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**If Crime Is Not the Problem, Crime Fighting is No Solution:
Policing Gang Violence in the Age of Abolition**

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If Crime Is Not the Problem, Crime Fighting is No Solution:

Policing Gang Violence in the Age of Abolition

Abstract

In their 1999 classic, *Crime is Not the Problem*, Zimring and Hawkins changed the way criminologists thought about crime and violence simply by forcing us to distinguish between them. In so doing, they advanced an agenda for a more effective response to the real 'crime' problem in America—violence. In this short commentary, we apply this logic to gang research and responses. We argue police fall short in responding to 'gangs' because researchers and policymakers have defined them in terms of criminal behaviour writ large, not the problem that really needs policing—the precise social and spatial dynamics of gang violence. We stand on the shoulders of others who have stated violence trumps gangs when it comes to policy and practice, to provide a conceptual review of the literature that captures mainstream and critical perspectives on gangs and offers both sides some common ground to start from as they contemplate 'policing' gangs with or without police.

Keywords: Gangs; Violence; Policing; Eurogang definition; Databases

'The gang' is one of the most contested concepts in social science (Fraser 2015; Curry 2015; Reid and Valasik 2020; Klein and Maxson 2006; Pyrooz and Densley 2018b). Leaving the ontological, epistemological, and methodological concerns of the Ivory Tower aside for this special issue on policing gangs, the interests of criminologists and police converge around the fiercest debated issue in gang research: the role of crime in gangs and gangs in crime (see Curry 2015). This debate centres around whether gangs should be understood as primarily criminal groups, whether 'the gang' is to blame for the crime and violence of its members (Pyrooz et al. 2016), and what feature of collective crime and violence designates 'gangness' (Klein and Maxson 2006).

At time of writing, the police response to the 'gang crime' construct has sparked civil unrest in cities across the globe and led some commentators to forecast the 'end of policing' entirely (Vitale 2018). From London to Los Angeles, there have been calls to eliminate gang

databases built on police intelligence data on the grounds that the criteria used to document

gangs and gang members are invalid (Densley and Pyrooz 2020; Pyrooz and Densley 2018a).

Abolitionists envision replacing traditional law enforcement tools and tactics with a strong

social safety net, creating a society in which the police are largely unnecessary because basic

human needs like a living wage, safe affordable housing, and access to mental healthcare are

universal (Gimbel and Muhammad 2019).

Conventional gang policing methods are controversial and there is no doubt that

social services and anti-poverty measures could reduce the appeal of gangs and therefore the

need to police them at all. However, opponents to police abolition fear a rise in crime and see

the idea as a threat to public safety; not least because inadequate policing is already a risk

factor for gang violence (Densley and Stevens 2015).

This short commentary strikes at the root of this problem. We argue police fall short

in responding to 'gangs' because researchers and policymakers have defined gangs in terms

of criminal behaviour *writ large*, not the precise social and spatial dynamics of what needs

policing—gang violence. We argue that by shifting the focus from crime to violence,

researchers can develop an evidence base the police can actually use, and policymakers can

stop validating practices that are not developed from the evidence from the start.

Criminalising the Gang

Many critical and cultural criminologists (e.g., Hallsworth 2013) blame the academy

for criminalising the 'playgroups' we now call 'gangs' (Thrasher 1927), beginning in the

1970's when cooperation between research universities and state agencies interested in

juvenile delinquency began in earnest (Katz and Jackson-Jacobs 2004). Once state agencies

funded academic gang research, gang studies morphed into an academic-state conglomerate

that compromised the political impartiality of gang research, they argue (Hallsworth and

Brotherton 2011). A 'criminologists' gang' was swiftly constructed, which Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004) argued was an academic conceptualisation less representative of the phenomena as it exists in reality, and more aligned with the crime-control interests of the police and other sponsors of gang research.

Eurogang represents a network of over 200 researchers and practitioners interested in gangs (Esbensen and Maxson 2018) and is traditionally perceived as both a symptom and cause of this process. Eurogang set out to bridge the divide between scholars and practitioners, so unsurprisingly its' yearly workshops are dedicated to dissemination of findings about gang crime and the gang's relationship to a variety of social issues, from migration to social media (Decker and Weerman 2005; Esbensen and Maxson 2012; Klein et al. 2001; Maxson and Esbensen 2016; Melde and Weerman 2020; van Gemert et al. 2008). The Eurogang 'consensus' definition that 'any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity' is a gang (Klein and Maxson 2006: 4) plays a regulatory role in this international, multidisciplinary, academic-practitioner hybrid. This definition leaves room for interpretation, but its operationalisation in the Eurogang methods manual (Weerman et al. 2009) limits its application to inherently criminal groups, potentially excluding more 'pro-social' views of gangs (e.g., Brotherton 2015; Biondi and Collins 2016; Tapia 2017).

The focus on 'illegality' broadly conceived, instead of specific crime forms, also has net-widening consequences. Illegality is itself a social construct that varies across time and place and captures a diversity of conduct from public nuisance and status offenses to homicide and serious violence. So even when more strictly interpreted through the Eurogang's operationalisation, the definition captures collectives of individuals with substantially different patterns of illegal behaviour or a 'cafeteria style' of offending (Klein 1995: 132). It also turns gangs into criminal groups through tautological reasoning, i.e.,

selecting only those individuals that self-report their involvement in collective illegal activity

as gang members necessarily leads to groups composed of individuals that do crime and thus

criminal groups (Curry 2015). That is, a set of individuals form a gang because they

collectively engage in, approve of, and tolerate each other's illegal behaviour and they

collectively engage in, approve of, and tolerate each other's illegal behaviour because they

are gang members.

Why should (law enforcement) practitioners care about these issues? First, the

Eurogang definition is used by 'more policymakers than any other' (Sanders 2019) and

policymakers are generally not well versed in these debates about net-widening and sampling

biases (e.g., Aldridge et al. 2012). Overly broad definitions of gangs and gang crime have

been accused of assisting 'gang talk' (Hallsworth 2013), a highly stigmatising and racialised

discourse that relies on the gang concept to criminalise Black and minority ethnic people in

general (Gunter 2017; Smithson et al. 2012b; Williams 2015), and street culture (Ilan 2015),

urban music (Ilan 2020), and minority resistance (Brotherton 2008; Hagedorn 2008) in

particular. By ignoring the political dimensions of the gang concept (Fraser and Atkinson

2014; Hallsworth and Young 2011) a growing number of scholars complain that any broad

definition like Eurogang, that affords wide interpretation but never outside of the criminal

realm, gives the political class a conceptual tool to label the labouring classes as dangerous

classes (Hallsworth and Young 2008, 2011; Ilan 2015) and justify repressive measures

against them (Zilberg 2011; Brotherton and Barrios 2011; Ward 2013; Flores 2014; Fontes

2018).

Ethnographies from the United Kingdom (Densley 2011; Hallsworth 2013; Ilan

2015), France (Mohammed and Mucchielli 2016), Spain (Feixa and Romaní 2014), the

United States (Flores 2014; Martinez 2016; Tapia 2017; Durán 2018), and Central America

(Cruz 2010; Baird and Rodgers 2015), from Guatemala (Levenson 2013; O'Neill 2015;

Fontes 2018) to Honduras (Wolseth 2011; Rivera 2013), to El Salvador (Zilberg 2011; Ward

2013), describe how 'gang talk' is used as a political windfall for authoritarian politics. For

example, the Trump administration strategically associated Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) with

migrant 'caravans' moving through Central America (Fontes 2018) and used 'the gang' to

politically construct a 'Latino crime threat' in the US (Flores 2014) that resulted in children

being separated from their parents at the border and increased use of detention and

deportation to deter migrants and asylum seekers. The Eurogang definition has no direct

impact on these policies and practices, but critics fear it provides rationale if needed. Not

ignoring the harmful practices of gangs and gang members, they point to the harms of anti-

gang zero-tolerance policies and conclude that these might be more damaging to local

communities than the gangs themselves. That brings us back to the unifying theme of this

special issue: policing gangs.

Policing the 'Criminologists' Gang'

Marginalized and racialized urban youth are the overwhelming recipients of the 'gang

member' label (Durán 2013; Phillips 2012) to the extent that there is some debate about

whether white gangs even qualify as gangs at all (for a discussion, see Reid and Valasik

2020). For some, the primary function of gang definitions is to legitimise the identification,

surveillance, and suppression of Black and minority ethnic youth, and to justify enhanced

prison sentences for them (Brotherton 2015). Repressive police tactics in theory focus on

targeting criminal gang members, but in practice gang enforcement targets all minority youth

living in urban settings because police officers overestimate the percentage of street crime

that is gang-related (Kennedy et al. 1997) and they view urban Black and minority ethnic

youth as a threat for gang membership (Durán 2013).

A recent ride-along study (Rios et al. 2020) found officers' general adherence to

traditional, punitive policing practices like stop-and-frisk was undermining courtesy policing

efforts designed to improve community trust and legitimacy. The paradox of policing Latino

gangs, the authors found, was treating suspects with respect ('mano suave'), while continuing

to reinforce the racial bias at the heart of stop-and-frisk ('mano dura'). These findings echo

those of Durán (2008, 163), who found that 'Gang units legitimated the social control of

people beyond involvement in crime to include perceived criminality.' Durán claimed

specialized gang units, which are a common police adaptation to gangs (Braga 2015; Katz

and Webb 2006), fabricated intelligence and initiated frequent, unwelcome, even violent

contact with Mexican American gang youth, thus contributing to the general 'suppression' of

already marginalized communities, and deeper construction of the gang problem.

The rise of suppression as the dominant response to gang crime problems started in

the late 1970s and the 1980s as either a function of growing political conservatism or a

reaction to increased levels of gang violence (Miller 1975). Purported 'gang members' since

have been subject to a differential and discriminatory pattern of policing that serves both to

stereotype whole sections of Black and minority ethnic communities, especially young men,

as involved or potentially involved in crime. A recent report on policing gangs in New York

City, for example, found alleged gang members were 'subjected to harassment, intimidation,

surveillance, and threats' (Trujillo and Vitale (2019, 2), leading the authors to conclude,

'gang policing replicates the harms of mass incarceration… [it is] racist policing at its worst'

(29).

Crime management is a mandate that falls to police, so when gangs are defined as

inherently criminal, it makes sense that police target gang members. The fact that they

sometimes do this based on stereotypical or inaccurate depictions of gangs (Esbensen and

Tusinski 2007) feeds a broader 'legitimacy crisis' facing law enforcement today (Cook

2015). Part of the problem is police focus on *descriptors* of gangs (Klein and Maxson 2006),

superficial characteristics like an interest in certain music, colours, jewellery, or clothing, and

treat them as 'objective' indicators of gang membership. In so doing, they confirm existing

stereotypes about Black and minority ethnic youth (Trujillo and Vitale 2019) and criminalise

the complex symbolism and performances of gangs and gang members as elaborately detailed

in ethnographic research (e.g., Garot 2010). Lest we forget that gangs are multi-faceted,

socially constructed, hybrids of fiction and fact (Van Hellemont and Densley 2019), and gang

symbolism has been strongly commodified (Hayward and Yar 2006; Ilan 2015) to market

clothing and music (Ilan 2020; Pinkney and Robinson-Edwards 2018) and sell sensational

tales of Black and minority ethnic criminality to a mostly White, affluent, suburban youth

market (McCann 2017).

Scott (2020) found huge variations in methods of gang member identification as

reported by law enforcement across regions in the United States. Some areas were more

likely to identify gang members through associations or arrests with known gang members,

gang symbols, or self-nomination, whereas other regions were more likely to identify gang

members through a reliable informant. In some jurisdictions, someone first had to commit a

crime in order to be entered into a police gang database. This makes sense in the context of

the Eurogang definition—after all, why would someone who hasn't committed a crime be

included in a police database? —but makes no sense at all when you study gangs as groups

(as most gang ethnographies do) instead of aggregating individual data to the group level.

Research shows there is a difference between *gang member* activity, in which

individuals in gangs behave as independent agents, and *gang-motivated* activity, in which

individuals in gangs act as agents of the organization (Sánchez-Jankowski 2003). However,

only some police agencies require a gang *motive* to be present to classify a crime as 'gang-

related', while others only require gang *membership* to define a crime as a gang crime

(Maxson and Klein 1996; Valasik and Reid 2021). This relates back to the academic question

(e.g., Thornberry et al. 1993), to what extent is the gang responsible for all the criminal

behaviour of its members? This question is relevant for law enforcement practitioners

because anti-gang policies might not even address the alleged gang crime that is perceived to

be the issue. In fact, while the perpetrator is registered as a gang member, their gang status

might have nothing to do with their actions.

From Gangs and Gang Crime to Gang Violence—Shifting the Focus

As discussed, where police have traditionally come unstuck in their response to gangs

is in their generalisation of gang *member* crime to gang crime, and street culture symbolism

to gang symbolism. The contemporary climate around police abolition (Vitale 2018) affords

us the rare opportunity to focus squarely on what the gang actually *does* and redirect our

efforts from gangs and gang members *per se* to harmful gang behaviours. Instead of starting

from the premise that gangs are inherently a problem, we must ask what makes gangs a

problem in the first place. The answer is violence (Sullivan 2005). To paraphrase Zimring

and Hawkins (1999), *gang crime isn't the problem, but gang violence is*. Gang-motivated

violence is the only crime attributable to 'the gang' and it exists with or without the

criminologists or the police; that much is clear from nearly 100 years of gang research.

The founding father of gang research (Thrasher 1927) did not see crime as a

constitutional feature of gangs, but he did identify *conflict* as the driving force in gang

formation. The cycle of gang violence is well-documented (Decker 1996; Moule, Decker, and

Pyrooz, 2017) and involves a chain reaction of retaliation until eventually intervention and/or

de-escalation results. The cycle of violence is explained by opportunity structures (Hughes

and Short 2014), normative influence (Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Densley 2013), status

concerns (Miller 1958; Anderson 1999), and collective behaviours (Thrasher 1927; Klein

1971; Pizarro and McGloin 2006)—all components of a 'group process' perspective on gang

violence (McGloin and Collins 2015; Short and Strodtbeck 1965). This gang-motivated

violence is the only form of illegal behaviour that is truly unique to gangs and is so 'central to

gang identity and certainly to gang lore' (Maxson 2015: 529) that it deserves its own gang-

specific research focus (Katz 1988; Maxson 1999; Maxson et al. 1985; Maxson and Klein

1996; Mares 2010).

Gang violence is by far the most harmful feature of gangs to the communities in

which they reside (Abt 2019). The challenge for researchers and practitioners alike is

capturing it accurately (Valasik and Reid 2021). Existing studies utilize police data—

primarily field interrogation cards and gunshot victimizations—to study the cycle of gang

violence and its spatial and temporal patterns (e.g., Papachristos 2009; Papachristos et al.

2015; Valasik et al. 2017). However, owing to existing gang constructs, police data are

imperfect for more granular interpretation of gang-motivated violence; that is, violence that

truly arises from gang (not gang member) activity and is committed on behalf of the group

(Rosenfeld, Bray, and Egley 1999; Maxson and Klein 1996; see also Sanders 2019).

For example, the violence of organised crime groups tends to be policed separately

from gang violence, but in practice some gangs evolve and gang members can be embedded

within organised crime networks (Densley 2014; Densley et al. 2019; McLean and Densley

2020; Roks and Densley 2020). Gang members also fulfil a number of non-violent and non-

criminal roles (Fraser and Atkinson 2014), many gang members go out of their way to avoid

violence (Garot 2010), and a fear of retaliation is often a much more important driver of

conflict than the will to violence itself (Vandenbogaerde and Van Hellemont 2016).

To prevent gang violence, actors need the necessary information and the right status

to resolve tensions (Sierra-Arévalo and Papachristos 2015). First, in terms of data issues, we

see a middle ground in the creation of more restrictive gang databases that are less a tool and

more a source of information. As mentioned above, gang violence is an act and it is determined more by motive than by its descriptive characteristics (Maxson and Klein 1996). A gang violence database could be designed around said motive(s), and a court decision by a judge could provide checks and balances for inclusion and exclusion criteria. Such an endeavour would allow police to collect data on the patterns of gang violence, and police the real problem with gangs, without problematising the gang in general.

If social service providers shared all they knew about gangs with police officers in the construction of a more accurate gang violence database, there is no doubt a more nuanced understanding of gang membership would emerge from police data (Densley and Pyrooz 2020). However, mere information sharing between police and community partners will remain caught in a fundamental dilemma of conflicting aims if policing itself remains anchored in a culture of crime-fighting and gang suppression (e.g., Brunson et al. 2015). The potential to unduly label individuals who have committed no crime will remain, so too will the risk that the database becomes a tool for surveillance, prosecution, and repression, criminalising the communities where gang members reside. Including in a database people who have never committed any violence, but are at risk of offending or victimisation, *should* facilitate humanisation of gang members and move us closer to valuing the experience of gangs as laid out in the 'thick descriptions' of gang members themselves. Absent broader changes in police culture (e.g., Vitale 2018), it is more likely to result in further net-widening that is harmful to vulnerable communities.

Still, the tension between data collection and intelligence sharing on the one hand, and data privacy and protection on the other remains regardless of whether it is the police gathering the data or the community. The most effective (and evidence-based) approach to community work to combat gang violence involves not just the police, but other agencies (e.g., social work, education, etc.). Recidivism rates tend to be lower when the individual is

supported by multi-disciplinary teams during the rehabilitation pathway (Bender et al. 2016), and we need this approach to be adopted on the front end before the crimes are committed. Traditionally, police have led and managed these efforts in the context of focused deterrence (Braga et al. 2018; Sierra-Arévalo and Papachristos 2015), but there is scope to do more.

Police can have a *proactive* role in gang-motivated violence, but it requires a subtle shift in emphasis from hard deterrence to soft prevention. Surveys find that traditional police gang units are engaged in some form of gang prevention (Langton 2010), but distributing literature to schools, parents, and community groups is the most common activity, followed by after-school activities and late-night sports programming (Gravel et al. 2013). Police also deliver education and training in schools to facilitate gang resistance (Densley et al. 2017; Esbensen 2015). However, we are more inspired by police and mental health worker 'co-responder' models where a specially trained officer and a mental health crisis worker respond together to mental health calls for service (for a review, see Puntis et al. 2018). Such models draw on the combined expertise of the officer and mental health professional to link people with mental illnesses to appropriate services or provide other effective and efficient responses. Studies find this leads to a reduction in the use of police custody and improved relationships between law enforcement agencies and their local partners and citizens (Puntis et al. 2018).

Something similar could occur in response to gang violence whereby police partner with social service providers and community-based violence interrupters to de-escalate tensions and offer triage services before violence gets out of hand. This would signal a move away from militarized, broken-windows policing toward a consent-based policing model that encourages and develops a culture based on the minimum use of force, transparent complaint handling, community policing and outreach, and procedural and restorative justice (Deuchar et al. 2021). Where the community is confident they can call on the police to intervene if

necessary, but also discuss and troubleshoot problems in the community beyond gangs.

Where the police are not only crime-fighters but problem-solvers, and where information

shared is valued even when it is not actionable intelligence.

Concluding Remarks

A recent report by John Jay College Research Advisory Group on Preventing and

Reducing Community Violence (2020) identified several evidence-backed strategies for

improving public safety without depending on law enforcement, including place-based

interventions that help design-out crime (Lasley 1999; Valasik 2018); outreach programs like

Cure Violence (see Butts et al. 2015) that rely on people respected in the community, like

former gang members and local pastors, to intervene among people who are at risk for violent

behaviour, strengthening anti-violence social norms and peer relationships; engagement and

support for the people most responsible for community violence—namely young males; and

comprehensive and uniform policies that can limit access to the tools of violence, namely

firearms. However, it is clear that these measures alone, or even in conjunction with greater

public spending on social services, cannot and will not replace a police response to the

violence committed by gang members entirely. Community and outreach workers may be the

first line actors, but the police will always have a reactive role to play. When community

'violence interruption' (Butts et al. 2015) fails and gang violence occurs, for example, we

need police to respond in an investigative capacity to bring offenders to justice (Leovy 2015).

For police to regain community trust and legitimacy in this endeavour, a refocus of

their efforts on the problem of gang violence versus gangs *per se* would constitute a first

valuable step. This is not just a philosophical switch; it is a practical one. It requires law

enforcement to resist the temptation to police communities vulnerable to crime through the

lens of the 'criminologist's gang' and recognise that practices designed to tackle *gangs* are

not necessarily effective in tackling *gang violence*. In fact, they may inadvertently contribute

to violence if they increase gang cohesiveness (Klein 1971) or validate the gang's claim that

it provides community protection when government is absent (Leovy 2015; Sobel and Osoba

2009; Venkatesh 2000). Leaving the gang-lens aside and tackling the issues that

neighbourhoods and communities struggle with most requires a policing that is embedded

within these neighbourhoods and communities and appreciates even some pro-social

understandings of gangs. In the end, if crime is not the problem, crimefighting is not the

solution. Community-based policing is, and if done right it could transform our understanding

of gangs within and beyond the walls of policing.

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