

# Seeing differently: Working with girls affected by gangs

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## Abstract

While concern has grown in recent years about the extent of gang activity in Britain, the ways in which girls and young women are affected tends to be overlooked or distorted. This research aimed to address this gap by investigating how those working closely with young women defined their gang-association and what they believed to be the most effective way of responding to this. It looked to a small but vibrant number of voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs) to see how they have responded to meet girls' needs through their work and the challenges they faced in delivering this.

## Findings

Participants expressed varying views on the use, appropriateness, and definition of the word 'gang', reflecting wider dilemmas about the use of the term. Gang culture and the motivation to join a gang were seen as reflective of a wider 'crisis of identity' amongst young people, particularly in areas where life chances and opportunities had been significantly eroded.

All participants stressed the value of gender specific work, from universal services to focused interventions, yet universally described a youth justice system set up to respond to boys. Generic services failed to recognise the different lived experiences of girls and boys, gender-specific provision was patchy, and appropriate referrals were not always made.

The lack of gender-mainstreaming in youth services underlined all participants concerns, characterised by the feeling that both their work and they as individuals were marginalised, under-resourced and under-supported. Relationships with other agencies, both voluntary and statutory, were at times problematic and frustrating. The uniqueness of VCSOs, in their independence, flexibility and knowledge of the communities they worked with, was seldom felt to be acknowledged.

Delivery of work was extremely financially dependent, with a lack of funding and resources cited. This restricted the development of resources, staff training, clinical supervision, innovation, and the length of time that practitioners could support young women.

## Recommendations

- Caution should be taken on the part of funders, policy-makers, services, and the media when using the word 'gang'.
- Girls work has value in its own right. Scaled levels of support and intervention should be delivered to address the spectrum of girls' needs and levels of risk.
- A greater awareness of girls' needs and experiences must be mainstreamed throughout all young people's services, particularly amongst those working in the youth justice system.
- Where there is a locally identified gang problem, there must be a multi-agency safeguarding response involving the full range of partners to meet the requirement of the Equality Act (2010). Strategic arrangements must:
  - a. Address girls' particular needs at the same level of priority as boys';
  - b. Support partnership work across agencies, involving VCSOs as equal partners;
  - c. Ensure there is full local service provision to address girls' needs along a spectrum, from universal to targeted services;
  - d. Include a clear gang exiting strategy for high-risk girls;
  - e. Include delivery of gender-sensitive boys' work to run alongside girls work;
  - f. Provide wider work with gang-affected families and the wider community;
  - g. Address the importance of prevention work and specifically the role schools can play.
- Clinical supervision must be provided to professionals working with traumatised young people to keep their work safe, professional, and to ensure their continued professional development.
- Gender-sensitive boys' work should be delivered alongside girls' work.
- VCSOs should be empowered to take their work forward by being embedded within local strategic arrangements that address offending, through more sustainable funding and evaluation of their services to evidence their effectiveness and value.
- Education providers should take a greater role in addressing gangs.
- The potential of using mental health and therapeutic models for gang-affected young people should be further explored.