Future approaches to gangs and youth violence would benefit from being evidence-based

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Research by Project Oracle into gang and youth violence found that the strongest indication of a positive impact has come from targeted, comprehensive, multi-agency initiatives. However, there were significant caveats in the available evidence. In particular, few programmes or projects in London had measured the effect of their work on levels of gang and violent behaviour. **Simon McMahon** *writes that a first step in tackling this issue is to encourage the right conditions for an evidence-based approach to inform future decisions.*

Gangs and youth violence have recently returned to the forefront of public debate in Britain. Negative assessments of the government's record since the riots of 2011 in many parts of London have been accompanied by calls for more concerted and sustained action against gangs. Yet one perspective which the debate appears to lack is how future policy and programme developments can be improved by being evidence-based.

The call for renewed action against gangs has focused on London, where the *Evening Standard* led with a dramatic special in late September and early October titled 'Frontline London'. This presented research findings from UCL with some significant findings: 10,000 young Londoners were exposed to sustained and extreme violence, nearly half of high-risk young people in London had seen a stabbing or shooting over the last year, one in four had witnessed a killing and one in five had been stabbed or shot themselves. These figures led the reports to describe everyday life for many young people in London as similar to that of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro or the frontline of a war zone.

Following these findings, calls have come from press, politicians and charities for a renewed push against gangs in the capital. An *Evening Standard* editorial claimed emphatically that 'until politicians on all sides recognise the scale of the problem and the urgency of tackling it, the scandal of London's gang culture will continue'. Camila Batmanghelidjh, leader of the charity Kids Company, with an annual budget of £20 million to help vulnerable children, claimed in a conference at the LSE that there was a need for a new model of working with London's children, and Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper stated that efforts so far had been too small-scale and that 'the Mayor and Government need to do more'.

These reports and calls for action rightly draw attention to the violent situations in which many young people in London live. But their responses do not contain much evidence of which attempts to change things have been most successful and which will be likely to result in future improvements.

Recent research for a forthcoming Project Oracle report can help to fill in this gap. Our objective was to systematically review the available evidence on the impact of interventions aimed at reducing gang and youth violence in London. We found two key points of relevance for the current debate.

Firstly, the strongest indication of a positive impact on gang and youth violence has come from targeted, comprehensive, multi-agency initiatives. These are programmes and interventions aimed at high risk groups and which focus on changing more than one cause of gang activity and violence, such as by promoting non-violent lifestyles *and* improving employment opportunities *and* punishing crime. This requires such efforts to be coordinated effectively among multiple organisations and government agencies such as community groups, schools, Local Authorities, Youth Justice Boards and the Metropolitan Police.

Secondly, our study also found, however, significant caveats in the available evidence. In particular, few

programmes or projects in London had measured the effect of their work on levels of gang and violent behaviour. Some evaluated internal programme dynamics and implementation processes, whilst others showed an impact on the attitudes of young people towards gangs and violence, but not on changes in their behaviour. A subsequent reduction in gang and violent activity may result from changing attitudes, but further data such as offending rates would be required to draw such a direct link. Unfortunately, this data and the resources required to carry out more elaborate research are not always available or within the scope of the charities and organisations which work with gangs and young people.

These findings reflect both a lack of certainty regarding the impact of current work aimed at reducing gang activity, and the complexity of developing an evidence-based approach to gangs and youth violence.

Our research suggests that programmes and interventions *may* be more effective if part of a broad holistic approach bringing together the key organisations in contact with high risk young people. Indeed, calls for a 'complex enforcement' approach which looks beyond simply increasing the police's ability to carry out arrests have already been made by others such as Patrick Reagan of the charity XLP. Similarly, what is known of the impact of anti-gang work would benefit from being able to join up the different types of data available from these organisations. This deepening and broadening of the evidence-base is something that Project Oracle is actively working to contribute to in collaboration with charities and voluntary organisations, academics and programme commissioners in London.

So if there is indeed a need to rethink the working model behind gang and youth violence reduction efforts, this should not be limited to calls for 'more action' and 'greater funding'. A good starting point would be to encourage the right conditions for an evidence-based approach to inform future decisions.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our comments policy before posting.

About the Author

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