



# **Youth Gangs, Sexual Violence and Sexual Exploitation**

**A Scoping Exercise for  
The Office of the Children's Commissioner for England**

**by**

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**March 2011**

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# Youth Gangs, Sexual Violence and Sexual Exploitation

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# Youth Gangs, Sexual Violence and Sexual Exploitation

## A Scoping Exercise for

### The Children's Commissioner for England

#### Introduction

This report outlines the findings of a scoping exercise on *Youth Gangs, Sexual Violence and Sexual Exploitation* undertaken for the Children's Commissioner for England.

The data collected for this scoping exercise is derived from two main sources:

- A literature review using key words/phrases including: gangs; young people; sexual violence; sexual violence against girls and young women; sexual violence against boys and young men; sexual exploitation in gang-affected neighbourhoods. It has accessed scholarly literature, central and local government reports and policy documents (e.g. *Manchester City Council Child Protection Scrutiny Committee* report, *West Yorkshire Police Authority Gang Culture Scoping Exercise* report) the publications of relevant think tanks (e.g. *Centre for Social Justice*), pressure groups (e.g. *Race on the Agenda*) and children's charities (e.g. *NSPCC*, *Barnardo's*, *St Michael's Fellowship*, *The Children's Society*). The remit of the review includes literature published before the end of January 2011; Appendix one includes brief reference to a number of key documents published after this point.
- Interviews with lay and professional 'key informants' with experience of living and working in gang-affected neighbourhoods and of working with sexual violence (including sexual exploitation) directed against children and young people.

# Youth Gangs, Sexual Violence and Sexual Exploitation

## A Scoping Exercise for

### The Children's Commissioner for England

## 1 Summary

### 1.1 Definition of a gang (pages 12-16)

Gangs are groups of young people with a discernible structure, a recognised territory and distinctive beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours. Although the gang may offer inclusion, protection and success to some socially disadvantaged children and young people, it is primarily concerned with crime, not infrequently drug-related, and violence, often armed and occasionally lethal. While most gang affiliates are young men, young women may be involved, occasionally as 'soldiers', but more usually as partners of the young men or 'links' (someone to have casual sex with).

### 1.2 Definition of sexual exploitation (Pages 17-18)

Sexual exploitation is a form of sexual abuse. It involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive some reward as a result of sexual activity. In most cases exploitation involves coercion, force and/or violence and in all cases those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources.

### 1.3 The prevalence of gangs (Pages 16-17)

It is argued that the data available underestimates the extent of the problem. In 2007, a survey by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) identified approximately 170 to 178 youth gangs in London alone, many using firearms in furtherance of their crimes. These gangs were estimated to be responsible for 20% of the youth crime in the capital and 28 knife and gun murders (MPS 2007). *Dying to Belong* published by the Centre for Social Justice (2009) estimates that around 50,000 young people in England and Wales have some involvement with violent youth gangs.

### 1.4 The prevalence of sexual exploitation (Pages 19-21)

1.4.1 There is currently no reliable data on the numbers of sexually exploited children and young people. As it is a 'hidden' problem, figures that do exist are said to underestimate the numbers involved. The University of Bedfordshire is currently undertaking the first systematic review of Local Safeguarding Children Boards' responses to child sexual exploitation in their localities. This includes an overview of the prevalence of child sexual

exploitation. The findings from this research are to be published in October 2011.

- 1.4.2 In 2004/5 Barnardo's UK worked with 2,075 sexually exploited young people (Scott and Skidmore 2006). Recent figures from the *National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children & Young People* show that between November 2009 and November 2010 the 53 member organisations had 4206 referrals of sexually exploited young people. Eleven per cent was sexually exploited boys and young men.
- 1.4.3 The extent of sexual exploitation of young women and young men in gang-affected neighbourhoods is hidden behind the apparent 'normalisation' of sexual violence, the fear of reprisal following disclosure of violence and a belief amongst young people that involvement in criminal activity negates their right to protection from the state.

## **1.5 The policy context (Pages 22-29)**

- 1.5.1 There is a lack of co-ordination between policy aimed at enhancing community safety within gang-affected neighbourhoods and policy directed towards safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation.
- 1.5.2 Local Safeguarding Children Boards are seldom identifying or working with children and young people who are sexually exploited within gang-affected neighbourhoods.
- 1.5.3 Criminal Justice and Community Safety initiatives targeting children and young people in gang-affected neighbourhoods are not specifically focused on addressing sexual violence, sexual abuse or sexual exploitation.
- 1.5.4 Thus far, the development of regional initiatives funded by The UK Government's 'Focussed Gang Project' has been uneven and their impact uncertain.
- 1.5.5 The DCSF (2009) Guidance for '*Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation*' notes the need to support young people who are at risk of harm because of gangs. Reference has been made to the DCSF consultation on '*Safeguarding children and young people who may be affected by gang activity*' (2009), the precursor to the final guidance '*Safeguarding children and young people who may be affected by gang activity*' (2010). However, details of how to protect children and young people from sexual exploitation in gang-affected neighbourhoods are not explored. The expert knowledge developed by practitioners working with gangs is seldom shared with practitioners working with sexual exploitation.

- 1.5.6 Evidence from current research (Jago et al 2010) shows that The DCSF (2009) Guidance for ‘*Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation*’ has not been effective in promoting interventions to protect children and young people living in gang-affected neighborhoods.
- 1.5.7 Recent policy documents such as the Mayor of London’s 2010/11 Action Plan ‘*The Way Forward: Taking Action to End Violence Against Women and Girls*’ (GLA 2010) are beginning to address the need for a gendered approach to serious youth violence and gang violence. The impact of such initiatives cannot, however, be determined as yet.

## **1.6 Violence and gangs (Pages 15,16,18-21,29-32,38-42)**

- 1.6.1 Between April and November 2007, 1,237 young people were injured in gun and knife attacks. Three hundred and twenty one were shot, 39 ‘seriously’. Nine hundred and fifty two were stabbed, 188 ‘seriously’. In the same year there were 12 armed rapes and 88 ‘gun-enabled’ muggings (Metropolitan Police Service, 2007).
- 1.6.2 Gang-related fatalities of young people in London numbered 19 in 2010. In any one year, young women constitute between 15 and 20 percent of gang-related fatalities.

## **1.7 Sexual violence and multiple perpetrator rape (Pages 18-20,31-32,36-40)**

- 1.7.1 The number of reported multiple perpetrator rapes appears to be increasing. The Metropolitan Police Service identified 93 such rapes in 2008/9 compared with 36 in 2003/4. (NB multiple perpetrator rape was previously classified as ‘gang rape’ but the term was changed to address any potential confusion that ‘gang rape’ is solely associated with gang activity; this type of rape can be perpetrated by both ‘gang members’ and those with no known association with gangs).
- 1.7.2 Thirty six per cent of the victims of multiple perpetrator rape identified in 2008 were aged 15 or younger. Forty two per cent of suspects were under 19 in 2008 compared with 38% in 2003/04.
- 1.7.3 Multiple perpetrator rape is less likely to be reported than other offences because of ‘social links’ between victims and perpetrators.
- 1.7.4 It appears that some young people tend to ‘normalise’ the sexual violence they experience in gangs and minimise the impact that it has upon them.

## **1.8 Victimization, race and ethnicity (Pages 15-16,19-21,33)**

- 1.8.1 There has been a rise in the number of black and minority ethnic children and young people being victimised in gang-affected neighborhoods in recent years.

- 1.8.2 The proportion of white victims of reported multiple perpetrator rape fell from 69% in 1998/99 to 50% in 2008. During the same period, the proportion of black victims rose from 17% to 34%.
- 1.8.3 In 2008/09 eight per cent of reported multiple perpetrator rape suspects were identified as white, 32% were identified as black and 24% were identified as 'different ethnicities'. The ethnicity of the remaining 36% is unknown.

## **1.9 Victims of gun-enabled crime (Pages 20-21)**

- 1.9.1 While the overall volume of 'gun-enabled crime' in Britain has fallen slightly in the recent period, those involved, both as victims and perpetrators, are becoming younger.
- 1.9.2 Young women and girls are likely to be victimised through gun-enabled crimes. For example in 2006/7, while between 2% and 5% of gun crime suspects in Waltham Forest were young women, they constituted around 30% of gun crime victims.
- 1.9.3 There is an over-representation of African-Caribbean young people as victims of gun-enabled crime.

## **1.10 Young women as perpetrators of gang-related violence (Pages 40-42)**

- 1.10.1 There is evidence that girls and young women perpetrate some violent crimes in gang-affected neighbourhoods. In 2008 for example, a group of younger teenage girls were engaged in a series of violent confrontations with other girls in Peckham. At one point this led to the closure of a number of schools and the suspension of bus services.
- 1.10.2 More seriously, in March 2007, Kodjo Yenga (16) was stabbed in the heart after being ambushed by a gang, including two girls, aged 14-17, armed with knives and bats in Hammersmith, West London, shouting "kill him, kill him". They were said to be affiliated to the West London MDP (Murder Dem Pussies/ Murder, Drugs and Power).

## **1.11 Research findings from North America: Girls and Gangs (Pages 29-32)**

- 1.11.1 North American studies of girls in gang-affected neighbourhoods suggest that the gang appears to offer a way out of and protection from, difficult family situations. This is called the 'Seduction Model' where the gang appears to offer inclusion, affection and protection.
- 1.11.2 These studies show that gang membership may be the "rational choice" in the face of the limited options and opportunities available to girls and young women.

- 1.11.3 Girls and young women are used to hide and transport drugs and weapons because they are less likely than boys to be caught.
- 1.11.4 Girls and young women engage in criminal activities to maintain status. If they lose status, they are vulnerable to assault and sexual exploitation by gang members, sometimes with the active support of their 'boyfriends'.
- 1.11.5 Some girls and young women have been introduced to drugs in the gang and, once addicted, made to sell sex to pay for them.; this is a clear form of sexual exploitation.
- 1.11.6 Once associated with a gang, links to 'home' and more conventional peers tend to be weakened.
- 1.11.7 When girls do leave the gang it tends to be the result of an event or a series of events that have altered the girls' perception of the gang as a safe place to be. This could be an arrest followed by incarceration, being badly beaten up, seeing this happen to a friend, or being forced into sexually exploitative behaviours, which they found unacceptable.

## **1.12 Research findings in the UK: Girls and Gangs (Pages 32-34, 36-42)**

- 1.12.1 While the most recent research carried out in the UK (Firmin 2010) has echoes of the North American 'seduction' model, it also throws light on other dimensions of the involvement of some young women in gangs.
- 1.12.2 In addition to seduction, evidence in the UK suggests that ostensibly prosperous young women from outside the area may join gangs for excitement. Other evidence suggests that some young women of predominantly 'religious communities' may be harassed by groups of young men into making themselves sexually available. Other young women may become involved through family connections.

## **1.13 Data from key informants (Pages 36-42)**

- 1.13.1 As part of this scoping exercise, focus groups and interviews were completed with 'key informants'. Data was gathered from a total of 25 key informants; 10 who took part in interviews (two solicitors, three youth workers, three peer mentors and two police officers) and fifteen who took part in focus groups (youth workers, social workers, a psychologist, managers of community safety, youth justice and probation services, researchers, and residents in gang-affected neighbourhoods).

- 1.13.2 These informants had extensive experience of working with, or researching, sexually victimized young women, gang-involved young men and women, and residents of gang-affected neighbourhoods.
- 1.13.3 Informants identified a wide range of often interconnected roles played by gang-involved girls and young women. These included 'girlfriends/wifeys', 'links' and 'soldiers'. Both young women from within, and outside of, gang-affected areas were observed to play roles within the gang scenario; those from outside were variably described as non-neighbourhood girls, out of areas girls or respectable girls.
- 1.13.4 Key informants suggested that in many cases, younger, gang-involved young women had 'normalised' the sexual violence to which they were subjected and, as a result, would be unlikely to report it.
- 1.13.5 Whatever the 'pathologies' of individual gang members, the abusive relationships they foster appear to be a defining characteristic of 'street culture', and are supported by the misogynistic lyrics of gangsta rap and the rapping and 'spitting' produced by gang-involved young men on You-Tube and other social networking sites.
- 1.13.6 Whereas gang-involved young men may protect and defend their mother or sister, they would not necessarily protect 'gang girls' since these relationships tend to be fairly 'casual'. If something 'bad' happened to these girls, the young men would tend to think it was not their problem.
- 1.13.7 Although 'gang-girls' are sometimes kidnapped and raped by rival gang members, the gang-involved young men would not necessarily feel that they had to seek retribution for this. If another male gang member was assaulted however, they would feel it incumbent upon them to seek retribution to regain lost 'respect'.
- 1.13.8 'Gang girls' are expected to undertake tasks for the gang and, if they fail, they can expect violent retribution.
- 1.13.9 The daughters of high status 'first generation' male gang members serving lengthy prison sentences are another group vulnerable to violent attack. These young women may be the targets of vendettas against their fathers and therefore need to remain gang-involved in order to receive their protection.
- 1.13.9 There is limited evidence of a connection between violent youth gangs and commercial sexual exploitation. However, two key informants were aware of

older gang members organising 'parties' where school-age girls were plied with drink and drugs and then required to have sex with older paying clients. Although in some cases girls, or their families, were subject to threats and violent coercion, most of the young women involved do not think of such 'partying' experiences as a form of sexual exploitation.

- 1.13.11 Informants noted a gendered split between 'Community Safety' crime prevention strategies (which tend to focus on boys as perpetrators of crime/gang related activities) and 'Local Safeguarding Children Boards' sexual exploitation prevention strategies (which tend to focus on girls as victims of sexual exploitation).
- 1.13.12 This gendered split limits a sophisticated understanding of the 'child protection' needs of young men who are victims of crime and abuse in gang-affected neighbourhoods and of young women suffering sexual violence in gang-affected neighbourhoods.
- 1.13.13 Informants voiced concern that the current cuts to services will impact worst on children and young people from poorer communities as opportunities for employment contract. These young people may become more reliant on the informal economy and/or more vulnerable to 'joining' gangs and/or being sexually exploited.

## **Youth Gangs, Sexual Violence and Sexual Exploitation**

### **2. The Literature Review**

#### **2.1 What is a youth gang?**

There is no agreed definition of what a 'youth gang' is. This is partly because the 'gang issue' is highly contentious in both political and academic circles. For example, having deliberated for four years, *Eurogang*, a consortium of US and European social scientists, produced the following definition:

*Any durable street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal acts is part of their identity (Eurogang 2004:1)*

Its vagueness is accounted for by the resistance on the part of some European members to, what they saw, as North American definitional entrepreneurship. This reluctance to name the phenomenon is also evident in a report recently produced by the Youth Justice Board (2007). Its authors are at pains to emphasise that the 'gang' is, essentially, just another kind of peer group; that group offending is a common

form of youth crime; that many non-offending young people adopt a gangster 'style'. In a (failed) quest for greater specificity, the Home Office (2006:10) posits:

*Young people (who) spend time in groups of three or more. The group spends a lot of time in public places. The group has existed for 3 months or more. The group has engaged in delinquency or criminal behaviour together in the last 12 months. The group has at least one structural feature (a name, an area or a leader).*

The definition devised by the Centre for Social Justice in its report *Dying to Belong* (2009) offers a sharper definition, suggesting that the violent youth gang is:

*... 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 activity and violence, (3) identify with or lay claim over territory, (4) have some form of identifying structural feature, and (5) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs. (Centre for Social Justice 2009:21)*

This builds upon the definition devised by Simon Hallsworth and Tara Young (2004) who, usefully, endeavour to distinguish the youth gang and other *urban collectivities*.

Hallsworth & Young's Three Point Typology of Urban Collectivities
<b>The Peer Group:</b> A small, unorganised, transient grouping occupying the same space with a common history. Crime is not integral to their self definition.
<b>The Gang:</b> 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.
<b>The Organised Criminal Group:</b> Members are professionally involved in crime for personal gain operating almost exclusively in the 'grey' or illegal marketplace.

This too is what Robert Gordon (2000) endeavours to do in his study of youth grouping, all of which are sometimes colloquially described as gangs, in Vancouver.

<b>Robert Gordon's Six Point Typology of Youth Groupings</b>
<b>Youth movements:</b> are social movements characterised by a distinctive mode of dress or other bodily adornments, a leisure-time preference, and other distinguishing features (e.g. punk rockers).
<b>Youth groups:</b> are comprised of small clusters of young people who hang out together in public places such as shopping centres
<b>Criminal groups:</b> are small clusters of friends who band together, usually for a short period of time, to commit crime primarily for financial gain and may contain young and not so young adults as well.
<b>Wannabe groups:</b> include young people who band together in a loosely structured group primarily to engage in spontaneous social activity and exciting, impulsive, criminal activity including collective violence against other groups of youths. Wannabees will often claim 'gang' territory and adopt 'gang-style' identifying markers of some kind.
<b>Street gangs:</b> are groups of young people and young adults who band together to form a semi-structured organisation, the primary purpose of which is to engage in planned and profitable criminal behaviour or organised violence against rival street gangs. They tend to be less visible but more permanent than other groups.
<b>Criminal business organisations:</b> Are groups that exhibit a formal structure and a high degree of sophistication. They are composed mainly of adults and engage in criminal activity primarily for economic reasons and almost invariably maintain a low profile. Thus while they may have a name, they are rarely visible.

Gordon's, Vancouver-based, work also suggests that definitions may need to be specific to particular places, times or groups.

## 2.2 The definition of 'Gang' that will be used in this scoping exercise

In his study of youth gangs in three London boroughs Pitts (2008) uses the term *youth gang* to denote

'A social group composed of children, young people and, not infrequently, adults who see themselves, and are seen by others, as affiliates of a discrete, named, group; variously described as a *crew*, *'fam'* (family), *massive*, *posse*, or as *brerrs* (brothers/'bredderin'), *cousins*, *soldiers*, *sabbos* (saboteurs), *boys* or *mandem'* (Pitts, 2008:21).

These groups described above have a discernible structure, a recognised territory and distinctive beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours. Although the gang may offer inclusion, protection and success to some socially disadvantaged children and young

people (Kohli 2007), it is primarily concerned with crime, not infrequently drug-related, and violence, often armed and occasionally lethal, and usually directed against rival gangs and/or young women. Success in these spheres described above determines the 'respect', or fear, that the gang and its affiliates inspire in others, and this in turn determines their safety from, or vulnerability to, attack (Stevens, 2007). While most gang affiliates are young men, young women may be involved, usually as 'links' (someone to have sex with) or as partners of the young men (Firmin, 2010).

This definition echoes in several ways those developed recently by North American and British academics (Gordon 2002, Hallsworth & Young 2009). As with the definition devised by Thrasher (1929), it ascribes greater significance to inter-group violence as the hermetic which holds the gang together. Those on the outside are drawn to the gang's periphery and those on the periphery are drawn towards its centre.

This definition proposed by Pitts (2008) will be used in this scoping exercise.

### **2.3 How long have these kinds of youth gangs been evident in the UK?**

There is nothing new about groups of young men becoming involved in crime and violence. The media and 'social commentators' have been identifying American-style, violent, youth gangs in Britain for the last 50 years at least.

Some social scientists have challenged this. David Downes, in his classic study of young people and crime in East London, *The Delinquent Solution* (1960), found no evidence of American-style 'youth gangs' and, over the next thirty years or so, nor did anyone else. In the mid 1990s, Peter Stelfox (1998) embarked upon a national survey for the UK Home Office to see if he could track them down. Although he elicited a remarkable 91.45% response rate to his questionnaire, only sixteen police services were able to identify gangs in their area, yielding a national total of 72.

The majority of the UK gangs identified by Stelfox (1998) were composed of adult males aged between 25 and 29. Some gangs spanned a broader age range with a few gang members below the age of 16. These gangs were predominantly white, only 25% had members described as 'Black Caribbean', and only 7% had members who were predominantly from ethnic minority groups. This led Stelfox to conclude that:

*These figures challenge the perception that violent gangs are primarily either a youth problem or one which occurs mainly within ethnic communities. Organisationally the majority of gangs tended towards a loose structure (Stelfox 1998:47).*

In 2007, a survey by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) identified 172 youth gangs in London alone, many using firearms in furtherance of their crimes, and estimated to be responsible for 20% of the youth crime in the capital and 28 knife and gun murders (MPS 2007).

As gun crime rose, the ages of perpetrators fell. Whereas in 2003, young people under 20 constituted 16% of victims of the *'Black-on-Black'* gun crime investigated by *Operation Trident*, by 2006 this had risen to 31%. Bullock and Tilley (2003) found that the ages of the predominantly African-Caribbean and Mixed Heritage gang members involved in gun crime in South Manchester were evenly spread from their early teens to 20s: two to four at every age between 15 and 23.

In London in 2007, 28 young people under the age of 20 were killed in 'gang-related' murders. Moreover, between April and November of that year, 1,237 young people were injured in gun and knife attacks. Three hundred and twenty one were shot, 39 'seriously'. Nine hundred and fifty two were stabbed, 188 'seriously'. There were 12 armed rapes and 88 'gun-enabled' muggings (MPS 2007). Gang-related fatalities numbered 19 in 2010. In any one year, young women constitute between 15 and 20 percent of gang-related fatalities.

These figures are generated by the police and the Home Office and, over the period, there have been important changes in policing policy, policing practice and crime recording techniques. Nonetheless, these shifts are no mere statistical quirk and, if anything, significantly understate the problem.

Despite a steady decline in adult and youth crime in Britain in the past 15 years, in certain parts of our towns and cities and amongst certain social groups, life has become far more dangerous for children and young people. The immediate reason for this is the proliferation of violent youth gangs and the culture that they ferment.

## **2.4 How many violent youth gangs are there?**

A Metropolitan Police survey undertaken in 2007 found approximately 170 to 178 violent youth gangs in London, although this is believed to be a significant underestimate. Indeed, a study undertaken shortly afterwards (Pitts 2008) found 40 named gangs in Lambeth alone. A report by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary entitled *Getting Organised* (2009) puts the number of *Organised Crime Groups*, which it describes as 'criminal gangs', operating in the United Kingdom at 2,800, of which an estimated 60% are involved in the illegal drugs trade. These gangs are what Gordon (2000) calls '*Criminal Business Organisations*' and Hallsworth & Young (2008) describe as '*Organised Criminal Groups*'. However, there is strong evidence (Pitts 2008) that these organisations reach down to street level via several of what

- Smith and Bradshaw (2005, see below) describe as *Hard Core* gangs
- Hallsworth & Young (2008) call *Gangs*,
- Gordon (2000) calls *Street Gangs* and
- Pitts (2008) calls *Violent Youth Gangs*.

The report also notes that whereas these gangs have previously been concentrated in London and the North West, of late their sphere of operations has expanded from the inner cities to the shires. This would suggest that the actual number of *Hard Core Gangs/ Gangs/Street Gangs/Violent Youth Gangs* is considerably greater than the 1,680 *Organised Crime Groups* involved in the drugs trade identified by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (2009).

## 2.5 How many young people are involved in these gangs?

The Centre for Social Justice report *Dying to Belong* (2009) estimated that around 50,000 young people in England and Wales are affiliated to violent youth gangs. In his study of Waltham Forest, Pitts (2007) found thirteen groups that corresponded with his gang definition. He concluded that:

*In the 2001 census, Waltham Forest had a population of 222,340, of which 30%, (around 70,000 people) fell within the 10-29 age group. If around 700 young people are directly involved in gangs, this represents 1.0% of the age group. We estimate that a further 1% is directly, adversely, affected by gangs and that a further 2% is indirectly, adversely, affected, because they live in an area or attend a school where gang activity threatens them or limits what they are able to do. If this is so, we can say that gangs adversely affect the day-to-day lives of around 4% of the children and young people in the borough in the 10-29 age group (Pitts 2007:73).*

The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions found that in a sample of over 4000 school students aged between 13 and 17, 'self-nominated' gang affiliates constituted 20% of the cohort at age 13, falling to 5% at age 17. However, whereas at 13 the numbers of boys and girls in a gang were similar, by 17 there were three times as many boys as girls. These gangs tended to have around 20 members. The researchers also found that the constitution of what they called *Hard Core* gangs remained fairly constant from age 13 onwards suggesting that the groups most seriously involved in crime and violence are also the most durable (Smith and Bradshaw 2005).

## 2.6 What is Child Sexual Exploitation?

Child Sexual Exploitation is a form of sexual abuse that takes place in all communities and impacts on boys as well as girls (Pearce 2009, Jago 2010, Pearce 2010). The DCSF (2009) guidance to Local Safeguarding Children Boards for 'Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation' draws on the

definition of sexual exploitation developed and used by 'The National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People':

*Sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive 'something' (eg food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of performing, and/or others performing on them, sexual activities.*

*Child sexual exploitation can occur through use of technology without the child's immediate recognition, for example the persuasion to post sexual images on the internet/mobile phones with no immediate payment or gain. In all cases those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. (DCSF 2009:10)*

## **2.7 Are local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) protecting children and young people from sexual exploitation?**

A recent review of all LSCBs in England showed that under 30% were able to confirm that they met their dual responsibility of working towards protecting children from sexual exploitation and collaborating with police to prosecute abusers (Jago et al 2010).

There is concern that LSCB's focus most of their resources on protecting younger children from familial child abuse and that older children are not granted the protection from abuse that they need. Older children are, in the main, demonized as opposed to protected from the harm they face (Bromley-Derry 2009).

Many girls and young women, and boys and young men, who are sexually exploited may not recognize their circumstances as abusive, and may blame themselves for the exploitation they receive (Warrington 2010). This has been termed the 'normalisation of sexual violence.'

## **2.8 What are we doing about the 'normalisation' of sexual violence?**

A recent review of young people's attitudes to sexual imagery and violence suggested a correlation between young people's access to images of sexual violence, the 'commercialisation' of sexual imagery and the prevalence of sexual violence amongst children and young people (Papadopoulos 2010). Although the findings of this report have been disputed as poorly evidenced and potentially scaremongering (Smith 2010) they reflect a general concern that too many young

people have come to expect sexual violence as a part of a 'normal' sexual relationship.

In their enquiry into 'teen partner violence' Barter et al (2009) note that 88 per cent of young people in their study of 1,353 young people aged between 13 and 17 years old, reported some form of violence in their intimate relationships. They note that this is of central concern for girls who reported greater incidence rates for all forms of violence. They note the importance of understanding the context within which such violence occurs, and the meaning it holds for young people. They argue that violence in young people's intimate relationships should be viewed as a significant child-welfare problem.

In response to some of these concerns, central government recently produced a UK strategy titled '*Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls*', (HM Government 2009). This incorporated some of the initiatives created through the 'Cross Government Action Plan on Sexual Violence and Abuse' (2007), The Cross Government 'National Domestic Violence Delivery Plan' (2009), the 'Co-ordinated Prostitution Strategy' (2006), The 'UK Action Plan on Human Trafficking' (2007/2009), The 'Action Plan for Tackling Violence' 2008-2011 and the guidance on 'Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation' (DCSF 2009).

The strategy to 'End Violence Against Girls and Women' (2009) is helpful in that it calls for the further development of specialist girl and women only services; for 'violence against women' to be included as a topic within the national curriculum; and for a stronger focus on prevention of violence. However, the strategy does not specifically address the nature and prevalence of sexual violence in gang-affected neighborhoods and, by definition, excludes a consideration of the vulnerability of boys and young men as victims of sexual violence.

A further Call to End Violence Against Women was issued by the current government in November 2010. Setting out a vision for a society in which no woman or girl has to live in fear of violence, the document emphasises the importance of a multi-faceted approach that addresses the prevention of violence, support for victims and the prosecution of perpetrators (HM Government 2010).

In the same year, the Mayor of London's action plan on this issue, '*The Way Forward: Taking Action to End Violence Against Women and Girls*,' was published. This plan makes a number of commitments to addressing violence against young women, including adopting a zero-tolerance approach to gang-related rape. Specific actions outlined within the plan include: improving identification, early intervention and support for young women affected by gangs and sexual violence, developing safe reporting mechanisms for girls experiencing serious youth violence including rape and sexual exploitation, encouraging greater learning and cross-reference

between victims involved in prostitution and those associated with gangs and a gender review of existing strategies and procedures by key partner agencies (GLA 2010).

## **2.9 How many girls and young women are involved in or adversely affected by gangs?**

The limited data available suggests that youth gangs tend to be concentrated in areas characterised by high levels of social deprivation. The Centre for Social Justice (2009) estimates that there are 50,000 gang-involved young people in England and Wales. In addition if

- we assume that the male-female ratio in *Hard Core* 'street gangs' is the 1-to-3 posited by the study in Edinburgh (Smith and Bradshaw 2005) and
- we accept Pitts' (2008) estimate of the prevalence of gang involvement in a 'gang-affected' borough,

it would suggest that 12,500 girls and young women are closely involved in gangs, and that a further 12,500 may be directly adversely affected by the presence of youth gangs.

## **2.10 What do we know about sexual violence in gang affected neighbourhoods?**

The Metropolitan Police define 'multiple perpetrator rape' (as '*a sex attack by three or more people*'). (see 1.7.1 for questions relating to the definition of multiple perpetrator rape). Multiple perpetrator rape is less likely to be reported than other offences because of 'social links' between victims and perpetrators.

A study by Scotland Yard's Operation 'Sapphire', which investigates sex crimes, revealed that in 2008/9, the London Metropolitan Police recorded 93 multiple perpetrator rapes compared with 36 in 2003/4. The number of attacks involving four or more attackers is growing and the average age of victims is falling. In 1998/99 48% of victims were under 19. In 2008, this rose to 64%. Thirty six per cent of victims were aged 15 or younger. Forty two per cent of suspects were under 19 in 2008 compared with 38% in 2003/04. In 2008/09 8% of multiple perpetrator rape suspects were identified as white, 32% were identified as black and 24% were identified as 'different ethnicities'. The ethnicity of the remaining 36% is unknown. The proportion of white victims fell from 69% in 1998/99 to 50% in 2008. During the same period, the proportion of black victims rose from 17% to 34% (MPS 2009). In London, the boroughs with highest rates of multiple perpetrator rape are Lambeth, Croydon, Newham, Southwark, Westminster and Hackney.

## 2.11 What do we know about the serious victimisation of young women by gangs?

In gang-affected neighbourhoods young women are also at heightened risk of other forms of violent crime. In his study of youth gangs in Waltham Forest, Pitts (2007) found that in the two years from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2005 and 31<sup>st</sup> December 2006, there were 493 incidents of gun-enabled crime in the borough, 275 in 2005 and 218 in 2006 (Crime Reporting Information System 2007).

The term *gun-enabled crime* covers everything from threats with a replica firearm to wounding and death. The figure below shows that gun crime tends to be perpetrated by young people under the age of 20 and that African Caribbean children and young people are heavily over-represented as perpetrators. Perpetrators are, overwhelmingly, male.

The victims of gun-enabled crime are, once again, over-represented by African-Caribbean young people. However, there are also a far larger number of White Caucasian children and young people becoming victims of gun enable crime.

Particularly striking is the number of perpetrator children aged 1-10 and the large number of girls and young women who are victimised in this way. While between 2% and 5% of gun crime suspects in Waltham Forest were young women, they constituted around 30% of gun crime victims. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, gun-enabled crime in Waltham Forest was concentrated in, or near, the major gang estates and overlapped with street crime and drug-dealing hotspots.

<b>Gun-Enabled Crime in Waltham Forest</b>	
<i>Source: Metropolitan Police Crime Reporting Information system Data, 2007</i>	
<b>Ages of Perpetrators</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1-10	11%
11-20	53%
21-30	30%
<b>Ethnicity of Perpetrators</b>	
White Caucasian	18%
Black African Caribbean	59%
Asian	10%
<b>Gender of Perpetrators</b>	
Male	92%
Female	5%
<b>Ages of Victims</b>	

1-10	19%
11-20	27%
21-30	27%
<b>Ethnicity of Victims</b>	
White Caucasian	39%
Black African Caribbean	31%
Asian	13%
<b>Gender of Victims</b>	
Male	69%
Female	30%

These figures underline the fact that overall volume of ‘gun-enabled crime’ in Britain has increased in the recent period and that those involved, both as victims and perpetrators, are becoming younger and that young women and girls are more likely than ever before to be victimised.

As yet we know little about why this should be but, because of the violence and the sexual abuse and exploitation to which young women are subject, it is clear that engagement with them must be a priority for any strategy developed to combat gang crime.

## **2.12 What is the policy response to the ‘gang’ phenomenon and to safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation?**

### **2.12.1 Central Government Policy responses to the ‘gang’ phenomenon**

2007, the year in which gang-related homicides peaked in London, saw a flurry of policy statements about violent youth gangs at national, regional and local levels. More recently, we have seen attempts to bring these apparently ‘ad hoc’ initiatives together to create a coherent regional strategy.

Perhaps inevitably, these statements have concerned what we might do in the short term to halt the rising death toll from gang-related homicides, rather than how we might stem the flow of young people getting involved with gangs.

The Prime Minister’s ‘*Gun Crime Summit*’, held in February 2007 and attended by senior police officers, community groups and voluntary organisations, promulgated a three-point plan to tackle gun crime involving:

- Policing: ensuring the police are equipped to tackle gun crime

- Judicial Powers: giving the police and courts the powers to deal with offenders
- Prevention: empowering communities to take action to prevent gun crime and gang culture and offering support to parents to challenge their children's behaviour.

In practice this meant that there would be a review of the legislation and sentencing policy vis-à-vis gangs, guns and knives and gun supply, and better co-ordination of criminal justice agencies.

The *Summit* welcomed the creation of a *London Youth Crime Prevention Board* by the London Community Safety Partnership. The role of the new Board was to bring together the Metropolitan Police Service, relevant local authorities, the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and community groups in London to tackle gun, gang, and other youth crime in the capital more effectively.

In August 2007 the Prime Minister's '*Focussed Gang Project: Serious Gang Violence, Prevention and Risk Management*' programme was announced by Scotland Yard. Commencing in 2008, the project aimed to direct resources to ten pilot sites developing 'innovative approaches to tackling gun-related violence'. One of these is the *Five Boroughs Alliance* (FBA), which is endeavouring to develop a coordinated response to youth gangs in Croydon, Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark. Thirty one of the 170 to 178 gangs identified by the 2007 MPS survey operate in the FBA area and three of these are amongst the four identified by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) as causing the greatest harm.

The *Focussed Gang Projects* (FGP) were to be 'delivered' via the MPS Serious Violence and Youth Strategies, but they required support by the management board of the Metropolitan Police Authority, the Mayor of London and the relevant borough chief executives. They also needed to recognise communities as partners with clear roles and responsibilities. Where possible, these initiatives were to endeavour to involve young people.

Like the FBA, all of these initiatives were to have five strands; *Intelligence, Prevention, Enforcement, Reassurance* and *Criminal Justice/Prosecution*. The document also recommended that a cross-agency risk-management process be established; that a multi-agency infrastructure be developed to support the FGP, and that *Safe Houses* for witnesses and victims be created. The report commends a particular focus on 18 and 19 year olds, presumably because these young people sometimes 'fall through the gap' between Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) and the Probation Service.

For its part, in April 2007, the Youth Justice Board published '*Groups, Gangs and Weapons*' a report which recommends that YOTs should:

- Target seriously delinquent youth groups
- Tackle the causes of group offending
- Prevent the further involvement in group offending of those presently involved
- Ensure that young people already seriously involved in delinquent youth groups desist from crime
- Ensure more access to pro-social activities
- Ensure more parental support
- Develop effective interventions to address group-related aspects of offending
- Tackle ongoing risk factors in the personal circumstances of perpetrators
- Respond to victimisation (Youth Justice Board 2007).

However, these objectives appeared to be essentially aspirational since there is no indication in the report of how they were to be achieved. At a more practical level the report recommended:

- Improved identification of individuals and groups involved
- Coordinated action initiated by local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships to disrupt gangs and organised crime groups
- Good information sharing

The report indicated that YOTs should not be the lead agency in initiating preventative work to combat 'group' or 'gang' offending. It seems unlikely therefore that it presages a shift away from the Board's current priorities which coalesce around 'effective offender management'. Although, in 2006, the YJB gave YOTs £150m to develop preventive work, it is not clear whether these monies were earmarked for the YJB gang strategy.

Further commitments to tackling the issue of gang-related violence were introduced in a series of action plans and guidance documents issued in 2008. In the overarching strategy for tackling violence, '*Saving Lives. Reducing Harm. Protecting the Public: An Action Plan for Tackling Violence 2008-11*', the government committed that "by 2011 we will have reduced gun and gang-related violence, knife crime, and sexual and domestic violence, and improved the criminal justice response to these offences" (HM Government 2008a:1). Focusing in on young people, the '*Youth Crime Action Plan 2008*' similarly committed to "taking tough action to keep our streets safe – dealing with gangs and young people out of control" (HM Government 2008b:5). Two key guidance documents were also issued in 2008: '*A Practical Guide for Local Authorities, CDRPS and Other Local Partners*' (Home

Office 2008) and *'Gangs and Group Offending: Guidance for Schools'* (DCSF 2008). Further practice guidance was issued by DCSF and the Home Office in 2010 (see below).

A six month Tackling Gangs Action Programme (TGAP) was announced in September 2007 to target and reduce youth violence, particularly gang-related firearm offences. A total of £1.5 million was allocated to support the work in four cities in England and Wales: London, Merseyside, West Midlands and Greater Manchester. Monitoring of the TGAP showed a decrease in firearm injuries and offences, and a reported increase in police presence in the communities where the programme was in operation (Dawson 2008).

Other relevant initiatives introduced in subsequent periods include the Tackling Knives Action Programme (2008-2009; 10 police force areas) and the subsequent Tackling Knives and Serious Youth Violence Action Programme (2009-2010; 16 police force areas). Injunctions to prevent gang-related violence (hereafter referred to as gang injunctions) have also been introduced in an attempt to address concerns about gang-related activity. Introduced under the Policing and Crime Act 2009, and amended under the Crime and Security Act 2010, gang injunctions became operational as of the 31 January 2011. The police or local authorities can apply to the court for a gang injunction where there is sufficient evidence (able to prove on the balance of probabilities at court) that an individual has engaged in, encouraged or assisted gang-related violence, and where an injunction is deemed necessary to prevent them from being involved in gang-related violence and/or to protect them from such violence in the future.

For the purposes of gang injunctions, the legislation defines gang related violence as (threat of) violence relating to the activities of *"a group that (a) consists of at least three people, (b) uses a name, emblem or colour or has any other characteristic that enables its members to be identified by others as a group, and (c) is associated with a particular area"* (Part 4, Policing and Crime Act 2009). Injunctions can include both prohibitions (such as exclusion zones, non-association clauses and stipulations re. gang colours and other identifying features) and positive requirements (such as mediation or anger management). Initially applicable to those aged 18 or over only, the Home Office guidance on their use states that *"it is envisaged that injunctions to address gang-related violence for 14-17 year olds will be piloted in 2011"* (Home Office 2010:4). Subsequent rhetoric on the issue confirms this to be the case.

In providing guidance on the use of gang injunctions, the Home Office highlights the different circumstances relating to male and female involvement in gangs, cautioning authorities to *"take account of the particular needs and experiences of women in the gang context, which are often very different to those of men"* and to recognise that *"gang injunctions may also affect women who are associated with male*

*respondents*”, such as sisters or partners who may lose the ‘protection’ of a male who becomes subject to an injunction (Home Office 2010:21).

A major advance in policy in this field has been the acceptance by central and local government that gang violence is a ‘Safeguarding’ Issue. A report from *Manchester City Council Children and Young People’s Overview and Scrutiny Committee*, published in September 2009, states the matter succinctly:

*The safeguarding issues of young people involved in criminal gangs and subject to sexual exploitation are unfortunately not new concerns to Manchester. The issue of gun/gang violence has existed in the City for the past twenty or more years, with a growing trend of younger adults becoming active gang members. The issue of sexual exploitation of children by predominantly older men has also been a recognised child protection concern for many years.*

*It is within this context that we wish to focus on what is increasingly being reported as a growing child safeguarding concern that is involvement and association of young girl’s with gangs. This is a different type of sexual exploitation in that it is often the victim’s peers through gang membership and association who exploit young girls under the threat and intimidation of reprisals by gang members (Manchester City Council Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2009:2)*

‘*Safeguarding Children and Young People who may be Affected by Gang Activity*’, published jointly by the DCSF and the Home Office in March 2010 identifies a number of areas in which young people are put at risk by gang activity, both through participation in, and as victims of, gang violence. It argues that safeguarding procedures can provide a:

*‘... key tool for all agencies working with young people to assist them when working together to prevent young people from being drawn into gangs, to support those who have been drawn into the margins of gangs; and to protect those who are at immediate risk of harm either as members or victims of gangs.’ (DCSF & Home Office 2010: p7)*

This practice guidance is addressed to those who work in voluntary and statutory services across the children’s workforce, social care, crime prevention, the police, prisons and probation, offender management, health, education and all others whose work brings them into contact with children and young people.

It is intended to help agencies and practitioners respond effectively to the needs of children and young people – girls and young women, as well as boys and young men, who are at risk of gang-related violence and harm. To that end, the guidance outlines factors for agencies and practitioners to consider and processes to follow in terms of identification, referral, and assessment and support for young people who may be affected by gang activity.

It also looks at the reasons young people become involved in gangs, the particular risks associated with gang membership for the young people and the risks of being affected by gang activity in other ways.

The London Safeguarding Children Board produced a guidance in 2009 titled '*Safeguarding Children Affected by Gang Activity and /or Serious Youth Violence*'. This draws upon the work of both the Manchester and Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Boards, the Youth Justice Board and the London Serious Youth Violence Board.

It provides guidance for front-line professionals and their managers in all agencies, and individuals in London's local communities and community groups on identifying and safeguarding children who are vulnerable to or at risk from involvement in

- Emergent criminality, serious youth violence perpetrated by their peers in gangs, or increasing anti-social behaviour; and
- Serious youth violence perpetrated by children acting on their own.

It is intended that it be read in conjunction with the London Child Protection Procedures and, in particular: sections 2.10.36 dealing with *Screening and Searching Pupils for Weapons in Schools*; 5.6 *Bullying*; 5.18 *Harming Others*; 5.23 *ICT-based Forms of Abuse*; 6 *Referral and assessment*; 13 *Risk management of known offenders* and Section 5.40 *Sexually Exploited Children, and the Supplementary Procedure for Safeguarding Children Abused through Sexual Exploitation* (London Safeguarding Children Board 2007).

This lengthy list suggests that there is still some way to go before a truly 'joined-up' response to gang violence emerges however.

The procedure is informed by the principles that:

- Children who are harmed and children who harm should both be treated as victims, and professionals should bear in mind that a child may be a perpetrator and also a victim of violence;
- The safety and welfare of the child is paramount;
- All agencies act in the interests of the rights of the child as stated in the UN Convention (1989);

- All decisions or plans for the child/ren should be based on good quality assessments and be sensitive to the issues of gender, nationality, culture and sexuality’.

### 2.12.2 Regional initiatives

In September 2007, the then Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, announced a renewed effort to prevent gun crime and violence amongst young people. This initiative, which appeared to be an amalgam of the proposals of the Prime Minister’s, February 2007, *Gun Crime Summit* and his, August 2007, *Focussed Gang Project*, concentrated on neighbourhoods identified by the police in London, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham, where more than half of all gun crimes in England and Wales are committed.

A new, dedicated, national unit, with £1m additional funding, was to run the Anti-Gang Programme. Members were to be drawn from central government, local authorities and frontline agencies. Government aimed to work with the police, local authorities and the voluntary sector to devise initiatives that included:

- A high-visibility police presence on the streets in troubled areas, especially around schools
- Civil orders to restrict the activities of known gang members
- Greater witness protection, including safe houses for victims and witnesses
- Mediation services for gang members
- A crackdown on illegal gun imports
- Enhanced local community forums to improve communication between police and residents
- Extra activities at local schools to keep children and young people off the streets

The programme was to be overseen by a ministerial taskforce on guns and gangs, headed by the Home Secretary.

At the same time, the Home Secretary commissioned the Association of Chief Police Officers to provide an assessment of the nature and scale of gun crime across the country, especially crime that involved gangs or young people. This was to include specific proposals for what the government, police and other agencies could do to further tackle gun and gang crime.

In London, *The Five Boroughs Alliance (FBA)* mentioned above (comprising of Croydon, Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark) held a day conference on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2007 to decide how they might best operationalise the initiatives to

be funded by the Prime Minister's Focused Gang Project. They referred to the FBA's five subgroups: 1. Intelligence, 2. Prevention, 3. Enforcement, 4. Criminal Justice and 5. Reassurance. It was agreed that the FBA was to develop:

- A Boston Model (Operation Ceasefire) across the five Boroughs
- A cross agency risk management process that addressed serious violent offenders including gun crime and the cross borough issues linked to gangs
- A 'safe house'
- A multi agency infrastructure to support the FBA
- Through the London Criminal Justice Board, effective criminal justice interventions to address gang related criminality, with a particular focus on 18 and 19 year olds

It is fair to say that, thus far, the development of regional initiatives funded by the *Focused Gang Project*, has been uneven and their impact uncertain.

In 2009, in response to the Metropolitan Police proposing the identification of 169 youth gangs in London (many using firearms in furtherance of their crimes and estimated to have been responsible for around 40 murders and 20% of the youth crime in the capital), the *London Serious Youth Violence Board* (LSYVB) was established to examine proposals for a pan-London approach to serious youth violence. The final report of their work was published in March 2011 (see Appendix one). Noticeably, the report noted the appointment of a 'gender champion' to address the gendered nature of violence.

As previously noted in section 8.3, the Mayor of London's Action Plan for tackling violence against women and girls has also addressed the issue of gangs, with particular reference to violence against females within this (GLA 2010). Time for Action, the Mayor's proposals for equipping young people for the future and preventing violence issued in November 2008 also addressed the issue of gangs, considering the reasons why young people may get involved in this and potential policing solutions to the issue.

### **2.12.3 Gang policy, girls and young women**

As with gang research, gang policy tends to be primarily concerned with the threat posed by young, gang-involved men rather than the threat posed to young, gang-involved women. However, this neglect is beginning to be recognised in documents produced by the government, both regionally and nationally, which have referenced the roles of women, as mothers, sisters, partners or friends of gang-involved young men.

The Home Office *Tackling Gangs Action Programme* (2007-08) indicates that women play significant roles within gangs. In support of this, Firmin (2009) notes that

*Women who are involved in gangs can occupy a number of roles, including: perpetrators...victims...partners... (and) can be targeted by gangs. Women associated with rival gangs can also be targeted with violence (including rape); and associates: partners, sisters and mothers might be involved with hiding drugs and weapons, washing blood-covered clothing, etc. Even where they have no formal involvement, partners can serve to 'glamorise' gang members, and to put pressure on them to provide the material wealth associated with criminal behaviour. However, women can also play a role in supporting gang members to leave gangs – peer and parental pressure can be a key tool in persuading gang' (Firmin 2009:14-16)*

Yet, none of the many 'action points' in the programme concern women or girls directly and no statistical data is presented concerning the involvement of girls and young women in, or victimised by, gangs. Likewise the Mayor of London's *Time for Action Plan* (GLA 2008) emphasises:

*The important indirect role of some girls and young women in endorsing and approving violence by young men and the worrying increases in violence by young women themselves are also important issues.*(GLA 2008:46)

This was not accompanied by any indication of how their situation might be ameliorated at the time, however as previously highlighted the subsequent Action Plan to End Violence Against Women and Girls (GLA 2010) has included a series of actions designed to address the needs of girls and young women involved as victims and perpetrators in gang violence, and other women (mothers, sisters etc) affected by the same.

#### **2.12.4 Policy for Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation**

The University of Bedfordshire is currently undertaking a two-year research project, funded by Comic Relief, into *Preventing Child Sexual Exploitation*. The focus of the project is to work with local practitioners and partnerships to maximise the impact of the government guidance, *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation* (DCSF 2009). The project has been in contact with over 100 Local Safeguarding Children Boards to gain a picture of the extent of activity in this area.

The project is also working more closely with 25 areas to explore in more depth the level of awareness and ways of responding to child sexual exploitation.

It seeks information on the nature and prevalence of the sexual exploitation of children and young people and asks specifically about whether gang-related sexual exploitation is an issue in their locality.

The current phase of the project is focussing, amongst other things, upon the links between sexual exploitation and involvement in gangs, and responses to it. The preliminary findings are that:

- The question about the existence of gang-related sexual exploitation frequently surprised interviewees who had not given any consideration to gang 'culture' in the context of sexual exploitation
- The question sometimes led to a discussion about what constituted a gang. There was little clarity about this and a general feeling that the situation is worse 'elsewhere'.
- In areas where interviewees acknowledged that gangs were present in their locality there was little knowledge of patterns of female victimisation within gangs. 'Gangs' and 'sexual exploitation' were rarely seen as linked.
- Similar responses were given with respect to travellers. Gangs and groups of travellers were both perceived as outside conventional cultures and so separate from the usual CSE practice.
  
- There have been few examples of work by LCSBs to respond specifically to sexual exploitation related to gang association

While responses to these issues formed only a part of broader-ranging interviews, the local authority areas from which respondents were drawn represent those with the most developed strategies and the greatest levels of expertise and experience in working with Child Sexual Exploitation. The sample also includes a number of London boroughs, and major metropolitan areas.

It would be reasonable to conclude, therefore, that knowledge and understanding of the potential links between sexual exploitation and gang involvement is unlikely to be greater in other areas. It was also evident that the detailed expert knowledge developing amongst practitioners working specifically with young people associated with gangs was not being shared with practitioners working on preventing sexual exploitation in the same area.

In the light of these findings from avenues of policy initiatives, Lewisham Youth Offending Service, which has established a *Girls and Gangs' Multi-Agency Forum*, with representation from agencies concerned with social welfare, education housing

and teenage pregnancy, appears to be exceptional and may suggest a prototype for future practice.

## **2.13 What does the academic research tell us?**

### **2.13.1 North American 'Gang' Research**

Much of the limited literature in this field derives from North American studies. Most of the available 'gang literature' deals more or less exclusively with the involvement of boys and young men in 'gangs'. The relatively small, but growing, body of mainland European and UK literature has a similar emphasis (Klein 1995, 2008).

The majority of young women interviewed in Jodi Miller's (1998, 2001) influential study of gang-involved girls in five US cities, had

- experienced childhood violence or sexual abuse, usually perpetrated by a family member,
- had grown up with alcohol or drug-abusing parents
- had witnessed frequent violence at home and on the street.

Chatterjee (2006) found that many girls and young women affiliated to violent youth gangs had unstable family lives and had experienced physical, sexual, and emotional victimisation in the home. Compared to males, females have experienced significantly higher levels of these types of childhood abuse. Many also had relatives with prior involvement with the criminal justice system. Several had run away from home, sometimes leading to involvement in child sexual exploitation. Most had experienced academic failure, truancy or dropping-out of school. They also had what Chatterjee (2006) calls a history of unhealthy, dependent relationships, primarily with older males as well as 'mental health issues' and a history of substance abuse.

According to Dorais and Corriveau (2009), young women who become involved in gang-related commercial sexual exploitation share a desperate desire to be liked, respected and acknowledged. This echoes other research into the reasons why girls and young women affiliate with gangs which include the need for love, companionship and belonging; recognition, self-worth and acceptance; power, status and excitement; structure, opportunity and, physical safety and protection (Chatterjee 2006, McCreary Youth Foundation 2004).

These experiences are echoed in a small qualitative study undertaken by Cousineau et al (2002) in Quebec which endeavoured to understand the pathways that led girls to join a gang; their experiences in the gang; whether they had been victimized before or during their gang affiliation; and their motivation for, and the processes whereby, they left the gang. They found that most of the girls who became involved

with gangs had been subject to parental neglect and suffered psychological, physical and sexual abuse at home, school or elsewhere. Joining the gangs tended to be a process of 'seduction' rather than 'coercion', sometimes following in the footsteps of an older sister, or more often, an older brother, who was already a gang member or starting a relationship with a gang-involved boy or young man. For many of the girls or young women the gang appeared to offer a way out of, and protection from, a difficult family situation, 'real' friendship, a sense of being appreciated and popular, excitement and money. Burton (1990) and Franklin (1988) produced similar findings in their studies of gang-involved African-American young women, as did Cepeda & Valdez (2003) in their study of Mexican American girls. Indeed, Cepeda & Valdez contend that this

*... may be the "rational choice" in the face of the limited options and opportunities available to them. (Cepeda & Valdez 2003:15)*

However, as the authors note, the girls eventually came to realise that there was a heavy price to pay for gang involvement. They realised that although they are associated with gangs, they could never become 'full members': Instead, they were, in the main, classified as 'girlfriends' with specific roles and tasks such as 'looking good', 'being available' for 'leisure time' when the gang are not busy and being put aside when the gang are busy.

Where they do take part in gang activities like drug and weapons trafficking, it is because they are less likely than boys to be caught. The girls felt that they had to keep proving that they were worthy of gang involvement because, if they lost status, they were vulnerable to assault and sexual exploitation by gang members, sometimes with the active support of their 'boyfriend' (Totten 2000). Some girls had been introduced to drugs in the gang and, once addicted, made to engage in prostitution to pay for them. This is what John Hagedorn (1998, 2008) found in his study of street gangs in Milwaukee.

Dorais & Corriveau (2009) suggest that some Canadian gangs engage in selling sex as part and parcel of their 'business endeavours'. They argue that experienced gangs know where to find young women from schools, youth clubs, shopping malls, bus and train stations to name but a few specific locations. Specifically targeted are vulnerable young women who may have run away from home, have problems with drug or alcohol use, or be looked after by the local authority. These young women may be targeted and offered accommodations, friendship, food or drugs as a means of encouraging them to become involved with the activities of the gang. In addition, they may be enticed into the gang through offers of modelling or art careers through websites or on line chat rooms.

Knox (2004) notes that some gang members may advertise for a party they are throwing by giving away flyers at malls and areas frequented by teenage girls. When girls arrive at the party, they are given alcohol and drugs, and later expected to pay for them through sex and sexual favours.

In their study of *Young Mexican American Gang-Associated Females* Alice Cepeda and Avelardo Valdez (2003) found that young women associated with male gang members had a markedly increased likelihood of becoming involved in substance use, crime, and high-risk sexual behavior which had negative personal and social consequences, including sexual and violent victimization, criminal justice involvement, and drug dependency. This echoes finding from social network studies which associate increases in 'risk behaviors' with the individual's immediate social relationships rather than their individual attributes (Friedman et al.1999). It also supports Thornberry 's et al (1995) 'facilitation' thesis, which maintains that the youth gang acts as a kind of escalator, propelling gang-involved young people up into more serious and risky forms of law breaking

Cousineau et al (2002) suggest that the lives of these girls and young women were characterized by control and isolation which is particularly intense because of the paranoia about betrayal surrounding life in the gang. Girls stayed in the gang because for some this was the only alternative 'home' they had and it was better than the one they had left. Not only did they think they had nowhere else to go, but because they had attenuated their links with non-gang-involved peers, they had nobody to turn to either. Thornberry et al (1995) suggest that this may be because one of the social costs of the sexual practices of gang-involved young women is that they are stigmatised and marginalised by *'other types of young females, male gang members, and the community'*.

Beyond this, for Cousineau's young women, leaving the gang usually meant finishing a relationship with a 'boyfriend', attempting to construct or re-build a social network, re-entering education, training or employment and dealing with the health problems resulting from poor nutrition, drug abuse and unprotected sex. When girls did leave the gang it tended to be the result of an event or a series of events that altered the girls' perception of the gang as a safe place to be. This could be an arrest followed by incarceration, being badly beaten up, or seeing this happen to a friend, or being forced into sexually exploitative behaviours.

### **2.13.2 UK 'Gang' Research**

Gang research in the UK is at a beginning stage and while, in the poorest parts of UK cities, police officers, health and welfare professionals, adults, children and young people appear to believe that violent youth gangs exist, many academics remain sceptical (Aldridge et al 2008, Hallsworth & Young 2008). Several reject the term 'gang' as an unhelpful 'social construct' and argue that many adolescent groups in the UK engaged in relatively innocuous adolescent (mis)behaviour are erroneously identified as 'gangs' (Hallsworth & Young 2008, Aldridge et al 2008,

Klein 2008) and that such misrecognition, or 'gang talk' (Hallsworth & Young 2008) gives rise to misplaced, social anxiety (Pearson 1983).

Nonetheless, there is a growing body of evidence that social groups bearing all the hallmarks of a violent youth gangs exist and that their existence poses a serious threat to the safety and wellbeing, and in some cases the lives, of the children young people and adults who live in gang-affected neighbourhoods (Bullock & Tilley 2003, Youth Justice Board 2007, Palmer & Pitts 2006, Matthews & Pitts 2007, Pitts 2008, Palmer 2009, Centre for Social Justice 2009, Balasunderam 2009, Firmin 2010)

As in the USA, UK gang research is far more concerned with the threat posed by gang-involved young men than the threat posed to gang-involved young women. The little research into gang involvement amongst young women in the UK tends to focus upon the existence, or not, of gangs (Alexander 2008, Hallsworth & Young 2008, Young 2005). If the researcher believes that they do, indeed, exist, focus is on whether girls and young women necessarily play a subordinate role within them, or whether they are able to act as 'agents' in their own right (Batchelor 2009). Thus far, this research has provided little detailed information about the lives of the young women associated with youth gangs.

The most revealing research in this regard is that undertaken by Carlene Firmin for the pressure group *Race on the Agenda*. In *'The Female Voice in Violence'* (Firmin 2010) reports on interviews with over 300 women; girlfriends, sisters, mothers, aunts; involved in, or affected by, gang violence in general and gang-related sexual violence in particular. While her research has echoes of the North American 'seduction' model, in that it suggests that many gang-affiliated young women are fleeing from 'dysfunctional' family situations, have a loyalty to a gang member and are seeking the inclusion, affection and protection the gang may appear to offer them, it also throws light on other dimensions of the involvement of young women in gangs.

Firmin's (2010) research identifies young women who become involved in a gang scenario via a brother or other family connections; either directly through their relative, or through a rival gang seeking to antagonise this individual or settle a score by establishing a relationship with their female relative or by sexually assaulting them. It also identifies young females from outside of gang-affected neighbourhoods, with no prior association with gangs, who become involved in a relationship with young males from gangs and get drawn into the scenario in that manner. The research considers the various reasons why these and other young women may be drawn to the gang scenario, exploring the potential benefits they perceive it to offer, such as protection, status and respect. It also outlines the wide range of risks facing young women who either are directly involved in a gang or associated with someone involved in a gang (brother, father, boyfriend etc). These include involvement in

offending behaviour, isolation from family and friends, physical violence, verbal aggression, drug dealing, pressure to engage in sexual activity, and rape or other sexual assaults. The research highlights the limited concern afforded these risks by young males within the gang scenario and also the inadequate understanding of, and responses to, such risks by service providers.

For example, one of Firmin's interviewees, Laila (not her real name), highlights several issues not dealt with elsewhere in UK gang literature. Laila is 17 and attending college. She is practicing her religion but does not wear conventional dress. She says that she feels constantly persecuted by member of two local gangs who attend her college. They say that girls who are not 'appropriately dressed' according to their religion are 'easy', and are only there to have sex with. She wants to leave college because of this as she does not feel safe. These boys have touched her while walking down the halls and have approached her asking for oral sex during the lunch break. She says that some girls in her college are passed amongst the boys and have given up trying to protest. She did share this with a mentor in the college who spoke to the staff, but she is scared of reprisals. She is afraid to tell her parents as her older brothers would be asked to intervene and she knows that the abusive boys at the college have a reputation for extreme violence.

Firmin identifies a small group of young women who come from relatively prosperous families in 'respectable' neighbourhoods, who have been successful at school or college, but become involved in romantic relationships with high status male gang members. She cites Amy (not her real name), who gained 11 GCSEs at grade A-C at grammar school, who at 17 has a boyfriend, also 17, who is currently serving a sentence in a Young Offender Institution (YOI) for gang-related crimes. She says she is always attracted to 'bad boys' but doesn't know why. She does not live in a gang-affected area but knows that the enemies of her boyfriend may come looking for her at any time to exact revenge upon him.

A further issue, (one raised by several key informants, interviewed for this scoping exercise) is illustrated by the case of Julie aged 23. Her two younger brothers, aged 15 and 17, are seriously gang-involved. Her youngest brother is still in mainstream education but has been placed in an 'exclusion unit' in the school for violent conduct. Because of this, and her parents' apparent lack of awareness of the real situation, she has moved back from the university she was attending. She is sometimes called by her brothers to pick them up late at night especially when situations are getting dangerous. On one occasion she paid an outstanding debt to another gang on their behalf. She is afraid of what will happen to them if they continue with their gang involvement. She does not know how much her parents know and doesn't want to discuss it with them as she is afraid of losing the trust of her brothers. She has tried to talk to them but they say it's what they need to do to avoid being attacked. Because of her known, albeit marginal, gang involvement, she could also be

vulnerable to attack since reprisals against female relatives of gang-involved young men to resolve a 'beef' is not uncommon.

## 2.14 What are the best strategies for intervening with young people who are sexually exploited in gangs?

Policy makers in British Columbia (JIBC 2006) have developed a 'holistic' model for intervention with young people at risk of gang involvement, or subject to sexual exploitation in gangs. In developing the model the authors have adopted what they describe as a 'rights-based framework'. The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989)* places a responsibility upon governments to protect young people from abuse. Additionally, the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (UN 2002)* recognizes that girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Eliminating the occurrence of sexual exploitation requires a holistic approach that addresses the contributory factors for high-risk groups. The six key areas for intervention commended by the model are:

- **Global prevention strategies** to counter child abuse, promote the education of at-risk groups, ensure adequate housing, health and employment opportunities and promote public awareness of their needs.
- **Targeted prevention:** North American Research indicates that young women who become gang-involved typically 'hang out' with gang members for as much as a year, before making a commitment to join (Miller 2001). Targeted prevention would therefore include 'outreach programmes', targeting both the neighbourhoods and schools, counselling and mentoring, residential drug and alcohol treatment for high risk young people, intervention with families, especially hard-to-reach families, and specialised professional training for those who work with them.
- **Harm reduction:** including the construction of 'bad date' databases, supportive police protection, HIV prevention, needle exchange, STD testing, street outreach and the provision of emergency shelters.
- **Crisis intervention** which takes the form of outreach work with exploited and 'street-involved' young people that spans mental health and suicide prevention services.
- **Exit programmes:** including programmes to support commercially sexually exploited young people leaving gangs, 'reconnect programmes', education and training programmes leading to worthwhile jobs and financial support for young people leaving exploitative relationships or situations. Irving Spergel (1995) who evaluated the *Comprehensive Gang Strategy* developed by the *US Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)* in 1993 concluded that the most successful programmes are based upon 'community mobilisation' in which local

citizens, police officers, probation officers, community youth workers, church groups, boys and girls clubs, community organizations, work as a team to understand the gang structures and provide social intervention and alternative social opportunities.

- **Programmes to assist healing and reintegration** should include emotional and psychological support, economic assistance and life skills training that include conflict resolution and anti-bullying elements which aim to reduce young people's reliance on physical violence as a way of exerting power and control and healthy recreational activities. Research also suggests that programmes should aim to providing at-risk , gang-involved girls and young women with positive opportunities to fulfill their needs. (Chatterjee, 2006)

The principles informing these programmes emphasise that they should be 'strengths' rather than deficit-based, culturally relevant and gender-specific, particularly in dealing with sexual assault and abuse (Miller 2009, Totten 2008). The different central government violence against women strategies have also repeatedly noted the need for gender awareness within programmes intervening to prevent violence. Moreover, programmes should recognise variations in young womens' age and levels of gang-involvement. Research also suggests that intervention strategies should be responsive to diversity of need and experience among female and male gang members, with a particular sensitivity to ethnic and cultural differences.

# Youth Gangs, Sexual Violence and Sexual Exploitation

## 3. Data from the Key Informants

### 3.1 Method:

Data was gathered from 10 individual key informants; two solicitors, three youth workers, three peer mentors and two police officers. In addition, data was gathered from two key informant focus groups. These were composed of fifteen individuals; including youth workers, social workers, a psychologist, managers of community safety, youth justice and probation services, researchers, and residents in gang-affected neighbourhoods, each of whom had extensive experience of working with or researching, sexually victimized young women, gang-involved young men and women, and residents of gang-affected neighbourhoods.

### 3.2 The roles played by gang-affiliated young women

Key informants identified three main roles played by young women in youth gangs:

- 'Girlfriends'/ 'Wifeys' who tend to be monogamous and occupy a relatively high status. Their boyfriends are rarely monogamous however and tend to have sex with 'gang girls' described as 'Links' (see below). Wifeys might hide or carry weapons, drugs or money for their boyfriends, and have their babies. However, when they return to the gang having given birth, they may find that they have lost status and are now lower down the pecking order, becoming a 'gang girl' or 'Link' (see below). 'Girlfriends'/ 'Wifeys' are also vulnerable to kidnap by rival gangs seeking revenge against their boyfriends. Although not exclusive to gang –associated females, phrases such as 'wifey' and 'link' are frequently used.
- Within the gang context, 'Links' are usually younger gang-involved girls, aged from 12 upwards, who are passed around between gang-involved young men. Should one of these girls become pregnant by a high status male, a situation which can be perceived as a bid to establish a more solid relationship with him, they may be attacked by other 'gang girls' endeavouring to 'bring them down to earth', or indeed to induce a miscarriage.
- 'Soldiers', normally associate with a small, all female, 'crew'. They do not have sexual relationships with male gang members and tend to be involved in gang violence, street crime and drug dealing. 'Soldiers' demand to be accepted by male gang members on the same basis as their male peers.

This categorization echoes the findings of other research (Pitts 2008, Firmin 2009).

The key informants also suggested that the roles available to young women and girls in gangs were more diverse than this and they described these other roles/definitions:

- **Gang girls** play a similar role to a so-called 'link', having low status in the gang and being available for sex with all gang members.
- **Set-up girls** lure members of other gangs to particular places with the promise of sex, where they are robbed or assaulted.
- **Non-neighbourhood girls** live in another part of town but have a relationship with a male gang member. This means that they will not necessarily be known to be gang-involved in their usual social milieu, retaining relationships with more conventional peers.
- **Non-affiliated girls** are not recognized as being affiliated with any particular gang but have friendships/sexual relationships with boys from a number of different gangs. They will sometimes use this relative autonomy to relay news about one gang to members of another in exchange for rewards or favours. Relatively few young women adopt this potentially dangerous role
- **Casual girls** may try to become involved with high status gang members by becoming pregnant. However, this strategy may lead to them being attacked by other young women affiliated to the gang, either to drive them away or to precipitate a miscarriage.
- **Out of area girls** are unlike 'non-neighbourhood girls' in that they will usually come from a relatively prosperous home in a more prestigious neighbourhood and will have achieved at school. However, although their high status boyfriends will usually meet them in their own neighbourhood or a neutral area they are not immune from reprisals from or kidnap by other gang-affiliated girls. They may, for instance, be 'tagged' in photos on social networking sites, thus removing their anonymity.
- **'Respectable'** girls: the girl friend of male gang members (especially those who have high ranking in the gang) who consider themselves to be 'Chief Executives', and will only engage with people they consider to have the same status as themselves. Some male gang members will boast that they have 'a girlfriend at university'.

These are largely similar to the range of experiences shared by young women who participated in the Female Voice in Violence Project previously outlined (Firmin 2010).

### **3.3 Young women joining the gang**

Key informants echoed the findings of the North American research and more recent UK research such as Firmin (2010) which suggest that girls become involved in gangs because of pre-existing family connections or because a close friend or boyfriend is involved. One participant indicated that in her research, all the young women who got mixed up in gangs were involved as a result of some relationship of familial or romantic 'loyalty' to a male gang member. Another suggested that chronically deprived or traumatized young people, who appear to be over-represented in youth gangs, may be involved as a way of resolving these problems. She argued that young women from abusive home situations are often looking for a 'father-figure' or a male 'protector' and may use their sexuality to gain favour with gang members. However, they tend to get involved in relationships with similarly troubled young men who are unable to provide this nurturance and protection because of their own negative experiences of family. Other young women may become involved in the wake of loss, through death, separation abandonment or divorce, a factor which is also associated with the onset of youth offending and exclusion from school (Berridge et al 2002). Even if young people have not experienced loss, they may be living with emotionally absent parents. As a result they may tend to have poor self esteem and may become targets for bullying.

### **3.4 The attitudes of gang-involved young people to sexual violence and exploitation**

One of the key informants suggested that the attitudes of gang-involved young men to young women were complex and that in some cases they stemmed from emotional trauma experienced in their formative years. Being unable to confront the neglectful or punitive parent directly, the anger generated by the humiliation and pain they have suffered was projected onto these gang-involved young women. The fact that the young women are treated as if they were of little or no importance is a reversal or inversion of the relationship they experienced with their mother in which she was both all-powerful and all-important. However, whatever the 'pathologies' of individual gang members, these types of relationships appear to be a defining characteristic of 'street culture', and are supported by the misogynistic lyrics of gangsta rap and the rapping and 'spitting' produced by gang-involved young men on You-Tube and other social networking sites.

Key informants suggested that in many cases, younger, gang-involved young women did not recognise the seriousness of the sexual violence to which they were subjected and, as a result, would be unlikely to report it. For some young women, they said, rape and other forms of sexual violence appear to have become normalised. This mirrors the findings of the literature previously outlined.

### 3.5 Vulnerability to sexual violence and exploitation

Key informants suggested that gang-involved girls and young women are particularly vulnerable because they think they have 'chosen' to put themselves into this risky situation voluntarily. Gang-involved young men may have a strong sense of fatalism, tending to believe that they have no alternative but to be involved. As a result, young men tend to be indifferent to the risks that gang-involved young women face (see also Firmin 2010). Whereas gang-involved young men would protect and defend their mother or sister, they would not necessarily protect 'gang girls' since these relationships tend to be fairly 'casual' and if something bad happened to these girls, the young men would tend to think it was not their problem. Although 'gang-girls' are sometimes kidnapped and raped by rival gang members, the gang-involved young men would not necessarily feel that they had to seek retribution for this. If another male gang member was assaulted however, they would feel it incumbent upon them to seek retribution to regain lost 'respect'.

'Gang girls' are expected to undertake tasks for the gang and, if they fail, they can expect violent retribution. Carlene Firmin (2010) gives the example of Louise (not her real name). Louise was bored at school and at 13 became involved with members of a local gang and began selling drugs for them. She was arrested for possession of drugs and the drugs were confiscated. As a result she was kidnapped and repeatedly raped as a punishment. She did not seek any help following this incident. At 14 she dropped out of school and started selling drugs on her own. She was arrested and ended up at a YOT where she took part in a girls group. She said that she didn't feel like she could talk about things because she was always encouraged to use people's names, and didn't want to be a 'snitch'. Further arrests followed and aged 16 she was put into Care under Section 20 of The Children Act 1989.

However, in gang-affected neighbourhoods, sexual violence can happen to girls and young women whether they are gang-involved or not. As one key informant observed:

*On my estate there are two kinds of girls, those who are involved with gangs and are sexually abused by male gang members and those who are not involved with gangs but are afraid that they could be sexually abused by male gang members.*

A key informant spoke of an incident in which an apparently particularly attractive young woman was 'given' to a rival gang to settle a 'beef'. Far from feeling enslaved, this appeared to make her feel '*tremendously important and powerful*'. In addition girls whose status is waning were 'passed down' through the gang and they were unlikely to have a say in this. These scenarios are explicitly referenced in Firmin 2011.

Another group vulnerable to violent attack are the daughters of high status 'first generation' male gang members serving lengthy prison sentences (see Firmin 2011 for further details). These young women may be the targets of vendettas against their fathers and therefore need to remain gang-involved in order to receive their protection. Carlene Firmin (2010) cites Cindy whose high status boyfriend is serving a long jail sentence, at one point the door of her flat was kicked in by people looking for her boyfriend who threatened her with death. She says that when she reported to the police and the housing authority, nobody asked her any questions about the safety of her or her baby; they simply came and fixed the door.

### **3.6 The violent youth gang 'partying' and commercial sexual exploitation**

There have been rumours that violent, drug-dealing, gangs are involved in commercial sexual exploitation but there is a paucity of evidence to substantiate this. There is however, according to a key informant, fairly strong evidence of the trafficking, by adult drug dealers, of older women and some younger boys from Liverpool and South London to Brighton for the purposes of sexual exploitation. In Liverpool there are also demonstrable links between drug dealing and prostitution, with taxi firms acting as legal fronts for the illegal businesses (see Firmin 2011 for further details) This tends to involve older women, however, and is linked to adult organised crime.

Key informants indicated that 'Partying' is central to young women's sexual exploitation in gangs but that the young women do not perceive this to be prostitution and do not understand themselves to be exploited. Two key informants suggested that this was the prevalent form of commercial sexual exploitation of young women in certain parts of East London and that the parties were organized by gang-involved young men and young adults who were also involved in the drugs business.

### **3.7 Young women as perpetrators of gang-related violence**

Whereas all-girl gangs are evident in the USA (Campbell 1995, Chesney-Lind & Hagedorn 1998), none of the key informants interviewed or participating in the focus groups was aware of any specifically female gangs in the UK. However there have been instances of short-lived, named, groups of girls involved in violence against other girls.

In 2008, for example, a group of younger teenage girls, who styled themselves the 'Showah Chicks'\* , engaged in series of violent confrontation with other girls in Peckham, which, at one point, led to the closure of a number of schools and the suspension of bus services. The 'Showah Chicks' was apparently composed of a 'hard core' of three or four, gang-involved, girls and some other, local, female peer groups. These confrontations lasted, on and off, for around a year but a key

informant who works in the area noted that the young people involved had simply 'grown older and moved on'.

*(\*Their name derives from that of the 'Shower Posse' – a notorious Jamaican drug trafficking gang led by the infamous Christopher Coke who was recently extradited to the USA following a protracted gun battle in Tivoli Gardens Kingston to face charges of murder and drug trafficking in June 2010)*

More seriously, in March 2007, Kodjo Yenga (16) was stabbed in the heart after being ambushed by a gang, including two girls, aged 14-17, armed with knives and bats in Hammersmith, West London, shouting "kill him, kill him". They were said to be affiliated to the West London MDP, (Murder Dem Pussies/ Murder, Drugs and Power). A key informant who had interviewed all the young people involved in this murder noted that in Hammersmith, young women usually played a less prominent role in the gang; keeping weapons (guns and knives) and bringing them to the young men when they were needed.

In July 2008 Shakilus Townsend (16) was murdered because he was caught in a love triangle involving Samantha Joseph (15). Samantha, the girlfriend of Danny McLean (18), lured Shakilus to a cul-de-sac in Thornton Heath, South London, where he was ambushed by McLean, a known gang member, and five others. They beat him with a baseball bat before stabbing him six times. Although Samantha said she thought the gang would only beat him up, she was also convicted of murder.

A male key informant who is now a peer mentor observed that:

*They will sleep with you and then go through your pockets. They will sleep with you and phone guys and they will be waiting for you when you leave the flat. That's how people will run up this information, they will get girls in. They can get certain information this way. Boys are clowns when it comes to girls.*

In her study of gang-involved young women, Carlene Firmin interviewed Rita (not her real name) a 'Soldier'. Rita's older brothers are involved in gangs and at 12 she became involved. She says she did this because it was all she knew and she needed to find a way of earning money because her mother didn't have any. She was permanently excluded from school in Year 9. Now, aged 17, she uses weed regularly and acknowledges that to some extent this has numbed her ability to feel emotion. However, she says that she has seen so many people die that when she goes to funerals she doesn't cry anymore. She says she is fighting in a war just like any other war; she doesn't know why – she just knows 'they' are her enemy. She has been involved with the YOT for several years, and says she tells her workers what they want to hear because she doesn't believe they could understand or help. She is currently in a Youth Offender Institution.

A female key informant explained that she left home with her younger sister at the age of 14 as a result of family conflict. She supported herself, initially, by selling soft drugs, but eventually moved on to Class A., crack and cocaine drug dealing. She used the proceeds to buy a car and a flat and to cover the costs of her own and her sister's higher education. At the outset she was not involved in any violence but as her business expanded, rivals attempted to take it over; *'I had a gun put in my face and nearly lost my life several times.'* In order to ward off these attempts she felt forced to arm herself with a gun and demonstrate that she was prepared to exact revenge upon anybody who threatened her business or the people working for her. At one point she was regarded as the most feared young person in the borough in which she conducted business.

### **3.8 Summary of data from key informants**

The consultation with key informants produces evidence similar to findings from research both in North America and the UK.

Young women experience high levels of sexual violence and sexual exploitation in gang-affected neighbourhoods, but this is 'normalised' and hidden from view.

Young people in gang-affected neighbourhoods have not been adequately consulted about their experiences of sexual violence or about how the violence may be prevented.

Exit strategies are poorly developed with little 'joined up' policy between law enforcement and child protection agencies.

#### **4. Appendix one: Youth Gangs, Sexual Violence and Sexual Exploitation - Key documents published 1 February – 31 March 2011**

The remit of this review included documents published on or before 31 January 2011. A number of key documents have however been published since, that merit highlighting in terms of their relevance to the issue of sexual exploitation and sexual violence within gang-affected neighbourhoods. These include:

##### **‘This is it. This is my Life...’ Female Voice in Violence Final Report on the Impact of Serious Youth Violence and Criminal Gangs on Women and Girls Across the Country (March 2011)**

This final report follows on from the 2010 report referenced in the main body of the report (Firmin 2010). The report presents the full findings of the research project, both nationally and in relation to area-specific findings, offering unique insights into young women’s experiences of serious youth violence and criminal gangs within the UK and young men’s understanding of the same.

The report provides a comprehensive overview of key developments that have occurred since the publication of the Phase one report in March 2010, and areas in which further progress is still required. It report concludes that *“the current approach fails to prevent female association to criminal gangs, rarely identifies those at risk [and] places vulnerable girls in high-risk situations, such as male-dominated spaces or programmes”* (Firmin 2011:85), setting forth a series of recommendations as to how the impact of criminal gangs and serious youth violence on girls can be better addressed.

##### **The London Serious Youth Violence Board Final Report (March 2011)**

The report outlines the work of the Board over a two year period (2009-2011), highlighting case studies of relevant programmes and setting forth a series of recommendations for moving forward efforts to address serious youth violence.

##### **The Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan (March 2011)**

Subsequent to the *Call to End Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG)* in November 2010, the government produced an accompanying action plan. Action 23 within the plan is to “establish a working group of the Home Secretary’s Guns, Gangs and Knives Roundtable to develop proposals to address VAWG and female

involvement in gangs...combining early intervention work with tough enforcement and empowering local communities to prevent the spread of violence (Cabinet Office 2011:10).

NB. A good practice guide, emanating from the Tackling Knives and Serious Youth Violence Programme was also issued in May 2011.

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