

Study explodes myths of gang life

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Two years of field work with members of six English gangs has produced one of the most revealing portraits of their lives, exploding distorted stereotypes of their culture.

Researchers from The University of Manchester conquered initial suspicion to forge friendships with the gang members for the Economic and Social Research Council funded study.

The team, led by Judith Aldridge and Juanjo Medina from the University's School of Law, revealed that contrary to common perceptions, most gangs were not organised as drug 'businesses' – though individual members often got involved in dealing primarily in cannabis.

According to the team, serious acts of violence such as shooting are rarely the result of conflict around drug dealing and territory.

They also found little evidence to back the view that gangs were more likely to be black - criticising the focus of the media, government, police and other agencies on ethnic minorities.

Dr Robert Ralphs, lead fieldworker on the project, says the over-policing of young black men in particular can alienate them, resulting in a lack of willingness to cooperate with the police.

That, he argues, can hinder their ability to solve crimes.

"Police and other statutory agencies respond to gangs as clearly

identifiable groups of criminally involved young people, where membership is undisputed," he said.

"In reality, gangs are loose, messy changing friendship networks less organised and criminally active than widely believed with unclear, shifting and unstable leadership.

"Someone who is related to or friends with someone identified as a gang member by the police or other agencies can result in themselves being unfairly being labelled with gang membership, regardless of whether they have any criminal history or not."

The team carried out 100 interviews with gang members and others in the community – alongside the fieldwork with six gangs.

Dr Juanjo Medina said: "Responding to the gang and not the individual exhibiting problem behaviours may increase group cohesiveness among young people and to young people adopting an 'us versus them' stance.

"And that can increase the status of gangs to young people in these socially excluded communities.

Judith Aldridge argues that drastic changes in Government policy are desperately needed to stop cycles of violence.

She said: "What is often missed is that young people in gangs and their families often experience considerable trauma as they live in severely deprived neighbourhoods.

"References to violence as victims and perpetrators is part of their everyday experience."

She added: "Young people in gangs and their friends suffer considerable

and sometimes horrifying trauma.

“But official responses to young people in gangs has been primarily to see them as perpetrators of crime.

“They are mainly victims. So there is a desperate need to appropriately assess the needs of these young people and their families – and not blame them.”

Robert Ralphs added: “Our approach in dealing with parents of gang-involved young people also needs to shift from the dominant ‘blaming’ approach.

“These parents often see themselves and their children as victims – but lack the confidence to seek help through fear of catastrophic repercussions from the statutory agencies who are supposed to help them.”

Provided by University of Manchester

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