

Safeguarding Children and Young People Affected by Gang Activity

This non-statutory guidance helps frontline practitioners across the children's workforce understand the nature of the risk that gang activity poses to children, both through participation in gangs and as victims of gang violence.

The guidance also explain how signs of gang involvement may manifest itself and how to deal with such issues.

See also [.\(Knife\), gun and gang crime - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk) on the government website And [Ending Gang and Youth Violence - A cross Government Report \(2011\)](#)

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Introduction

Addressing concerns arising from a young person's involvement in a gang is a multi-agency issue. Partnership working and information sharing are therefore key to safeguarding children and young people at risk of gang-related harm.

Children can be put at risk by gang activity both through participation in and as victims of gang violence.

Overall, children particularly vulnerable to suffering harm in the gang context are those who are:

- Not involved in gangs, but living in an area where gangs are active, which can have a negative impact on their ability to be safe, health, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being;
- Not involved in gangs, but at risk of becoming victims of gangs;
- Not involved in gangs but at risk of becoming drawn in, for example, siblings or children of known gang members; or
- Gang-involved and at risk of harm through their gang-related activities (e.g. drug supply, weapon use, sexual exploitation and risk of attack from own or rival gang members).

Victims and offenders are often the same people. When adults treat a child as just a victim or just an offender, they are not taking into account the complex, cyclical nature of the victim-offender link and the factors that influence children's lives.

Definition of a Gang

Being part of a friendship group is a normal element of growing up and it can be common for groups of children to gather together in public places to socialise. Although some group gatherings can lead to increased antisocial behaviour and youth offending, these activities should not be confused with the serious violence of a gang.

A gang is defined as 'a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group; engage in criminal activity and violence; lay claim over territory (not necessarily geographical but can include an illegal economy territory); have some form of identifying structural feature; and are in conflict with other, similar, gangs.

The Pyramid of Gang Involvement on page 13 of the government guidance *Safeguarding Children and Young People Who May be Affected by Gang Activity* set out a tiered approach to defining gangs.

The guidance focused on safeguarding those children at Level 2, *ie* those on the cusp of/vulnerable to making the transition to gang involvement as well as those already involved in gangs.

At the top level (Level 3) are organised criminal gangs, composed principally of adult men.

At the bottom level (Level 1) are peer groups.

A street gang will engage in criminal activity and violence and may lay claim over territory (not necessarily geographical but it can include an illegal economy territory). It has some form of identifying structure featuring a hierarchy usually based on age, physical strength, propensity to violence or older sibling rank. There may be certain rites involving anti-social or criminal behaviour or sex acts to become part of the gang. They are in conflict with other similar gangs.

An Organised Criminal Group is a group of individuals normally led by adults for whom involvement in crime is for personal gain (financial or otherwise). This involves serious and organised criminality by a hard core of violent gang members who exploit vulnerable young people and adult. This may also involve the movement and selling of drugs and money across the country, known as 'county lines' because it extends across county boundaries. Young women may be at risk of sexual exploitation in these groups. Further information on the signs of a child's involvement in county lines is available in guidance published by the Home Office and The Children's Society [County Lines Toolkit For Professionals](#).

There is a distinction between organised crime groups and street gangs based on the level of criminality, organisation, planning and control, however, there are significant links between different levels of gangs. Activity can include street gangs involvement in drug dealing on behalf of organised criminal groups and the sexual abuse of girls by organised criminal groups.

The evidence from intelligence and analysis suggests that gangs are predominantly male with an average age of 20 and extensive criminal histories with the average age of a first conviction of 15.

Safeguarding should focus on children who are vulnerable to making the transition to gang involvement as well as those already involved in gangs. Practitioners should be aware of particular risks to children involved in gangs from violence and weapons; drugs and sexual exploitation.

Issues of respect, territory and gang identity often motivate these young gang members. They may engage in a lower level of criminality to begin with, including street robbery, burglary, assault and anti-social behaviour.

Gang-Related Activity – What is the Risk?

See also [Knife, gun and gang crime - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

Local evidence-gathering and profiling of local gang problems will be needed to establish what the risks are in a particular area.

Practitioners should consider the risks to children involved in gangs from violence and weapons, drugs, and sexual exploitation.

Children who are involved in gangs are more likely to suffer harm themselves, through retaliatory violence, displaced retaliation, and territorial violence with other gangs or other harm suffered whilst committing a crime. Children involved in gangs are more likely to possess and use weapons, both knives and guns. Evidence shows that those carrying weapons are more likely to become victims of weapon attacks and the risk of being seriously injured increases in group situations. There is some evidence to suggest younger children carrying or using guns and of girls and young women being used to carry guns on behalf of gang members.

Gangs use violence to assert their power and authority in a local area and may have to assert their power in relation to other gangs in the area. This is why so much gang-related crime and violence is perpetrated against other members of gangs and their relatives and rarely against the police or other public sector employees. In some cases, violence may also be directed against, or required of, a gang's own member as a part of belonging to that group.

Dealing drugs can also bring gang members into organised crime and can increase the threat of violent situations. Some gang members deal in drugs either as a way to make money or to fund their own use of drugs.

There has been a reported increase in female members in gangs. There is often pressure for girls associated with young boys in gangs to 'link' with gang members to attain status, for their own protection and perhaps to benefit from a criminal lifestyle. Some girls adopt an antagonist role within gangs.

Safeguarding principles should be a priority for girls who are sexually exploited and abused, which can be a particular risk for girls associated with or targeted by gang members, but it may also affect male gang members. The risk of sexual exploitation and abuse was highlighted by the Children's Commissioner's inquiry, 2013 and should always be considered as a risk when assessing individuals and when developing a local profile of gangs. For example, rape by gang members, as a form of retaliation or as an act of violence, is said to occur quite frequently in some areas and reports to the police are rare due to fear of intimidation or reprisal. This may also be a risk for siblings and other family members of female gang members.

Some children are at risk of exposure to or involvement with groups or individuals who condone violence as a means to political end. Violent extremist causes range from animal rights to far-right politics to international terrorism.

Practitioners should bear in mind when assessing either victims or perpetrators of crime of the potential for young people to become involved in gangs and gang-related violence as a result of being a victim of crime.

Research has shown that victims of crime can become offenders because of their experience. Retaliation and the need for respect can be factors in the progression from victim to offender; carrying a weapon following an attack can help a young person to rebuild respect, as well as offering a feeling of personal protection.

Identification and Risk Factors

There are particular risk factors and triggers that young people experience in their lives that can lead to them becoming involved in gangs. Many of these risk factors are similar to involvement in other harmful activities such as youth offending or violent extremism.

Risk indicators may include:

- Becoming withdrawn from family
- Sudden loss of interest in school – decline in attendance or academic achievement
- Starting to use new or unknown slang words
- Holding unexplained money or possessions
- Staying out unusually late without reason;
- Sudden change in appearance – dressing in a particular style or 'uniform'
- Dropping out of positive activities
- New nickname
- Unexplained physical injuries
- Graffiti style tags on possessions, school books, walls
- Constantly talking about another young person who seems to have a lot of influence over them
- Broken off with old friends and hanging around with a new group
- Increased use of social networking sites
- Starting to adopt codes of group behaviour e.g. ways of talking and hand signs
- Expressing aggressive or intimidating views towards other groups of young people some of whom may have been friends in the past
- Being scared when entering certain areas

- Being concerned by the presence of unknown youths in their neighbourhood

This is not an exhaustive list and should be used as a guide, amended as appropriate in light of local knowledge of the risk factors in a particular area.

There are links between gang-involvement and young people going missing from home or care. Some of the factors which can draw gang-involved young people away from home or care into going missing can come through the drugs markets and 'drugs lines' activity, there may be gang-associated child sexual exploitation and relationships which can be strong pull factors for girls. Exploitation is at the heart of this activity, with overt coercion taking place alongside the pull factors of money, status, affection and belonging.

In suspected cases of radicalisation, social workers and local authorities are under a duty to refer the case to the local Channel panel, which will then decide the correct, if any, intervention and support to be offered to that individual.

Referral and Assessment

Anyone with concerns about a young person's involvement in a gang can contact the [NSPCC](#) a 24-hour helpline (0800 800 500).

The helpline is funded by the Home Office is available to help parents, carers or any other adult worried about a child or young person at risk from gang-related activity. This includes children and young people who are not themselves in a gang, but may be at risk of being targeted by gang members.

The Early Help Assessment may be crucial in the early identification of children and young people who need additional support due to risk of involvement in gang activity.

Any agency or practitioner who has concerns that a child may be at risk of harm as a consequence of gang activity should contact the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). The Assessment should be led by a qualified and experienced social worker. As always, evidence and information sharing across all relevant agencies will be key. It may be appropriate for the social worker to be embedded in or work closely with, a team, which has access to 'real time' gang intelligence in order to undertake a reliable assessment. Careful involvement of parents or carers is required as they may be a useful source of information to assess the risk of harm but may condone their child's involvement in gangs.

Practitioners should be aware that children who are Looked After by the local authority can be particularly vulnerable to becoming involved in gangs. There may be a need to review their Care Plan in light of this information and to provide additional support.

Where there is a risk to the life of a child or the likelihood of significant harm, emergency action might be necessary to secure their immediate safety.

It is particularly important that girls and young women who have been sexually abused or exploited by gang members have access to appropriate support and counselling, in an environment where they feel safe and secure.

An Osman Warning (a warning given following intelligence received about a threat to life) is so named after the *Osman v United Kingdom* (23452/94) ECHR 101 (28 October 1998) which placed a positive obligation on the authorities to take preventative measures to protect an individual whose life was at risk from the criminal acts of another individual. In the context of gangs, this may occur as a result of gang rivalry or because of an incident occurring within a young person's own gang (for example, threatening to leave or refusing to commit an act of violence). Any Osman Warning should result in an automatic referral to Children's Social Care, the initiation of a strategy discussion and consideration of the need for immediate safeguarding action, unless to do so would place the child at greater risk. In these cases, the decision not to refer should be actively reviewed to allow a referral to Children's Social Care to be made at an appropriate stage.

Support and Interventions

Support and interventions should be proportionate, rational and based on the child's needs identified during assessment. Areas of intervention will range from family-based/multi-agency interventions, youth inclusion projects, peer mentoring to initiating Care Proceedings.

Gang Injunctions are a civil tool that allows the police or a local authority to apply to the County Court, High Court or Youth Court for an injunction against an individual to prevent gang-related violence and gang-related drug dealing. By imposing a range of prohibitions and requirements on the respondent. A gang injunction aims:

- To prevent the respondent from engaging in, or encouraging or assisting, gang-related violence or gang-related drug dealing activity; and/or
- To protect the respondent from gang-related violence or gang-related drug dealing activity.

Over the medium and longer term, gang injunctions aim to break down violent gang culture, prevent the violent behaviour of gang members from escalating and engage gang members in positive activities to help them leave the gang. Gang injunctions can also be used to help protect people, in particular children, from being drawn further into more serious activity. Anyone seeking to apply for an injunction must have evidence that the respondent has engaged in, encouraged or assisted gang-related violence or gang-related drug dealing; and will need to be able to prove this on the balance of probabilities at court. Applicants will also need to convince the court that the gang injunction is necessary to prevent the respondent from being involved in gang-related violence and gang-related drug dealing.

Local children's services who have legal responsibilities for safeguarding children should always be involved in discussions regarding a potential gang injunction for a 14- to 17-year-old and to advise what action it would be appropriate to take to ensure the safety of the child and to protect them from significant harm.

Gang Injunctions

"Gang injunctions offer local partners a way to intervene and to engage a young person aged 14-17 with positive activities, with the aim of preventing further involvement in gangs, violence and/or gang-related drug dealing activity". (Home Office, June 2015)

The Serious Crime Act 2015 amended the Crime and Security Act 2010 to extend this provision from 18 years and to include children (14 -17-year-olds). It now covers “drug dealing activity” as well as “violence” including the threat of violence. Applications should focus on gang related behaviour that may lead to violence, and not on other problematic anti-social behaviour.

In order to make a gang injunction, the court must be satisfied that the respondent has engaged in, encouraged or assisted gang-related violence or drug dealing activity. In addition, the court must then be satisfied that:

- The gang injunction is necessary to prevent the respondent from engaging in, encouraging or assisting gang-related violence or drug dealing activity; and/or
- The gang injunction is necessary to protect the respondent from gang related violence or drug taking activity.

For further information please see [Statutory Guidance: Injunctions to Prevent Gang-Related Violence and Gang-Related Drug Dealing \(Home Office, June 2015\)](#). (archived)

Practitioners should consider their own safety whilst working with children and visiting a household. It may be appropriate to interview the child and the parents in a neutral setting. Information sharing about high-risk families and individuals (such as those carrying lethal weapons) should be considered across all agencies that might have contact with the individuals concerned.

Resources

[National referral mechanism guidance: adult \(England and Wales\)](#) - a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support