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Reluctant Gangsters Revisited: The Evolution of Gangs from Postcodes to Profits

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Abstract

The aim of the current study was to understand how gangs have changed in the past ten years since Pitts' (2008) study in the London Borough of Waltham Forest. The study undertook interviews with 21 practitioners working on gang-related issues and 10 young people affected by gangs or formerly embedded in them. Two focus groups involving 37 participants from key agencies then explored the preliminary findings and contributed to a conceptualisation of a new operating model of gangs.

The study found that local gangs had evolved into more organized and profit-oriented entities than a decade earlier. The new operating model rejected visible signs of gang membership as "bad for business" because they attracted unwanted attention from law enforcement agencies. Faced with a saturated drugs market in London, gangs moved out to capture drugs markets in smaller UK towns in "county lines" activities.

This more business-oriented ethos has changed the meaning of both territory and violence.

While gang members in the original study described an emotional connection with their postcode, territory is increasingly regarded as a marketplace to be protected. Similarly, violence has moved from an expressive means of reinforcing gang identity to being increasingly used as an instrumental means of protecting business interests.

The current study offers a rare opportunity to gain a picture of gangs at two time periods and contributes to work on the contested nature of UK gangs and renewed interest in gang evolution. These findings have important implications for local authorities and criminal justice agencies who need to address directly the profit motive of gang activity.

Keywords: Gangs; Gang Evolution; County Lines; Drugs; Violence.

Introduction

The term ‘gang’ is contested and controversial in the UK context, but a definition is essential to the understanding of all groups, regardless of their name or primary activities and goals. Thus, the ‘consensus Eurogang definition’ of durable and street-oriented youth groups whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity is sufficiently general to capture the essence of the groups described herein (Klein and Maxson 2006: 4). Emphasis on resilience and collective identity does not diminish the fact that gangs can and do change—a theme well established in gang studies (Ayling 2011; Thrasher 1927; Weisel 2002). Research demonstrates that factors internal and external to the gang contribute to its ‘maturation’ (Gottschalk 2017) and over time gangs shift from a focus on youthful, recreational, non-delinquent pursuits (i.e., Thrasher 1927) to financial gains, whereby crime becomes more central to group identity (Densley 2012, 2014; McLean 2018).

This study investigates gang activity in the London Borough of Waltham Forest, which was the site of Pitts' (2008) *Reluctant Gangsters: The Changing Face of Youth Crime*, the first in what has since become a resurgence in contemporary studies of 'gangs' in the United Kingdom (Densley 2013; Deuchar 2009; Fraser 2015; Hallsworth 2013; Harding 2014). Pitts' study provided a clear baseline for understanding gangs, especially in east and south London, but most notably in the borough of Waltham Forest, where much of the study took place (see Pitts 2007). In his original study, Pitts (2007, 2008) found that gangs had only developed in the preceding decade. Gang members in Waltham Forest described an emotional relationship with their local area, leading one young respondent to say that he would 'defend anyone who lived in his postcode' (Pitts 2008: 114). These territories bore little if any relationship to drugs markets and the violence involved appeared to serve little practical purpose beyond providing an arena to demonstrate courage and physical prowess.

A decade later, a research team went back Waltham Forest to see what, if anything, had changed. The study was commissioned by the London Borough of Waltham Forest on behalf of the local gang partnership because they perceived that gangs in their area had changed and they wanted to understand how they had changed and what their new operating models were (Whittaker et al. 2018). As a ten-year follow up study, it provides an opportunity to compare gang activity across two time periods and to establish current and future risks and implications. Below, we outline the findings in detail, namely the evolution of gangs from an emphasis on territorial violence (postcodes) to a focus on illicit enterprise (profits). We begin by examining the contemporary literature on UK gangs and evidence for the evolution of gangs in this context.

Literature Review: A Decade of UK Gang Research

The ‘empirical turn’ and subsequent ‘quantification of gang research’ that began in the late 1980s (Pyrooz and Mitchell 2015: 42) has meant that in the decades since, gang research has morphed into research more about gang *members* than gangs. Bucking this trend, the current study works in the tradition of the ‘classic’ or ‘golden’ eras of scholarship that put the gang front and centre (Pyrooz and Mitchell 2015: 41). The nature and origin of gangs in the UK has nevertheless been contested by those arguing that gangs are a response to urban poverty and those arguing that gangs are a social construction reflecting a victimisation of youth, particularly black and ethnic minority youth (Williams 2015).

Notwithstanding the ethnographic work of Patrick (1973), who identified the presence of violent territorial gangs in Glasgow in the 1960s, Britain is traditionally known for its street-oriented youth tribes and subcultures of ritual resistance, not ‘gangs’ per se (see Pearson 2006; 2011). Britain’s inability to *see* gangs has been attributed in part to a collective failure of imagination, brought about by a constrained view of what Britain is supposed to be imagining (Klein 2001). All this changed in 2008, when, amid rising youth violence in Britain’s urban centres, John Pitts (2008) proclaimed gangs to be the “changing face of youth crime.” Drawing on qualitative research in east and south London, Pitts offered an explanatory theoretical position centred on the impact of globalization and the concentration of poverty in deprived neighbourhoods, which acted as crucibles for gang activity. Pitts identified a generation of marginalized ‘reluctant gangsters,’ who pragmatically joined gangs in an effort to negotiate the harsh realities of street life. Gangs were real, violent, and disproportionately affected the poorest in society, Pitts said.

Pitts’ findings prompted backlash from some critics. Notably, Hallsworth (2013) argued

youth crime could not be reduced to gangs and that Pitts had misrepresented the ‘violent street worlds’ young people seeking relief from boredom and structural inequality had created.

Gangs, Hallsworth argued, were a social construction and media invention around which both police and academics coalesced in order to keep themselves in paid work. Pitts, he concluded, had succumbed to unguarded ‘gang talk’ (Hallsworth and Young 2008) and was reminded that *loose lips sink ships*. Hallsworth foreshadowed heavy criticism of subsequent government policy on gangs (see Shute and Medina 2014; Smithson and Ralphs 2016), with some commentators arguing the ‘G-word’ helped politicians justify the scapegoating and criminalization of black and minority ethnic youth (Alexander 2008; Gunter 2017; Smithson et al. 2012; Williams 2015).

Pitts (2012, 2016) responded in kind to these criticisms, describing the academics underplaying victim impact or neutralizing harm caused by gangs as ‘reluctant criminologists’ blinded by cognitive dissonance and in dereliction of their professional duty to transform private troubles into public issues. He argued that knowledge of gangs was first raised in Britain’s deprived neighbourhoods by victims, their parents, and local (but voiceless) youth workers (Pitts 2012). These concerns were soon picked up by media narrators and journalists who, in the absence of any contemporary UK vocabulary, adopted US tropes and language to refer to these different delinquent collectives (see Densley 2011; Van Hellefont and Densley 2018). The discourse adopted often obfuscated the fact that the UK had its own home-grown areas of ‘multiple marginality’ (Vigil 2002) and that racial discrimination, income inequality, a lack of affordable housing, and conflict over the control of drug markets, had birthed a quintessentially British variety of street gang. Gangs were a reaction to British society, not the other way around.

Battle lines were drawn. To gang, or not to gang, that was the question. By interviewing youth in Manchester, colleagues were able to identify territorial gangs, with the caveat that they were more ‘messy and fluid’ than those studied by Pitts in London or, indeed, the prototypical gangs of the United States (Aldridge and Medina 2008; Ralphs et al. 2009). Densley (2013) too found gangs, this time in London, including violent, hierarchically organized groups that resembled those described by Pitts.

Densley (2012, 2014) further identified a linear progression of gangs from early expressive to late instrumental stages. This evolution permitted movement from recreational goals and activities through crime towards financial goal orientation, wherein gangs ‘resemble not just crime that is organized, but organized crime’ (Densley 2013: 66). For Densley, UK street gangs were not only real, but covered a wide spectrum from simple to complex.

Also in London, Harding (2014) applied Bourdieu’s social field theory to argue gangs constitute a unique social field with its own rules and logic. Within this social arena of intense competition, young gang members both survived and thrived by generating, trading, and maintaining personal levels of ‘street capital’—a road ranking that determined position in the gang hierarchy and allowed others to rank their position. Harding said this was done by employing the ‘gang repertoire’, a variable collection of criminal activity that allowed gang members to build reputations and demonstrate skill. For Harding, the social field of the gang was always evolving, as demonstrated by the recent integration of social media into the life of UK gangs (Irwin-Rogers et al. 2018; Storrod and Densley 2017). The evolution of UK gangs has been further demonstrated by an emerging ‘county lines’ supply model of illicit drugs (NCA 2016; Robinson et al. 2018; Storrod and Densley 2017; Windle and Briggs 2015b), whereby gang members in hub cities like London ‘commute’ to provincial markets not just to wholesale their product, but also to retail it

(for a discussion, see Coomber and Moyle 2017). Gang evolution in relation to drug dealing has also been observed in Glasgow, Scotland's largest city (McLean 2018; McLean et al. 2018).

The Current Study

The process of gang evolution is difficult to capture in research, however, because gang studies often focus on individual gang members (not gangs), are cross sectional and time-bound, and are very rarely if at all replicated. Such is the unique contribution of the current study, a 10-year follow-up of John Pitts' (2008) *Reluctant Gangsters*. Set in the London borough of Waltham Forest, the site of the original study, and based on interviews with practitioners and young people, but also analysis of official data, the current research provides an opportunity to compare gang activity across two time periods. It investigates the extent to which there are perceived similarities or differences in the nature of street gangs in the area studied by Pitts, and whether or not gangs were thought to have changed in the last ten years, thus contributing to the emerging literature on the nature and extent of gangs in the United Kingdom.

Methods

The study adopted a research design using qualitative data collection methods of semi-structured interviews and focus groups at two stages, allowing for the exploration of a model of gangs developed from the initial data. Since those affected by the topic of interest can hold strong views and even participate in 'gang talk' where professionals who work together can form a shared view that may not be accurate but which is a shared story that is propagated through a particular team or service (Hallsworth and Young, 2008), the study design

emphasised both methodological and data triangulation to avoid ‘outsider’ interpretations being imposed on the data (Williamson and Whittaker, 2017).

The first stage consisted of semi-structured interviews with professionals from the statutory and voluntary sector (21 participants). Professional participants were recruited through the local multi agency gang partnership. The professionals had a range of different levels of experience of working with gangs, from people who had only a few years’ experience to people who had worked continuously with gang members in the local area for the previous fifteen years. **Table 1** lists the professional participants involved in the study.

Table 1: List of participants

The following people were involved in individual interviews or focus groups:

- Former gang members (4 participants) from a range of local gangs
- Young people affected by gang activity (6 participants)
- Professionals (21 participants) from the following services:

Local voluntary sector gang intervention agencies

Pan-London agency working with young girls involved in gangs

Local authority young people’s involvement staff

Local authority victim advocacy team

Local authority community safety team

Local authority early help service

Metropolitan Police, including senior and front line officers involved in the

Youth Offending Service

Gang lead workers for neighbouring local authorities

Pan London Trident police gang unit

Youth Offending Service

Probation Service

Local research and intelligence service

Political leaders within the local authority

Voluntary sector drugs organization

Pupil Referral Unit (school service for young people who have been excluded from or otherwise unable to attend a mainstream education).

Staff from the local Prevent (anti-terrorism) service

Ten young people, four of whom were former gang members were interviewed. We have used the term 'former' or 'ex-gang member' to describe young people who have had varying degrees of 'embeddedness' in gangs (Pyrooz et al. 2013) and who either self-identify as gang members and/or who have been identified by gang intervention agencies as being involved with local gangs. This is a group that has traditionally been very difficult for researchers to reach. This is a modest number of gang members but this is a traditionally difficult to reach group and the new emphasis on secrecy had made recruitment significantly more difficult. They represented a range of different gangs and were recruited through grassroots gang intervention agencies. All had left within the preceding 12-18 months and some still retained strong social links with the gangs that they had been involved with. Six young people living in the local area who were affected by gang activity were interviewed together as a group. These young people were not embedded gang members but had extensive knowledge of local gang activity and were recruited by the local authority.

All participants, whether former gang members, gang-affected youth or professionals, were asked questions focused on their knowledge of local gangs, the gangs' current activities and any changes that they had noticed in the previous ten years.

The study was ethically sensitive, particularly because of the risk of retribution towards ex-gang members who participated. Therefore, former gang members were interviewed individually and care was taken when making contact and establishing a safe place for interviews to take place.

Similarly, transcripts were carefully anonymised to protect the identity of participants.

Participants were provided with a participant information sheet and a consent form before and at the interview. Afterwards, participants were debriefed by the interviewer and had the opportunity to ask questions. The study received ethical approval from the London South Bank University ethics committee. To avoid potential identification, all descriptive information relating to participants' demographic details, have not been included.

A documentary analysis was undertaken of data related to gangs held by local services, including law enforcement and social service providers. This included historical data on the activities linked with specific gangs and the scale and severity of the crimes attributed to them, which provided snapshots of how specific gangs had developed over a time period. It was important to review such data critically as some information was more reliable than others, e.g., had been corroborated from multiple reliable sources. Professionals involved in gathering and analysing information were aware of these difficulties and discussed how it had become increasingly problematic as gangs were becoming more sophisticated in hiding their activities.

At the end of stage one, the whole data set from the first stage was imported into qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 11) and was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and

Clarke, 2006, 2013) and preliminary themes and sub-themes findings were formulated. The research team found that there was a comparatively high degree of agreement between data obtained from former gang members and young people affected by gangs and the voluntary and statutory sector professionals involved in working with them.

The initial data analysis suggested a new operating model of gangs. To explore and elucidate this model, two focus groups were held comprised of key people across the range of statutory and voluntary agencies: voluntary sector gang intervention organizations, youth groups, the youth offending service, police, the probation service, health and voluntary agencies working with young people. A total of 37 participants were involved in two focus groups, who helped triangulate and clarify points made earlier, and reflect upon the proposed new operating model for gangs. The aim was to strengthen the credibility and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of the study by using methodological as well as data triangulation in order to provide an opportunity for the emerging themes to be challenged and deepened and the findings to be made more robust.

Findings and Discussion

Waltham Forest

Waltham Forest is a London borough of 15 square miles and 275,000 residents in northeast London, England. It was one of the host boroughs of the 2012 London Olympics and this, and a burgeoning economy, have seen the development of a night-time economy in parts of the borough, combined with rises in house prices and rents. In the past decade, social housing stock had been sold and returned as 'buy to let' properties. The number of employed people in the borough had increased and improvements have also occurred in school performance. At the same time, however, there has been reduction of government funding to the public sector

and its partners owing to an austerity response to the global financial crisis of 2008. Although many respondents lamented that less money was available today than ten years ago for both mainstream and specialist services in Waltham Forest, analysis of the impact on communities, gang members, and their families was beyond the scope of this study.

Through all these changes street gangs were constant. In 2017, approximately 230 individuals were identified by police as being gang members or associates, and 56 people were currently imprisoned or on remand for a gang-related offences, ranging from minor fraud to serious violence. **Table 2** lists the gangs identified in the Pitts (2007) study and the currently identified gangs in Waltham Forest.

Table 2: Gangs identified in the original Pitts (2007) study compared to current gangs

Original gangs (Pitts, 2007)	Current gangs (2017)
1. Beaumont E10	1. Beaumont Crew E10
2. Boundary/Monserrat	2. Boundary Boys E17
3. Priory Court	3. Priory Court E17
4. Drive	4. The Drive/DM Crew E17
5. Piff City	5. Mali Boys/Mali Strip E10/E17
6. Red African Devils	6. Loyal Soldiers/Cathall Boys E11
7. Canhall	7. Chingford Hall E4
8. Barrier/Brookcroft	8. Selrack E4
9. Highams Park	9. Stoneydown E17
10. New World Order	10. Coppermill E17
11. Asian Auto Theft	11. OC Crew E10
12. Hackney Overground	12. Thatched House Thugs E15

Commuters 13. Russian/Lithuanian/Polish Gangs	
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There are currently 12 gangs who are active in Waltham Forest, compared to the 13 gangs identified by Pitts (2007). Of Pitts' original gangs, only four (Beaumont Crew, Priory Court, Drive and Boundary) are still active. One new gang, the Mali Boys, features prominently in this paper because it featured strongly in the data obtained both from young people and professionals. When participants were asked about the different gangs, the Mali Boys were discussed more than any the remaining gangs combined.

Gang Evolution

There have been key changes in the ways that gangs operate since Pitts' (2007, 2008) original report ten years ago. Gangs have moved away from a focus on postcodes towards a more professional business approach focused upon the drugs market. Succinctly stated:

'Back then it wasn't about money...Back then it was just about ratings (Participant 27, ex-gang member).

'It's not really about postcodes any more. It's about money' (Participant 10, statutory sector professional).

This shift has three core elements. Firstly, a move away from postcodes and visible displays of membership towards avoiding activities that attract police attention. Secondly, territory has developed a new meaning. Instead of an emotional sense of belonging to a postcode that needs to be defended, territory is valued as a marketplace to be maintained. Thirdly, a focus upon financial gain through control of drugs markets, particularly through alliances with other gangs and aggressive expansion outside of London to new markets with the development of ‘county line’ operations. Each element will be explored in greater depth.

From Postcodes to Profits

‘We just don’t hear about postcodes...they’ve evolved now in that, you know, the money’s with the drugs (Participant 9, pan-London statutory sector professional).

It’s moved on from postcode related activity: it’s now more to do with drug dealing. I think that’s changed, probably, over the last, maybe, five years (Participant 8, statutory sector professional).

When the *Reluctant Gangsters* study was completed 10 years ago, the focus was upon postcode territories that needed to be defended from outsiders. Gang members described an emotional relationship with their local area, encapsulated by one participant who stated:

I’d defend anyone in E10 (Key Informant 27, Pitts 2007: 34).

These territories often bore little if any relationship to drugs markets and gang territories. Gang membership was exhibited through gang ‘colours’, where clothing and other insignia

were used to demonstrate a visible presence within that territory. Throughout the fieldwork, however, local and pan-London participants consistently reported that this had changed:

Gangs nowadays have gone away from that territory based colour, clothing with violence...they are all going towards financial criminal activity (Participant 12, statutory sector professional).

We have become more and more aware of a decreasing focus on territory and honour (Participant 1, statutory sector professional).

The most commonly expressed explanation for this change was that using gang colours drew unwanted attention from law enforcement agencies. One statutory professional explained:

I don't see it at all anymore so it was particular bandanas, particular colours linked to specific gangs and that was how you would identify whether you were a member of a particular gang, whether you were a rival gang member, so it's very unclear that the person, whether they are linked to a gang at all because this clothing or colour association isn't sort of present anymore and it's a lot more covert, the gangs are active and operating at a more covert level (Participant 12, statutory sector professional).

A pan-London statutory professional saw it as a wider trend across London and made a similar point:

Why stand out? Why wear colours and identify yourself? Because you know police are just going to stop you..., So, yes, they've moved with the, they've certainly moved with the

times (Participant 9, pan-London statutory sector).

However, one young person saw the original focus on postcodes and gang colours as heavily influenced by the media:

Someone in the media came out and called us gangs and then everyone just seemed to run with it and it became a cool thing. Let's do this thing and let's get colours, let's get bandannas and we'll give ourselves a name but realistically it is just individuals who are friends (Young person, focus group).

This presents an interesting account of how media interest in gangs may have originally contributed towards gangs responding by adopting American style gang insignia (for a discussion, see Van Hellemont and Densley 2018). Both explanations are not mutually exclusive; media interest may have provoked an impetus to develop a gang identity, but gang members may then have realized that these insignia have unwanted consequences. Another aspect was avoiding ostentatious displays of wealth, such as expensive cars and clothes. This is mainly promoted by a specific gang, the Mali Boys, who will be discussed in detail later. Whilst this was often attributed to being a distinguishing feature of this gang compared to other gangs, this new way of operating is consistent with a recent Home Office study (Disley and Liddle 2016: 36), which found:

Gangs were thought to be operating more covertly, in part in response to the use of gang injunctions and other enforcement tactic... But practitioners and associates also suggested that reduced visibility could be a sign of gangs evolving into more organized groups (a

trend reported in other research into gangs in the UK) who avoid public signs of gang affiliation on the grounds that it is “bad for business”.

Gang ‘Business’ and the Drugs Market

You notice how gangs have changed, how their modus operandi has changed, it just shows that they will evolve, the strong gangs will evolve and change (Participant 48, statutory sector professional, focus group 2).

A consistent theme across the accounts of ex-gang members, young people, and professionals was that there had been a move towards a more professional operating model that was focused upon the drugs market:

That seems to have exploded in the last few years, I think: the drug dealing. I think it’s still more now because of the whole thing: the explosion round drugs. It’s more around getting the money (Participant 6, statutory sector professional)

Indeed, one participant felt that it had become so centred on the drugs market and so economically driven that the original focus on gang identity was being lost:

To be honest with you, what I think now is that it’s more about the drug dealing. The gangs isn’t really ... I mean, the drug dealers don’t care: they just need to make their money and they don’t care if people say they’re from a gang or whatever (Participant 6, statutory sector professional).

In the original report, Pitts (2007) described the embryonic stages of this development as a response, in part, to the theory and practice of situational crime prevention (e.g., Clarke 1980), which had forced gangs to change their modus operandi from one-off large robberies or ‘blags’ involving banks, post offices, and security vans to drug distribution, which was inherently less risky. One professional also linked it to increasing affluence in the local economy that contributed to the growth of the drugs market:

Ten or fifteen years ago robbery was the main crime because the money wasn't there for a drug market, it was robbery to fund the recreation habit but it's now moved on, drugs is now the main thing (Participant 37, statutory sector professional, focus group 2).

Anchored in Thrasher's (1927) classic concept of gangs as ‘playgroups’, Densley (2014) argues that gangs initially start off as groups of peers who come together based on similar recreational activities, which then expands into offering each other goods and services. One professional that was interviewed for the study described the ‘recreation stage’ through the eyes of a gang member as:

They go to the [music] studio, they hang out and they may play games like PlayStation and X-box. Some of them go to school so they meet in education they meet anywhere, like the chicken shop (Participant 10, statutory sector professional).

Participants from the focus group described the recreational stage of a gang as:

Similar people tend to do similar things so if you are around somebody that is doing something for long enough, birds of a feather you will naturally start to do it

You make friends, you chill with your friends and if your friends do bad things then sometimes you get caught up and sometimes you don't (Participant 23, young person, focus group 1).

While the initial recreational stage was focused on socializing and participating in everyday activities, it also became clear that not everyone within the gang had the same agenda. A former Mali Gang member that was interviewed for the study explained that some people were very focused on money whilst others were more focused upon recreation:

There are two different types of people. There are people who are just really money hungry and then there's people that are just coming to the Strip (the main drug dealing area) just to chill, small quantities of [marijuana] spliffs and chill, do you know what I mean. There are certain people who are just on money, those type of people, the police know them, individuals know those people and those people make a lot of money (Participant 28, ex-gang member)

The prospect of making money was appealing to gang members from low-income backgrounds and little formal education, hence the evolution to the stage where more criminal offences take place and members are integrated into the gang by committing offences in order to gain respect amongst the peers and rival gangs (Harding 2014). However, this 'crime stage' (Densley 2014) also attracts attention from the police and, as documented in prior research (e.g., Thrasher 1927; Decker 1996; Suttles 1968), the gang then forms greater solidarity in order to navigate external pressures, including from rival gangs.

In relation to the criminal stage, the Mali Boys were mentioned several times throughout the study as being the most prominent gang in the borough. In order to gain respect during the

‘crime stage’, an ex-gang member gave an example of a situation that had previously occurred within the borough:

So, I could be a younger that will carry knives and I don't care about stabbing people so I will do the dirty work for people. So, in that sense, one of the olders can go up and say, 'Oh yes, I've got an issue with this person, deal with him'. I do it repeatedly, until I get this reputation of, 'Right, that guy is crazy, he will stab you in seconds, he doesn't care and then you gain this more of a status.....people just have more respect for you' (Participant 29, ex-gang member).

It is in the ‘enterprise’ stage, the third part of Densley’s (2014) gang evolution model, where ‘street capital’ (Harding 2014) earned through crime and violence is transformed into financial capital, as gangs move away from everyday recreational activities and personal friendships to focus more on business acumen:

They have a got a good supply of drugs and so from a business point of view I think certain people have teamed up with them because they get good stuff at a good price I guess (Participant 7, voluntary sector professional).

The Mali Boys had moved from a ‘crime’ stage onto the ‘enterprise’ stage. The difference is that criminal activity such as drug dealing is an important means to support the gang’s activities in the crime stage, whereas it becomes an end in itself in the enterprise stage. This was captured by one statutory sector professional:

The drug dealing is almost their raison d'être – it is an industry – that they would look to

expand as any successful industry (Participant 11, statutory sector professional).

Consistent with prior research on drug-selling gangs (e.g., Decker et al. 2008), enterprising gangs adopted a more formalized structure in order to organize activities efficiently, which was noted by both young people and professionals:

What I've seen is they are more organized now (Participant 22, young person).

The thing which we're more aware of is a more formalized structure to things (Participant 1, statutory sector professional).

The reasons for why drugs markets had become central to gang activity was explained by a former gang member:

It's predominantly drugs because, as a gang member, that's your most stable income. It's easier for you to get a bag of weed or a kilo or half or whatever and sell it. It's easier than going out and having to rob people every day. There's a lot less risk involved (Participant 29, ex-gang member).

This view was elaborated on by a statutory sector professional:

Mobile phones back then were worth a lot more than they are now, there are mechanisms now to block phones, so they're just useless handsets, there isn't really much benefit from robbing someone unless you're going to rob them for cash but people aren't walking around with cash in their hands... We've seen a massive reduction I think in robberies

because it's not a viable source of income, drug criminality is a confirmed source of income (Participant 12, statutory sector professional).

Whilst illegal drug markets were perceived as generally peaceable compared to robbery, interviewees still shared examples of 'systemic' violence (Goldstein 1985; Reuter 2009), both internal to gangs (i.e., for disciplinary purposes) and external to gangs (i.e., transactional). For example:

When your son or daughter becomes somebody who is just evil, as in violent and doing heinous crimes, like kidnapping people and holding them hostage...like I know a story where the Mali's had got a boy in the [car] boot and drove him all the way to Wales...money, drugs, you know, owe people money, you've got to pay the debt, if you ain't got the money get yourself killed or something (Participant 20, young person).

Young people argued that money was the key motivator for gangs and violence was an instrumental means of protecting business interests rather than an expressive means of reinforcing gang identity:

You need to make some money and that is the best way to make money and if you've got links already into that kind of activity then I can see why people do it and it's going away from the violence. There is still violence because of the drug activity but not so much violence just for the sake of violence because it then highlights the other activity you were doing (Participant 12, statutory sector professional).

The gangs at the moment are much more about making money and they will use violence to

get what they want (Participant 6, statutory sector professional).

Recent research in another London borough discovered a similar emphasis on money-making among gang youth, with social media being used to advertise and facilitate the gang's instrumental activities (Storrod and Densley 2017)

A Changing Relationship with Territory

With a reduced focus upon postcodes, territory had developed a new meaning for gangs. While territory was also important for business purposes, it was more for instrumental rather than expressive reasons. Rather than purely an emotional sense of belonging, there was an increasing sense of territory as a workplace (see McLean, Deuchar et al. 2018). For example, 'county lines' operations provide access to new markets without the constant physical presence required to defend a particular postcode or estate (Robinson et al. 2018).

It is likely that this has been influenced by developments in housing, such as increasing housing pressures and the redevelopment of the Beaumont Estate, which made it increasingly difficult for some gangs to maintain a structure based on small estates. Some senior gang members now do not live in the estate where their gang is based, but rather they 'commute' to work. This was expressed by one professional in the following way:

Some of the more senior ones that are a bit older – some of the more coordinated players – may well have their own addresses. Some of them live off borough as well. So they come in to work (Participant 11, statutory sector professional).

Gangs operating 'county lines', moreover, use a single telephone number for ordering drugs, operated from outside the area, which becomes the group's 'brand'. Part of the more business focused operating model is the expansion of markets using county lines operations, which is common across London and other major UK cities, rather than being a local phenomenon (see Coomber and Moyle 2017; Densley et al. 2018; NCA 2016; Windle and Briggs 2015b). One statutory sector professional described the logic behind the targeting of new markets:

They identify areas where there is a demand and if you think a lot of these people in Ipswich, there are these dead end towns with former days of glory and unemployment is going up, the industrial decline. People who would have done those jobs in the past are now targeted by drug dealers, that creates a demand (Participant 16, statutory sector professional).

One young person expressed it as follows:

When you look at gangs, the root of it, a lot of criminal offences come from money and the money comes from the drugs so like in any market, when it becomes overpopulated they need to find a new market so they find another area that maybe they can make money from (Participant 24, young person, focus group 1)

Greater Opportunities for Business Alliances

The pursuit of business interests has led to greater opportunities to engage in alliances that can serve the interests of both parties. This is particularly true of the Mali Boys as the most influential gang in Waltham Forest currently and leading the new operating model. One statutory sector professional described their approach:

They're very much into much more of a business alliance... it is the professionalism of that particular gang, they are more focused on making money than on inter-turf warfare

(Participant 4, statutory sector professional).

Another statutory sector professional gave the example of how the Mali Boys had recently formed an alliance with a smaller gang (DM Crew):

But the Mali Boys being feared and being the bigger gang by this point... have basically absorbed the DM Crew, they are almost like an umbrella gang where they move into areas where there's smaller gangs and basically I'm assuming put it to them, you are either with us or against us, so the smaller gangs join them. It's almost like a franchise, like

McDonalds or Benetton where the Mali Boys have got a very effective pyramid structure, business plan, but instead of burgers and woolly jumpers its Class A drugs and cannabis

(Participant 16, statutory sector professional).

Franchises and alliances are well documented in the literature on drug-selling gangs (e.g., Levitt and Venkatesh 2000) and also consistent with the literature, one former gang member explained how business alliances between gangs could be unstable:

One minute you're friends; the next minute you're not. And it could just be one person within that group. You lot could all be fine. There could be ten guys from this gang, ten guys from that gang: everyone's fine with each other apart from this person and this person doesn't get on. They have a fight: their friends have to back their friends

(Participant 29, ex-gang member).

Indeed, a former gang member described how, in times of hardship, gang members can turn on each other, at times using what Reuter (2009: 275) describes as ‘successional’ violence for upward mobility:

Even within that tight circle, when things are getting hard, there’s not enough money coming through, maybe there’s been a drought with the drugs – no weed coming in – they will, literally, look at who’s in their circle and think, ‘Who can we rob?’ ‘Who can we kick out?’ ‘Who can we get rid of?’ In their own circle (Participant 29, ex-gang member).

A Highly Exploitative Operating Model

There is clear evidence that gangs in Waltham Forest have developed county lines operations outside the capital:

It’s all about the drug dealing now. It’s about getting young people out in the streets, selling your drugs for you, not really caring too much about any outcome they may have...
(Participant 6, statutory sector professional)

However, this new business model places several groups of people at elevated risk of ‘criminal exploitation’ (Robinson et al. 2018). Firstly, through financial and status incentives or debt-bondage, or both, children and young people are at risk of being drawn into working in drug markets, both locally and outside of their area. The particular vulnerability of younger people was highlighted by one participant:

Youngers are normally easier to influence, when they are at school (Participant 21, ex-gang member, focus group 1).

A second vulnerable group are individuals whose properties are taken over by gangs for use as a local base for drug dealing, a practice known as ‘cuckooing’ (Coomber and Moyle 2017). This is well established in county lines activities (Robinson et al. 2018), however, this tactic is also used locally to provide addresses to store and package drugs and to hide in during police activities. A former Mali Boys member insisted that the ways that they took over people’s homes was not exploitative:

You see one thing that we’re known for, the Mali’s, we ain’t dickheads, we won’t be a prick that knows this woman is disabled and what not and we’re going to use her house to do our things and what not, yeah. It can happen, I’m not saying they won’t do it but it is a thing where we have respect that comes from our culture, respect, that’s one thing we’ve got, we’ve got respect, do you know what I mean? So stuff like that, disabled people, old people, people like that is the type of thing where we have respect for them so it’s not like we can run in their house and do whatever we need to do and then shut the door behind their backs. We do it where the person where we are using their house is getting something out of it as well, so it’s not just oh we’re friends, we’ll use your house, that person is getting money or drugs or something (Participant 28, ex-gang member).

This could be seen as a form of denial in which taking over someone’s house is morally reframed as a transaction between consenting adults in which both parties gain. When he was questioned further, he explained the motivation for using somebody’s home in this way:

If they are outside it is more of a way that they can get caught, let's be honest. They are just getting paid to think smart here. What people are getting paid for is to think for us so what it is, we have to find our little rat holes where can just crawl in quickly so them rat holes – even those houses, they don't really sell things out of it, all they really do with these type of houses is they just go there and bag up their weed (Participant 28, ex-gang member).

However, individuals with drug debts, prior criminal histories, or precarious non-citizenship status are especially vulnerable to cuckooing. When used locally, the existence of established drug dealing areas means there is less need to use properties to sell drugs. Instead, the properties are often used to store and package drugs and as somewhere for street dealers to hide during law enforcement activities. This means that they attract less attention and are more difficult to discover, which presents additional risks to the vulnerable people involved.

Another group at risk is local businesses, who may be intimidated by gangs, including being forced to remove or disable their CCTVs. One participant identified a case in which a local branch of a national fast food chain was taken over to sell drugs from:

Sometimes, they do want to set up shop somewhere so they use intimidation. If they've a favourite shop: they intimidate the shopkeeper into taking down the CCTV for example. They threaten violence and use violence sometimes. There's a [local branch of a national fast food chain] that they took over for a while, intimidating the owners there. Again, I think they choose them quite carefully. So they probably choose their victims carefully' (Participant 11, statutory sector professional).

Campana and Varese (2018) argue that if a gang can generate fear in a community and coerce legal businesses then it is beginning to regulate or ‘govern’ illicit production and exchange—the last stage of evolution toward ‘organised crime’ (see also, Von Lampe 2016).

The ‘Postcodes to Profit’ operating model: The Mali Boys

The Mali Boys will be discussed in detail as they personify the changes that had taken place in the new operating model. They are currently the most influential gang in Waltham Forest, having filled a power vacuum created two or three years ago following police operations in relation to two other prominent gangs. The Mali Boys were formerly in alliance with another large gang, the Beaumont Crew, but split in 2016 and now operate separately.

The Mali Boys have subsumed several smaller gangs (DM Crew, Boundary, Coppermill and Stoneydown gangs) under their umbrella due to their reputation for extreme violence and access to high quality drugs supply. As one participant stated:

I think they’ve got a good supply of drugs and so from a business point of view I think certain people have teamed up with them because they get good stuff at a good price
(Participant 16, statutory sector professional).

Although the gang called itself the ‘Mali Boys’, the gang has a multi-racial membership, as did all of the gangs of Waltham Forest. Although gang elders were more likely to be Somalian, ‘youngers’ (Densley 2012; Pitts 2008) were rarely from Somalian backgrounds, which was consistent with their philosophy of keeping a low profile. They were recruited and used as retail drugs dealers and drug runners and sometimes left the London area for county lines drug dealing organized and paid for by the Mali Boys elders. The younger gang members between the ages of 12–17 were increasingly becoming active in street level crime

both as victims and perpetrators, including serious violence, weapons carrying, sexual violence and exploitation, and drug dealing:

Then you saw the Mali Boys become much more of a network within the criminal element of the Somali community who are very active initially across London and now nationally. ...one thing about the gangs is that they are very diverse and have a very multicultural recruitment policy and you started seeing younger boys, less so girls, mainly boys being affiliated and associated with the Mali Boys who had a non-Somali background

(Participant 6, statutory sector professional).

Notably, the Mali Boys initiated the £5 bag model of drug supply in the St. James Street area, known as the ‘Mali Strip’:

They will sell any amount to make whatever they can. They obviously produce such a level that they can afford to do that... they are not geographically driven, they are spread across the whole of the borough and in other parts of London as well... I think they are going to have the variety of product to take over from everyone else (Participant 42, statutory sector professional, focus group 2).

Many interviewees described how this presented a new operating model. For example, one participant identified several other ways in which the Mali Boys were different from others. Firstly, they collected intelligence on police officers through social media such as Facebook, as well as collecting officers’ personal number plates as a form of intimidation:

With seeing the Mali Boys coming now it’s a different kettle of fish altogether. Whereas

some of the other gangs were involved in the drugs trade, that wasn't necessarily their raison d'être. It was the gang came first... But the Mali Boys seem to have a business model and are a much more professional outfit. And that manifests itself in many different ways, such as the intelligence collection they do on officers. So they try and intimidate officers by collecting number plates, etc., and going on social media'.

Second, they used mobile phone technology to place spotters at strategic places to warn others of any police presence—a tactic first observed in London by Densley (2013). This was combined with more traditional methods, such as waiting outside of the police station to record the number plates of officers' personal cars.

It's for power, to try and intimidate... there were a number of the Mali Boys recently who were hanging around the back gate of one of the police stations where the police come in and out and they were making notes of the registration marks of the police officers' personal vehicles and taking photographs of those vehicles. What they were saying was we know where you live, we can trace you from this and that type of thing. It is a statement from the Mali Boys that they're not scared of the police and it's almost sabre rattling (Participant 16, statutory sector professional).

The participant pointed out that gang members would not be able to gain home addresses for car registrations so the information was of limited value, adding that:

I just don't think it would be in their best interests to start taking on the police that way. They know the legal system, they're using these kids so for the older gang members to say right, we're going to take out the police and do this, that and the other, is only going to

make it more tough for them so the status quo is better for them as it is so at the moment it is why disrupt it? We're not the enemy, the enemy is the rival gangs. They're making money, they're being successful (Participant 16, statutory sector professional).

Thirdly, the Mali boys worked in flexible ways in response to police operations:

They are agile enough not to shut down operations when police have a high visibility operation on the High Street. They'll just go into people's houses: cuckooing. So, actually, it's a more sophisticated approach than, I think, hitherto, we've experienced with the other gangs (Participant 11, statutory sector professional).

Reports from multiple sources indicated that four gangs (the Boundary Boys, The Drive/DM Crew, Stoneydown and Coppermill) were operating under the umbrella of the Mali Boys. Four other gangs (Beaumont Crew, Priory Court, Chingford Hall and Loyal Soldiers) are larger gangs that have evolved in a similar way to the Mali Boys but are less organised and powerful. Three gangs (Selrack, OC Crew and Thatched House Thugs) are smaller and less visible, partly due to the incarceration of key members.

One of the key questions now is whether the emergence of the Mali Boys is a local phenomenon or part of wider pan-London trends. Clearly knowledge gaps remain, especially when the UK continues to debate the utility of the word 'gang' (e.g., Gunter 2017). Definitions aside, although local participants have described the Mali Boys as being unique in many respects, participants working in pan-London roles have identified similar changes in gang operation models, which suggest that it is more than a local phenomenon. One participant noted:

Gangs have become much more organized... it's not so much around postcodes... a lot of it centres around the drugs, the county lines, the violence and vulnerability (Participant 9, pan-London statutory sector professional).

Further, this is compatible with a recent Home Office survey across the 33 areas in the government's Ending Gang and Youth Violence (EGYV) program found a mixed national picture (Disley and Liddle 2016). In London, over a third of areas (35%) reported that gangs in their area were more likely to get involved in organized criminal activities compared to two years previously. Only 11% of respondents from outside London identified a similar change. Respondents in London were also more likely to report an increase in organized and large-scale drug supply, describing local gangs as more 'professional', operating in more 'intelligent' ways and having financial or commercial motivations (Disley and Liddle 2016: 46).

County lines operations, for example, are already well developed and the emerging threats arise as gangs move onto the next stage, when local gangs seek to secure markets in rural towns that already have county lines activities run by other gangs from London or other large cities. The result is likely to be escalating conflict as gangs compete for new territory (Densley et al. 2018).

Local professionals and young people have identified the Mali Boys as 'different' and have explained the new operating model in terms of specific features of the gang. However, pan-London professionals and other recent research studies have identified similar features, which would suggest that it is part of a wider evolution of gang activity. In summary, the emergency of the Mali Boys is best understood as a particular stage in gang evolution rather

than an isolated phenomenon. The Mali Boys exemplify the core features of the later stages of the 'enterprise' phase of gang development, with early signs of 'governance' (Densley 2014).

Limitations

The study contributes to the literature on gang evolution by providing a rare snapshot of gangs in one area at two points in time. However, there are some methodological limitations. First, as a snapshot at a specific point in time, it is not a longitudinal study, but rather a revisiting of an old study site, whereby the first study (Pitts 2007, 2008) provides the baseline for comparison. Second, although the study triangulated the data from knowledgeable professionals and the lived experience of young people and ex-gang members, there is a potential bias that practitioners may engage in 'gang talk' reproducing a political and ideological discourse (Hallsworth and Young 2008). Third, the study is of one London borough and gangs will reflect the territories from whence they come although the findings of a more ruthless business-oriented model are transferable and reflected elsewhere.

For these reasons, future studies are encouraged to continue to emphasise the gang as the unit of analysis (versus gang members), not least because research is needed to uncover the precise mechanisms underlying gang evolution, including factors internal and external to the group. More rigorous, longitudinal methods are also needed to better observe continuity and change in gangs and gang neighbourhoods over time.

Conclusions

The current study presented a ten-year retrospective on gangs in Waltham Forest, the site of John Pitts (2008) seminal study, *Reluctant Gangsters*. It has documented some continuity, but mostly change in the presentation of gangs, best articulated as another example of UK gang

evolution (Densley 2014). Qualitative research with practitioners and young people in the Waltham Forest, including young people involved in gangs, revealed the emergence of a more organized and ruthless operating model focused on the drugs market and driven by a desire for profits. This new operating model rejected visible signs of gang membership as ‘bad for business’ because they attracted unwanted attention from law enforcement agencies. One gang, the Mali Boys, led these changes as the most business driven, violent, and exploitative of the gangs, but also the most secretive; working hard to remain anonymous to the police and local agencies.

Although the Mali Boys presented as a local phenomenon, there is growing evidence that they are part of a wider pan-London development as gangs become more organized (Densley 2012; Harding 2014). Understood within a gang evolution model (Ayling 2011; McLean, 2018), the dominance of the Mali Boys results from their moving into an advanced ‘enterprise’ stage. While local gangs have moved from a postcode focus, the Mali Boys have been the most successful at responding to the demands of a more professional operating model. They secure markets locally through being the dominant partner in business alliances with other gangs and outside London through developing county lines to transport and sell drugs in other towns where there is little competition and where gang members are unknown to local law enforcement agencies (Coomber and Moyle 2017).

This more business-oriented ethos also changed the meaning of territory, a central organizing feature of gangs (for a review, see Papachristos et al. 2012). Instead of an emotional sense of belonging to a postcode that needs to be defended, territory is valued as a marketplace to be protected (see also, McLean, Deuchar et al. 2018). The local housing estate still has meaning for younger gang members as they are usually recruited from that locality, but older gang members are less likely to live on the estate and identifying with the estate is often more symbolic than real. In other words, the gangs first documented by Pitts (2008) a

decade ago, have moved from postcodes to profits.

Implications for Research and Practice The observed move away from postcodes to a new operating model focused on profits, personified by the Mali Boys, presents a number of practical challenges. The ethos of maintaining a low profile presents challenges to intervention agencies because it makes it more difficult to track gang activities—something police are already struggling to do legally and ethically (Amnesty International UK 2018). The growth of business alliances between gangs also presents new challenges for criminal justice agencies as it increases their capacity for up scaling drug dealing activities and achieving market dominance through economies of scale and better access to high quality drugs (see McLean et al. 2018). However, gang alliances are inherently unstable and conflicts amongst younger and less mature gang members could present a threat. The fluid, ever changing nature of gang activity (e.g., Windle and Briggs 2015a) makes it difficult to predict future gang development but there are a number of possibilities.

One possibility is that gangs like the Mali Boys could become more entrenched and develop into what Densley (2014) describes as ‘extra-legal governance’ (see also, McLean, Deuchar et al. 2018). Given the wide availability of drugs in London, it would be difficult for the Mali Boys to achieve monopoly control except in very limited geographical areas. Monopoly control is more feasible in specialist markets, such as firearms, but there is no evidence that street gangs are seeking to develop into these areas and they would face significant resistance from established organised crime groups (Hales et al. 2006). Another possibility that is more likely is that they will continue to seek to widen their geographical reach to secure profitable markets outside London without having to engage in conflicts with other gangs. While this may work in the short term, the expansion of other London gangs into rural areas is likely to lead to gang conflicts enacted in other areas as they compete to dominate new markets.

Finally, the changes in the operational model have implications for policy for public agencies involves in addressing the issues raised. Given that the pursuit of profit appears to be the primarily driver of gang evolution, measures that address this directly are needed. Firstly, initiatives that encourage individuals away from gang activities such as initiatives to channel entrepreneurial skills towards legitimate businesses. Secondly, initiatives that deter gangs through economic measures, such financial investigations that identify illegal funds and money laundering mechanisms, which is being trialed in Waltham Forest as its first financial investigation initiative.

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