



Consultation Response
Home Affairs Committee inquiry into Gangs and Youth Crime

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imkaan



**Girls
Against
Gangs
Project**

About Us: The MsUnderstood Programme aims to improve local and national responses to young people's experiences of gender inequality. The MsUnderstood Partnership is a three year partnership between the [University of Bedfordshire](#), [Imkaan](#) and the Girls Against Gangs Project, to improve responses to peer-on-peer abuse in young people's relationships and peer groups through:

- Intensive support of local areas to review and improve their strategic and operational response to peer-on-peer abuse
- A national assessment of provision for boys and young men who perpetrate gender-based violence
- Paid internships and volunteer placements for young people to influence policy and service development locally and nationally

[The MsUnderstood Programme](#) is founded and headed by [Carlene Firmin MBE](#), Research Fellow at the University of Bedfordshire

Introduction

The MsUnderstood Partnership welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Home Affairs Committee inquiry into Gangs and Youth Crime. In developing this response the MsUnderstood Partnership has drawn upon the following evidence:

- Emerging findings from local area support being delivered by the MsUnderstood Partnership
- Research from the University of Bedfordshire's International Centre Researching child sexual exploitation, trafficking and violence
- Emerging findings from on-going police case file analysis being conducted by the Head of the MsUnderstood Partnership
- Research into the impact of gang and serious youth violence conducted by the Head of the MsUnderstood Partnership while at Race on the Agenda
- Broader research and evidence into child sexual exploitation, teenage relationship abuse, and serious youth violence

Given the remit of the MsUnderstood programme (to focus on peer-on-peer abuse and exploitation) this response focuses on answering the following questions proposed by the inquiry:

- How reliable is statistical data concerning gang-related offences and "hotspots"?
- How can early intervention reduce or prevent gang membership?
- What examples of best practice are there in agencies responsible for ending gang violence, and what have been the results?
- What action should be taken to combat the involvement of girls in gangs?
- What action should be taken to protect children and young people from gang-related sexual violence and exploitation?

How reliable is statistical data concerning gang-related offences and "hotspots"?

1. While the definition of serious youth violence includes rape, statistical data tends to focus on gun and knife crime and there is an underreporting of domestic violence and sexual violence in the context of gang-related offences. We still do not have accurate data on the numbers of young people affected by sexual exploitation, and all figures that have been published are acknowledged as under-estimates. As is the case with national policy, the MsUnderstood partnership audit of local sites has found that that the data collected by local areas on youth violence often fails to include any data on sexual violence alongside statistics on stabbings and shootings. When local intelligence is used to identify 'hotspots' for gang-related violence and

abuse, MsUnderstood is yet to identify areas including data on sexual violence alongside other forms of serious youth violence.

2. While national and local data has not been collected in a uniform manner, cases of gang-related sexual violence and murders that involve young women have been processed through the criminal justice system. Ongoing analysis of these cases is uncovering that information gathered through these investigations is not used to improve local data on gang-associated young women, the risk they pose or the risk they face. We could be doing much more with this data to improve our understanding of the local and national picture.

How can early intervention reduce or prevent gang membership?

3. In the final Female Voice in Violence report (ROTA, 2011), interviews with men and boys demonstrated very violent attitudes and behaviours towards women and girls, both within and outside of a gang context: “Because you know and I’ll tell you this straight if a girl ever tried to set me up or snitch me out I’d be banging her teeth through the back of her face” (p69).
4. Interviews also demonstrated the lack of understanding and responsibility men and boys had for both their attitude towards, and their roles in, the violence experienced by women and girls: “Sometimes men will just hit girls because they’re the kind that can’t hit other men...they’ll hit girls because they think they can’t hit men, because they don’t think they’re hard enough” (p69).
5. Such attitudes and behaviours towards women and girls need to be routinely challenged in early intervention work or in school settings. Professionals who work directly with men and boys engaged in serious youth violence need to be equipped to address these attitudes, along with their engagement in criminal gangs and weapon carrying.
6. MsUnderstood advocates for compulsory PSHE lessons in schools that include sessions on respectful relationships, gender identity and masculinity, delivered by external professionals in the context of a whole-school approach to gender equality and safeguarding. Furthermore, any commissioning processes for early intervention services must include ways in which providers’ knowledge of gender inequality and notions of masculinity can be assessed.
7. Emerging findings from on-going police case file analysis being conducted by the Head of the MsUnderstood Partnership highlight situations in which children are

more vulnerable to gang membership and where early intervention following these situations could reduce or prevent future gang membership:

- 7.1 Boys who are experiencing domestic violence at home.
- 7.2 Boys whose first contact with police is as a victim of offences such as robbery, but where the response to that offence does not result in that young person being safeguarded a gang can become the source of protection.
- 7.3 Boys aged 12-14 who go missing and parents/agencies are unaware of where they are or who they are with. This may involve 'sofa surfing' and there is a serious concern about what boys are exposed to during such times.
- 7.4 Lack of support to and blaming of parents who seek support when they express concerns regarding their son's peer network or the risks he faces outside of the home. Emerging evidence suggests that parents are asking for help, but the offer of parenting classes seems insufficient as a response to supporting parents who are trying to protect their children from significant harm outside of the home environment.

What examples of best practice are there in agencies responsible for ending gang violence, and what have been the results?

8. As part of the case file review process, the Head of the MsUnderstood Partnership is identifying ways in which girls and young women have exited gang violence over the past five years and this information should enhance any approach that is developed to end gang violence. MsUnderstood also hopes to generate best practice over the next three years through direct support to local sites. Previously identified examples of best practice include:
 - 8.1 The Female Voice in Violence report highlights Lewisham Girls & Gangs Forum as an example of best practice. The forum was established in 2008 with the main aim of developing a joined-up way of working for local (and national) services who are working with girls and young women who are risk of sexual, financial and criminal exploitation, through gang association. As a result of a need identified by the forum, there is now a Youth Offending Service (YOS) 'Girls ONLY' group work programme that addresses the needs and risk of gang-associated girls and young women.
 - 8.2 Furthermore, the final report of the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) inquiry into child sexual exploitation in groups and gangs highlights the Women and Girls Network (WGN) treatment model to meet the needs of children and young

people who have experienced sexual violence. This model seeks to address the impact of trauma and build a child or young person's confidence by:

- Providing interventions to minimise trauma
- Providing age-specific interventions, as children and young people experience, express and manifest the impact of trauma in different ways according to developmental and chronological age
- Addressing their additional vulnerabilities and stressors that may impact on the traumatic experience and management of recovery e.g. family situation, gang association, disabilities, cultural harmful practices and minority ethnic communities

WGN has developed a specific framework to address these issues which is presented on page 38 of the OCC report.

What action should be taken to combat the involvement of girls in gangs?

9. Current policy and practice fails to prevent female association to criminal gangs, rarely identifies those at risk and places vulnerable girls in high-risk situations. In order to begin tackling the impact of girls in gangs we need to recognise that:
 - 9.1 Serious youth and gang violence is a child protection issue and should be seen as one in both practice and policy.
 - 9.2 Local authorities require a strategic and operational plan for responding to the impact of criminal gangs and serious youth violence on women and girls.
 - 9.3 Support services which are not criminal justice-focused must be provided, with clear communication of this to girls and young women.
 - 9.4 Female only spaces are required in schools e.g. Pupil Referral Units, gender-specific group work.
 - 9.5 Services must address the myriad of experiences faced by gang-associated girls and young women, such as their engagement in offending, experiences of domestic violence, sexual violence and sexual exploitation.
 - 9.6 Services should be developed for girls and young women with complete regard of their age.
 - 9.7 Domestic violence services must consider and respond to the specific needs of 16 and 17 year old girls, as they are now included in the government definition of

domestic abuse. This does not mean merely replicating services designed for adult women.

- 9.8 The strategic and operational response to girls and young women is at a very early stage of development and therefore requires coordination and oversight to avoid duplication and poor practice.
- 9.9 Policy and services must acknowledge the differences that may ensue for different forms of gender-based violence, and when abuse is instigated or perpetrated by other young people instead of adults.
- 9.10 Given that girls and young women under 18 are still children, the role of current provision for children including residential children's homes, fostering, and secure estates need to be considered, in addition to supported and semi-supported housing for young people who are 16+.
- 9.11 The importance of sexually harmful behaviour programmes that have been designed to work with children and young people; therefore drawing upon both the VAWG and Children and Young People sector to develop age and gender appropriate responses.

What action should be taken to protect children and young people from gang-related sexual violence and exploitation?

10. Responses to adult to child sexual exploitation usually focus on individual adult perpetrators. However sexual violence and exploitation occurs differently within a gang context and the issue of peer-on-peer exploitation is an increasing concern. This has been evidenced in both the Female Voice in Violence reports (2011), University of Bedfordshire reports in gang-associated sexual violence (2013), and most recently a study of Pan-London responses to child sexual exploitation produced by researchers in the University of Bedfordshire, including the Head of the MsUnderstood Partnership. In a chapter published last year, the Head of the MsUnderstood Partnership stated that young people experience and witness sexual exploitation in their peer-groups, schools, and neighbourhoods (Firmin 2013). For example, young women are exposed to sexual violence and exploitation through friendship groups where there is a norm of violence in their relationships, and in schools where there is a culture of sexual violence. Locating experiences of violence only in their homes or intimate relationships could render services inadequate.
11. Many of the warning signs and indicators of child sexual exploitation currently only refer to adult perpetrators. For example:

- Association with older boyfriends/girlfriends
- Relationships or association with risky adults
- Entering or leaving vehicles driven by unknown adults
- Schools and youth clubs are missing from potential locations where young people are exploited or accessed (this is sometimes the case for peer-on-peer exploitation)

12. While these are all valid for adult-on-child exploitation, they are not so for peer-on-peer exploitation. To identify and disrupt cases of peer-on-peer exploitation additional consideration may need to be given to:

- The impact on the school environment when both 'perpetrators' and 'victims' are in the same school
- Management of investigations when young peers linked to 'perpetrators' are able to threaten victims and witnesses
- Additional measures required to prove lack of consent when all those involved are under 18
- The need to identify cases where younger 'perpetrators' are associated to, and controlled by, organised crime groups and when they are not
- The potential overlap between cases of peer-on-peer exploitation, serious youth violence and teenage relationship abuse

13. Given increased awareness of abuse perpetrated by adults, it is important that professionals are given additional support to recognise, identify and address cases of sexual violence and exploitation perpetrated by young people.

14. On-going case file analysis of peer-on-peer abuse cases, and emerging evidence from local site support, indicates that there are a number of considerations that need to be taken into account to safeguard children who are exploited by their peers. When initiating an investigation, and throughout the criminal justice process, these cases have:

14.1 Sometimes involved on-going bullying and harassment within schools requiring victims to leave education.

14.2 Often required victims and all young people who act as witnesses to be re-located with their families.

14.3 Resulted in threats from peer groups and neighbourhoods which have delayed victims in agreeing to make complaints.

- 14.4 Involved online bullying via social media and mobile phones, from other young people, to force victims to retract statements.
15. This means that safety planning in education, on routes to-and-from school, and within peer groups and neighbourhoods is required when managing cases of peer-on-peer abuse and exploitation.
16. The University of Bedfordshire and Female Voice in Violence reports also evidence that there is a fear amongst young people that professionals can't keep them safe. It is often this level of fear which prevented them from reporting what had happened to them (in addition to other reasons such as not recognising that they were victims of abuse). Disclosures of serious incidents would often have to be shared with the police and young women do not have confidence in police in relation to their victimisation or her exposure of offending:

"If I'm telling you something and it's that serious like of course I'm wanting you to do something about it, but if I don't know what that is gonna be then I ain't gonna say; coz next thing you know you've got two police cars up the side of your house and people talk" (Young woman, 18 years old, Manchester) (Female Voice in Violence, 2011, p32)

17. If professionals can better communicate how they will try to keep young people safe it will encourage reporting (alongside preventative work to enable young people to identify abusive behaviour).
18. Action to protect children and young people from gang related violence and exploitation should include:
- 18.1 Prevention work as a compulsory element of the national curriculum in schools that includes sessions on gender identity and masculinity.
- 18.2 Support services which are not criminal justice-focused. These interventions should be focused on safety and empowerment and development with the recognition that CJS interventions may not deliver the best outcomes.
- 18.3 Family intervention projects should take into consideration the risk of gang association and develop work with parents in relation to their daughters, as well as their sons. This should be delivered by third sector organisations to ensure trust and engagement between the service and the family.

18.4 Sexual Harmful Behaviour Agenda is used in schools and that the wider school ethos explicitly revisit gender equality and addresses it through its community cohesion agenda.

Summary of key points

19. Gang-associated women and girls must be proactively mapped and identified in order to offer and provide adequate support.
20. Policy and services must recognise the risk to children and young people posed outside of the home, in social spaces such as schools, neighbourhoods and peer groups.
21. Work on child sexual exploitation must be designed to support young people who are exploited by their peers, rather than having a sole focus on young people who are abused by individual adults.
22. Work on domestic abuse must begin to include young person specific responses rather than adult domestic abuse services being applied to young people.
23. Gender specific services for girls and young women must be embedded in gangs and serious youth violence services.

We are happy to provide oral evidence to the Inquiry and should you want to arrange this or to discuss anything from this consultation response in further detail please contact Carlene Firmin MBE, Head of the MsUnderstood Partnership, on carlene@msunderstood.org.uk.

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