

GANG-INVOLVED YOUNG PEOPLE CUSTODY AND BEYOND

A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE

Introduction

This practice guide is one of an ongoing series produced as part of the Beyond Youth Custody (BYC) programme, funded under the Big Lottery Fund's Youth in Focus initiative. BYC has been designed to challenge, advance, and promote better thinking in policy and practice for the effective resettlement of young people.

A significant amount of research into the onset of, and involvement in, gangs, gang crime, and serious youth violence has already been carried out. However, there is a limited amount of material available on desistance from gang crime, the resettlement of gang-involved young people and, in particular, how their period of incarceration and return to the community might best be managed. This practitioner's guide examines how knowledge about the specific needs of gang-involved young people and the factors relating to desistance from gang-related crime can inform effective practice with current and former gang-involved young people during their time in custody and beyond.

This guide uses the current literature, interviews with policy makers and practitioners and focus groups with professionals and young people who were either serving, or had recently served a custodial sentence for a gang-related offence.

The full research report by Fiona Factor and Professor John Pitts with Dr Tim Bateman upon which this briefing is based, along with full details of the references used, is available at www.beyondyouthcustody.net.

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Why there is a need to consider the resettlement needs of gang-involved young people

There are several key messages about good practice in resettlement that have already been identified through the work of Beyond Youth Custody (BYC) which do of course hold relevance for young people who are gang involved. However, the implementation of these good practice principles may require additional considerations for reasons of safety and wellbeing or indeed need to be more nuanced in design and delivery to ensure appropriate and effective engagement with these groups. It is hoped that making professionals aware of these themes will result in successful resettlement within the context of these additional complexities and for many, difficult or complicated life histories.

For many, the term 'gang' remains a contested concept. In this guide we have used 'gang involved' to describe those whose resettlement needs we are describing. Further information about this debate and how young people's gang association is described can be found in the full research report. We also acknowledge that many young people do not recognise these descriptions as applying to their own experience of being involved in gangs; for many, they are just associating with a group of friends.

Current trends and the custodial context

The following information is to remind practitioners of the current context within which services are being delivered and how this may impact upon resettlement practice:

- The youth custodial population has fallen sharply in recent years with the decline being particularly sharp for those aged under 18. Those who are imprisoned are likely to have a more serious offending profile and more complex needs.
- Gangs in prisons are a source of growing concern. In 2013/14, 16% of boys in young offender institutions (YOIs) reported having experienced 'gang problems' when they first arrived at the establishment (rising to 21% for black and minority ethnic (BME) young people). There is evidence of increased violence within the secure estate serving this group.
- Gang-involved young people tend to be concentrated in a handful of penal establishments, leading to a potential reinforcement of gang identity, and pressure on previously unaffiliated young people to become associated with particular groups to enhance their own safety. Conversely, in an attempt to break down gang affiliations, some gang-involved young people may be dispersed, to institutions far away from their homes, and this can mean that gang activity might be 'exported' to institutions located away from areas that have traditionally been associated with gang problems.
- A recent report identifies the high rate of mental illness amongst young people involved with gangs. Additionally, the centrality of serious violence within the gang places gang-involved young people at serious risk of poor mental health.
- Although the number of children in custody has fallen sharply in recent years and the number of young adults has also reduced, albeit rather more slowly, the proportion of the incarcerated population from a minority ethnic background has been rising steadily. By April 2014 BME representation in the institutions which comprise the secure estate for children and young people had reached 39%.
- As the Young Review notes, black and/or Muslim offenders who have been imprisoned have poorer post-release outcomes than their non-Muslim and non-white counterparts. These facts create significant challenges for professionals supporting young men from these communities.
- There is a concern that with the funding for the social intervention element of the *Ending Gang and Youth Violence* programme running out and a renewed focus on improving practice in the areas of enhanced prosecution and joint enterprise, this disproportionality could continue to grow.

- Some resettlement providers have welcomed the extension of statutory post-custody supervision commended by the government's *Transforming Rehabilitation* programme to those who previously did not benefit from any statutory support on release. From the point of view of gang-involved young people this might provide an opportunity to maximise the potential for taking advantage of the 'window of opportunity' that the transition to the community involves.
- A further difficulty for resettlement agencies is the recently introduced policy of moving prisoners to a resettlement prison in the final week or so of their sentence. This can mean that work done in custody in preparation for release may come to nothing because the support worker loses touch with the prisoner at a crucial moment.

Starting the resettlement process whilst in custody

One of the differences between the experiences of gang-involved young people and other returning prisoners is that many will have been involved in gang-desistance programmes prior to their incarceration. Youth workers and mentors in these programmes emphasise the importance of maintaining contact with these young people during their period of incarceration in order that the desistance work in which they had been involved will not be undermined while they are in the prison or the YOI. Assertive outreach and persistence are also appreciated by this group.

” She approached me in a more personal way. She even wrote with her own handwriting. Then I thought to myself she's sending me stamps. See, these little things, it opens you up a little bit. She sent me stamps. She was, like, oh, any time, just message me or send me an email, give me a call. Here's my number. When you're released get in contact with me. So it's a...she, obviously, kinda, built up that little...and I thought OK, yeah, she's helping me. She's sent me stamps, she's constantly sending me letters. She cares. But normally people just send you one letter. If you don't reply then you'll just never...that's the last of it.

21-year-old male released in 2014

Considerations for practice

- Make contact early in the young person's sentence.
- Personalise that contact via handwritten letters and visits from one identified worker.
- Be persistent.
- Do what you say you will and give the young person regular feedback about decisions that affect them.
- Offer 'through the gate' support at the point of release.
- Signpost young people to local services.
- Be available at times when a young person is most likely to want to return to their previous lifestyle.

Project 507 is a personal development programme for gang-associated young men aged 16-25 in custody. Funded by the National Offender Management Service and the European Social Fund, over 200 young men have participated over the last two years. Participants attend three-hour weekly sessions for 12 weeks. It looks at strategies for breaking the cycle of offending, gang awareness, violence in the home, personal violence and how to turn skills learnt in the streets into productive skills. Real-life scenarios are used to help young men to come up with more positive solutions to their own dilemmas.

Objectives:

- 1 To build on young men's strengths and identify and promote confidence, attitudes and behaviours which reduce risk
- 2 To utilise creativity to enable young men at risk of and caught up in gang activity to develop their self-esteem and life skills
- 3 To provide relevant opportunities for young men at risk of offending/currently offending to re-engage in education, training and job opportunities
- 4 To meet the unique needs of high-risk young offenders
- 5 To empower young men to reach their full potential and to provide them with choices, decision-making opportunities, and ownership of the work

Project 507 curriculum

| Session and title | Aim |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1 Me, Myself and I | To introduce the programme, the team, get to know each other and ourselves. |
| 2 The World and I | To understand different kinds of behaviour and relationships including dysfunctional and hurtful ones. |
| 3 The Choices I Make | To explore the possible explanations behind offending behaviour and what might stop people from offending in the future. |
| 4 The Man in Me! | To look at character development and the choices we have before, during and after an offence takes place. |
| 5 Been There Done That! | To use role play to experience all the different perspectives of people affected by crime. |
| 6 Breaking the Cycle | To look at what it means to be a man and the different roles of men within society. |
| 7 It's All About Me! | To look at our own identities. |
| 8 I Am Who I Want To Be! | To think about who we want to be moving forward. |
| 9 Transformation! | To start developing a five-year plan and personal statement. |
| 10 Got The Talk! | To look at language, the way it is used and how it can affect our daily lives. |
| 11 The World's My Oyster! | To reflect over the last ten sessions, using all the knowledge gained to finish plans and personal statements. |
| 12 Closing Ceremony! | To present personal statements either to family members or to staff within the prison. |

Education

Research suggests that education can offer the inmate a route to success when they are eventually released. However, professionals observed that prisoners of widely different abilities and at very different stages of their educational careers were frequently put together in YOIs. Provision did not account for those young people who had the potential to achieve significant academic success, e.g. attend university, nor those who were struggling.

As a result of the general increase in violence, behaviour management tends to be focused on confinement and isolation, inevitably reducing a young person's potential to participate in educational opportunities and classes on offer. It was also reported that much of the gang-related violence 'kicked off' during education classes. Professionals we spoke to said that there is a high level of undiagnosed learning disabilities and mental health needs within this population and the early use of screening tools could avoid many situations in which these problems exacerbate the violence.

For gang-involved young people leaving custody it was important that clear arrangements were put in place to ensure that they could continue with their education. Arrangements for suitable placements in schools or colleges were often made extremely late, or indeed, sometimes not at all.

Considerations for practice

- Are the necessary plans in place for the young person to continue with their education after release? Is it a pathway plan that builds upon what has already been undertaken?
- Is the required support in place for those who have a diagnosed learning disability?
- Can the young person access Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) to seek out or indeed attend appropriate educational opportunities or volunteering?
- Is the location of the education provider suitable? This is especially pertinent if the young person is to be relocated.

Mental health

The central place of serious violence within the culture of the gang means that gang-involved young people are both potential victims as well as perpetrators. Such exposure to violence, especially over the long term, is associated with psychological problems including depression, conduct disorders, accumulated trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The secure estate needs to undertake appropriate screening of gang-involved young people in order to ensure that the necessary support is available to inmates as part of the prison's violence and self-harm reduction strategy. Professionals we spoke to believed that a 'trauma-based' approach which acknowledges the violence these young people had witnessed and the world from which they come should inform responses to violence in penal institutions.

Considerations for practice

- Young people's mental health needs should be identified and addressed whilst in custody.
- Make sure there is continuity of care for young people upon release.
- Work in partnership with mental health services to enable regular monitoring of the young people's needs and ensure appropriate and timely support is on offer.

Girls and young women

Although fewer girls and young women are involved in gangs than boys and many of them are involved only relatively briefly, the damaging effects of gang involvement may stay with them for a long time. Practitioners who were surveyed suggested that girls and young women were involved in gang-related crime; storing drugs or firearms, or setting up attacks on rival gang members etc. However, their motivations for involvement are normally different and their role within the gang is often linked to their risk of victimisation. There is an increased awareness of the violent and sexual exploitation of gang-associated girls and women, probably as a result of recent research in this area.

” I was mixing with guys who, basically, sexually exploited me, and I would say they sexually exploited me not because they were having sex with me. I don't even mean that context, but they would use... it's almost like they know that you're innocent but you're not innocent. So they...they use that, and I used to hold drugs, guns, anything that they'd ask me to do for a bit of money I would do it.

24-year-old female released in 2014

Some younger girls and young women appear not to recognise the seriousness of the sexual violence or exploitation to which they are subjected; it has become normalised. Other girls and young women do recognise the seriousness of their sexual victimisation but will rarely report it because they believe that the 'authorities' are unable to keep them, or their families, safe from violent retribution.

Considerations for practice

- Is your service gender-specific and culturally relevant, particularly in dealing with sexual violence and assault?
- Is your service strengths-based, building the young woman's confidence and self-worth?
- Is your service individually oriented to reflect the nature of the young woman's gang association? Remember there is a likelihood she has been a victim of sexual violence.
- Refer to BYC's practitioner's guide on the resettlement of girls and young women.



Sex and the gang

Exploitative social and sexual relationships appear to be a defining characteristic of 'street culture', which is reinforced by the misogynistic lyrics of gangsta rap and the rapping and 'spitting' produced by gang-involved young men on YouTube and other social networking sites. This means that gang-involved young men are under continual pressure to demonstrate their sexual prowess and this can mean that they will sometimes engage in group sexual activity or assaults, 'line-ups', even if they do not want to, for fear of losing face and making themselves vulnerable to attack or rejection by their peers. Some professionals involved with gangs appear to be unaware of the complexities of these encounters, sometimes assuming the young women are simply making ill-informed choices and that the young men are willing participants.

Depends on what kind of name she has. If she has a name and someone tries to sleep with her and she won't let them, and they know that she's slept with loads of other people, they'll force her into it. They would rape her, if you class that as rape.

21-year-old male

Considerations for practice

- Find effective strategies to challenge young men about their attitudes towards young women and sex.
- Recognise young men might be victims too.
- Equip young men with the skills necessary to challenge their peers and not engage in sexual violence.
- Make it OK for young men to disclose being a victim of sexual violence and seek support.
- Ensure there are appropriate therapeutic services available for both young men and young women to deal with the trauma of sexual violence.



SHELLEY'S STORY

Shelley was committing crime from the age of 11, but got caught at 14. She was selling drugs for an older associate, and owed him 200 pounds. He threatened to shoot her if she failed to deliver his money. In order to find the money quickly, she stole mobile phones which could be sold on. Shelley was arrested and found herself the subject of electronic monitoring, 'on tag'.

I was young, dumb, hanging round with friends...I'm cool, I'm bigger than you...and then you get arrested and I'm, like, 'wait, hold on'...and then I stopped committing crimes.

Whilst under the youth offending team's supervision, Shelley didn't breach her tag and lived within the law for a couple of years. Then 'things started happening' to her. Her family life became volatile, her home was no longer a safe place, and she left. Now homeless and unable to return to her parents' house, Shelley had no income or security. She turned to the people she called friends for support. Together, they survived.

...when you have no food...and no one really wants to help you...what are you gonna do?...if you're not thinking correctly or if you're really, really desperate...I dunno how to explain it...'I don't know where I'm sleeping tonight'...it's, like, 'I'm so sorry, I have to eat'...to be honest, like, 'it's your phone, it's not the end of the world'.

After a year of making ends meet via crime, Shelley was arrested. At 17, she was placed into the care of social services. She was housed alone and miles away from home; the only place available. Shelley found the situation difficult to manage. People she then considered to be her friends were abusing her, and she had nowhere to turn.

...I tried to turn to social services, I didn't have any family...all I'm doing is committing crimes...'you owe money, go and commit some crimes'...I knew I was going to go to jail...there was a time before I went in, that I wanted to go to jail...it needed to happen, basically.

After robbing someone at knife point, Shelley found herself in prison just shy of her 18th birthday.

Desistance from gang-related crime

Research tells us that desistance from crime is a process rather than an event. Evidence suggests a number of points or situations where gang-involved young people may desist from gang crime. However, desisting from gang crime does not necessarily mean leaving the gang. Although research suggests that dissociation from delinquent peers facilitates desistance, for those who have been embroiled in serious gang conflict, continued involvement may well be a prerequisite of personal safety.

Young people may desist from gang crime and intensive gang involvement when any of the following occur:

- When a friend or relative dies or is seriously injured. Indeed, researchers have observed that constant exposure to violence may promote desistance.
- When they make the transition from school to college.
- When they set up home with a partner or when they become a parent.
- When they are apprehended by the police and there is a prospect of imprisonment.
- When they have access to legitimate educational or vocational opportunities or they start a legitimate business.

The one consistent finding from desistance research is that age is a major determinant of desistance from crime in general and gang involvement and gang crime in particular. The 'drop-out rate' from gangs between the early teens and the mid-20s is over 75%, suggesting that most young people 'mature out' of gang involvement. However, as several studies have found, this maturation is by no means automatic, but rather a process facilitated by particular life events such as finding a stable job and entering a stable relationship.

Beyond acknowledging individual difference it is important to recognise that maturity seldom comes at 18 or 20. Protracted adolescence seems to be a characteristic of many gang-involved young people and this is exacerbated by imprisonment and service providers have to have realistic expectations of their clients.

Considerations for practice

- Do you take account of desistance as a process in the design of services? For example, do you encourage estranged clients to return?
- Does your service reflect the developmental maturity needs of the individual rather than chronological age?
- How is the young person supported in the transition from the youth offending team to probation when they turn 18?



POSITIVE PRACTICE INTEGRATED GANGS MANAGEMENT UNIT

Joe, 23, was serving a 116-month standard determinate sentence for assaults with intent to rob. He was assessed as presenting a high risk of serious harm to the public and rival gang members. Whilst strenuously disputed by Joe and others close to him, he was identified as someone associated with urban street gangs (USG). This view was shared by key agencies responsible for his supervision. The Integrated Gang Management Unit (IGMU) began working on Joe's case more than 12 months before his release.

The IGMU convened a meeting. Attendees included a senior probation officer, a specialist probation officer, a social worker, a family support worker, an interventions worker and an education, training and employment (ETE) specialist. Victim liaison, Neighbourhood DI and MAPPA support were also present. The points below outline what was discussed, agreed and achieved.

Key themes discussed

- Joe's association with well-known USG members
- Poor financial and ETE prospects
- Lack of suitable accommodation
- Joe was suffering significant levels of anxiety
- Traumatized victim with anxieties about Joe's imminent release from prison
- High community interest in the case with risk of adverse publicity

Action plan agreed

- Place Joe in an approved premises and arrange extensive control measures
- Refer Joe to local specialist mental health provider for USG-involved offenders
- Arrange appointments with the IGMU's ETE officer

Outcomes achieved

Since Joe's release in October 2014:

- He has not breached any conditions of his licence
- He has completed the Approved Premises placement successfully
- There is no new intelligence of USG association
- He has obtained part-time employment as a waiter
- He has engaged in a work programme to obtain qualifications
- He has accessed mental health support
- He has engaged well with probation interventions
- Safe accommodation was eventually provided out of the immediate vicinity

Summary

The IGMU is a well-established multi-agency team with a high level of expertise around USG work. Barriers are multiple when leaving custody, and even more so in the case of USGs. Some agencies can be risk averse but the IGMU will 'take a risk to manage a risk' because their shared understanding provides confidence whilst remaining risk aware.

Practical challenges

There are a number of practical challenges that need to be addressed for gang-involved young people serving a custodial sentence in planning for their release; these require the support of a skilled practitioner.

- 1 **Securing appropriate accommodation** which is long term, safe and secure and within reasonable distance of employment/educational opportunities. This is particularly crucial for those who have been relocated and needs to reflect the cultural needs of the young person concerned. Young people will often need help to sustain their tenancy as this will be a new experience for many and service providers need to include this in their support work.
- 2 **Families** can often play a key role in helping the young person resettle. Skilled practitioners are required to navigate the complex dynamics of family engagement, particularly when the safeguarding needs of children are considered. The researchers would recommend early intervention which involves supportive family members before a young person's *on road* (gang) lifestyle is established, and definitely involves them in the plans for release from custody.
- 3 **Financial support.** For gang-involved young people, the lack of financial support can be a problem that they resolve by returning to the gang and benefitting from its illicit activities; securing a regular income therefore remains a high priority for the young people we spoke to. Whilst they recognise that this is not easy to achieve upon release, being involved in suitable education or training in order to secure this ambition in the longer term was deemed helpful.
- 4 **Employment, education and training.** The use of ROTL could be expanded to ensure that inmates get the chance to attend relevant educational or volunteering opportunities and interviews prior to release. Having arrangements confirmed would alleviate the anxieties associated with uncertainty on leaving custody. Ensuring a structure to their day, by attending work or training, was something young people recognised as helpful; distracting them from the temptation of returning to their previous criminal activity.
- 5 **Licence conditions.** The success of the resettlement process was often predicated on the effectiveness of the multi-agency partnership responsible for supervising licence conditions upon release. It is important to develop these in consultation with the young person concerned, their family and practitioners in order to maximise the opportunity for young people to comply with their licence. This is especially the case where the conditions prohibit either access to certain areas or association with old friends.

Partners across agencies engaged in supporting young people with resettlement need to:

- 1 be willing and able to share information
- 2 ensure buy-in and mutual benefit across relevant agencies
- 3 maintain good communication between partner organisations
- 4 develop common objectives
- 5 agree data-sharing protocols

Applying lessons for practice

There needs to be centralised information about community resettlement programmes that are available and these programmes should start work whilst the young person is in custody. Where they have already been engaged with a gang-desistance programme, that work should continue. Coordination between agencies so that young people do not have to tell their stories dozens of times to different people is fundamental to successful engagement.

Agencies need to recognise that mentors can be drawn from the whole of society and that an ex-gang-affiliated mentor does not always necessarily make the best fit for a young person. Resettlement professionals felt that recruiting people with passion who could be positive role models, enabling young people to make sense of what it is that a woman or a man is meant to be is important. They emphasised the need for the right kind of support for workers who also needed to feel needed, wanted and cared for if they were going to do that for the young people. They pointed to the high level of burn-out if the agency did not 'look after its staff'.

Resettlement practitioners cited success in using 'pathway planning'; breaking down the aspirations of prisoners into a series of easily achievable steps. Young people's support needs should be identified and negotiated with them at the point they are sentenced and, ideally, they should be followed through by the same worker. All respondents were agreed that sustained and consistent support was of paramount importance and that short-term commissioning should be avoided.

Notwithstanding the need for statutory engagement as part of the licence, there is also a recognition on the part of young people we spoke to that sometimes they just want to be left alone. Being able to recognise these signs and hear these messages was deemed extremely valuable in development of the relationship.

” I'll tell you why they don't wanna engage, because I've felt like that myself. I've had someone telling me what to do for the last four years. Do I really want someone else telling me what to do again? Plain and simple. And the sooner that is understood the better. And you can't say well they've got to because they...no, they don't, because they've done their time.

You want to see your family and friends, but who you don't want to see is a case worker. Sometimes you don't wanna mentor....because it's just, like...invasion into your life. It's, like, well, when can I have my time? I'm free now. And that's where a lot of failure comes forth, for those that don't understand why prisoners seem very off-brushy once they get out.

24-year-old female released in 2014

The time required for effective engagement to be achieved cannot be underestimated. Young people were clear that staff needed to demonstrate consistency and care if they were to build effective relationships with the young people.

Several practitioners suggested the provision of a 'resettlement pack' containing basic essentials to survive for the first few days would be a positive development. This would relieve a lot of the stress and anxiety, and for some, lessen the trauma of release.

Finally, it is important to understand that many young people may need to change their whole way of life, and this new lifestyle may seem inferior, especially initially, to their lifestyle when they were gang involved, and may often involve losing ties with friends and family. This may create some significant emotional responses. Staff should consider the availability of their services at evenings and weekends when these emotions are likely to occur.

Summary

To be successful, interventions with gang-involved young people should be consistent, personalised, reliable and sustained. The resettlement process should start during time in custody, and in the community support should be available at the times when a young person is most likely to miss and want to return to their previous gang-involved lifestyle. Practitioners also need to involve young people in any decisions made about them.

Access to education is cited as a key factor which increases the chances of a young person desisting from crime, including gang crime. Education needs to be appropriate to an individual's ability and experience and clear arrangements should be made for individuals following their release.

It is important to identify and support any mental health needs. Rates of mental illness are high among gang-involved young people. They often experience trauma as a result of being exposed to violence and many have been victims as well as perpetrators.

Resettlement practice must also take into account the specific needs of girls and young women who may have different levels of and motivations for involvement. Practitioners should understand that there is a likelihood they have been victims of sexual violence.

The BYC team hopes that this practice guide is useful to you and would be interested to hear about your experiences of the issues raised here. Please feel free to contact the programme manager at: beyondyouthcustody@nacro.org.uk to share your insights or discuss these issues.

This practitioner's guide is based on the research report: Factor F and Pitts J with Bateman T (2015) *Gang-involved young people: custody and beyond* London: Beyond Youth Custody (Available online at www.beyondyouthcustody.net).

This review has been produced by the Beyond Youth Custody partnership, consisting of Nacro, ARCS (UK) Ltd, the Centre for Social Research at the University of Salford, and the Vauxhall Centre for the Study of Crime at the University of Bedfordshire.

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