

Toolbox on

STREET GANG PREVENTION



EUCPN
EUROPEAN CRIME PREVENTION NETWORK



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The toolbox outlines the phenomenon of street gangs and details three types of preventive approaches to youth gang problems: social work and welfare approaches to prevent recruitment into gangs, focussed deterrence policing strategies to reduce levels of gang violence, and exit programmes to stimulate rehabilitation of gang members and reduce recidivism.

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PREFACE

This Toolbox on preventing street gangs is published on the occasion of the French Presidency of the EUCPN. The focus of this publication is twofold. First, it outlines the phenomenon of street gangs. Street gangs, or youth gangs, can take different forms in different countries or even cities. Starting from a European consensus definition, this Toolbox sheds light on the most important properties of street gangs. Special attention is devoted to the way in which gangs make use of the internet and social media. Secondly, the paper details three types of preventive approaches to youth gang problems: social work and welfare approaches to prevent recruitment into gangs, focussed deterrence policing strategies to reduce levels of gang violence, and exit programmes to stimulate rehabilitation of gang members and reduce recidivism. For each type of intervention, it looks at what we might or might not expect from it, what the difficulties are in successfully implementing it, and its overall effectiveness.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Definition

A street gang, according to the Eurogang research programme, is a durable, street-oriented youth group whose identity includes involvement in illegal activity. This definition consists of five definers—essential qualities of a street gang. (1) The gang consists of a group at least three, usually more people. (2) Gang members are typically teenagers or young adults. (3) Gangs exist for some length of time, i.e., they are not founded for collaborating in one specific crime. (4) Street gangs occupy the public space: gangs are conspicuous, which is why they cause public unease or fear. (5) Gangs are involved in illegal activities as part of the gang's identity. This does not mean that everyone associated with the gang commits offences, but rather that the gang as a collective is associated with the willingness to commit crimes and especially violence.

2. Other characteristics

Although not a definer of street gangs, many gang members self-identify strongly with a particular street or neighbourhood. They consider this geographical area their territory which they (have to) control. Gang members often belong to ethnic minorities or have a migration background. This is because minority groups in general and especially the young people that join gangs are more likely to belong to risk groups (low income, high unemployment, discrimination).

3. Use of the internet and social media

Gangs are present online and use the internet and social media to strengthen gang cohesion and develop their criminal portfolio. For the most part, gangs' use of social media sites is related to gang identity and gang culture, with gang members using social media to construct identities and build an image. The role of the internet in gang recruitment is limited; recruitment still depends on physical proximity and social interaction. This does not mean that the social media use of gangs is not a concern. Especially the cyber banging phenomenon, consisting of explicit gang content and associated with an escalation of violence, needs to be monitored.

4. Street gang prevention

Prevention efforts aim to reduce the level of crime or the harm (e.g. fear of crime) caused by street gangs. Various types of street gang prevention involve different partners and will have different potential outcomes. The three most important strategies focus on the prevention of street gang recruitment, on reducing the immediate harms caused by gangs, and the rehabilitation of gang members.

5. Risk factors

Preventing gang recruitment can be achieved by addressing the risk factors that make young people vulnerable to joining gangs. The risk factors are inequality and social exclusion, negative childhood experiences, and the proximity of one or more street gangs. Identifying at-risk individuals within the broader group exposed to socio-economic risk factors is challenging. It requires detailed information about the neighbourhood and its people that can only be obtained through long-term personal engagement, for instance through street work or community-oriented policing.

6. Family therapy and parental support

Interventions that aim to support parents and address problems in families have the potential to prevent gang recruitment and involvement. Parental support programmes stimulate positive reinforcement methods in parenting to foster pro-social behaviour and healthy parent-child relationships. Family-oriented interventions have a multidisciplinary and more directly address imminent or already present delinquent behaviour in young people. Several family therapies and parental support programmes have proven effective; others may be considered promising.

7. After-school activities

The preventive effect of adequate and accessible sports or cultural activities is significant. Group activities boost social cohesion and social control and participants can develop individually and enjoy success. Especially when local role models are involved in such activities, they may offer a great opportunity to establish relationships of trust with local youth. They are also well-placed to mediate gang conflicts.

8. Sustainable social development

Socio-economic policies aimed at eliminating the breeding ground for criminality require significant long-term investments, but offer structural solutions to the street gang problem. Gang members experience gang life as a career filling the void left by the absence of legitimate opportunities for a fulfilling life. Social development, poverty alleviation, policies to reduce systemic discrimination, employment counselling, adequate housing policies and improving the quality of education will all contribute to a sustainable reduction in gang activity.

9. Policing gangs

The implementation of preventive policing strategies has the potential to significantly reduce crime and violence in a neighbourhood. However, police activities may also have unintended consequences and actually contribute to gang crime. Indiscriminate use of intrusive police tactics and recurring unpleasant experiences with the police may increase gang cohesiveness and exacerbate gang activity. A solution lies in a problem-oriented policing strategy which shifts the focus from gangs and gang crime broadly speaking to gang violence specifically.

10. Focussed deterrence

Focussed deterrence policing strategies such as Gang Violence Intervention are problem-oriented and aim to end the most harmful manifestation of street gangs: gang violence. They combine the threat of punishment to deter offenders with a range of social support services and community involvement in order to raise community standards and foster informal social control. Its application in Europe (e.g., Malmö, Sweden) has proved promising.

11. Exit: disengagement and rehabilitation

As gang members grow older, they are more likely to no longer wish to be involved in the gang and to dissociate from it. The objective of exit programmes is to stimulate and expedite this process by enhancing the conditions for leaving the gang. One variant of exit programmes are programmes focussing on young people

who are not fully invested in a gang, typically after a first offence, and could be part of a deal involving a reduced sentence.

12. Recommendations

Prevention work for street gangs can take various forms. It is important that there is a good understanding of both the problem and mechanisms behind possible interventions, in order to match objectives and expectations. Preventive actions should be proportionate and initiated timely. Inherent risks and weaknesses of different approaches to the gang phenomenon need taken into account. Multi-agency cooperation is required, but presents some pitfalls which should be avoided. It is recommended that the communities themselves, especially role models from within them, are actively involved.

01

STREET GANGS: WHAT ARE THEY?

Street gangs are a problem that cities and suburbs in all corners of Europe are facing. In some places, the problem of street gangs and gang violence seem on the rise. Street gangs deserve special attention because they are a tough nut to crack. Street gang members are significantly more likely to commit violent crimes than non-members, with those whose lives are deeply embedded in the gang causing the most trouble. Where they operate, gangs are responsible for most the violent crime.

But what exactly are street gangs? Different actors and researchers have different definitions of the street gang phenomenon. We will use the consensus definition of the Eurogang research programme as a starting point:

A street gang is a durable, street-oriented youth group whose identity includes involvement in illegal activity.¹

This definition is composed of five definers, the minimum criteria to be able to speak of street gang. It leaves out all descriptors, properties or characteristics that apply to many but not all gangs. The **five definers** are the following:

1 Group | When we talk of a street gang, we are referring to a group of people. Usually, a group is defined as three or more persons. In the context of street gangs, groups would typically comprise more than three individuals. Street gang members would often be conscious of the fact that they form a group. They will often have a name for their group and maybe a logo or emblem that members could have tattooed on themselves or wear on their clothes. None of these is necessarily the case. In other words, characteristics like names or emblems should be considered descriptors rather than definers.

2 Young age | Street gang members are typically young—teenagers or young adults. As members grow older, they tend to leave or cut ties with the gang gradually, e.g., because they grow tired of the violence or because give their life a new direction by getting married and having children. Others may specialise and move on to other types of organised crime groups or be arrested. At any rate, gang members are typically young. This is why street gangs are also referred to as youth gangs. In Europe, there are some worrying indications that gang members are becoming younger on average.

3 Durability | When multiple co-offenders get together for a one-time collaboration, they do not form a gang. Street gangs and the interpersonal ties within them exist for a given period of time. Gangs are not founded for the commission of one or more specific crimes. Instead, the gang exists both before and after any given crime they may be responsible for.

European versus American street gangs

Youth gangs are mostly associated with North America, as is most gang research. In Europe, we need to exercise caution in looking at the situation here through an American lens. Concepts and observations from American gang research as well as gang policing strategies from the United States do not necessarily apply to the European context.

Nevertheless, European gang research, in particular from the **Eurogang research programme**, has shown that Europe has its own street gangs. There are indications that the number of street gangs is growing. They show significant similarities to American gangs, but there are also certain differences. These have prompted some researchers to speak of “troublesome youth groups”, a term they prefer over gangs.

Some differences between European and American gangs are important to take into account. One example is the use of firearms. Guns are ubiquitous in American gangs, but while some European gangs are associated with gun violence, many European gang members typically do not use or carry firearms.

4 Street orientation | As the name suggests, when talking about street gangs, we do not mean groups that try to keep their existence a secret. Street gangs occupy the public space: they literally hang out in the streets, in certain neighbourhoods. When gangs fight, they do it in the streets. Emblems or insignia, when they have them, will be worn for all to see. Gangs are conspicuous. As a result, they cause public unease or fear.

This aspect of the definition of street gangs has been criticised. Some have pointed out that youth gangs are not necessarily street-oriented, and that some youth gangs generally try to stay away from the public space. This could be for a variety of reasons. In colder areas, it may simply be too uncomfortable to hang out outside. Access to private spaces is a more important reason: youth gangs,

especially the youngest members, hang out in public areas because they do not have access to a place of their own. When they do, however, gang members tend to prefer the comfort of their own place. Finally, gangs may consciously stay away from the streets to avoid encounters with the police. Even if that is the case, however, gangs will often be present in (semi-)public online spaces (social media) and conflict may still be settled in the streets.

5 Involvement in illegal activity as part of the gang's identity |
Gangs are involved in illegal activities. If they were just a group of youths hanging out in public spaces, they would not constitute a threat to public safety. Nonetheless, this aspect of gangs is not as straightforward as it seems. An important question is whether or not all kinds of illegal activity make a youth group a gang, and if not, then which kinds of crime do we associate with street gangs?

Depending on who you ask, youth gangs may be associated with violent crime, drug dealing, and property crimes. Consequently, definitions of street gangs tend to leave this question open, and simply refer to illegal or criminal activity. But then what about youth groups involved in illegal activities that are neither serious nor a cause for public concern? One classic example is the “pot-smoking club”. When a group of youths regularly meets over a period of time to use cannabis, are they a gang (insofar that smoking cannabis is illegal)? Most people would tend to say no, and even though such a group could become the target of prevention programmes for nuisance or substance use, it is unlikely they would be perceived as part of the street gang problem.

In sum, there appears to be a consensus that when referring to gangs, the groups in question should be associated with violence. Aggressive youths are more likely to join gangs, and gangs, in turn, may propagate the use of violence; gang members commit violent offences much more frequently than non-gang members.² However, not all gangs, all alone all gang members, are violent. Rather, what they have in common is the reputation that the gangs are willing to resort to violence.³

Gang violence: types and motivations

There are four different types of gang-related violence and accompanying motivations for gang members to engage in violence.

- 1. Inter-gang violence:** rivalries between two or more gangs, possibly over territory, often culminate in fights between gangs. Violence is also used to execute revenge (including honour killings).
- 2. Intra-gang violence:** violence is used within a gang to control members and to exert authority, but also to punish members who violated the code of conduct (e.g., reporting to the police).
- 3. Violence for the purpose of criminal activities,** for instance violence used in the context of a robbery.
- 4. Violence committed to establish a gang identity:** in gangs, violence is important to establish credibility, status, and identity. Note that the first three categories of violence, too, can contribute to status and identity.⁴

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Besides these five definers—essential qualities of all street gangs—there are some properties that can be observed in many street gangs. **Three descriptors** of gangs are worth explaining here:

1. Territoriality and rivalry as part of gang identity

Youth gang members often self-identify strongly with a particular street or neighbourhood. They consider this geographical area their territory which they (have to) control. “Control”, in this context, could mean that this is the place that they, as opposed to members from other groups, hang out, but also that they have a local monopoly in certain illicit markets (e.g., they alone sell drugs in that area). This strong local connection could also take the form of a strong support for local sports (e.g. football) club, either or not involving hooliganism.⁵

2. Ethnicity and migration

Many gang members belong to ethnic minorities or have a migration background. However, the relationship between gang membership and ethnicity is a complex one. The association between ethnicity and gang membership sometimes raises the question whether certain minority group members are intrinsically more likely to join gangs than others, for example for cultural reasons. There is no compelling evidence, however, that this is the case. Minority groups in general and especially the young people that join gangs are more likely to belong to risk groups (low income, high unemployment, discrimination). In other words, any correlation between ethnicity and gang membership is not a direct causal link. The social processes that lead to gang formation and delinquency, such as peer pressure, group identity formation, and us-them thinking, are universal, and not in any way linked to the culture of the gang members.⁶

In Europe, there is quite a wide variety of groups that fit the criteria of a street gang. Some groups exist for decades, others for a much shorter periods; some gangs are quite large, others rather small. Most European street gangs consist of 10 to 50 members, exist for a few years, and are characterised by wide-ranging criminal activity. These are called **compressed gangs**: modest in time, size, and criminal activity. The next most prevalent type are **specialised gangs**. Their members are generally somewhat older and their members would focus on a specific criminal activity, e.g. drug distribution. **Traditional gangs**, prevalent in the

US and responsible for the stereotypical image of a gang, exist in Europe, but are much less prevalent. These are the highly territorial, multi-generational gangs that are connected to a given neighbourhood.⁷

02 ‘STREET GANGS’ USE OF THE INTERNET

Gangs are present online and use the internet and social media to strengthen gang cohesion and develop their criminal portfolio. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that gangs existed long before the popularisation of the internet and social media, which should not be considered to be a cause of gang formation. However, the internet offers additional resource for gangs to manifest and organise their activities, and as is the case for most other people, gang members now occupy a hybrid public space, one that blends online and physical interactions.⁸

Gangs use the internet in several ways. The following uses stand out:

- **The internet as an extension of the physical world.** Gang members use the internet, in particular social media and chat apps, to hang out together, discuss things, make arrangements, and so on—things they also do in the real world. Likewise, they can occupy and disrupt “public” online spaces (discussion forums, public social media posts).
- **The internet as a source of information and inspiration.** Especially ideology-based street gangs, such as neo-Nazi gangs, use the internet to connect with similar groups and to find information on the ideology, rituals, and histories of similar groups. Similarly, social media may serve as a space to assert or propagate gang culture.
- **The internet as place for self-representation,** to display gang association and assert the gang’s dominance. Gangs use the internet and social media to impress rival gangs, for instance by documenting and bragging about their actions, as well as giving expression to their rivalry with them.
- If the gang is active in **cybercrime or internet-facilitated crime**, the internet is used for criminal purposes.⁹

Generally speaking, the use of social media sites by street gangs is related to gang identity and gang culture rather than recruitment or specific criminal acts. Gang members use social media primarily to construct identities and build an image. Many gang-related social media posts amount to nothing more than a picture (e.g. with a gang insignia) that suggests gang membership or glorifies gang life. Gang members may boast about criminal acts, often in such a way that they avoid admitting to specific criminal acts—the reputation for violence is all that matters.

The impact of social media on gang recruitment should not be overestimated. There is a legitimate concern that social network sites facilitate gang recruitment, since they can act as a place where non-gang members meet with gang members and come in contact with gang life. However, there is little evidence that recruitment takes place on social media on a significant scale. Rather, recruitment still depends on physical proximity and social interaction.¹⁰ This may help explain the strong identification of a gang and a certain neighbourhood. Whereas the gang may be active on the worldwide web, its members tend to come from the same place.

The limited use of social media for recruitment purposes does not mean that the use of social media by gangs is not a concern.

While research into gangs and social media shows clearly that gangs use social media both to manifest publicly as gangs and to communicate privately, it is much less conclusive about what this means for gang prevention and police investigations. Researchers have drawn contradictory conclusions as regards the opportunities offered by social media to identify gang members, with critics warning that identifying gang members using social media data might be both inaccurate and ethically problematic, e.g. when algorithms that perform the identification replicate racial biases.¹¹

The limited use of social media for recruitment purposes does not mean that the use of social media by gangs is not a concern. One phenomenon of particular concern is so-called internet banging or cyber banging. The three defining factors of this online behaviour are the promotion of gang affiliation (often explicit, such as posing with firearms), claiming involvement in violent acts or threatening violent acts, and sharing information about rival gangs. Typical for cyber banging is the explicit violence. Rather than suggesting involvement in gang activity, cyber bangers often post explicit videos of their acts of violence against rival gang members. This is often related to a practice called “posturing”: gaining respect through acts of violence and/or diminishing the rival’s street credibility. Such fights typically follow escalating threats on social media.¹² Research into this worrying trend predominantly focuses on the United States (specifically the Chicago area), but there are indications that the phenomenon, along with its connection to the ‘drill rap’ music genre, has made its way to certain European urban areas.

Online gangs – online prevention?

One consequence of the increased use of virtual public spaces (social media) by street gangs and new, often encrypted, communication channels (WhatsApp etc.) is that the less often they meet up in the streets, the less feasible and effective traditional street work and “street education” projects become. It is simply harder to approach youth groups than it used to be.¹³ The online life of gang members is semi-public at best—selected posts and comments are public, but interactions between gang members will often be private, making it hard to intervene.

03 STREET GANG PREVENTION

There are several ways to deal with street gang problems. Each of these has different objectives, involve different partners, and will have different potential outcomes. Strictly reactive or repressive responses to gang crime are driven by law enforcement and the criminal justice system and aim at catching and punishing criminal gang members. These come into play after the fact—when the crime has already been committed—and fall outside the scope of this Toolbox.

Prevention efforts have a different goal: they aim to reduce the level of crime or the harm (e.g. fear of crime) caused by street gangs. The most important preventive strategies to prevent gang crime are the following:

- Preventing gang recruitment: focusses on keeping young people from joining gangs.
- Preventing/reducing gang violence: focusses on keeping gang members from committing violent crimes.
- Providing exit support for gang members: focusses on providing ways for gang members to leave the gang environment and adopt a non-criminal lifestyle.

The French gang plan

France has adopted an inter-ministerial plan to prevent and tackle gang violence. The plan is a response to the rise of gang violence, both in number and in seriousness. In addition, the average age of gang members is dropping. The gang plan was developed to provide a comprehensive answer to this trend. It is a comprehensive, multi-agency strategy, developed with input from local representatives and frontline workers.

The three pillars of the plan are:

1. Prevention of gang-related conflicts and violence
2. Better monitoring and analysis of the gang phenomenon and improved operational response through information exchange between actors
3. Enhanced investigation strategy to boost the efficacy of the criminal justice response to gang crime.

As for the prevention pillar, the plan contains several concrete actions, including community mediation and improving the offer of adequate after-school activities. Attention is also given to institutional aspects of prevention. Part of the plan, for instance, is a framework for improved information exchange between parental support organisations and crime prevention actors.

1. Preventing street gang recruitment

Programmes and projects focussing on preventing gang recruitment aim to reduce the impact of gangs by reducing the number of new recruits. This can be achieved by addressing the risk factors that make young people susceptible to joining gangs.

In this regard, it is important to know what these risk factors are. The first category is socio-economic risk factors, which include structural inequality and social exclusion. Gang members are often marginalised and not well integrated into mainstream society. They are often unemployed, live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and are discriminated against or stigmatised along ethnic or class lines.¹⁴ In many ways, gang subculture and gang membership offer people what they (perceive to) miss out on in mainstream society: an income, prospects for social mobility (rising through the ranks) and success, and a sense of belonging. The second category or risk factors consists of negative childhood experiences, including failed school careers, broken families and deficient parenting.¹⁵ The final category of risk factors concerns the presence or proximity of one or more street gangs. When there are street gangs present in the neighbourhood, or when there is an establishment or even a school where street gang members go, there is an increased risk for gang recruitment, while this risk is obviously much lower or non-existent when there is no gang activity in the neighbourhood.

As such, it is important that policymakers and practitioners have an accurate view of both gang activity and risk factors for recruitment, in order to be able to devise tailored and effective approaches. This is the responsibility of street workers, law enforcement, and other local actors, and it is not an easy task. The group to which the above-mentioned socio-economic risk factors apply is very broad; identifying the individuals within that group who will be more likely than others to get involved in gang activity is the real challenge. This will require detailed information about the neighbourhood and its people that only long-term personal engagement in it can produce, for instance through street work or community-oriented policing.¹⁶ Criminal justice and police data on prior convictions, the seriousness of offences, or the age of the first offence, might prove to be of little use in identifying at-risk persons given that such data do not always show significant differences between future gang members and others.¹⁷ Even for street workers, it is hard sometimes to identify which gangs are active in their neighbourhood and which youths are involved in which gangs, presumably because people do not tell them and leave it up to them to find out.¹⁸

Beware of stigmatisation and unintended effects of street work

Gang outreach or street worker programmes can have the unintended effect that they stigmatise an ethnic group or neighbourhood. Labelling a group as prone to gang violence or in need of social work interventions, may, in turn, enhance gang cohesion. Increased group solidarity is associated with increased gang violence. This means that programmes intended to reduce gang involvement and gang violence run the risk of actually causing more gang violence. Programmes can also have adverse effects through a mechanism called deviance training: at-risk people are brought together for preventive purposes, but instead a dynamic of bragging about, and looking up, to each other's delinquency is created.

Evaluations of gang street worker programmes have had mixed results, with some having positive effects but others leading to a noticeable increase in gang violence. This shows that while social work targeting vulnerable people generally has positive outcomes, street worker programmes for the prevention of gang involvement and gang violence should be implemented with care and reservation. When implementing them, it is advised to monitor rigorously for adverse effects.¹⁹

This has consequences for preventive action. Welfare approaches to prevent gang recruitment targeting the wider population (primary prevention), including fighting poverty, boosting employment and reducing discrimination, will have a positive effect on gang recruitment along with many other benefits, but it will also require a significant long-term investment. On the other hand, secondary prevention, targeting a smaller at-risk group, is challenging and risky: it is hard to identify this group accurately and if too broad a group is targeted (e.g. an ethnic minority group in a particular neighbourhood), it may be stigmatising and have adverse effects.

Who works?

Professional social workers often have a hard time establishing relationships of trust with street gang members or at-risk youths. It is therefore important to not only consider “what works”, but also “who works”. Many social work interventions to prevent street gang recruitment and gang crime depend on a sustainable relationship with the individuals in question, but professional social workers are often perceived as representatives of conventional society who cannot imagine what life “on the streets” is like, and they thereby fail to gain trust. Experiments in the Netherlands have shown that one way to achieve success is to engage **local role models, possibly ex-gang members**, as they are able to establish sustainable relationships with local youth and can act as an intermediary between the streets and the service providers.²⁰

Family therapy and parental support

Children who grow up in families with problems such as divorce, addiction, or even just a lack of time on the part of parents to devote to education, are at a higher risk of developing anti-social behaviours such as substance use disorders and delinquency, including street gang activity. Those growing up in multi-problem families, confronted with multiple problems at the same time, run an even higher risk. Interventions that aim at supporting parents and addressing problems in families have the potential to prevent gang recruitment and involvement.

Family-oriented interventions, especially when they target families in multi-problem situations, should have a multidisciplinary scope, and be flexible in how they are implemented and what kind of services and support they offer families. Different families need different kinds of help. The range of services being offered could encompass treatment for addiction, debt counselling and support in managing household budget, behavioural therapy, school stimulation and helping children with their homework, and adequate leisure activities (see below).

Two mistakes in family-oriented interventions should be avoided at all times. First, the intervention should not focus on one particular problem, because families in multi-problem situations cannot handle the situation on their own precisely because there are multiple problems. At the same time, however, a situation where the multidisciplinary, multi-agency intervention turns into a fragmented approach in which the families themselves have to deal with too many agencies and workers., should be avoided²¹ So, an integrated partnership approach is often required, but the quality of service should be monitored.

Various family therapies and parental support programmes have proven effective in reducing and preventing the development of anti-social behaviours such as substance use disorders and criminality. The Incredible Years parenting programme, the Parent-Child Interaction Therapy and the Triple P Positive Parenting Programme, are examples of parent management training interventions which have been positively evaluated in a wide range of settings.²² All of them stimulate positive reinforcement methods in parenting to foster pro-social behaviour and healthy parent-child relationships from a young age onwards, thereby helping to prevent problematic behaviours even at a later age. Similar European programmes which incorporate many of the same principles are seen as promising, but have rarely been evaluated.

Family therapy interventions have a wider focus than parent management programmes, namely on all interactions within a family and between the family and its environment. At the same time, it addresses imminent or already present delinquent behaviour in young people more directly within their family setting. Multi-systemic Therapy (MST), for instance, is a community-based but family-focused programme to re-orientate children who have displayed problematic behaviour with the help of their families. MST, as well as Multi-Dimensional Family Therapy (MDFT) and Functional Family Therapy (FFT), are fully manualised and have been proven to be effective in reducing and preventing youth delinquency and other anti-social behaviours.²³

Functional Family Therapy

Functional Family Therapy is a tried and true systemic therapy programme for children with behavioural problems and their families. Families can self-select, but the programme can also be mandated by the criminal justice system. Its main objectives are to improve communication within the family and reduce problematic behaviours. It is a relatively short intervention (30 hours in total, about half a year), consisting of weekly therapy sessions with the family.

FFT therapists are specially trained and will tailor the therapy to specific problems and families. Together with the family, the therapist identifies risk and protective factors as well as ways to reduce risk and increase protective factors. At regular intervals, the family's and therapist's satisfaction with the programme is evaluated, and whenever necessary it is adjusted.

Sports and cultural activities as crime prevention

Young people who regularly participate in after-school sports or cultural activities are less likely to engage in delinquent behaviour or join street gangs than their peers who do not participate in such activities, which literally keep children off the streets. But more importantly, group activities boost social cohesion and social control; participants can develop individually and enjoy success (e.g. winning a football match). The preventive effect of an adequate supply of, and participation in, group activities is not to be underestimated.

Furthermore, sports clubs and other leisure organisations such as youth associations are good ways to reach out to young people and establish a relationship of trust with them. Whereas street workers may experience difficulties in making contact with young people in certain neighbourhoods, establishing intergenerational relationships with (potential) street gang members may be much less challenging for the trainer of a local football club. Ex-gang members or other people with whom local youth can relate (i.e. people from the same neighbourhood who grew up in similar circumstances) involved in such sports or cultural associations may be particularly well-placed to mediate gang conflicts.²⁴

Perhaps the most difficult, but also the most effective, way to reduce gang recruitment as well as various types of crime, is to address it through socio-economic policies aimed at reducing the risk factors in order to eliminate the breeding ground for criminality: poverty, unemployment, and inequality.

The presence of role models in sports and cultural associations and the local anchoring of the clubs is also important for another reason. To boost participation, the offer must be adequate, accessible and affordable. Initiatives that could be perceived as an outside intervention or alien to the neighbourhood (e.g. set up by the city to do something about problems in the neighbourhood) are less likely to attract the young people who would benefit the most from participation, whereas initiatives that are rooted in the neighbourhood and in which locals take ownership will be more attractive.²⁵

Nonetheless, some caution is warranted. For leisure activities to be effective in reducing anti-social behaviours, including delinquency and illegal gang activity, it must be ensured that the setting does not act as an incubator for delinquency. Given that delinquent and at-risk youth are brought together, there is a risk that the social dynamic is upended, with the result that anti-social behaviours are idolised and fostered in the group.²⁶ This can be counteracted by implementing a pedagogical framework that devotes sufficient attention to social skills, besides the leisure activity itself, and by ensuring that leaders (e.g. football trainers) are properly trained to deliver on this front.²⁷

Factors of social conformity

Preventive policy should not be guided by risk factors alone, but should also observe the factors that keep most young people out of street gangs, or delinquency more generally. These can be summed up as activities and relationships with people who value a conformist, non-criminal lifestyle. When parents, friends and other role models are non-criminals, a young person is less likely to engage in criminal behaviour. There are several mechanisms behind this. A young person's moral compass is attuned to that of their peers. More trivially, they will avoid behaviours that would negatively affect their relation (they do not want significant others to think badly of them), or that would cause them to lose a job. Finally, engagement in conformist activities consumes time which could otherwise be spent in non-conformist behaviour.²⁸

This emphasises the role of parents and parenting. When this is lacking, parenting support and other positive role models need to play a key role in preventing street gang recruitment and youth delinquency in general. Another pillar of prevention is the availability and accessibility of conformist activities: young people are better off spending their time in sports or leisure clubs than hanging out on the streets, but in order for this to happen, there needs to be an adequate offering

Sustainable social development

Perhaps the most difficult, but also the most effective, way to reduce gang recruitment as well as various types of crime, is to address it through socio-economic policies aimed at reducing the risk factors in order to eliminate the breeding ground for criminality: poverty, unemployment, and inequality. Only through such an approach can we take away the root causes of gang formation, and thus gang crime. Gang members experience gang life as a "career", which much like professional careers "combines opportunities to achieve pleasure, reward and status with unavoidable doses of drudgery and submission."²⁹ In many ways, gangs fill the void left by the absence of legitimate opportunities for a fulfilling life.

Social development, poverty alleviation, policies to reduce systemic discrimination, employment counselling, adequate housing policies and improving the quality of education will all contribute to a sustainable reduction in gang activity. However, such measures require substantial long-term investments and are often difficult to roll out locally without national support. Politically, they may be hard to sell, because they require investments now but the results will show in the longer term—too long for elected officials to benefit from them. Nonetheless, social and economic policies aimed at reducing poverty and poverty and creating opportunities should be seen as important and sustainable crime prevention measures as well.³⁰

2. Policing gang violence

The police play an important role in the fight against gangs and gang crime. Reactive law enforcement interventions are necessary in situations of acute threats to public safety (e.g., an armed fight) and as part of the criminal justice response to concrete crimes, i.e., by investigating crimes and arresting the offenders. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the police have an important role to play in preventing gang violence. The implementation of preventive policing strategies has the potential to significantly reduce gang crime and violence in a neighbourhood. However, police activities may also have unintended consequences and actually contribute to gang crime.

Increased police presence in deprived neighbourhoods and intrusive tactics like stop and searches and zero-tolerance policing may feed the perception that the police is an oppressive force that is out to get them rather than to protect the neighbourhood from gang crime. Recurrent unpleasant experiences with the police constitute a driver for gang formation, with gangs perceived as a way to obtain the protection that law enforcement fails to deliver.³¹ Additionally, there is evidence that the repeated subjection to police tactics aimed at controlling gangs (e.g. ID checks) may fail to control but rather increase gang cohesiveness and even make them more resilient to police control.³²

To be avoided: zero-tolerance or policing

Zero-tolerance is a policing strategy that aims to eliminate any transgression or incivility. It often involves intensive patrolling and stop-and-searches, including arrests for any possible offence. It is also referred to as aggressive policing. While the police sometimes launch and mediatise these approaches with the aim of creating an image of the police as an effective and decisive force, zero-tolerance policing has no statistically significant effect on crime rates,³³ but causes a deterioration of the relationship between the police and the neighbourhood. It should therefore be considered an ineffective use of public funds that should best be avoided.³⁴

Repressive anti-gang police tactics are often not focussed on perpetrators, but on non-criminal groups and group members as well. Since it is impossible to reliably distinguish criminal gang members and others, police methods like patrols and stop-and-searches often target minority groups or an entire neighbourhood. Consequently, gang policing often results in the criminalisation of ethnic minority youth, feeding a polarisation that exacerbates rather than prevents gang activity.³⁵ As the police tends to focus on gang descriptors—non-defining properties of gangs—many become guilty by association. Belonging to a certain minority, living in a certain neighbourhood, and even listening to certain genres of urban music (e.g. drill rap) could mean that an individual is treated as a gangster.³⁶

This illustrates the inadequacy of many conventional police responses to gangs, which has prompted critics to question the need for police responses to gangs at all, arguing that only a strong social safety net would reduce the appeal of forming or joining a gang. Such controversies are the result of a mismatch in the definition of gang definitions between researchers and law enforcement. Academics have described gangs first and foremost as a social phenomenon, emerging in a disadvantaged milieu and fulfilling certain social functions. In this view, crime is a by-product. Policymakers and law enforcement sometimes equate gangs with

crime, leading to attempts to police what is a normal, if not legitimate, response to specific social parameters.³⁷

One solution lies in a shift of focus from gangs and gang crime in the broad sense, to violence.³⁸ Gangs are a social phenomenon, best addressed through social policy, yet violence warrants a police intervention. Such an intervention should not only be reactive, but also preventive, whether by taking away the opportunities for crime, increasing the collective efficacy of communities, or de-escalating tensions.

Problem-oriented policing: a strategy for policing gang violence

One policing strategy that can help law enforcement agencies focus on preventing gang violence, but avoid police action that may very well stimulate gang activity, is problem-oriented policing (POP). POP centres on solving a specific crime problem rather than one or more policing methods such as patrolling, stop-and-searches, or arrests, which are considered as just the means to an end.³⁹ A POP strategy therefore requires a thorough understanding of the problem, which needs to be well-defined, as does a clear goal. This is often operationalised by adhering to a strict workflow such as the SARA model (scanning, analysis, response, assessment).⁴⁰ It is essential that before any action is taken, it is clear that there is a problem and all partners agree on what that problem is.⁴¹

Police action is often shaped by directing traditional policing methods (e.g., stop-and-searches) to specific places (which are more likely to be poorer neighbourhoods than affluent ones). POP turns this around, by not defining a priori what the police should do, but by looking at a specific problem and seeing what the police can do to remedy it. When such a strategy is adopted in the fight against gang violence, it would potentially improve the benefit-cost ratio of gang policing: more violence is prevented instead of punished and there are fewer adverse effects.⁴²

One policing strategy that is highly promising in terms of effectiveness is focussed deterrence.⁴³ Focussed deterrence policing strategies target specific crime problems and aim at curbing the most harmful manifestations of this crime problem (e.g. gang violence). It is, in this sense, the polar opposite of blanket police checks (patrols, stop-and-searches) and zero-tolerance policing.

Deterrence, as a crime prevention mechanism, entails the raising of the risks and costs of committing a crime to the point that potential offenders decide not to commit the crime.⁴⁴ Deterrence can be obtained through punitive sanctions: when the threat of punishment is high enough, offenders are likely to choose a different course of action. Focussed deterrence strategies are effective as they ensure that the conditions for success are met. As these strategies focus on specific high-priority crime problems, they free up resources that can be put towards increasing the risk of getting caught for specific acts within the focus of the strategy.

Deterrence: conditions for success

The effectiveness of deterrence is the subject of debate. For deterrence to work as intended, the following conditions need to be met:

Punishment must be (almost) certain: the risk of getting caught must be high and punishment must be implemented with certainty. If for whatever reason (procedural grounds, insufficient capacity of the penitentiary system) getting caught does not lead to punishment, the deterrent effect of the criminal justice system is neutralised.

Punishment should be severe yet proportionate: the punishment should be in proportion to the offence. As a disincentive, a light sentence may be insufficient to offset incentives. However, past a certain point, i.e. when the punishment becomes disproportionately high, no additional deterrent effect should be expected. Punishments should be swift: behavioural research has shown that punishment should follow not too long after the crime to have the intended effect⁴⁵

There are different kinds of focussed deterrence strategies, but the one relevant for preventing gang violence is known as **Group Violence Intervention** (GVI) or ‘pulling levers’ policing. GVI is an evidence-based strategy for preventing serious gang violence and gang homicide. It was first applied in the 1990s in Boston (Operation Ceasefire), but has since been implemented successfully in various places in North and South America and Europe.⁴⁶

There are different kinds of focussed deterrence strategies, but the one relevant for preventing gang violence is known as Group Violence Intervention (GVI) or ‘pulling levers’ policing. GVI is an evidence-based strategy for preventing serious gang violence and gang homicide.

The premise of GVI is deceptively simple. Of all types of crime, the harmful effect of violence is the highest in terms of both the immediate impact and the fear of crime. However, the number of violent offenders is small, so small in fact that a very limited number of people are responsible for most high-impact violent crimes. Focussing all attention on these individuals and making sure they do not commit acts of violence will immediately and significantly reduce their harmful effect, with limited resources.⁴⁷

GVI has ironed out some of the potential weaknesses in the design of deterrence strategies. Firstly, it has a narrow focus, specifically on (serious) gang violence. All other gang-related activities, including drug use, other crimes and recruitment, are essentially left alone, and there is no intention to dismantle the gangs. This may seem counterintuitive, but it means that all available resources are allocated to monitoring gang members for violence and apprehending them when they transgress. Secondly, GVI takes a partnership approach, which besides the police also involves social services and prosecutors. The role of the latter is to make sure that transgressors receive swift punishment. Thirdly, during a call-in, groups are informed of the increased threat of punishment, which is essential to achieve the intended deterrent effect. The message could be subtle as regards the permissiveness of gang membership, but should be explicit both about the reaction to any violence and the help that is on offer — something along the lines of “We’ll give you any help you want but I’ve been to too many funerals. The violence stops now.”⁴⁸

GVI offers support to group members who want to stop the violence. During the call-in sessions, available social services and support (e.g. mental health care, addiction counselling, debt counselling, etc). are advertised. Unlike any other policing strategy, GVI invokes, and elevates, group values and community standards. Authority figures from the community are also invited to the call-in to underline the importance of desisting from violence. Since the transgression of one group member will negatively affect the others, group members are incentivised to keep one another in check, thereby introducing a form of social control in the group and increasing the collective efficacy of the community. Group members are also offered an honourable way out: the quitter cannot be considered a traitor.

The paradox of focussed deterrence is that it is effective as long as the threat of punishment is sufficient to bring violence down. When it is not, it comes down to severe enforcement, the preventive effect of which is questionable. Critics have also pointed out that despite many good evaluations, results in other places were less promising, and the long-term effect needs to be investigated further.⁴⁹

Sluta Skjut: bringing GVI to Europe

In Europe, the country that has implemented GVI most extensively is Sweden. With help of the National Network for Safe Communities, the American network behind the strategy, and with financial support from the European Union's Internal Security Fund, the Swedish National Crime Prevention Council piloted Sluta Skjut (Ceasefire) in Malmö in 2018. Following a promising evaluation study, it has now been rolled out in several other towns and cities,⁵⁰ demonstrating that transferring an American evidence-based prevention strategy to Europe is worthwhile.⁵¹

3. Exit: disengagement and rehabilitation

As gang members grow older, they are more likely to no longer feel the need or wish to be involved in the gang and—sometimes slowly—dissociate from it. This could be the case when other opportunities arise (e.g., a job) or when a gang member has moved on to life that is less compatible (e.g. married with children) with gang life. In other words, gang exits happen naturally. The objective of exit programmes, as a prevention strategy, is to influence this process. They do so by supporting gang members in leaving the gang, enhancing the conditions for ending gang membership, expediting the disengagement process and ultimately dissolving the entire gang. The strategy was first used, with moderate success, in the fight against right-wing violent extremism, organised motorcycle gangs, and terrorism, but applies to street gangs as well.⁵²

These programmes work by gaining a thorough understanding of the factors that influence gang exits and manipulating them to increase the likelihood of a positive outcome. There are three categories of such factors:

- 1. pull factors: positive factors outside of the gang that *pull* gang members away from the gang, such as attractive opportunities (e.g., a job) or a normal family life;
- 2. push factors: negative factors within the gang that *push* members away, such as deteriorating gang relationships or intra-gang conflict, or a decreasing willingness to use violence;
- 3. barriers: factors that hinder an exit, e.g. difficult access to welfare services.⁵³

Exit programmes attempt to reinforce pull and push factors and at the same time remove barriers. Reinforcing pull factors is probably the most rewarding; those who leave a gang on account of other attractive opportunities tend to suffer fewer hostilities from the gang. Put simply: exiting gang members are less likely to face hostilities from the gang when they marry and have children than when they admit they are tired of the gang. Therefore, it is important that these opportunities are adequate. For gang members to be attracted by legitimate employment, there need to be job opportunities for ex-gang members or ex-convicts. Likewise, it should be avoided that the window of opportunity for marriage and family life, which usually happens at a certain age, is not cut off by long prison sentences.⁵⁴

Barriers for the successful disengagement from gangs

People “mature out” of gangs. Growing older, even in their twenties, they become more aware of the risk that gang life may negatively impact the rest of their lives, leading to some reducing active gang involvement and even leaving the gang. Gangs themselves are not typically unwilling to let members go, as long as they agree not to divulge any secrets of the gang. What makes it hard to leave the gang is, on the one hand the legacy of gang membership (criminal record, bad reputation, gang tattoo, ...) and on the other and the fact that the original conditions have not gone away (unemployment, discrimination) so that it may be hard to adopt alternative lifestyles.⁵⁵

The impact of exit programmes, while positive, should not be overestimated.⁵⁶ Of all gang members, only a small subset is eligible for an exit programme, since the gang member should be willing to leave to gang in the first place. The exit process itself can be long and arduous, with clients being alternately drawn towards the gang and post-gang life. In other words, a positive outcome is not guaranteed. And when a gang member successfully quits, the criminal activities of the gang are likely to continue as before. It is important, therefore, to define objectives. Exit programmes work at the individual level, but to address gang-level violence, focussed deterrence policing is more suitable.⁵⁷ Ultimately, programmes that integrate elements of both, like GVI discussed above, are likely to perform the best.

One variant of exit programmes in the strict sense are the programmes focussing on young people who are not fully invested in a gang, but are becoming involved in gang life. Such interventions are typically initiated after a first offence, and could be part of a deal involving a reduced sentence. One example is the method of social network conferences. This method brings together the young offender, their family, and the probation officer to discuss opportunities for a better future. Together they come up with a plan, including a care plan when necessary, and clearly defined roles and conditions for everyone involved.⁵⁸

D4 PITFALLS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Prevention initiatives for street gangs can take various forms and target different groups, depending on the objective. Social and developmental prevention initiatives aim to prevent recruitment by reducing risk factors, including negative childhood experiences such as unhealthy family situations and parenting issues, poverty, unemployment, and discrimination. Preventive policing strategies such as focussed deterrence policing aim to minimise the immediate impact of gangs by reducing gang-related violence or crime. The objective of exit and rehabilitation programmes, finally, is to prevent reoffending by stimulating and supporting disengagement from the gang and reintegration into mainstream society.

It is important that there is a good understanding and clear definition of the problem. The objective of the intervention should be clearly delineated and legitimate (there is nothing intrinsically illegal about a street gang). **Projects or programmes should be selected based on evidence and experience, so that there is a clear view on the expected outcomes.** This helps avoid that resources are invested in interventions that have little potential to reach objective. It also establishes criteria to evaluate the project or programme later.

Interventions should be proportionate: over-reactions (e.g. intervening as soon as one risk factor is present) should be avoided as they could lead to moral panic.⁵⁹ On the other hand, **action should be taken in good time**, since waiting too long to take action closes the window of opportunity for primary and secondary prevention, and it is difficult to change the life course of individuals who are fully anchored in the gang.⁶⁰

It is highly advisable to take the inherent risks and weaknesses of different approaches to the gang phenomenon into account. Early social prevention initiatives, especially those targeting entire communities or neighbourhoods may come across as stigmatising, and labelling may exacerbate the problem.⁶¹ The careless use of police tactics such as patrols and stop-and-searches is likely to increase tensions rather than contribute to solving a gang problem. After-school activities need to have local ownership and be adequate (attractive, accessible), so that the target group—those who would benefit the most from them—take the step to participate.

All approaches require the involvement and cooperation of different agencies and actors. **All multi-agency collaborations are challenging, and there are several risks and pitfalls that need to be avoided.** Common definitions and objectives can help prevent thematic expansion, where every partner adds something to an ever-expanding, incoherent patchwork of actions. There should also be a balance in the exchanges between partners: what does each have to offer, what do they get in return, and how does this benefit prevention efforts? The impact of multi-agency collaborations will be greater than the sum of its parts.⁶²

The involvement of authoritative figures and role models from within the community is recommended. The success of prevention initiatives depends on who or which organisation is delivering them. Even street workers may find it difficult to connect with youths in street gangs, who will be more likely to take advice from or cooperate with people they have something in common or with whom they can relate.

STREET GANG PREVENTION

Our toolbox details three types of preventive approaches to youth gang problems:

1

SOCIAL WORK AND WELFARE APPROACHES TO PREVENT RECRUITMENT INTO GANGS

Preventing gang recruitment can be achieved by addressing the risk factors that make young people vulnerable to joining gangs: inequality and social exclusion, negative childhood experiences and the proximity of one or more street gangs.

2

FOCUSSED DETERRENCE POLICING STRATEGIES TO REDUCE LEVELS OF GANG VIOLENCE

Focussed deterrence policing strategies combine the threat of punishment to deter offenders with a range of social support services and community involvement in order to raise community standards and foster informal social control.

3

EXIT PROGRAMMES TO STIMULATE REHABILITATION OF GANG MEMBERS AND REDUCE RECIDIVISM

The objective of exit programmes is to stimulate and expedite the process by enhancing the conditions for leaving the gang.

Preventing problems caused by street gangs means addressing them from multiple angles.

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