The role of the family in facilitating gang membership, criminality and exit

A report prepared for Catch22

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Our gratitude extends to practitioners who helped to identify willing participants and provide the opportunity to conduct this important piece of social research; your assistance was invaluable. Last, but by no means least, we acknowledge Johanne Miller and Ebony Reid for their research support, Stella Scherbach for her contribution to the literature review and Janet Ransom for her thorough review of the material presented.

The authors are solely responsible for the views expressed in this report, which may not reflect the views or opinions of Catch22.

Tara Young, Wendy Fitzgibbon and Daniel Silverstone
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Introduction and aims

The role of the ‘gang’ in shaping and encouraging criminality has an ever-increasing profile within the criminal justice system, the third sector and across the political landscape. The growing perceived threat from the gang has occurred against the background of increasingly restrictive legislation and numerous policy documents focusing on what might be responsible for the possible rise in gang membership. One often-cited factor is the role of the family and its influence on gang membership. It is this relationship that the report explores.

2. Research aims

The overarching aim of the research was to examine the role of the family in gang formation, criminality and exit in order to inform best practice for practitioners working with gang-involved families.

3. Methodology

Catch22 commissioned an exploratory piece of qualitative research based on a literature review, semi-structured interviews and focus groups (91 interviews across the study). The interviews were conducted with former and current gang members, families of gang members and practitioners working with gang-involved individuals and their relatives. The sample is broadly drawn from areas with reputations for high gang activity. In order to capture the geographical, ethnic and cultural differences in gang membership the research was conducted across three sites: London, the West Midlands (Wolverhampton and Birmingham) and Scotland (Glasgow).

4. Findings

The role of the family in gang formation

- People who associate with or are in gangs come from all types of families. Irrespective of family composition, the majority of respondents described families experiencing multiple difficulties (such as economic deprivation, family separation, bereavement, domestic violence, imprisonment, and alcohol and substance misuse) that preceded their involvement with gangs. This supports findings elsewhere that suggest successful family interventions have a range of positive generic outcomes, for example gang desistance to reduction in truancy, and drug and alcohol problems.

- In regard to family composition, the evidence of this report suggests that the combination of multiple family difficulties and gang involvement is more likely to occur, and will have more severe consequences, in single-parent, larger than average families. However, it should be borne in mind that gang activity was also found in dual-parent and smaller families.
The role of the family should not be overstated as a key driver of gang formation. It occasionally plays a role in driving young people into gangs but the wider socio-economic context is often as, if not more, important.

The family and the influence of the gang

- The gang’s influence on the family should not be overstated. Gang involvement by one family member is not likely to infringe on the wider family’s personal safety or mean all family members will join a gang.
- The structure, influence, definition and activities of the gang are not uniform. Gangs are influenced by geography and ethnicity, therefore the consequences for and influence on the family of gang membership will differ between London, Scotland and the West Midlands.
- The vast majority of families experience a member’s gang involvement as an additional and significant problem in their lives that may precipitate serious consequences (physical, emotional or punitive) for the gang member.
- Gang involvement is likely to increase the risk of victimisation to those family members directly involved and to their associates and friends.
- Although some family members may benefit materially from the criminality of their children, these benefits are usually overshadowed by the feelings of helplessness, shame, tension and anxiety that gang-involved family members can generate.
- Beleaguered families feel they lack the ability to impose appropriate boundaries and the necessary skills to address their children’s gang involvement. This feeling of powerlessness is most acute when their children reach adolescence.

The role of the family in desistance

- Male siblings and/or wider family members play a significant role in encouraging gang membership, whilst mothers and sisters are key enablers in facilitating desistance and exit from a gang.
- Leaving a gang is difficult, not primarily due to fears of gang-led reprisals or violent leaving rituals, but due to the perceived lack of viable alternatives for gang members.
- Family members and networks can facilitate gang exit but success is driven by the gang member themselves.
- Practitioners need to be aware of the local criminal landscape and be sensitive to multiple family issues. They will need to deploy strategies that can empower family members who are sometimes complicit, sometimes in denial and sometimes ignorant of their family members’ involvement with gangs.
- Despite the plethora of recent initiatives, there still remain gang-affected families and individuals who feel shunned and isolated from current attempts to engage them.
A change in physical location (family-assisted or not), away from local gangs and criminal opportunities, was seen by family members to be the most effective strategy for gang exit.

5. Recommendations

- Avoid stigmatising the families of gang members unduly. Not all are ‘troubled’ or ‘broken’ families but most can better be described as ‘beleaguered’. This label is non-stigmatising as well as more appropriate.

- Do not reify, exaggerate or homogenise the gang. The majority of gang members drift out of gang behaviour and the families’ experience of the gang is influenced by geographic and ethnic variation. Local practitioners need to be aware of the local criminal landscape. One size, as they say, does not fit all.

- Practitioners involved in the delivery of bespoke interventions need to anticipate some complicity and denial when working with families of gang members. Yet beyond this, family members, in particular mothers, ought to be sought out as valuable partners in positively working to change the dynamics of family relationships.

- The report lends support to existing multiagency programmes designed to provide help for vulnerable parents to improve their parenting skills, with particular emphasis on parenting in adolescence and non-corporal ways to discipline adolescent boys.

- The report suggests that replicating initiatives that provide safe accommodation for those who are victims of serious violence and investing in other programmes that can provide long-term housing away from the local gang will help gang members desist from their offending behaviour.

- Interventions are important, but they need to be targeted at complex problems experienced by beleaguered families rather than the spectre of future gang involvement. Adolescence is a key point at which gang members and their relatives, especially mothers and sisters, need appropriate facilities and support that they can access; particularly at the point at which the gang member is ready to leave the group.
1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years growing concern over the increase in serious youth violence and gang culture in the UK has prompted considerable debate over how best to tackle these issues. Within this debate there is some acknowledgement that the majority of young people resident in the UK are not involved in serious youth violence or gangs (Home Office, 2011). Moreover, there is some recognition that ‘gangs’ are not homogeneous groups and that people who are associated with them do not all engage in the same type or level of antisocial behaviour or criminality (Hallsworth and Young, 2005, 2008).¹ That said, whilst the number of young people who are involved in street-based groups labelled ‘gangs’ may be relatively small (Sharp et al, 2006; Home Office, 2011), some research has found that these young people are disproportionately involved in crime that includes, but is not limited to, serious violence. This is of major concern to policy makers in the UK, who are tasked with legislating against behaviour that harms the community and devising suitable initiatives that protect the general public.

Identifying the factors that promote gang membership and gang-related violent crime is an essential part of the process of understanding the possible reasons why young people engage in certain behaviours and commit particular acts of violence. Academic research has detected several interconnected factors that are associated with gang membership and related criminality. As a generic, but not exhaustive, list these include social deprivation and poverty, poor educational experience and exclusion, lack of legitimate employment opportunities, subculture and peer influences, and particular family characteristics.

It is the family that is of interest to us here and the main focus of this report. The influence of the family on gang membership and youth crime, including gang-related violence, is an under-researched area. Few studies exist in the UK. The main body of literature on this topic originates from North America. Whilst the applicability of this material for understanding the emergence of the gang in the UK has been challenged (Downes, 1966; Hallsworth and Young, 2004, 2010), it provides a useful point of departure for debate and a framework from which to start to piece together a coherent picture of the relationship between the family and gang experience in the UK that may, in turn, lead to an appropriate plan of action.

Within the literature the family as a key factor in encouraging gang membership and criminality is hotly debated. Familial variables such as poor home socialisation (Hagedorn, 1998), lack of parental supervision and weak familial ties (Hirschi, 1969), fatherlessness and lack of male role models (Miller, 1958), parental alcohol and substance abuse (Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Artz, 1998; Fleisher, 2000), physical and sexual violence within the home (Campbell, 1986; Vigil, 1988; Moore, 1991; Young, 2011) and familial criminality, including inter- and multigenerational gang membership (Jankowski, 1991; Klein, 1995; Miller, 2001), are thought to be key variables which push young people into gang culture.

Indeed, a number of policy documents dedicated to understanding and tackling gang violence have identified problems and troubles that arise within the family, particularly those

¹ The authors recognise that the term ‘gang’ is problematic and it is important to note that much violence and criminality by young people in groups is not attributable to gangs. (See Hallsworth and Young, 2005, 2008, 2010; Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009; Young, 2009, 2011.)
that surface within the formative and teenage years of a child’s life, to be crucial ingredients for gang membership (Centre for Social Justice, 2009; Home Office, 2011).

As convincing as the literature on the family may seem to some scholars and policy makers, others have pointed out that the evidence is far from conclusive. Offering a more nuanced viewpoint, scholars have suggested that gang formation is not simply the result of a poor home environment or a ‘broken’ family. Influential factors outside the family unit are also known to have an impact on young people’s involvement in street gangs. Negative school experience and academic attainment (Curry and Spergel, 1992; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993), deindustrialisation and lack of legitimate employment opportunities (Hagedorn, 1988; Vigil, 1996; Hallsworth and Young, 2010), peer association (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Jankowski 1991) and institutional racism and oppression (Scott, 2004; Hayden, 2004) are correlated with gang formation and membership, as are individual characteristics such as a predilection for defiance, excitement and violence (Miller, 1958; Katz, 1988; Jankowski, 1991) and the search for status and respect.

1.1 Research aims

The research commissioned by Catch22 was designed to contribute to the debate on the role of the family in facilitating gang membership, criminality and exit in the UK. The purpose of this exploratory study was to understand the complex relationship between gang membership and family dynamics. It had several key aims:

- to examine the role families play in influencing gang membership and gang-related criminality and in doing so to identify which factors, if any, are most influential;
- to identify what strategies parents and carers take to discourage gang involvement; and
- to highlight family-focused best practice policies and interventions that encourage desistance amongst gang affiliated youth.

1.2 Report structure

The following section provides an account of the research methodology. Section three reviews the literature on familial influence on gang formation, criminality and desistance. Sections four to six present the findings from gang-involved individuals, family members and practitioners. Section seven comprises a summary of the research and recommendations.
2. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research was undertaken to explore the nature of the relationship between family members and their gang-involved relatives. By gathering the experiences and perceptions of gang members and relatives of gang-involved individuals we wanted to discover how family members experienced being associated with gangs.

We also set out to explore how differently family members were situated in terms of their knowledge of gang-related activities and the extent to which relatives (principally parents and primary carers) were able to influence the behaviour of their gang-involved relative.

Several broad questions informed this research. These were:

- What are the characteristic features of gang-associated families (i.e., composition, socio-economic status)?
- What kind of relationship exists between gang members and their immediate family members (e.g., parents/carers and siblings) and how does this influence gang membership, criminality, and desistance?
- To what extent do external factors (such as social disorganisation and youth culture) override familial influences and encourage gang membership, criminality, and exit?
- To what extent do gang-associated families benefit from having a gang-involved relative?
- What, if any, are the negative aspects of gang membership for the individual and gang-associated family members?
- How do the families of gang members cope with the gang experience and how does this relate to other factors in their lives?
- Under what conditions do families seek assistance to help with their gang-involved relatives?

2.1 Research design

The fieldwork was undertaken in three sites: London (Area 1), the West Midlands (Area 2: Wolverhampton and Birmingham) and Scotland (Area 3: Glasgow). Participants drawn from these sites represent different cultural and ethnic groups; they also reflect a broad range of experiences in relation to gang membership.

Conducted over a six-month period, the research comprises three strands: a literature review; semi-structured one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions with former and current gang members and family members of those involved; and interviews with practitioners working with gang-involved individuals and their relatives (see below).
2.1.1 Strand one: Literature review

The literature review was completed at the beginning of the study. Its aim was to review existing theories on family composition, functionality and interpersonal relationships as causal factors for gang membership, criminality and exit. Literature and research material focusing on the impact of culture, social and economic structure on families and young people was also considered. The strand involved a systematic search of the literature using a range of materials, including online sources, peer-reviewed journal articles and monographs. The literature review was conducted in four stages:

- Stage one: The identification of key and relevant material (eg US, UK and European academic literature, policy documents and research).
- Stage two: Sifting and filtering the information. This screening process assessed the quality of the literature/evidence to ensure that the collated material was fit for purpose. Material that was deemed not fit for purpose (eg biased or incomplete research) was discarded.
- Stage three: Synthesis of findings and production of an overall summary.
- Stage four: Drawing of the literature review together into a coherent, accessible chapter to include in the final report.

2.1.2 Strand two: Semi-structured one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions with ‘gang-involved’ people and family members

Thirty-one face-to-face interviews and two focus groups were conducted across the three areas. The main focus of the interviews was to explore the relationships between family members and their gang-involved relatives to identify which factors were most influential in determining gang membership, criminality and exit. The findings in this report are based on the testimonies, opinions and perceptions of those involved in gangs or ‘on road’ and family members.

Sampling

A number of strategies were used to identify a sample for the study. Catch22 provided the research team with lists of community organisations and practitioners to follow up (see Appendix A). Prospective interviewees were identified from within these organisations and from previous contacts established by the research team. Organisations were approached by letter (electronic) outlining the purpose of the study. The letter was followed up by a telephone call and interviews arranged with willing participants. The majority of participants were recruited from the supplied list, but some were recruited using the ‘snowballing’ technique. This involved asking participants to provide the details of other gang-involved individuals or family members whom they knew who might be willing to contribute.

Following procedures used in previous research with vulnerable young people (Cusick et al, 2003), each participant was asked to read and sign a consent form (see Appendix B) detailing the study aims and issues around confidentiality. All prospective participants were given a chance to digest the information and ask further questions about the study before deciding whether or not to participate.
Participants

Fifty-eight gang-involved individuals and family members took part in interviews (see Table 1).2 Of these, the majority (36) were current or former gang members. In some instances these respondents were also the children, siblings or relatives of gang-involved individuals. Others interviewed were parents and siblings of former or current gang-involved individuals (n = 22).3

Table 1: Interview sample across all three areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>London (Area 1)</th>
<th>West Midlands (Area 2)</th>
<th>Scotland (Area 3)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current/former gang member</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family members (parents/siblings)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>58</td>
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Data collection

The main method of data collection for this study was the semi-structured interview and focus group. An interview schedule was used as part of the interview process (see Appendix C) and explored the following topics:

- the neighbourhood in which respondents grew up or in which they are currently residing;
- family composition and history of criminality and/or involvement in/with gangs;
- the consequences of gang involvement for the individual and their family;
- young people’s involvement in gangs or being ‘on road’; and
- leaving the gang and strategies employed by the family to dissuade involvement.

Given the sensitivity of the topic it was essential that the interviews were informal and flexible. An interview schedule was designed (see Appendix C) to inform, rather than overly structure, the interviews. Respondents were encouraged to explore a range of views and experiences on the links between family factors and gang criminality, membership and exit. In some instances (two) this was done via focus groups, with icebreaker games, mind maps and vignettes used to encourage those involved to bond as a group, engender trust and encourage participation.

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2 All research participants have been given false names wherever they are referenced in the report.
3 It is important to note the difficulty in accessing family members for the study. From early on in the study we noted some reluctance from participants to discuss family issues in groups. To achieve a high number of responses a decision was taken by the research team (in collaboration with Catch22) to reduce the number of focus groups and supplement them with individual interviews. Another important note is that the parents and siblings involved in this study are not necessarily related to the gang members who participated.
The interviews were organised at the convenience of the participants and typically took place within the referral organisation. They lasted between 25 minutes and 2 hours. Most of the interviews were tape recorded, fully transcribed and analysed. Due to problems associated with accessing gang members and family members for interview it was agreed that each respondent would receive a gift token (of their choice) in recognition of their participation.

Secondary data

We intended to interview girls and young women as part of this study. However, because of difficulties in identifying and recruiting girls and young women involved in gangs (or associated with gang members), we were not able to access as many as we hoped. Consequently, in this study, the majority of gang-involved individuals interviewed were male (only two were female; see Section 4). To ensure that the experiences of girls and young women involved with gangs or their members were heard, it was agreed that the findings on family structure and dynamics generated from an ongoing research project focusing specifically on girls’ and young women’s experiences ‘on road’ would be extrapolated and incorporated in this study (Young, 2013 forthcoming).

In this latter project the girls and young women spoke about their home environment and the key factors that prompted their involvement in gangs. The data on families generated enriches this research because (a) it is one of the few research projects that has managed to engage young female ‘gangsters’ and (b) it offers a unique insight into the factors that push and pull girls towards ‘the road’. Research has consistently shown that these differ significantly from those influencing boys (Campbell, 1984; Moore, 1991; Miller, 2001; Young, 2009). The familial experiences of 16 girls and women affiliated to gangs will therefore be used to augment the findings presented in this report. The majority of girls and young women were from the London area; one grew up in the West Midlands.

2.1.3 Strand three: Practitioner interviews

We conducted face-to-face and telephone interviews with voluntary and statutory practitioners delivering gang intervention/prevention initiatives and those working in law enforcement agencies (see Table 2). A wide range of services was contacted by the research team and Catch22, and asked to participate in this research.

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4 Two interviews were not recorded, one because it took place in a noisy public space and the other because the interviewee agreed to participate but did not want to be recorded. In both instances extensive notes were taken afterwards.

5 Individuals who participated in a one-to-one interview were given a £30 voucher whilst those who participated in a focus group were offered a £10 token of thanks. The variation was due to the amount of participation required by each participant.

6 This research is currently being funded by London Metropolitan University.
Table 2: Interviews conducted with practitioners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>London (Area 1)</th>
<th>West Midlands (Area 2)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth offending service</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probation service</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local borough council provision</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third sector</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
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</table>

Seventeen practitioners from London and the West Midlands were interviewed. Those involved included front-line practitioners and operational managers from the youth offending service, probation service, police, local borough councils and third-sector organisations working with young people and parents affected by gangs and gang-related issues (see Appendix A for a full list of participants).

Practitioners were asked to consider the most influential factors relating to gang membership and to comment on the delivery of support for those young people affected. To ensure comparability in the data the semi-structured interviews conducted with practitioners closely mirrored those conducted with gang-involved young people and family members. The aim of the interviews was to elicit whether practitioners' perceptions of the issues concerning gang-involved young people and their families were the same as those of young people and families themselves, and to consider how these informed the provision and support they provided.

Practitioners and operational managers were asked about their practice, which obviously varied according to their role and whether this was statutory or non-statutory. They were also asked to highlight any duplication or gaps in service provision.

2.2 Data analysis

The interviews were analysed using a method known as ‘Framework’, which was especially designed for analysing qualitative data (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). This method involves systematically shifting, sorting and coding data and charting key issues and themes that emerge from the interviews. The analysis draws on questions informed by the original research brief, emergent issues raised by the interviewees themselves and recurrent patterns of views and experiences.

2.3 Methodological issues

Recruiting participants proved more difficult than expected. Three main reasons were identified: the reduction in service provision, problems defining the gang and research saturation.
2.3.1 Reduction in service provision

One of the main hurdles to recruitment was the loss of contact with services and practitioners. A number of projects working with gang-involved young people have lost funding and closed down (National Children’s Bureau, 2012; Puffet, 2012), making the search for suitable and willing participants more difficult and protracted as we searched for new contacts and agencies to work with.

2.3.2 Defining the ‘gang’

The second issue in recruitment is related to the term ‘gang’. Defining what constitutes a gang is a consistent problem (Hallsworth and Young, 2005, 2008). There is little consensus on which groups are gangs and, by implication, who the gang members are. The lack of coherence in defining the gang has allowed people to adopt their own view of the gang (and its members).\(^7\)

The term ‘gang’ is not neutral and conjures up stereotypical images of a street-based, organised and territorial fighting group that is involved in serious, violent criminality. Its members are often assumed to be disenfranchised, feral young people who are habitually violent and aggressive. In England and Wales, gangs are negatively associated with black and minority ethnic young people (Hallsworth and Young, 2006). In Scotland youth gangs, or ‘teams’ as they are commonly known by young people, are white and Scottish; few youth gangs are from minority communities (Bannister et al, 2010:19).\(^8\) These groups, like their black and minority ethnic counterparts, are associated with problematic behaviour, including serious violent crime.

This popular view of gangs had an impact on our ability to reach young people and family members for inclusion in this study. A common response from practitioners working with young people in gang-affected neighbourhoods was that they did not work with gang members. We suspect that this attitude reflects, in part, reluctance by practitioners to be associated with media and law enforcement-led ‘gang-talk’ and its criminalising consequences (Thompson et al, 2002).

To overcome this hurdle we adopted the term ‘on road’ when approaching agencies. We switched to this term because it is frequently used by young people to describe their involvement with street-based groups and/or the illegal drugs market (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009; Gunter, 2010; Young and Hallsworth, 2011).\(^9\) It is an inclusive term that encapsulates the gang whilst at the same time not restricting recruitment of young people involved in other street groups. On the basis of this change, we managed to boost our sample. As it turned out, the profile of people we recruited to the study did, in fact, fit the requirements of the gang definition by Hallsworth and Young (2004).

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\(^7\) At the time of writing the Home Office had adopted the definition drafted by the Centre for Social Justice (2009). See literature review.

\(^8\) According to Bannister et al (2010) the youth gang groups that were not ethnically Scottish were of Asian and Eastern European origin.

\(^9\) In Scotland the term ‘team’ was used to inform research.
2.3.3 Limitations

No one research method is infallible and, as such, care must be exercised when interpreting the data accumulated for this exploratory study, particularly when generalising to the wider population. The following limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings from this study.

Qualitative interviews provide the ‘rich text’ data that quantitative analysis cannot supply. However, interviewee testimonies do not always produce the ‘reality’ of a situation. Memories are subjective and selective (especially over time) and thus there can be many different interpretations of the ‘truth’ when considering the role of the family in facilitating gang membership, criminality and exit. Since the ‘truth’ of a situation is a subjective, as well as an objective, experience that differs according to perception, politics, positioning and power, it is important to understand the findings presented in this report as versions of the truth as expressed by the research participants, and also to take account of the motivations for sharing particular experiences.

The sample size for the project was relatively small, while sampling was purposive, with respondents deliberately chosen with the research aims and objectives in mind. The findings should NOT therefore be read as representative of all experiences involving gang-involved individuals and families.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to a better understanding of the patterns and links between family structure, coherence and dynamics and gang membership, criminality and exit. As the literature review reveals, it also represents one of the first independent studies focusing on this issue in the UK.
3. A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON THE FAMILY AND GANGS

There is some contention in the body of literature that exists on the relationship between the family and gang membership. Familial variables such as poor home socialisation, lack of parental control and weak familial ties, fatherlessness and lack of male role models, parental alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, multigenerational gang membership and familial criminality are thought to push young people into gang culture. Indeed, commentators who place particular emphasis on the family argue that children raised in dysfunctional families join gangs to fill a void. A contemporary understanding of gang membership is that youngsters are attracted to gangs because they seek a surrogate family to fulfil their emotional needs (Campbell, 1984; Miller, 2001; Centre for Social Justice, 2009).

Other scholars have suggested that gang membership is not simply the result of a poor home environment but is also influenced by factors outside the family. Research has shown structural factors such as negative school experience and low academic attainment (Curry and Spergal, 1992; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993), deindustrialisation and lack of legitimate employment opportunities (Hagedorn, 1988; Vigil, 1996; Hallsworth and Young, 2010), peer association (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Jankowski, 1991), institutional racism and oppression (Scott, 2004; Hayden, 2004) to be associated with gang membership. Individual characteristics such as a defiant personality, a predilection for excitement and violence (Miller, 1958; Katz, 1988; Jankowski, 1991), and the search for ‘respect’ are also known to play a part. In what follows we outline the main debates that connect family structure, behaviours and relationships to gang membership, criminality and desistance.

3.1 Defining the gang

It is important to define what is meant by the term ‘gang’ as it can have a significant bearing on how we understand the issues facing gang-associated families and respond to their needs. As an idea, the gang, as it is commonly understood, emerged from North American society and it is from research conducted in the USA that the most influential definitions derive. Sociologist Frederick Thrasher was one of the first scholars to offer a workable definition of the gang. Drawing on findings from his observation of 1313 juvenile gangs in the slums of Chicago during the 1920s he defined a group of this type as being an:

‘…interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict and characterized by meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict and planning. The behaviour develops a tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, group awareness and attachment to local territory.’ (Thrasher 1927:144)\(^{11}\)


\(^{11}\) It is beyond the scope of this study to present the vast number of definitions on the gang that currently exist. This section provides a basic outline of those that are most pertinent to the research.
When Thrasher spoke of the gang he was referring to a peer group in crisis, one that grew out of mass migration into Chicago. In the ‘melting pot’ that was Chicago in the 1920s disparate groups, struggling to maintain their own identities, lived together in cramped urban environments.

According to Thrasher, what resulted was interethnic conflict as each group tried to preserve its own cultural script. For urban youth, the gang provided the space to resolve some of the problems inherent in living in a new, culturally diverse environment (Thrasher, 1927). What is of importance to note is that Thrasher’s concept of the gang did not have, at its core, an emphasis on crime and violence, and this is what differentiates it from some of the more contemporary definitions that inform public policy in the 21st century.

3.1.1 The gang as criminal entity

Most contemporary gang definitions emerge from within correctional discourse where the gang is considered a criminal actor rather than a peer group adapting to adverse social conditions.

Yablonsky (1962) challenged Thrasher’s idea of gangs as structured entities and, along with Haskell, argued that the primary characteristic of the gang was its collective offending. He consequently defined the gang as ‘a group of lawbreakers who are primarily organised around violence and other illegal activities’ (Haskell and Yablonsky, 1982:452).

Following Yablonsky, Klein (1971) penned the next most influential definition of the gang. For Klein, an important factor in the classification of the gang is the social reaction towards it. His definition was amongst the first to highlight the importance of public perception in shaping the discourse on what constitutes a gang. In Malcolm Klein’s terms the gang is:

‘...any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighbourhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name) and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighbourhood residents and/or enforcement agencies.’ (Klein, 1971:13)

Klein’s definition brings to the fore the importance of self-perception and the process of labelling individuals as gang members and the groups to which they belong as gangs. According to Klein’s definition, it is not enough for individuals to conceive of themselves as gang members; this self-image has to be reinforced and accepted by the wider community in order for it to be sustained. How people are viewed and treated by the wider community, particularly law enforcement officials, is therefore of central importance, as it has considerable implications for constructing and cementing an individual’s gang status as well as the status of their family.
3.1.2 Defining gangs in the UK

Reviewing the literature to date, the Centre for Social Justice (2009) expressed concern at the lack of coherence and consistency of definitions of gangs. There is, however, considerable similarity in the definitions that are in existence.

In 2004, Hallsworth and Young (2004) penned a definition for the Metropolitan Police Service as part of an initiative to develop a framework for interpreting collective violence in the UK. They developed a typology of delinquent collectives in urban society and classified one component of this model, the gang, as

‘...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 and practice. The minimal characteristic features of the gang then are that it has a) a name, b) a propensity to inflict violence and engage in crime where c) violence and delinquency performs a functional role in promoting group identity and solidarity.’ (Hallsworth and Young, 2004:68)

This definition resonates with that of Klein illustrated above. However, Hallsworth and Young were keen to make the distinction between street-based groups of youngsters who were largely antisocial and the ‘organised’, collective offending of career criminals operating in gangs.

A Home Office study reporting on the offending behaviour of youth groups (Sharp et al, 2006) echoed a reluctance to apply the gang label too liberally. Reporting on the offending profile of delinquent youth groups this study identified the following characteristics as defining such collectives:

- young people who spend time in groups of three or more (including themselves);
- the group spend a lot of time in public places;
- the group has existed for three months or more;
- the group has engaged in delinquent or criminal behaviour together in the last 12 months; and
- the group has at least one structural feature (either a name, an area, a leader, or rules).

(Sharp et al, 2006:1)

Since the publication of these definitions a few more have surfaced. Some offer a fairly broad definition of gang groups, such as that used by Strathclyde Police, which classifies gang groups as:

‘A group of three or more people who associate together, or act as an organised body, for criminal purposes’ (Centre for Social Justice, 2009)

whilst others clearly resemble past efforts. In 2011, the Home Office adopted an alternative definition produced by the Centre for Social Justice. According to the Home Office, a street gang is:

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

(Home Office, 2011:17)

Despite the seeming differences several features connect all of these definitions. Each refers to groups of three or more, usually young, people, with a territorial presence, who engage in criminal behaviour. Since Thrasher, and notwithstanding some of the other definitions of the gang that do not connect these types of groups with criminal behaviour (see Kontos et al, 2003), many definitions incorporate these elements.

If, as asserted above, young people formulate their self and collective identities in relation to how they, and their groups, are defined, then it is crucial to our understanding of gang membership and associated interests to ensure that the most appropriate definition is applied when researching aspects of the gang experience. A standardised working definition of the gang is needed to assist practitioners in their efforts to frame appropriate policies to tackle gang-related issues such as the role of the family in relation to gang membership. In the absence of such a definition, this study will use that offered by Hallsworth and Young (2004) as we believe it is the most useful for our purposes because it offers a nuanced distinction between the different types of groups to which young people belong.

3.2 The family and delinquency

When considering why young people engage in delinquency one of the most common focal points is the family. Familial structure and composition, and the quality of the parent–child relationship have all come under scrutiny in attempts to explain antisocial and criminal behaviour in young people. In particular, it is the idea that the ‘problem’ family, as opposed to the ‘normal’ family, creates the basis for delinquency that dominates the discourse in this area.

3.2.1 The urban underclass

Charles Murray is the academic most notably associated with this way of thinking about the family and delinquency (Murray, 1996). Murray’s thesis is important to the debate on the role of the family as it directly links ‘non-traditional’ families, particularly single-parent households headed by unmarried women, with crime and violence.

According to Murray, the 1990s saw a significant growth in the number of illegitimate births in ‘municipal’ districts and amongst those in the lowest social classes (Murray, 1996:23). For Murray, this was problematic for society because people who had children out of wedlock lived ‘in a different world from other Britons’ and subscribed to norms, values and behaviours that were ‘contaminating entire neighbourhoods’ (Murray, 1996:26).
Murray’s message was clear: single mothers could not raise children, particularly boys, effectively (Murray, 1996:33); that they could not do so effectively was problematic for society. He claimed that women were unable to rear boys because they could not translate what it meant to be a man in a morally and socially acceptable way. Consequently, without the guidance of fathers young men raised by women were apt to display a ‘level of unruliness’ that made life difficult for everyone around them (Murray, 1996:34). Moreover, in a female-dominated household boys were unlikely to learn what it was to be a ‘good’ father to their own children later on in life, which had negative implications for future generations. The net result for Murray was the formation of an ‘underclass’ community that espoused a lawless, feckless culture peppered with violent criminality amongst the young, particularly young men.

Although Murray’s thesis was founded on little evidence, and despite the numerous criticisms that his assertions have attracted (Williams 2004:342), variants of the ‘underclass’ thesis can be seen in contemporary discourse on youth crime and violence. Whilst not fully embracing Murray’s position on the underclass, UK government policy has, and continues, to stress the strong links between families and young people’s involvement in antisocial behaviour, crime and gang-related violence. The 1998 Crime and Disorder Act introduced the Parenting Order as an initiative to tackle ‘problem parenting’ through both sanctions and support for those unable to control their children’s behaviour. This was followed by Family Intervention Projects designed to extend intensive support provision to the most chaotic families causing the most harm to society (Gregg, 2010). Both initiatives locate the family, particularly female single-headed households, at the centre of youth criminality, continuing the legacy of the underclass thinking as expressed by Murray. However, the academic evidence to date suggests a more complex picture.

3.2.2 Family structure and delinquency

Wells and Rankin’s (1991) study compared 50 research studies on ‘broken homes’ and delinquency. They found the officially recorded delinquency rate for children from ‘non-traditional’ homes (ie single-parent homes or step-families) to be 10–15% higher than that for children from traditional families (eg where both biological parents lived with their children) (Wells and Rankin, 1991:87). However, what is of importance to note about Wells and Rankin’s findings is that the link between ‘broken’ families and delinquency held only for minor offences and not for more serious ones (Williams, 2004: 342).

Other research has identified family size (as distinct from family structure) as having an impact on delinquency, with young people from large families (i.e. three or more children) more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour than children from smaller family units (Rutter et al, 1998; Lyon et al, 2000).

Some have recently suggested that the link between family structure, including family size, and delinquent behaviour is inconclusive and point to other influential factors. Hoffmann (2006) found that whilst disruptive children do come from ‘non-traditional’ families there is no proven evidence that family structure alone causes delinquent behaviour; other factors, such as neighbourhood characteristics, were found to be as influential. He found that children living in impoverished neighbourhoods with high levels of ethnic variance and male unemployment were likely to experience behavioural problems irrespective of family structure (Hoffmann, 2006:867). In other words, children growing up in ‘socially
disorganised’ communities but living in a traditional, two-parent household are as likely to develop delinquent behaviour as those from single-parent families (Hoffmann, 2006).

3.2.3 Family structure and gang membership

Hoffmann’s findings echo those of research carried out by gang researchers. Short and Strodtbeck’s (1965) work on group processes and gang delinquency in Chicago found, for instance, that whilst a large number of gang members came from ‘non-traditional’ families, a significant proportion came from two-parent households. Similarly, Moore’s contemporary studies on Latino gang membership in Los Angeles found that just over a third (37%) of gang members came from ‘traditional’ families who owned their own homes (Moore, 1991). Indeed, as Vigil notes, only 1 in 10 youths living in impoverished neighbourhoods join gangs (Vigil, 1988, 2003). Hagedorn’s research in Milwaukee from the early 1990s onwards produced findings consistent with Moore’s. He found that one in four (25%) of both male and female gang members came from conventional two-parent families who were homeowners (Hagedorn, 1991). In the UK, a longitudinal study on youth transitions and crime conducted by Smith and Bradshaw (2005) found a similar pattern regarding family structure and gang membership. Their study revealed that whilst a significant proportion of gang members in the cohort came from ‘non-traditional’ families (23%), nearly one in five (18%) gang-affiliated youths lived with both parents.

3.2.4 The parent–child relationship and its relation to delinquent behaviour

The conflicting picture regarding family structure and delinquency has led some scholars to suggest that family structure is less influential than the quality of the relationship between parent and child. Joan McCord’s study of 232 boys showed how positive interaction between parent and child insulated against delinquency and crime (McCord, 1991:411). Children of confident, engaged and encouraging mothers with high expectations were less likely to become involved in delinquency than those whose mothers lacked these characteristics. Interestingly, the father’s influence on the child’s behaviour was less important than the mother’s when the child was young but increased as the child matured (McCord, 1991:412). Additionally, the behaviour of father towards the mother was as important as the father’s behaviour towards the child. McCord found that the behaviour of the father towards the mother, whether positive or negative, influenced the child’s behaviour. Fathers who demonstrated a capacity for mutual respect engendered these characteristics in their children; those who were aggressive and antisocial provided deviant role models for their children. In other words, both showed children how to behave (McCord, 1991:411). This finding is important because it challenges the discourse, such as Murray’s above, that suggests lone women are principally responsible for their children’s engagement in delinquency and criminality by not being able to rear them properly. McCord’s study suggests that fathers who are present but whose influence is negative can also be instrumental in encouraging delinquent behaviour.

3.2.5 The parent–child relationship and gang membership

Findings from research suggest that positive experiences between parent and child discourage criminality. Control theory as developed by Hirschi (1969) provides a general
explanation that might help explain why this relationship is important. When the bond between parents and their children is strong, children grow up attached to their families and, beyond this, become committed to the values of the wider society. If healthy and strong, this bond makes children less inclined to engage in harmful practices such as delinquency, not only because they have been taught that this is wrong but because they identify with their families and do not want to engage in acts that might cause them to suffer. By contrast, where no bond exists, attachment to the family is weak and young people are more likely to deviate and become involved in crime, lacking commitment to formal institutions (Hirschi, 1969).

Support for this theory can be found in a number of studies on urban street gangs. These studies point to a range of factors that can impact negatively on child–parent relationships and weaken the bond, or attachment, between parent(s) and child. According to a study published by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency (Finkelhor et al, 2009) examples of disruptive influences include:

- parental absenteeism;
- authoritarian and/or erratic parenting style;
- substance (alcohol and drugs) abuse;
- domestic violence; and
- child sexual abuse.

Where these tend to be found, not only is the bond between parent(s) and child adversely affected, but the child is more likely to display delinquent behaviour in later life.

Moore’s empirical research into gang members (1991) provides some supporting evidence for this thesis. Moore discovered high levels of physical and sexual victimisation in the families of gang members, much of it directed at the children, particularly female children. Her research also found that more than half of the gang members whom she interviewed were afraid of their fathers. Corporal punishment and other forms of violence seem to have been commonplace in such families (Moore, 1991).

Similarly, Bourgois (1995) and Miller (2001) identified prolific family violence, in particular sexual violence, amongst gang members. Miller, in her analysis of female involvement in gangs, noted that a significant number of young women had witnessed domestic violence in the home or had been abused (sexually and physically) by family members (Miller, 2001). These young women were also more likely to have witnessed drug and alcohol abuse. Indeed 60% of young women in her sample came from families with multiple problems (Miller, 2001:37). Following scholars such as Moore (1991) and Campbell (1984), Miller surmised that girls joined gangs to escape their family environment and to find a refuge from abuse (Miller, 2001).

As well as physical abuse, research has shown that the quality of the parent–child relationship may be affected by a lack of positive interaction between parents and their children. Research has found that a lack of parent–child interaction between boys and their parents – particularly the father’s disengagement from his son’s leisure pursuits – is a strong predictor of antisocial behaviour (Hawkins et al, 1998).

Factors that might also impact negatively on the quality of this interaction include parental absence from the home (for example parents working away for long hours or being
imprisoned), emotional unavailability and/or lack of physical capacity to respond to the needs of their child(ren). These factors may derive from depression, alcoholism, drug abuse, chronic illness, disability, separation and bereavement (Gutman, 2002; Silverstein and Ruiz, 2006; Young, 2009).

Inadequate parental supervision has also been identified as a potential causal factor in child deviance. For example, an inability to supervise and establish appropriate boundaries has been identified as a potential risk factor for gang membership (Loeber and Farrington, 1998; Thornberry, 1998). Shute (2008) draws attention to the numerous ways in which overly punitive or permissive forms of discipline can also be detrimental to a child's behaviour. Citing several studies (Glueck and Glueck, 1950; West and Farrington, 1977) he illustrates how overly harsh, neglectful or erratic parenting styles can contribute or lead to antisocial behaviour and may contribute to gang membership.

Of equal importance to the debate is the dynamism of the parent and child relationship. As noted by McCord (1991) this relationship is not static; it changes over time. Parental influence on the child invariably wanes as the child matures and builds relationships with other people who in later years might influence their behaviour more significantly than parents. As Williams notes, adolescent desire to strike out from the family and become an independent individual in control of one's own life may cause a young person to accord less importance to parental attempts at supervision and to seek to exert more power over their own life (Williams, 2004:345).

3.3 The role of familial criminality or tacit endorsement of criminality as an influential factor

So far we have considered how issues such as family breakdown or conflict within the family might influence gang formation and membership. Here we consider the link between familial criminality and gang membership. Studies on delinquency have consistently found a link between delinquent parental behaviour and youthful criminality. Burr (1987), for example, in her ethnographic study of young heroin users in South London, found that the majority of young people in her sample grew up in households where family members shared a positive attitude towards drug taking or similar forms of law-breaking behaviour.

3.3.1 Familial gang membership

Some researchers have claimed that families’ positive attitudes towards gangs encourages young people to become involved in gang groups (Maxson and Whitlock, 2002) and promotes intergenerational gang membership (Rutter and Giller, 1983; Thornberry et al, 2003). Studies conducted by Moore (1991) and Vigil (1988) show a history of intergenerational gang membership amongst families in Los Angeles. However, gang research, such as that conducted by Decker and Van Winkle (1996) in St Louis, did not. This suggests that familial involvement in gangs may vary according to geographic location. Of the 99 gang members interviewed, 12 had fathers who were in gangs; more had a gang-involved brother and in one case both parents were gang members (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996:233).
3.3.2 Family influence on gang membership

What is important to note from Decker and Van Winkle’s study is that whilst some of the gang members had gang-involved relatives none of the respondents with a gang-involved parent cited their involvement as a reason for joining a group nor did they disclose any parental encouragement (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996:233). In contrast, a sibling’s involvement in gangs, typically a brother, was a contributory factor. Half of the St Louis gang members interviewed had a brother involved in a gang; over a third said that their brother had encouraged them to join.

Decker and Van Winkle’s findings echo those of earlier studies that showed that younger siblings joined gangs because of their brothers’ and cousins’ involvement (see Moore, 1991; Bourgois, 1995). It would be a mistake, however, to presuppose that having a brother in a gang inevitably leads to gang membership. There were gang members in Decker and Van Winkle’s research who did not have a gang-involved brother, while those with gang-involved brothers did not always cite this as part of their decision to join.

One of the reasons for encouraging younger siblings to join the group was to provide security and protection for the new member. Decker and Van Winkle’s work also shows that, for some gang members, having a gang-involved relative or legacy of familial gang involvement was seen as bringing protective benefits for both gang and non-gang-involved relatives. Aldridge et al’s ethnographic account of ‘gang’ membership in England tends to support this (Aldridge et al, 2009). This research found that some respondents with extensive and extended gang membership in their families believed that this enhanced their familial reputation, which in turn helped shield them from crime and violence. With these ‘perks’ female relatives perceived themselves as being relatively ‘untouchable’ by other groups because of the respect accorded to their gang-affiliated family members (Aldridge et al, 2009:376). Certainly ‘perks’, with regard to status in the neighbourhood and in material form, may, on these findings, encourage gang membership.

Whilst Aldridge et al’s study illustrates some of the protective aspects of gang involvement, other research suggests that the benefits might be outweighed by the dangers that exist. According to Thornberry, the protective benefits of the gang are severely limited and, although gang membership may afford a certain amount of safety (also generating ‘perks’ for families of gang members), gang members are significantly more likely to be victimised than non-gang-involved individuals (Thornberry, 1993) and their families are more likely to experience threats and violent victimisation (Fagan, 1999).

3.3.3 Family knowledge of gang membership and endorsement

It is not always the case that families know about or endorse gang membership. Decker and Van Winkle expected to find intra-familial gang membership amongst their cohort in St Louis but found little evidence of it (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996:232). Within their cohort they found that knowledge of gang membership, and support for it, was patchy amongst the gang members and family members studied. Some gang members said their families knew about their gang status whilst others said it was suspected. Often the gang-involved individuals declared that did not know for certain whether their family members were aware of their involvement as they had taken care to hide it (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996:239)
and some gang members with younger brothers actively attempted to dissuade their younger siblings from becoming members (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996).

Research in the UK has also noted that parents and families are often genuinely unaware of their children’s involvement in gang groups. Aldridge et al’s ethnographic research on gangs in ‘research city’, for example, showed how gang-affiliated young people adopt a different personality when with their parents from that which they adopt with their peer groups. Indeed, parents in their study knew little of what their children were doing when outside the home (Aldridge et al, 2009).

While family members who are gang-affiliated may actively encourage and promote gang membership, research also suggests that on many occasions young people’s involvement in gangs might be tacitly, but reluctantly, accepted by them. In some instances it might be more harmful not to be involved in gangs. Carlie (2002), citing research by Brown (1998), found that 35% of interviewees with gang-involved relatives felt that they had no chance of social or economic survival outside the gang. Some family members claimed that under ideal circumstances they would not wish younger family members to join gangs but argued that the life chances of their children were limited if they remained outside (Carlie, 2002). As Jankowski (1991) notes, being attached to a gang engaged in the illegal drugs economy can improve an individual’s chances of making some money and alleviate some of the structural problems caused by persistent poverty experienced in run-down neighbourhoods.

Parents who live in poor areas and who experience financial hardship may value the independence and the financial assets their young people generate from gang membership. Gang involvement can lead to independence from the family and provide an ‘opportunity’ for a young individual to stand on his own two feet (Anderson, 1999:132). Anderson’s study of ‘decent’ and ‘street’ families showed that, whilst parents disapproved of their children’s gang affiliation and illegal appropriation, they on occasion accepted donations of money and goods from their sons without asking too many questions about where these came from. The economic fragility of some families in Anderson’s study meant that parents and carers were often in a double bind about their relative’s gang involvement (Anderson, 1999:133) and as a result tacitly accepted this membership by ‘turning a blind eye’ to gang activities.

### 3.4 Looking beyond the family: social and individual factors

In an attempt to understand juvenile delinquency in urban areas, social theorists, like Thrasher, looked to social conditions as a possible explanation. Thrasher’s seminal gang study concluded that gang membership could not be understood as simply the product of a ‘broken’ and or ‘chaotic’ family; wider ecological factors also needed to be taken into account (Thrasher, 1927). Using a ‘social ecological’ framework Thrasher argued that stable, organised environments with settled, homogenous populations promoted law-abiding behaviour whilst disorganised environments, unstable and culturally diverse populations encouraged delinquency and crime.

Since Thrasher a number of scholars have continued this line of thought and there exists a certain consistency amongst scholars in acknowledging that particular social conditions affect the healthy development of families and individuals. Shaw and McKay (1942) argued that the social ecology within deprived inner urban areas militated against the orderly
transmission of family values stressing law-abiding behaviour. Put simply, the disruption and cultural disequilibrium created by unstable social conditions created a space in which delinquent values could emerge and be disseminated.

Contemporary studies of gang formation and membership continue this emphasis on the social factors that encourage gang membership today (Hagedorn, 1998; Moore, 1991, Decker and Van Winkle, 1996, Miller, 2001; Vigil, 2003). For Hagedorn (1998) social structural conditions (such as demographic change, deindustrialisation and lack of legitimate employment opportunities, poverty and racism) appeared far more influential in gang formation than family structure. This perspective is largely replicated in British studies of urban street gangs (Hallsworth and Young, 2004; Smith and Bradshaw, 2005; Pitts, 2007; Aldridge and Medina, 2008). Smith and Bradshaw also found that gang membership was consistently higher for young people living in deprived neighbourhoods (Smith and Bradshaw, 2005:11–12).

For Vigil, gang membership is an amalgamation of familial, social and individual factors. He argues that an individual’s exposure to the ‘multiple marginalities’ (e.g., living in close proximity to gangs (see also Miller, 2001), family sub-cultural conflict, social control, habitual exposure to violence and victimisation) that exist in some communities (particularly in Latin American, but including African American minority ethnic groups more generally) has a significant impact on young people which must be taken into account when considering gang membership (Vigil, 1988, 2003). According to Vigil, when social conditions are harsh and social institutions like the family (and the school) fail, the children are ‘up for grabs’ (Vigil, 1988, 2003). Here Vigil is referring to young people’s movement towards the street and the socialisation in gang culture that occurs there.12 ‘Choloization’ is the cultural process that occurs as a result of the pressures and influence of the gang, describing a commitment by young people to what Hallsworth and Young (2004, 2006) and Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009) term ‘road life’ (Vigil, 1988, 2003). Consequently, young people immersed ‘on road’ internalise the subcultural mores and values of the gang, adopting a ‘locura’ mindset (Vigil, 1988, 2003).13

Jankowski (1991), however, is a little sceptical of the social determinist arguments that have been put forward to explain gang membership. Whilst he does not entirely dismiss familial or social influences, he asserts that these should not take precedence over individual characteristics. After ten years of ethnographic research with gang members, his research revealed that gang members were as likely to come from two-parent households as not, and many gang members experienced supportive relationships with their family members (Jankowski, 1991:39). Gang members were not, as commonly predicted, searching for a substitute father or male role model to emulate or with whom to identify (Jankowski, 1991:39), nor were they trying to find a surrogate family to replace their ‘dysfunctional’ biological one; the gang members in his research were ‘deviant’, ‘individualistic’ characters competing for scarce resources (Jankowski, 1991:22).

Jankowski argues that deviant young people living in poor neighbourhoods are constantly on the look-out for ways to get what they want. Being affiliated to a gang increases the likelihood of successfully getting money, respect and power, and is much more profitable than going it alone. Indeed, at the beginning, the young initiate believes that the links and

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12 See also Anderson’s (1999) differentiation between ‘decent’ and ‘street’ families.
13 According to Vigil, the characteristics of a ‘locura’ mindset include unpredictable, hedonistic behaviour, displays of toughness and daring, and a lack of empathy (Vigil, 1988, 2003).
contacts established through the group will enhance their status within the community and significantly improve their quality of life (Jankowski, 1991:30). Thus, in resource-poor areas, gang membership is the end result of a cost-benefit exercise, rationally calculated by prospective members (Jankowski, 1991:40).

We must be careful here to avoid falsely characterising young people as inherently deviant, as Jankowski appears to do. As gang research clearly illustrates, the majority, even those from ‘high-risk’ neighbourhoods, do not join gangs (Klein and Maxson, 2006; Sharp et al, 2006). Similarly, as Matza notes, delinquent youth (including gang members) are not habitually deviant. He claims that, like non-gang members, they routinely live in a non-deviant world and only occasionally engage in deviant or law-breaking practice (Matza, 1964). According to Matza young delinquents ‘drift in and out’ of delinquent behaviour using specific reasons to ‘neutralise’ their offending behaviour (Matza, 1964).

3.4.1 School environment, education and gang membership

The effects of schooling on youthful behaviour and gang membership have not commanded as much attention as family, peer group and social factors (Klein and Maxson, 2006). Those studies that do consider education as a variable commonly associate delinquency, including gang membership, with poor educational achievement (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993), low educational expectations (Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993),
14 truancy (Smith and Bradshaw, 2005), exclusion (Pitts, 2007) and ‘drop-out’ (Vigil, 1988, 2003; Thornberry, 2001). Vigil’s research with Chicago gangs notes the high level of drop-out amongst gang members and Pitts’s study of gang membership in Waltham Forest found that over two-thirds of gang members had been excluded from school (Pitts cited in Centre for Social Justice, 2009:78). It is possible that the disproportionate levels of school exclusion and truancy, and the lower than average educational achievements found amongst gang members is related to how young people experience the school environment.

Few studies consider young people’s perception of school as a centre for learning or as a safe environment. Whilst not seeking to explain delinquency in young people or gang membership, Willis’s seminal study ‘Learning to Labour’ looked at schooling from a child’s perspective. His findings highlighted how working class children created their own subculture as an adaptive response to a school system they came to recognise as failing them (Willis, 1977). Consequently, the young men in his study rejected middle-class values that stressed educational achievement and deferred gratification, and embraced a subculture of masculinity that celebrated toughness (including violence) and immediate gratification, one they believed would stand them in better stead to gain employment as ‘working-class’ males (Willis, 1977).

Offering a slightly different perspective from Willis, a recent ethnography by Garot (2010) found that the gang members studied were not so much rebelling against the middle-class values projected in school as against teachers whom they perceived to have given up on them, with no real interest in educating them. Garot’s research, conducted in an ‘alternative school’ for children living in a high-crime neighbourhood, highlights the ambivalent relationship pupils may have with teachers and the influence this may have on their attitude to school, educational outcomes and gang membership. Indeed, Garot found that, in some

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14 Bjerregaard and Smith (1993) found this finding to be more significant with females than males.
instances, the teachers considered gang members as ‘unteachable’ and experienced their role as educators was just getting through the day (Garot, 2010).

Other school-based gang studies find a correlation between gang membership and victimisation. In a study measuring victimisation amongst gang and non-gang members, Peterson et al found higher reporting rates for assault by gang-involved individuals than those who were not involved in gangs (60% in comparison to 40%) (Peterson et al, 2004:804). Whilst schools are often perceived as being relatively safe spaces for young people, research focusing on school experiences (Ofsted, 2008; Hayden, 2008; Young and Hallsworth, 2010) suggests otherwise. The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) TellUS3 survey found bullying to be a problem for many young people (Ofsted, 2008). Two in five young people surveyed (39%) said they were bullied at school. Hayden’s study revealed that 20% of pupils sampled had been ‘bullied a little’ in school (Hayden, 2008:2), and Young and Hallsworth found that 14% (87) of pupils who took part in their gang study had been ‘threatened or intimidated’ on the school estate; 9% (54 pupils) had been ‘robbed/jacked’ and 7% had been hit or beaten up (Young and Hallsworth, 2010:20). It is important to take account of the levels of violence in school and the relationship that pupils have with teachers because research has repeatedly shown that one of the primary motives for getting involved in gang groups is protection from victimisation (Peterson et al, 2004).

3.5 Leaving the gang: the family and its influence

Criminological research has shown that gangs are populated by young people and membership rarely extends into old age (Thrasher, 1927; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry, 1998). As a number of studies have shown, for many young people gang membership is transitory; it is a phase they enter and leave through the process of growing up. Many young people ‘join’ gangs in the early years of their lives during puberty (usually between 12 and 15 years old) and typically remain in them for about a year (Decker and Lauritsen, 1996). Only a small number of young people are still gang members four years after joining (Peterson et al, 2004). These findings suggest that most people will grow out of gangs fairly quickly. A few, however, do not and for these entrenched individuals the process of leaving may be a little more difficult to achieve.

Leaving a gang can be dangerous and according to the literature has little to do with the family and more to do with the individual. According to ex-gang member Kody Scott, gang membership is for life; once a gang member, forever a gang member (Shakur, 2004). If a person ‘wants out’ there are only two credible options: death or imprisonment. The research of other scholars, however, points to alternatives. Vigil’s work exposes the ritual of ‘beating out’ amongst some Chicago gang members (Vigil, 1988). Yet others refer to common exit strategies such as ‘fading out’ (Skolnick, 1988), ‘aging’ out (Hagedorn, 1998) or opting out, leaving when the group is in crisis (Jankowski, 1991).

In research conducted by Decker and Van Winkle on gang members in St Louis, gang members’ principal reason for leaving the gang was the level of violence (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996:109). Quite often, it was the personal violence they had endured as a result of

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15 ‘Beating out’ involves being beaten by several members of the gang before leaving.
being involved in a gang that caused them to leave. Their decisions were also influenced by
the impact of abuse, violence and gang culture on family members and close friends.¹⁶

Like the gangsters in Hagedorn’s study (1998) those interviewed by Decker and Van Winkle
had reached a point where they had matured or outgrown gang life. They had grown weary
of the threats against them, or their families, and had started to prioritise other aspects of
life, such as a new relationship or having children. It is paradoxical that the very thing that is
supposed to unite and facilitate camaraderie in the gang (violence and the threat of
violence) is the very thing that destroys allegiances to the group. This is a factor that should
not be overlooked. Recent studies on youth transitions and desistance have found similar
results (Maruna et al, 2004). Barry’s (2010) work shows that young people come to a point
in their lives where there have been too many run-ins with other gangs or too many knocks
on the door from the police or they have started their own family and wish to keep it safe.

It is commonly believed that fear is the motive that keeps most young people in the gang.
For example, scholars such as Foley (2011) and Pitts (2007) argue that leaving can have
dire consequences, not just for the individual wishing to leave a gang but also for their
family. According to Pitts, ex-gangsters are doomed to spend the rest of their lives in fear,
dodging retribution or attack from remaining members or rivals. Indeed, by leaving they not
only lose the protection accorded to members but they, and their family members, are at
risk of assault from gang members unhappy with the decision to leave and from rivals
waiting to harm them. There would certainly appear to be some evidence supporting this
scenario in some cases. Leaving a gang might well be particularly hard for longstanding
gangsters and offenders who have caused much harm in the community.

However, Decker and Lauritsen (1996) claim that it is not the fear of persecution or
punishment from other gang members that frightens people into staying but rather the fear
of life outside the gang unit, particularly the fear gang members may have of not being able
to make their way in society. Gang members often have poor experience of mainstream
social institutions so that they perceive these as rejecting them (Metcalf et al, 2001). Many
struggle to find employment or other opportunities to reconnect with the legal economy and
remain stigmatised by their ‘gang-banging’ past (Bourgois, 1995). Ex-gang members recall
harassment by the police long after they have left the gang and find the gang label difficult
to dislodge once it has been applied (Aldridge and Medina, 2008). These factors increase
the likelihood that young people will stay locked into gang life (or be driven back to it).

3.6 Summary

- A review of the literature highlights the complex nature of influences on gang
  formation, criminality and exit. Whilst there is a substantial body of research
  highlighting the increased risks of youth delinquency and gang involvement
  associated with family breakdown and conflict, harsh or erratic parenting and weak
  family bonds, other evidence points to the importance of individual characteristics
  and of wider social variables outside the family. The evidence highlights the risks of
  living in deprived neighbourhoods, with high levels of exposure to violence and

¹⁶ When asked why they decided to leave the gang, a typical respondent answered, ‘Cause everybody was
getting killed and shot for no reason. I said one day it’s gonna be one of us. I just quit’ (Decker and Van
Winkle, 1996:269) and ‘at first it was fun and then it just got kind of stupid cause too many people was getting
killed and stuff’ (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996:269).
victimisation and with low expectations from school, where street culture exerts a strong ‘pull’ and gang membership can be seen as the best means of securing protection and economic success.

- Studies suggest that family members’ knowledge of young people’s gang involvement and endorsement of it is disjointed and variable. The limited studies focusing on the experience of family members range from active encouragement by relatives who are themselves gang-involved to tacit acceptance to ignorance of young people’s lives outside the home.

- Families are not shown by research to play a key role in young people deciding to leave gangs: rather, the decision to leave is one taken by the gang member. The motivations that lead gang members to leave gang life tend to be linked to personal experience of crime, violence and victimisation, while threats against families, witnessing violence directed at family members, starting a new relationship or having children are among the influences that can prompt gang exit. Most young people who engage with gangs drift into gangs and most will drift out (Matza, 1964). In this their behaviour is consistent with the offending patterns of other young people. They may grow too old for gang life; often they ‘mature’ out of it. Finally, they leave because they have had enough of the violence that is endemic to gang life.
4. FINDINGS FROM INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED IN GANGS OR ‘ON ROAD’

This first section presents findings generated from interviews with young people with experience of being ‘on road’ or in gangs.

4.1 Respondent characteristics

The 53 gang-involved people whose interviews we analysed for this study came from the three key areas: London, the West Midlands and Scotland (see Table 3). The group consisted of 35 males and 18 females and was culturally diverse. Thirty-four participants were from the African Caribbean community or of mixed heritage. Seventeen individuals classified themselves as ‘white’ and two as Asian. There was an even spread of ages within the group. Nineteen participants were children between 14 and 17 years old. Eighteen were young adults and 16 were adults aged 25 years or more.

Table 3: Profile of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>London (Area 1)</th>
<th>West Midlands (Area 2)</th>
<th>Scotland (Area 3)</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>London (Area 1)</th>
<th>West Midlands (Area 2)</th>
<th>Scotland (Area 3)</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>51%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>London (Area 1)</th>
<th>West Midlands (Area 2)</th>
<th>Scotland (Area 3)</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14–17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36%</td>
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<tr>
<td>18–24</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25+</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17 This table includes demographic data from the 16 young women interviewed in Young (forthcoming 2013).
4.1.1 Gang membership

At the time of interview, participants were currently involved with groups defined as gangs or had a history of gang involvement; that is, they were, or had been, affiliated to a street-based group that had a collective identity whose members had engaged in offending, including violent crime.

It is important to note that, whilst the participants could objectively be seen as ‘gang members’, not all agreed with this label and some did not regard their group as ‘gangs’ or themselves as gang members. This point is particularly pertinent when discussing Scottish groups. Scottish ‘gangs’ are thought to have a different structure from those found in England and Wales (Bannister et al, 2010) and do not appear to be as hierarchical or organised as some scholars have suggested (Pitts, 2007). This may account for the relative absence of the term ‘gang’ within the Scottish interviews as compared to the English ones. When describing their ‘affiliation’ Scottish respondents, like some of their English counterparts, were more likely to consider their gang to be a group of friends, youth group or team.

Setting aside the tricky application of the gang label, some interviewees, particularly those from the London and West Midlands areas, were affiliated to named groups that were known to law enforcement agencies, groups that featured in gang surveys undertaken by the Metropolitan and the West Midlands Police (Metropolitan Police Service, 2006).

Gang status and role

The majority of interviewees did not describe themselves as performing a particular role within their groups. However, when speaking about their experience ‘on road’ some older participants claimed to be ex-gang leaders. It was common for these respondents, in the late 1980s early 1990s, to claim responsibility for starting the feuds that persisted in their area.

‘I’m saying, in my day it was totally different because, obviously, I’m from a generation where all this gang banging started. We started this in the whole place. Obviously, this is our area ... we was moving here, growing up, we was the originators of the whole gang thing.’ (Clifton, African Caribbean, male, 25+)

As the above quotation illustrates, few, if any, of these claims were boastful. These statements were said with sorrow and regret at the ongoing rivalries experienced by the younger people.

In addition to the ‘gang leaders’ the pool of interviewees included several (five) girlfriends of known gang members and a number of ‘shotters’ and ‘hustlers’. Within this cohort of respondents these terms were commonly used to describe individuals who were engaged in selling illegal drugs.

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18 In this section full respondent details are given once, either in the text or following the quotation.
Offending profile

Respondents were asked not to disclose offending for which they had not been arrested and/or convicted. Participants revealed engaging in a largely ad hoc range of criminal activities, a phenomenon described by some researchers as ‘cafeteria style’ offending (Klein, 1995). These included, but were not limited to:

- drug dealing;
- common assault;
- criminal damage;
- street robbery;
- handling and distributing stolen goods;
- possession of an offensive weapon;
- serious violent crime involving firearms and other weapons (eg knives);
- shoplifting.

Within this cohort, both males and females revealed committing offences of these types although, in keeping with the offending profile of female offenders more generally, offences tended to be less frequent and less serious amongst female respondents than their male counterparts (Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn, 1991; Young, 2009). From the interviewees it was difficult to classify the offences committed as ‘gang-related’ offences, but it is noteworthy that many respondents had committed an offence with other people, particularly street robbery and common assault.

4.2 Family structure and upbringing

Respondents were asked to describe their family structure and home environment at the time of interview. Seventeen participants described growing up in a family home with both biological parents and siblings. The remainder were reared in single-parent households or ‘reconstituted’ households (step-family or living with other relatives).

There were a number of reasons why participants grew up in households headed by a single parent (in all cases their mothers). In many instances the participant’s father was not known to them or had ‘not been around’ for most of their lives. In seven cases the father had left the family home and was either separated or divorced from the mother. In three cases the father had died (one murdered) and one young woman’s father had gone to prison.

Over half of the respondents grew up in large families with three or more children (the average being four children per household). Of those from smaller families, eight had one sibling and three were only children; four interviewees did not state whether they were an only child or grew up with other children.

It was commonplace for participants from large families to describe living in properties that were too small. For example, Harvey’s experience of living in a household with many people sharing a small space illustrates some of challenges faced by these children. Whilst growing up, Harvey shared a house with his parents and six other children. He described his living conditions as ‘crazy’ and ‘cramped’, and so he spent a considerable amount of time outside the home. His family eventually moved to a bigger, five-bedroomed, property
and he acquired his own room, which gave him the private space he needed but Harvey
continued to hang out ‘on road’ with his friends.

Acting as a carer to young siblings was also common amongst those in families with three
or more children. Shantelle (19), who grew up in a ‘broken’ home, described her early
childhood as ‘hard’ and regarded herself as a ‘single parent’ because of the frequency with
which she had to look after her two siblings.

‘I’ve been through a lot basically. I’m basically the father of the family that’s how it is
because I am the oldest.’ (Shantelle, African Caribbean, female, 18–24)

Shantelle’s job as ‘father of the family’ was made more difficult by the poor relationship she
had with her mother (see below) and because her younger brother (15) was ‘on the road’.

4.2.1 Relationships with parents

Whilst some young people spoke positively about the relationships they had with their
parent(s), 23 participants had experienced problems with parent(s) and/or carers. Most of
these difficulties were linked to conditions within the family home. These ranged from
parental substance and alcohol abuse to domestic violence (see Section 4.4.3), fighting
with parents and parental mental health issues (eg depression).

Two out of five respondents had been exposed to domestic violence in their homes and a
quarter made reference to alcohol or substance abuse by their parents. Whilst growing up
brothers William and Simon lived with parents addicted to heroin. It was commonplace for
them, as young boys, to have to tend to and care for themselves when their parents were
not able to do so. This was an experience shared by Chesney who, along with her younger
sister, resided with a mother who was also a habitual substance user. Chesney described
how she was often left alone in the house by her mum and frequently went hungry. Eventually, she was placed in local authority care and then with her grandmother.

Ten young people spoke about fighting with, or being beaten by, their parents or carers. A
key driver for this violence was the difficult relationship male respondents described with
fathers or step-fathers. These fractious relationships were exacerbated by alcoholism,
substance misuse and mental ill-health.

Fraser, along with five other participants, recalled being beaten by one, or more, of their
parent/carers. As a young boy, Fraser lived with his alcoholic parents and experienced
extreme forms of violence from both his mother and his father. This resulted in his
experiencing some psychological trauma which contributed directly to his gang involvement
and offending behaviour (see Section 4.4.3).

Two male respondents had difficult and frustrating relationships with their fathers which
resulted in a ‘beating’ or a ‘fight’ on more than one occasion. In both cases, it was their
opinion that the father was trying to impose order on a son he deemed to be becoming
unruly or disrespectful to the household.

Controversially, one of these respondents, Bradley, described these altercations as having
had a positive impact on him. Despite witnessing numerous incidences of domestic
violence against his mother by his father and being the recipient of his father’s violent rage,
it was his perception that his behaviour ‘on the road’ would have been much worse if his father had not been tough on him. Below he illustrates how the fear induced in him by his father stopped the escalation of a feud he was engaged in with a local boy over a girl.

‘I had an incident with a girl, someone said I was seeing her and her boyfriend wanted to fight me. They came knocking at my door at 10 o’clock ... I was thinking, I’m going to go out there and do something to this boy. I remember my dad saying, “no”. I was so angry ... because he (the boy) had come to my school, he was threatening me, he was telling people he was going to do things to me. ... My dad said, “You can’t go out” and I had to stay in.’ (Bradley, African Caribbean, male, 25+)

It was Bradley’s retrospective view that had his father not stopped him he would have gone out to face his protagonist. He stated that, in this instance, his mother’s protests or attempts to control him would have failed. This was a sentiment shared by one other respondent (who did not reveal whether his father had beaten him or not) who said that it was his father’s aggressive stance that curbed his gang-related behaviour.

Other respondents were not so positive about the remedial effects of their fathers’ aggression or attempts at control. As a consequence of fighting with his father, Rodney was thrown out of the house and the doors were locked. When this happened he would ‘stay out, put the windows in or break the door down’ but his reaction was consistent and he grew more resentful, angry and thus more aggressive towards his father. At least five more respondents had been thrown out after fighting with their parents, although some, like Susie, thought it was justified.

‘I caused mah ma all sorts ay shite ... my ma couldnae take it.’ (Susie, white, female, 18–24)

Susie put some of the relational problems she had with her mother down to her own marijuana smoking and identified this as being the point when the relationship really broke down. It was about this time that she ‘started running about with Toy’ (gang) and was eventually thrown out and found herself living in a hostel.

4.3 What were the main push and pull factors for being involved in a gang or ‘on road’?

Respondents were asked to highlight the factors that pushed or pulled them into gangs. Four inter-related key factors emerged as being instrumental. These were the social environment, educational experience and school exclusion, unemployment, subcultures and peer group pressure, and the search for independence and identity.
4.3.1 The social environment

Many of the respondents who engaged in this research came from some of the most deprived areas in London, the West Midlands and Scotland. Areas like Hackney in London, and Handsworth and Whitmore Reans in the West Midlands, from which our sample of respondents was drawn, are ranked amongst the 5% most deprived areas in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (Wolverhampton Council, 2008; Middleton et al, 2009).

Areas such as Barrowfield towards the east of Glasgow and Renfrew towards the west, home to roughly one third of the respondents, have the highest level concentration of deprivation in Scotland (Scottish Government National Statistics, 2009:1). In nearly all of these areas the worklessness, substance abuse, unemployment and exposure to gang-related violence and criminality is higher than the national average (Wolverhampton Council, 2008; Scottish Government National Statistics, 2009).

Respondents described the areas that they grew up in as ‘hostile’, with few opportunities for work or to engage in positive play activities. Over three-quarters of the sample referred to living in high-crime areas riddled with gangs. They recalled plenty of incidences of violence and had witnessed a spectrum of interpersonal crimes ranging from street robbery to murder. Frequently, these crimes involved weapons such as knives, guns, golf clubs and balls, broken bottles, bats and machetes.

Simon grew up in an area where gang fighting ‘happened every night’ and described himself as ‘de-sensitised’ to the violence.

‘I bide [grew up] in Barrowfield ... an’ thaur used tae be ae lot of violence; ae lot of violence. ... th’ folk that lived in it created th’ violence, th’ feud got split in two.’
(Simon, white, male, 18–24 years old) 19

The psychological toll of living in a neighbourhood characterised by crime and violence can, as Vigil (1996) notes, prompt gang membership. Both male and female interviewees described how living in high-crime areas left them feeling they had little choice but to be associated with gang groups as protection from victimisation. Describing the tempestuous area he grew up in Rabbie states:

‘Er it was radge [mad], a’ folk [everyone] jist to jump aboot ... an’ barnie (fight) wi’ each other an’ smashin’ other’s windows an’ we used tae barnie against the Hucks. A’ folk used tae fight.’ (Rabbie, white, male, 18–24)

Consequently, Rabbie would emulate the behaviour of older people in the community because ‘they were frightening and I was trying to impress them’. In a similar vein, Bradley and Christopher adapted to their environment:

‘You’re sort of thirteen, fourteen and you find yourself and your mates growin’ up in the area I did ... there was a lot of knife crime, and robberies was the trend as well and people going to other schools and causing havoc.’ (Bradley)

19 The names of participants have been changed to maintain confidentiality and preserve anonymity.
‘When you’re young an’ ye see folk fightin’ ye hink that’s alrite an’ ’en ye jist get’s intae it an’ wantin’ tae dae it an’ aw that.’ (Christopher, white, male, 18–24)

For Marvin, gang membership was also influenced by consistent harassment by people in his area. As a young man of 16/17, on several occasions he was ‘chased down’ by armed men looking for his brother.

‘You know what, “fuck it”! No chance. I’m not accepting this, all of a sudden it’s twice that I’ve ran, now they’re gonna start thinking that this is the situation. Ever since that day I’ve just stood up.’ (Marvin, African Caribbean, male, 18–24)

This was enough of an influence for him to affiliate to a well-known crew in his area.

4.3.2 Educational experience and school exclusion

The respondents were asked about their school experience. Of those who spoke about it, 14 were excluded from school, three others had been suspended and one had ‘left’. The most common reason for being excluded was ‘fighting’ with other pupils or, on several occasions, with teachers. One respondent, George, was excluded from two primary schools and three senior schools for fighting. The majority did not complete their secondary education, resulting in a lack of qualifications.

Exclusion from school had considerable effects on these young people. Among them was failure to attain any qualifications and disillusionment with the whole experience. The latter was experienced by George, who had become jaded and despondent with school after his multiple exclusions and what he perceived to be unfair treatment. He explained how, after being excluded, he began attending college in the hope of completing his education but further complications at the college made this unachievable.

‘I had to go to college with all the people who’d been kicked out of school, but at that point I didn’t really care less to be honest. So it all started to go downhill from then.’ (George, African Caribbean, male, 18–24)

George went on to explain how, without school to occupy him, he would hang about with older people and smoke cannabis all day. Taught not by professionally qualified teachers but by the scholars of the street, he began his street education and ‘learnt lessons’ that would be useful when ‘on road’. He described learning how to hustle, fight and distrust people, particularly those who are your friends. This lesson proved valuable to him as later on in his road ‘career’ he was almost killed by one of them.

Bradley joined a gang at the age of about 13/14, when he was in school. He grew up in a London area historically known for gang-related violence in the form of shootings and stabblings. Bradley was aware of his potential to be victimised and as such took steps to avoid this eventuality. As the quotation below suggests, one way to stave off victimisation from other people was to band with others in a group and become the aggressors:

‘[When] you’re growing up in an area I did, especially at that time when there was a lot of knife crime, and robberies were the trend in them days, we was well, erm, going to school and sort of causing havoc.’ (Bradley)
Jacob's school experience was similar to Bradley's. He described a consistent cycle of bullying and fighting that used to occur between his 'team' and a rival 'team' at a nearby school.

Harvey was as jaded about school as George, Bradley and Jacob. His disenchantment with school arose because being at school couldn't make him money. At the time of interview he did not believe in, nor was he committed or attached to, school. It was, however, through school that Harvey became involved in selling drugs. He describes how a former school mate 'introduced' him to the idea of dealing drugs.

‘I was thinking to myself, obviously, this is the only way I could get money. I'm not working and what else can I do? Signing on money ain't going far enough; that couldn't even support a sixteen-year-old much less me ... One of my friends from a long time ago. He used to go to my secondary school, he kind of, not told me to, but he said I should do it ... [he said] like it's quick, easy money.’ (Harvey, African Caribbean, male, 18–24)

4.3.3 Unemployment, subcultures and peer influence

Amongst this group of respondents the social cultural setting in which they were raised shaped the types of groups to which they belonged and the criminality they engaged in. Scottish respondents were exposed to a drinking and fighting culture, and the groups to which these young people belonged reflected these characteristics. Scottish respondents talked more often of engaging in physical confrontations than their southern counterparts. Young Londoners and those from the West Midlands were more likely to live in proximity to men or 'elders' in the community engaged in illegal economies such as the drug trade (see below) and thus to be exposed to a subculture committed to making money by hustling, and it was this, along with fighting, that acted as a pull for young men. Only one female, Audrey, cited making money as a motivational factor for her involvement in a street-based gang group but her money-making schemes were influenced by her brother's involvement in the gang.

Poor educational results and exclusion from school led to several respondents (8) being attracted by the prospect of making 'easy money' by dealing drugs to peers. After leaving school at 16 without the qualifications required to find work and uninspired by the prospect of doing a low-paid minimum wage job, Jorell could not see any real short-term solution to his cash-flow problems and so:

‘I just ended up on the road, just making, trying to make some money ... selling weed, selling drugs and stuff like that.’ (Jorell, African Caribbean, male, 18–24)

The experience of Jorell mirrored that of other young men who, after witnessing displays of wealth in the community, and recognising their relative poverty, became involved in drug dealing, street robbery or hustling to get money. Another respondent illustrates how the process worked and why many young men living in his area ended up hustling on the road:

‘I don't think they're forced. I think that they've – they've seen the glamourised life through some of the elders and they want some. There’s no way that they're gonna
get up every morning, they’re not doing nothing with their life, knowing that they can make money: there’s no way these youths will say “All right, I’m going to sit down for a while” – they’ll observe it for a little while, but after that they – something ticks in their brain, they’ll go the older one and say “Blood, I beg you bring me in, what’s happening? You’ve seen me every day, you’ve seen me struggling and I beg you bring me in.” So sometimes it’s the youths that actually push it to the olders to say “I wanna make money” and then the olders bring them in.’ (George)

‘I couldn’t find a job or nothing else ... I was literally on my arse, and I had a girl that I felt embarrassed to kind of show her that I’d got no money left. So I thought it would be easy to turn to the drug situation and erm, I was only in it for two months and I got caught.’ (Marvin)

Consistent with findings from other gang research, our interviewees saw the opportunity to hustle or deal as a rational response to the constrained choices available to them. They consistently voiced that they did not want to take this route but saw it as an ‘easy option’ and a quicker way to ease their poverty, or to make money.

‘I made a conscious decision, I ain’t got any money, I want money, my mum can’t buy me this and that, and I want this, I gonna get it for myself.’ (Clifton)

‘I remember one of the things that made me wanna get into selling drugs was – I remember, ... one of them was having a birthday party and they must’ve gone to town. Erm, I remember seeing the receipt and it’s a bit over £1000 just on shoes ... at the time, coming from a single-parent household where we hadn’t really got much money, and you see someone spending £1000 on shoes and that, it – it – it’s a big thing like, especially when you’re young and impressionable. I mean they used to give us like a tenner just to go shop and then like they’d give us £20 and go and buy some cigarettes and they’d say like “Keep the change” and all that; and as a child, like, when you see that, it’s a big thing like.’ (George)

**4.3.4 The search for identity and independence**

The real and perceived promise of money, coupled with the mystique and respect accorded to successful dealers and people in gangs, proved to be a strong magnet towards ‘the road’ for young people with a desire to be independent from the family or with little to keep them attached to the family unit or committed to social institutions they believed had failed adequately to provide for them (see above quotations). In terms of a growing need for independence one young man expressed it thus:

‘When you maybe reach fourteen or thirteen or fifteen, you just feel, “I’m free!”. You just want to go out now, and you just want to enjoy, you just want to mingle with friends, whatever they’re into you’re just gonna get into it. It’s only when you start growing up you realise what you’ve done when you’re young.’ (Mark, African Caribbean, male, 18–24)

‘That’s what I believed. I’m of age now. Sixteen, seventeen, I’m of age. Yeah, I would still go out and stay out, but they would still phone to make sure, wherever I am, to make sure that I’m safe. ... I’m a man now; I’ll stand on my own two feet. Do what I
have to do. They were still parenting me and I was still listening, I wasn’t rebelling in that way like that, I still had manners towards my mum and my dad. You know, maybe you might have the little arguments for whatever it may be, but I’ll still listen to them, because obviously they’re my guardians innit, so I’ll still listen to them and that, but when I go outside, that’s my time. When I’m inside, it’s their time.’ (Rhys, African Caribbean, male, 14–17)

These statements show that, for these young men at least, it was the allure of being free and outside the confines of the family that attracted them onto the road and into street-based groups. For teenagers with little alternative means of expressing their individuality and creating an identity separate from the family, the road, quite literally, provided a space for people to socialise in the company of like-minded youngsters. For these respondents going ‘on road’ was part of growing up, the start of their search for independence, self-discovery and control. It was in their peer groups, and not necessarily in the home, that they began to ‘become a man’ under the guidance and influence of ‘road guys’ and it was to these men that younger males turned when they wanted to make money and gain respect. When they were ‘on road’ the respondents were still attached to their parents and bound to the home; their parents also tried to retain some control over them, but the desire to socialise, to ‘stand on my own two feet’ and ‘to be a man’ were stronger influences.

4.4 Which push/pull factors were ascribed to parenting or the family?

Whilst the majority of respondents cited factors outside their home environment as being the most influential, even in the face of strong evidence to the contrary, a few indicated family factors as being pertinent. For those who did, several key themes emerged: the influence of gang-involved relatives, particularly a brother(s) and/or cousin(s), fatherlessness, domestic violence and the pent-up anger caused by parental neglect or abuse.

4.4.1 The influence of gang-involved relatives

Nineteen of the respondents interviewed had at least one relative involved in a gang or ‘on road’. The relative most likely to be involved was a brother (in ten cases) or a male cousin (in eight cases) but respondents also came from families where their fathers and uncles were ‘on road’.

Six young women had older brothers whose involvement in gangs had a significant influence on their own engagement ‘on road’ or with gang groups. These young women argued that they were ‘compelled’ to be part of the gang for two reasons: loyalty to the brother or the status he held within the group. As 20-year-old Jennifer noted:

‘My brother is an elder member of a gang so that had a lot to do with it. We repped our area and cuz of my brother, I was immediately associated and I got involved.’

(African Caribbean, female, 18–24)

Jennifer associated with her brother’s group from the age of 14 and, like the five other young women whose brothers were in gangs, fought for and supported them. Like Jennifer,
Audrey’s brother, who was just a few years older, was a significant figure in forming her criminal career.

‘My brother would encourage me to do so much of it. When we used to be out he’d be like, “Look at that girl, don’t you like her chain?”’, “Rob her!” or “That girl’s looking at you; fight her!” He used to encourage me to do these things all the time ... I loved my brother, he was my role model and I wanted to be like him.’ (African Caribbean, female, 25+)

It was her brother who introduced her to street robbery, selling weed and taking crack cocaine at the age of 14. Audrey went on to become an accomplished drug dealer and hustler with a career that spanned decades. Besides the young women, 13 young men had brothers with a history of gang involvement and as with the young women their siblings were instrumental in their becoming gang affiliated.

Two young people interviewed grew up in a family where the majority of adults, including mother, aunties and grandmother, were engaged in gang life in some way. The brothers felt they had little choice but to be involved in gangs. Coming from a family of ‘gangsters’, these young men felt that they were drawn into their families’ wars by virtue of birth, whether they liked it or not.

‘It was jist kin’ ay a body [one] ay those situations whaur you’ll groon up an’ wud see yer uncles fightin’ in th’ causey [street] an’ see them fightin’ in th’ streets mebbe wi’ firearms, an’ as a young bairn ye thooght, it was tough; that’s gangsters an’ that’s whair you’d loch [like] tae be ... I looked up tae them.’ (William, white, male 25+)

As young children, William and his brother Simon idolised their family members and wanted to emulate their behaviour but they realised as adults the consequences of being ‘born in’ a fighting family and the significant impact it had on them. It left them, as they believed, with little choice. As the younger of the two brothers notes:

‘We wir brooght up in’at. It wasn’t an option whair ye cud either say tae yerself ye didnae want anythin’ tae dae wi’ it. ... it’s the “name thing”, it’s fa yoo’re related tae an’ whair yoo’re fae e’en though ye ne’er wanted anythin’ tae dae wi’ it.’ (Simon)

Even though they were involved ‘on road’ some respondents said that their older gang-involved relatives had attempted to discourage their involvement. With the benefit of hindsight, and armed with first-hand experience of the reality and consequences of being ‘on road’ or associated with a gang, the relatives actively sought to deter them.

Bradley, whose father and uncles were involved ‘on road’ in some capacity, described how they tried, unsuccessfully, to steer him clear of becoming involved.

‘They kind of try to deter you from doing it coz they know, and they can see the road that they’ve gone down. Erm, they want you to be tough, they want you to be able to stand up for yourself but I don’t think they want you to do what they’re doing.’ (Bradley)
Despite the warnings, in his youth Bradley was affiliated to a well-known street gang. He did not become a ‘hustler’ like his father or uncles. His ‘road time’ was taken up mostly with fighting over ‘money, girls, clothes, drugs, respect, power all them sorts of reasons’.

4.4.2 Fatherlessness

The absence of a father was cited by some, but by no means all, participants as the catalyst for their involvement in gang groups. The experience of being without a father was summed up for two people.

‘I kinda felt th’ loove Ah didn’t gie [get] fae me da. Ah thooght I’d fin’ it in me pals.’

(Christopher)

‘As I said, my dad wasn’t there. I remember callin’ my dad and saying, “Please can I come and live with you [mothers name] doesn’t want me?” ... I remember my dad coming to the house and saying, “I haven’t got time; I haven’t got space in my house or life for you right now!” Them words hurt.’

(Audrey)

Without a father figure at home these two young people and others went looking for validation and recognition from men in their community in the form of elders, peers or boyfriends.

In some ways the testimonies of respondents echoed the literature. For example, it was Clifton’s perception that because ‘women can’t raise a man’ young boys looked outside their families for men to emulate. What is interesting about Clifton’s statement is that he was one of several children, including boys, raised by a single mother. Without expressly referencing himself, Clifton was recalling his own experiences.

Following Clifton, Kai rationalised his gang membership in terms of his father’s absence. Generalising his loss to others on road, he argued that:

‘Boys need a man at home to show them how to be a man. If they do not have this then they go looking elsewhere. Females need a man at home to show them how men should be and to advise them on how they are to be treated and respected by the men they meet.’

(Kai, African Caribbean, male, 25+)

Kai’s statement is an illustration of the importance placed on having a father present in the lives of young people as they grow up. Kai’s father went missing from the family home during his formative years, which affected him. Kai was involved in two gangs and has a history of gang-related violent crime.

From the testimonies of these two men at least, young people, particularly young males, gravitated towards the road looking for some emotional investment from other men. Kai indicated that his gang membership was driven by two interconnected things: love and fear. He went to the streets looking for ‘love’ from his peers; something he felt was missing from his life. According to him, this ‘love’ is expressed by ‘having someone’s back’, letting people sleepover when they have nowhere else to stay, sharing food and treating someone with respect. It is also the compassionate pat on the back that is given in hard times.
4.4.3 Domestic violence, abuse and neglect experienced in the home

Ten of those interviewed had grown up in families with drug and alcohol problems, and 15 had experienced domestic violence within the home. Typically these respondents were exposed to their parents’ drug-taking or had witnessed repeated violence against a mother by a father (or step-father), a mother’s partner or, in the case of Gayle, her brothers:

‘I used to watch my mum get hit. I’ve got older brothers who have got schizophrenia and they would lash out on my mum and beating my mum.’ (Gayle, mixed race, female, 14–17)

Gayle’s father had died when she was five years old and so she had spent a large proportion of her life in a household where her mum had to cope with three children, two of whom had mental health problems. Gayle describes being scared of her mother, but very fond of her brothers. She did not elaborate on what ‘scared’ meant but she did say that her fear stopped around Year 8 (aged 12) and it was then she started to ‘run about on road’.

Exposure to drug abuse or domestic violence varied significantly within the sample, with young women and Scottish young men reporting more incidences than their male London or West Midlands-based counterparts. For example, Andrula, Chesney, William, Simon and Fraser all grew up in families where one or both parents were addicted to Class A substances or alcohol and as a result experienced high levels of violence or neglect.

‘Basically, my mum was an alcoholic, prostitute druggie. ... Growing up was a harsh struggle. We didn’t have electricity and hardly any food in the house.’ (Chesney, African Caribbean, female, 14–17)

‘It was bonnie tough [pretty tough], coz ma an’ dad whair on smack [heroin] an’ I had tae watch after mah wee brother most ae th’ time.’ (William)

The harsh upbringing experienced by respondents had a significant impact on their physical and mental well-being and was noted as being a key factor in pushing them towards the streets.

‘Thair was a lot ae conflict in mah hoose atween mah ma an’ dad ... When ah went ootwith [outside], ah be carryin’ aw th’ pressures an’ anger issues an’ takin’ ‘at tae th’ streets.’ (William)

‘My dad being an alcoholic did have an effect on us. I started playing up at school and I got kicked out at the age of 14. It made me not wanna be at home and I used to go out a lot as I didn’t wanna be there when my dad was there. He would always be arguing and drunk. I spent a lot of time outside on the estate ... this led me into other things which I shouldn’t have been getting in to.’ (Andrula, white, female, 25+)

Like Fraser, these respondents described being ‘angry’, ‘fearful’, ‘resentful’ and ‘distrusting’ of adults and people in positions of authority because of the neglect and abuse they had suffered at the hands of their parents.

‘I grew up in an jakey [alcoholic] hame. Mah ma was blooter’d [drunk] all th’ time an’ mah da was violent an’ a lot ay violence cam mah way ... Ah didnae troost anybody.'
Ah didnae troost mah ain fowk [my own family] ... Ah hud a total mistroost ay adults an’ fur th’ fowk fa [who] ur meant tae nurture yoong fowk. Whit it pure dun tae me was bred defiance. Ah was full ay fear as a wee yin [boy]. Ah didnae run mah life, fear ran it ... an’ it put me in positions whair it was a negatife ootcome. Ah wuds rin abit [run about] in a gang stealin’ [and] shopliftin’, an’ fightin’. Ah was tryin’ tae gettae frae th’ hoose ... Ah wasn’t comfortable in mah ain hoose.’ (Fraser, white, male, 25+)

What Fraser is describing above is akin to what Jankowski refers to as ‘defiant individualism’ (Jankowski, 1991). Within the home he learnt the power of violence and the painful realisation that he could not rely on adults whose responsibility it was to care for and nurture him. Consequently, Fraser adopted a ‘defiant and aggressive personality’ and, like others, took to the streets to vent his frustration and rage by engaging in violent activities. In his interview Fraser made consistent links between his experience in the home and the harm that he inflicted on people.

Rodney also connected his anger at violent conditions within the home with his gang involvement. He attributed some of his offending, principally street robbery of people who had ‘pissed him off’, to the anger and frustration he had towards his father. He revealed that the motivation for his robbery was not material but psychological. The street robbery presented a way for him to vent his anger and deflect his powerlessness in relation to his father onto another target.

As children and young adults, both male and female respondents had not only experienced violence, but imprisonment (their own and that of significant others), attempted suicide, sexual violence and neglect within the home, yet few spoke about receiving any institutional help or support to help them resolve, psychologically, the feelings of frustration and anger evidenced here.

In addition to living with a mother who abused substances Chesney (16) was raped by a male relative and was disturbed by this event. When asked whether she’d received any official support she responded that outside of legal representation she did not get any. She went on to say,

‘I couldn’t deal with it but at the time I thought I could. I’ve had to deal with so much in the past ... it’s just another stepping stone I had to get over.’

Trying to cope with the multiple stresses in her home, Chesney went to the youngsters on her estate whom she felt would understand and keep her safe. She describes herself as being ‘on road’ from aged ten. She identifies the start of her ‘road life’ as following the time when her relative raped her and said that she felt safe outside with her friends because she knew that they would protect her. As she illustrates below,

‘There was this one particular boy who knew what had happened, so every time my uncle would come and try to get me from them he wouldn’t allow it which made me feel more bonded with them ... ‘cause you could see that they wouldn’t let nothing hurt me’.

Not all young people cited violence in home, neglect or abuse as a precursor to their being ‘on road’ or involved in gangs. Indeed, young people with no familial history of domestic violence or substance abuse ended up in gangs or ‘on road’. Even within the sample of
young people who had these hardships there was an overwhelming reluctance to attribute any blame for their gang membership to their parents (see Section 4.8).

4.5 Do the families know about respondents’ involvement in gangs or being ‘on road’?

The young people were asked whether their parents or other family members knew about their involvement in gangs or their experiences ‘on road’. Ten participants said that a parent, specifically a mother, did know that they were in a gang or engaging in some form of antisocial or criminal activity. However, most were keen to stress the limitations of parental knowledge and to make a distinction between knowledge and parental collusion.

‘They know some of the stuff that I do, but not all of it.’ (Mark)

The issue of parental knowledge was linked to that of control and supervision. Whilst acknowledging how well their parents managed them inside and outside the home, the respondents said that parental control dwindled as they matured and so did the amount of knowledge parents had about what they were doing and with whom. Mid-teen age (14–16) was identified, by almost all respondents, as the point at which parents began to lose influence over their children’s behaviour.

‘She could try and call me, but she knows that obviously – not that I won’t listen. ... I’m older now, I’m not gonna really – you understand – be as on it as when I was younger.’ (Harvey)

‘That’s what I believed. I’m of age now. Sixteen, seventeen, I’m of age. Yeah, I would still go out and stay out, but they would still phone to make sure, wherever I am, to make sure that I’m safe. ... I’m a man now, I’ll stand on my own two feet. Do what I have to do. ... I’ll still listen to them, because obviously they’re my guardian innit, but when I go outside, that’s my time. When I’m inside, it’s their time.’ (Rhys, 14–17)

This last quotation refers to the distinction young people made between home time and street time, and it was this splitting of the world into two that enabled a significant proportion of the young people interviewed skillfully to hide their involvement in gangs or criminal activity from their mothers.

Below, Bailey describes how, when he was ‘on road’, he had two identities, his home identity and his street identity, and how he strove to keep these separate.

‘So it’s like you’re two different people. You go outside, then you go back home – ... I mean Mum – Mum doesn’t know who you are outside, she just knows who you are when you’re at home, innit? ... Mum might not even know they call you that name. She can hear people calling the name – some mums don’t even know that, just say Mark’s got a name and they call him ‘Bell’ outside, and Bell’s going on with all like he’s shooting people and everything. He might be your son, but you don’t know him as Bell. People have been telling you stories about this guy Bell and you’re saying, “Yeah, what a bad breed of a (pygmy) he is”, or whatever, and then you get to find out one day it’s your son.’ (Bailey, African Caribbean, male, 18–24)
The participants took active steps to hide their behaviour and gang involvement from their mothers: sometimes this was to protect them from the disappointment of knowing that their child was involved in a gang or criminality, but at other times it was because they believed, as did an ex-drug dealer, that it was no longer their business.

‘No, I hid it well. I would just say, “I going out’ innit!” She don’t need to know what I’m doing when I’m out ... she’d ask me where I’d got the clothes from, but I didn’t tell her.’ (Anthony, white, male 18–24)

The frequency with which respondents spoke of falsifying the information given to their mum or taking steps to hide their behaviour from her seriously calls in to question how much knowledge parents (principally mothers) have about their child’s behaviour and whereabouts. As one young female acknowledged:

‘My mum don’t know the truth. I can tell my mum, “Yeah, I doing this”, but I will be going something else’ ... If she actually knew what I was doing I wouldn’t be able to’ve done it!’ (Emily, white, female, 14–17)

Consequently, it could be argued that the lack of information significantly hinders parents' ability to supervise, control and advise their children.

4.5.1 Familial collusion?

As noted above, it is possible for family members (particularly mothers) to know nothing about gang membership or to have limited understanding of the extent to which their children are involved in gang or ‘on road’ activities. As one respondent notes, his family was ‘blinded by lies’. However, five respondents believed that their parents knew more than they expressed but ‘turned a blind eye’ to their behaviour until it drew attention to the family.

‘My parents just say to me “Don’t bring police back to my door!” That’s it, and then you’re good with your parents, that’s all, that’s the rule with parents in our area basically.’ (Joshua, African Caribbean, male, 14–17)

‘That’s what my mum used to say to me, “Don’t bring police back to my door”.’ (Clifton)

Having the police ‘knock the door’ was unacceptable and the above quotations illustrate how enduring this cultural trait is. It indicated that the child had not been skilled enough to hide their dealings from the family, had exposed the family unit to the criminal justice system and overstepped boundaries of tolerance within the family. The presence of the police at the door also denied the family the chance of pleading ignorance about their child’s involvement in a gang or being ‘on road’.

Whilst some parents engaged in a subtle form of collusion, ‘turning a blind eye’, this did not always mean that they condoned their children’s behaviour or indeed that they were able to stop it. A great many young people, particularly those who were involved in the illegal drug economy, described how ‘knowing’ parents would argue with them about their involvement in a gang or ‘on road’, and would try to deter them from being involved. Few young people indicated that their parents were successful. One reason for this was the inability of parents
to compete with the allure of the lifestyle of the gang or to offset the external pressures brought to bear on their children once they were out of the home. The following statements illustrate how difficult it was for parents to intervene.

‘I only remember one time she searched my room and found the money and said “What’s this?” and then all hell broke out … but I still didn’t stop. All it is, is I didn’t hide the money at home.’ (George)

‘I was in there, I was in that lifestyle and, at the time, it was too hard to just walk away.’ (Marvin)

‘She doesn’t want it in her house. She can’t stop you from doing it; she can’t lock you up forever. You have to do what you have to do as a boy child. All your friends and everybody else is active: they’re not working, they’re on road. They’re going out, they’re buying trainers, you can’t be always saying “I’ve gotta go to my mum, ask my mum or my dad to get me a pair of trainers”; you’ve got to learn to stand on your own two feet, so if that’s – if it has to be the way, then it has to be the way. I don’t wrong no-one for doing it; it’s how you’re doing it. You can do it and be discrete about it. That’s what I believe.’ (Bailey)

The last respondent recalled how his mother tried to stop him but noted that the pull of the street was too great to resist, particularly since his friends were involved and they were making money.

Lack of money and peer pressure meant that he was not going to stop dealing drugs. He felt bad about what he was doing to his mother and about the fact that his dad ‘was dead against it’ but their disapproval was not enough to stop him. Whilst his parents did not directly benefit from his involvement (by actively taking money or goods from him) he took pride in the fact that he was able to ‘pay for his keep’ and ‘look after his mum’ in the way that he wanted to.

4.6 What are the benefits and/or costs for the families of people involved in gangs or ‘on road’?

Two of the main questions arising in relation to gang membership are the extent to which families benefit, materially, from their children’s involvement in gangs and, given the levels of violence associated with gang groups and being ‘on road’, the extent to which family members are victimised. One key benefit recurring throughout the interviews was protection from victimisation. Perhaps one of the reasons why this was the main benefit cited was that the respondents repeatedly attempted to keep their involvement in gangs separate from their home life.

4.6.1 Protection from victimisation

Having family members involved in gangs or ‘on road’ was thought to give protection, particularly if the family had a credible street reputation.
‘Where I felt that where we’ve already made our name in our estate and you’ve done whatever else, paved the way for them to have an easier ride. So when they did probably wanna just go to the park or wanna go to play football they could because they knew that no one ain’t gonna try and trouble them if they get seen.’ (Marvin)

‘On road, he was well known and no one would really touch him and I used to be proud of that because I used to think that no one would touch me because that’s my older brother.’ (Gayle)

However, there is a disjunction between the myth and the reality. The protection afforded to a family member did not always appear to work for those who were gang-involved.

Gayle, like other respondents, was not protected from victimisation by her brother’s reputation as a well-known gang member: his status did little to protect her or to override her own gang status. At the time of interview, she had been attacked, shot at and stabbed by members of a group she used to know in her area. Talking about a ‘run in’ she had with a group of boys she describes as being known ‘for stabbings and things like that’, she notes how:

‘They don’t like me now but I don’t care. Once, they’ve seen me and grabbed me down and thrown me in the corner and went to beat me up. If they see me and they beat me up the most it will do is hurt me for a day and then I would be back to normal.’ (Gayle)

Associating with a gang eroded any protection she thought she had because of her brother’s involvement in gangs or his reputation.

4.6.2 Families and victimisation

Exposure to violence was commonplace for the interviewees and they had witnessed a whole gamut of interpersonal crimes ranging from street robbery to murder of a friend or relative. They had themselves been beaten up, robbed, stabbed, shot and/or sexually abused because of being involved in street gangs. As illustrated in other research, gang members are significantly more likely to be engaged in crime and violence than non-gang members. Some of our respondents had themselves engaged in serious interpersonal violence.

Research in the UK has shown family members to be targets of gang violence (Pitts, 2007; Firmin, 2010) and exposure to violence is the cost family members have to pay for their relatives’ involvement. The majority of respondents here, however, stated that violence against relatives, such as mothers and sisters, was rare. A number of male participants explained that there was an unwritten rule that, for their group, non-involved family members are not harmed. This code is illustrated below.

‘People don’t really go for other people’s family.’ (Jorell)

‘Gang fights ‘at ah was involved wi’, ye wuds ne’er goon [never go] loch fur [look for] somebody’s coosin. Ye woods be fightin’ wi’ th’ fowk ‘at fooght against ye, an’ that’s
‘at! Ye wuds ne’er gan an’ fuck wi’ people’s mum’s an’ dads.’ (Alexander, white, male, 18–24)

One interviewee, an ex-gang leader with over two decades of experience in a well-established street gang, referred to an incident where family members were directly targeted but stated that this was ‘the only one in 25 years’. He clarifies:

‘Really and truly like there’s no risk to families, coz you know, the person that’s on the road really they’re responsible for their own actions ... however, there are certain lines that you just don’t cross you know.’ (Clifton)

None of the respondents referred to instances where non-involved members of their own family had been attacked. A couple had, however, heard of someone’s family home being ‘shot at’.

‘I know of at least four houses that have got shot at. These are the homes of mums of the guys [her gang friends], and other side has found out and done these things.’ (Sharna, African Caribbean, female, 18–24)

The threat of violence against the family member is therefore real in some situations (irrespective of family reputation) for those with gang-involved relatives, and an enhanced risk of victimisation exists for those people with ‘pagans’ (these are ‘enemies’).

Having ‘pagans’ is potentially dangerous for family members of gang-involved individuals, particularly for those who have committed serious crimes against others or who have unsettled debts.

In keeping with the ‘codes of the street’ (Anderson, 1999) and the intrinsically violent and retaliatory nature of the street as described by him, some respondents illustrate the lengths to which some people ‘on road’ will go to avenge past infractions. According to a number of interviewees, if an individual has ‘pagans’ and they can’t avenge themselves on him or her directly then they may target family members.

‘If they can’t get you, and they know that they can’t get you they’re moving on to the next thing that’s closest to you, your family. If they hurt one of your family members that’s the only way without physically hurting you, that they can hurt you.’ (Joshua, African Caribbean, male, 14–17)

The enduring worry and concern that having ‘pagans’ can cause is encapsulated in this statement from William:

‘Sometimes ... ah see somebody fa ah ken [that I knew] mebbe 10 years ago ‘at ah hud a barnie wi’. I’ll see these fowk comin’ towards me ... an’ ah can feel myself startin’ tae build inside; th’ heart’s poondin’, an’ ah teel myself, “Recht, [right] it’s okay” an’ en ah hink, “Recht, whit if they attack at me?” Yoo’ve got tae teel yerself, “No, jist donner [walk] hame, an’ jist nod yer head”.’

As real as the threat of violence against family members posed by ‘pagans’ and other groups may be, it is important to stipulate that the respondents deemed this type of violence to be relatively rare. Victimisation by police was cited as a more common occurrence. A
number of African Caribbean participants, particularly those from the West Midlands, complained about consistent harassment by the police. As a group the respondents recalled multiple stop-and-search situations and police house raids. It was the perception of many respondents that the police were a racist organisation that stigmatised and stereotyped black youngsters. A common complaint from ex-gang members and those who had ‘come off the road’ (ie were no longer dealing drugs or with the gang) was that the police did not recognise their change of behaviour and continued to stop them at any given opportunity.

‘There was one officer, he used to just, anytime he used to see me he used to stop me. All the time, like. I was legit, I had a driving licence, insurance, MOT, everything, but he’d always stop us. Just like trying his hardest to try and catch us with anything but at that time I wasn’t dealing no drugs or nothing.’ (Jorell)

4.6.3 Disappointment and regret

Another cost to the family perceived by respondents was disappointment. A significant minority (six) of ex-gangsters and roadsters regretted the pain, worry and confusion that they had caused to their family as a result of being involved. As Alexander notes:

‘I hink ah was selfish an aw when ah hink back. Sae fur me, ah don’t hink it hurts as much as whit it did fur mah ma an’ mah aunties.’ (Alexander)

4.7 What were the main reasons for leaving the gang or coming ‘off road’?

In this study, getting out and staying out of the gang and coming ‘off road’ was seen by some respondents as a challenging experience. When asked what motivated them to disassociate from their group or come ‘off road’ a number of reasons were cited and these mirrored some of those cited in the literature. The most common themes were incarceration, growing up and out of the gang, becoming a father, and over-exposure to violence and criminality.

4.7.1 Incarceration

Fourteen participants had been to prison because of their involvement ‘on road’ or with gangs. Many more had witnessed the incarceration of peers and family members, some for long-term sentences spanning decades. Serving a jail sentence prompted at least three young people to reassess their gang lifestyle. Bradley describes his jail time as a ‘leveller’ that taught him the value of his life:

‘Jail’s change me a lot, for the better. Some people it changes them for the worst. ... You kinda realise in jail [that] you’re down on the floor innit. You’ve got nuffin. ... It’s kinda a reality check.’
Similarly, two other respondents, both of whom had been sentenced to serve a long time in prison, realised the futility of gang life and on release began the process of turning their lives around.

4.7.2 Exposure to gang life, violence and criminality

As stated above, many respondents had perpetrated violence against another person, witnessed many violent incidents or had been victims of violence. By far, this latter factor was the most influential for this cohort.

The fear and threat of violence was a constant reality for most gang-involved individuals. The continual ‘having to look over your shoulder’, having constantly to be out on the beat, having to answer the phone to secure a drug deal, having to sleep ‘with one eye open’ and live in a heightened state of anxiety eventually took its toll on respondents.

It was the ‘drip, drip’ of violence that eventually caused Gayle to extract herself from the group to which she was affiliated. Echoing the experience of Gayle, Judith told of how, after being exposed to the hyper-violent and exploitative nature of gang life, she realised the futility of being involved in a notorious street gang.

‘My experience of road life was nothing but hell in the sense that whilst it appeared loving, protecting, cool and the “in thing to do”, actually it was nothing but misery. Having to be … constantly paranoid about your own safety … and nothing but torture and hell.’ (Judith, Asian, female, 25+)

Similarly, ex-gang member Nick, after years of running about with a group involved in serious interpersonal violence, quit shortly after witnessing his friend’s arrest for suspicion of causing grievous bodily harm to another person. Nick’s decision to extract himself from the group brought about its demise.

‘The change came when one of my friends was arrested for stabbing someone. I thought it was time to turn my life around. I started to see things on a different level. Everyone went their separate ways.’ (Nick, Asian, male, 25+)

4.7.3 Growing up and out

Four respondents described gang life or ‘being on road’ as losing its significance as they grew up. They talked about being ‘bored’ and ‘disillusioned’ with life ‘on road’ and the realisation that being ‘on road’ was counterproductive.

‘A lot of people that are involved in this situation ... they all want out, they all don’t wanna be involved in it, they all wanna have a nice family, kids, woman working nine till five, they wanna have that, but erm, they ain’t gonna say it to you. [They will say] “What am I working nine till five for £250?” Everyone wants a normal lifestyle, they wanna – they don’t wanna look over their back.’ (Marvin)

A number of factors can be identified as being correlated with this growing out process. What brought these factors together was an opportunity to change. For Anthony, it was the
prospect of a new job; for Christopher finding a girlfriend was instrumental to his leaving his group. Here he notes her distracting influence on him and his behaviour:

‘Gettin’ myself a bird an’ jist bein’ wi’ ‘er, it’s jist stopped me thinkin’ aboot th’ streets.’
(Christopher)

Similarly, at 16/17 when Scott had ‘had enough’ he was doing well at college and took the opportunity to concentrate on his academic future rather than being in a gang or ‘on road’.

Like Christopher, Kenneth and Alexander thought, after a few years of fighting and drug dealing, ‘What's the point?’ and went to find a job.

‘Drug dealing and fighting are a young person’s game. The longer you are on road the less respect you are given unless you are ‘seriously flossing’. ... [There is a] realisation that you’re getting too old for the game.’ (Alexander)

One of the motivations for being involved ‘on road’ was the promise of making money, but as the interviews have demonstrated this could come at a high price. It was the stress of gang activity and the lack of long-term benefits that caused this street-based drug dealer to quit:

‘Nice life, getting away on holidays. Whatever! Nice cars, nice clothes. Girls come with it. Raving, going on. Everything, really. But there comes a time when you just say “It’s got to stop sooner or later”. The older you get, you can't continue to do it.’
(George).

4.7.4 Becoming a parent

Part of the growing up process for some respondents involved becoming a parent and assuming responsibility for their own children. Becoming a father, wanting to be instrumental in their children’s life and not having them grow up with a feckless, absent or dead father was a pivotal theme in the lives of both Jorell and Fraser who, given the chance to put things right for their children, decided to leave their previous lives behind.

‘I pure techt [mean], Ah jist want tae be a braw da an’ mah dochter [I just want to be a decent dad to my daughter] an’ at. Ah don’t want tae expose ’er tae th’ mince [stuff] I’ve seen gonnae oan.’
(Fraser)

‘Well, for me personally it’s like, I’ve got, I had kids from when I was young so my kids now they’ve got bigger and like I’m with them most of the time, I couldn’t take the risk of like either going back to jail or ending up dead because I just wanted them to see me.’
(Jorell)

20 ‘Flossing’ is similar to the term ‘blinging’ and it means that an individual is able to demonstrate to others that they are materially successful.
4.7.5 What influence does the wider family have?

One important finding was that, on the whole, it was the respondent’s perception that parents had little power to stop young people from being involved in street-based groups. Similarly, according to the majority of respondents, despite being warned off, pleaded with, chastised, over-supervised and coerced by parents, parental techniques of persuasion had little influence over their decisions to leave. Quitting was a decision that the gang-involved individual said they had to make for themselves.

Despite the bleak outlook, some parents were influential in attempting to steer their children away from trouble and gang life. Callum explains how his mother, aware of the trouble he was in and knowing her son’s limitations, took steps to help him out.

‘I hink mah ma planned it [the move to another area] Ah hink mah ma planned it sae, coz it was far awa’ frae [the gang area] by bus. Ah jist cooldn’t be bothered goin’ doon thair everyday; tae far.’ (Callum, white, male, 14–17)

As a strategy, moving far away from area was successful in so far as it stopped him hanging about with his gang friends. The reason Callum gave for why it worked was that he could not be bothered to travel the long distance back to his old stomping ground.

Other removal strategies were less successful in extracting youngsters from the road and in some instances exacerbated an already tense and stressful situation. As a young person ‘on the road’ Clifton was engaged in serious offending and he had been imprisoned on more than one occasion. He describes how his mother, unable to cope with his behaviour and struggling with three other children, put him into care in order to straighten him out. However, her decision had unintended, negative consequences for Clifton:

‘[She] put me in there for a year … but the thing is it was a mistake. [There was] criminals all over the place! I’ve come out of there 10 times worse than when I went in.’ (Clifton)

Although some young people had ‘assistance’ from their family members the majority noted that it had to be their decision to leave; they had to draw on their own personal reserves to get themselves out of the gang situation or off the road. Some, however, acknowledged that leaving could not be done by them alone. Having people to listen to their struggles and experiences was deemed crucial to the process of leaving and they suggested that, whilst it seemed as though they were not listening to the advice and lamentations of the people around them, they did, when the right time came, take into account the protestations and assistance of credible family member(s).

‘I dunno, Ah jist needed somebody tae listen tae us. Tae see whit I’ve got tae say an’ fin’ a solution’. (Suzie)

4.8 Perceptions of the role of the family in facilitating gang membership

One of the main objectives of this research was to determine what role the family has to play in gang formation. Respondents were asked whether anything in their family history or upbringing had caused their gang membership. There was reluctance amongst
respondents to cite something within the family as triggering their involvement in gangs. Few respondents made direct links between their childhood and being in gangs, ‘on road’ or in a youth team. Only six respondents, principally those who had been exposed to extreme levels of domestic violence, neglect and or abuse, attributed their gang involvement or being ‘on road’ to their upbringing.

‘If my family weren’t all over the place then things might have been different for me.’ (Jennifer)

‘Yes, if my mum didn’t kick me out all the time.’ (Gayle)

‘Yes, definitely, Ah wuds say ’at fowk woods be a cair [core] issue.’ (William)

This finding chimes with other research that argues that abused children are susceptible to joining gangs (Campbell, 1984; Moore, 1991; Vigil, 1996). Other interviewees who had experienced parental abuse recognised the part their parents played in pushing them onto the road but felt there were also external factors involved.

Two such respondents took account of the surrounding environment and how this impacted on their parents’ ability to look after them. For example, Kai, an ex-member of several large crews across east and north London, said that the family is just one of a number of important factors that push young people, including him, onto the road and into gangs. As a child he was raised in a ‘broken home’ and experienced repetitive bouts of violence from his mother.

At the time of interview, Kai acknowledged the dysfunction within his family and the part it played in facilitating his ‘road life’ but he also pointed to his mother’s experience of being a single parent and the toll this had taken on her. He strongly argued that the severe beatings he experienced at the hands of his ‘vicious’ mother were a demonstration of her own pain, fear and frustration in her social situation. For him, these beatings were an expression of his mother’s shame at being unable to provide adequately for her children.21

The thoughts of Kai were echoed by Bradley. He acknowledged the domestic violence and the irreparable damage it did to him and his family but:

‘It’s not just about your family, your friends are very important. It’s more to do with the situation your parents put you in and where you are growing up; like in the ghetto.’ (Bradley)

He also noted that out of the four children in the family he was the only one to ‘run about on road’.

The majority of people who did not see their families as responsible for their gang involvement focused on the influence of wider social variables, drawing a clear distinction between social-economic conditions, individual will and the role played by the family.

‘I chose to go on the street. My mum and dad always tried to get me off the streets. She would come to parties, drag me out, I would be standing on the block, my man

21 The interview with Kai was not recorded so a verbatim quotation was not possible to insert.
then would say “Your mum! Your mum!” I would run. She tried her best. I didn’t want to – I just wanted to be on road. Families can only do so much … feels outside is a better place.’ (George)

For these respondents it was freedom and the independence brought by being out ‘on road’, the social camaraderie, excitement and, importantly, the prospect of making money that overrode the influence of the family. Against these factors, parental controls and advice were limited (at best) and largely ineffective for young people, primarily young men who wanted to grow up and impress their friends or felt they had no foreseeable way of earning a living by legitimate means.

4.9 Conclusions

- This section focused on the experiences of 53 gang-involved young men and women and the extent to which the family was a key influencing factor in facilitating their gang membership, criminality and exit.

- The majority of gang-involved respondents were raised in single-parent households headed by women. However, 17 young people grew up in households with both parents present. This finding concurs with the literature that claims gang members come from all family types.

- In a number of instances, factors associated with the family, such as poor familial relationships, parental alcohol and substances abuse, domestic violence, having gang-involved relatives and fatherlessness were seen as contributing to young people’s gang involvement. However, these were far from being the only factors. Other influences cited included growing up in an environment young people experienced as ‘hostile’, negative experiences of (and frequently exclusion from) school, the pull of a peer subculture that emphasised the attractions of earning easy money, and the search for identity and independence.

- There was little evidence in the testimonies of the young people interviewed of collusion from parents or carers, or of family members deriving benefits other than perhaps a sense of safety, which could not be guaranteed. There was also a strong sense among many young people of leading a ‘double life’, with one identity at home and another on the streets.

- Parents were seen as having little influence on young people’s decision to leave gangs; factors outside of the family, for example victimisation, were cited as being more significant. However, young people acknowledged the role of supportive family members in assisting their gang exit.
5. FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH FAMILIES OF GANG MEMBERS OR INDIVIDUALS ‘ON ROAD’

This section reviews the data gathered from family members of gang members. The material analysed consists of semi-structured interview and focus group transcripts of gang-involved families. There were 17 separate transcripts which included interviews with 21 family members. Respondents comprised five siblings, three aunts or uncles and 13 parents or step-parents.

The family members were located within the three designated sites of research in London, the West Midlands and Scotland. All lived in the poorer wards within their boroughs. All but two of the family members living in England were African Caribbean or mixed race. This is a key demographic for the research as black and mixed race people are over-represented in both the literature on the causes of gang violence (Gunter, 2008; Hallsworth and Young, 2011) and in available statistics on offending behaviour such as gun crime, allegedly linked to gang participation (Hales and Silverstone, 2005). Finally, it is noteworthy that African Caribbean families are a hard-to-reach group and, outside London, little qualitative research has been carried out into their experiences and perceptions of the ‘gang problem’.

In contrast, the respondents interviewed in Scotland were from white families with the exception of one family of mixed race Caribbean descent. Although this group has been the subject of recent research, this research has concentrated on young women’s involvement in gangs, with little academic work on other aspects of this group’s experience (Batchelor, 2011).

It should be noted that, while the research was conducted with three different target populations, gang members, families of gang members and practitioners, and the findings from each are presented as discrete sections, in practice there is a degree of overlap in the experiences recorded. Several interviewees were not only family members of those involved in gangs but had been in gangs themselves, whilst others were mothers of gang members but had also been, or were currently, practitioners. This overlap reflects the fact that both gangs and projects addressed to reducing the impact of gangs coexist in similar social spaces (Hallsworth and Duffy, 2011). A consequence is that several interviewees had a very detailed knowledge of their local gang problem from more than one perspective.

The semi-structured interview schedule used for both the interviews and the focus groups mirrored the topics addressed directly within the interviews with young people and the practitioner interviews to ensure complementary data was collected. Like gang-involved respondents and practitioners, family members were asked to consider the role that the family plays in relation to facilitating gang membership, facilitating gang criminality and enabling an exit from the gang.

Clearly, this is a small sample of family members, comprising families who have experienced brief interludes of gang membership and families whose offspring have been involved in serious criminality and gang violence. As such, the research provides a qualitative basis to explore relationships and perceptions within families and particular contexts within which gang membership and experience are shaped and lived.
‘I think it is the area that I live in and peer pressure, he just wants to be included and not be seen as a nerd.’ (Sister of gang member)

The analysis of the interviews reveals several key themes. First, as the quotation above states, respondents (rightly or wrongly) perceived their children’s/siblings’ gang membership, ensuing criminality and/or desistance as outside the family’s control. In contrast to the views of the respondents in the earlier section, internal family problems identified within other research such as alcohol and substance abuse in the family (Artz, 1998; Fleisher, 2000) and physical and sexual violence within the home (Campbell, 1984; Moore, 1991) were not expressed by the majority as concerns.

Instead, families mentioned non-family socialisation such as peer pressure, bereavements, physical or mental impairments, violent victimisation and criminal opportunities in the area as critical factors for their relatives’ involvement ‘on road’ or in gangs. Often these factors were combined, so in an account of why a son or brother had become involved in criminality, the lack of leisure opportunities, victimisation and family breakup were all highlighted by respondents as contributing factors.

Respondents also identified a motivation in breaking away from the constraints of childhood and reaching out to forge social interconnections beyond the family:

‘Because then you may reach fourteen, thirteen or fifteen, you just feel I’m free. You just want to go out now, and you just want to enjoy, you just want to mingle with friends, whatever they’re into, you’re just gonna get into it.’ (Brother of gang member and ex-gang member)

However, these developments could represent a trying time for mothers, as encapsulated in the quotation below. Mothers struggled both physically and emotionally to set boundaries for their children (especially adolescent male children), particularly in the absence of a father figure:

‘We had a bit of an argument the night I heard he got slashed, he got suspended that day from school. He went—‘I take it I’m grounded the night’, I went—“Yes”. Oh my god all hell broke loose in this house, he set about his room, wrecked his Xbox.’ (Mother of a gang member)

Secondly, in addition to gang members, all the families also contained individuals who were in employment and were not currently involved in criminality. There are several examples of families with parents and siblings in employment where only one child/sibling was involved in serious criminality.

Although the majority of families suffered from multiple issues (such as bereavements and post-traumatic stress disorder), in only one case could the family be characterised as significantly criminal. In this instance both parents were heroin addicts, one of the three siblings was in prison and a second sibling was being sanctioned by the criminal justice system. A more typical example would be a family where the mother worked intermittently, a brother might drift in and out of less serious criminality and a sister might be studying or working.
Thirdly, there is a generational gap. The older generation, represented by mothers in particular, hark back to a time where parents had more control over their children and could use physical chastisement, such as smacking and beatings, more freely.

For the younger generation, in contrast, there seems to be a process of normalisation taking place in regard to participation in ‘road culture’ or ‘gang life’. Normalisation is a concept taken up and developed by pioneering British academics to describe the burgeoning recreational drug scene in the late 1990s (Parker et al, 1998). In this context it was deployed to show how drug-taking had moved from the margins towards the centre of youth culture ‘where it joins many other accommodated “deviant” activities, such as excessive drinking, casual sexual encounters and daily cigarette smoking’ (Parker et al, 1998:152).

Parker et al argued that normalisation does not have to be concerned with ‘absolutes’ but just the extent to which drug use is regarded as usual or commonplace amongst both users and non-users. In the context of the present study it seems that for these family members, a young person being ‘on road’ or ‘exploring street life’, both of which could include membership of a gang, is an accepted deviant activity in the areas in which these respondents live. The majority of young men and women do not participate in gangs but those who don’t nevertheless acknowledge and accept others who do without making moral judgments or proposing significant alternatives to what is taking place. Instead, those who are involved and those who are not, and others who desist having had some brief involvement, acknowledge that socially there is a shared legitimate aspiration for symbolic material goods and this is one possible, albeit potentially risky, way of attaining those goods. This mirrors attitudes to drug taking and low-level drug dealing found in other studies (Parker et al, 1998; Measham, 2004; Sanders, 2005).

This attitude, however, was not found in the Scottish sample, where the group criminality has some significantly different aspects. Here territoriality was more significant, although a number of respondents said that even where group territoriality was well established the younger people were uncomfortable with the violence that accompanied it. As active gang members expressed in the earlier section, in Scotland the group offending in which respondents were involved revolved around drinking, fighting and knife crime, and less around generating income from the criminal economy. Only one respondent mentioned the drug business, and the criminality articulated seemed to be more violent and ultimately self-destructive than revenue generating.

The final theme is the importance of gender. This has two dimensions: first, if there is any acknowledgement that the family dynamic has some influence in family involvement with ‘gangs’, the culprit is the lack of an effective father figure.

‘My dad is there when he wants to be. He hasn’t really supported my mum. We have seen her struggle. If my dad was there, then maybe he would have chosen a different path, he would have had support.’ (Sister of gang member)

These sentiments were also voiced by several mothers who pointed to problems caused by the absence of the child’s father. This was expressed by several mothers who described adolescent sons smashing up their homes, both in England and Scotland.
‘Cos he put my window in one time, and I did phone the police, cos that time I didn’t know what to do and I thought I’m going to have to phone them for housing to fix this.’ (Mother of gang member)

‘Ah he was punching holes in his own doors and everything. Really bad. Getting dead, dead angry he was on curfew.’ (Mother of gang member)

Although road life is normalised throughout the sample, from the sample of families here it was only the young men who entered gang life. Despite some counter-evidence, the finding that gang membership in the UK is overwhelmingly still a male preserve is consistent with current research (Young, 2009, 2011). Indeed, there were a number of examples of older sisters playing very supportive roles in tackling their brother’s violence and criminality.

5.1 Family characteristics

5.1.1 Socio-economic background

The families in the sample all lived in socially deprived areas, often in the most disadvantaged wards of their respective boroughs. The family members’ lack of education and employment, whilst not uniform, is consistent with that found in other research (Hagedorn, 1998; Vigil, 1996; Hallsworth and Young, 2010). However, it is also worth noting that several respondents were well educated and had been, or were currently in, employment. For example, the sample includes Family A, with four children and a mother not working, and Family B, with both parents present and working and three out of the four siblings currently employed. Also in the Scottish sample, more than in the English sample, several gang members were employed or entering employment. Initially this was in conjunction with their offending behaviour, but ultimately employment displaced this behaviour. It is worth noting that unemployment for young (16–24) black men is at record levels of 55%, twice their white counterparts, and this is reflected in a qualitative difference within the transcripts (Ball et al, 2012). In Scotland, several mothers, sisters and aunts spoke of their criminal relatives’ aspirations within the work world as achievable if they contained their criminal behaviour. This narrative is entirely lacking within the interviews of black/mixed race families in England.

5.1.2 Family structure and discipline

‘So when he went to look for his father he wasn’t very impressed with what he found.’ (Mother of gang member)

‘Our father left when he was about two or three, I can’t remember, never seen him again ... I don’t even know where he is.’ (Sister of same gang member)

Most of those interviewed came from families above average in size. In the UK the average family includes 1.9 children, whereas the majority of those interviewed were in families with three to five children. It is also worth noting that several parents of gang members had their children relatively early, between the ages of 18 and 21 compared with the national average, which was around 28 at the time (Bates, 2011). However, neither family size nor
the parents’ age when the children were born was acknowledged as important by respondents.

Almost all the families were headed by single parents and of the remainder only two couples had stayed together in reconstituted nuclear families. There were two families in which the parents had been together when a child had joined a gang and in one of these cases the young man had eventually desisted from offending. In this instance, the presence of both parents did seem to make a difference to the family’s ability to cope with the children’s offending.

In this sample, however, (with two exceptions) siblings who had experienced the lack of a father had very different trajectories (for example in Family A, one sibling was a professional while the other was incarcerated for drug dealing), suggesting that the lack of a father does not in itself necessarily have a determinantal effect on the propensity to engage in criminal behaviour. The lack of a father was nevertheless highlighted as having a significant impact on family members’ criminal and gang involvement, both in relation to the respondents’ own families and in relation to other families within the community.

‘I brought up the kids up myself, but they do need a father … he feels he has to handle his business as his dad doesn’t do anything for him, taking into account that all our baby fathers are absent out of our lives.’ (Mother of gang member)

The lack of a father figure was identified as a problem by several women who noted that they lost control of their teenage boys as they reached adolescence and there was a general consensus that often the families found it difficult to control or discipline their children or place appropriate boundaries on their behaviour once they reached the age of 13 and beyond. These interviews support previous research in this area (Thornberry, 1998; Loeber and Farrington, 1998) and the parents’ views also echo sentiments expressed by gang members in the previous section, that adolescence is a critical time for parenting.

‘After a while my mum start to realise that he was getting into trouble why he wasn’t coming home, but he was very hard to keep track of, it got a point where my mum had to let him do what he had to do.’ (Sister of gang member)

‘We lost – your son has taken control of your household.’ (Mother of a gang member)

‘You know, going out and taking a lot of drugs and drinking, he was very rebellious and there was a lot of arguments in the house, and he would be punching doors and … then he would storm off for days on end.’ (Sister of gang member)

Within the English sample, the problems of lack of control, discipline and respect for siblings and parents were compounded by what parents saw as their lack of power to address the situation. Respondents in England, both parents and siblings, harked back to their experience in either the Caribbean or parts of Africa where parenting could legally include physical chastisement beyond smacking. It is also likely that harsh physical punishments were deployed by some parents and this resonates with the experience of the ten young people in the earlier section who were emotionally scarred by these parenting tactics. Despite research evidence on the negative impact of physical disciplining of children and the tragedies which can ensue (Kandel, 1992; Gershoff, 2002; Shute, 2008) the following comments were typical:
‘We was brought up and not beaten but not smashed up or anything but you would get a good slap for stepping out of line! In this country the parent is powerless.’
(Sister of gang member)

5.2 Family facilitation of gang criminality

‘One of my cousins came back one day and got beat up and he obviously went and protected his cousins and that caused a big thing in the family.’ (Sister of a gang member)

The interviews reveal a diverse group of experiences in relation to the role of the family facilitating gang criminality. It is important to recognise that within families, siblings' experiences and life trajectories can be very different. What emerges from the interviews is gang involvement and criminality by one sibling contrasting with professional success by other siblings. For example, within a family based in Wolverhampton one brother went into gang life and was soon arrested whilst his younger brother eschewed all criminal activity and is now a university-educated professional.

In Scotland, one sibling was involved in local gangs and reciprocal violence whilst his sister studied for university and tried hard to assist him to leave his criminal lifestyle. This is also often a gendered process and, as the literature on girl gangs attests, female involvement in gangs is rare in the UK. All the families here are reflecting exclusively on male involvement in the gang, and in both Scotland and England there were several families where the sisters were legitimately employed or studying at university whilst their brothers were 'on road' (Young, 2011)

The literature on gangs also argues that although gang membership may afford a certain degree of safety (while generating 'perks' for families of gang members), gang members are significantly more likely to be victimised than non-gang-involved individuals (Thornberry, 1998) and their families are more likely to experience threats and violent victimisation (Fagan, 1999). As in the previous section, much of the violence experienced by family members was internecine, due to criminal disputes or disputes over territory. However, and in contrast to the previous section, there was no evidence of families of gang members being targeted in revenge attacks. Instead, the violence was confined to friends and associates of the gang member.

On the other hand, family involvement in gangs and criminality could provide instigation for further incidents and, although the families did not speak about the influence of the family in their child’s decision to enter the gang, it is noticeable that several of the families experienced more than one sibling becoming involved in gang life. These respondents did not acknowledge that family dynamics played any part in this process but instead blamed young people’s involvement on the pervasiveness of road culture and the economic disadvantage in the area, both of which made it hard for young men not to be ostracised unless they participated in petty criminality. Given the evidence from the other sections, it is possible that some family members were being defensive and did not want to admit complicity in their family’s offending.
There is some suggestion here of the tacit acceptance of criminality although, given the legal difficulties of admitting to enjoying the proceeds of crime in a taped interview, it is unsurprising that not too much was admitted. However, it is likely that the majority (if not all) of family members were aware of their offspring’s criminal activity. Given the evidence elsewhere in the report, it is worth noting that several family members were looking back with hindsight and it is possible that at the time of their offspring’s offending they may not have been cognisant of it. The respondents spoke about seeing their children involved in violent incidents, or of finding drugs or suspiciously expensive items in their bedrooms. Their tacit acceptance of this behaviour is suggested by the absence of any consequential action (they do not mention talking to social services or speaking to the police). It is also clear that several family members enjoyed the privileges of criminal lifestyle:

‘He brought me a very nice gift. He brought me an iPad recently, I was thinking, he doesn’t work so where does he get this money from? I’m working and I can’t afford it, so where does he get it from? I chose not ask. I can’t be bothered with argument. Just take it and be quiet. I don’t want no argument.’ (Sister of gang member)

In Scotland the criminality seemed to revolve around territorial violence and enjoying intoxicated leisure. This does not bring any financial benefits to families and it is unsurprising that the families were less likely to receive financial or material benefits and were more condemning of their relatives’ behaviour. Here, there were examples of parents reporting their sons’ violent activities to the police. On balance, in England but not in Scotland, it does seem that families associated with gang members do benefit from their criminal activity. However, as research in the UK and the USA demonstrates, the actual financial benefit from this type of low-level criminality is relatively limited (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009; Levitt and Dubner, 2005).

5.2.1 The relationship between gang members and their family members

‘It is difficult for a lot of us mothers. We are just waiting for the phone call. Every weekend that comes we know or we expect to hear a phone call that somebody has been stabbed, somebody had been beaten up or somebody is dead.’ (Mother of a gang member)

‘I remember a time when one of his friends got badly beaten up … and this is what caused a rift between me and him because the guys did it to him I knew them …. this got between our relationship because of the people who beat up his friend, I knew and they were ok with me.’ (Sister of gang member)

The overriding experience of gang involvement for family members was stress and worry. Mothers in particular worried about the safety of their children and worried for the future of young men in their communities more generally. In Scotland, a mother commented ruefully that whilst her daughter joined the army and served in Iraq, her son became ensnared in the local criminal culture and was the one she worried about at night. The quotations above are typical, with several respondents stating that criminal activity had had a detrimental effect on relationships between siblings and parents. This is hardly surprising since being an active gang member exposes the participant to violence and also the risk of arrest. Family members had experienced both gang-involved relations being arrested in their homes and gang members coming home after being physically attacked and neither were pleasant.
Although some members knew that relatives who were criminally active could offer them some protection and could act to ‘squash’ or dissipate disagreements, this protection was not valued highly.

Although Bourgois (1995) and Miller (2001) identified prolific family violence, in particular sexual violence, experienced by gang members, incidences of domestic violence did not feature in any of these interviews. Overall, from the interviews here the overwhelming feeling was that gang involvement increased the stress in the family and also increased the distance between the family member who was involved in gangs and their non-gang-involved family members. This stress was felt particularly keenly by mothers, who were already struggling with many of the social and economic problems which confronted their children. Mothers spoke movingly of seeing their children struggle with the impact of mental and physical disabilities, parental intoxication, bereavement and separation. Clearly, these events impacted on them too and some acknowledged that they were or had been clinically depressed. At least two mothers spoke about the professional stigma attached to their children’s involvement with gangs. This was especially acute for them as they worked with, or alongside, the police and criminal justice agencies. Having children ensnared in local criminal cultures added another level of disruption, stress, anxiety and even ill-health, to what were often already beleaguered lives.

‘I have seen a big change in him ... he talks to me more about it. Like I know he drinks and he knows that I know he drinks but he’ll not drink in front of me.’ (Mother of a gang member)

Despite the stresses families experienced during their children’s involvement with gang life, relationships were sustained. Although several families had given ultimatums to relatives regarding their living arrangements and insisted that if their disruptive behaviour continued they would have to leave home, ultimately all the families were still in contact with each other and most still shared a home. Therefore, during and especially after family members desisted from crime, family members were there to support them. Mothers and siblings reported that relationships improved as gang life dissipated.

‘Erm but he’s still ... I think it ... we’ve got a good relationship now, you know and ... he definitely will come and speak to us about anything. And he’ll come and speak to me about wee things now and he knows that he can have that conversation with you, but has no other expectations of you than to be listening and give him my opinion.’ (Sister of gang member)

5.3 Coping strategies

‘The only thing that I can do personally for him is to take him out of the area.’ (Mother of gang member)

The key coping strategy that emerged most strongly from these interviews was moving or sending the relative away from the area. Family members recognised the lack of economic opportunities in their local area and were aware of the intensity of contact and conflict generated by feelings of territoriality and criminal involvement, and so developed a sense that their relatives were out of control.
‘If I had resources – I’d leave the country, to be honest, take my family and move out of the country. Cos I don’t see it getting any better.’ (Mother of gang member)

Family members encouraged their relatives involved in gang violence to move away to live with relatives such as grandparents or siblings in areas where the gang member did not know, or was not known by, those of a similar age. For those families who did not have the resources to do this, the desire to move from the area was strongly expressed:

‘There is no one to help them, there is no one. The government is not really helping them.’ (Sister of gang member)

There was a significant divide between the respondents in relation to their access to formal services. Despite the plethora of new government and third-sector initiatives, those in England (Home Office, 2011) did not access relevant services, whilst those in Scotland had accessed a wide range of services, from charitable organisations such as Gingerbread to CAMHS, social work support, counselling and psychologists. It is not clear from the interviews if this difference is to do with the ethnic composition of the sample with those from minority communities feeling excluded from formal services (Bhui, 2002) or whether this is simply a matter of geography and/or the vagaries of a small sample.

The experience of using local services where it occurred was mixed. However, most families spoke about the positive impact social workers and caring professionals made on their lives, even if they acknowledged that they were reluctant to engage or found it hard to get access. The intervention of local services combined with the provision of employment or apprenticeships was the route most often accessed out of the current quagmire. The respondents were united in their less than positive experiences of criminal justice practitioners, most glaringly the police service.

‘I phoned the police and then the police came and, er, nothing ever happened, I never heard anything happened, and I think the police was called about 20 odd times, the wardens were called about the same as well.’ (Mother of victim of gang violence)

Respondents commonly voiced two negative types of experience: first, a despondency and dismay that when their relations had been attacked, the police failed to protect them and/or failed successfully to prosecute those responsible for inflicting the serious violence (in all the cases mentioned here the prosecutions failed at the evidential stage). Secondly, they complained that police officers had been unprofessional or corrupt in their encounters with them:

‘Jewellery went missing from the house and items went missing from the house. You know I have lived in the black community for many years, when I was a kid I used to go to the blues, the police used to go round the back, smoking the draw and eating the food.’ (Mother of gang member)

Finally, the majority of respondents were disparaging of the lack of facilities for local young men. The absence of football clubs or playing fields was mentioned as significant by some Scottish respondents. Parents felt the lack of outdoor spaces deprived their children of the opportunity to play with their peers in a competitive but non-violent way.
‘There is nothing to do … no football club, park. The only community centre they pulled it down.’ (Mother of gang member)

Nevertheless there were examples in Scotland of families successfully coping and helping their male relatives desist from criminality. In none of these cases could the successful desistance from criminality be reduced to one factor as all of the families deployed a number of strategies, ranging from familial informal help or reasserting boundaries, to reaching out to criminal justice or social work interventions.

For example, in Family A, the mother moved herself and her son out of the area and instigated contact with a local charity as well as paying for him to enrol on a practical course that would lead to employment. Mothers also sought help from their extended family networks, for example sisters or daughters or grandmothers. For example, in Family B, the mother initially sent her son to live with his grandmother, then accessed a local charity for support and finally sent her son to live in England with his sister. This, combined with drug rehabilitation, broke the lure of his local gang affiliation. These informal networks seem to be invaluable, except where more of the family were criminally involved as the child then just moved into another difficult situation. The important caveat in all these cases is that the move away from criminality was relatively recent, with a risk that it may not be sustained.

5.4 Conclusions

- The picture that emerges from interviews with family members is one of families experiencing multiple difficulties (such as economic deprivation, family separation, bereavements and violence), for whom having a child join a gang is an added source of stress and worry.

- Another common theme is the parents’ feeling of powerlessness, with a sense that young people are caught up in a pervasive culture, that (especially where fathers are absent) family members are out of control, that parents lack the means to impose discipline and (in England in particular) a sense among young people that gang involvement is becoming normalised – seen as one of a number of rational responses by young people seeking access to the good things in life.

- There are differences between the black and minority ethnic families interviewed in England and the white families interviewed in Scotland. In England there seems to be normalisation of ‘on road’ life within the narratives of some young people and a lack of viable alternatives to gang life, such as employment. As a whole these narratives are certainly different from those of the white respondents and possibly bleaker, which is consistent with literature on BME disadvantage (Home Office, 2011).

- Despite this, there are significant differences within families: a given family with a criminal son can include both law-abiding and enterprising siblings and mother, and although a minority of families may experience some of the privileges of a criminal lifestyle, as demonstrated in the previous section, as a whole families are disapproving of their relatives’ involvement in crime.
As has been explored in earlier sections, leaving a gang or leaving the violence associated with criminality is not easy, not because exit rituals constitute a disincentive nor because gang membership is expected for life but because of the poverty of viable alternatives. In relation to successfully leaving a gang the most often voiced coping strategy was to leave the area, a move often facilitated through informal (extended) familial networks, although for some this was impossible. Families that succeeded in helping male relatives leave gangs tended to deploy a mix of strategies, combining informal family help with agency support and interventions.
6. PRACTITIONER FINDINGS

The findings below are based on semi-structured interviews with 17 practitioners and operational managers overseeing practitioners working with young people ‘on road’ or involved in group-related offending. The agencies are listed within Appendix A and a table of interviewees is provided in Section 2 under Strand three: Practitioner interviews. There were slightly more men than women in the practitioner sample.

Due to the small number of practitioners interviewed within each area, general perceptions and themes regarding family characteristics will be discussed collectively. The final section will discuss the types of interventions available and the rationale behind the provision. Practitioners’ comments on their personal evaluation of the effectiveness of this support will also be addressed.

All the practitioners interviewed were highly qualified and experienced. It was striking that many had higher degrees at Masters level and above. They also had a wide range of varied and relevant professional qualifications. These included teaching, residential care experience, working with special needs, law, professional music performance and race relations. This undoubtedly enriched and broadened their direct experience of working within the criminal justice system or other agencies engaged with young people. All of the practitioners also had a number of years’ experience which they utilised within their role. Their level of commitment and obvious passion for their work and for helping the young people, and their families, came across in all the interviews conducted, whatever the role being undertaken.

6.1 The role of the family in facilitating gang membership

When looking at the role of the family in facilitating gang membership, practitioners had a variety of experiences regarding the composition and culture of the families they had worked with in their agencies. Some of these findings correspond with the experiences of the gang members interviewed for the study, while others support research that has been previously undertaken into the family characteristics of gang members (Hoffmann, 2006).

6.1.1 Family characteristics

The families with whom practitioners had worked were varied in their structure. The vast majority of the practitioners interviewed stated that the gang members they had worked with often came from larger families with a large number of siblings. This correlates with other research into children who have the propensity to engage in delinquent behaviour (Loeber and Farrington, 1998; Rutter et al, 1998; Lyon et al, 2000).

‘I’d say it differs, a number we’ve been to see are very large families, and it tends to be, and I’m generalising here, but a lot of the young people I’ve met are the eldest son, and they’ve got three, four, five siblings.’ (Police manager, male)

‘… quite large families. Large families … living – as I say my perception would be living in deprived areas.’ (Local council manager, female)
Some interviewees in London and the West Midlands identified the families they worked with as varied in composition but predominantly Caribbean.

‘A general family, it’s the – mum and dad working hard, you get similar scenarios where it may be single parent families, but that’s not always the case. It’s actually a lot of – unfortunately it’s definitely a black, Caribbean issue, on the whole, although there is some gangs that are made up of whites … unfortunately it’s a stereotype, but it’s a true one, is that it’s a black Caribbean issue, they tend to be both parents working or single-parent families, other siblings in the household, and it’s just a case of the children are out doing stuff in the street in their local environment where this is an issue.’ (Probation officer, male)

Other practitioners reinforced the fact that single-parent families and children whose parents had separated were over-represented among those attracted to gang membership. This characteristic was seen as influencing the amount of active supervision children received from their parent/parents and also the material resources available for the family (see later for more discussion of these matters).

‘A lot of it is single-parent families. They haven’t really got that male … role model, they haven’t got that male in the family, and so the mum’s gotta do two roles and she might, you know, work full time and not always have the time with the children, I don’t always say it’s a bit of a cliché “Oh it’s single-parent families”, coz a lot of the time it’s not – it’s not their fault that they’re a single-parent family … most of it is the home life I think that does cause it.’ (Local council practitioner, female)

‘A similar characteristic like the father’s not on the scene in any consistent way, and hasn’t been, so generally from my experience they have been single mothers raising children on – mainly on estates. That’s just been the kind of general. The other large minority group represented were those families who had employed parents, including a parent or parents in good or professional work.’ (Probation officer, female)

‘Some of them are in what would be considered quite good jobs. Maybe nursing, I’ve had a social worker, teacher, you know? They fit the whole range … yeah some of the mothers are not going to be working, but some of them that’s due to being homemakers, but they – you know, they don’t fit into a category in terms of my own experience of them, they have had, you know, like what would be considered quite good jobs. I would have to say it’s generally been those mothers who I’ve had more contact with, because they’re ringing up, wanting to know, so if I’ve interviewed the son at pre-sentence report stage or they’re just coming onto the Order.’ (Probation officer, female)

It is possible that these parents are most likely to seek help and therefore receive a disproportionate amount of attention from these agencies (see Section 6.5).

6.1.2 Supervision and control

There was general consensus that often the families found it difficult to control or discipline their children or place appropriate boundaries on their behaviour once they reached the age of ten and beyond. This supports previous research in this area (Thornberry, 1998; Loeber
and Farrington, 1998). Many of the practitioners interviewed voiced concerns about the inability of parents to communicate and negotiate with their children.

‘I think the parents are quite concerned. They’re concerned, they don’t quite have it down as to what levels of supervision they should be giving, so they have difficulty with implementing boundaries, setting boundaries and implementing them … as their youngsters get older, it’s harder for them to think about sanctions or consequences for undesired behaviour, where, you know, there’s no real pattern. So if you don’t sort of have that pattern from when they’re very little of benevolent consequences … people sort of struggle with some of those skills and techniques, even more so as the child gets older.’ (Local council manager, female)

The other difficulty that practitioners noted within families with gang membership issues was that parents were often unaware of their children’s activities outside the home (Aldridge et al, 2009). This could be due to both social or community isolation of the parent(s) and general lack of awareness of the lived reality of their children outside the home.

‘I think for a lot of the families is this not really being aware of what is going on outside of the context of the family, and aware of what their young children might – or young people might be getting up to. I think there’s a lack of connectedness between the parents and the children as a result.’ (Local council practitioner 2, female)

This is particularly relevant where parents were either both working full-time or within single-parent households where the parent was working full-time or held down a number of part-time jobs.

‘There’s a lot of major problems in there, and it’s like the families – we find that some of the parents – it’s not their fault, but they work full-time so there’s little supervision at home, these kids don’t always rush back from school, they’re causing a lot of problems after school.’ (Local council practitioner, female)

It was identified that key peak time for difficulties in terms of setting boundaries was the period just after school finished (3.30 pm) and before the parent arrived home after work, usually after 6 pm.

‘The mother’s working, yeah, and the child leaves the school at three-thirty. Now it doesn’t take a brain surgeon to work out that beautiful gap between three-thirty and six o’clock, seven o’clock, you know what I mean? And the mothers or family members, whoever look after the child, will give them a mobile and so they can say “At least I know where you are.” Well you don’t know where you are, do you? You don’t know where your kid is if you’ve got a mobile phone. As long as they can speak to – “Where are you? Are you at home?” “Yeah. I’m going home, I’m just five minutes away,” or whatever, and they can do whatever they wanna do within that golden period … that’s the most troublesome period for school kids in particular, to actually cause madness.’ (Third-sector practitioner, male)

Practitioners repeatedly stated that this lack of awareness or ability to monitor their children’s behaviour in between school activities and arriving home in the evening was
particularly significant in terms of gang membership and involvement in delinquency or criminal behaviour.

This was enhanced by the fact that children were often astute at maintaining different identities or personalities and playing different roles within the family at home from those they played with their peers outside the home.

‘And here’s these kids on the bus, and I was sitting there listening coz of that, because you have to. And listening to the language and the crap they’re talking, it was just amazing stuff, yeah? And they were kicking off, banging their feet on the bus, kicking the side of the bus, cursing, laughing out loud, and then one of their phones rang. And it was obviously the mum. And it was “I’m on the bus.” And it was suddenly just went quiet. Anyway, it’s like that, all the kids went quiet, “Yeah I’m on the bus, I’m just five minutes away, I’m just getting off now.” And he changed into a completely different person on the phone to his parent. Yeah? And it was like he walked off the bus like a completely different person, because he was somebody else until the phone rang.’ (Third-sector practitioner, male)

Parents’ lack of awareness of their children’s behaviour in gangs was made worse by the fact that children often became very skilled at hiding their whereabouts or their behaviour. This was a method they used both to protect their parents and to enable their gang activities to continue. The quote above reinforces the observation a few practitioners made regarding the fact that the presence of mobile phones to monitor children’s whereabouts actually seemed, in their view, to enable children to be more deceptive and lead a double life. Thus the child on the bus could switch his behaviour/attitude on the phone to his mother and because it was possible to receive calls anywhere could claim to be ‘five minutes away’ rather than involved in making trouble with his friends on the bus. The conclusion practitioners drew from this was that, far from protecting the child or enabling the parent to communicate with their child and establish their whereabouts and safety, these devices were seen as part of the problem, and a means of deception.

6.1.3 Substance abuse and violence

Practitioners’ perceptions of the effects of parental drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence were mixed. Some felt that alcohol and drug abuse was quite evident in some of the families they had dealt with where children were in gangs. The gang members interviewed for this research revealed that 27% had parents who abused drugs or alcohol.

‘The reason why they ain’t wearing … their trainers to school every day is because maybe there’s a problem at home with the shoes. Maybe – maybe there’s no money for the shoes. You know, and the reason why their uniform is messed up is their mum’s on crack and they ain’t washing the shirts and they ain’t ironed nothing, that’s why the school uniform looks in a mess.’ (Third-sector practitioner, male)

‘Home visits to families, sitting down, and it’s clear that, you know, mum and dad are – and the kids know this – dealing, or recreational smokers of cannabis or harder drugs, or alcoholics, or doing things that are such an influence, that it’s a norm for these kids.’ (Police officer, male)
However, other practitioners stated that they had not noticed or had very rarely come across substance abuse or violence within the families they dealt with. This could support the findings from gang members interviewed for this research. It could also indicate either that those parents who accessed practitioner support were able to hide these problems or that they were atypical in terms of drug and alcohol abuse or that they did not fit into this lifestyle.

### 6.1.4 Intergenerational gang involvement

Another predominant theme that emerged from most of the practitioners’ interviews was that parents and/or older siblings in particular were often responsible for introducing younger members of the family into the gangs. This supports other research studies (Moore, 1991; Bourgois, 1995; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). This was especially the case when an older brother or sister was a member of a gang.

‘I can think of some cases ... one young man in particular, his older brother had been in prison, and I think they're like the role models, aren't they? So I think it's a lot easier or more accessible, to get involved in gang culture if you already know somebody in it, if you already have a sibling in there, you're exposed to it ... it wouldn't be unusual to find several or a couple of kids from the same family involved.’ (Local authority practitioner, female)

There were a number of case studies of younger siblings following their older siblings into gang membership.

‘We have come across some families where ... the younger sibling ends up becoming like the older siblings, there’s a pattern there where they end up following the footsteps of the older child that’s committed all these offences, and at the moment on Pathways we’ve had two family members where one has gone into prison for stabbing someone, quite badly, and then, you know, robbery as well on top, so it’s quite a few offences, big big pattern there, and then the younger boy was doing quite well and then he’s actually ended up in custody at the moment as well because actually he was hanging round with his brother’s friends, even though they were about four years older. He was associating with the same people, and it started off again at – there’s a big link between school exclusion, so it started off at a school exclusion ... He was probably around thirteen when he started showing signs of this bad behaviour, and then it just got worse and worse, we were doing all the home visits, trying to work with him, but again there was a pattern there because the father – it’s just the father living with the children – he’s just not interested to be honest with you, you try and get him involved and get him to meetings, he will come and he’s just – it’s like he just doesn’t care, or he doesn’t see the problems.’ (Local council practitioner, female)

### 6.2 How influential are families?

Some practitioners felt strongly that families played a big role in facilitating gang membership, not least by a complicit denial or refusal to acknowledge the effect of gang membership on a child’s behaviour.
‘It’s like the mum – we find with some of the home visits, the mum … would actually collude with the young boy? Like we go round and say, you know, “You’re doing the following things, you’re offending, you’re doing this, this could lead two ways for you: you could end up in prison, you could end up, you know, dead” which are – you know, is powerful messages. But you sometimes find with either the mum or the dad, they’re not interested. It’s like – it’s not they don’t care, but they’re just, “Oh my son’s fine,” or they collude with their child and say, “Oh, you know, oh he was in this time of night,” but you know, we’ve got evidence where, you know, the person has committed a crime, they will cover for them and say, “Oh no, no, they were home, there were at home doing their homework.”’ (Local authority practitioner, female)

Also due to the material benefits derived from some types of gang activity, some parents, particularly those in single-parent households living in economic and emotionally distressed environments, seemed to collude with their child/children. This enabled gang membership to continue and over time become more entrenched.

‘A mother in a council apartment … who’s never worked, who’s had a relationship with somebody, had a couple of kids maybe, and never … managed to get out of the poverty trap. Right, never been anywhere, just do what’s she gotta do, bring up the kids … collect her money from social, or part-time job every now and then … But then her kid becomes a lunatic, yeah … and they start stealing and doing stuff and get involved with the wrong people. But he starts bringing money home … he’s bringing his own trainers, so she’s thinking “Oh I don’t have to buy him trainers, do I? Fantastic!” You know, she makes feeble attempts, saying “Where do you get that from?” … And then she’s “OK, all right. As long as you don’t bring nothing stolen into the house” … And then, you know, it goes on … and he brings a few pounds in, “Are you doing some part-time or something? Oh, OK” And he lends her a fiver. That’s the first stage … She takes it. And then he brings in money, gives – “Yeah, Mum, take £10, it’s all right.” And she’s into it, and more and more money’s come into the house … she’s getting comfortable with the fact that he’s got money of his own, and she don’t have to spend her money on him. So that gives her a breather. Yeah? … it develops … to the point that she can’t even go into his room. Because he’s now become so empowered that he’s giving … his mum money, he’s become the man of the house, all right? She doesn’t go into his room, she doesn’t know what’s in his room, whether it’s drugs or weapons. And, you know, the flat screen TV’s on the wall, and … he’ll send her on holiday. Never been on holiday before. You gotta look at this kind of temptation … She knows what he’s doing all the time anyway.’ (Third-sector practitioner, male)

6.2.1 Socio-cultural influences

In terms of social and cultural influences, all practitioners acknowledged that impoverished, deprived environments and the influence of peer groups greatly enhanced the likelihood of peripheral gang activity, which could then develop into more significant gang membership (Hagedorn, 1998; Moore, 1991; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Vigil, 2003).

‘There’s a lot of deprivation, disaffection, disengagement from educational – fairly classic things, and a lot of young people who don’t really have anything to hook onto
really, so things like gangs are there for them.’ (Youth offending team practitioner, male)

‘And it’s not that what goes on in the home doesn’t have any bearing, because it influences them to a large degree, but it seems to me it’s more of how they’re interacting with their peers. That is quite significant … a lot of them will, you know, have been going to college, but there’s still that mix of yes, they’re trying to do something positive, but they’re still mixing with a lot of the people that they were raised with, so there’s an influence that’s coming from there, that I think is stronger than what’s coming from the home … Because of that sense of wanting to belong, not wanting to be ostracised because maybe you’re not part of whatever they’re dealing with … I do think the peers are hugely significant for a lot of them.’ (Probation officer, female)

However some practitioners also argued that the school situation could facilitate gang membership, particularly if the home situation led to the child feeling isolated and alienated in terms of parents being absent or preoccupied by working extremely long hours to support the family.

‘I think what’s really real for the young people is the sense of alienation and lack of opportunity, lack of direction and lack of motivation, and as probably for all of us, some degree of certainty and solidity at certain times is extraordinarily attractive.’ (Youth offending team practitioner, male)

Practitioners saw disrupted education, truancy and school exclusion as risk factors in terms of lack of supervision and alienation, leading to gang involvement.

‘One of the things, and certainly my personal view, from a lot of the data and the research that I’ve seen, one of the biggest single factors are young people who have had disrupted education. You know – you look at the statistics of young people who have spoken about their involvement and dig into their background, and that is the biggest common factor. Same as it is in the prison population. You know, you look at the prison population and it’s over 70% of them have had disrupted education.’ (Third-sector practitioner 3, female)

They also pointed to the dangers that arise when children lack parental guidance and supervision outside their home situation.

‘But lives are so busy nowadays that parents don’t have the time to monitor their kids from morning till evening … then you start talking about, being excluded. Now what do you do then? Do you stop work and look after your kid? You’re – yes, it’s madness, isn’t it? And there’s so many exclusions at the moment. What do you do when your child’s excluded? You can’t stop work. So you’ve got a child who’s free and wild on the street. So that’s – the supervision goes as far as that, when a child’s excluded, what do the parents do? Do they explain to their boss, “Oh by the way my child’s excluded, so I’m gonna take two weeks off” or a month off, or six months in some cases.’ (Third-sector practitioner, male)
6.3 Family, criminality and victimisation

6.3.1 Intergenerational gang membership

When asked whether gang membership and criminality were facilitated by parents or other siblings/extended family members, all the practitioners interviewed felt that only a minority of families actively sought to recruit their children in this way. However, there was general agreement that between 10% and 20% of families with gang members had a history of criminal activity or custody and that this did seem to present a role model to the children growing up within those families.

An even smaller percentage, between 5% and 10%, were identified by the majority of practitioners interviewed as actively recruiting their children into the family gang which was sustained by organised criminal activity. This was of critical significance in some families with a ‘long’ history of criminality and imprisonment.

‘Those young people who – where that’s the situation, it’s nigh impossible to work with them. Very difficult to get them out, because they’ve got that family loyalty ingrained in their – you know, in their DNA really. And so we’d be looking at sort of their peers, who are possibly more compliant, with a view to doing some work with them, but I think – I think those members who – who are second generation are – are, you know, are almost beyond redemption in terms of how you get them out of that.’ (Local authority manager, male)

In these cases it was very difficult for practitioners to envisage that these children could be facilitated or encouraged to leave a strong familial gang organisation. However, it should be noted that this was very much the minority of the gang members discussed by practitioners and was seen as atypical.

6.3.2 Families and victimisation

Agencies were much more concerned about the families being victims targeted either directly by rival gangs or by gang members who were angry that their children had attempted to extricate themselves from gang membership. Although a few families would appear to be secure that their child’s involvement would not threaten their home life, practitioners felt that the vast majority were fearful for their child and their other children, and had experienced threats or violence spilling over into their family’s home environment. Intimidation and revenge against previous gang members who had crossed boundaries or challenged dominant power structures seem to be a very real and dangerous consequence of children being in gangs for these families. This would appear to support some of the gang members interviewed: although many prided themselves that they could keep their two worlds separate, in reality practitioners felt this was unrealistic and families often were victimised and intimated.

‘When a kid comes home and the family we visited the other day, the daughter came back after the boy was stabbed and she was about thirteen, and she broke down in tears because she didn’t know her brother had been stabbed, but she was on the estate half-an-hour earlier and kids – there was a group of kids and they were talking about her and talking about her brother and they were giving her the evil eye and
really got upset and she came in, and she’d found out subsequently that they were talking about her brother who’d been stabbed. And it’s about the support that you provide for those kids … But again there’s issues of retaliation, because these kids think “Well I know who’s done it and he’s my brother, he’s my blood,” and we have problems of kids taking it, you know, to extreme circumstances because they want to get revenge.’ (Police officer, male)

Although often downplayed by the gang members themselves, practitioners believed that families did experience high levels of victimization, and threats towards family members/home environments were reported to practitioners during their interventions. Practitioners referred to instances where pressure and direct threats to siblings and cousins were used as a method of controlling or intimidating the actual gang member.

6.4 Leaving the gang: familial influence

One of the areas in which it was particularly hard for practitioners to demonstrate any signs of success was facilitating gang exit within the family. Often gang membership was interrupted by conviction and a period in custody (Barry, 2010). As interviews with gang members indicated, the person had to mature, find new purpose in life or reach the end of the line with their involvement before they left their ‘on road’ lifestyle. Practitioners struggled to measure their impact on supporting families to enable their relatives/dependents to successfully exit their gang involvement.

One of the challenges practitioners faced acutely was how to enable the gang member on release from custody to resist being drawn back into gang membership. Families often tried to help their children to leave by moving away from the area or encouraging new forms of behaviour, such as employment, but this seemed to be extremely problematic.

‘We’ve got someone that we tried to get on Pathways recently, who came up at a multiagency we’ve called Operation … it meets fortnightly and we talk about all the most recent gun offences, gang offences, knife offences, and this person came up and we tried to get him involved in Pathways and the mum was all for it, she used to work for the Youth Offending Team … she was brilliant, she really wanted him to be part of Pathways. He didn’t want to know, he was doing a lot of drug dealing on … Market, and mostly robbery as well. But he didn’t want to know. He went missing recently, the police only just recently found him a week ago, and the mum was in a right state, she was devastated, she’s like, “Oh, I just want to help him,” but – so you can’t always say it’s always the parents’ fault, to be honest with you.’ (Local council practitioner, female)

Some families tried to enable their children to leave gangs before conviction for offences or imprisonment occurred. However, this was again noted as extremely difficult even within families which had two parents employed and a number of choices available economically.

Practitioners often talked pessimistically with regard to gang exit where children had been active within gangs for a number of years. This was because of the hold over the member by the gang both emotionally and economically. This sometimes followed them even when they tried to move from the area or to change their lives by gaining employment or education.
However, sometimes success did occur if the young person was able to recognise the consequences of their gang membership or their targeting by police. It was often when they matured, in terms of having their own families, or felt that they were now too old to participate in childish gang activities that they changed their delinquent behaviour. This is supported by other research into when teenagers or young adults are unable to leave gangs (Hagedorn, 1998).

‘But maybe as they – they get a bit older, as one told me today who – he – he slipped out, “Yeah, but, you know, because I’m the gang – the people I mix with,” and he just changed it – and he’s getting older, I mean, you know, he’s in his mid – coming up to his mid-twenties now, and it’s like, “Oh, you know, this is just nonsense, I’ve got to do something else.” So it’s kind of a realisation (for) that, it’s just the same old, same old, and it’s not really going anywhere. And, so that’s the kind of intervention from you as an officer is reinforcing that, “Where is that leading you?” You know, it’s a road to nowhere at the end of the day.’ (Probation officer, male)

This theme is also consistent with much of the literature on desistance from crime which argues that, once young people have some social capital in terms of gainful employment, family connections or their own accommodation, they are able to desist from engaging in further delinquent behaviour (Burnett, 2004; Farrall, 2004; McNeill, 2006).

However, practitioners noted this is very difficult when employment and educational opportunities are extremely rare. This combines with the research that indicates that in deprived areas the ability to reconnect with the legal economy and lose the stigma that gang membership imposes is even less likely (Bourgois, 1995).

6.5 Professional intervention to facilitate gang exit

Although clearly not exhaustive, the practitioner interviews provide a useful insight into the professional interventions being tried by different agencies to facilitate gang exit.

As mentioned previously, the majority of statutory agencies were/are predominantly concerned with monitoring and reducing risk in terms of risk of harm and risk of reoffending.

‘We have something called a Merlin system, which is part of the CAP, the Common Assessment Programme, and anyone can refer: if any young person comes to notice, a Merlin report goes on, so if your two children are throwing stones at cars or out late at night and it doesn’t have to be a criminal offence, if they come to the notice of the police, so if you have a domestic argument with your husband, that domestic report will be taken but a Merlin would be created for your two children if they’re under 18, just so we are aware that they’ve come to our notice. And if it’s for anything to do with knives, gangs, serious youth violence, then my team will investigate it, so you would have a home visit, we would sit down with you and your son and say, you know, what is the issue, why has he been seen with a knife, with this group of people who we know are known gang members.’ (Police officer, male)

However, this was not their only aim and many of them attempted to work on a multiagency level in order to share intelligence to minimise the chances of reoffending or victimisation
within the gang situation. This was undertaken in various ways by agencies, either via formal systems as above or by more informal networks involving information sharing within the community. This supports previous practice research in regard to liaising and building up a rapport with communities with the aim of supporting families and their children to access facilities locally to prevent reoffending and enable reintegration (Fitzgibbon, 2011).

All the practitioners interviewed, whether statutory or non-statutory public/third sector, were unanimous in believing that the best way to facilitate gang exit was to intervene early with preventative measures targeted at known groups within deprived areas and particularly younger siblings of gang members.

‘Early intervention’s key, when they’re forming the values and the opinions, to get that causal change in the mind. As I said, and I’ve said this many times, the most dangerous thing on the street isn’t the gun or the knife, or the bat or – whatever you’re gonna use to cause violence: the most dangerous thing on the street is the mind. And if that mind is impacted at an early age through some type of programming, correct programming, then the likelihood of them falling down a certain way will be less.’ (Third-sector practitioner 2, male)

Many of the practitioners were pessimistic about the chances of success if early interventions were not the primary aim of their agency. It was to be noted that some of the third-sector organisations were particularly skilled at this type of work.

Some of the third-sector agencies targeted very young children at school and were equipped with knowledge and awareness of the dangers of becoming involved even on the very periphery of gangs.

‘So we go to schools and work with groups of boys, separately to the groups of girls, and have some real talk. We have sessions where kids are able to interrupt the presentation and not just wait while we stand in front of them and preach to them. So they can interject at any time and ask questions or comment or put something towards the presentation. And we talk about the realities of what they’re doing, and the consequences, and we explore the consequences, and – and nine times out of ten by the end of it they fully get it. You know, but you can see pennies dropping all round the room, because they actually explain – they actually explain themself what the problems are. So you kind of plant a seed and watch it grow in the room, as opposed to going in there and just preaching to them, so we have an open discussion. And then, you know, as well as that though, there’s fixed presentations that we do, and then we open it up.’ (Third-sector practitioner, male)

Other non-statutory third-sector agencies gave examples of very imaginative and creative solutions that used practitioners’ various previous skills and professions, such as photography, music and theatre.

‘That’s creative, intervention that’s mentoring and training, and they’re not a theatre group or a drama group or a music group, although involves those things we use to kind of draw young people through problems, but when you say the types of programmes, at the moment we’ve got a gangs programme, a school programme.’ (Third-sector practitioner, female)
Other creative solutions involved mentoring schemes and buddy schemes designed to enable young people who feel isolated and may be attracted to gangs due to their alienation to find alternative ways of making friends, increasing their self-esteem and feeling part of society.

Some of the interventions did appear to have quite high success rates, for example the Pathways projects demonstrated by one local authority practitioner.

“We’ve had a lot of good success rate with our Pathways clients, as I mentioned earlier, where they get an advocate and we do home visits with them and everything. And a lot of the time the family, you know, most of the families have been on board with us, so they’ve also helped the young person exit as well by influencing them and just saying, “Look, you know, this person here is your lifeline. This is your last resort, they’re offering you an apprenticeship, they’re offering you the way back and into college, or employment or another job,” if they’re over a certain age they can’t do apprenticeships. So we have had it where parents do encourage them and they do help us as well because they’re saying, “Oh, you know, my child wants to do this,” and then – I mean previously, we’ve stopped doing it now, we used to have something called a call in, where the parents would bring their young person along and they would sit in front of panel with people like superintendents from the police, probation and the youth offending team officer, the head of community safety, and like a community voice … So they would have their chance to do that, and we did find that parents would bring their children along when they got the letter saying, you know, “You have to attend this call in, if not you – enforcement route will be taken.” We did have a lot of positive outcomes from that. Parents would bring their families, their children would say. It did help. A lot of the time it has helped, I mean we found that out of the forty-five young people we’ve worked with on Pathways, twenty-nine have stopped offending.’ (Local council practitioner, female)

All the practitioners saw work with parents to improve their communication and parenting skills as essential. This could also be done on a one-to-one level with mentors.

‘… we ran a parenting workshop, I’m going to be involved in recruiting parenting mentors, so actually having mentors going to families whose children might be with a mentor, but to be able – because what we don’t want to do is to mentor children and then take them back into the same environment where actually things may not be changing, so for those parents who feel that they could benefit from having a mentor to be able to support them, and look at their parenting skills, look at, you know, better ways of coping strategies for them’. (Local authority practitioner, female)

Other practitioners had found groupwork with parents a particularly effective means of facilitating better communication skills and enhancing parents’ ability to set boundaries.

6.5.1 Working with denial

One of the concerns of the professionals was the level of denial by both the gang members themselves and the gang members’ parents about their involvement.
'I think I'd say at least 98% would never admit to being in the gang, that's the first thing. There will be police intelligence that says they are linked to gangs, which is – or are in gangs, which has become something different. So when you’re sort of thinking about how it impacts on it, it can be a little bit tricky because they’re not going to admit to it.' (Probation officer, female)

The collusion, self-denial and public shame regarding the involvement of their children in gang activity would appear to prevent families accessing or successfully engaging with the agencies providing support and advice whether they are statutory or third sector, within the criminal justice system or outside. This is not uncommon in other areas where professionals are working with families to protect their children and facilitate healthy relationships (Hiles and Luger, 2006).

Many of the schemes that are being attempted were discussed in terms of the funding available. Concern was repeatedly voiced that some of the most successful projects are in danger of being cut, either because of austerity measures in public sector finances or a reduction in short-term charity funding, which prevented projects’ sustainability and development for permanent long-term support.

‘The next six months or so it’ll be like I says, practically it comes down to funding. And then if you, you know, you try to get the funding to continue the support, and they’ll – “Well actually we can do this, we’ve got the administration to do it,” and they’ll take it off you, and just destroy six months’ worth of work, so it’s very frustrating at times … everybody shared work, let it be a partnership, If they’re saying throwing money more specifically at this agenda, then they really need to work in partnership with people who … have been doing it for years. And bring them into the loop, and share the resources properly, because they’re still, you know, we can’t do it without them, they can’t do it without us, so share the work and get real with it, otherwise ending gang violence, I mean, that will never happen.’ (Third-sector practitioner 3, female)

6.6 Conclusions

- As with other strands of this research, the picture emerging from the practitioner interviews is mixed. Whilst examples were cited of intergenerational family involvement, other family stances cited ranged from tacit collusion with young people’s gang involvement to denial of a child’s involvement to – in many cases – a lack of family awareness of their children’s reality outside the home.

- Families were commonly seen as struggling to supervise and control their children and set appropriate boundaries, a challenge compounded in many cases by the absence of a parent, economic and other pressures on the family, peer influences and the pull of the streets.

- Whilst parents were seen in some cases as benefiting (eg materially) from some aspect of their child’s gang involvement, they were also seen as experiencing negative consequences and as wishing for their children to come out of their gang lifestyle and live a safer existence.
Practitioner feedback on effective interventions highlighted the importance of early intervention, overcoming family reluctance to acknowledge children’s gang involvement and encouraging families to seek support and taking effective measures before young people’s ‘on road’ lifestyle was established. It also highlighted the importance of supporting parents to improve their communication and parenting skills, and of providing young people with positive alternatives.
7. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this research was to explore the role of the family in facilitating gang membership, criminality and exit. This research revealed a complex mix of interlinking factors that include, but are not exclusive to, the family. This section summarises the main findings in the form of answers to several key questions.

7.1 Do gang-affected families have characteristic features?

This research concurs with the literature that shows that gang members come from single-parent and dual-parent households, large and small families, illustrating that there is not one gang family type.

We found evidence of gang membership in families where young people had a strong attachment to their families and parents, and in homes where one or more parents or carers were employed and law-abiding citizens, where the respondent was the only person engaged in gang-related activities, as well as in homes commonly described as ‘broken’.

Irrespective of composition, the majority of respondents described families experiencing multiple difficulties (such as economic deprivation, family separation, bereavement, domestic violence, imprisonment, and alcohol and substance misuse). There was a general reluctance by the young people, and the family members, interviewed to point to issues in the family as the main reason for their involvement in ‘gangs’, ‘on road’ or in ‘teams’. This finding was reflected in the testimonies of family members, who often cited factors external to the family as being more influential than internal ones. Thus both the young people and the family members interviewed tended to see the following factors as playing a part in facilitating gang membership:

- a hostile social environment where gang membership, criminality and violence were normalised in youth culture;
- poor school experience and lack of educational attainment;
- the search for identity, independence and respect; and
- a paucity of social services for young people, in particular social clubs and activities.

Whilst the vast majority of participants placed little emphasis on familial variables, some practitioners felt strongly that families did indeed play a large part in facilitating gang membership in addition to environmental and social factors. One of the common characteristics observed by practitioners was the denial, or refusal, of individuals and families to acknowledge gang membership.

This research suggests that troubles within the family can contribute to pushing some young people into street life and gangs but for the majority of young people and family members who took part in this study it was not seen as the key driver for gang formation or exit; the reality, as the literature illustrates, was more complicated. The complexity of these ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors that propel young people into street life and gangs requires practitioners to think of creative and multifaceted methods of engaging with families to support them in facilitating gang exit. Agencies working with beleaguered families need to address the social and emotional difficulties they face with focused interventions that target specific problems such as education, employment and housing as well as general parenting.
and communication skills. What is clear from these interviews is that, on the whole, being ‘on road’ or a gang member or having a relative that is involved in a gang causes problems for the majority of individual and family members.

The overriding experience of gang involvement for family members was stress and worry. Mothers, in particular, worried about the safety of their children and worried for the future of their children and noted how they had lost control of them, particularly boys, as they approached adolescence. The lack of control, together with a heightened sense of individualism and freedom in young people, had resolved into a situation where some parents were unable to discipline or place boundaries on their child’s behaviour. Some were unable fully to comprehend their child’s reality outside of the home and were therefore disempowered with regard to being able to protect their children from harm or to encourage desistance, despite trying. The lack of comprehension was exacerbated by the ability of those engaged in gangs and illegal activities to develop a range of strategies to hide their deviant behaviour from others.

Most parent(s), relatives and siblings interviewed disapproved of gang involvement, which some youngsters knew, and attempted to dissuade their children from involvement. Some family members, but by no means all, ‘colluded’ with their relative by ‘turning a blind eye’ or accepting money or goods, but this was not found to be the norm amongst participants. Many felt that once someone had become embroiled in gang life there was little that they could do to change it unless the gang-involved individual themselves wanted to do so.

The research suggests that gang members are not a homogeneous community and come from a range of family types. Some families are troubled, some neglectful of their young and some highly abusive. The majority, however, were not the ‘problem’ families singled out for censure by underclass thinking; they may best be described as ‘beleaguered families’. By and large they were composed of multiply marginalised people, living in highly adverse social and economic conditions, who tried to do the best for their young people with very limited resources, very limited support, in the context of a society keen to label them pejoratively and criminalise them.

### 7.2 Family victimisation

#### 7.2.1 Do gangs target family members?

The research uncovered some cases where family members were targeted by individuals from rival groups but found no compelling evidence to suggest that this was a regular occurrence. In addition, there was no evidence that family members were forcibly recruited into gangs or that sexual violence was used as ‘a weapon of choice’ against family members of gangs. There appeared to be a general consensus that the code of the street stressed the importance of keeping ‘beef’ within the constituency of gang members and others involved in life ‘on road’, and this was largely coupled with the injunction to leave those not involved out of consideration.
7.2.2 Are families therefore victims?

Family members may not in general be the direct victims of gang violence but they are victims in two other ways. First, they experience considerable distress at their children’s involvement in the crime and violence that accompanies gang life, and their victimisation can be compounded by the absence of the positive support they need in order to address the stresses that are associated with this. Second, although by no means responsible for their child’s decision to join gangs or commit crime, families may have to experience the sometimes tragic consequences. This can vary and can involve having their homes raided by the police, being coercively treated by enforcement agencies, dealing with the prosecution and incarceration of their young, and the bereavement that might follow a fatal incident. Coupled with the stigmatisation they may also face and the adverse living conditions many experience, such victimisation may increase as opposed to decrease the beleaguered situation they confront.

7.3 Desistance and exit

7.3.1 Can families play a decisive role in helping their young people leave gangs and gang life?

The majority of gang-involved young people featured in this report argued that the decision to leave their group was one that they ultimately had to make alone. The motivation to relinquish gang life often followed a significant event in their lives, such as starting a family, being arrested and/or imprisoned, serving a lengthy prison sentence. It was also the case that some had matured and become disillusioned with gang life because of the constant violence and harassment they were exposed to. It was perhaps because the motivation to leave the gang was linked to personal events that few respondents cited family influence as a deciding factor.

However, as some of the interviews revealed, family members did play a role in gang exit. The interviews revealed accounts of mothers trying to steer their children from involvement by listening and supporting them through tough times, keeping them in, seeking help from local services and taking steps to remove young people from the area. Some parents were more successful than others but the point to raise here is that where the influence of families is limited, particularly if the gang-involved relative is not ready to quit, they can have some beneficial effect, which means there is a role to play for families in promoting gang desistance. The challenge for services is to identify how best to assist gang-involved families to provide a supportive environment to encourage their relatives to leave, and to help and support those who are in the process of assisting their youngster to leave.

7.4 Recommendations

- Avoid stigmatising the families of gang members unduly. Not all are ‘troubled’ or ‘broken’ families but most can better be described as ‘beleaguered’. This label is non-stigmatising as well as more appropriate.
Do not reify, exaggerate or homogenise the gang. The majority of gang members drift out of gang behaviour and the families’ experience of the gang is influenced by geographic and ethnic variation. Local practitioners need to be aware of the local criminal landscape. One size, as they say, does not fit all.

Practitioners involved in the delivery of bespoke interventions need to anticipate some complicity and denial when working with families of gang members. Yet beyond this, family members, in particular mothers, ought to be sought out as valuable partners in positively working to change the dynamics of family relationships.

The report lends support to existing multiagency programmes designed to provide help for vulnerable parents to improve their parenting skills, with particular emphasis on parenting in adolescence and non-corporal ways to discipline adolescent boys.

The report suggests that replicating initiatives that provide safe accommodation for those who are victims of serious violence\textsuperscript{22} and investing in other programmes that can provide long-term housing away from the local gang will help gang members desist from their offending behaviour.

Interventions are important, but they need to be targeted at complex problems experienced by beleaguered families rather than being directed specifically at future gang involvement. Adolescence is a key point at which gang members and their relatives, especially mothers and sisters, need appropriate facilities and support that they can access, particularly the point at which the gang member is ready to leave the group.

\textsuperscript{22} Examples include the Southwark Emergency Rehousing Victims of Violence Enterprise.
APPENDIX A: CONTRIBUTING AGENCIES AND ORGANISATIONS

London

Not Another Drop
Hackney Probation Service
Hackney Youth Offending Service
Westminster Youth Offending Service
Barking and Dagenham Probation Service
Chaos Theory
SafetyBox
VIPMinds
Metropolitan Police Service

The West Midlands

Wolverhampton Council
Wolverhampton Youth Offending Service
The West Midlands Mediations and Transformation Service
West Midlands Police Service
Engage Youth Empowerment Services (Wolverhampton)
Citizens for Change
The New Day Foundation (Birmingham)
City of Wolverhampton College

Scotland

Violence Reduction Unit
SideKix Ltd
Glasgow Community Safety Services (GCSS)
The Princes Trust
Fairbridge in Glasgow (part of the Princes Trust)
APEX Scotland
APPENDIX B: YOUNG PERSON CONSENT FORM

The Role of the Family in Facilitating Gang Membership, Criminality and Exit – Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you agree to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being carried out and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information and be sure to ask questions if you need to.

This study concentrates on the family. It seeks to explore whether, and in what way, family characteristics contribute to gang membership and criminality. It looks at the life experiences of parents, siblings and other family members whose relatives are in gangs. The study also seeks to uncover the strategies used by family members to protect themselves from the negative aspects of gang membership (eg victimisation) or to help their gang-involved relatives to quit their involvement in gangs.

The focus group/interview you are about to take part in will be tape-recorded. All the answers that you give will remain confidential. The research is independent of any criminal justice organisations and the responses that you give will not be passed on. Whilst the focus group/interview is confidential it is imperative that you do not disclose serious offending which may be carried out in the future.

All findings from the research will be generalised. Your responses will not be recognisable by other people. Where quotes are used they will be anonymised (for example we will use a letter or a fictitious name) in order to secure your identity.

Your views are important to us, but it is up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. There is no pressure for you to do so. It is also important to note that there are no right or wrong answers; just be as open as you can.

If you agree to take part please read and sign the consent form (attached). If you do consent, but find that do not want to continue, you can withdraw at any time without giving an explanation.

Thank you
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Consent statement

I have read the information sheet. Yes No

I have had an opportunity to ask questions about the research and am satisfied by the answers given. Yes No

I am clear about the purpose of the study and willingly volunteer to be involved. Yes No

I am aware of what participating in this study will involve and I consent to the interview being recorded. Yes No

I am aware that I can withdraw from the interview at any time without providing a reason for doing so. Yes No

I agree to participate

Signature: ......................................

Date: .............................................

____________________________________________________________________________

PARENTAL CONSENT

This section is to be signed by a parent (or guardian) of participants under the age of 15.

I ......................... being the parent ( or guardian of ) ......................... agree to his/her participation in the study undertaken by Catch22 and London Metropolitan University. In signing this form, I declare the following:

I have read the information sheet Yes No
I am clear about the purpose of the research Yes No
I understand that the interview/focus group will be recorded Yes No
I understand that his/her participation in this research is voluntary Yes No

Name: ...................................................
Signature: ..........................................
Relationship to participant: ........................ Date: ..............................
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The Role of the Family in Facilitating Gang Membership, Criminality and Exit – Interview/Focus Group Plan

Welcome

Introduction of the facilitator and assistant.

What is the study about?

This study concentrates on the family. It seeks to explore whether, and in what way, family characteristics contribute to gang membership and criminality. It looks at the life experiences of parents, siblings and other family members whose relatives are in gangs. The study also seeks to uncover the strategies used by family members to protect themselves from the negative aspects of gang membership (e.g., victimisation) or to help their gang-involved relatives to quit their involvement in gangs.

Why have we asked for your involvement?

Problems within families are often cited as being key factors when explaining why some young people join gangs or end up ‘on road’. Very little research has been done with family members whose relatives are, or were, in gangs so, for example, we do not know much about the costs or benefits of gang membership for the family. We do not know the type of stresses and strains family members experience as a result of this and how, and if, they cope. Your experience is crucial to our understanding and the voices of families need to be heard. We are interested in the positives and negatives.

What we will do with the data?

A report will be published by Catch22. The report will be used to inform policy and service provision for young people who are involved in gangs (or ‘on road’) and their families.

What are the focus group guidelines?

- Tape recording and making notes throughout.
- Assure confidentiality.
- No right or wrong answers.
- Not necessary to be ‘politically correct’ when speaking just respect each other and don’t be offensive.
- We all have different points of view. We would like to hear yours so try not to talk over each other. This will also help with the recording. There is no need to agree with someone. If you disagree, then listen and wait until they are finished before voicing your views.
- Put mobile phones ‘on silent’ or switch off. If you need to take a call then please leave the room and join us again when you can.
- You are free to leave at any point. If you wish to go please do so quietly.
- Talk to each other.

You will find some cards on the table in front of you (or wherever they are!). Please write your name on them as these will help us to remember. Let’s take two minutes to introduce ourselves.

**Suggested focus group exercises**

1. **Picture/photographic inquiry** – Turn over the paper in front of you. You will see some photographs of famous families. Which do you identify with and why?
2. **Time line/life line** – On the piece of paper in front of you draw a time/life line showing the highs and lows of your family. Think about any events that have influenced your family life significantly in either positive or negative ways.
3. **Objects on the table** – On the table in front of you there are some objects. Choose one that best describes your feelings about your family member being involved ‘on road’ or in a gang. Think about the impact this has had on you and your family.
4. **Community tree exercise** – Use the blank piece of paper in front of you and draw a tree. Then, indicate where you think your family is in relation to the rest of the community (eg you might think that the top of the tree represents a high standing in the community and the bottom a low one). Draw (or write) the type of support/guidance you have received, or sought, from the community in relation to gangs.
5. **Poetic inquiry** – Ask someone to read out the poem. If none wants to read do it yourself. This poem was written by someone in a gang who is now in prison. Read the poem. What does it say to you? What do you think about the writer’s state of mind? What do you think about the writer, their family and their life choices? Would you add/take away anything?

**Interview/focus group topics**

- **About the neighbourhood**
  - Neighbourhood characteristics (people and built environment).
  - Likes and dislikes about living in area.
  - Interact with neighbours? Trust people in the area? Engage in community activities?
  - Major community safety problems in the area? Impact on families?
  - Length of residence in area (moved around a lot?).

- **Family history and childhood**
  - Family composition.
  - What types of activities do/did the family engage in?
  - Level of supervision and control (e.g. do parents know children’s friends, where they go when outside, set a curfew?).
  - Significant/memorable issues within the family (e.g. separation, domestic violence).

- **Gang/’on road’ involvement**
  - How they came to be involved in a gang/’on road’?
  - Any significant incident in the family that may have triggered involvement?
  - Any intergenerational family involvement?
  - Family know about involvement? Do they support or reject involvement?
Relationship with family member changed since being gang-involved? Examples. Impact on family/individual.

- **Consequences of being involved in gang for the family**
  - What benefits to the family from being gang-involved or ‘on road’ (money/good/protection/reputation)
  - What costs to family from being gang involved or ‘on road’ (increase in violence/victimisation/involvement with the criminal justice system)

- **Leaving the gang/‘on road’**
  - Strategies used by family to dissuade involvement and/or help gang member to leave gang/being ‘on road’.
  - Any professional advice/assistance? Examples? Results?
  - If still in gang/‘on road’ what would prompt them to leave?

**Asking questions – tips**

- Ask people to think back to a particular point in their life. Avoid asking them about the future and of the experiences of others.
- Ask ‘why’ questions.
- Ask about the things that influenced particular decisions they made.
The Role of the Family in Facilitating Gang Membership, Criminality and Exit – Practitioner Topic Guide

What is the study about?

This study concentrates on the family. It seeks to explore whether, and in what way, family characteristics contribute to gang membership and criminality. It looks at the life experiences of parents, siblings and other family members whose relatives are in gangs. The study also seeks to uncover the strategies used by family members to protect themselves from the negative aspects of gang membership (e.g. victimisation) or to help their gang-involved relatives to quit their involvement in gangs.

Why have we asked for your involvement?

Problems within families are often cited as being key factors when explaining why some young people join gangs or end up ‘on road’. Very little research has been done with family members whose relatives are, or were, in gangs so, for example, we do not know much about the costs or benefits of gang membership for the family. We do not know the type of stresses and strains family members experience as a result of this and how, and if, they cope. Your experience is crucial to our understanding and the voices of families need to be heard. We are interested in the positives and negatives.

What we will do with the data?

A report will be published by Catch22. The report will be used to inform policy and service provision for young people who are involved in gangs (or ‘on road’) and their families.

Section 1: Professional background

- Current role
- Experience of working with young people
- Qualifications

Section 2: Family and gang membership

Thinking about your clients who are involved in gangs, how would you describe their families?

Have you noticed similarities between the family characteristics of group members?
Probes:
- Size of family or composition?
- Levels of supervision?
- Level of family interaction?
- Type of discipline used within family?
- Any link to religious beliefs?

How much influence do these factors have on gang membership?
- What other factors do you feel are influential?

Section 3: Family and criminality

What % of the families that you have been in contact with have a history of gang membership?
- Can you give me an example of a family?

Is there a history of other sorts of relevant offending or a history of custody?

Consequences of being involved in the gang for the family?
- Benefits to the family? (goods, drugs, protection, reputation)
- Costs to the family? (violence, criminal justice system involvement, etc)

Section 4: Intervention

Can families successfully enable their children to exit gangs?
- What strategies have you seen?
- Where do you see your role in this?

What assistance is there available?
- What should be done to assist and improve situation for families?
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