

Gang-associated sexual exploitation and sexual violence

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- Funded by Office of Children's Commissioner for England
- Gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation (SVE)
 - Scale and nature
 - Routes in
 - Potential responses
- In-depth study in 6 research sites (anonymised)
- Multi-method approach
- Interim report November 12; Final report November 13

Definition of gang

‘A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who (1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, (2) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence, (3) identify with or lay claim over territory, (4) have some form of identifying structural feature, and (5) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs’ (Pitts 2008; Centre for Social Justice 2009).

- Disconnect between how young people and professionals define gangs

Definition of SVE

- Sexual exploitation: exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where a young person (or a third person) receives 'something' in return for involvement in some form of sexual activity (DSCF 2009).
- Sexual violence: incorporates any behaviour that is perceived to be of a sexual nature, which is unwanted or takes place without consent or understanding (NIO 2008).

Emerging findings

- Based on 68 interviews in first 4 sites
 - Half male, half female
 - 14-25 years of age
- Tentative observations based on preliminary analysis
- Presented with reference to existing knowledge

Nature of gangs

- Area-based
- Predominantly male
- Some female only gangs
- Variable ethnic composition across different locales
- Raison d'être and mode of operation varies across, and within, sites

Routes into gang environment

- Involvement of family or friends in gangs
- Normalisation of gang-involvement within social network
- Desire for a sense of belonging, status, power and/or respect
- Need for protection
- Disaffection with or disengagement from education
- Lack of training or employment opportunities
- Inadequate youth provision (particularly given the impact of recent cuts)
- Difficulties at home or in care

A unique phenomenon?

- Reflects what we know about SVE in general:
 - Perpetrators are predominantly male, victims are predominantly female;
 - It invariably takes place between people who are known to each other; and
 - It is used as a means of boys and young men exerting power and control over girls and young women.
- Utilise existing structures/learning – CSE and sexual violence, domestic violence, gangs

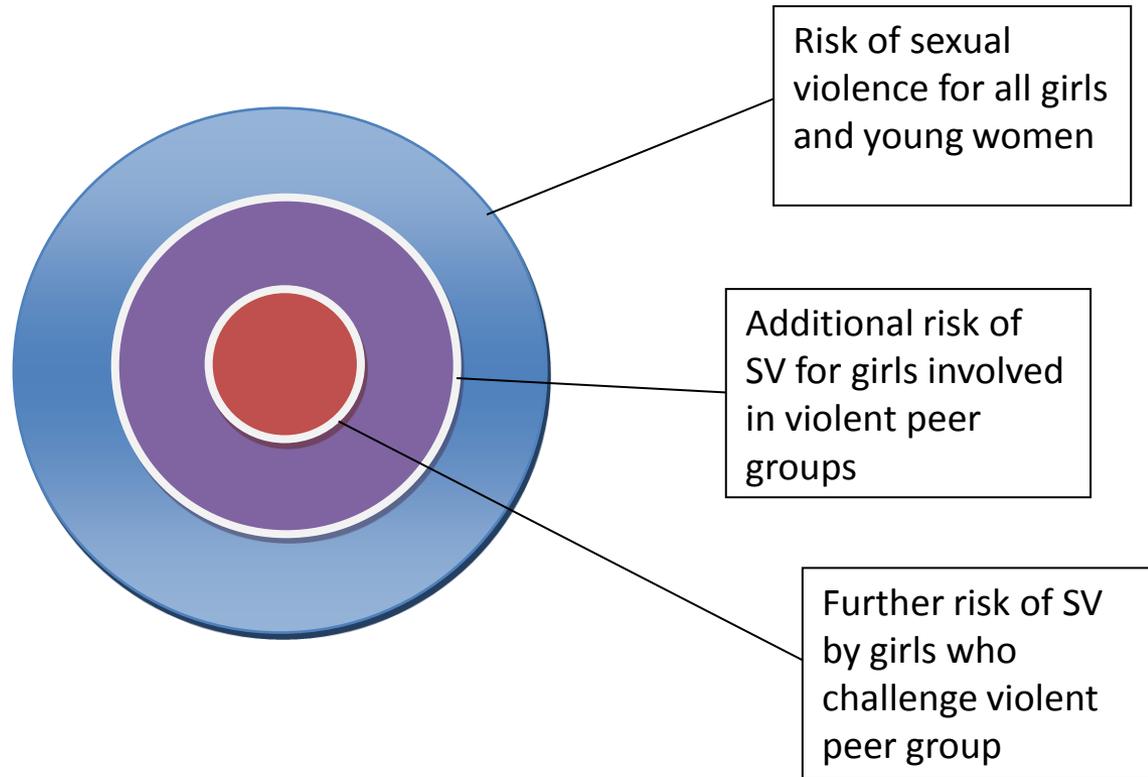
A unique phenomenon?

- Some features unique to, or exacerbated within, gang-environment, including:
 - Using sex as a means of initiating young people into a gang
 - Sexual activity in return for (perceived) status or protection
 - Young women 'setting up' people in other gangs
 - Line ups
 - Sexual assault as a weapon in conflict
 - Targeting sisters/female relatives

“Like my friend, it happened to her in the past...She was walking in the park and there was a gang of boys and then that [rape] happened to her...that’s cos of who her brother was. Cos’s he’s a top boy, they thought cos they can’t get to him, cos I think he was in jail, they can’t get to him, they’ll get to her” (21 year old young man, ex-gang involved)

Context of gang-associated SVE

- Hyper-masculine environment
- Young women viewed in terms of relationships to males
- Normalisation of violence
- Conflict mentality
- Relationship between role/status and risk of SVE



Risk of sexual violence for girls associated with violent peer groups
(Weller 2010)

Context of gang-associated SVE

- Gender and gang-associated SVE
 - Gendered assumptions about victims and perpetrators
 - Incidences against young men, but information not forthcoming
 - Different conceptualisation of incidences against males/females
- Lack of understanding as to what constitutes SVE
 - predominant discourses around masculinity and femininity
 - confusion around consent and coercion
- Gradients of consent

'If she has a name and someone tries to sleep with her and she won't let them, they know that she's slept with loads of other people, they'll force her into it. They would rape her. They would rape her, if you class that as rape, yeah... You've got girls like, one girl, I won't say her name but if you go to [area] and say her name everyone will know her. She's slept with everyone. Everyone. But it's got to a point that cos she's slept with so many people, when people see her it's more forced onto her 'Just touch it, man, just do that, just do this' and then she'll have to do it cos she'll be scared' (21 year old young man, ex-gang involved).

Low levels of identification/reporting

- Systems historically focused on males
- Low levels of reporting of SVE in general
- Normalisation, judgement, fear, mistrust
- Resignation to, or normalisation of, such experiences
- Fear of retribution or retaliation
- Judgment
- Lack of confidence in the ability of police and other statutory services to offer adequate protection following a disclosure

“Let me give you an example of why people don’t [go to the police]. Because if you go to the police station and say ‘this gang member raped me’ that gang member might be found guilty and go to jail, but remember he’s part of a gang. So all the ones in the gang, 500 people, 400 people, will come back to you, to your house. Could go to your family’s house, you know. So you might as well keep it on the low and move on with your life innit...If you go to the police, that’s the wrong move. That’s the worst thing a person could do...It’ll come back cos with gangsters they got to win innit. They never give up” (17 year old young woman, father of her child is gang involved)

Further reading

- Beckett et al (2012) *Research into gang-associated sexual exploitation and sexual violence: Interim report*
- Firmin, C. (2011) *This is it. This is my life...*
- OCC (2012) *'I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world'* OCC Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups
- Pearce, J. and Pitts, J. (2011) *Youth Gangs, Sexual Violence and Sexual Exploitation*
- Weller, N. (2010) *'Gangs: Don't you know it's different for girls?'*

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