Gang Transformation, Changes or Demise: Evidence from an English City

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gangs experience, or provide explanations for these changes (Rodgers 2006).

Some evidence suggests that (1) transformation rather than dissolution is the modal way in which gangs change and that (2) these transformations have more to do with external community characteristics than with the characteristics of the individual gang members or the group itself (Klein and Maxson, 2006). Most of this research, however, is based only on police data. On the other hand, some ethnographic studies have supported the view that individual gang member trajectories in relation to “maturing out” of crime are key to understanding the process of gang transformation (Jenssen, 2008). As contested as to what drives gang changes is the pattern of transformation that gangs experience. Some have argued that gangs naturally evolve from turf street groups, to market-oriented drug gangs, and finally to groups that mix political and mercenary elements (Sullivan and Bunker, 2002). However, there are too few empirical studies of gang transformations to make general claims of this nature. It is also far from certain that once drugs come into the equation there is only one possible path of evolution: towards greater organisation and sophistication.

In this chapter we aim to address the question of gang transformations using data from an ethnographic study of gangs in an English city. Fieldwork took place between 2005 and 2008 but we gathered considerable retrospective information about local gang history through interviews with individuals involved in gangs back in the 80s and have, after completion of fieldwork, managed to keep in touch.

Introduction

There is ample recognition within the criminological literature that gangs come and go and that those sustaining longer periods of existence may undergo important transformations (Klein and Maxson, 2006). Thus, “as types of criminal opportunities and social and institutional circumstances change, different types of criminal organisations develop” (Arias, 2006: p. 55). There are, however, very few empirical studies that assess gang stability, document the process of transformation that
with key informants. The longitudinal aspects to the research design allow us to reflect on some of the intergenerational and intragenerational changes in relation to gangs and transformations of two specific gangs. Although our ethnographic study was focused on a variety of neighbourhoods across Research City, here we only report about gangs (Upperside and Lowsider) in Inner West (a corridor of historically marginalised neighbourhoods with a substantial black and minority ethnic population) since they are the ones about which we are in a stronger position to discuss transformations. Most lethal firearm violence in Research City is considered by the police to be "gang-related" and involves conflict within and between gangs from Inner West. Inner West gangs are often presented by media and authorities as the archetypal "contemporary" violent and profit-oriented street gang in the UK.

Before we describe our findings we describe the terms of the debate about gangs in the UK. This is relevant as it raises questions about changes in the UK gang landscape over the last few decades. Gangs, as specific groups, do not experience processes of transformation in a vacuum. We can only understand within-gang transformation in the context of more general societal changes. Some commentators, as we show, have argued that cultural and economic changes have resulted in key cohort-related changes to gangs in the UK over the last few decades. We then explain how these micro-level changes have interacted with micro-level changes within gangs in Research City. In particular, we discuss how the proliferation of drug markets and the police response to this proliferation in Research City contributed to foster a gang culture that has continued to today. The degree to which this gang culture allows us to speak of articulated "supergangs" hierarchically organised around drug dealing, as some have argued (Pitts, 2008), is however more questionable. Equally, we will question the degree to which we can always assume gang stability exists when particular gang names continue to be used in certain localities.

**Context: The Changing Gang Landscape in the UK**

The dominant view of youth gangs until recently in Britain was established during the 1960 and 1970s. Downes, in his influential *The Delinquent Solution*, argued that delinquent groups in the east end of London lacked "structured cohesion," institutional permanence, and a group commitment to delinquency similar to that described by contemporary American criminologists such as Cloward, Ohlin, and Yablonsky. Downes concluded that at most, he found street-corner groups or "small cliques whose members committed illegal acts sometimes collectively, sometimes in pairs, sometimes individually in some cases regularly, in others only rarely" and for which delinquent engagement was not more central than "sexual prowess." These groups did not either "obtrude, let alone dominate an area" (Downes, 1966: 199). Despite the fact that his work was grounded in only a particular area of London and Downes himself suggested that "gangs" with leaders and territorial disputes had historically been present in the East End, his research was interpreted as evidence by the British criminological community that there have never been gangs in the UK. Similarly, Howard Parkers' (1974) ethnographic account of delinquent youth networks concluded there were no gangs in Liverpool, insofar as the delinquent groups he described did not "possess such rigid defining criteria." Despite their persistent offending involvement, their *raison d'etre* was primarily social. These observations and descriptions are not dissimilar from many descriptions of gangs in the US: however, these findings have been widely interpreted to offer support for the notion that gangs were an American anomaly. What the UK had instead was groups of rowdy working-class adolescents involved in a succession of youth subcultures (teddy boys, punks, skinheads, rude boys, etc.) that, according to the dominant view, were not gangs (Pitts, 2008). They were loosely structured groups for which fighting, crime and antisocial behaviour were incidental and secondary to their social and developmental functions. The only research from this period that had no difficulty attaching the descriptor "gang" to these groups was Patrick's (1973) ethnographic account in Glasgow, a city perceived in the criminological literature as an outlier.

Things began to change during the late 1980s and early 1990s. A number of shootings of young black people involved in drug dealing in Manchester at the
Mares’s research was followed by a number of self report surveys with samples of arrestees (Bennett & Holloway, 2004) and young people (Communities that Care, 2004; Hayden, 2008; Bradshaw, 2005; Sharp et al., 2005) with a specific focus on measuring gang membership. These surveys document a level of gang involvement in the UK that is similar to those levels encountered in other advanced capitalist societies, including the US (see Klein and Maxson, 2006). These surveys also suggest that young people identified as gang-involved present a more serious offending profile and problematic background than other young people. This developing body of survey evidence also suggests that British gangs show a less pronounced institutional identity than those encountered in the USA (Winfree et al., 2007) and that their offending profile is far removed from the gun- or knife-toting and drug dealing projected in the media and by law enforcement agencies.

Are these surveys simply rebranding the long-standing phenomenon of neighbourhood based groups of young people involved in low-level offending? Is the term gang simply a new label being used to designate the—not radically changed—experiences of marginalised urban youth? Or did something really change during the late 1980s in the nature and dynamics of these groups? Can we assume that significant changes in political economy and culture from the 1970s to today (e.g. deindustrialisation, globalisation, consumerism, increased spatial polarisation of poverty and wealth, new philosophies of local government and urban development) have not had an impact on youth group dynamics, as they have in other neighbourhood-rooted criminal networks (Hobbs, 2001) and gun culture (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009)? A new generation of ethnographic or qualitative studies of gangs has emerged over the last five years in Cardiff and surrounding areas (Maher, 2007), London (Pitts, 2008), the anonymous “Research City” about which we report here (Aldridge and Medina, 2008), the five main Scottish cities (Bannister et al., forthcoming) and other areas that are considered to be hotspots for gang violence (Youth Justice Board, 2008). All have aimed to further clarify these questions.
SECTION III: Gang Structures and Group Processes

The author that is most often associated with the assertion that we have witnessed a transformation of delinquent youth groups in the UK is Pitts (2008). Pitts claims that we are witnessing the development of new articulated “supergangs” with long histories of involvement in organised crime, clear subgroups, role differentiation, established territories and neighbourhood control, vertical links into higher echelon organised crime, and highly organised drug dealing activity. Pitts moreover identifies a new phenomenon of more institutionalised gangs with higher levels of organisation, more formalised structures, and greater hold on young peoples lives, which are more embedded in neighbourhoods’ economic and social life. These supergangs, according to Pitts, developed from conditions of marginalisation and flourishing drugs markets. This explanation echoes accounts about the spread of gangs during the 1980s in the USA (see Eagan, 1996) and is consistent with research suggesting that during the first heroin outbreaks in the 1980s in the UK, young people were increasingly drawn into the informal economy and drug dealing to secure “a standard of living better than mere survival” (Auld et al., 1986: 173) and to achieve status, identity and meaning in contexts of marginalisation (Pearson, 1987).

A similarly debated point is whether these emerging gangs have been responsible for changing trends in violence (Hallsworth and Young, 2008). But regardless of whether gangs have contributed significantly to overall levels of violence, evidence suggests gang violence has a highly localised character (Home Office, 2008; Bannister et al., forthcoming). Police sources suggest diverse scenarios across cities. In Manchester and Birmingham, for example, drugs gangs developed with shootings linked to entrenched but highly fluctuating “tit-for-tat” violence around issues of “respect.” In Glasgow, weapons of choice are knives. Hales et al. (2006) suggests that gun violence is closely tied to illegal drug markets and gangs. Both police intelligence and independent research suggest a close tie between gangs and firearm violence in affected communities (Bullock and Tilley, 2002). Although fatalities from firearms are exceptionally rare in England and Wales (59 in 2006/2007, or 0.15 deaths per 100,000), precisely because of their rarity they raise significant public alarm. In England and Wales these disproportionately affect black young people as both perpetrators and victims. This research suggests that gangs often underlie a changing criminal culture in which guns are becoming increasingly significant.

The development of policy responses to the media’s increasingly sensationalist reporting of gangs and gang violence was slow at first. As Pitts (2008) has highlighted, this is particularly curious for a government that has exploited fear of youth crime for electoral advantage. This sluggishness changed significantly in 2007, when Prime Minister Tony Blair presided over Britain’s first “gun crime summit” as a response to new shootings of very young innocent bystanders in what were presented as gang related incidents. Later that year, one of the first measures adopted by Gordon Brown as new Prime Minister was the formation of the Home Office’s Tackling Gangs Action Programme (TGAP) to identify good practice in dealing with gangs and gun crime. This resulted in the toolkit: Tackling Gangs (Home Office, 2008) and a government guidance leaflet for parents on how to detect children’s involvement in gangs. Increasingly, police forces and local authorities are drawing on US interventions, importing models developed in Los Angeles and Boston of dedicated firearm/gang units and gang databases, as well as multi-agency gang intervention teams. Recent legislation introduced gang injunctions as a new tool in the police arsenal against young people suspected of gang membership. At the policy level, the term “gang” has now become entrenched in both national and local crime and disorder strategies (e.g. Home Office, 2008). However, considerable confusion still remains as to what a gang is. A serious concern for civil liberty advocates and gang researchers is how the “gang” label is both being used in a rather indiscriminate manner and disproportionately applied to ethnic minority youth (Bullock and Tilley, 2008; Ralphs et al., 2009).

In sum, media, policy and some academic accounts recognised that delinquent youth groups in Britain experienced change during the 1980s that continues today. These groups were seen to have become more institutionalised, more oriented toward profit activities built around participation.
in drug markets, and to have increased their level of participation in serious injurious violence, particularly firearm-related violence. In a parallel fashion, policy and programmatic responses to gangs have also changed and become more intrusive in the lives of young people (Ralphs et al., 2009; Medina et al., 2010; Aldridge et al., 2010). In the remainder of this chapter we focus on changes in the gang landscape in Research City in order to try to understand the reasons for such transformations.

The Origins of Inner West Gangs: From Peer Street Groups to Violent Drug Dealing Networks

It is probably fair to say that groups meeting the broad Eurogang definition1 have existed in socially excluded parts of urban Britain for a very long time (Patrick, 1973; Parker, 1974; Mares, 2001; Hallsworth and Young, 2004), with accounts even going back to the nineteenth century (Davies, 2008). Our research confirms that gangs are not a recent phenomenon in Research City. Some of our older informants (now in their 50s) described their experiences in street-oriented, territorial, offending and fighting groups as part of their growing up in poor areas of Research City during the 1970s, and police we spoke to likewise described enforcement tactics used with these groups dating from around this time.

Were there any changes in the attributes and behaviours of groups of this type that may have made them more likely to be labelled as gangs? Consistent with Pitts’ observations (2008), we saw evidence in Inner West of the impact of changing drug market conditions in the development of new gang identities. Inner West was traditionally an important focus for distribution of cannabis partially tolerated by local law enforcement, and the dealing of heroin in closed drugs markets by user-dealers. When crack cocaine hit the street, dealers from Inner West capitalised on this laissez faire climate in this more profitable merchandise. We have clear evidence that during the 1980s and 1990s, territorial peer groups of ethnic minority youth facing significant discrimination in education and the

labour market were becoming increasingly involved in minor offending and the retail sale of heroin and crack in very successful open drug markets: “There were mainly street markets whereby anybody could go to that market place and buy drugs basically, mainly heroin, and people would travel great distances to Research City to buy from these open markets simply because the reputation was of good quality gear and good, reasonable prices” (K19).

In Inner West, these two groups (Upperside and Lowerside) soon started to be identified as gangs in media reports and by the police, and eventually adopted for themselves the “gang” names the police had assigned them. In a context of marginalisation and ethnic discrimination, young people involved in these groups saw these emerging illegal opportunities as key in explaining the transition of their informal delinquent peer groups into “gangs.” This Inner West gang member explains: “There were always gangs, but they weren’t selling drugs. People just used to hang around together in groups. Before Upperside and Lowerside appeared... My brother is 8 years older, so when he was younger they did go out and commit petty crimes; they were gangs, but they were doing different things.” External labelling by media and the police played a pivotal role in reinforcing the group identity of these gangs. These peer groups became, or perhaps following local lore about criminal groups aspired to become, what the drug literature describes as structural pyramidal distribution systems (May et al., 2008) and the gang literature as specialist “drug gangs.” In sum, changing drug markets and the societal response to them contributed to foster the encroachment of a gang culture in Inner West.

Apart from the growing significance of drugs in the informal economy and social organisation of the street in these neighbourhoods, a second key development during the 1980s and the 1990s was the emergence and stabilisation of comparatively high levels of gun violence. We found considerable evidence of conflict that arose from within the illegal open drugs markets in which these gang members participated. This conflict in Inner West was not, however (as commonly supposed), over the markets themselves, but tended to result from dealers stealing from or “taxing” one another, and often members of their own gang. In this context,
dealers and gang members in Inner West began to arm themselves with guns. Violence linked to these market conditions and personal disputes from interpersonal conflict resulted in a spiral of retaliatory, primarily gun, homicides: "We just wanted to make money, sell drugs, get rich. And, we were getting robbed, getting shot at, and then what are you gonna do, shoot back, innit? ... All of sudden you start to sell drugs obviously and it starts to be like jealousy; we were clashing with each other so before you knew it everybody had like beef with each other."

In a context of tight gun controls and very low national levels of gun violence, these events made the phenomenon of "gang" violence particularly visible. This violence, although of an order of magnitude many times lower than that found in the US, continues to fluctuate today and marks Inner West as separate from other gang areas in Research City. The introduction of guns, as documented elsewhere (e.g., Jensen, 2008), had a significant impact in the lived experience of gang involved young people. References to violence and exposure to violent events as victims, perpetrators and witnesses, became part of everyday conversation and of growing up for many of the young people we spoke to. As this former girlfriend and relative of key Inner West gang members described to us: "There was that many shootings at the time that it was just normal, it did become normal, you didn't even really think about the value of life, it was sad an everything, but then a couple of days later you would have forgotten about it and somebody else would have been shot" (BE-A2). Our ethnographic work in Research City offers consistent support to these observations. Gangs in the Inner West area of the city developed and armed themselves during the late 1980s and 1990s in a context in which predatory attacks on dealers, as well as dealing activities, were increasing. The two dominant gangs at the time then initiated a long irregular cycle of retaliatory violence. As Klein has noted, there is no city with just one gang. Conflict is essential to the development of gang identities and, although a good deal of the violent conflict we registered was intra-gang rather than inter-gang, the clash between Upperside and Lowerside contributed to reinforce their respective group identities and brand names.

Changes in Inner West

As suggested in the previous section, explanations referring to ethnic discrimination, social exclusion, the role of drug markets, the international arms trade, and police labelling, then, have some value when understanding the transformation of delinquent youth groups in Inner West into quasi-specialist drug gangs in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Our data suggests that was the case. More questionable, as we will see, is the degree to which these processes during the late 1980s and early 1990s have led to the continued organisational institutionalisation of the gangs we studied. Although important changes have taken place in Inner West from the late 1990s to today, we cannot conclude that these changes have resulted in Inner West gangs achieving greater formal organisation (whichever way you define this). In this section we discuss these more recent changes.

The Decline of Open Drug Markets and the Factors Facilitating This Decline

Changing market conditions and successful police operations during the 1990s disrupted these specialist drug gangs. As in other parts of Britain, we find the transition from a "highly structured pyramidal distribution system" into a "fragmented, non-hierarchical market with little structure" (May and Hough, 2001: 555). A combination of factors conspired to change the significance of Inner West as the place for the successful sale of drugs in open markets. This sort of market was particularly vulnerable to surveillance police operations, as TV dramas like The Wire have popularised. As a result of these operations a number of Inner West gang members received custodial sentences. The architectural redesign of the locations where these markets operated and the re-housing of numerous families also played a role in disrupting these markets. Other factors external to the activity of the authorities (e.g., mobile phones) also played a key role to the transition from open markets to distribution through personal networks. The breakdown of the street markets facilitated the move from gang co-ordinated drug dealing to individuals trading as free agents: "Back in the day there was a structure of
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literature has established, legal and illegal economic activities are not mutually exclusive and “doubling up” in crime and other earning activities is common (Fagan, 1997).

Only a small minority of older gang involved individuals appear to have established consistently successful “illegal only” incomes by using their gang reputation and contacts to get involved in more serious criminal enterprises (e.g., prostitution, importation, and multi kilo drug distribution). However, whether these individuals can be considered any longer to be “gang members” is in question as we discuss below.

Gang Transformation or Gang Demise?

What is really left of the gangs of Inner West that developed during the 1980s? For a gang to have “transformed” assumes that the gang continues to exist in some form. But how meaningful is it to speak of these gangs still existing as subsequent generations come along? This section examines the extent to which the Upperside and Lowerside gangs can be seen as having a continuing existence.

These gang names in Belmont have continued to be used by the media and law enforcement agencies and have become part of the popular folklore of Research City. The police often identify delinquent groups formed by younger siblings and relatives of individuals formerly affiliated to either Upperside or Lowerside as if they were subgroups of these entities. These new subgroups, according to the official view, can be considered a “confederation of cliques” that share a common identity with older members. As one city official put it to us: “Today a lot of our kids weren’t even born at that time when these gangs started. And they’ve grown up knowing only of the war, as they like to call it. And they don’t know why it started, and they don’t know what it’s all about, they just know that it goes on and they’re on one side of it.” The official and popular position on whether Upperside and Lowerside gangs remain in existence today is therefore clear. However, it is worth thinking systematically as to whether this is actually the case by examining our evidence. In order to answer this question, we separately consider (1) whether original members, twenty and thirty years on, are
rightly still considered members; and (2) to what extent younger individuals are members of these original groups or somehow affiliated to them.

Original Members: Community Merchants and Criminal Merchants
We begin with those who were affiliated to the Upperside and Lowerside Belmont gangs from the 1980s and 1990s, now in their thirties and forties. Although some of these have moved away or in other ways cut former connections, many retain gang connections through the myriad friendship and family links that run through gangs and their neighbourhoods. Police tend to treat those who have maintained links with suspicion (for example by keeping their names on existing “gang” databases, and their photographs on the wall of the specialist gang unit). However, the extent to which these individuals have completely desisted from gang-connected and other criminal activities varies considerably. One typical “route out” of gang activity was in becoming (or aiming to become) community activists or community workers. We refer to these individuals as “community merchants.” We found that these individuals were able to use their past (or existing) connections to gangs as a way to acquire credibility in their roles as those who “know whereof they speak.” Community merchants were sometimes put into service informally within the community, where their past reputations are turned to as a leveller in the resolution of conflict involving younger siblings or other gang members. We got to know well our individuals over the course of our research and, as a result of taking on community-oriented roles like these whilst retaining gang connections, could sometimes become embroiled in current-day gang dramas. Some of these individuals may even use their gang contacts to engage in activities in the informal economy to supplement their legal income (most often, this was through retail level rug dealing). Whilst we identify something of a blurring of the boundaries between “outside” and inside the gang amongst individuals like these, it is clear that it would be misleading to see these individuals as sitting at the top of a hierarchy in order to preserve the legacy of a common gang entity.

But what about those who persist in more dedicated criminal careers—does it make sense to consider any of these individuals as retaining gang membership today? As highlighted in the previous section, only a small minority of older individuals that were part of Upperside or Lowerside appear to have established consistently successful “illegal only” (or primary) incomes. However, we question whether they can be considered “gang members,” given the extent to which their contacts and operations spread across Research City, and involve dealings with a wide range of what they may previously have considered “rival” gangs and family firms. Although they may retain social and family connections to their former peers and amongst the younger generation, and even rely on some of them for “backup” in criminal enterprises, critically, they do not restrict their criminal collaborations to current or former members of their gangs. Criminal merchants are often still proud of their past gang affiliation and invoke it as something that gives them street capital (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2009). However, they do not appear to get involved in everyday “gang dramas,” for example, involving tit-for-tat retaliations or in relation to perceived slights. We refer to these individuals as “criminal merchants.” We have argued that gangs first and foremost are groups with a reputation for a willingness to resort to violence, even if rarely enacted (Medina et al., in submission). Upperside and Lowerside as “brand names” still retain these associations and are likely to prove useful as street capital amongst these merchants. Thus, as with the community merchants, criminal merchants may retain some superficial features of gang membership insofar as doing so facilitates their trade, and is anyway a natural part of continuing to live in a city without severing long-standing friendship and family ties. But on this we are clear: it is misleading to see them as leaders of their former gang or any of its younger cliques, as Pitts may in relation to the London “supergangs” he observed (Pitts, 2008). Indeed, we go even further: not only are community merchants and criminal merchants not leaders of Upperside and Lowerside today (in spite of police insistence to the contrary), it makes very little sense to even consider them members.
The Newer Generations

There are a number of gangs that are believed by local law enforcement to be younger off-shoots of cliques within Upperside and Lowerside. From Upperside, these cliques include Shankleytown's Crestside Man Dem (only a few streets' distance from the Upperside neighbourhood) and Fairview's Fairview Crew a few miles further afield and outside of Belmont. In relation to Lowerside, the Belmont Bloods reside in areas that overlap with the Lowerside neighbourhood, and, a few miles further afield, Ravenna's Raven Bloods gang, again, outside of Belmont. The "official" view about these younger groups is that they can alternatively be read: (1) as integral parts of Upperside and Lowerside in a hierarchical organisation scheme, (2) as "proxies" of Upperside or Lowerside (younger groups being manipulated in a war by proxy), or (3) as "projects" being sponsored by Upperside or Lowerside as venture capitalist firms. The image of some Chicago gangs underpins some of these police interpretations. Explanations of gang proliferation in the research literature, however, have emphasised processes around local community factors and cultural mimicking spawning new gangs rather than as the result of imperialist or capitalist gang broadening of their geographical scope (Klein and Maxson, 2006). In this sense, alternatively, these youth offending groups could be interpreted as simply reproducing the cultural template laid out by Upperside and Lowerside. This cultural template would have been known in many cases to younger gang involved individuals through intimate or family connections to key individuals in these groups but also as reinvented by media accounts that have heavily popularised these two gangs.

So what do we find in Inner West? Are these younger groups in fact younger "cliques" or subgroups connected to Upperside and Lowerside in the ways that law enforcement suggest, or are these simply new gangs? Our evidence on this question is mixed. Both of the same-neighborhood "doorstep" cliques for each gang—Crestside Man Dem and Belmont Bloods—have clear familial and social links to Upperside and Lowerside respectively. Members are the children, cousins, family friends, and neighbours of original members of Upperside and Lowerside. Although the young people in these cliques sometimes refer to themselves by their clique name, at other times they refer to themselves by the "parent" gang name, especially, for example, using the parent gang name for credibility when travelling further afield in Research City or outside of it, where the parent gang names are more widely known. The situation is slightly different, however, for the cliques whose members reside outside of Belmont—Fairview Crew and Ravenna Bloods. These cliques are made up of members who, like the doorstep cliques, include individuals who are children, cousins, family friends and neighbours of Upperside and Lowerside. The reasons for their "residential outsider" status in relation to Belmont are varied, and described elsewhere (Aldridge et al., 2010). However, these cliques also contain individuals born and bred in the neighbourhoods in which they are located—Fairview and Ravenna, without the same familial and social connections to Upperside and Lowerside. These young people are aware of and acknowledge the connections to the original gangs, but are much less likely to use the names, see themselves as representing them, or show respect to original Upperside or Lowerside gangsters. When referring to themselves, they prefer instead to identify with their home-grown neighbourhood gangs' names (but like those in the doorstep cliques, however, they may use the parent gang names as and when it suits to do so). In summary, then, the young people in both doorstep cliques and those further afield identify with the "parent" gangs, although the extent of this identification seems to vary depending on the extent to which the social networks of these groups overlap.

Original and older Belmont gangsters also recognise these cliques as "belonging" to one or the other of Upperside or Lowerside. But to suggest that the lines of connection between "parent" and "child" gangs are clear and unequivocal would be ill-advised. Our research makes clear that gangs all over Research City—Upperside and Lowerside included—are messy social networks that often overlap, including within families and friendship groups. We found the same to apply amongst these younger cliques. We have ample evidence that kinship does not strictly—or even
primarily—determine with which cliques gang affiliated young people will identify. Even teenage children of well-known and respected Upperside and Lowerside individuals from the 1980s and 1990s are known to affiliate with cliques affiliated to a father’s ostensibly “rival” gang.

We see only minimal—or at best mixed—evidence of hierarchical obedience and respect amongst young people in these cliques to the older generation of Upperside and Lowerside gang members (amongst its current members, as well as to both the community merchants and criminal merchants we describe in this chapter). To the extent that we do find a vertical deference, this is primarily amongst the “doorstep” cliques (Belmont Bloods and Crestside Man Dents); even here, however, our evidence is suggestive that control by older members over younger members appears to be declining over generations. We have, however, encountered situations of exploitation of younger members by some of the older generation.

The police imagine these cliques as part of the Upperside or Lowerside confederations and as part of two violently rival “supergangs.” We return therefore to our question in light of the evidence presented. Does it make sense to talk about “gang transformation”? Or are we simply documenting a case of Upperside and Lowerside demise and the development of new gangs that are better understood as distinct and autonomous entities? As we have shown, we have evidence for both of these possibilities. The answer to these questions, however, is not only empirically complicated, but complicated in the very asking, because of the assumption contained in the question that gangs—as a concept—are, primarily, organisations. It is clear that Upperside and Lowerside continue to have some kind of existence, but it is not clear that this existence refers to a concrete criminal organisation with clear institutional connection to the past. Today these gangs continue to exist as objects to the police, but also more widely as symbols of status and street capital, as cultural referents for younger residents of these communities, and many other things besides. The criminological angle of most gang research means that when we talk of transformation, the focus is on organisational change or on change in the criminal careers of gang involved individuals. From that limited organisational viewpoint, we see evidence of demise of the groups as active criminal networks, as well as evidence of ongoing existence, primarily through the cliques that have been spawned from them.

Final Thoughts

This chapter has described some of the basic changes that have taken place amongst Inner West gangs over the last 30 years. Our data support the view that profound cultural and socio-economic changes (e.g., globalisation of firearms and illegal drug trade, increasing spatial polarisation of poverty, etc.) shaped the experiences of young people participating in social networks with a group identity built around participation in criminal activities. This was a significant break from the past. Policing practices that were too keen to emphasise the distinctiveness of the criminal activities of the mostly-ethnic minority youth associated with these networks also contributed to raise their visibility and group identity.

However, the evolution of these groups does not conform to common stereotypes in Britain. We found little evidence of the appearance of supergangs that others have reported and that law enforcement agencies often mobilise as an image for strategic and political reasons; instead we find a much more complex picture. Why did Upperside and Lowerside not become supergangs? Visions of the gang as cohesive entities tend to overlook the high level of internal and violent conflict that may predate the lives of these groups. A good deal of the violence we encountered, as also reported about gangs elsewhere, emanated from interpersonal disputes regarding friends, family, and especially romantic relationships. More significantly, we found conflict within gangs to be as important as conflict between gangs, and more important on a day-to-day level, consistent with the view that most violence takes place between people who know each other. Jealousy and the recovery of debt were important sources of this sometimes violent within-gang conflict (Medina et al., forthcoming)

The interaction of this level of internal conflict, the lost role of Inner West in drug markets, the “heat” associated with being a member of these
gangs (in terms of elevated police pressure and risk of victimisation: see Ralphs et al., 2009 and Aldridge et al., 2010) as a pressure to “leave the game,” death and incarceration of key individuals, and individual trajectories of aging out of crime or progressing toward other profit making criminal activities requiring different forms of cooperation are explanatory candidates that may account for this process. In sum, we find then that both social and community external to the group, alongside factors linked to the developmental trajectories of gang members are significant to understand the process of change in gangs.

Yet, despite the dubious institutionalisation of supergangs in Inner West, we do find that, as reported above, some young people in these communities today display a greater familiarity with and use of gang iconography. Whether these groups can be considered part of the previously existing gangs is difficult to ascertain. Nonetheless, this is the way that is interpreted by local agencies to justify their actions: considerably greater intrusion and proclivity among local social services and law enforcement to treat ethnic minority young people in these communities as suspect or potential gang members and to label their peer groups as gangs. As Jensen (2008) has highlighted gangs are neither simply sociological facts, nor constructions; rather they are co-produced by state institutions, civil society and young men’s practices. In this sense, the state, almost by definition, continues to play an important role in processes of recognition, transformation and disappearance of gangs.

Notes

1. Klein and Maxson (2006) argue that “traditional” and “compressed” gangs are the more stable gang formations, with “specialty,” “collective,” and “neotraditional” gangs more likely to change their nature or disappear. They speculate that “specialty gangs” are particularly vulnerable to police suppression and undercover efforts and, thus, likely to disappear as a result.

2. For a detailed description of the methodology of the research project and the research site see Aldridge and Medina (2008). We deliberately avoid naming the city to further protect the confidentiality of participants, as a way of addressing the problems of stigmatisation of the neighbourhoods we observed, and to foster greater community support. All names we use for places, gangs or individuals are fictitious.

3. The Eurogang Project defines street gangs as “any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Klein and Maxson, 2006).

4. Jensen (2000) attempts to distinguish between street gangsters and drug dealers in Cape Town through a case study of “Kelly,” a former street gang member who became a “big time” drug dealer: in local parlance a “merchant.” Jensen does not take up the term merchant to imply only those who have made the transition from street gang to big-time dealing. However, we like the term “merchant” as applied to those both in and making the transition out of street gangs, as so much of their roles involve “trade”—whether legitimately, in the informal economy, or in more organised criminal enterprises. Although inspired by Jensen’s use of the term, we recognise that we take it up in a slightly different way. In this chapter, we describe both “community merchants” and “criminal merchants.”

5. Some of this debate is resonant of conflicting views or Al-Qaeda. Interpretations of this terrorist group have also portrayed it as some form of super-organisation. Investigative journalist Jason Burke (2003) has argued in relation to Al-Qaeda that an alternative interpretation is to think of Al-Qaeda as an idea, a worldview that can be subscribed to and serve as inspiration for terrorist action.

References


SECTION II: Gang Structures and Group Processes


Sharp, C., Aldridge, J. and Medina, J. 2006. Delinquent youth groups and offending behaviour: findings from the
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