New
Thinking
About
Women &
Criminal
Justice

THE GRIFFINS SOCIETY

Seeing differently:

Working with girls affected by gangs

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Executive Summary

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While concern has grown in recent years about the extent of gang activity in Britain, the ways in which girls and young women are affected tends to be overlooked or distorted. This research aimed to address this gap by investigating how those working closely with young women defined their gang-association and what they believed to be the most effective ways of responding to this. It looked to a small but vibrant number of voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs) to see how they have responded to meet girls' needs through their work and the challenges they faced in delivering this.

Seventeen interviews with practitioners and experts, and three small focus groups with young women, were carried out in early 2011. The programmes participants represented were quite different in approach, varying from specialist targeted intervention to universal work with girls facing a range of risks, of which gangs were one.

Gangs: Terminology, characteristics, and girls' experiences

Participants expressed varying schools of thought on the use, appropriateness, and definition of the word 'gang', reflecting wider dilemmas and divided opinion about the use of the term. Gang culture and the motivation to join a gang were seen as reflective of a wider "crisis of identity" amongst young people, particularly in areas where life chances and opportunities had been significantly eroded.

Gangs were consistently described as male dominated in which men held power; the concept of the 'girl gang' was mostly dismissed. The majority of girls' gang-association was relationship-based, commonly as family members, friends, girlfriends, sexual partners, or as the result of living in a gang-affected area. When girls were close to a gang, their roles frequently followed subservient and gender normative lines, fulfilling domestic, sexual and care-giving roles. Girls' levels of risk varied by the extent of their involvement and knowledge of a gang's activities, but could result in extremely high levels of intimidation and violence, as well as the risks of criminal involvement as a result of their association, including holding drugs, money and weapons, providing safe houses, and acting as alibis.

Some of the problems and risks faced by gang-associated girls were particular but many of these experiences were shared by girls more widely, much of which related to their experiences and negotiations of social norms, authority, and male power. Participants highlighted a profound lack of self-esteem amongst girls, cited as one of the main underlying causes of their behaviour and experiences. Many girls defined their worth and needs in relation to boys and men and sought social credibility from their association with powerful and respected men. Girls' relationships were frequently described as unhealthy and characterised by a general sense of powerlessness, with abuse, violence and exploitation common. The trauma girls experienced from previous abuse could led to internalised shame, guilt, and anger, often manifested through self-harming behaviour.

While there was disagreement about whether girls' violence had increased in recent years, it was clear that intimidation, fear and threat played a significant role in girls' lives. Many had extremely negative experiences of authority which could lead them to be suspicious, aggressive, and distrustful. Violence was often a form of self-protection or a reaction to having been slighted, disrespected or dishonoured. As a result of the precariousness of their social position, many girls' held extremely negative views of other women and were highly competitive with one another.

The case for gender-specific girls work

All participants stressed the value of gender specific work, from universal services to focused interventions, yet universally described a youth justice system set up to respond to boys'. Generic services failed to recognise the different lived experiences of girls and boys, gender-specific provision was patchy, and appropriate referrals were not always made.

At the heart of all the work represented were shared ambitions of supporting girls to raise self-esteem, develop a clearer sense of identity, increase aspirations and opportunities, develop a critical consciousness, an awareness of the consequences of their choices and potential vulnerabilities, and to be able to relate safely to others, particularly men. Girls were said to prefer different delivery styles to boys, responding best to an honesty or 'realness' which broke walls of silences by speaking about taboo subjects, particularly sex and relationships. This enabled girls to share openly and move from an individualised to a

shared sense of experience which reduced feelings of isolation. Single-sex space was seen as critical to this process, enabling more open discussion and a greater sense of safety. Work addressed girls' interpersonal relationships as priority and aimed to help them develop positive relationships with other women. Therapeutic approaches which addressed the impact trauma had on girls' lives were often cited as innovative practice. Having the right, engaging and motivational staff, was seen to be as important as the work itself. Female practitioners that girls could identify with, trust, and who could become positive role models were vital; the value of personal experience and authenticity was frequently cited.

Challenges to delivering work with gang-associated girls

The lack of gender-mainstreaming in youth services underlined all participants concerns, characterised by the feeling that both their work and they as individuals were marginalised, under-resourced and under-supported. It frequently meant only one individual delivering a programme, holding all the expertise, and championing girls' work. This could be a lonely, isolating and exhausting experience which risked diminishing the quality of their work. Strategic arrangements were seldom in place to identify girls at risk or address their needs, and many slipped through the net between services. Relationships with other agencies, both voluntary and statutory, were at times problematic and frustrating, and could significantly affect a project's success. The uniqueness of VCSOs, in their independence, flexibility and knowledge of the communities they worked with, was seldom felt to be acknowledged.

It was unanimously agreed that while there was a clear need for girls work, this could be more effective if other work, complementary to its aims, ran alongside it. A 'brother model' of gender-sensitive work with boys, addressing in particular masculinity, respect, sex and relationships, was frequently discussed. Boys involved in gangs and offending were rarely worked with in a gender-sensitive way and few practitioners were appropriately skilled to do this. Early intervention was also vital to increase girls' self-esteem, awareness of risk, empower them to make informed decisions, and address healthy relationships and consent. Schools had a critical role to play, though few responded in this way. Support for wider communities affected by gangs, particularly mothers and family members, was also identified as a gap.

Delivery of work was extremely financially dependent, with a lack of funding and resources cited as a constant challenge. This restricted the development of resources, staff training, clinical supervision, innovation in delivery, and the length of time practitioners could support young women for. Participants were extremely concerned that girls work would 'be the first thing to go' in the current economic climate as it would not be seen a commissioning or funding priority. Many struggled to prove the worth of their services as little evidence was available to back up the need for and value of their work, and measuring outcomes was often problematic due to a lack of longitudinal data.

Conclusions

A range of recent measures have been taken to reduce gang activity and serious youth violence, though most have been developed without consideration of gender. In comparison to the priorities outlined by practitioners, gaps in delivering appropriate support to girls and young women remain unaddressed, including having sufficient staff support or expertise, an appropriate balance between prevention, intervention and support services, and addressing attitudes, particularly with young men, that enable a culture in which violence against girls and women is permissible.

The lack of clarity and agreement about the use of the word gang should be addressed to ensure the term is applied appropriately, and that girls are correctly identified and supported. Where areas have a known gang problem there is a clear need to raise awareness of the particular risks faced by girls, provide appropriate interventions for them, and advocate on their behalf. The voluntary and community sector should be embedded in all strategic arrangements from the outset to ensure girls receive comprehensive and appropriate support. It should not be left to singular individuals to champion girls needs, rights, or the value of girls work, and practitioners need ongoing support and clinical supervision to develop their skills, professionalism, and self-reflexivity to cope with their work and retain safe boundaries.

The report ends with a series of targeted recommendations to funders, commissioners, education settings, policy-makers, voluntary and statutory services, and the media.

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