



Safer Schools:

Keeping gang culture
outside the gates

May 2016

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catch
22

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thank you to all of the young people, teachers and mentors who participated in this research – I am grateful for the opportunity to listen to you talk about your experiences and views.

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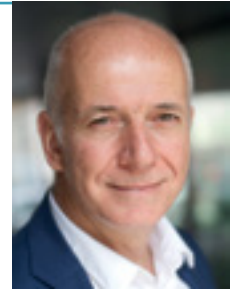
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Foreword

**Chris Wright,
Chief Executive, Catch22**



Youth gang culture poses serious challenges for a significant and growing minority of schools in the UK. This report provides a timely and unique insight into these challenges by exploring the experiences and views of pupils and teachers in alternative provision. Too often, young people reported that they had attended schools – including mainstream schools, pupil referral units and other forms of alternative provision – where gang culture had taken root. This led to increased levels of violence, drug and weapon possession, and young people disengaging from their education.

The essence of this report, however, is forward-looking, positive and optimistic. It presents the case that there is nothing inevitable about gang culture permeating through a school's gates. To this end, the report highlights current examples of best practice that schools are using to manage and address the challenges posed by pupil gang involvement. It also identifies a number of progressive steps that any type of school affected by these issues should find useful.

To ensure that our schools are places where young people can feel safe and focus on their education, we need an open and honest discussion about the issue of youth gangs and a willingness to address the associated challenges from a wide range of stakeholders. Implementing some of the recommendations in this report will require difficult decisions to be made about the appropriate allocation of resources in the education sector and elsewhere.

It is important that these decisions take into consideration the significant economic and human costs of failing to take adequate steps to keep gang culture outside our schools. Given the magnitude of what is at stake, it would be prudent to pilot and robustly evaluate a range of strategies designed to address issues around pupil gang involvement in the UK. The findings presented in this report point towards a number of options that are worth pursuing.

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The Catch22 Dawes Unit brings together research, policy and practice in order to reduce the harms caused by gangs and gang-related crime.

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Executive summary



1. 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.

1.1 Key findings

1.1.1 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.

1.1.2 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.

1.2 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.

1.2.1 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.
- **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.

1.3 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.

1.3.1 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.



Introduction

2. Introduction

Deon: We get pupils that are involved in all kinds of stuff: some are in gangs, drugs, been abused. They have lost faith and trust in adults and people in general. A lot of the time they get excluded because they are so caught up in the street life that they bring it into the school environment.

Head teacher

All young people have the right to an education that enables them to reach the highest level of which they are capable, in an environment that is safe and nurturing.¹ When youth gang culture is allowed to permeate a school, however, this can put pupil and teacher safety in jeopardy 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 violent conflict, a decline in pupils' educational engagement and school attachment, challenges around the possession of weapons, and the use and distribution of drugs.²

This report provides a first-of-its-kind insight into the issue of schools and gangs by drawing on fieldwork inside alternative education provision (AP) across three major cities in the UK. Whilst we know from recent research that pupil gang involvement is a growing concern for some mainstream schools, the situation in AP has yet to receive attention from researchers.³ This report redresses this gap by exploring the challenges raised by pupil gang involvement and identifying best practice for schools in responding to these challenges.

2.1 Alternative education provision

The vast majority of young people in the UK are educated in mainstream schools. A significant minority, however, struggle with this form of schooling. Some pupils may begin to attend their school infrequently, stop attending entirely or attend but behave in a manner that the school deems unacceptable. This can result in pupils being referred to an alternative form of education, referred to in this report as alternative provision (AP). Compared to their mainstream peers, young people in AP are more likely to come from deprived backgrounds and chaotic homes, be known to social services and criminal justice agencies, and be involved with and affected by gang involvement and serious youth violence.⁴

Types of AP in the UK vary considerably. Ofsted define AP as 'something in which a young person participates as part of their regular timetable, away from the site of the school or the pupil referral unit and not led by school staff.'⁵ Whilst pupil referral units – local authority establishments that provide education for young people outside mainstream schools – are themselves a form of AP, for the purposes of this report AP and pupil referral units will be treated separately.

During the last five years, policy and practice in relation to AP has been in flux. In 2011, the (then) Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, made a speech referring to the ‘educational underclass’; he was referring to young people in AP. The speech prompted a review into improving AP outcomes. The report that followed outlined 28 recommendations in areas such as ‘expectations’, ‘quality assurance’ and ‘commissioning’, all of which were accepted by the Department for Education.⁶

In May 2015, a government report was released which reflected on the policy changes that had taken place (and are still taking place) in relation to AP over the last five years.⁷ The report also provided an update on the ongoing actions to improve AP, which include extending school powers to use off-site AP, trialling a new approach whereby mainstream schools choose and fund AP for the pupils they exclude, and phasing out pupil referral units by replacing them with free schools and academies. Overall, the stated aim of these changes is to improve pupil outcomes by giving providers of AP more control over their staffing, curriculum and budget to ensure that children ‘receive the same quality of education as pupils in mainstream schools’.⁸

The most up-to-date, publicly available UK statistics show that there were 20,503 young people in AP in January 2015; these figures are projected to remain stable over the next five years.⁹ Given the potential for gang involvement to affect the lives of so many young people attending AP, therefore, this is an issue that demands the attention of policy makers and practitioners alike.

2.2 What do we already know about pupil gang involvement and schools?

Despite the central role of school in young people’s lives, as well as the recent notoriety of serious youth violence and gangs in political discourse and the UK media, there is a paucity of research focusing on the subject of pupil gang involvement and schools. One notable exception to the dearth of research in the UK is a recent report commissioned by the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), which presented the results of four case studies of UK schools.¹⁰ The report concluded that pupil gang involvement raised the following challenges for schools. First, some members of staff believed that gangs inculcated an anti-education attitude among those who were involved. This was often the result of young people thinking they could secure a better future through drug dealing rather than through progress in their school education and legitimate forms of employment.

Second, the possession of knives associated primarily with gang-involved young people decreased the extent to which pupils and members of staff felt safe within schools, as well as on their journeys between home and school. In order to feel safer, some pupils became involved with gangs, despite research indicating that gang involvement increases the likelihood of a young person being victimised.¹¹

Third, members of staff were concerned that older gang members were encouraging younger pupils to hang around with them outside school, which led to a decline in their school attendance rate. And fourth, incidents related to gangs, for example stabbings and shootings in local communities, were distracting pupils from their work, as gossip about these events disrupted pupils’ focus within the classroom. Overall, however, the study concluded that the problems associated with gang involvement were confined to a minority of pupils in each of the participating schools.

Another recent UK study involving surveys with pupils from five London schools found that pupils' school commitment had an indirect yet significant relationship to their propensity for gang involvement.¹² The importance of school commitment in terms of predicting a young person's propensity for gang involvement has been supported in some US-based studies, but not others.¹³ There is also some support, primarily from US studies, for a link between gang involvement and a number of other school-based risk factors, including academic failure, low educational aspirations, negative labelling by teachers, clarity and fairness of school rule enforcement, being associated with gang-involved peers, few teacher role models, educational frustration, high levels of antisocial behaviour in school, low test scores and an unsafe school environment.¹⁴

Although not focusing specifically on the issue of pupil gang involvement, there has been a greater quantity of research on violence within schools, and on the effectiveness of school-based violence prevention initiatives. Studies on violence-specific programmes, again mainly from the US, show some promising signs, particularly those which sought to teach social competence skills and improve knowledge and attitudes through the use of cognitive behavioural methods.¹⁵ In addition, whole-school initiatives that involve, among other things, adjusting the ways in which discipline is managed, pupils are taught and classes are structured have been found to reduce violent attitudes and behaviour.¹⁶

Two sources of guidance for UK schools on pupil gang involvement and youth violence are worth noting. First, the Department for Children, Schools and Families published *Gangs and Group Offending Guidance for Schools* in 2008.¹⁷ Whilst this guidance provided a useful set of strategies and techniques for addressing pupil gang involvement in mainstream schools, its scope did not specifically include AP nor did it empirically examine the challenges posed by gang involvement in any depth. The same can be said about the recent Home Office guidance *Preventing youth violence and gang involvement: Practical advice for schools and colleges*, published in 2013.¹⁸ Viewed in the context of the fieldwork on which this report is based, both documents underplay the importance of supportive and trusting relationships between members of staff and their pupils.

Although studies conducted across a range of countries reveal that the age at which people join gangs varies widely, there is general consensus that early adolescence – between the ages of 11 and 15 – is the most likely time for young people to become gang involved.¹⁹ Despite this being a period during which many countries mandate young people to attend full-time education, the subject of schools and gangs is yet to receive adequate attention from researchers.²⁰ The limited amount of research that has been conducted in this area has provided a consistently negative portrayal of the effects of pupil gang involvement on schools. Whilst the findings presented in the current report are largely consistent with previous research, the evidence from the fieldwork conducted inside AP in the UK indicates that the relationship between pupil gang involvement and its effects on schools is more contingent and nuanced than the straightforwardly negative one presented by many previous studies.

2.3 Methodology

The current study had two main aims: (1) to explore the challenges to schools raised by pupil gang involvement, as perceived by members of staff and pupils working within and attending these schools; and (2) to identify best practice in terms of addressing the challenges posed by pupil gang involvement.

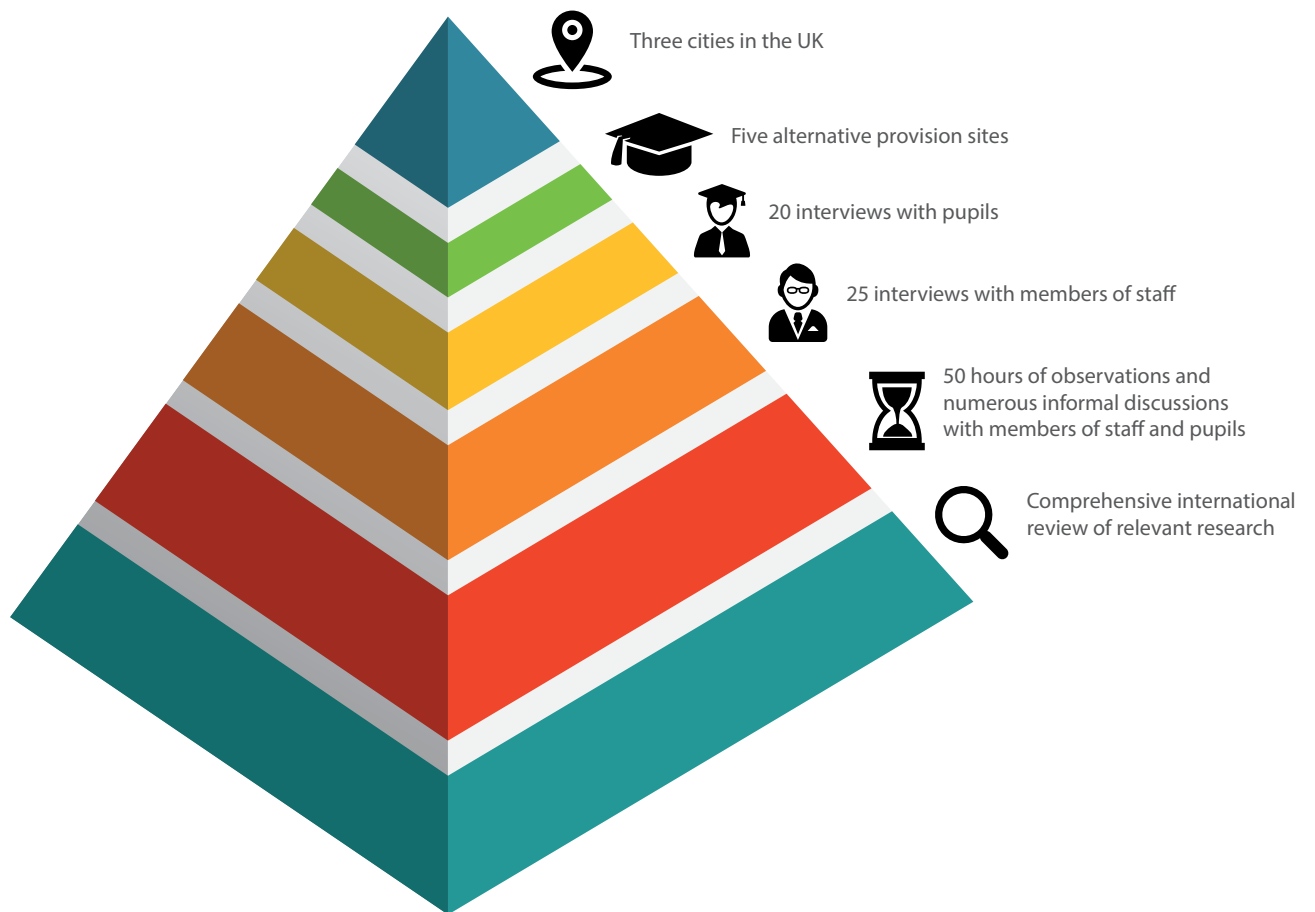
It is important to note that the study was not intended to provide a representative reflection of AP across the whole of the UK. Instead, it was designed to shed light on the types of challenge that pupil gang involvement raised for schools, and to identify best practice in this area.

Fieldwork was conducted inside five AP sites across three major cities in the UK. Prior to the research, each AP had reported experiencing issues around pupil gang involvement. All three cities contain areas with an established history of gang culture. The schools' intakes ranged between 25 and 50 pupils, making them considerably smaller than the average mainstream school.²¹ The vast majority of pupils who attended these schools were aged between 14 and 16; all pupil interview participants fell within this age range. All five schools were mixed gender, although every school had a higher proportion of boys on their roll than girls.

Periods of observation were conducted in each site, totalling approximately 50 hours. In addition, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with pupils and members of staff. Interviews with pupils (16 with boys and four with girls) focused primarily on their feelings of safety within their school and the effects of gang culture on these feelings of safety. Of the 20 pupils interviewed, seven were identified as gang involved through a process of both self-nomination and teacher identification. Interviews with 25 members of staff (14 with male members of staff and 11 with female members of staff) focused on their knowledge and awareness of gang involvement and how it affected their pupils, as well as how pupil gang involvement affected the school as a whole.

Whilst discussions tended to focus on AP, this report also addresses the experiences and views of members of staff and pupils in relation to mainstream schools and pupil referral units because many participants had recent experience of attending or working in these institutions. Consequently, the focus of this report is not restricted to AP, but instead provides an overarching portrait of the UK's educational landscape.

Figure 1: Sample and research methods



A photograph of three young men in a pool hall. The man on the left wears a black hat and a grey sweater. The man in the middle wears a black cap and a grey hoodie. The man on the right is leaning over a pool table, focused on a shot. The background features vibrant graffiti in purple, yellow, and red. The text 'The challenges of pupil gang involvement' is overlaid in the center in a bold, blue font with a yellow outline.

**The challenges
of pupil gang
involvement**

3. The challenges of pupil gang involvement

Pupil gang involvement can raise a number of significant challenges for schools. The fieldwork undertaken for this report largely supported the findings of previous international research on gangs and schools.²² There were, however, a number of noteworthy points of divergence. Whilst pupil gang involvement *could* result in increased levels of violence within schools, *could* enhance issues around drugs and weapon possession, and *could* result in lower levels of school attachment and educational disengagement, these outcomes were certainly not inevitable.

In this section of the report the main challenges of pupil gang involvement have been broken down into four main sections: (1) violence; (2) weapon possession and use; (3) drugs; and (4) school attachment and educational engagement. Each issue will be discussed in turn before the report explores best practice for schools in terms of responding to these challenges.

3.1 Violence

Previous research provides evidence of a significant link between gang involvement and an increase in violence.²³ On the whole, the current study provided further confirmation of this link, with most young people reporting that the presence of rival gang members within schools produced a tense atmosphere, punctured by frequent outbreaks of violence:

Luke: At my last school there was bare gangs; it was a violent place.

Pupil

When attending schools with an established gang presence, many pupils described how young people either affiliated with a gang or faced the constant threat of bullying and victimisation. A number of pupils were sceptical about the ability of members of staff to protect pupils from one another, with pupils consequently reporting that they felt it was down to young people themselves to secure their own safety::

Interviewer: Are there any changes that you think would help make school feel safer for young people?

Marcus: Naa, not really. I don't really think there is anything, there's nothing you can really do to be honest... if someone feels unsafe at school, what could you really do? For that person to be safe, they're gonna need to find their own way – man's gonna need his own way of feeling safe.

Pupil

Marcus's own way protecting himself was to become involved in a gang in school. The irony here is that gang involvement typically increases the risks of violent victimisation.²⁴ Whilst it is concerning that a gang presence in schools created a vicious cycle in which other young people were drawn into gangs out of fear for their own safety, this fact should provide a powerful stimulus to schools to take up the challenge of helping their pupils to feel safe.

Some members of staff were concerned about the potential for gang-involved pupils to inflict violence on non-gang-involved pupils outside the school gates.

The majority of violence, however, seemed confined to incidents that occurred between rival gang-involved young people. Of particular relevance in the context of the current report were cases in which pupils had experienced violent confrontations on their journeys to and from school.

One member of staff recounted an episode in which one of her students, Talik, had been recognised in a music video that had been uploaded onto a popular social media site, and subsequently was targeted by young people from a rival gang. Several young people from the rival gang, which had been denigrated in the music video, had recognised Talik and targeted him in a revenge knife attack on his way home from school, stabbing him multiple times.

Members of staff spoke about the potential for conflict stemming from interactions over social media during evenings and weekends to spill through the school gates:

Chris: [Pupils] will pop up on social media and start disrespecting each other in a rap video, then they'll come back to school on Monday and start kicking off.

Member of staff

Pupils also spoke about the potential for gang-involved young people to visit different schools during the school day to attack members of rival gangs:

Rio: I've been at schools where rival gang members have come looking for individuals, and have actually managed to get into the schools. It's real life, it's one of those things that can happen...rival gang members have come in to play a football match, and they've come loaded, meaning they've come with knives. Basically, they go into a school and they know that such and such is there and that is the only time they can really get to him.

Pupil

It is important to note, however, that many members of staff and pupils reported that the vast majority of violent incidents inside their schools were not connected to gangs. According to teachers as well as pupils, these schools experienced a certain level of verbal and physical conflict because many of the young people in attendance had histories of violent behaviour, which had often triggered their exclusion from mainstream settings. In fact, in a number of cases members of staff argued that the presence of gang-involved pupils could decrease pupils' propensity for violence inside school premises:

Kelly: Because the students that are gang involved seem to have more of a culture of respect around them, possibly that might be a reason for them not being involved in fights and stuff, because the [non-gang-involved] students don't tend to really bother them too much; but then [the gang-involved students] don't seem to particularly bother the other students either.

Member of staff

In one school, the presence of two young people who held relatively senior positions in a well-known local gang generated a degree of order and calmness that some staff members believed would not have existed had they not been on the school roll. Some members of staff believed that gang-involved pupils were typically more emotionally mature than non-gang-involved pupils because surviving and thriving in gangs involved a process of rapid maturation.

Even the presence of rival gang members within the same school did not necessarily generate violent conflict between pupils:

Liane: Last year we had another student, Marcus, very much involved in all that [gang culture], you know, quite high up in the pecking order of things. He comes to school absolutely fine, and he would be in the same class as Darren [member of a rival gang], absolutely fine – no concerns. As soon as school ended, Darren said, ‘If Marcus sees me on the street, he’ll cut me up’, and Marcus would tell you, ‘Yeah, I would’. But we’ve got to that point where in school we have control of it.

Member of staff

The success of Liane’s school in terms of creating an environment within which pupils from rival gangs could ‘rub along’ together during school hours was commendable; the ways in which the school achieved this are explored in Section 4 of this report.

3.2 Weapon possession and use

Members of staff in all schools reported that a number of their pupils carried weapons – predominantly knives – outside school premises. Moreover, they reported that those most likely to carry weapons were young people involved with gangs. These views were supported by discussions with pupils. In relation to two of the five participating schools, members of staff believed that a small number of their pupils carried weapons whilst inside school premises.

Simon: If I was to guess, in our school here right now, out of our students, I would say about four or five are probably carrying weapons.

Interviewer: And do you think there’s any link between those students who are carrying weapons and being involved on the outside as groups that you might label as a gang?

Simon: Yes, definitely.

Member of staff

Members of staff in one school reported instances of pupils crafting weapons whilst on school premises, for example by removing the blade from pencil sharpeners and using a lighter to melt it into a pen to create a makeshift shank. Incidents involving weapons within the school gates, however, were extremely rare.

The reason most cited by members of staff underpinning a young person’s decision to carry a weapon was to feel safer, despite research suggesting that knife possession makes victimisation more likely.²⁵ Gang-involved young people stated that they carried knives when travelling to and from school to protect themselves, particularly if their journey required them to pass through areas associated with rival gangs.

Chris: Some of my pupils carry knives because they’re repping this so-called postcode rubbish, so for them to go from one postcode to another they can’t walk freely – they carry a knife for protection because they are scared.

Member of staff

Four recent incidents of pupils being stabbed on their journeys home from school were described by members of staff from three of the five participating schools. Despite some members of staff believing that gang-involved pupils carried weapons within their schools, most did not seem worried about their own personal safety. Members of staff were insistent that pupils did not carry weapons for use within the school. Indeed, some teachers highlighted that pupils would hide weapons in a nearby location before entering school, and then pick them up again at the end of each day for their journey home:

Scott: They would never use them in school, that isn’t why they’re carrying. Most of them don’t bring them inside anyway; they stash them somewhere nearby and collect them on their way home.

Member of staff

Whilst most members of staff strongly believed that their pupils had no intention of using weapons within their school, it is important to note that a small number of teachers were concerned for their personal safety. Pupils themselves were more divided on this issue. Some believed, like most members of staff, that weapons were unlikely to be used on school premises. Other pupils, however, felt anxious about the fact that other young people carried weapons whilst in school:

Interviewer: How do you feel about other pupils carrying knives in school?

Jermaine: On edge, innit. No one would step to me, but like, you just don't know what is gonna happen, do you?

Pupil

Whilst the fieldwork did not uncover any instances of physical harm being caused by pupils using weapons inside school premises, pupils' awareness of other pupils carrying weapons whilst in school understandably caused some young people a certain degree of anxiety. Moreover, whilst most members of staff did not think that pupils would use weapons inside school premises, there was a general concern about young people carrying weapons and their vulnerability outside the school gates, particularly in relation to those who were gang involved.

3.3 Drugs

When asked about the issue of drugs, members of staff in all five schools reported unanimously that drugs affected a large proportion of their pupils. There was little doubt amongst staff that many used drugs, primarily cannabis, but also other drugs such as cocaine, amphetamines and synthetic cannabinoids. One of the major issues around drugs is that they could cause pupils to become academically disengaged due to their immediate and direct effects on a pupil's ability to learn:

Darius: Yea, cannabis is our number one, definitely number one problem. I would say fifty percent of the students in this school are users, possibly could be higher; regular users, daytime users, morning users, night-time users...a lot are actually those who are trying to block life out more – those are the ones that we tend to notice are struggling more emotionally, academically and so forth.

Member of staff

In terms of any connection between drug use and gang involvement, however, most members of staff argued that drug use affected most pupils regardless of their gang involvement. In fact, some staff members were keen to highlight that gang-involved pupils exhibited a certain level of control over their drug use that meant it did not interfere with their schooling in the same way as other non-gang-involved pupils.

The key issue around drugs and gang-involved young people, therefore, was not necessarily drug use, but drug dealing; this could have a powerful effect on pupils' academic progress by impacting on their motivation to learn:

Steve: They [gang-involved pupils] say things like, 'What is the point in being in education when I can go out and earn this amount? Why am I bothering with education?' They want to be out [of school] because they want to be earning money, and their phone is ringing constantly...some of the boys always say, 'I need my phone, I'm a businessman'.

Member of staff

Beyond the immediate effect that drug dealing had on stunting an individual's motivation to learn, there were broader concerns about the allure of the drugs which gang-involved young people had access to, as well as the violence that drug dealing could entail:

Damien: They [gang-involved pupils] might start bringing in bags of weed, and they might be the person that is telling everybody, 'If you want it, I got it', and acting like the pied piper and everyone is following them after school... if that person is heavily [gang] affiliated then they might have people looking for them, then that also draws others into potential danger, and staff as well.

Member of staff

Whilst drug use was an issue that affected a large proportion of the pupils in AP, drug dealing was confined to a far smaller number of pupils – pupils who were likely to have some type of link to gangs in the community.

3.4 School attachment and educational engagement

Based on previous research, it might reasonably be assumed that gang-involved pupils would be less attached to their school and less academically engaged compared to their non-gang-involved peers.²⁶ Some evidence from the current research supported these findings, with many members of staff believing that a gang lifestyle could leave gang-involved pupils feeling demotivated:

Amy: A lot of them are so demotivated to learn because they think, 'Why should I go to college when I can get so much money on the streets?'

Member of staff

Gang involvement, drug dealing and the allure of fast money appeared to offer some pupils an attractive alternative to what they perceived to be the difficult grind of education that ultimately held little prospect of success. Although Rio (discussed above) expressed a strong desire to leave gang life behind, his vision of the future was torn because of the perceived difficulty of succeeding in education and gaining employment:

Rio: The way that teachers make it out is that you go college, you go uni, and then the minute you step out of uni there's a guy in a suit that says, 'Yo, I've got a job for you in a big company'. Ain't happening like that 'cause there's a million people that want that same job – what have you got that they haven't? You know what I'm saying?

Pupil

Some gang-involved young people had become so demotivated to learn that they had stopped attending school entirely. In these cases schools attempted to engage pupils using outreach work – a process by which members of staff would visit the young person in a location outside school, such as their home or a local library, to provide them with mentoring and support with their learning. Members of staff generally reported that a higher proportion of gang-involved young people were educated in this way compared to their non-gang-involved peers.

There was also some evidence that incidents related to gang-involvement that occurred outside school hours, such as violent conflict between rival gang members, could spill into school and significantly affect pupils' ability to concentrate on their work:

Sam: He [a gang-involved pupil] is always telling me about what's going down on the street for him. One day he said, 'Yeah, my mate got stabbed yesterday. There was a group of boys; they stabbed my friend'. And it messed him up for the whole day in school because that is all he kept thinking about, you know what I mean, he didn't want to study, he was just thinking about revenge.

Member of staff

This finding resonated with previous research which found that pupils were easily distracted from their work by discussions of gang-related incidents occurring outside the school gates.²⁷ The hype and drama around events occurring in local communities, therefore, could not always be kept outside the school gates.

As with violence, however, the connection between school attachment and gang involvement was not straightforward. A number of staff members were keen to challenge the assumption that gang-involved pupils were less likely to be academically engaged than their non-gang-involved peers:

Kelly: The two students that are gang involved here, they have fairly good academic ability, so they are perfectly fine to just sit down and get on with their work. They could be sat in the classroom for an hour just writing, whereas for some of the other students that is just not where they are at.

Member of staff

Participation and success in gangs endowed gang-involved young people with a certain standing among their school peers. Not only did pupils treat gang-involved young people with a certain degree of respect that was not automatically afforded to one another, but gang-involved young people themselves exhibited high levels of social confidence within AP. In short, they felt secure about their status because of their reputation of being part of a gang, and therefore did not feel the need to prove themselves through altercations with other pupils:

Interviewer: The students who are in gangs, would they cause more problems in school than other students, or not?

Mark: I would have thought, yes; instantly, I would think yes. But the three that I know who are in gangs are probably three of the most well-behaved. But then, how we interpret that is that they already have that reputation, they don't need to show it off.

Member of staff

Not only did members of staff report that gang-involved pupils were better behaved than other pupils, but some also reported that the presence of gang-involved pupils could encourage an environment in which other pupils were better behaved and focused on their work:

John: The first year I was in this school, one of the leaders of a big gang in [City X] was my student. Back then I didn't know that. He was good for helping me keeping the class quiet, everyone did their work, so I never knew he was in a gang until he left the school.

Member of staff

An incident during a period of observation indicated the potentially positive impact that a gang-involved young person could have on a school's climate. Simon, a teacher who was shortly due to be taking a two-month leave of absence from the school, was concerned about the potential for his pupils' behaviour and work ethic to deteriorate whilst he was away. He decided to speak to Marcus, a gang-involved young person who was acknowledged by all members of staff to be particularly influential amongst other pupils – influence that stemmed in large part from his position in a well-known local gang.

Simon spoke to Marcus about how important the next few months would be for many pupils who were approaching their GCSE examinations. He acknowledged the power that Marcus had in terms of influencing the behaviour of other pupils in the school. Simon stressed to Marcus that it was important he use his influence among other pupils to foster a positive attitude towards learning and revising in the remaining few months before final examinations. Marcus responded maturely to Simon's request, and agreed to try to keep other pupils on track while Simon was away.

It is worth noting that despite being involved in a gang outside school, Marcus had relatively high educational aspirations; he reported during his interview that his goal was to study business at university. Indeed, gang-involved pupils commonly exhibited higher levels of ambition and drive to be successful than their non-gang-involved peers. Whilst much of their ambition and drive was currently being directed toward success in street gangs – particularly in terms of making money from drug dealing – most gang-involved young people also expressed a desire to earn money legitimately:

Rio: It's better for me to do my grades, go to uni, and if it works out have a legit business, work a legit life, because then I know I'm not looking behind my back. I'm not driving and thinking someone is going to pop this door and put two in my head because what I'm doing is illegal.

Pupil

Most gang-involved young people, however, were highly sceptical about the potential for educational progress and legal employment to match the current level of income they were able to generate through drug dealing. This, they argued, meant that it was unlikely they would desist from gang activity for the foreseeable future.



**Addressing the
challenges,
building on
the positives**

4. Addressing the challenges, building on the positives

The previous section highlighted two major challenges that pupil gang involvement can raise for schools. First, the presence of gang-involved pupils in a school can (but does not inevitably) cause young people to worry about their personal safety. This is concerning not only because schools should be places in which young people feel secure, but also because fears over personal safety can drive young people to become involved in gangs because of a belief (albeit often mistaken) that being gang involved will make them safer. Second, when young people become gang involved this can (but does not inevitably) result in them feeling less attached to their schools and disengaging from education.

Bearing this in mind, in order to address the challenges raised by pupil gang involvement, schools should focus on two primary components: (1) ensuring pupils feel safe whilst they are in school; and (2) increasing the extent to which their pupils feel attached to school and are engaged in their education.

4.1 Making schools safer

Ensuring that young people feel safe at school is a desirable end in and of itself. In addition, however, it is particularly important that schools are places in which young people feel safe because when they feel unsafe they are more likely to become involved in gangs.²⁸

4.1.1 Knowledge and understanding

A prerequisite to creating safe schools is for members of staff to have a good understanding of the causes, indicators and consequences of young people's gang involvement. In relation to the five AP schools involved in the current study, knowledge

and understanding of pupil gang involvement was mixed. All five of the participating schools employed a combination of teachers and mentors. Whilst the primary role of teachers was to deliver lessons to pupils, the main role of mentors was therapeutic, focusing on pupils' attitudes and behaviour.

All members of staff agreed on the crucial role played by mentors in AP, owing to the additional needs of their pupils compared to those of their mainstream peers. On the whole, it was mentors who had a better understanding of issues around youth gangs, due in large part to their childhood and adolescent experiences of being gang involved themselves, as well as their continuing personal connections to individuals involved in gangs, or connected to gangs, in their local communities.

Generally, teachers had less of an understanding of the issues relating to pupil gang involvement. Lack of knowledge and understanding was raised as a concern by several teachers, who highlighted that training on youth gangs was a prerequisite to their ability to address issues relating to gangs:

Helen: We can only make assumptions about some of these kids until you actually get the training...and in some respects, no disrespect to any of the staff, but they're not from that background, so they haven't got a clue about it: the signs, the signals. If you're not sure about it, you're guessing.

Member of staff

This highlights the importance of mentors or experienced and knowledgeable members of staff sharing their awareness of issues around youth gang culture with other members of staff who required training in this area.

Several pupils spoke about how difficult they found being in mainstream schools. Largely, they attributed this to poor relationships with their teachers, whom they felt knew nothing of the challenges and difficult home and community environments that young people inhabited when they left school each day. Some members of staff suggested that a key step in preventing these young people from being excluded from mainstream education in the first instance would be for mainstream schools to employ teachers and mentors with a good understanding of the lives of the young people who were at risk of exclusion:

Simon: The right amount of staff with the right amount of knowledge of the young people they're working with – I think that would be a great start. Definitely mentors, definitely. If [mainstream] schools had mentors their job would be so much easier, because they'd be the ones working on relationships – it's all about relationships. Once you build the relationship and they know they can trust you, the rest is easy.

Member of staff

Simon's emphasis on the importance of high-quality relationships was echoed by many other members of staff, as well as pupils. Lower staff-to-student ratios in mainstream schools, however, made it difficult for teachers to establish relationships with their pupils. A number of interviewees also argued that training on the subject of gang involvement was of limited benefit in terms of helping members of staff to engage and support gang-involved young people:

Greg: You can be trained all day, man. They can tell by the way you walk, by the way you stand up, you know what I mean? It's obvious...I could show you a member of staff or a social worker, and I could guarantee they could not talk to this young person, just because of the way they are.

Member of staff

Training, however, can be useful in a wider sense, for example in relation to identifying aspects of pupils' attitudes and behaviour that indicate gang involvement. The teacher identifying these issues does not necessarily need to be the adult acting on this information. Instead, if teachers are adequately trained to spot the signs of gang involvement, this would enable them to pass on their concerns to mentors, who could then decide how best to subsequently engage and support the young person concerned.

4.1.2 Relationships, respect and conflict resolution

The most important step that adults can take to help pupils feel safe whilst at school is to work on establishing positive relationships with their pupils. Whenever young people reported attending schools that suffered from frequent and serious conflict between pupils, they also typically spoke about poor relationships between staff and pupils. The link between poor-quality relationships and school violence seemed to exist for two main reasons. First, poor-quality relationships were a reflection of pupils' lack of respect for members of staff as well as the school, which meant that young people felt under no obligation to obey school rules.²⁹ Second, when members of staff lacked positive relationships with their pupils they could not effectively challenge and address pupils' propensity for violent behaviour:

Josh: There was a lot of fights [at a previous school], a lot.

Interviewer: And was there anything which the school could have done to prevent the fights?

Josh: [They] should have took a more caring approach to people...I definitely had some anger issues back then. When I came here they spoke to me, and look at me now: I'm happy now, I'm alright. But back then I couldn't control my anger or anything...they just didn't know what to do about it...here, they focus on you.

Pupil

Whilst Josh had been involved in violent confrontations with pupils in previous schools, he felt that one of the main reasons that he no longer got involved in such conflict was because of the positive relationships he had with certain adults in AP. Positive relationships, therefore, enable members of staff to identify the causes and triggers of a young person's violent behaviour and take appropriate action to address them effectively.

Other pupils in AP reported following similar transitions away from violent behaviour, often citing the patience, understanding and time that they had received from members of staff. A key factor that underpinned the relatively positive staff-pupil relationships in AP compared to mainstream schools was the lower ratio of pupils to staff in AP schools. Simply put, teachers in mainstream schools were tasked with educating far higher numbers of young people and were therefore unable to spend extended amounts of time with individual pupils.

Members of staff placed a similar emphasis on the importance of staff-pupil relationships in making schools safe places for the young people who attended them:

Interviewer: How do you think you managed to create an environment where those two [rival, gang-involved] students could get along with no problems in school?

Liane: I just think that we build an amazing rapport around students. And don't get me wrong, Darren was always wary, he wouldn't sit next to Marcus [member of a rival gang] in a lesson, but he'd be in the same environment as him...I think it's all about respect for the school, respect for the staff members that are here.

Member of staff

Interviewer: In terms of keeping schools safe, how easy do you think that is?

Simon: The relationships that staff have with young people is the key; I don't think it matters whether it's mainstream, or PRU, or alternative education.

Member of staff

Simon was highly respected by other members of staff and pupils. He had grown up in an area with a high gang presence and been involved in gangs during his adolescence. As discussed above, Simon had a good relationship with some of the gang-involved pupils in his school, which enabled him to persuade one particularly influential gang-involved young person to act as a role model for other pupils in the school, for example by outwardly adopting a positive stance toward the importance of final-year examinations.

A key benefit of positive staff-pupil relationships was that members of staff could have their finger on the relational pulse between pupils; they were able to recognise the warning signs of potential conflict at an early stage, pre-empt violent episodes and take preventative action:

Amy: We've had young people who have been, you know, sort of like enemies coming to the same provision. A lot of the work is done to prevent anything flaring up in the first place, so staff are very aware of a change in dynamics...staff can normally do something before it gets to conflict.

Member of staff

Moreover, if and when violence did occur between pupils, respect between staff and pupils enabled members of staff to bring together rival gang-involved young people in mediation sessions, in an attempt to resolve conflicts:

Dean: Conflict is handled swiftly through mediation, not suspending students, because they're going to have to work in life, so we just try to teach them that you might not be able to get along with everyone but you're going to have to squash any differences you have and get on.

Interviewer: And you do that by bringing students together?

Dean: We let them come together, yeah... otherwise we wouldn't be able to have students that have conflict in the same building, so to get past that and to teach them in life that, ok, you might not get along with everyone, but you need to be able to communicate where necessary.

Member of staff

Whilst the challenge of getting rival gang-involved young people to 'rub along' together in a confined space should not be underestimated, there were numerous examples of schools resolving conflict between young people to the extent that gang rivalries could be set aside upon entering the school gates:

Caroline: Although they were gang-related outside, they didn't bring it into school. We knew of them, we knew the gangs, we worked with them, but the kids themselves didn't actually bring it into school.

Member of staff

A further benefit of positive staff-pupil relationships is that they enabled members of staff to capitalise on 'teachable moments':

Darius: If a situation comes up, you can use that live situation to tap into it – that's often the best way. So you know, for a student arrested with a knife, his reason was self-defence – the gang that was round the corner from him was after his gang. Well, there you've got him: it's laid out on a plate for you to actually work with somebody.

Member of staff

Several staff members spoke about the period immediately following particularly negative gang-related events as being a crucial time to address a young person's gang involvement.

4.1.3 Supervision and security

One of the main reasons cited by both pupils and members of staff for the lower level of conflict between pupils in AP compared to mainstream schools was their relatively low pupil-to-staff ratio. This allowed adults to monitor pupils for the vast majority of their time whilst inside AP:

Liam: You're not going to get a one-to-one basis with 3,000 kids in a school, and even if you do, you can work with them in the classroom, you might do some fantastic work, but in break time and lunch time you send them back out into the wilderness and they're going mad, whereas here it's contained, we're with them from the time they walk through the door to the time they leave.

Member of staff

This view was reiterated by Remi who, when asked why his current school contained less violence than his previous school, highlighted the importance of staff-to-pupil ratios in keeping young people safe:

Interviewer: So why don't fights happen here?

Remi: There's more staff to students, so obviously there are less fights, which is good... there are more staff and a lot of mentors.

Pupil

Even when incidents did occur within AP, there were sufficient numbers of staff to respond quickly and effectively:

Darius: It's how quick you can get other staff around and so forth... I mean it is safety in numbers; it is safety within a good team that knows each other.

Member of staff

Another important aspect of pupil safety concerned the ways in which schools dealt with the possibility of young people bringing weapons into school. As discussed above, members of staff in all schools suspected that their pupils carried weapons outside school, and that gang-involved pupils were disproportionately likely to carry weapons. Both staff and pupils were also concerned about the potential for pupils to bring weapons into school, although the vast majority of people involved in the current study thought that the risk of weapons being used in school was very low. Nevertheless, some schools had taken quite drastic measures to prevent weapons from entering school premises:

Graham: When you entered our reception you wouldn't have been able to get through this door without somebody ringing you through because all the doors are secured. Pupils get searched in the morning – every pupil is searched. Not one pupil is allowed to go anywhere in the school without being searched; they empty their pockets, they leave their bags in the lockers – everything gets searched, simply because of the type of young people that we have here.

Member of staff

Findings from studies on the effectiveness of metal detectors and search policies are mixed.³⁰ Whilst increased security measures have been linked to reductions in incidences of violence, they do not seem to be effective in helping young people to feel safe. In the current study, young people had contrasting feelings about school policies that required pupils to be systematically searched upon entry. Ironically, gang-involved pupils whom members of staff deemed most likely to bring weapons into school reported the most positive views about the security measures:

Rio: I've been at many schools where rival gang members have come looking for individuals, and have actually managed to get into the schools. It's real life, it's one of those things that can happen and you never know, so it's good to be safe like in here...with this searching policy, and as you can see the magnetic doors, it would make things a lot harder.

Pupil

On the other hand, non-gang-involved pupils seemed to resent the intrusive search measures, which they felt should not be applied to young people who have never been caught in the possession of a weapon.

Other schools operated a less stringent search policy involving targeted searches of pupils using hand-held metal detector wands. These searches would typically be performed when staff members suspected a weapon had been brought into school. For some members of staff, however, the introduction of security wands into the school repertoire had not helped because they felt that they lacked adequate training to use them.

Another security measure was the confiscation of pupils' mobile phones. Some schools required their pupils to hand in their mobile phones at the beginning of each school day and collect them again at the end of the school day. The rationale underpinning this decision was that conflict could be initiated and escalated by pupils if they had access to phones within school:

Graham: Let's say someone has had an incident in class – starts with something simple like they've fallen out with each other – so they're there calling each other names and then it escalates from that into something that could become a fist fight. And then imagine they had their phone, so then they start to call all their people at the end of the school day to come down, and then we've got something else going on. So to eliminate all of that we just basically say, 'Hand in your phone'; that's it.

Member of staff

Most schools, however, primarily viewed mobile phones as a distraction from making progress in lessons rather than as a potential security issue. Therefore, it was more common for schools to require their students to hand in their phones before lessons; after lessons, the phones would be returned for use during break periods.

Given the extent to which young people are typically attached to their mobile phones, it was unsurprising to find that one of the things most disliked by pupils was their AP's 'no phones' policy. When pupils understood the rationale behind the policy, for example to help pupils avoid distractions during lessons or to make school safer, however, they generally accepted it:

Rio: When I first came, [teachers] explained to me that [the confiscation of mobile phones] is a safeguarding issue, because they've had rival gang members here and it's easy to make a phone call and say, 'Meet me outside', and so on and so on; so I can understand why they don't want us to have our phones on us.

Pupil

In summary, whilst the schools participating in the current study operated very different security policies, both pupils and members of staff largely reported that it was supportive and trusting staff–pupil relationships – based on high staff-to-pupil ratios – which in turn enabled an enhanced level of supervision that contributed to safer school environments.

4.1.4 Managing journeys to and from school

Although it is important that schools take seriously the issue of pupil safety within school premises, it was journeys between home and school that seemed to constitute the most dangerous time for gang-involved pupils. Whilst incidents of gang-related violence were rare within the participating AP schools, there were numerous examples of gang-involved pupils experiencing violent conflict on their journeys to and from school.

To reduce the likelihood of gang-related violence occurring, a number of schools had implemented policies regarding the end of the school day. One school, for example, ensured that members of staff were present at the school gates, as well as at the nearby bus stops which pupils used to return home. These policies were appreciated by gang-involved pupils, who reported that these were the times when they felt most exposed to violent conflict:

Josh: In our school the kids would leave and there would be two members of staff at the gate, two members of staff on the main road, and two members of staff near the bus stop, because let me tell you, we've got rival gang members in here, so me and you can laugh and joke like, 'Yeah, we're cool', but I know, and you know, that after school it's all different: I'm coming for you.

Pupil

The increased risk of violent conflict between gang-involved young people at the end of the school day was closely linked to pupils hiding weapons in nearby locations before entering school premises, which they collected for their journeys home:

Amy: We've had at times people bring weapons and hide it, stash it out there, so at the end of the school day staff are on guard... and that's because of incidents that take place outside school.

Member of staff

Given the risk posed to gang-involved young people on their journeys between school and home, the policy of providing some level of staff supervision of pupils after they had left the school gates seemed to be one of the most important and effective means of increasing the safety of pupils.

4.1.5 Managing intake and pupil transfers

All participating schools had some form of management over the referrals they received from other schools. This was particularly important in relation to gang-involved young people due to the additional issues that their gang involvement raised. First, there was potential for newly arriving gang-involved pupils to have issues with other pupils from rival gangs already in attendance at the school. Second, even if there were no rival gang members attending the school, it was possible for a school to be located in an area associated with a rival gang, meaning that journeys to and from school could be problematic for newly arriving pupils.

To minimise the risks associated with integrating new pupils, AP schools received information from referring schools and conducted their own assessments to find out as much relevant information about a pupil's potential involvement in gangs as possible:

Liane: When the students come in we do the assessments, and part of our assessment questions is, 'Do you have any concerns about any students from [Area X] or [Area Y]?' Are they gang-related? We're doing a risk assessment to make sure they're safe. And you know, we've had times where Leon [a pupil] has been stood outside, and he has been punched and got chased after school, so you know, we have to look very closely about where that student can be placed because of gang-related affiliation.

Member of staff

These assessments were important in terms of pre-empting potential problems for the young person concerned. When the majority of a school's intake came from a particular area – meaning that most pupils belonged to a single gang – then schools had to be particularly careful not to accept referrals of young people who lived in other areas that were associated with rival gangs.

Some schools were split into multiple sites located in different parts of a city. This meant that they were able to circumvent the potential problems of educating rival gang-involved young people in the same building. Craig, a gang-involved pupil, had recently been attacked by a group of young people from a rival gang outside his school because the school was located in an area 'belonging' to the rival gang. As a result, Craig was transferred from a site in the north of the city to another of the school's sites in the south – a pragmatic solution which meant that Craig no longer had to enter the area claimed by the rival gang.

When there was effective multi-agency communication, schools could gain a good understanding of a young person's gang involvement and strategically plan the move from their previous school to minimise the risk of gang-related violence:

Mike: Well the ones that we do know [are gang-involved], it has been a part of their background information that has come across with them.

Interviewer: From the referring school?

Mike: Yes, the school, social workers, the YOT team. There are security reasons why he can't be at certain sites, so he was put at this site because it is out of the line of fire.

Member of staff

When a pupil's gang involvement was not adequately captured during the assessment process, this could have negative implications for the pupil concerned as well as other pupils within the school:

Graham: Jayden [pupil] didn't tell us that there were any issues and we didn't hear that there were any issues from our people at the school. He starts the school and within that first week there are fights, a lot of things going on, and it turned out that [Jayden and some of the other pupils] knew each other from previous areas. Incidents had happened outside school and they were still continuing the incidents.

Interviewer: And how did that work out eventually?

Graham: In the end we had to terminate the newest pupil from the school...it's about safeguarding everybody.

Member of staff

This case highlights the problems that can occur when a pupil's gang involvement is not identified by schools at the earliest possible stage. Given that many pupils arriving at AP will already have experienced the process of being removed from mainstream education, it is important that further upheaval is avoided due to its potential to inflict further damage to a young person's self-esteem and identity.³¹

4.1.6 Programmes focused on gang culture or character building

Research suggests that young people are most likely to become involved with gangs between the ages of 11 and 14, although there is evidence that some become involved as young as five.³² Given these statistics, it is worth highlighting that preventative initiatives and early intervention are best targeted at children in Key Stages 2 and 3 (the final years of primary school education and the first three years of secondary school education). This view was strongly advocated by members of staff:

Liane: I think there needs to be a lot more education; you know preventative stuff that needs to happen early. I think it's all done afterwards actually, when we think, 'Oh that child must be involved', then we try to pick them up. These kids are already in deep, they're earning money and they're thinking, 'Actually, this is my new family, these people care about me'.

Member of staff

In particular, some members of staff highlighted the importance of support for at-risk young people during the transition period between primary school and secondary school:³³

Brian: That's what I think is missing: the transition from primary to secondary, even before [at-risk pupils] left primary, we used to do nurture groups going into primary schools, working with the families. Now I thought that worked, but it was all to do with funding... they pulled the funding. At one stage we were actually doing ourselves out of a job because we were keeping so many kids in school.

Member of staff

The schools participating in the current study were primarily responsible for educating pupils between the ages of 14 and 16. Pupils and members of staff, therefore, both expressed their opinion that preventative efforts would be better targeted at younger pupils because the majority of at-risk young people would already be gang involved by the time they entered AP.

There is some evidence that school programmes focusing directly on the issue of reducing pupil gang involvement can have positive effects on pupil attitudes and behaviour.³⁴ Members of staff also highlighted the potential for recent government initiatives promoting character education to benefit young people in AP.³⁵ Projects that help young people to build character, resilience and grit have the potential to bolster young people's confidence and ability to resist gang culture.

It is worth noting that pupils were sceptical of the value of targeted gang and youth violence programmes for older pupils (those in Key Stage 4, the final two years of secondary school). It is interesting to note that when asked about the likely effectiveness of gang programmes in schools, most gang-involved young people assumed such programmes would consist of efforts to assure pupils that their schools were safe environments, rather than efforts to teach pupils about the negative implications of joining gangs:

Rio: If they could put in like a programme for kids like us [gang-involved young people] who are going through the same thing, to kind of make them feel like in school there is nothing to be worried about, around the school perimeter there is nothing to be worried about, so kind of making us feel safe, I think that would help.

Pupil

This reinforces a point made throughout this report about the importance of pupils' perceptions of school safety and its relationship to young people's propensity to become involved in gangs.

When asked about the potential for gang-specific programmes to reduce young people's propensity to become involved in gangs, most pupils believed that such efforts would be ineffective for older pupils because they were already well aware of the causes and consequences of gang involvement. Those who did advocate the use of gang education programmes stressed the importance of these programmes being delivered by someone who had credibility in the eyes of young people, which typically meant having first-hand experience of gang involvement – something that many teachers lacked.

Some members of staff were concerned about the potential for school gang programmes to exert a negative influence on impressionable young people, who might become desensitised to gang culture and inclined to perceive it as something 'cool'. Indeed, analogous programmes aimed at reducing young people's propensity to become involved with crime

have actually been shown to have the perverse effect of increasing the likelihood of offending behaviour in later life.³⁶

In summary, therefore, whilst gang-specific programmes might have a role in educating young people below the age of 14, most pupils and members of staff participating in the current study were sceptical of the value of these programmes to older pupils.

4.1.7 Multi-agency working

All members of staff flagged up the importance of multi-agency information sharing. In general, staff members felt that their schools cooperated well with other agencies:

Darius: We have a staff member [who] liaises with all agencies involved with that young person: YOTs, social services, CAMHS, flip-workers, mentors from outside. If they go to a youth club, we'll get to know them, if they join a football team or a netball team, we'll get to know those people. That for me helps give a massive holistic picture of our young people, which enables us to tackle those issues around gang involvement.

Member of staff

Members of staff argued that having a detailed account of pupils' lives outside school was valuable in helping them to understand and respond appropriately to pupils' attitudes and behaviour within school. A number of members of staff reported that the quantity and quality of information from other agencies about gang-involved pupils, however, was sometimes lacking. In particular, staff members reported that there were occasions when they did not receive appropriate information about pupils who had been referred to them from mainstream schools or pupil referral units.

One point worth noting in particular is that several members of staff highlighted the divergence between the picture presented by a young person's written files, and how that young person behaved when they arrived at AP:

Simon: Some of the files I get...I've had kids where the local authority has described them as the Kray twins; two brothers, and we was like, 'Oh my god, shit, what are we gonna do?' And when they came they were the nicest two boys we had in the school; they were at the bottom of the food chain. You are just like, 'Who wrote this?' The things you read...there were like 38 incidents for this one girl in her previous school, and since she's been here, nothing.

Member of staff

Members of staff suggested that the information in pupils' files might sometimes have been exaggerated to justify their exclusions from mainstream settings. Nevertheless, it seems likely that young people were better behaved on their arrival at AP because these schools were more able to cater for their needs, for example because of their smaller class sizes, higher staff-to-pupil ratios and the presence of mentors who were particularly good at establishing positive and trusting relationships with young people.

Most members of staff reported that a multi-agency network that shared a greater quantity and quality of information about gang-involved pupils would be helpful, but acknowledged that the extent to which this was possible in practice was restricted by time and resources.

In relation to young people's views of other agencies, gang-involved pupils had particularly negative perceptions of the police. This could largely be explained by the fact that interactions between gang-involved pupils and the police came predominantly in the negative contexts of the police reacting to reports of criminal or antisocial behaviour. One common suggestion aimed at changing young people's views about the police, therefore, was for the police to visit the school and interact positively with pupils on a regular basis. However, a number of members of staff highlighted that police visits must be carefully managed to avoid unintended negative consequences:

Brian: I think having more of a stronger link with the police, not just police coming in when there's trouble, but so they see the kids often and have better relationships with them. Our kids might say something while the police are in and there could be some quite serious repercussions, so it depends on how the police might manage that sort of situation – if a kid is giving him abuse and he ends up getting arrested because we brought the police in, how much good has that done? Who did we actually do that for, you know?

Member of staff

Previous research has identified a strong relationship between people's perceptions of police legitimacy and their willingness to cooperate and engage with those in authority and obey the law.³⁷ Improving relations between young people and the police, therefore, could be a key component of a school's strategy to prevent and address gang-involved pupils' propensity to engage in criminal behaviour.

4.2 Increasing school attachment and educational engagement

A less direct but equally important component of a school's strategy to address pupil gang involvement is to take steps to increase pupils' attachment to school and educational engagement.

4.2.1 School attachment

The majority of gang-involved pupils spoke positively about AP, particularly when comparing it to previous experiences in mainstream schools and pupil referral units. Two main factors underpinned these positive assessments: the quality of relationships between members of staff and pupils, and the perceived fairness of school rules.

When asked what they liked most about their current school, the most common reply from pupils included a reference to their relationships with adults in AP. Pupils explained this by highlighting

the relatively high staff-to-pupil ratios, which gave adults more time to spend with young people than had been possible in mainstream settings:

Jermaine: What I like about [this school] is, because the classrooms are more small, you're getting more one to one. And they've got a system where you actually have a mentor and a teacher, so you basically get the attention you need.

Pupil

In addition to an increased quantity of attention, gang-involved young people also spoke about the quality of attention they received from adults in AP who understood their backgrounds and the challenges they faced when growing up in their communities:

Rio: There's a bit more of cultural diversity going on [in this school] and there's more black teachers, so you can relate – not that you can't relate to white teachers, but there's a lot more teachers who in a way kind of have lived what we have lived, done what we have done, but changed, so it's like a role model for us...I do think it's a positive thing.

Pupil

Pupils also spoke positively about their time in AP because of the relationships they had established with other pupils.

Josh: This school is like, all together. We're like family here – we stick up for each other, we're like friends. But [my previous school] is like, split up; it's like being in America.

Pupil

As illustrated by Josh's comment, the relatively small intakes in AP meant that pupils typically felt part of a connected, unified group of young people, which contrasted to their experiences of division between factions of young people in mainstream schools. Some members of staff emphasised the

importance of school attachment, particularly in terms of fostering something akin to a 'whole-school gang':

Darius: So within here, how do you create your own gang – your [school] gang, without calling it a gang? We're a family, we're a group, it's the same things you're looking for out there; how can we mimic it in here...

Member of staff

One of the most important steps in terms of fostering a 'family culture' within schools was to ensure that conflict between pupils was kept to a minimum. Pupils reported that levels of bullying in their schools were minimal compared to previous schools. This did not mean that incidents of conflict between pupils were non-existent. Because of the high staff-to-pupil ratios, however, pupils were rarely unsupervised by members of staff, meaning that incidents could be dealt with swiftly and effectively.

Another important factor which affected school attachment – also highlighted in previous studies³⁸ – was pupils' perceptions of rule fairness. Rule fairness is perhaps most important in relation to gang-involved young people, who often exhibit a higher propensity to break rules compared to their non-gang-involved peers.³⁹ Schools in which pupils' perceptions of rule fairness were most positive had implemented two main steps regarding rules.

First, teachers had engaged pupils in collaborative discussions which informed the content of school rules, as well as the rights and responsibilities of pupils and members of staff within the school. Secondly, each rule was underpinned by a clear rationale, which was explained to pupils during their school induction, as well as on posters displayed around the school. Although pupils in these schools expressed their dislike of particular rules, for example not being allowed to consume fizzy drinks and having to hand in their phones during lesson time, the vast majority of pupils reported that they regarded these rules as fair.

4.2.2 Educational engagement

On the whole, young people in AP are less engaged in their education than young people in mainstream schooling.⁴⁰ Pupils participating in the current study, however, commonly reported that they had made better progress since moving to AP because of the higher staff-to-pupil ratios and the greater level of attention that they received from teachers (the importance of staff–pupil relationships is already well established in research on education, particularly with regard to young people with issues around school attachment and educational engagement). Pupils believed that their mainstream teachers either had no interest in their educational progress or could not give them sufficient attention due to the demands of larger class sizes:

Remi: There are a lot less problems at this school because there are more staff and a lot of mentors...in [mainstream] school the teachers don't care about you that much – if you learn, you learn, and if you don't they just want you to get out of the class, whereas in this centre they will motivate you to learn.

Pupil

On the other hand, not all pupils felt that their education had benefited from being in AP. Some of the more academically able pupils felt that they had been held back by less able or disruptive pupils, and that some of the work they were asked to do in AP did not fully challenge them because it replicated work they had already covered in mainstream education.

All young people argued that positive relationships between pupils and teachers were a key ingredient in fostering positive attitudes towards learning:

Marcus: If the teacher respects you and you can have a little laugh and whatever, then you'll do the work and you'll listen to him.

Interviewer: And what advice would you give to a teacher on how best they could do that?

Marcus: Get to know the students; get to know each student, like on their level.

Pupil

It is worth noting some recent initiatives, most notably in the US, that have sought to stimulate pupils' interest in education through the integration of music, particularly rap and hip-hop, into the curriculum.⁴² The UK's equivalent of rap is known as 'grime' and it forms a core component of many gang-involved young people's identities, as reported by pupils themselves. The vast majority of gang-involved young people involved in the current study spent much of their spare time outside school either listening to grime music or making it.

Given the success of integrating hip hop and rap music into classrooms in schools in the US, grime music would appear to offer a valuable mechanism for inspiring and engaging gang-involved young people in their education in UK schools. It should be noted, however, that members of staff warned against stereotyping young people and reinforcing negative labels and stereotypes. Moreover, some members of staff argued that 'hooks' such as music and sport should only be used as tools to engage young people, and should not form the core focus of education itself.

4.3 Limitations

Whilst it was possible for schools to effectively manage the challenges raised by gang-involved pupils inside school premises, many pupils and members of staff were sceptical about how much schools could do to reduce the prevalence of young people's gang involvement outside the school gates.

Many members of staff reported that once pupils were involved in gangs, the forces that bound them to the gang were too powerful for schools to counteract. Young people stressed that the environments in which they lived meant that gang involvement was an almost unavoidable part of their lives outside school:

Aaron: It depends what you're brought up around; if you're brought up in a rough area and there are gangs around, you got no choice.

Pupil

For precisely the same reasons that pupils would seek to join a gang in an unsafe school, young people sought the protection of gangs if they lived in unsafe communities.

In addition to the desire to feel safe, another powerful motivator of gang involvement was the money that young people could make 'on road' dealing drugs. Gang-involved pupils reported that drug dealing was a stressful activity that involved significant risks to young people's safety. One way of minimising these risks was to become involved in gangs, which they believed would afford each individual member the protection of the group:

Rio: People are put in situations where they have to make that money illegally to provide the life they are living...

Interviewer: And is it easier to deal [drugs] if you're involved in a gang?

Rio: A lot, yes. Because it can mean that you can handle yourself. It can mean that people don't really want to snake⁴³ you because they know you're not just a normal drug dealer; you got a posse, people behind you.

Pupil

Gang-involved pupils highlighted the gap between the amount of money that they made through drug dealing and how much they could realistically make through legitimate employment:

Rio: There's no way I'm leaving my house at five in the morning to work for someone for six pounds an hour – what am I, some kind of slave or something? I could go on-road and come back with a grand in my pocket; new creps⁴⁴ and new tracksuit, and you want me to go out at 5am? Naa mate, ain't happening.

Pupil

Viewed in this context, it is understandable that some teachers focused squarely on the goal of keeping gang culture outside the school gates, whilst arguing that the task of reducing the prevalence of youth gang involvement in the community lay beyond their remit:

Liane: It's about saying, 'Well actually, whatever goes on outside school happens outside school – it doesn't happen in here.'

Pupil

Members of school staff can and should take appropriate steps to keep their pupils safe whilst in school and help them to make the best possible progress in their education – this will go some way towards minimising the negative effects of pupil gang involvement, as well as preventing some young people from being drawn into gang culture. Schools are limited, however, in their ability to change a macro-economic, sociocultural climate in which many young people believe that drug dealing offers them opportunities to generate significantly greater amounts of money than legitimate employment. Nor can members of staff do anything to redress the reality that when their pupils are ejected from school at the end of the day, many return to deprived and volatile communities in which status and respect depend overwhelmingly on the fast acquisition of wealth and physical violence.⁴⁵

This much has been acknowledged by leading politicians in the UK, including the (then) Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, who stated that 'gangs...are the product of the high levels of social breakdown and disadvantage found in the communities in which they thrive'.⁴⁶ Karen Bradley, the Minister for Modern Slavery and Organised Crime, has also highlighted that gang and youth violence 'is not an issue that any one agency or government department can tackle alone'.⁴⁷

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



Conclusion

5. Conclusion

Although youth gangs have been notorious in recent political discourse and UK media, and whilst young people spend a significant amount of their time in school, there has been a dearth of research on the subject of pupil gang involvement and schools. This report has provided a first-of-its-kind insight into young people's gang involvement by drawing on fieldwork conducted in five AP sites across three major cities in the UK.

The research addressed two main aims: (1) to explore the main challenges for schools that are raised by pupil gang involvement; and (2) to identify best practice in terms of responding to these challenges.

5.1 The challenges of pupil gang involvement

The main challenges of educating gang-involved young people related to violence, the possession and use of weapons, drug use and drug dealing, school attachment and educational engagement.

Pupil gang involvement was not straightforwardly linked to an increase in violence within schools as one might assume from the existing literature on gangs.⁴⁸ When gang culture entered a school's gates, this could lead to frequent and serious violent conflict between pupils. When schools were successful in keeping gang culture outside school, however, there were many examples of gang-involved pupils being able to 'rub along' together. In these cases, violence between gang-involved young people predominantly occurred outside the school gates, as schools found effective ways to reduce violence between pupils during school hours.

Reports of violent incidents involving the use of weapons inside school were rare. Although members of staff and pupils typically believed that at least some young people carried weapons both outside and inside school, most did not think that weapons would be used inside school grounds. Understandably, however, pupils' awareness of other young people carrying knives whilst in school caused some pupils a significant degree of anxiety. There was also a general concern among members of staff about young people carrying knives on their journeys to and from school, particularly in relation to those who were gang involved.

Drug use was an issue that affected a large proportion of the pupils in participating schools regardless of young people's gang involvement. Drug dealing, however, was confined to a far smaller number of pupils – pupils who were likely to have some type of link to gangs in the community.

The relationship between gang involvement and young people's attachment to their schools and educational engagement varied depending on individual circumstances. Certain aspects of gang culture had the potential to demotivate students from engagement in their education, leading them to believe that the quick money associated with drug dealing and gang involvement offered a more attractive future than the pursuit of legitimate careers. On the other hand, some gang-involved young people showed signs of relative maturity compared to their non-gang-involved peers, and therefore behaved relatively well and made relatively good progress in terms of their education.

5.2 Addressing the challenges, building on the positives

The challenges associated with educating gang-involved young people should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, schools can take a number of steps to effectively address these challenges.

The most important thing that a school can do to prevent gang culture from negatively affecting the school environment is to focus on ensuring that their pupils feel safe. In large part, this depends on fostering and maintaining positive relationships between adults and young people. These relationships enable members of staff to pre-empt conflict between pupils and respond effectively to conflict when it does arise. In relation to gang-involved pupils – who members of staff argued were often affected by issues around attachment – the quality of their relationships with members of staff was particularly important.

Too often, pupils reported that they did not have a single positive relationship with an adult in their previous mainstream school or pupil referral unit. In these schools, the establishment of positive relationships was problematic for two main reasons. First, gang-involved young people reported that their mainstream teachers typically led very different lifestyles to their own, and lacked any knowledge or experience of the challenges they faced. Additionally, the structure of secondary school education (which involves pupils having different teachers for each subject), combined with relatively large class sizes, prevented adults from spending extended periods of time with their pupils, even if there was potential for positive relationships to develop.

In AP, on the other hand, specialist mentors and many members of staff often had similar life experiences to the young people they were educating. Moreover, some schools had adopted a primary school structure of teaching that involved one or two adults continuously teaching each young person over the course of several months. Both of these factors resulted in young people forging positive relationships with adults in AP, which contributed in large part to pupils' positive accounts of school safety.

Appropriate security measures also played a part in ensuring pupils felt safe. In some schools in which serious incidents had occurred involving the possession of knives, systematic searches of pupils on their entry to school were an appropriate response and helped young people to feel safe. In other schools where issues around knife possession were less prevalent, however, less intrusive security measures had been adopted that involved more targeted searches on a case-by-case basis. Moreover, because the journeys to and from school often constituted the periods of highest risk of gang-related violence, some schools had taken measures to increase the safety of their pupils, for example by ensuring there was a staff presence at the school gates and by the main bus stops used by pupils.

Positive relationships between staff and pupils not only created safer schools, but also enabled staff to address pupils' potentially low levels of school attachment and educational engagement, both of which have been found in previous studies to be significant predictors of gang involvement.⁴⁹ Attitudes toward school and education also depended on schools implementing an engaging curriculum. The relative flexibility of the curriculum in AP meant that pupils were often re-engaged in their education through vocational learning opportunities and the use of educational 'hooks' such as music and sport.⁵⁰ This provided pupils with a sense of achievement and allowed them to obtain a greater number of qualifications that both members of staff and young people believed would not have been obtained had pupils remained in mainstream education.

In relation to reducing the prevalence of young people's gang involvement, safer schools will go some way towards preventing some young people from becoming involved in gangs. Moreover, school programmes educating pupils about the dangers of gangs and youth violence might have some role to play in preventing gang involvement. For two main reasons, however, these programmes are best targeted at pupils under the age of 14. Pupils under this age are less likely to have cemented their own views on gang culture and therefore may be more amenable to messages from adults about the negative implications of gang involvement. In addition, by the age of 14 many young people are already embedded in gangs; by this time it is very difficult to counteract the forces that bind them to gang culture.

5.3 Final reflections

A fundamental distinction should be made between the presence of gang-involved pupils in schools and the presence of gang culture. If gang culture infiltrates a school, this can result in increased rates of violence, increased weapon possession and drug dealing, and decreased levels of school attachment and educational engagement. If schools can keep gang culture outside their gates, however, the mere presence of pupils in school who are gang involved in the community will not necessarily generate negative outcomes. Indeed, some members of staff in AP argued that gang-involved pupils were often better behaved and more engaged in their education than their non-gang-involved peers.

The current report has portrayed a relatively positive picture of the way participating schools had responded to the challenges raised by pupil gang involvement. This is not intended to infer that AP necessarily provides a better means of educating gang-involved young people than mainstream schools. Indeed, the damaging effects of exclusion from mainstream education have been well-documented in previous research.⁵¹ Moreover, given the sample of five AP schools across three cities in the UK, it is important to highlight that this report is

not intended to provide a representative portrait of AP in the UK more broadly.

Instead, the current research was valuable for identifying key challenges that the presence of gang-involved pupils may generate for all schools across the UK, regardless of whether these schools are mainstream, pupil referral units or AP. In addition, the fieldwork uncovered many strategies and interventions that were successful in terms of responding to the challenges raised by pupil gang involvement. Whilst these strategies and interventions might need to be tailored to suit the needs of individual schools, their utility is certainly not restricted to the AP schools that participated in this study.

It is worth noting that researchers interested in gang involvement have highlighted that young people's identities are multifaceted and contingent.⁵² 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 suggested that if gang-involved young people are given the opportunity to leave gang culture outside the school gates – with all of its associated pressures and risks – and transition into a safe and nurturing school environment, they will often embrace it. When this happens, the negative effects associated with gang involvement fade, and gang-involved young people simply become young people in need of a decent education.



Recommendations

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on fieldwork in AP schools as well as an extensive review of the international literature on schools and gangs.

6.1 Building supportive and trusting staff-pupil relationships

- To establish and maintain supportive and trusting relationships between adults and young people in schools, every pupil should have frequent and prolonged contact with at least one member of staff. These relationships enable gang-related issues to be identified, managed and addressed effectively. It is important for all members of staff to adopt a non-judgemental attitude toward gang-involved young people.

6.2 Knowledge and training

- 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. If certain members of staff already have a good understanding of these issues – as was often the case with mentors in AP – schools should seek to train other staff and share knowledge internally. Members of staff working in schools affected by gangs should receive specialised mediation training to effectively pre-empt gang-related conflict between pupils and respond effectively to such conflict as and when it occurs.

- When pupils are transferred between schools, referring schools should provide an adequate quantity and quality of information about the pupil to the school receiving them. Wherever possible, schools should arrange home visits to establish positive working relationships with pupils' families at the earliest possible stage.

6.3 Prevention and early intervention

- Once young people are gang involved it becomes increasingly difficult to counteract the forces that bind them to gang culture. A focus should therefore be placed on prevention and early intervention. School gang and youth violence programmes should be piloted and robustly evaluated using randomised control trials with children at risk of gang involvement in Key Stages 2 and 3. These programmes are most likely to be successful if implemented by adults with credibility in the eyes of young people; often this means that teachers will not be the best people to deliver these programmes.

- Aside from gang and youth violence-specific programmes, recent government initiatives around building character, resilience and grit in pupils have the potential to reduce the likelihood of young people becoming gang involved. Again, these programmes should be piloted and robustly evaluated using randomised control trials with children at risk of gang involvement.

6.4 Increasing educational engagement

- Members of staff working in AP recognised that the content and structure of education adopted by mainstream schools does not suit all young people. This is reflected in the provision of different structures and styles of learning, and the offer of vocational learning opportunities, which were often embraced by pupils in AP. Young people should not have to experience the rejection and esteem-damaging process of exclusion to access a form of education that suits their needs. To reduce the likelihood of young people being excluded from mainstream education, all schools should be granted sufficient flexibility and resources to encourage and enable their pupils to access vocational learning opportunities if these have the potential to reignite young people's passion for learning.
- A flexible and engaging curriculum is crucial to increasing pupils' engagement in education, particularly in the context of AP, where young people are particularly prone to educational disengagement. Schools should seek to integrate multiple hooks into the curriculum based on things that young people feel passionately about, such as music and sport. These hooks can be integrated into a broad range of subjects and used to engage young people in the wider curriculum. Care should be taken, however, not to stereotype young people or to inappropriately narrow the focus of their education.

6.5 Increasing school attachment

- A lack of school attachment is an established predictor of gang involvement. The best way of increasing pupils' attachment to their schools is to focus on building positive relationships between young people and members of staff. To reiterate a recommendation provided above, schools should focus on ensuring that each of their pupils has frequent and prolonged contact with at least one member of staff in order to establish and maintain positive and trusting relationships between adults and young people. This is particularly important for gang-involved pupils or pupils at risk of gang involvement because these pupils are more likely to have issues around attachment than their non-gang-involved peers.

6.6 Weapon possession

- If weapon possession is known to be a serious issue among pupils in the school, then routine pupil searches may provide the only feasible mechanism of adequately protecting pupils. Wherever possible, however, such searches should be avoided in order to respect the rights and dignity of young people, and prevent the breakdown of positive relationships and trust between pupils and members of staff. Alternative strategies and methods that schools should consider include (1) liaising with police around the possibility of a police presence outside the school gates before school begins to provide a potential deterrent to weapon possession; (2) a more selective search policy based on specific information related to pupil weapon possession; and (3) a whole-school approach to educating young people about the dangers of knife possession, including open dialogue between staff and

pupils, and signs displayed prominently around the entrance to schools warning pupils about the consequences of bringing weapons into school. A blanket recommendation around school security would be inappropriate given that school security policies should be tailored to suit the needs of individual schools.

6.7 End-of-school-day policies

- Where there are concerns around the potential for gang-related violence to occur in a school's surrounding vicinity, the school should ensure that there is a staff presence at the school gates as well as near the main bus stops used by pupils to return home. Appropriate safety training should be provided to members of staff.

6.8 Working constructively with other stakeholders

- Schools educating gang involved pupils should ensure that they have a good knowledge of surrounding communities. 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.
- As a strategic priority and as part of their wider strategy around the reduction of gang involvement and youth violence, police officers should visit schools and interact with pupils on a regular basis. This will help to redress the negative perceptions that gang-involved young people have of the police.

The implementation of some of these recommendations, such as those regarding the reduction of violence and weapon possession, or effective multi-agency working, would require only the development or amendment of current policies and practice. Others, such as ensuring that all schools affected by pupil gang involvement employ mentors who have an in-depth knowledge and awareness of gang culture, ensuring that pupils have extended contact with at least one member of staff to build supportive and trusting relationships between adults and young people, and ensuring that schools are able to provide a range of academic and vocational learning opportunities to young people, would require difficult decisions to be made around the appropriate allocation of resources in the education sector and elsewhere.

A crucial consideration, however, is the costs of not implementing effective policies and practices around addressing pupil gang involvement. When young people become gang involved, their short- and long-term life prospects are damaged in a number of important ways. These include being significantly more likely to (1) drop out of education; (2) become involved in criminality and be arrested by the police; (3) be unemployed in later life; and (4) spend prolonged periods of time inside the criminal justice system.⁵³ Whilst all of these things impose a considerable cost in human terms, they are also undesirable from an economic perspective.

The current research was not designed to test the value or cost-effectiveness of strategies aimed at addressing pupil gang involvement. Given the magnitude of what is at stake, however, it would be prudent to pilot and robustly evaluate a range of these strategies; the findings presented in this report point towards a number of options that are worth pursuing.

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