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EVIDENCE

PREVENTING GANG AND YOUTH VIOLENCE: SPOTTING SIGNALS OF RISK AND SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

AN OVERVIEW

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Home Office

The Early Intervention Foundation was commissioned by the Home Office to produce these reviews.

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Introduction

“...gang and youth violence is not a problem that can be solved by enforcement alone. We need to change the life stories of young people who end up dead or wounded on our streets...”

(Ending Gang and Youth Violence Report, HM Government: 2011)

Since it began in 2011, the Government’s Ending Gang and Youth Violence programme has emphasised the need to intervene early to identify children and young people who may be vulnerable to gang involvement or to exploitation by gangs, and to give them the right support in order to prevent this happening.

Some of the signs that children and young people may be at greater risk of involvement in gangs or violence are present from birth. Strong predictors such as substance use can be seen in children as young as seven. It is vital that local early help and safeguarding systems spot and respond appropriately to these signals of risk and when required provide additional support at the earliest opportunity.

It is also vital that this support stands the best possible chance of being effective. These children and young people may be some of the most vulnerable in our society. They need high-quality, evidence-based support, delivered in the right way by the right people to help them build critical social and emotional skills, develop resilience and lead safe, healthy and law-abiding lives.

Two reports draw on the international evidence base to begin to answer key questions about how and when we can identify the signs that children and young people may be at risk, and which types of programme interventions appear to work (or indeed appear not to work) to prevent young people becoming or staying involved in gangs or violent youth culture. We also provide an initial guide to what is learnt about signals of risk and interpret findings for a practitioner audience.

These reports do not provide all of the answers, nor do they provide everything that practitioners might want to know. They do provide rich source material for those seeking to provide early intervention that responds to signals of risk, improves outcomes and delivers savings.

A note on definitions

There are many challenges inherent in defining a “gang” and different understandings of what distinguishes a gang from other youth groups. The Government has adopted the definition below, adapted from the Centre for Social Justice’s report *Dying to Belong* (2009).

“a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who: 1. see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group; 2. engage in criminal activity and violence; and may also 3. lay claim over territory (not necessarily geographical, but can include an illegal economy territory); 4. have some form of identifying structural feature; and/or 5. be in conflict with other, similar, gangs”.

The Serious Crime Act 2015 updates the definition of a gang for the purpose of a gang injunction to reflect changes in the way gangs operate (e.g. removing references to names and colours, and making the links to serious and organised crime), and it expands the range of activities for which a gang injunction can be issued to include illegal drug dealing:

Section 34(5) of the Policing and Crime Act 2009 (updated by the Serious Crime Act 2015) defines gang-related violence as:

“Violence or a threat of violence which occurs in the course of, or is otherwise related to, the activities of a group that:

- a) consists of at least 3 people; and,*
- b) has one or more characteristics that enable its members to be identified by others as a group.”*

Section 34(5) of the 2009 Act (updated by the Serious Crime Act 2015) defines gang-related drug dealing activity as:

“the unlawful production, supply, importation or exportation of a controlled drug which occurs in the course of, or is otherwise related to, the activities of a group that:

- a) consists of at least 3 people; and,*
- b) has one or more characteristics that enable its members to be identified by others as a group.”*

There is also no single definition of “youth violence”. In line with other reviews, our starting point has been to define “youth violence” as “*community/public space violence committed by young people under the age of 25*”.

Purpose of the reports

Evidence Review 1: Preventing Gang and Youth Violence: a review of risk and protective factors

The Home Office Ending Gang and Youth Violence team has been working with local areas since 2012, helping them develop effective strategies to prevent gang and youth violence and to tackle it where it does occur. Local areas are increasingly thinking about how to spot at an earlier stage the signs that children and young people may be at risk and work with them before problems escalate. Some areas are beginning to design risk assessment tools and have asked for advice on how to go about this.

The review of risk and protective factors is designed to provide practitioners with a list of the most powerful indicators that a child or young person may be at greater risk of gang involvement or youth violence, broken down by age group. The research was undertaken by Cordis Bright Consulting on behalf of the Early Intervention Foundation.

The first report, *Preventing Gang and Youth Violence: a review of risk and protective factors*, is based on the findings of academic research concerned with young people living in community settings. The studies reviewed were those that repeatedly measured the risk and protective factors of the same group of young people over a long period of time.

We also consider the implications of these findings for local systems and practice in an annex to this report.

Evidence Review 2: What works to prevent gang involvement, youth violence and crime? A rapid review of the features associated with effective and ineffective interventions delivered in the UK and abroad

Ending Gang and Youth Violence areas have also told the Home Office team that they would welcome more advice on the most effective approaches for working with children and young people to prevent gang involvement and youth violence. Our fieldwork has indicated that the evidence base for many of the “gang prevention” programmes commissioned or delivered in local areas is relatively weak, although we have not conducted a formal audit.

The second evidence report, a review of preventative programmes, was conducted by the Early Intervention Foundation and aimed to (a) identify preventative programmes with a good evidence base; and (b) summarise the common features underpinning effective programmes.

The report is the first step towards making more information about relevant programmes available to commissioners. Some of the programmes we identified are available in the UK and more that appear to be effective will now undergo detailed scrutiny and consultation

with the providers to enable us to confirm an EIF evidence rating and include information about these programmes in our online Guidebook.¹

Together, these reports support policy makers, commissioners and service providers to design systems and processes for identifying the signs of being at risk of gang and youth violence at the earliest opportunity, and to make more informed decisions about the best types of programmes to support young people facing different levels of risk.

¹ <http://guidebook.eif.org.uk/>

Key findings

Review 1: Preventing Gang and Youth Violence: a review of risk and protective factors

Researchers who have assessed the relative predictive capability of risk and protective factors have often grouped factors into five different domains, as set out below.



Within each domain, the review identified the following as the strongest signals of risk for gang involvement and youth violence (by age group).

| Domain | Strong risk factors for youth violence | Strong risk factors for gang involvement |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Individual | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Troublesome (7-9; 10-12) • High daring (10-12) • Positive attitude to delinquency (10-12) • Previously committed offences (7-9) • Involved in antisocial behaviour (10-12) • Substance use (7-9) • Aggression (7-9) • Running away and truancy (7-9; 10-12; 13-15; 16-25) • Gang membership (13-15; 16-25) • Low self-esteem (13-15) • High psychopathic features (13-15) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marijuana use (10-12) • Displaced aggression traits (13-15) • Anger traits (13-15) • Aggression traits (13-15) |
| Family | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disrupted family (7-9; 10-12; 13-15) • Poor supervision (10-12) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No strong risk factors identified |
| School | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low commitment to school (13-15) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low academic achievement in primary school (10-12) • Learning disability (10-12) |
| Peer group | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delinquent peers (7-9; 10-12; 13-15) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No strong risk factors identified |
| Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No strong risk factors identified | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marijuana availability (10-12) • Neighbourhood youth in trouble (10-12) |

A number of interesting points from this analysis are worth highlighting in relation to **youth violence**:

- Across the age groups, individual factors (such as low self-esteem) as opposed to their contexts (such as coming from a low-income family) are found to be the most powerful signs of risk.
- Running away and truancy are important indicators of risk across the age bands 7-9, 10-12, 13-15 and 16-25.
- Family-specific factors are particularly important amongst the younger age groups but their value as signals diminishes as children mature.
- Community-specific factors, while often included in studies of youth violence, are not identified as strong risk indicators. However, it should be noted that community factors may influence individual, family, peer and school factors.

Whilst there are fewer studies available which look at **gang involvement**, the following points are worth highlighting:

- Much like youth violence, individual features or behaviours are found to be the most powerful signals of risk or protection.
- School and community factors both provide useful signals for children in middle childhood, in the studies assessed here meaning those aged 10-12.

The following table presents overlapping indicators of risk which have been found in studies looking at youth violence and in studies looking at gang membership. It should be stressed that only a minority of these have been shown to be strongly associated with youth violence and/or gang membership (see p. 8 in [Preventing Gang and Youth Violence: A review of risk and protective factors](#)). For others the signalling power is weaker.

| Domain | Overlapping risk factors |
|-------------------|---|
| Individual | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hyperactivity • Lack of guilt and empathy • Physical violence/aggression • Positive attitude towards delinquency • Previous criminal activity |
| Family | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family poverty • Family violence and abuse • Broken home/change in primary carer • Anti-social parents |
| School | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic underperformance • Low commitment to school • Frequent truancy |
| Peer group | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delinquent peers • Commitment to delinquent peers • Peer rejection |
| Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighbourhood disorganisation • Availability of drugs |

More recently, work has started to explore factors that could protect young people from involvement in youth violence. The table below provides an overview of the strongest protective factors, broken down by the five domains. None of the studies reviewed as part of this research considered protective factors in connection with gang involvement.

| Domain | Protective factors for youth violence |
|-------------------|---|
| Individual | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belief in the moral order • Prosocial/positive attitudes • Low impulsivity |
| Family | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good family management • Stable family structure • Infrequent parent–child conflict |
| School | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic achievement |
| Peer Group | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None |
| Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low economic deprivation |

Identifying and assessing the signs that children and young people may be at risk

Practitioners can use these findings to inform the way they identify young people who may be at risk of gang involvement or youth violence. The report identifies the most powerful predictors, but there are many other factors that practitioners may also want to consider as part of any risk assessment process.

Practitioners also need to be aware that signals of risk may have a cumulative effect. The greater the number of these indicators experienced by a young person, the greater the likelihood of gang involvement and/or youth violence. That being said, there may be occasions where a single risk indicator, for example a history of involvement with serious violence, is enough to provide cause for concern. Practitioners will need to use professional judgement when assessing signs of risk. It is important to understand that risk assessment tools may help identify potential risk, but are not perfect for predicting future involvement in gangs or youth violence. The report "[Preventing Gang and Youth Violence: A review of risk and protective factors](#)" provides source materials to inform this work.

The review identifies the following key areas for consideration in designing tools for early identification and assessment of the signs of risk for children and young people:

- The purpose of any risk assessment tool needs to be clearly determined. Is it to identify young people “at risk” of involvement in gangs or youth violence, to identify a group of young people who could benefit from a significant, targeted intervention, or to understand the reach and impact of local gangs, for example?
- Any risk assessment tool should be constructed around the indicators of risk and the protective factors that are the strongest predictors of youth violence or gang involvement. It may be helpful to use scoring and weighting mechanisms, such as those used within the CAADA (Coordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse) risk assessment tool in relation to domestic abuse (www.dashriskchecklist.co.uk).

- It is important to consider the level of professional expertise needed to complete a risk assessment. It is relatively easy, for example, to assess whether a young person reports being in a gang, but it might be more difficult to assess a young person's level of impulsivity. It is desirable to have a comprehensive risk assessment tool but this needs to be balanced with the time available to conduct the assessment.
- It is important to differentiate between behavioural risk indicators such as truancy and previous offending, and explanatory factors such as high impulsivity or low empathy. Behavioural indicators are very useful for identifying who best to work with and will provide higher levels of predictive power, but will not necessarily provide information about how best to work with a young person.

There are various sources of information that practitioners can draw upon outlined in the table below.

| Source | Comments |
|--|---|
| Self-report | The majority of the research used for this review relied upon information collected through self-report questionnaires and interviews with young people. These sources can provide a more accurate assessment of issues such as gang involvement and youth violence. |
| Information from parents and carers | A number of the studies included in the review collected information from parents and carers, which can be helpful in providing a more complete picture of some of the key risk and protective factors (for example, parents can be asked to comment on the levels of aggression shown by their children). |
| Other stakeholders | Practitioners may also find it helpful to consult with agencies who refer young people to them and to consider using referral forms which encourage referrers to identify young people's risk and protective factors. Some of the risk factors identified in the review ("high psychopathic features" for example) will be more accurately identified with the support of independent professionals such as clinical psychologists. |
| Case management systems | These systems may already hold information about risk and protective factors for young people. Practitioners should consider which organisations may have been in contact with young people and seek to share information. This may require information sharing protocols to be in place (see http://informationsharing.org.uk for more advice). |
| Official sources | These sources can be useful for profiling risk and protective factors at both a population and an individual level. Examples include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School records • Police data • Health agency data • Office for National Statistics (deprivation etc.) |

Evidence Review 2. What works to prevent gang involvement, youth violence and crime? A rapid review of interventions delivered in the UK and abroad

This work had two main components: a rapid literature review and a rapid assessment of the evidence underpinning programmes.

Literature review findings

The literature review highlighted approaches that have been associated with positive or harmful effects for young people. The key findings were:

- Skills-based and family-focused programmes are amongst the most robustly evaluated and effective types of programme to prevent youth violence. These programmes aim to foster positive changes for children, young people and families as well as prevent negative outcomes.
- Mentoring, community-based and sports-based programmes to tackle youth crime and violence appear promising, but have a limited evidence base.
- The evidence behind programmes specifically designed to prevent young people from becoming involved in gangs is very limited or non-existent.
- Approaches based on deterrence and discipline (e.g. boot camps) are ineffective, and may even make things worse (e.g. increase the likelihood of offending).

Findings from the review of effective programmes

Using existing assessments from key evidence clearinghouses, we identified 67 well-evidenced programmes designed to prevent gang involvement, youth violence or associated problems such as youth crime, conduct disorder or aggression. 54 of these programmes had been assessed as effective by the clearinghouse(s), while 13 were classed as ineffective, including some with potentially harmful effects.

The types of programmes we identified are summarised in the table below. Programmes of these types have been found to be effective, though that is not to say all such programmes have been found to be or will be effective.

| Effective programmes by target population and type | |
|---|---|
| Universal: for children & young people generally | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Curriculum & Skills-Based programmes • School-Wide Climate Change programmes • Classroom Management programmes • Parent/Family Training programmes |
| Targeted: for at-risk children & young people | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Curriculum & Skills-Based programmes • Combined School & Family programmes • Parent/Family Training & Home Visiting programmes • Other Community-Based programmes |

Targeted: for high-risk children & young people, or those already involved in gangs, youth crime or violence

- Family-Focused Therapy-Based programmes
- Trauma-Focused Therapy-Based programmes
- Other programmes

What works?

We drew out the key discernible features associated with the programmes that have been found to work. These are a good indication of the activities and intervention models typically associated with programmes that work but are not “magic ingredients” that guarantee effectiveness.

- **Seeking to create positive change:** Effective programmes seek to create positive changes in the lives of young people and/or their families, as well as prevent negative outcomes. For example, some programmes sought to give young people the skills to help them make healthy life choices, resist peer pressure and manage conflict, whilst others aimed to strengthen the ability of families to tackle problems together.
- **Schools-based or family-focused:** Most of the effective programmes were school-based or family-focused, and involved skills practice, parent training, or therapy. These programmes often took wider risk factors into consideration such as peer groups and family problems. The programmes were interactive in nature, enabling young people to practise the skills they were being taught and families to practise effective communication and problem-solving strategies with guidance and feedback from an instructor/therapist.
- **Skilled facilitators:** Nearly all of the effective programmes identified required or recommended trained facilitators, including those implementing the programme as part of their regular job or profession (e.g., as a teacher or therapist), and those working regularly with children and/or families.
- **Implementation fidelity:** Sticking to the original programme specification and ensuring good implementation quality was often crucial, in terms of both ensuring and/or maximising effectiveness, and avoiding harm.

Where is the evidence lacking?

- **Programmes specifically designed to prevent gang involvement:** Many programmes are running across the country to prevent gang involvement and help young people leave gangs. However, there is a lack of robust evidence on whether these approaches work. The review did not find any gang-specific programmes in the UK with a robust evidence base and evaluated impacts on gang involvement, and found very few international examples. This does not mean that effective, well-evidenced programmes do not exist, but it may reflect the difficulties facing frontline practitioners and researchers in measuring and tracking programme effects on young people’s actual gang involvement.
- **Mentoring and community-based programmes:** Very few mentoring and community-based programmes were identified. That is not to say these programmes don’t work,

but rather that evidence of their effectiveness is lacking – at least in the sources we searched.

What may not work?

- **Programmes based on deterrence/discipline:** Other reviews have suggested that programmes designed around things like prison visits or militaristic boot camps can be ineffective and potentially harmful. None of the effective programmes identified in our review had a military element, and the one programme that did have a military element was assessed as ineffective overall and could potentially have harmful effects. The evidence is clearly in favour of non-military-style programmes aiming to foster positive changes through, for example, skill building, parent training, and therapy.
- **Computer-based programmes:** Two interventions using computer-based software to deliver the content of the programme to adolescents were assessed as ineffective overall by clearinghouses. Both had minimal staff input and one was very brief (lasting less than an hour in total). These effects may be limited to the specific programmes assessed and this finding should not be overstated. Furthermore, our findings do not caution against all use of technology in delivering programmes.

Conclusions and implications for policy, practice and research

Gang involvement and youth violence have potentially devastating consequences for young people and their families. Once young people become involved in gangs or other violent lifestyles, it is often very difficult for them to disentangle themselves and find alternative paths. During the time they are embroiled in gang activity, young people may disengage completely from education, may commit serious crimes and receive tough sentences, may experience significant trauma through suffering, witnessing or committing acts of serious violence, and of course may end up dead or seriously wounded.

We are pleased that the Ending Gang and Youth Violence programme recognised from the outset that prevention was as important as enforcement. The Ending Gang and Youth Violence report (2011) discussed the “life stories” that could lead vulnerable young people to join gangs and recognised that public services often failed to intervene early to address signs that children and young people may be at risk and build their resilience to the influence of gangs.

These two reports strengthen the argument for early intervention to prevent gang involvement and youth violence, and offer evidence-based advice to practitioners and policy makers about making this a reality. Several clear messages emerge from the reports:

- Young people who become involved in gangs or violent lifestyles are some of the most vulnerable young people in our society and may have experienced adversity from a very young age. They should be seen and treated first and foremost as children and young people in need of support.
- Strong signals of risk for gang involvement or involvement in youth violence can be identified in children as young as seven. The earlier these signs are identified, the greater the chance of working positively with the child and his or her family to increase protective factors, build resilience and significantly improve life chances.
- Effective multi-agency information sharing arrangements are critical to identifying the signs of risk as early as possible. Primary schools, for example, will have information about a child’s behaviour, attendance and engagement which can be crucial to build a complete picture of the level of risk facing the child.
- Once indicators of risk are identified, children and young people need to be given the right support, which responds effectively to their particular needs.
- Our perception is that there are a myriad of “gangs prevention” programmes running across the country, but that very few of these have a sound evidence base behind them. They may work, but they may have no impact, or even be harmful. Local commissioners should satisfy themselves that evaluation plans are

in place and that they are able to assess the impact and value for money of the programmes they commission.

- Commissioners should also pay attention to the principles of effective and ineffective programmes set out in our report, and ensure that commissioning decisions are based on an awareness and understanding of this evidence base.

Overall, the key message of these two reviews is that there are many effective, well-evidenced ways of working with children and young people who may show signs of greater risk of gang involvement or youth violence. The earlier that these children are identified, the greater the potential for working with them to ensure they go on to lead healthy, safe, law-abiding lives. Whilst young people who are entrenched in gangs or violent behaviour are likely to need intensive, expensive, therapeutically based support to change their lives, those who are showing earlier signs of risk of involvement can benefit greatly from good-quality, strengths-based programmes which seek to strengthen the protective factors around a child, and build social and emotional skills.