



# The Palgrave Handbook of Youth Gangs in the UK

*Edited by*  
Paul Andell · John Pitts

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*For Jock & Roger—“There Ain’t Half Been Some Clever Bastards” Ian  
Dury and the Blockheads*

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**Deuchar Ross** is a Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice in the School of Education and Social Sciences at the University of the West of Scotland. He is known primarily for his work on gangs,

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**Factor Fiona, Ph.D.** has a professional background in youth work. Her academic career began at the University of Bedfordshire in 1995 developing youth work training; she is now responsible for a number of courses and projects in the School of Applied Social Sciences. She has also run her own consultancy company, established numerous professional and academic partnerships in the UK and Europe and undertaken multiple research projects focusing on how professionals support vulnerable young people, particularly within youth justice systems, policing and children's social care. She is committed to co-creating knowledge and practice with young people and professionals that challenge dominant narratives and promote social justice.

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**Hagedorn John** is Professor Emeritus from the University of Illinois-Chicago. He has studied gangs in Chicago, Milwaukee, and around the world for the past 40 years. He has written five books, edited two more, and written dozens of popular and academic articles. Since the mid-1990s he turned his attention to the courtroom as an expert witness. His last book, *Gangs on Trial: Challenging Stereotypes and Demonization in Court*, tells stories from trials and sentencings of gang members. Rather than an examination of ‘them’—gangs, he turns his attention to ‘us’—how we all think in stereotypes and too easily demonise ‘the other’. He lives in Milwaukee and is married to Mary Devitt and together they have four children and ten grandchildren.

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**Smart Junior** joined St Giles Trust in 2006 upon his release from prison from where he served a 10-year sentence for a drug and gang related offence. With support from St Giles Trust, he is credited in developing the award-winning SOS Gangs project, London's largest ex-offender gangs exit programme. Covering 14 London boroughs and employing a team comprising predominately of ex-offenders. This year

the SOS Project is on target to reach over 700 young people caught up in Serious group offending and has won numerous awards and recognition, including the South London Press Awards 2008 and the Centre for Social Justice Awards in 2009. Whilst undertaking his Ph.D. at Middlesex University into the connection between gangs and families, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by Greenwich University in Education. In 2020, he was included in Her Majesty the Queens New Year's Honour List receiving an OBE for recognition of his work with young people in tackling youth violence.

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# 1

## Introduction

Paul Andell and John Pitts

The study of ‘violent street gangs’ only began in earnest in the UK in the early years of the twenty-first century. It was then that writers, researchers and scholars in different parts of the country were becoming aware of groups of young people, from similar types of neighbourhood, involved in particular types of serious offending. And so, the sometimes heated debate about UK youth gangs began.

This book brings together for the first time the work of some of the leading writers, researchers and scholars in the field of UK gang studies.

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However, many of them have also worked in or with agencies and organisations dealing with gang-involved and gang-affected young people and so they bring practical as well as academic experience.

Some people opening this book will be aware that in academia, the idea of a UK ‘youth gang’ is disputed. Some scholars argue that contemporary concerns about violent youth gangs are akin to the demonising discourses, the ‘moral panics’ (Cohen, 1972) that attended the teddy boys in the 1950s, the ‘mods and rockers’ in the 1960s, the punks in the 1970s, the lager louts in the 1980s and so on (cf. Aldridge & Medina, 2008). These scholars maintain that these periodic expressions of popular outrage tell us more about the anxieties of an adult public, ‘opinion formers’ and the media than the behaviour of young people. And most commentators agree that the term ‘gang’ is frequently used to transform Black young people into contemporary ‘folk devils’ (cf. Alexander, 2008/2009; Amnesty International, 2018; Cohen, 1972; Gunter, 2017; Williams & Clarke, 2016). Moreover, some also believe that this demonisation, or ‘othering’, has a more sinister purpose, suggesting that current concerns about violent youth gangs are orchestrated by the state, its agencies and the media who generate ‘imaginaries’ in order to justify ever deeper incursions into our freedoms and ever greater control over our lives (cf. Hallsworth, 2014; Simon, 2007).

All this academic scepticism notwithstanding, in ‘gang-affected’ neighbourhoods around the UK, police officers, health, welfare and educational professionals, local residents and their children were becoming all too familiar with the effects of gangs and gang crime. As too were several other academics who had conducted extensive empirical studies in some of these neighbourhoods (Balasunderham, 2009; Densley, 2013; Harding, 2014; Palmer, 2009; Pitts, 2008).

## Defining the Gang

In the early part of the twenty-first century, academics like Gordon (2000) and Hallsworth and Young (2008) produced typologies which aimed to clarify the differences between delinquent peer groups, street gangs and criminal business organisations. Simon Hallsworth and Tara

Young, for example, offered a succinct definition of these different groupings in their *Three Point Typology of Urban Collectivities*:

- **The Peer Group:** *A small, unorganised, transient grouping occupying the same space with a common history. Crime is not integral to their self-definition.*
- **The Gang:** *A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is integral to the group's identity.*
- **The Organised Criminal Group:** *Members are professionally involved in crime for personal gain operating almost exclusively in the 'grey' or illegal marketplace.*

It is of course the case that not all groupings that correspond with this gang definition will define themselves as a 'gang'. In Mohammed Qasim's article, in this volume, for example, the group he writes about are just known as 'The Boys'. Elsewhere, they may be called a 'Mandem', a 'Fam', 'Broes' 'The Boys' or just 'My Mates'. Pitts (2016) argues that, these differences notwithstanding:

Gangs are real because both those who claim affiliation to them and those affected by them are aware of the gang as a discrete social grouping with a recognised soubriquet, an identifiable structure, distinct norms and values and an unambiguous *raison d'être*; namely the perpetration of crime and violence. Gangs may meet other needs and perform other functions but their existence is predicated upon crime and violence and if these characteristics are absent, they are not gangs.

In this volume, the use of the term gang usually refers to *a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who:*

- (1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group,
- (2) engage in a range of criminal activities and violence,
- (3) identify with or lay claim to territory,
- (4) have some form of identifying structural feature,
- (5) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs. (Centre for Social Justice, 2009; Pitts, 2008)



However, by the second decade of the twenty-first century, the conceptual and practical focus had shifted from how we tell Peer Groups, Gangs and Criminal Business Organisation apart to whether, and if so how, the one may evolve into the others. And this prompted a new kind of research on the evolution of UK street gangs (Densley, 2013; Whittaker, 2017, Andell & Pitts, 2018; Densley & Harding, 2018).

Contemporary models of gang evolution tend to identify a linear progression from the adolescent peer groups to absorption into serious criminality. Densley and Harding (2018), for example, identify a progression from formative groupings, which facilitate recreational violence, through criminal activity to criminal enterprise and ultimately to 'governance'. They write:

This evolution permits movement from recreational and criminal stages to financial goal orientation. Rejecting Hallsworth and Young's (2008) position that gang members do not view crime as their "occupation", we argue that upon reaching the highest developmental stage, gangs "resemble not just crime that is organised, but organised crime." As such they develop structures for issuing orders, informal rules and codes of trust. (Densley & Harding, 2018)

This account neatly encapsulates an observable evolutionary trajectory, but it can also be read as a description of a spectrum of different gang forms, as well as a model of gang evolution. As Julie Ayling (2011) observes, *most street gangs are temporary and disorganised*, akin in some ways to what Lewis Yablonsky (1966) describes as the 'near group'; located on a continuum with the 'mob' at one end and the structured 'youth gang' at the other end.

This switch in the 'academic gaze' has been precipitated by an acceptance by most UK academics that street gangs really do exist, real changes in the way illicit drugs are distributed in the UK (see Simon Harding's chapter on County Lines) and concerns about the criminal exploitation of vulnerable gang-involved children and young people (c.f. Beckett et al., 2013; Densley, 2013; Melrose & Pearce, 2013; National Crime Agency, 2016, 2017; Sturrock & Holmes, 2015).

This book is divided into 27 chapters in six-themed sections which represent the focal concerns of much of the gang research and scholarship that is happening now. The sections are concerned with the ways we theorise the gang, the ways gangs evolve, international comparisons, developments in the different UK nations and regions, the central role played by gender and ethnicity within youth gangs, the responses of the justice system and government policy and professional practice in youth work, safeguarding and children's services.

## Part I: The Evolution of the UK Street Gang

In Chapter 2, *Theorising Gangs: Towards a Critical Realist Moral Theory of Youth Gangs*, Paul Andell and David James set out to answer a number of questions. If, for example, different groups of young people, involved in similar types of offending in different places, describe themselves differently, should we call them all 'gangs'. And, can we accept that what the young people say about the gang, or indeed what the academics, police officers and social workers who investigate or work with gang members say, represents 'the truth' about gangs. Their answer to both questions is 'yes but'. The 'but' says that while the accounts these young people and professionals give describe their day-to-day, 'common-sense' understandings of their world social, scientist must also investigate the unobservable social, economic and cultural structures and processes that account for the emergence, persistence and the distinctive characteristics of gangs and gang crime in particular settings. Having questioned whether our research into gangs and gang crime can ever be wholly 'objective', the authors suggest that such objectivity is probably unattainable because research, and the researchers, invariably bring a moral and empathetic dimension to their analyses.

In Chapter 3, *Reluctant Gangsters Revisited*, Andrew Whittaker and Tiron Harvard observe that although, to date, there have been no longitudinal studies of street gangs in the UK, research he and his team undertook in 2018, in Waltham Forest in the same area where John Pitts had undertaken a similar study in 2008 enabled them to trace the changes that had taken place over the period. He recounts the findings

of this research, noting that whereas in 2008, Pitts found that local drug dealing was just one source of income for the young people involved in street gangs, and that their main concern appeared to be the defence of their 'ends'. Ten years on, however, drug dealing had become the *raison d'être* of most of the borough's gangs, while the most powerful one, the Mali boys, having co-opted other local gangs as its 'foot soldiers', had morphed into what was, in effect, a criminal business organisation dealing drugs in numerous out-of-town locations.

In Chapter 4, *County Lines: Dealing in Vulnerability*, Simon Harding observes that from 2014/2015, onwards County Lines networks adopted different business practices which increasingly relied upon the exploited labour of young people. Continual mutation and adaptation of drug dealing networks were largely driven by improved IT technology and social media, alongside more localised factors in gang-affected neighbourhoods, namely increasing saturation of localised drug markets. This market adaptation represented a dramatic expansion of drug networks and increased utilisation of young people which rapidly drew the attention of local police, national policing organisations, NGOs, charities, the media, national government and the general public.

## Part II: International Comparisons

In Chapter 5, *US and UK Gangs: Models, Policy and Practice*, James Densley takes stock of what we now know about UK gangs in comparison to their US counterparts. He therefore examines points of convergence and divergence, and highlights what Britain can learn from the US experience of gangs and vice versa in order to set a research agenda for the next decade. He notes that although there is reluctance among UK criminologists to embrace gang research, UK gang studies should be viewed as foundational to UK criminology. They are important, he argues, for understanding the lives of children and young people because gangs are integral social groups for those involved. Moreover, gang membership changes people's lives and there is a pressing need to respond to its consequences.

In Chapter 6, *Gangs and a Global Sociological Imagination*, Alistair Fraser and John Hagedorn argue that across the globe, the phenomenon of youth gangs has become an important and sensitive public issue. As a result, research attention has focused on the development of what they describe as ‘universalised definitions’ of gangs in a global context. In this chapter, they contend that this search for similarity has resulted in a failure to recognise and understand difference. Drawing on an alternative methodology they call a ‘global exchange’, the chapter suggests three concepts—homologies of habitus, vectors of difference and transnational reflexivity—which will enable gang researchers to re-engage ‘the sociological imagination’ in the study of gangs and globalisation.

In Chapter 7, *‘Why Them?’ ‘Why Then?’ ‘Why There?’: The Political Economy of Gangland*, John Pitts argues that European gang scholarship has largely ignored the social, economic and political contexts from which street gangs emerge or in which they mutate. And it has therefore failed to understand the ‘politics of gangland’. The chapter considers how changes in the social, economic and political circumstances surrounding the emergence of different types of twentieth-century youth gangs in England, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Russia have affected their constitution, affiliations and activities. In exploring the differences and commonalities between these different groupings, he finds that, in each instance, the young people involved are drawn from socially and economically disadvantaged populations who experience social stigma by virtue of their ethnicity or social status. However, as he argues, that their involvement in gang crime and/or oppositional youth movements is profoundly affected by historical and contemporaneous economic and/or political events.

### Part III: Nations and Regions

In Chapter 8, *Gangs, Gang Evolution and Young People’s Involvement in Drug Supply and Distribution in Scotland*, Ross Deuchar and Robert McLean examine the changing nature of youth street gang formation in Scotland. In particular, they focus on Glasgow and the west of Scotland, because of the historical prevalence of gang culture, knife

crime and violence. Just over a decade ago, gang violence contributed to Glasgow being dubbed ‘the murder capital of Europe’, yet by 2015 commentators were suggesting that the city’s gang problem had been solved as a result of intensive intervention from law enforcement and voluntary and third sector agencies. However, since 2015 there has been a significant increase in drug use, and more worryingly drug deaths, in the country, particularly among young people. Organised crime groups using young people as ‘runners’ have come to dominate drug supply. They draw upon their interviews with young people between 2019 and 2020, to chart the evolution of street gangs, engaged primarily in territorial conflict, into an integral part of illicit drug supply in the region.

In Chapter 9, *Young People, Gangs and Paramilitary Violence in Northern Ireland*, John Pitts, citing research undertaken over several decades in Northern Ireland, considers the legacy of the ‘Troubles’ for the children, young people and families who live in the sectarian strongholds of the Province. He endeavours to explain something of the mindset of many of the people living in these areas, their sense of victimisation and the burden this places on the younger generation. By way of example, he charts the history of the Tartan youth gangs that morphed into a faction of the ‘Loyalist’ Ulster Defence Association and notes that despite the 1996 peace accord, young people continue to be recruited into both Loyalist and Nationalist organisations which may then involve them in fund-raising via drug dealing and violent street demonstrations. He concludes with a consideration of how re-framing this situation as a children’s rights issue could constitute part of the solution.

In Chapter 10, *Youth Gangs in Wales: Blocked Opportunities and Broken Transitions—A Generational Evolution from Troublesome Youth Groups to ‘Gangs’ in South Wales?* Jennifer Maher and Howard Williamson chart the history of groups of socially deviant young people in South Wales from the 1980s onwards, against a backdrop of worsening de-industrialisation. One of the authors, Howard Williamson, explored the development and subsequent life course of groups he first worked with on a social housing estate in the 1980s for the next three decades. ‘The Milltown Boys’ transition from teenagers to young adults coincided with the collapse of the youth labour market and the demise of traditional pathways from school to work for working-class boys. Three

decades later, Jennifer Maher, picked up the story in her ethnographic studies of contemporary youth formations in South Wales. On the basis of this research, she develops typologies of the various groupings one of which resembles the street gangs identified by other UK researchers. Bringing these studies together, this chapter offers a unique picture of the development deviant youth groups in one area over almost 50 years.

In Chapter 11, *Gangs in Liverpool: Scouse Soldiers Init? Urban Street Gangs on Merseyside*, Robert Hesketh and Grace Robinson discuss the emergence of urban street gangs on Merseyside. They observe that although Liverpool's recent problems with youth gangs have attracted national and international media attention, academic research has lagged behind. Nonetheless, the available data suggest that there are over 200 organised gangs involving an estimated 3000 members. Those involved range from low-level participants, largely engaged in anti-social behaviour to others who have links into international crime syndicates. The authors note that the Knowsley area of Liverpool has the highest rate of children at risk from gangs in the whole country; a rate even higher than London's. The chapter gathers together the findings of all the recent research that have been undertaken in Liverpool to give a thorough, and alarming, picture of developments in the city.

## Part IV: Race and Gender

In Chapter 12, *Supporting Young Women Affected by Gang Association and County Lines*, Fiona Factor and Abi Billinghamurst outline the political and practice context of supporting young women affected by gang association and County Lines drug dealing. It presents the model of practice developed by Abianda, a social enterprise in London working with young women. The authors consider the key practice challenges faced by Abianda when delivering gender-specific services, and how the learning gleaned from their combined experience in research and professional practice, could be helpful to policymakers and practitioners working with girls and young women.

In Chapter 13, *'The Alchemy of Race and Rights': The Logic of Historicizing the Contemporary Racialized Youth and Gang*