



Safer Schools:

Keeping gang culture
outside the gates

May 2016

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Executive summary

All children and young people are entitled to be educated in a safe and nurturing environment. When youth gang culture enters a school, this can put the safety of pupils and staff at risk and create challenging environments for teachers to educate their pupils. Schools with a gang presence are more likely than other schools to experience high rates of violence, a decline in pupils' educational engagement and school attachment, and challenges around the possession of weapons and the use and distribution of drugs.

There is nothing inevitable, however, about gang culture permeating through a school's gates. This report provides a first-of-its-kind insight into pupil gang involvement in Alternative Provision (AP) schools, presenting the findings of research conducted in five AP schools across three UK cities. It sets out a positive vision for the future, highlighting AP approaches to addressing pupil gang involvement, and revealing the successful steps that schools can take to improve the safety and security of their schools.

Pupils are typically referred to AP because of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, and a general disengagement from mainstream education. The most up-to-date UK statistics show that there were around 20,500 young people in AP in 2015, with projected figures set to remain stable until 2020.

The research had two main aims: (1) to explore the extent and ways in which pupil gang involvement raises challenges for schools; and (2) to identify best practice for schools in responding to these challenges.

Key findings

The challenges of pupil gang involvement

- When youth gang culture enters a school, this can generate a climate of violence, fear and disengagement from education among pupils.
- Pupils not involved in gangs primarily become gang-involved to secure their own safety and avoid being victimised.
- When schools are successful in keeping gang culture outside the gates, members of staff report little difference between the behaviour of pupils involved in gangs and their non-gang-involved peers.
- Young people from rival street gangs are able to rub along together whilst in school, but only in schools which are successful in keeping gang *culture* from entering their premises.
- Gang involvement has the potential to demotivate pupils from making progress in their education because the quick money associated with drug dealing often appears to offer a more attractive future than the pursuit of a legitimate career.
- Gang-involved pupils in AP are no more or less likely to use drugs than their non-gang-involved peers, but are significantly more likely to be involved in drug dealing.
- Violent incidents inside school premises involving the use of weapons are rare. Gang-involved pupils, however, are more likely to carry weapons and engage in conflict involving the use of weapons on their journeys to and from school.

Addressing the challenges, building on the positives

- A vital component of addressing pupil gang involvement is ensuring that pupils feel safe whilst at school. **Young people's perceptions of school safety are primarily shaped by the quality of their relationships with members of staff and other pupils.**
- In AP schools, all pupils report having **at least one positive relationship with an adult.** Many pupils report that they lacked positive relationships with teachers in their previous mainstream school or pupil referral unit. This divergence exists due to lower pupil-to-staff ratios in AP, specialist mentors employed by AP schools, and AP teaching frameworks that involve members of staff teaching multiple subjects. Together, these ensure that all pupils have extended periods of contact with at least one adult in school.
- Other important aspects of school safety include (1) effective supervision and security measures, particularly regarding pupils' journeys to and from school; (2) timely mediation between gang-involved pupils in rival gangs, both to pre-empt conflict and to resolve it; and (3) effective management of pupil transfers between schools.
- **Positive relationships between staff and pupils not only create safer schools, but also enable members of staff to address low levels of educational attachment and engagement, both of which are significant predictors of gang involvement.**
- **Pupils' attitudes toward education depend in large part on schools implementing an engaging and flexible curriculum.** The relative flexibility of the curriculum in AP means that pupils are often re-engaged in their education through vocational learning opportunities and the use of educational hooks such as music or sport. These provide young people with a sense of achievement, supporting them to obtain an increased number of qualifications. Both members of staff and pupils believe this success would not currently be possible within the framework of mainstream education.

Conclusion and recommendations

The most important thing that any school can do to respond to pupil gang involvement is to ensure that their pupils feel safe. Primarily, this depends on fostering and maintaining positive relationships between members of staff and pupils, enabling adults to pre-empt conflict between gang-involved young people and respond effectively when conflict does arise.

Gang-involved young people do not spend the entirety of their waking hours wedded to a gang member identity; gang-related attitudes and behaviours are exhibited only under certain conditions and around certain people. The current research indicates that if schools support gang-involved young people to leave gang culture outside the school gates – with all of its associated stresses and risks – and transition into a safe and nurturing school environment, pupils will often embrace this opportunity. When this happens, the negative effects associated with pupil gang-involvement fade, and gang-involved young people simply become young people in need of a decent education.

What can all schools learn from successful AP approaches?

- **Build supportive and trusting relationships.**
Every pupil should have frequent and prolonged contact with at least one member of staff.
- **Improve staff knowledge and training around gang culture.**
All members of staff working in schools with gang-involved pupils or pupils at risk of gang involvement should have adequate training on the causes, indicators and consequences of gang culture. Particular focus should be placed on ensuring members of staff share their knowledge and understanding internally.
- **Implement prevention and early intervention programmes that build character and resilience.** Programmes that focus on building character and resilience should be piloted and robustly evaluated using randomised control trials with pupils at risk of gang involvement. If effective, all schools affected by pupil gang involvement should be encouraged to implement these programmes.

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- **Increase engagement by creating flexible pathways to attainment within mainstream education.** Mainstream schools should be granted sufficient flexibility and resources to offer the types of academic and vocational learning opportunities that are embraced by pupils in AP; this will reduce the likelihood of young people being excluded from mainstream education.
 - **Introduce tailored weapon possession security policies.** Blanket recommendations around school security are inappropriate, given the need to consider the specific risks posed by pupil gang involvement in individual schools. All affected schools should therefore design and implement tailored security policies that are proportionate to local risk.
 - **Introduce a visible end-of-school-day presence.** Where there are concerns around the potential for gang-related violence to occur in a school's surrounding vicinity, the school should provide a staff presence at the school gates, as well as at the main bus stops used by pupils to return home.
 - **Establish close and constructive working relationships with families and wider stakeholders.** Schools should establish constructive working relationships with all external stakeholders, particularly families and also, for example, youth offending teams and voluntary organisations, and engage with these stakeholders as a priority to ensure that they have the best possible understanding of the needs of gang-involved pupils and the challenges these pupils face.
 - **Encourage positive interactions between pupils and the police.** As a strategic priority, and as part of their wider strategy around reducing gang involvement and youth violence, police officers should visit schools and interact with pupils on a regular basis, redressing the negative perceptions that gang-involved young people have of the police.

Limitations

While both staff and pupils are positive about the potential for schools to keep gang culture outside the school gates, they are generally less confident about the ability of schools to reduce the prevalence of gang involvement in the community more widely.

Teachers stress the significance of underlying economic, social and cultural factors driving youth gang involvement. These include the fact that many young people – particularly those who have been excluded from mainstream education – are despondent about future job opportunities, viewing drug dealing as the best way of making a significant amount of money in a short space of time.

In addition, teachers highlight that when the school day ends, many pupils return to deprived and volatile communities in which status and respect depend overwhelmingly on the fast acquisition of money, material goods, and physical violence.

Whilst these fundamental drivers of gang involvement continue to exist, it is not defeatist but simply realistic to acknowledge that schools are limited in their ability to reduce the prevalence of young people's gang-related activities beyond the school gates.

About the report

This report presents the findings of interviews and observations conducted in five AP schools across three UK cities. Data from the fieldwork were supplemented by a comprehensive international review of relevant literature. Participants in the research spoke not only about their views of AP, but also their experiences in mainstream schools and pupil referral units because many had recently attended or worked in these institutions. Consequently, the report provides an overarching portrait of the issue of pupil gang involvement in mainstream schools, pupil referral units and AP.

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