Tackling the gang problem in the uk criminology essay

In the past decade the concept of gangs has been debated thoroughly via research, media and government policy. This has led many to blame the youth of today for being the downfall of society by belonging to a gang. However this is not a new phenomenon, since the 1960's British research has focused on gangs, from a wide variety of groupings such as teddy boys, skinheads, punks, chavs and rudeboys.

America is seen as the base for gang research however American researchers have been unable to agree on a uniform definition of gangs. In Britain Klein et al (2001) devised an operational definition of a gang as a durable street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of the group identity. This definition has been found to have cross-national validity (Decker and Weerman, 2005), and has been adapted in British research and policy (Sharp et al 2006).

A problem in inherent in defining such a complex notion is the involvement of the media. This is shown from as early as 1964 with Cohens ' Mods and Rockers' studye. The media's exaggeration and distortion of the events resulted in the negative perception of those who defined themselves as a Mod or Rocker. They were depicted as ' folk devils' and acted out that role accordingly in following years (Muncie, 1999). In today's society young people who become a member of a gang often seek to maintain that label for reasons such as the material, financial and social status gains (Jeffery, 1960).

According to NACRO, youth offending fell between 1993 and 2001 and Britain has one of the lowest youth crime rates in Europe. However the

media disregards this and continues to make young people " folk devils" (Cohen, 1980). By doing so it has lead to a moral panic (Cohen, 1980) with 1. 5 million Britons considering moving home because of young people " hanging around" their neighbourhood (The Independent, 2006).

Within this essay U. K gangs will be discussed in terms of the problems they cause such as gun and knife crime. The issue of the over-representation of ethnic minority gangs will also be debated. Attempts to prevent gang crime and the successes of prevention programmes will be discussed. The focus will be upon youth gangs as this is where the majority of research is based upon and they arguably have the most impact on British society.

The significance of gangs in the U. K relates to the issues they cause in regards society and community cohesion. Although NACRO stated that youth offending had fallen young people involved in gangs are disproportionately involved in crime, especially involving weapons. In 2008 more than 70 youngsters died due to gang violence in Britain (Hughes, 2009). It is the death of innocent bystanders such as Rhys Jones, Sally Ann Byfield and Damilola Taylor. That has shook society, leaving many to be fearful of going to areas dominated by gangs. Such areas are inner-city, economically deprived and have a high ethnic population (Vigil 2002).

The Metropolitan Police identified more than 170 gangs in London, with members as young as ten. Many gangs are loose affiliations of friends from the same area intent on controlling a territory, often defined by a post code. The penalty for straying into the wrong area is to be robbed, beaten or stabbed. Many teenagers carry a knife out of fear or to defend themselves if

attacked. Recently knife crime has risen across England and Wales, the number of fatal stabbings in 2007-08 was 270, the highest since records began in 1977 (Hughes, 2009). The Home Office reported that gun crime fell by 29%, this could be down to displacement effect as knives are more readily available than guns (Hughes, 2009). It must be noted that official statistics do not offer a complete picture of gun and knife crime because often violence between criminals and offences by children under 16 goes unreported (Golding et al, 2008).

An issue of gangs relates to " reluctant gangsters" (Pitts, 2009). They don't wish to be in a gang but as they fail to gain other employment they return to the gang lifestyle. Those who attempt to leave a gang are at high risk of victimisation (Taylor et al, 2007). The issue of victimisation is also a consequence for family as they may fall victim of a retaliation attack, have physical and mental health problem and endure numerous police raids and community stigma (Pitts, 2009). But as many will join gangs from a young age the effect of their actions is often not apparent before it is too late.

Ethnic minorities are over-represented in media reports (Davison 1997) and in British Police accounts of gangs (Marshall et al. 2005). As gangs are more prevalent in areas populated by ethnic minorities (Vigil 2002), people consciously avoid or move from such areas which allows the area to worsen. Possibly rendering it un-fixable even with government or police intervention, this is in line with the Broken Windows Theory (Wilson and Kelling, 1982)

Ethnicity may also not be such a strong predictor of gang membership in England and Wales, as opposed to a more segregated country such as USA

(Peach 1996). Research on British gangs provides support for this view: Manchester gangs are ethnically mixed when the neighbourhood is ethnically mixed (Bullock and Tilley 2002), whereas in the more ethnically homogeneous Edinburgh, gangs tend to be mostly white (Bradshaw 2005). The ethnic composition of gangs is not divergent from the ethnic composition of other youth groups in Britain (Sharp et al. 2006). This is in support of Kleins (2001) definition is the what defines a gang is their involvement in crime.

In 2007 Tony Blair and Gordon Brown held emergency summits dedicated to gangs, guns and knife crime (Alexander, 2007). The government announced a ' Three point plan' to tackle gun and gang crime, focusing on policing, courts and community prevention (Alexander, 2007). Across the political spectrum policy amendments were called for ranging from David Cameron's swiftly recanted ' Hug a Hoodie' establishment of witness protection schemes to the establishment of ' safe houses' for those escaping ' gangs' (Alexander 2007).

Police action against gangs is often described as ' intelligence-led'; however, the nature, quality and ethical deployment of gang information continue to be questioned. Ralphs et al (2009) in a British ethnographic study found evidence of youth being targeted solely by association with ' known' gang members, together with evidence of exclusionary experiences for example school exclusion, hampered employment prospects and excessive police attention that were attributed to erroneous labelling.

Churchill and Clarke (2009) in a review of parent-focused policy to reduce social exclusion, list 39 separate major initiatives across early years, education, employment, benefit and parenting programme domains during 1997-2008, at a cumulative cost of hundreds of millions of pounds. Yet still numerous new initiatives are being introduced such as The Communities Against Guns, Gangs and Knives Initative at a cost of £18 million for 2011-2013 (Home Office, 2011)

Families have been conceptualised as a source of risk and resilience regarding antisocial and offending behaviour, and as a site for support and intervention. In an international narrative review (Klein and Maxson, 2006), the most consistent discriminator of gang involvement was a low level of parental supervision. It is a known fact the family can be a risk but also protective factor of criminal involvement for young people (Farrington, 2003).

Multi-systemic Therapy is a multimodal intervention that is delivered to the families of serious delinquents aged 12-17. The approach sees the adolescent's offending as being multiply determined by risk factors in nested socio-ecological risk domains. Multi-systemic Therapy has been evaluated to high standards in the USA, Canada and Norway with little dissent (Littell, 2005). In the British context Multi-systemic Therapy is seen in: Systemic Therapy for At-Risk Teens (START). As it is a new method the it is only recently that the positive effectiveness are beginning to emerge (Baruch and Butler, 2007).

Family-oriented policy conceived by UK Labour governments in the 1997-2010 included Parenting Orders. They are civil measures that require parents of children aged 10-17 who truant, show antisocial or offending behaviour to attend parenting support initiatives. However they have been criticised as being out of touch with practice, inconsistently applied, inappropriately placing responsibility on parents and as ' backdoor criminalisation', whereby non-compliance results in criminal conviction (Burney and Gelsthorpe, 2008). Evaluation of the effects of Parenting Orders on child behaviour is extremely lacking.

An inherent problem in parental involvement is that many parents often reject the blame for their child's gang involvement instead locating problems in the broader social context relating to lack of job opportunities and the influence of peers. This sense of misdirected blame, combined with a fear that one or more children could be taken into care, fed through into a mistrust of family support services that were felt to be stigmatising and inadequate (Aldridge et al 2009).

Since 1997, Government policy has also focused on the social exclusion of young people who see gang activities conflicting with their community interests. Interventions that have been used are Anti-Social Behaviour Orders and Youth curfews. The government announced this year that Anti-Social Behaviour Orders were going to be replaced as many saw them as a badge of honour. The new Crime Prevention Injunction is aimed at stopping anti-social behaviour before it escalates (BBC, 2011). Youth Curfews have been seen as questionable in terms of their implications for human rights and freedoms and as regards their utility (Walsh, 2002)

From the research put forward in this essay it is apparent that Gangs are still significant in contemporary society there are still issues related to their use of weapons and the over-emphasis on ethnicity in gangs. More needs to be done to help those seen as " reluctant gangsters" (Pitts, 2008) as individuals increasingly feel that they are unable to leave a gang in fear or retaliation on themselves, their family or the inability to survive financially. The media still has a strong impact on how society sees gangs which does not help such interventions that are attempting to decrease gang crime and culture. But it is clear nothing can be done to change the medias portrayal as they always need a social group to use as scapegoat for the problems within society and in the last decade gangs have been used as the moral panic (Cohen, 1980).

To conclude, the success of interventions is varied, there have been numerous interventions brought in by the government with the most promising one being the most recent. As it is apparent the previous interventions have not been seen to be entirely beneficial otherwise there would not be a need for a new intervention. As can be seen by the cost of intervention programmes, Gang Crime is costing society billions of pounds not to mention the human cost. Like the new Crime Prevention Injunction more initiatives should seek to address to stop anti-social behaviour before it escalates (BBC, 2011). This is being piloted in the form of an early intervention initiative in Nottingham, which seeks to reach those under 12 who are deemed at risk of offending.

There is strong support for involving family in the prevention method but this too should be instigated at an early age. As when individuals realise the detrimental effects of being a gang member it is too late and at the later

point in life it may also be harder for the parents to convince the parents to comply with intervention (Aldridge et al 2009). Multi-systemic Therapy should be continued to be implemented in programs as it seems to be a promising method (Baruch and Butler, 2007). Like any prevention method it will take a few years to see the success of such and as prevention of gang crime is a relatively new procedure perhaps it is that we are not yet seeing the positive effects of the interventions that have been implemented.