

Myth, reality and gun crime

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The assumption that gangs are at the root of gun crime in the UK is overstated, according to a study published today in a special issue of *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, published by SAGE.

In their paper, 'That's Life Innit': A British perspective on Guns, Crime and Social Order, Professor Simon Hallsworth and Dr Daniel Silverstone suggest that while gangs certainly exist, they are not involved in most illegal shootings: the reality is far more complex.

Working on separate research projects, both researchers independently concluded that the importance of gangs was vastly exaggerated. The article summarises combined third party data exploring issues such as firearms availability and the culture of weapons use in the UK.

In one of the largest studies examined, the Home Office conducted 80 structured interviews with young people involved with weapons. To find their subjects, the researchers travelled to several UK cities with high levels of [gun crime](#), and visited penal establishments and youth offending teams, as well as the streets themselves. One of the most striking findings from this study was the sheer level of violence that gun users had experienced. Of the 80 interviewees, 40 had previously been threatened with guns, 29 shot at and eight had been shot. Additionally, 28 had been stabbed, 17 injured with other weapons, 34 had been robbed and three had been kidnapped. 26 reported friends or family members shot and injured and another 26 reported friends or family shot dead.

They also found that gun users could be split into two distinct groups.

Some were experienced professional criminals who used weapons selectively to protect their 'business interests', for whom using guns were a strategic tool. The second group of illegal gun users were younger, vulnerable, disorganised and 'on road'. Their use of guns was far less rational or predictable.

'On road' has a complex and nuanced meaning in the slang of the young men it describes. It is the name that inhabitants of a volatile street world give to their home, a place outside of the structured world of legality and employment. For some, it is an elective destination, for others, a last resort.

"It's parochial social order populated by immature young men, with many striving to earn a living in the least lucrative but most violent part of the criminal economy," says Hallsworth, Professor of Social Research at London Metropolitan University.

'On road', bullets can be delivered in answer to perceived social slights, and these young men are typically traumatised by the violence they witness and experience. Very much 'socially included' in terms of their brand awareness and consumer aspirations, they are typically also excluded by narrow options for legitimate employment, poor educational achievements and difficult home situations. Three-quarters of the 80 interviewed also came from a disrupted family background, and only 15 had had any education or training beyond the age of 16. Ten of them had never worked at all.

To fill the chasm between opportunity and aspiration, dealing in drugs can appear an attractive option, despite the often very poor profits and the enormous risks of violence. As Hallsworth notes, so long as the drugs market is unregulated by law, it will be regulated by guns.

"Offenders often share girlfriends, family and criminal contacts, so the

origin of a potentially fatal dispute may be social rather than strictly criminal," says Hallsworth. "In this claustrophobic environment, firearms represent both power and the ability to inflict lethal violence for young people who are not necessarily physically strong."

As one offender told the researchers: "Power man, powerful, that is the addictive side of it. It is like, you know, the control, the power you have got when you have got that [gun] in your hand. And the way people react to it, that is a buzz in itself."

In this violent street world, Hallsworth believes, gangs might actually mitigate the problems if they were as prevalent as we currently imagine.

"Gangs have rules designed to minimise the instances where force is used," he says. "They ritualise violence. Like all subcultures, they develop responses to the challenges they face. 'On road' is not a subculture, in my view, because it has no effective strategy to deal with problems. It just normalises a hyper-aggressive form of masculinity. When we buy into the idea that the violence comes from gangs, we're creating the illusion that these crimes stem from a world with a recognisable social order of its own. We're conceptualising the problem in a form we think we can tackle. That's why we now have a veritable industry of public sector initiatives to combat gangs. In reality, however, these are chaotic and meaningless acts of violence from people on the margins of our own society, which is far more worrying."

Hallsworth is concerned that by gearing our response to gun crimes around gangs, we are further stigmatising the most vulnerable.

"Kids are getting excluded from school on the flimsiest evidence," he says, "and when they're in school, they have to negotiate metal detectors and spot searches - both of which would have been unthinkable in a school a generation ago. Even worse, since 'tackling gangs' is an agenda

which creates it's own bureaucracy, youth workers are deliberately identifying the kids they work with as 'gang members' - it's the most effective way of getting funding to help them, however stigmatising the label. They're just playing the system. But so long as the system is geared to tackle imaginary gangs rather than the real issues, guns will remain on our streets."

Source: SAGE Publications

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