theory, based around one conceptual framework (sociological, psychological or criminological) fully explains gang involvement. They propose a multidisciplinary framework that combines social factors, individual traits and environmental influences to explain gang membership and predict behaviours. This framework highlights how gang involvement offers various 'rewards', such as social support, belonging, status, male identity validation, protection, power and excitement.

Research Overview and Aims

This article reports on an interpretative study aiming to build knowledge through exploring the language and symbolism used by young people to explain their social contexts and to explore the way they make sense of their own reality and behaviours. Through an iterative approach to the data, using a combination of visual maps and traditional grounded theory analysis, we have blended a phenomenological orientation with a need to account for social and developmental processes. Our aim is to provide insight into the experience and mechanisms underlying gang-related behaviours. Unpicking the incentives of gang membership, how this varies in different contexts, is an important step towards informing preventive action and formulating proportionate responses. Seeking meaningful engagement is central, identifying solutions which are both compatible with the needs of marginalised young people and to facilitate productive engagement.

Method

Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 29 young people aged between 14 and 24 years (mean age 16 years) (see Table 1) and 20 professionals (see Table 2) working with the target group. The form and framework for these interviews was informed by public engagement involving consultation with a range of stakeholders including

Table 1. Demographic breakdown of young people recruited.

Interviews with young men and boys (n=29)	
Age	Mean age 16
Ethnicity	White British – 18
	Black African – 1
	Dual Heritage – 5
	Caribbean – 3
	Armenian – 1
	Pakistani – 1
	26 (mainly permanently excluded)
Criminal involvement (recorded if YP reported they had been arrested or held by the police)	24
Links to criminal gangs (recorded if gang involvement was spoken about by participants)	13
Mental health diagnosis (recorded if YP had formal diagnosis or referral to CAMHs)	15
Geographic locations	South East, North West, West Country
Interview settings	Alternative Provision, Youth Offending Teams, late night youth club, charities supporting gang involved young people

Table 2. Interviews with professionals.

Interviews with professionals by specialism (n=20)	
Mentors working with young people involved with, or at risk of, exploitation or members of criminal gangs	6
Service managers working in local authorities or charities to support young people in the target group	6
Therapists	2
Alternative provision worker	1
Psychologist in youth violence reduction team	2
Family support worker in secure unit	1
Specialist youth worker	2

young people, practitioners, academics and civil servants (Barker et al., 2024). Interviews were conducted between March–July 2023 and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. Creative, participative methods, were used to build trust in the target group who were typically reticent, mistrustful and fearful of divulging information in case of reprisals. Methods used were influenced by piloting techniques in public engagement sessions with young people and allowed for multiple means of expression. Prior to the interviews, to break the ice, participants were provided with small canvases and crayons and invited to sketch a portrait of the interviewer as she in turn drew them. While a small number declined the activity the majority embraced the challenge and appeared to find the shared endeavour levelling. Importantly interviewing techniques recognised the preferences of participants with adjustments and modifications made to suit individual needs.

Recruiting and consent

Sampling was purposive, with gatekeepers asked to help identify young people aged 16–25 who were known either to be gang-involved or at risk of becoming so (see Table 1). Gatekeepers were professionals linked to mentoring charities, youth clubs, alternative provisions or local authorities and had trusting relationships with participants which helped facilitate preliminary contact. Once contact was made the process of consent was carried out in stages – RB embarked on preliminary discussions with participants explaining the research aims, clarifying the topics that would be covered and emphasising safeguarding concerns. Follow-up meetings were then organised with those who showed interest at which point formal written consent was sought. Participants were rewarded for their time with shopping vouchers at a rate commensurate with NIHR guidelines (NIHR, 2022).

Ethics

Ethics permission for interviews with young people and associated professionals was received from The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine Ethics Committee (reference 26873). Written and oral consent was sought from all participants. The option to seek parental consent was carefully considered but, given research evidence showing that the obligation to seek such consent may skew research samples (Barker et al., 2025) making it harder for those from more disadvantaged backgrounds to participate, we sought permission instead from trusted gatekeepers acting in loco parentis. This is supported by English law which stipulates, in Great Britain (1984) and House of Lords et al. (1985), which for research on non-medicinal intervention or observational studies parental consent is not required when young people are judged to have the competence to assess and decide their own participation. Names reported in this article have been changed and data anonymised to protect the identity of individuals.

Analysis

Data analysis used principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), where theory and ideas are generated inductively, from the ‘bottom up’. Our intention was to build a theory of social process informed by an understanding of how participants construct meaning and explain behaviours. Analysis begins with the first data generated and continues iteratively throughout the study. A constant comparative method involved moving backwards and forwards between different levels of abstraction, both within and between cases. Data were coded at open, axial and selective levels to develop categories. This process helped develop an understanding of actors (the young-people being interviewed) and actants (people or processes that impact on the actor) and acknowledged the complexity of social processes.

A specific instantiation of grounded theory, situational analysis, was used as an analytical framework to help situate the central research question (the social process of entry into gangs) within the ‘big picture’. Situational analysis helps unravel some of the structural and systematic complexities and can be used to produce a ‘thick analysis of discourses, texts, symbolisms of the nonhuman’ (Pérez and Cannella, 2013: 506). The intention being to look, from different angles, at the relationships, knowledge, experience and encounters

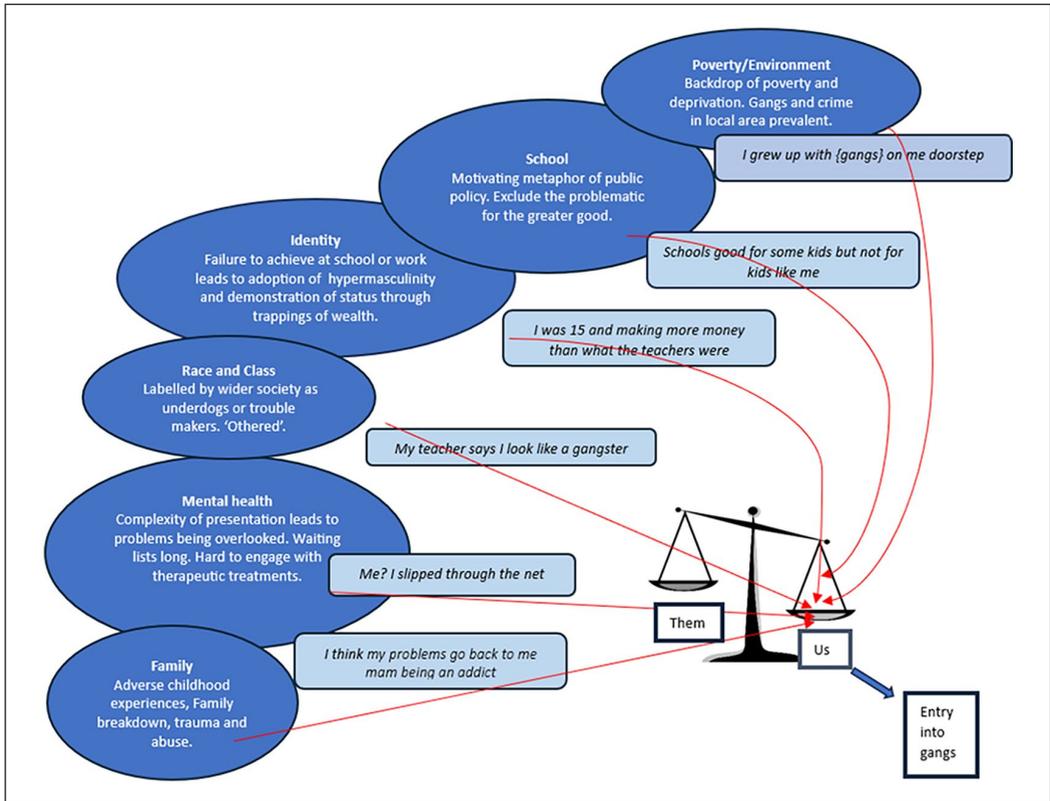


Figure 1. Situational map 1. Factors determining entry into gangs; excluded at every turn.

of the players involved, with a focus on theorising social and psychological processes. Situational analysis was used as a tool to add an additional layer of probing and insight, helping to illuminate the discourses and nonhuman ‘actors’ – that is, objects, ideas, processes or policies which can affect change. Following Clarke (2022) three types of maps were generated: (1) situational maps laying out human, nonhuman, discursive, historical, symbolic, cultural and political elements; (2) social world maps incorporating social organisational, institutional and discursive dimensions; (3) positional maps representing the full range of discursive positions including controversy found in the situation of concern.

Maps grew and evolved through the course of analysis and were used as ‘memos’ – enabling greater interrogation of each analytic fragment. This process helped construct the major categories of edge-work (Garot, 2015), ‘doing masculinity’ (Baird, 2012) and ‘deviant entrepreneurship’ (Hesketh and Robinson, 2019) which began to overlap with and encompass earlier categories. The intention was both to tell the story from the perspective of the participant, while interrogating the story to elicit broader meaning in relation to the research question.

The situational map presented in Figure 1 (detailed in the preceding section) is an example of one of the series of maps which emerged during analysis – these maps were a work in progress constantly evolving as the data was revisited and reconceived.

Although grounded theory is premised on the notion that theory is generated from the bottom up, it is nonetheless valuable to observe how data generated here, supports or refutes established theories, thus bridging past and current research by deepening methodological and theoretical connections across contexts (McCall and Edwards, 2021). With this in mind, in the spirit of a constructivist approach which encourages flexibility in procedure, a logic model (Annex 1) was developed in phase one of the research, derived from both literature and interviews with professionals, which outlined putative mechanisms of change leading to gang membership and criminal exploitation. The logic model in this case was used as a guide to provide a general sense of reference, akin to a *sensitising concept* (McCall and Edwards, 2021) and was revisited once data from phase 2 were collected and analysed. Using information from the positional map, revisions were made to the logic model, largely relating to the way in which young people reported active mechanisms of individual gang entry (highlighted in blue in the column headed ‘participation’).

The analysis provided in this article focuses primarily on the direct accounts of young people. Data from professionals was used to triangulate and enrich theory development. In instances where there appeared to be areas of tension or contradiction between young people and professionals this is noted in the analysis.

Findings

The focus of the following section is on how, within the accounts of young people, they rationalise the pathway into gang involvement. Figure 1 summarises the main human, nonhuman, discursive, historical, symbolic, cultural and political elements which young people referred to when reflecting on entry into gangs. The key narratives of: family adversity; mental health; race and class; search for identity; school experience and environmental context are all highlighted as impacting on the overlaying theme of exclusion.

Individual accounts suggested involvement often started with selling small quantities of drugs (typically cannabis in the first instance) among small informal networks of friends or acquaintances, before moving into more serious networks. This chimes with much contemporary literature suggesting that gang structures vary, adapting to the context and environment and do not always have rigid hierarchies (Densley et al., 2020). In some cases, particularly where the structures are more fluid, young people appear to assert a degree of individual control over the business model they enter into. Others acknowledged their activity as drug runners within a broader and more aggressively managed network. Pressure and coercion (from peers and wider networks) were mentioned by some, though others struggled to see their involvement either as coercive or as gang related.

My mum is schizophrenic and my dad's a user – I used to pick needles off the floor at the age of 6. . .By the age of 8 I was involved in gangs and drugs. One of the lads around the estate – he just came up to me one day and gave me money to buy a football and he just chatted with me. I didn't realise he was the one who used to supply my dad with drugs. The worker gives us drugs to sell. We sell them and then we pay them for the drugs they gave us to sell. . .And then as you

get older it just goes up in stages. You go from class B to class A. And that's when it involves more money. I was selling swag 'crack and brown' and weed. (Morgan, South West)

Although there were instances where young people suggested that gangs were a vehicle to membership of a protective group and the point of entry had been fuelled by the desire to 'be one of the boys', this was certainly not always the case.

Where the primary objective of gangs was drug dealing, as seen in the County Lines model, once individuals were recruited, business goals often outweighed relational obligations. While commentators such as Gunter (2017) and Pitts (2013) suggest that gang involvement is often motivated by a desire to address social exclusion and find a sense of belonging, this aspiration rarely appeared fulfilled. Although the initial draw may have been the search for a sense of community, once inside the gang, members experienced little sense of being part of a broader social group or inclusive team. Instead, the dominant ambition became financial gain and while hopes of camaraderie were often disappointed, there was notable pride and satisfaction in the money earned.

I ran away to stay with a friend. I just wanted to go out with the lads. . . . Yeh we were selling a bit of stuff . . . (Noah, North West)

I was good at making money – that puts a smile on my face (Narek, South East)

I make my own money – no one can take that away from me (Reuben, South West)

Many narratives referred to broken families, running away from home, struggles to get money to buy the clothes they wanted, complex mental health issues and school behavioural problems leading to exclusion. A combination of factors left young people vulnerable to the lure of following apparently easily available money from dealing drugs (either to benefit themselves, their mother or friends).

Yeah. I got meself involved, me. I started to go downhill when I went to that behaviour school. All the kids together. There was a few gang members in there. I just used to chill with them and sell a bit of weed and that. And then before I know it I was sucked up into it. I'm on bail now. (Ethan, South East)

The inevitability of behaviours and their outcomes was strongly felt – 'it's just the way it is' was a common refrain.

I grew up with them {gangs} on me doorstep. I just grew up in the wrong place. You know what I mean? Everyone around there is affiliated with a gang. There's all drug dealers on every street. (Ethan, North West)

While criminal behaviours were explained and justified most participants were aware that such behaviours would not be endorsed by 'mainstream' or 'legitimate' sections of society and therefore needed to remain hidden. This awareness of the need to hide activities in the shadows increases the sense of separation from those who know how to successfully navigate the hurdles at school and progression into paid employment. Ideas expressed align with Matza's (2018) idea of neutralisation, where individuals use techniques to rationalise

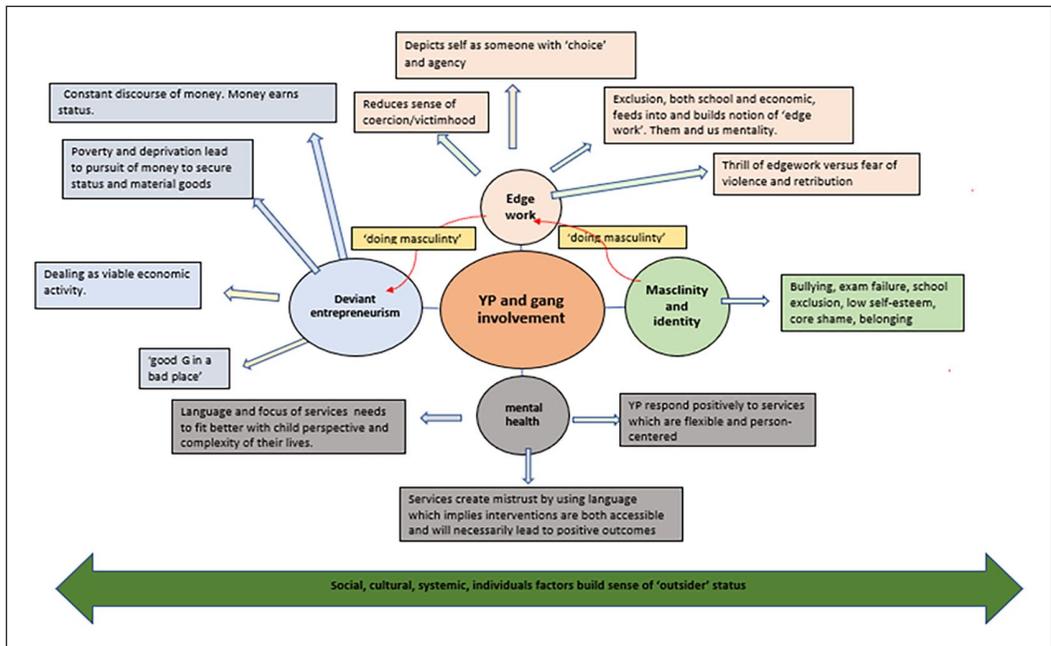


Figure 2. Positional map. Discursive positions and controversies.

anti-social acts while acknowledging societal norms. There is a precarious path between those who successfully navigate the education system and routes to employment on one hand and those, on the other, whose journey through these system is obstructed – mirroring Matza’s suggestion that individuals involved in anti-social acts may not be fully entrenched in criminal behaviour but are instead in a liminal state, drifting between mainstream and criminal paths.

The low self-esteem, which results from failure to negotiate educational and other challenges feeds into increased levels of disengagement and marginalisation. Yet, there was a strong oppositional counternarrative which suggests that some of those who have been pushed aside or overlooked by society, find their own ways to rise up and fight against the system.

Building on the range of factors shown in Figure 1, we turn now to the positional map in Figure 2, which illustrates some of the most pertinent discursive positions and controversies.

Concepts of ‘edge work’ (Garot, 2015) and ‘deviant entrepreneurship’(Hesketh and Robinson, 2019) are used here to offer explanations of how individuals exert agency. Masculinity and the search for a meaningful identity are also highlighted, as is the strong underlying influence of mental health and associated challenges.

Edgework

The concept of ‘edgework’ (Garot, 2015; Lyng, 2008) refers to voluntary risk-taking activities where individuals navigate the boundary between life and death, order and

chaos, sanity and insanity. For those who felt excluded from society at every turn, risk-taking could offer a welcome sense of excitement; the thrill and drama offered by a police chase is very real.

Yeah man, if you grow up watching Tom Cruise movies and that – you know what I mean? You want that kind of life. It's always at the back of your head. (Hassan, South East)

Many, excluded from school and marginalised from civil society spoke of the thrill of life on the edge. Here 'Bobby' talks with bravado about the excitement of the anonymity of the balaclava and the drama of the police chase.

Well, if we see something on Snapchat and we want to go and bang one of the 'ops' {opposition}. Give them some beef. . . you'll just keep a bali in your pocket cos you never know if you're going to end up doing something stupid. It's exciting.(Bobby, North West)

Deviant entrepreneurship and agency

The importance attached to making money was evident in the majority of accounts and chimes with Hesketh and Robinson's (2019) notion of 'deviant entrepreneurship' where young people enter a variety of business arrangements, often as dealers in their own right. Limited routes were described to acquiring status among peers with the most accepted, easiest means being via the demonstration of access to wealth and high status material goods.

While some young people had been purposefully groomed, lured into gangs through the short-term promise of belonging and designer goods, in line with other studies (Caluori et al., 2022; Turner et al., 2019), the key motivation here appeared to be money. The tension between being in control of your behaviours, in this case the active decision to sell drugs to bring in money, versus an awareness of being coerced into dealing, was evident in some accounts and relates to the importance of individual agency. Reluctance to admit to being groomed may relate to the desire to maintain a strong macho identity.

'It's a weak man that gets groomed' (Tyrone, South East)

Cash acquired was managed by individuals and was a means either to exhibit personal status; to pass money on to family; to assist independence and escape unhappy home lives or occasionally to fund individual drug habits. Amounts earned per day varied between small amounts which could be spent on food and clothes to a few hundred pounds for bigger operators.

I think it was just my brother that got me innit {involved in dealing}. But obviously there's always other reasons. Obviously my mum hasn't got loads of p's so she can't get me everything that I want. She's not going to pay for a nice trek suit like everyone is wearing (Reuben, South West)

A clear acceptance and understanding was reflected, in many accounts collected, of how poverty and deprivation in the local environment constrained life choices and meant that

it was harder to aspire to legitimate paid employment. A couple of, participants referred to gang membership either as an economic necessity and therefore morally justified or as something fuelled by an aspiration to get in with the cool set and therefore morally reprehensible. Joining gangs to help your mother pay the rent was seen as legitimate. Tyrone for example, whose father had been in prison most of his life, supported his mother financially and described himself as a ‘good “G” in a bad place’. He was disparaging of those not motivated by the need for money whose apparent impetus was to look cool.

In this day and age, a lot of youths –they see other men – and they decide they want to be like my man – so they start peeing on the walls – they start saying that they’re on to this area – cos my man’s come to this area and they’re from his area – they start maybe selling drugs – this and that – they’re just trying to be in with what’s cool. Are you getting me? Obviously there are certain men that are circumstantial – I’m not going to lie – certain guys are circumstantial. The way those guys start their lives, from the very beginning – it’s a bit messy innit–they never have the greatest start in life. Maybe they was born into it – maybe their dad was a gang member or even their mum sometimes as well. You get me? Sometimes their mums are just maybe a crackhead or something. . . You get me? There are certain people who just didn’t get a chance to see another life. They was in it from the beginning. (Tyrone, South East)

Tyrone’s account, like Ethan and Morgan’s below, powerfully evokes the inevitability, that growing up in certain environments predicates certain lifestyle choices.

I spent me whole life around drug dealers. Just like others teach their kids to drink milk to make their bones strong–I was just following what I was taught. It’s a cycle set hard into your brain (Morgan, North West)

Ahmed explained how levels of ‘naughtiness’ are dictated by your environment. If you are someone who challenges authority and hangs out in a skate park, he said, you may find yourself graffititiing the park, whereas:

If a kid is naughty and they are hanging around people selling class A drugs then that is the kind of naughty they’ll get up to . . . it’s kinda fate.(Ahmed, South East)

The sense of agency, gleaned both from earning money through loose forms of ‘contractual’ behaviours appears to blur the boundary between being either a victim of coercive practice or a perpetrator of criminal behaviour. There is a fluid and shifting relationship between acting as an entrepreneur, exercising personal agency, coercion and perpetrating crime. Morgan described how at 11 years he was taking drugs to pass through the school fence and at 15 he was knee deep in *county lines*, a model of gang characterised by its exploitative use of young people to transport drugs from urban centres into smaller towns and rural areas, often crossing police boundaries (Harding, 2020a).

I was earning the most money for my age in the area. Everyone would be in Air Max’s but I would be in Jordans. (Morgan. South West)

By the time he was 18 Mogan was running a ‘bando’, working for two gangs, hiring his own drug runners and dealing with drugs worth thousands of pounds. While some may embark on small scale dealing with a view to making a bit of money on the side, a number spoke of the way that over time they became sucked into a way of life that was more sinister and harder to navigate than they initially suspected. What starts as coercion or happenstance, where young people are drawn into criminal group activities, powerless to the pressures of their environment, (exerted through the influence of peers already involved in criminal activities, or through more coercive practices) can then progress to a set up where they take on more senior roles, luring others into gang activities and its associated culture.

Construction of male identity

Linked to the vulnerability of many of the young male participants in this study was the struggle to locate a secure male identity. A few participants offered insights into the precariousness of the male role and identity and the difficulties of building a secure sense of self – particularly for those who have faced challenges in statutory educational tests and have little hope of easy progression into paid employment. In some narratives the sense of disenfranchisement and emasculation was palpable.

For people who are strong. . . in the past you might have used this {strength} to defend your family this doesn’t happen anymore. All these typically male things – there is no place for them – the best thing you can do is get your thoughts in order – At the end of the day men are so lost in the struggle with all these feelings. There’s no real place for this physical strength . . . it’s harder for men to navigate the world and all their feelings. (Adem, South East)

Most boys take on ‘mainstream’ male behaviours with only occasional recourse to violence and machismo, rather the emphasis is on attaining status through educational and occupational success. But for those who do not find their way down that pathway and lack the cultural capital of strong supportive relationships, there is perhaps less to lose. In such cases, glimpses of an alternative male role, outside the conventional educational and occupational structures, where a higher value is attached to traditionally macho characteristics – can prove alluring. In the absence of secure bonding to family or authority figures young men may prioritise physical dominance, aggression and emotional detachment (Levell, 2022b).

Some young people referred to perceived gender inequalities, maintaining that the treatment of boys and men, beginning early on at school was skewed in favour of girls – who were more likely to display emotion to get out of fixes. Boys meanwhile took on the cultural expectations to be brave and show no fear. Those who were deeply enmeshed in violent lifestyles felt the pressure to present a strong masculine façade, accepting violence as the norm and dismissing any fear associated with violence.

If you go out and see something you don’t like you’re going to bang them aren’t you? (Bobby, North West)

Male identity was also demonstrated through the expression of absolute allegiance to mothers – valued as the givers of life. Fights were often said to result from lashing out over insults about mothers.

Mental health

Inextricably linked to the other factors discussed here was the underlying fragility of many participants mental health. Of the 29 young people interviewed 15 of them had a formal diagnosis of ADHD, ASD or behavioural issues related to mental health conditions. Others referred to suspected conditions which had gone unreported or had fallen below the threshold needed to illicit a service response. Those who lacked the support of adults to navigate the necessary hurdles in the health and care system were at a particular disadvantage.

I know I've got {mental health} problems.. I was proper naughty at school and that got me excluded . . .but I'm not diagnosed.. Me mam was an alcoholic and she never took me to the doctor–I've only just got put on the list. . . (Franklin, North West)

Although participants found it hard to relate the language of 'depression' and 'anxiety' to their lives, numerous glimpses of vulnerability crept through the macho armoury.

I used to be busting with jokes all day – now I'm switched off (Narek, South East)

Reuben admitted to a frequent fear of 'being jumped' on and how sometimes at night 'there's deep stuff going on innit'. Omar explained how his anxieties resulted in him carrying a knife:

No I don't do fear. I'm not scared. . .it just makes you kind of wary. On edge kinda. It gets to you. Like people walking behind you. Back then – I used to leave my house and I had to make sure I'm on point. That's why I carried a knife. (Omar, South East)

Tai reflected how the hardest part of growing up was the fear he felt manoeuvring his neighbourhood because of being in the wrong postcode and his face not fitting in. Leyton, following significant involvement in county lines operations, leading to him being stabbed by supposed debtors, now refused to leave his house without an escort and Franklin described the panic attacks that enveloped him. Morgan spoke movingly of how years of violence, stabbings and coercion finally led to a dramatic break down culminating in him locking the GP in the surgery as he begged for psychological support.

Discussion

This study has uncovered rich accounts of young people's understanding and experience of life on 'the margins' and shines a light on the disparities between organisational/systemic understandings and the way gangs are seen and experienced by young 'gang-involved' people. It has focused on issues seen to contribute to the risk of gang involvement

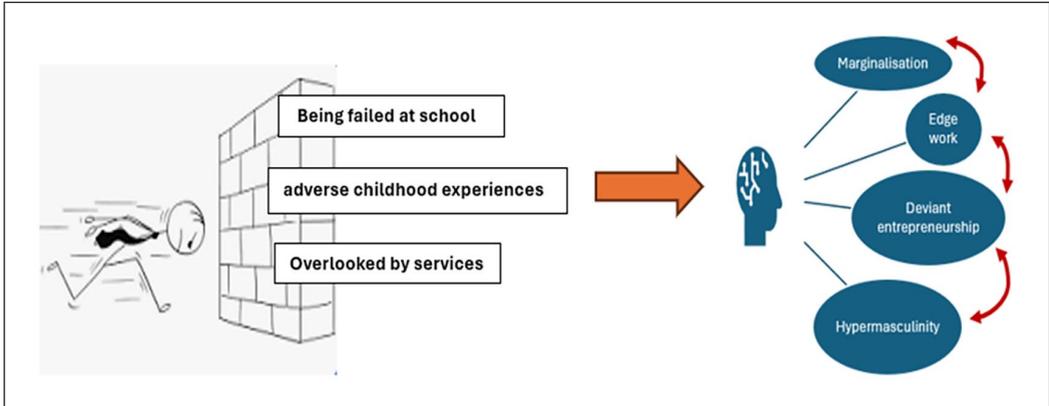


Figure 3. Putative mechanisms leading to gang involvement.

and the considerable range of factors spoken about appears to support a multi-dimensional models of gang-involvement (Wood and Alleyne, 2010). We suggest that no one-dimensional theory can it itself explain the full complexity of factors at play.

One of the benefits of enabling criminalised, marginalised young people to present their own accounts is that it allows for their world to be looked at and interpreted through a different lens, adding a complementary perspective to professional or parental narratives. While the press are increasingly prone to use the term ‘gang involved’ – the young people in this study, as elsewhere (Gunter, 2017) were generally reluctant to admit to current gang involvement. There are a number of possible reasons for this, the first being that most of those interviewed had been identified by criminal justice and social services and were being actively supported to disengage. The second, that the way the young people defined gangs, did not fit with the definition used by the police (Gunter, 2017). The term gang is contentious and both professionals and young people, particularly those from Black and ethnically minoritised communities, agreed that the term is sometimes used to criminalise and ‘other’ marginalised young people and legitimise over-policing of Black communities – for this reason many refuse to use the term (Williams, 2015). And third the form and constitution of a gang is in constant flux with individuals involvement often being fleeting and intermittent (Brewster et al., 2021).

The strength of this study is the insight it presents into the complexity and the brutality of young people’s lives. Many young people felt ‘failed at every turn’, describing how a lifetime of metaphorically banging their heads against a brick wall, led to pathways directed at violent and criminal behaviours linked to gang culture (Figure 3). Multiple hardships including being failed at school, suffering trauma during childhood, poverty, living in unhealthy environments, often compounded by unidentified complex mental health conditions, act to exacerbate vulnerability and insecurity – contriving a set of circumstances which push young people into acquiring status and group membership through a variety of anti-social behaviours.

Gang culture and behaviour is complex and nuanced. Status and honour are linked to money, material goods and transgression of societal boundaries. For those who are

marginalised, pushed to the extremes of society, street capital becomes a precious commodity, built up through demonstrations of material status, masculine posturing, reputation, natural justice and protecting local territories (McLean and Holligan, 2018). Acquiring street capital offers the most marginalised youth the promise of a route to manhood and the respect of peers (Whitehead, 2002).

Difficulties in negotiating the natural progression from school to workplace, exacerbated by de-industrialisation and lack of qualifications, means that boys whose experience is one of being 'othered' and marginalised, are left to express their masculinity in other domains, including through gang culture (McLean and Holligan, 2018). Weakness and fear are commonly associated with the female gender and therefore seldom owned. Power attained through the demonstration of strength and status are earned through material trappings and control of territory. Gang membership, while tacitly acknowledged is seldom actively recognised. The county lines gang model with its suggestion that membership is gained through coercive practice is often renounced, perhaps on the understanding that grooming is suggestive of weakness. Having agency on the streets is linked to personal control of money and deals.

Social reproduction of deprivation and marginalisation was played out through a systemic failure to make the metaphorical brick wall they all encountered, easier to climb over and chimes both with Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) and Willis' (1978) concept of structuration. Willis observed that in the 1970s industrial midlands, class stratification was reproduced generation to generation not by social structures but by working class 'lads' exerting agency in a context of structural constraint. Specifically, lads at school reacted against the authoritarian middle class culture of the school via minor acts of rebellion. However these in effect obstructed academic progress and consigned them to follow their father's into factory work.

This study highlights that within a highly complex landscape, where boys and young men have experienced a range of adversities, their behaviours can't be understood solely in terms of deficits. While a range of environmental, social and individual factors act as risk factors to gang involvement, decisions behind such involvement are based on a range of skills and insights which may be helpful to acknowledge when building preventive gang programmes. It is beyond the scope of the study to provide hard evidence to demonstrate why, many young people, living in similar contexts, desist from any sort of criminal activity. While we conjecture how and why, in the absence of other fulfilling activities and pass-times, the choice of gang-involvement can be alluring, it is important to keep sight of the protective relationships and 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) which appear to act, in many cases, as important protective mechanisms.

Limitations

This project initially set out to recruit both males and females. Recruiting of young women and girls however proved particularly difficult. While the reason for this is partly based on the lower numbers of girls involved in gangs, the different gender determined roles also needs careful consideration in terms of research. Although used as drug runners and sometimes favoured for their relative 'invisibility' females have different gang-related

experiences to their male counterparts, including significant sexual violence and coercive control (Havard et al., 2023). These different experiences mean girls tend to be supported by services in different ways and accessing them may require different forms of safeguarding. While two girls were interviewed as part of the project their data has not been included in this article and more comprehensive work focussing just on women is required to introduce the female perspectives.

My positionality as a white, female, middle-class academic, researcher and the juxtaposition of this with the experience I have as the mother of a gang involved son is important to note. The inevitable impact this will have had on participant responses is discussed in more detail in a linked publication (Barker et al., 2024). Finally it is important to acknowledge the context in which the narratives were collected. First the perspectives provided are not a totally transparent window on reality but will be influenced by factors such as setting, rapport with interviewer and the particular spin and emphasis the narrator chooses to convey. Second the method of recruitment may mean that participants are not representative of typical gang members. Third, in the light of fear of retribution, respondents may have presented only a partial picture of their real experiences and circumstances.

Conclusion

The narratives collected here show how young people, subjected to multiple adverse childhood experiences in the form of: family poverty, family breakdown, substance abuse, being failed and excluded at school, poor mental health, unresponsive health and social-care systems – may react to multiple ‘knocks’ by creating their own sub-cultures in which they can assert agency (Farrington et al., 2016; Wood and Alleyne, 2010). While coercive pressure was evident in many accounts, as was the desire to build social attachments, our findings suggest that the yearning for money and associated status was a particularly important factor determining entry into gangs. Part and parcel of these lifestyle choices are violent and extreme-masculine cultures, embraced as part of the pathway led by the aspiration of money, status and fulfilment.

Social policy, framing the way young people are educated, supported and policed, may benefit from more focus on the harms implicit in some of our institutions. Strategies developed to provide solutions to the social challenges gangs present must acknowledge that for young people excluded and failed at every turn, the choice to join a gang presents a viable and considered short-term solution to displacement and poverty. The young men in this study had goals and drives which were currently being thwarted by an education system which lacks a holistic vision of what young people, particularly those battling marginalisation, need and want. Schools could better attend to the needs of the most vulnerable boys by placing less emphasis on purely academic outputs and more on engaging children through activities offering greater excitement and building skills more relevant to everyday life, particularly supporting legal routes to earning money. In addition, long term solutions require more thoughtful and nuanced approaches to disciplining students, rather than relying on permanent exclusion.

The young people in this study had a deep mistrust of the social systems which have failed them at every turn. To counter this services need, as a starting point, to focus on

what young people want and need, rather than on what the service can offer. Understanding and accepting cultural norms of masculinity, the thirst for excitement, the impact of poor mental health and the imperative to earn money should be the starting point from which effective support can be offered. Young people are likely to respond best to practical support rather than moral education of wrongs and harms done. Without this there is a danger that no common points of reference will be found from which a true dialogue can be built.

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Data availability

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, for ethical reasons, supporting data are not publicly available. The corresponding author will consider reasonable requests for data that can be anonymised.

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Annex I

Logic model: Young people and criminal exploitation

Problem statement. Vulnerable young people (YP) and those suffering from poor mental health (MH) are at higher risk of experiencing problems at school, often leading to exclusion. Once excluded, they are more likely to be drawn into gang culture. Emerging evidence shows that those who were the most vulnerable and marginalised prior to the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to be suffering the worst outcomes; inequities have increased, potentially heightening dangers of susceptible YP turning to criminal activities including drug dealing and violence.

Aim. To identify mechanisms relating to the impact of school experience and MH which may act as facilitators to protect against criminal involvement and exploitation

<p>Contributory inputs</p> <p>School–low school commitment, bullying, exclusion.</p> <p>Peer group: marginalisation from ‘mainstream groups’, involvement with peers who have prior contact with gangs and criminal justice system. Normalisation of violence.</p> <p>Individual characteristics: mental health and well-being issues (e.g. ADHD, ODD, psychological distress, self-esteem, moral disengagement, learning difficulties, personality traits).</p> <p>Early perceived failure (sports, academic, school, difficulties with friendships).</p> <p>Environment: Family factors—poverty, domestic violence, abuse, absent parent (partic lack of male role model, siblings involved in gangs). Neighbourhood poverty.</p> <p>Social and statutory support: lack of access to support/prevention services e.g. CAMHS.</p>	<p>Outputs</p> <p>Activities</p> <p>Young vulnerable people – particularly those excluded from school congregate in areas where they are more likely to encounter others (YP and adults) involved in criminal exploitation. Grooming by ‘gang’ leaders. Criminal exploitation. YP labelled as failing – pushed out and marginalised. Gangs identify ‘territory’ which engenders feelings of shared identity – protecting ownership of area (physical and metaphorical). Conflict promoted as mechanism for survival – YP adopt values dissonant to those of prevailing social order. Cultural transmission of ‘criminality’. MH issues unrecognised or treated punitively. Family and community unable to support YP due to combination of environmental, economic, social constraints.</p>	<p>Participation</p> <p>YP who find themselves ‘on the margins’ may look for affirmation through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Choosing to participate in ‘illicit’ or criminal activities can be exciting/life affirming - adding colour to otherwise bleak lives. -involvement in drug dealing provides important revenue to share with family or confer status. -participation in group venture reduces sense of isolation. -those who are most vulnerable have a reduced sense of control over their environment. 	<p>Outcomes – impact</p> <p>Short</p> <p>Membership of gangs may provide both a sense of belonging, excitement and protection. Coercive control → growing fear and stress. Acquisition of power and status</p> <p>YP recognise similar characteristics in others and feel less isolated. Access to financial and material resources</p> <p>Internalise feelings of failure</p> <p>Increased anger and distrust that social support structures are dependable.</p> <p>Increased dysfunctional and antisocial relationships. Growing anger, distrust, isolation and marginalisation</p> <p>Normalisation of violent behaviour</p> <p>Deteriorating mental health, poor self-esteem, moral disengagement.</p>	<p>Medium</p> <p>Poor academic qualifications and vocational skills</p> <p>Lack of access to work opportunities</p> <p>Growing tensions between normalising ‘gang’ or ‘street’ culture and that of mainstream society (moral conflict).</p> <p>Unequal opportunities breed tensions and adoption of ‘anti-social’ norms and values.</p> <p>Status-frustration and loss of self-esteem or anger against society</p>	<p>Long</p> <p>Rise in serious mental health conditions</p> <p>Rise in violent and criminal behaviours</p> <p>Increasing poverty</p> <p>Poor physical health</p> <p>Sexual abuse</p> <p>Increased spending from state on health, social care and criminal justice</p> <p>Increased family breakdown</p>
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Assumptions and external factors

Criminal exploitation of YP and factors impacting on membership of criminal gangs are influenced by complex interplay of social, psychological, economic and cultural factors. Whilst the majority of YP, who have experienced multiple ACEs, do not get involved in the criminal justice system, evidence suggests that such experiences (e.g. family break down, poor mental health, childhood trauma, involvement with peers with experience of criminal justice system, poverty, learning difficulties, exposure to drugs) do increase the chances that YP will be subject to criminal exploitation.