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Enhancing the work of the Islington Integrated Gangs Team:

**A pilot study on the response to
serious youth violence in Islington**

Produced by the Centre for City Criminology,
City, University of London

Co-Funded by the London Metropolitan Police Service and
School of Arts and Social Sciences, City University of London



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Enhancing the work of the Islington Integrated Gangs Team:

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**A Research Report by the Centre for City Criminology,
City, University of London**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the result of research conducted by the Centre for City Criminology at City, University of London, in partnership with Islington's Integrated Gangs Team (IGT) and the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS). The research was co-funded by MPS and the School of Arts and Social Sciences, City, University of London. Following a collaborative research event in October 2017, City Criminologists were commissioned to carry out a small-scale research project to capture the work of the IGT and to make recommendations regarding its operations, coherence, effectiveness and sustainability. The research team conducted semi-structured interviews over several months with 23 practitioners across the services that constitute the IGT. This report presents the findings and recommendations.

Findings

1. *The Perceived Risk Factors behind Serious Youth Violence in Islington*

Participants' views on the factors behind Serious Youth Violence (SYV) in Islington accord with existing research. The problems accompanying socio-economic deprivation are prevalent. Islington is relatively typical but may also have local features, particularly extreme inequality.

2. *Origins of the IGT*

The IGT emerged out of pragmatic attempts to provide the most relevant and effective services with available resources in a period of austerity and a spike in SYV. This involved adapting what existed to new prerogatives at national and local level. The aspiration was that an integrated approach would combine the strengths of a range of partner agencies.

3. *Workings of the IGT*

The IGT is a well-resourced group able to intervene swiftly and decisively to safeguard young people, providing a 'wraparound service' that looks to their needs, circumstances and behaviour. This approach requires partnership working and information sharing between the different agencies.

4. *Strengths of the IGT*

While participants recognised that the language of 'safeguarding' can camouflage more robust enforcement, all demonstrated a clear commitment to the welfare of young people.

The IGT's success draws in part from the co-location of partner agencies. The team's effectiveness is not accidental; it reflects sustained political and financial support, and the capacity to unite excellent staff and good-will around a shared purpose.

The willingness to engage flexibly with concepts like 'the gang' and instruments like the Gangs Matrix, about which participants raised concerns, demonstrates a useful pragmatism.

5. *Weaknesses of the IGT*

Participants noted that tensions arising from differing occupational cultures, operational assumptions and perceived and actual power imbalances can complicate the IGT's work; the literature confirms these tensions as a common feature of multi-agency partnership working.

Additionally, different agencies have different attitudes to particular types of information: information sharing is not always automatic, and there is not always consensus on action.

Deficits in the membership of the team were noted to exist in housing and education, and concerns were expressed that mental health resources are low for young adults.

Building stronger links with the community remains a challenge and a priority.

6. Future Developments and Challenges

Alongside addressing the above challenges, participants noted the importance of effectively evaluating the IGT's success. Narrow and potentially unrelated indices, like general offending rates, may not be the most appropriate measures. A wide variety of indicators capturing both incremental and sustained outcomes could be recognised and endorsed.

Recommendations

- 1. Ethos:** reinforce the IGT's safeguarding ethos by routinely revisiting how it can be operationalised across the range of partners and activities that inform the team's work.
- 2. Co-Location:** maintain the principle of co-location as a defining characteristic of the Islington IGT.
- 3. Name:** consider whether the IGT's name adequately reflects the range of activities and cohorts with which it engages, given the controversies attached to the term 'gang'.
- 4. Data Sources:** re-examine the role and use of the Gang's Matrix and its interaction with other databases in the work of the IGT.
- 5. Partnership Working:** include personnel from housing, education and health, and re-embed probation.
- 6. Sharing Best Practice:** develop a more systematic, pan-London method for identifying and sharing best practice, what works and continuous learning.
- 7. Information Sharing:** clarify the agency-specific and legal constraints around information sharing within the IGT and between Boroughs to address perceived asymmetries.
- 8. Effectiveness:** develop an integrated framework for measuring 'effectiveness' that systematically incorporates multiple indicators within the partnership.
- 9. Community Links:** work with young people, educational services and the wider population to build stronger community links and co-produce a safer Islington.
- 10. Resources:** leverage resources within other parts of Islington Council (skills, culture, employability), private and FE/HE sectors to enhance young people's life chances.

Issues for Future Research

Future research should:

- engage with young people and the wider community to understand what they think of the police, the IGT, 'gangs', the Gangs Matrix, SYV, life chances, and the circumstances under which at-risk young people might be more likely to engage with relevant services.
- contribute to the development of a framework for co-producing a safer Islington.
- look at the impact of disproportionality within the youth and criminal justice system in relation to Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups in Islington.
- examine the role of 'county lines' as a contributor to gang affiliation and SYV in Islington.

ENHANCING THE WORK OF THE ISLINGTON INTEGRATED GANGS TEAM

1. Background to the Research

This research came about following contact from Islington Council to examine ways in which researchers at City, University of London might contribute to local community initiatives and projects. In late 2017, Criminologists at the Centre for City Criminology invited a group of Islington practitioners, mostly attached to the Integrated Gangs Team (IGT) and the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), to the University for an afternoon to discuss existing research on serious youth violence (SYV), the current situation in Islington, and the practices of and challenges faced by the IGT. This initial event resulted in a series of discussions around how City Criminologists might add value to the work of the IGT by conducting a short research project. Further exploratory discussions resulted in the co-production of the four key research questions that inform this report:

1. Is there an 'Islington approach' to tackling serious youth violence, and in what ways do members of the Islington IGT see this approach as distinct from others?
2. How do IGT members evaluate effectiveness and impact in tackling SYV in the borough, and what additional data sources might be used or developed to inform more rigorous or reliable evaluation?
3. According to IGT members, what are the key strengths and limitations of the tools made centrally available to the IGT and what improvements might be useful?
4. According to IGT members, what operational risks and opportunities does the IGT face going forward?

The research was match funded by the MPS and the School of Arts and Social Sciences, City, University of London to a total of £10,000. It was agreed early on that this initial research project would be inward-looking – focusing on the operational ethos, working practices, inter-agency tensions and challenges faced by the IGT – rather than outward-looking – examining the views and experiences of young people and the wider community who are affected by SYV and the IGT's work to address it. This was a pragmatic decision based on available resources and timeframes. The research process has reinforced the early recognition by all parties that the voices of young people and the wider community must be central to any attempt to develop an in depth understanding of SYV in Islington. Should a larger piece of research follow from this initial project, the focus would be expanded to include the full range of individuals and institutions touched by SYV in the local community.

2. Research Context: Gangs and Serious Youth Violence

The problems involved in identifying and defining gang affiliation have been evident since the pioneering gang research of Frederic Thrasher (1927) in Chicago nearly a century ago. As Maxson and Klein (2006: 4) note, the 'definitional issue has probably been the stickiest one that gang scholars have had to confront'. Less charitably, Hagedorn (2008: 245) refers to 'criminology's nit-picking definitional fixation on "what is a gang"'. Indeed, academic research has become embroiled in a bruising dispute over meanings and classifications. One set of scholars argues that local identity and group conflict are an enduring feature of working-class life, and consequently that territorial 'gangs' are nothing new (Alexander 2000; Hallsworth and Young 2008; Hallsworth 2013; Wilson 2016). As such, categorisation of this behaviour as 'gang-related' represents a form of academic entrepreneurialism (Hallsworth 2011) that cloaks racialised stereotypes and uncritically replicates police agendas (Williams 2015). Other researchers contend that new street-based groups have emerged for whom the term 'gang' is a meaningful descriptor (Pitts 2008, 2011). From this

perspective, business-oriented gangs have evolved from previous iterations of street-based groups in the context of austerity, illicit opportunity, and consumer culture (Densley 2013; Storrod and Densley 2017; McLean et al. 2018). For Ilan (2015: 77) the term ‘gangs’ can mean different things in different settings and when, for example, ‘US-derived gangs definitions are applied in a global context, they arguably begin to fray’.

There is more consensus when it comes to diagnoses of the issue, with scholars seemingly converging around a set of structural factors, albeit with differences according to exact emphasis and whether the resulting criminality is defined as ‘gang-related’ or ‘Serious Youth Violence’ (SYV) (Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson, 2016). The role of material deprivation (Densley 2013; Harding 2014; Pitts 2008) and, furthermore, processes of neoliberal globalisation that see similar forms of deprivation reproduced in urban locations around the world (Fraser 2015; Ilan, 2015; Gunter 2017), are stressed by many researchers. With adolescence being a period of transgression (Gunter 2017; Hallsworth 2011), the form and extent of transgression will be shaped by both the severity of deprivation and local particularities such as opportunities made available by the underground economy (Fraser 2015).

Research on gang desistance indicates that gang members tend to exit gangs both ‘abruptly’ and ‘gradually’ (Decker and Lauritsen 2002), and that the timing of exits is partly based on the fluctuating size and influence of gangs themselves (Densley 2013). A key concept here is ‘maturational reform’ (Matza 1964), with the passage into adulthood and its attendant responsibilities prompting a move away from crime. In the context of gang membership, it is the demands of education, employment, marriage and family life that can bring about desistance (Laub and Sampson 2003; Thornberry et al. 2003). More specifically, Densley’s (2013) study of 12 London gangs found that maturation brought a recognition of the impact of gang membership (on gang members themselves, as well as on their victims and personal relationships), while pressure from a partner, the responsibilities of parenthood, a serious injury or bereavement, and contact with the criminal justice system were also conducive to desistance.

Agents of criminal justice have been less conflicted than academics in adopting and operationalising gang terminology. Gang rhetoric has become embedded in the bureaucracies of criminal justice, most notably in the maintenance of databases comprising suspected gang members (Spergel 2009: 667; Barrows and Huff 2009) and in efforts to codify gang-affiliation into law (Siegel 2003). In the United States, such practices are well established (Bjerregaard 2003: 172), with debates being sparked as to the legality and morality of gang databases (Siegel 2003; Spergel 2009), and proof of gang-membership resulting in up-tariff sentencing or the invoking of federal law (Hagedorn 2008; Bjerregaard 2015). In the United Kingdom, a comparable effort to respond to gang membership has gathered momentum in the form of police intelligence databases (Fraser and Atkinson 2014), civil gang injunctions (Treadwell and Gooch 2015) and – most controversially – the application of the common law principle of joint enterprise in prosecution (House of Commons 2015; Williams and Clarke 2016).

A recent investigation of the MPS’ Gangs Matrix (Amnesty 2018) found that its databases lacked robust procedural practices for classifying individuals as ‘gang-affiliated’ and a sound legal justification for retaining and sharing personal data. Its authors noted that, ‘indicators used ... to identify ‘gang members’ simply reflect elements of urban youth culture and identity that have nothing to do with serious crime’ (Amnesty 2018: 3). This was significant given that individuals listed on such databases were subject to adverse outcomes involving housing providers, schools and/or employment agencies on the basis of data-sharing protocols. Also notable in this context is the highly racialised nature of these practices (Alexander 2008). As Williams and Clarke discovered, 87% of nominals on the London gang database were Black, Asian or minority ethnic (Williams and Clarke 2016).

3. Research Questions and Methodology

The report is based on 23 interviews with individual members of and stakeholders in the Islington IGT. Interviews were semi-structured, informed by the four primary research questions identified above, and agreed at the outset with senior members of the IGT. The semi-structured nature of the research interview process created a flexible space from which a range of salient topics emerged. These topics related to the origins of the IGT, its underpinning rationale, the usefulness and/or necessity of the term ‘gang’ for the IGT’s work, the nature and causes of Serious Youth Violence (SYV) in Islington, definitions of success, key absences from the Team, and the most significant challenges it would face in future. The interview schedule also allowed for follow-up questions, particularly concerning any emergent themes, with interviews ranging from 41 minutes to 68 minutes in duration. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded in order to identify the core and axial themes that feature in this report. Interviews are cited in the report with a letter (A,B,C...) corresponding to the interviewer, and a number (1,2,3...) corresponding to the interviewee.

4. What do IGT Members Believe is Behind SYV in Islington?

The approach to tackling youth crime outlined in *Working Together for a Safer Islington* focuses on structural and cultural risk factors over individual pathologies. This approach informs and underpins the prioritisation of welfare over punishment and the collaborative, strengths- and trauma-based ethos centred on safeguarding which recognises young people as victims as well as perpetrators. Though this philosophy was largely reflected in IGT members’ diagnoses of SYV in Islington, a number of individual and family problems, as well as a set of technological factors, were also identified. Furthermore, there was variation in extent to which psychologistic framing (F1) was linked to structural issues (D3).

4.1 Structural/cultural risk factors

Most interviewees cited a series of structural and cultural risk factors believed to underpin SYV and other crime in Islington. These factors included poor quality housing, overcrowding, a lack of both diversionary activities and job opportunities, and a corrosive sense of the lack of a ‘legitimate’ future. The detrimental impact of funding cuts to the MPS and youth services was another point of consensus. A reduction in the number of youth workers was bemoaned by many participants (though the number of youth clubs, centres and other resources may not have actually reduced). However, two IGT police officers saw youth clubs as part of the problem; they were being used as recruiting grounds for gangs (A5; G1). For one non-statutory member, cuts to police budgets had resulted in more ‘cost-effective’ methods of policing such as monitoring social media sites like YouTube, Twitter and Facebook (E2). Significantly, this monitoring has been recommended by the Home Office (2012) and further validated by the creation of the MPS Social Media Hub in 2018 (Trendall 2018). For many interviewees the decline of neighbourhood policing and a corresponding lack of systematic police engagement with young people had contributed to officers being seen as ‘the enemy’ (A3). A related problem was a paucity of young police officers from BAME backgrounds. As one officer put it, ‘We need people that the gangs can identify with. They’ve probably got to be slightly younger people... I think sometimes they’ve got to be BME individuals’ (A3). Multi-agency outreach work could also be undermined by young people refusing to engage with IGT members and relevant services because of an awareness of the connections between agencies (E2).

Inequality was another recurring theme in interviews with IGT staff, many of whom echoed the Islington Fairness Commission’s (2012) identification of ‘Two Islingtons’. One participant described a polarised borough where middle-class and working-class children lived ‘separate lives’ (E2). There was less consensus on gentrification and how it might accentuate this polarisation. Whereas one participant spoke of gentrification intensifying young people’s desire ‘to hold on to what they have’

(C4), another argued that these youngsters' horizons did not encompass the parts of the borough that had been gentrified. As they put it: "This is the thing about localising, I think everything is just about looking down and looking now, rather than looking out" (C3). This view was reinforced by another IGT member who described money generated by criminal enterprise being 'worn' rather than channelled into more legitimate activities (B1).

More explicit discussion of exclusion was evident in relation to schools. Although available research cannot determine whether school exclusions are *causally* linked to offending (Obsuth et al, 2014) there is an established evidence base to suggest that excluded children are at much greater risk of becoming either perpetrators or victims of serious youth violence (Deakin and Kupchik, 2018; McAra and McVie, 2010). Furthermore, there are multiple critiques of zero tolerance policies, filtered down from the criminal justice system into schools, resulting in already marginalised and vulnerable young people being excluded from mainstream education (e.g. Taylor et al., 2018; Timpson, 2019). Though efforts to reduce the number of young people excluded from school and placed in alternative provision has resulted in a decline since 2015 (*Working Together for a Safer Islington* 2016), some participants complained that schools' exclusionary practices can be fuelled by a containment mentality (B1; C4).

The experience of trauma and its possible connection with material deprivation was discussed by one participant: 'whether it's to do with poverty and things like that... it could be' (B3). For another participant, it was not just trauma but the significance of undiagnosed mental health issues and learning difficulties that was being overlooked (B1). As well as increasing the likelihood of both school expulsion and, especially for young women, sexual exploitation (B2), the marginalisation and bullying associated with these issues can see the emergence of group solidarities and related affordances (protection from bullying, etc.) that eventually are manifested in SYV (Cowie and Myers, 2017). Similar findings have been reported in a study into the links between schools and gangs commissioned by the NASUWT (Broadhurst et al., 2008).

The defensive function of gangs was also stressed by participants, with these groups acting as 'safe-havens' for young people feeling threatened by their peers (E1). Some suggested that young people carry knives for self-defence (B4; E2). Others sought to frame weapon-carrying as a cultural issue, and remarked that for those inculcated into a culture of violence from an early age, carrying a knife may be 'normal'. Euphemistic ways of talking about stabbing (e.g. 'poking') were also mentioned in diagnoses of SYV (E2), and it was proposed that this distancing language might contribute to desensitising young people to the realities of violence (C3). One participant speculated about the potentially dangerous influence of computer games and, in particular, hours spent playing the first-person 'shoot 'em up', *Call of Duty* (E2). The 'media effects' debate has been ongoing for decades, and is informed by research that varies enormously in quality (Greer, 2010; Greer and McLaughlin, 2017). The research evidence on the effects of computer games on violent attitudes and behaviour remains inconclusive. Yet such instinctive views still hold purchase, even among practitioners who deal up-close with serious youth violence on a daily basis.

One police officer offered their view of the national and local underpinnings of SYV in UK and Islington, together with the role of drugs markets in generating violence through competition: 'gang violence doesn't come... with gangs, *per se*, but it comes with drug markets and the saturation of drug markets, so the competition for that space' (A2).

4.2 Family/Psychological factors

Another factor identified by participants was the mind-set of young people. Frequently, the most reckless offenders are the youngest because they lack maturity. But the youngest people are also often the most exploited. Their approach to life was described as 'short-termist' by one participant (C4), and another argued that this short-termism adversely affects the choices young people make (C2). Technology further amplifies young peoples' short-termism with respect to both time and

space; workers from across the IGT described how local happenings conveyed on social media sites – including violent attacks – preoccupied young people while fuelling a perceived need to respond quickly and, almost invariably, rashly. With a global city on their doorstep young people's horizons remained intensely local. Social media sites were also implicated in the recruitment of gang members (E2), while the materials uploaded to such sites, especially drill music videos, cemented certain masculine scripts around pride, reputation and reprisal. One participant also noted the possibility of masculinity being amplified in the private realm because of the labour market offering so few opportunities to young men:

Part of that comes from what they see in society in terms of some dysfunctional and/or 'broken homes' and also from a lack of communication skills, in terms of how you talk to women (C3).

Family life was another locus of dysfunction. One participant spoke of broken families where mental health and substance misuse problems, among both parents and children, were common. In some cases, parents had drug-related debt and young men had been forced into a breadwinner role. As one interviewee described: 'sometimes they might have a parent that's a drug user who owes a drug debt, that has to pay that debt off. Or they're having to... step up and be a bit of a breadwinner... I don't like using that word, but there's a lot of pressure on young males to step up and earn money for their families' (E1). Another generational factor was young people's familiarity with prison (E2) through their parents' experiences of being held in custody.

With no structure at home, a sense of order – as well as feelings of acceptance, protection and solidarity – was sought elsewhere (E1). The 'gang as family' motif – a commonplace in the literature on gang membership – thus emerged. It was interesting to note, however, that notions of gang structure and hierarchy could themselves be under threat. As one participant described:

I think maybe 20 years ago there was structure within gangs. A younger person could never go to an older person in another gang and threaten to attack them. There had to be a system of command. What's happening now, there is no structure and invariably what you will find is that a lot of the issues tend to come from the youngsters who have been bandied about, are reckless, and that's because there is no structure, there is no guidance, if you like. (C3)

Taken together, the factors identified above have created a group of people who lack certain basic life skills and have no firm sense of the future (C4). As one participant said of young people, 'Some of them don't even know how to boil an egg. So, we're talking about basic stuff. So, [it's about] getting them to a point where they become more independent' (C1). However, a number of participants, especially the more high-ranking members of the IGT, also flagged reasons for optimism. There has been clear and sustained political 'buy-in' from Islington Council over this acute lack of life skills and the corresponding need for a long-term approach, and this buy-in remains central to the IGT's capacity, ethos and effectiveness (C1).

4.3 Nature of gangs/groups and SYV in Islington

In characterising SYV in Islington, a number of police officers noted that it tends to be disorganised and opportunistic rather than patterned and carefully orchestrated. As one officer explained:

I don't think much of it is that calculated. I have seen some calculated stuff... but I think normally they gee each other up, they drift into the rival territory for whatever reason they might do, and they find someone to victimise. And often the poor person they victimise is often a peripheral person or someone just sort of passing through, a youth from the area, because they sort of grab the first person they find. (A2)

This view was supported by a second officer who spoke of disorganised gangs, with some level of co-ordination and links to Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) but lacking a clear division of labour or hierarchy (A6).

For many IGT personnel, the nature of SYV and the criminal landscape of Islington more generally

is broadly similar to other London boroughs. Importantly, however, it is the local drug market that offers different opportunity structures (C1). The same interviewee also noted that Islington is small in relation to the level of neighbourhood crime recorded in the borough, and that this discrepancy is viewed as a problem by borough authorities (C2). The wide variety of criminal activity is definitely linked to organised crime, the participant added, before conceding, 'we just don't know where it's linked' (C2).

Participants also flagged differences with other London boroughs, particularly the demographic characteristics of Islington's gangs (C1) and the age of the borough's SYV nominals. Gangs are both younger and less organised in Islington than in neighbouring Camden, argued one police officer: 'In Islington there's a lot of younger, I'd say, gang members, compared to Camden for instance. Camden seems a lot more organised, Islington has a lot of younger groups that carry knives as a common practice' (A5). This was corroborated by a fellow officer, who added that gang members in Islington were more violent than their older counterparts in other boroughs, being less mindful of the consequences of their actions (A6). Another interviewee concurred, stating that offenders were getting younger – particularly for offences involving knives – with high reoffending rates a particular cause for concern (F1). One participant identified the borough's youth crime problem with theft and acquisitive crime, rather than violent altercations between groups of young people (C4).

Other boroughs contained more established gangs and although participants alluded to historic criminality in certain parts of the borough, gang membership in Islington was consistently described by interviewees as 'fluid' and 'messy' (A1; A3; C4). This was due to fission and fusion in relation to gang membership and related forms of intra- and inter-group conflict (B1) and crime patterns that were routinely shifting (C1, C2).

The geographical territories attributed to Islington's seven officially designated gangs straddle borough boundaries, and one police officer confirmed that some groups 'hang out' in places located some distance from the 'territory' demarcated by police analysts or described by gang maps (G1). One of Working Together for a Safer Islington's objectives is to 'work to establish a wider London footprint to tackle gangs and county lines, recognising that young people do not recognise boundaries or borders'.

In terms of young people exiting gang life, the routine pathways to desistance identified in the gang literature (Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson 2017; Pyrooz and Decker 2011) and summarised above are less in evidence because of the nature of the borough and its criminal opportunity structures. One participant spoke of a 'revolving door':

If there's not that support, they become more disengaged from society and then they start to spiral, and I think they would just be coming in and out of prison in terms of criminality, whether that's low-level crime or whether they go onto commit a serious offence. (C1)

Participants indicated that the familiar phenomenon of desistance via maturation does not apply in Islington. A police officer summarised this view, noting that in their experience gang nominals would be 'lost for good' if they hadn't desisted from gang-related activity by their mid-twenties (A4). As well as pointing to a structural diagnosis of SYV, this apparent trend underlines the importance of early intervention (C1), with one participant highlighting Education, Training & Employment (ETE) as a particularly effective 'maker' of desistance (C4).

IGT members' understanding of SYV in Islington in many places reflected their varied areas of expertise and different priorities in terms of addressing the challenges both faced by and created by young people with stagnating prospects in a period of austerity. The IGT was established precisely to engage better with complex sources of SYV in the borough and provide a more comprehensive approach to safeguarding, prevention and enforcement. It is to the creation of the IGT that we turn next.

5. Origins of the IGT

The Integrated Gangs Team (IGT) was formed in 2016. It brings together staff from Islington Council – including a Business Support Coordinator and Team Manager, four case workers, one Youth Offending Service (YOS) case worker, two Children’s Social Care (CSC) specialist gangs and Serious Youth Violence (SYV) social workers, and one gangs and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) analyst – the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) – including Detective Sergeants and Detective Inspectors and 28 Police Constables and Detective Constables – the National Health Service (NHS) – including a dedicated Psychologically Informed Consultation and Training (PICT) practitioner – the social enterprise group, Abianda – including experts on gang-affected young women – Victim Support, Probation (CSC case management and the National Probation Service), the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and the St Giles Trust. As a joint partnership aimed at combatting SYV, the IGT is part of Islington’s Youth Crime Strategy, elaborated in *Working Together for a Safer Islington*, and emerged in response to a spike in SYV across the borough in 2015.

The IGT built on and extended the remit of the previously existing 18–24 team, itself formed in the aftermath of a high-profile murder trial that hinged on the legal doctrine of ‘joint enterprise’. Four young people were murdered in Islington in 2015, while increases in knife crime and robbery offences were recorded during the same year. Many victims and perpetrators were under 18. This apparent increase in local serious crime prompted an expansion of the borough’s gangs agenda. The IGT’s focus would be on young people aged between 10 and 24, and the approach would be defined by the principles of safeguarding and diversion as well as enforcement.

The formation of the IGT took place in a context of fiscal austerity and organisational restructuring. Well-publicised cuts in funding to the MPS had resulted in Borough Intelligence Units being centralised and scaled-back, while local authorities also faced the scaling down and privatisation of services. In these straitened conditions it made sense for organisations to work together, sharing information and pooling resources. There was also a wider call for information sharing and a diversification of tactics in the combatting of gangs and SYV.

The riots of summer 2011 prompted a Home Office investigation into gang and youth violence. The subsequent report, *Ending Gang and Youth Violence* (2011), resulted in Operation Trident – up to this point responsible for investigating all non-fatal shootings in the capital – being repurposed into Trident Gang Crime Command, responsible for tackling gang crime more generally. The years following the riots would also see the creation of the MPS Gangs Matrix database.

The riots highlighted the importance of information sharing, but the initial stimulus came earlier. In 2010 the Department for Children, Work and Families published *Working Together to Safeguard Children*. This report contained guidelines to inform inter-agency working around the safeguarding and promotion of children’s welfare, and objectives relating to young people at serious risk of harm from community-based violence such as gang, group and knife crime. These guidelines, together with a greater recognition among relevant agencies that the response to gang crime and the emergent phenomenon of county lines should focus on support around vulnerability and exploitation, rather than drug arrests, was a further driver of multi-agency work and information sharing. This approach was subsequently endorsed by the Modern Slavery Act of 2015, with its focus on forced labour, child exploitation and debt bondage, all of which had been identified with the operation of county lines in successive National Crime Agency (NCA) reports (NCA 2015, 2016, 2017). The connection between this new legislation and gangs was strengthened in July 2018, when the Home Office announced a review of the Modern Slavery Act in response to the ‘evolution’ of gangs.

It is in this wider context of rising SYV, the promotion of multi-agency partnership working and information sharing, and a renewed national focus on child exploitation and vulnerability, that the IGT became part of Islington’s 2015 Youth Crime Strategy (subsequently built on by 2017’s *Working*

Together for a Safer Islington). The Youth Crime Strategy itself was a response to a spike in levels of SYV which temporarily brought Islington in line with high-SYV boroughs like Lambeth and Hackney. More specifically, the borough witnessed a 30% increase in SYV between 2014/15 and 2015/16, while the number of victims of knife crime under the age of 25 also increased by 9%. The principal sources of funding for the IGT are the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC), Islington Council, and the MPS.

5.1 Existing models

In terms of its structure, procedures and ethos, the Islington IGT took inspiration from a number of existing models. The Hackney IGT, referred to by one interviewee as 'the original 'Rolls Royce' (A4), was an important precedent, particularly in terms of the extent and nature of collaboration between local authority agencies and the police and the input of academic experts in gangs/SYV (from the University of Bedfordshire). Other existing models in Manchester, Haringey and Westminster were also examined, with one IGT member noting that 'we took bits from everywhere we visited' (C1).

As well as the government reports and legislation bearing on multi-agency collaboration and information sharing detailed above, the IGT's partnership element also borrowed from Trident Gang Crime Command's extended focus on 'proactivity and education' (A4), together with the work of existing gang units in Islington and elsewhere which similarly focused on proactivity, engagement and risk (A6). In organisational terms, the IGT subsumed the 18–24 team whose work, in the eyes of one interviewee, was not integrated enough, with insufficient information sharing and not enough focus on victimhood and gang-affected young females (C1), particularly given the proliferation of county lines and associated forms of exploitation (A1).

6. Rationale Underpinning the IGT

6.1 The role of safeguarding

All interviewees noted the centrality of safeguarding in the work of the IGT. Those leading and coordinating the IGT spoke of safeguarding reconceptualising the work being undertaken, with risk and vulnerability being determined in order to formulate individualised safety plans for young people (C2). Team members also recognised, however, that when risk of SYV exceeded a certain level, enforcement would come to the fore and the police would assume a leading role (A3). In these circumstances, other members of the IGT work to ensure police officers have a good understanding of the wider context in which enforcement takes place. Indeed, the primacy of safeguarding was evident in the fact that the other two elements in the IGT's three-tier approach (C1) – enforcement and intervention – were justified in terms of their relationship with safeguarding. One interviewee spoke of intervention being justified by the minimising of safeguarding risk (C1). Another noted that a lack of engagement with the IGT might prompt an enforcement-led intervention – and, ostensibly at least, the closing of a case – but that this intervention would create further opportunities for engagement and/or diversion geared to safeguarding (C2). While there was almost complete consensus regarding safeguarding as a first-order principle of the IGT's work, there was less agreement around how best to operationalise this principle as IGT practice. As one participant described, 'The concept of a solution I think is different. It looks differently to police than it does to us sometimes' (A7).

Recommendations

Ethos: reinforce the IGT's safeguarding ethos by routinely revisiting how it can be operationalised across the range of partners and activities that inform the team's work.

6.2 An evolving approach in a dynamic environment

Though the organising principles underpinning the IGT and its work are constant, the context within which these principles must be applied is dynamic and constantly shifting. The key contextual shift that the IGT faces is the fact that the individuals involved in SYV in Islington are getting younger. This shift was articulated by multiple participants, one of whom stated that the IGT's central objective is to make sure young people don't 'graduate' to Gangs Matrix status (C2). It reflects the priority objectives laid out in *Working Together for a Safer Islington* (2016: 13), which include a commitment to 'broaden the scope of the Integrated Gangs Team to work with young people on the periphery of gangs as well as those who are established members'. To meet this commitment, the lower age limit of the target cohort was reduced from 18 to 10, underpinned by the realisation that, as one interviewee put it, 'there's a vacuum and that is always filled very quickly with the next generation coming up' (C1).

A diversification in the nature and methods of exploitation, particularly relating to children and young women, was also important in refining the IGT's remit. More specifically, forms of grooming and child sexual exploitation, increasingly linked to county lines, necessitated the extension of the IGT's age range (C2; C3), while a significant increase in the number of young women falling victim to SYV, together with stronger indications that the number of young women committing SYV was also increasing (PCC 2016) underlined the importance of focusing on females as well as males. On this point, female-focussed members of the IGT spoke of their determination to reframe discussions of gangs and young women and, in doing so, to address longstanding biases around this issue (B2). Another factor was shifting patterns in street crime, in accordance with changes in demand for stolen goods (C2), and opaque links between moped crime, gangs and OCGs. As one police officer put it, 'The same people who snatch also do the raids on high-brand shop windows in Bond Street – it all starts in Essex Road and Cally. They're thieves really. But they know everyone who we are after as well' (G1).

These emerging trends, the complex links between them, and the safeguarding, intervention and enforcement realities to which they gave rise, created challenges regarding the IGT's remit and capabilities. For example, while intelligence across multiple areas (encompassing gangs, SYV, CSE, wider exploitation and county lines) had established a stronger evidential link between county lines networks and CSE than between gangs and CSE, it was unclear whether the IGT was equipped to take the right steps given the assumptions about gangs implicated in the Gangs Matrix and, relatedly, the composition of the IGT (A1).

6.3 How the IGT works

IGT staff were unanimous in describing the IGT as a well-resourced group able to intervene swiftly and decisively in the interest of safeguarding young people by providing a 'wraparound service' (E1). One police officer drew on the psychological notion of a 'gestalt' – denoting something that is more than the sum of its parts – to characterise the efficiency and effectiveness of the IGT's multi-agency work (A2).

Staff were also in agreement about the importance of extending the IGT's target cohort, in line with its preventative strands of work, beyond the Gangs Matrix's top 50 nominals to a wider group of 'at-risk young people' (C4), with the virtues of early intervention underlined by the majority of interviewees. The extension of IGT's remit resulted in three cohorts (amounting to around 70 live cases at any given time [C1]): the Gangs Matrix top 50; young victims; and young women. This extended focus was also informed by IGT analysis which showed that most of the young people under 18 who experienced gang violence also experienced another form of exploitation (A7).

Young people joined one of the three cohorts once referred by a relevant agency and via a collective decision based on the characteristics of their case reaching a pre-determined threshold (the vast majority of those not accepted into one of the IGT cohorts are redirected into another channel of

intervention). In this way the IGT was envisaged as part of a bigger picture (D2) encompassing CSE, Missing Persons and gang-affected young women (EM –Interview 1).

6.4 The diversification of methods

The extension of the IGT's target cohort entailed a diversification of its methods and the settings in which interventions took place, with one participant talking of prison-based work, person-based work and family-based work (C4). One virtue of the emphasis on early intervention and prevention seems to be more efficient use of resources; early intervention is considered more targeted and less continuous than the statutory forms of intervention which may occur later (C2). There was lack of clarity among participants about the formal mechanisms required to exploit and develop the prime objective of early intervention.

This diversification of methods involved balancing enforcement *and* diversion (C2). In this context great store was set by building relationships with young people. For many participants, relationship-building is fundamental because, due to their lack of statutory power, they must encourage young people to engage voluntarily (C2). Should these attempts at relationship-building with young people prove unsuccessful, focus can be redirected at family members and the ways in which they might be supported.

In the interests of building trust, some participants noted how the rationale for procedures relating to information sharing are explained to young people (C1). Similarly, one participant talked of emphasising the protective function of controversial measures such as stop and search, framing these as an integral part of public and individual safety practices (C2).

Participants also described the challenges they face in building relationships with disengaged young people. One participant described the 'needs-based work' which focuses not on how to replace the money acquired through SYV and/or gang-related activity, but instead on reframing the young person's aspirations (C4). Another challenge is trying to working more effectively with services that have already 'failed' the young person (C4).

The fact that the IGT was drawn from a range professional backgrounds was described as an asset by all interviewees. Different styles of work allowed IGT personnel to learn from one another (C4), and pooling different forms of expertise meant the IGT was better able to recognise and assess what is changing, be more 'proactive', and develop a better understanding of the young people it is working with (C2).

Participants reported having the space and resources – particularly within monthly 'reflective practice' exercises – to innovate and to a certain extent reshape their job description in the interests of greater effectiveness. For one participant, this means providing a weekly email of useful 'intelligence' to a range of relevant workers. For another, the ability to determine 'risk' in a different manner from the police, which is better suited to early intervention work, is pivotal in a context where the police may define and interpret high risk differently from other statutory and non-statutory IGT partners. Other participants noted, however, that support for innovation was not always consistent, particularly where temporary managers might be concerned (B1). Also, while all interviewees noted the importance of the IGT as a hub, many pointed out that it is not the only relevant partnership concerning gangs and SYV (E1; E2).

7. What is Distinctive About the Islington IGT?

7.1 Co-location

In identifying what is distinctive about the Islington IGT, interviewees pointed to the size and composition of the team, as well as the benefits of co-location at Islington Police Station. One police officer noted that while in the case of other IGTs, a limited number of Gangs Officers would devote part of their post to IGT work, all 28 of Islington's Gangs Officers are committed to the borough's IGT (A2). The benefits of co-location are harnessed via daily tasking meetings, the importance of which was stressed by many participants. These meetings are not police-led, but informed by police updates – with police officers holding a separate meeting immediately prior to the IGT tasking meeting – and conversations around the Gangs Matrix. The majority of participants also liked the accountability afforded by co-location, with actions being assigned across the IGT and updates being provided, in some cases as quickly as the following day. In addition to the greater accountability that results from daily tasking meetings, the way actions are formulated as a team was also singled out for praise.

The benefits of co-location were manifest in some of the cases discussed by interviewees. One police officer described a situation in which a 13-year-old at serious risk of grooming and child slavery was located by police officers on the basis of information shared by other IGT members. This information included details of recent places of stay and other locations connected with possible county lines activity. After being taken into police protection and subsequently into the care of social services, the young person's new address was provided to the police by a member of the IGT, and a strategy meeting concerning the young person's safeguarding scheduled for the same afternoon. As the officer in question put it, 'It (IGT co-location) just means that we are on the ball with exactly who's gone where, and their safety, really' (A5). As one participant summarised, 'It (co-location) means that I would say we're responding quicker than we ever were to risk, particularly acute risk' (A7).

Recommendations

Co-Location: maintain the principle of co-location as a defining characteristic of the Islington IGT.

7.2 Number/range of members

The sheer variety in IGT membership was also described as an asset in itself, with one police officer claiming that Islington's team is the only IGT in London to boast such variety (A3). This variety carries certain clear benefits from a policing point of view. As well as filling police intelligence gaps – 'people don't talk to us', as one officer put it (A4) – some participants argued that discussions among IGT members offers important additional context that can inform police decision-making and activities. One participant described the kind of situation in which this additional context can be of benefit: 'So ... when I've gone into custody and there's a young person there, the police are like, "Oh," about them and I have to say actually they witnessed dad beating the hell out of mum, that's going to have an impact on them, or actually, you know... they have come from war-torn country and they've witnessed, you know, half their family being blown up, so what do you expect?' (B3).

The contribution of particular IGT members was identified by some participants, while others focused on the combination of different kinds of expertise – the gestalt referred to earlier. One participant noted how having a psychologist on the IGT creates an enabling environment for young people (B1), while those who work with gang-affected young women underscored the importance of counselling and therapy sessions (B2). Others focused on proactively shifting the IGT's focus to a younger cohort, with one participant describing compiling their own list of at-risk youngsters by 'working back from

matrix' (E1). This interface between experts and datasets also enhances efficiency: IGT members are able to provide training on key aspects of gangs and SYV across the borough, where before this work may have been outsourced to a third-party organisation (E1). As a result of these multiple and intersecting factors, one IGT member proposed that 'our model is kind of like the Rolls Royce. If you think, every box is ticked and, you know, some of that's luck because of who we had and the funding we already had in-place. But it's kinda come together well' (D2).

8. Usefulness/Necessity of the Concept of the 'Gang' for Different Areas of IGT Work

8.1 The 'gang'

When it was first established, the IGT worked to the definition of gangs developed in the Centre for Social Justice report, *Dying to Belong* (2009: 26): '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'.

The Home Office Early intervention foundation (2015) confirmed that the UK government had adopted this definition. There is also a statutory definition of gang-related violence under the Serious Crime Act (2015):

Section 34(5) of the Policing and Crime Act 2009 (updated by the Serious Crime Act 2015) defines gang-related violence as

'Violence or a threat of violence which occurs in the course of, or is otherwise related to, the activities of a group that:

a) consists of at least 3 people; and,

b) has one or more characteristics that enable its members to be identified by others as a group."

Section 34(5) of the 2009 Act (updated by the Serious Crime Act 2015) defines gang-related drug dealing activity as:

'the unlawful production, supply, importation or exportation of a controlled drug which occurs in the course of, or is otherwise related to, the activities of a group that

a) consists of at least 3 people; and,

b) has one or more characteristics that enable its members to be identified by others as a group

Awareness of and adherence to these official definitions varied across the IGT, and many participants held their own views both on what constitutes a gang and on the usefulness of the term more generally. This diversity of views is unsurprising given the lack of research consensus on these matters. Opinions ranged from support, to qualified support, to explicit resistance. Those in favour of the term contended that as 'gangs' are 'not going anywhere', the label remains important (E2). Similarly, one police participant argued that the 'gang' label reflects the territorial attachments of, and tit-for-tat violence between, criminal groups, and that although young people may reject gang labels when confronted by police, they tend to self-identify with gang collectives when using social media (A5).

Other participants called for a more thoughtful and principled use of the term. One police officer noted that the term is useful for identifying collectives and keeping certain of them apart – and is particularly justified for the borough's 'well-established gangs'. However, they also stressed that misapplication of the term can hinder understanding of intra-group and disorganised violence, noting that 'some of the more recent murders and significant incidents have been internal disputes within what we believe to be all part of the same gang' (A3).

For some participants, what set gangs apart is their violence, with criminal groups being identified more with organised crime. Multi-agency consensus is key here. Graduation to gang status must be agreed by a set of key partners, emphasising that ‘you can’t make that decision on your own’ (A1). The issues of violence and labelling came together in the account of one police officer, who complained that the term ‘gang’ is being misapplied to young people amid a fluid gang landscape where entrenched gang ‘elders’ seldom came to the attention of authorities. This is because of the delegation of violence to youngers, who become labelled and targeted disproportionately in relation to their level of gang involvement (A5).

A similar ambivalence and desire for greater clarity on the term ‘gang’ and cognate labels was articulated by the Home Office in 2012 when it underlined the importance of defining and mapping ‘gangs’ and ‘groups’ and, more specifically, identifying the links between delinquent peer groups, urban street gangs and organised crime groups.

Other IGT members were more critical of the term ‘gang’, referring to the self-fulfilling nature of gang rhetoric. One participant argued that it was the ability to apply and validate the term that was important, stating: ‘I think where it matters is not necessarily amongst young people themselves, but people who have the power to label’ (C3). This view was echoed by another participant (C1), who contended that ‘gang’ was a label used more by authorities than young people themselves and that young people tend to deny gang affiliation – an assertion supported by multiple police officers. The difficulty of dispensing with gang talk altogether was evident in the fact that even those participants who bemoaned the term and its usage elsewhere spoke of ‘gang culture’ existing among young people.

Inconsistencies were also evident in the definition of gangs. *Islington’s Safeguarding Children Affected by Gang Activity and/or Gang-Related Serious Youth Violence: Multi-agency Protocol and Practice Guidance* (2016: 7) includes a definition from gang scholars Hallsworth and Young (2004), while one interviewee’s description of gangs approximated to Thrasher’s (1927) classic definition of gangs as groups ‘integrated through conflict’ (A1).

Some IGT members disavowed the term ‘gang’ when explaining their work to young people in order to pre-empt what was described as the, ‘I’m not in a gang, I don’t need a gang worker’ response (C3). It should be noted, however, that for other members of the team the label could be more empowering. As the IGT member described, ‘I think the big advantage is our name, we’re the gangs team, it’s one of those that when you throw that in there with housing or with the benefit office, in any service, they maybe take you a bit more seriously’ (B4).

Given the widening scope of IGT activity, the ambivalence of many participants toward the term ‘gang’, and the fact that since 2011–12 the MPS has classified a relatively small proportion of SYV as gang-related, it might be time to review the name of the IGT.

Recommendations

Name: consider whether the IGT’s name still adequately reflects the range of activities and cohorts with which it engages, given the controversies attached to the term ‘gang’.

8.2 The Gangs Matrix

All interviewees were asked about the use of the Gangs Matrix and invited to reflect on the criticism the database received from the charity Amnesty International. The Matrix itself was developed as part of the aforementioned *Ending Gangs and Youth Violence* strategy of 2011. It places gang nominals into red, amber and green categories based on intelligence concerning violence, with all nominals ranked according to risk and harm scores. The Matrix includes three cohorts – perpetrators, victims and those in custody – and it is possible to appear in more than one cohort. Participants in this study noted that the Islington Gangs Matrix contains between 150 and 160 names, of whom around 50 are in prison (A1).

A number of IGT members mounted a strident defence of the Gangs Matrix in relation to allegations contained in the Amnesty report. Most made the case that the database was not designed for public perusal or scrutiny, and that it performs a monitoring rather than an operational function (B3). Others argued that the Matrix is not the sole source of intelligence and information used by the IGT; it is cross-referenced with other lists (including social services and CSE lists) and indicators (A3; D1; D2). One IGT member noted how the Matrix was used alongside other information sources to identify young people for ‘victim empathy’ work, and that only 50% of the people worked with by IGT Victim Support appear on the Matrix. The Matrix could be used in similarly indirect ways to target the potentially vulnerable and ‘at-risk’ partners of ‘red’ gang nominals. As one participant explained, ‘the use it has to me is to be identifying the girlfriends of those guys’ (B2). The possibility of appearing on different Matrix cohorts as well as the risk-related lists of other agencies means that young people can be subject to different kinds of intervention concurrently (C1).

Where the IGT’s ‘Top 50’ cohort are concerned, the Matrix plays a more significant role. The entire top 50 on the Islington Gangs Matrix is allocated a case worker, with IGT work being key for nominals over the age of 18 – as is the case for the majority of the top 50 – who receive very little statutory support. As one police officer put it, for top 50 nominals the IGT’s services thus represent a ‘huge uplift’ in available support (A2).

The same officer noted that the Matrix provides a means of weighing the most violent and at-risk cases against levels of engagement with the IGT and any other support services. For example, an individual may be on the Matrix for a long time because of committing a serious violent offence, but because of their engagement with the IGT be considered less of a priority than someone with the same score who is not engaging, and for whom prison may be only remaining option (A2). Another participant was less positive about the Matrix and targeting its top 50 nominals. Here the issue was the mixing of absolute (red, amber, green) and relative (target the top 50) measures: ‘The pitfall is that if you are number one, you stay number one until someone relieves you, goes above you’ (E2).

Some participants defended the Matrix on practical grounds. As one put it: ‘I think if we’re working with the Gangs Unit, the police unit, we will always have to... work around the risk assessment tool that they use, and if that’s the matrix, that’s the matrix’ (A7).

Others admitted confusion concerning the intelligence on which the Matrix is based and the algorithm that processes this information, but reasoned that ranked cohort lists seem to correspond with an anecdotal assessment of key players and are useful for case selection (A5). More specifically, one police officer accepted that there can be informational anomalies, but proposed that the Matrix is more accurate ‘the higher you go’ (A6). Concerns related to the risk of an ‘expert’, neutral gloss being given to unintentional bias and subjective judgement. This concern is important given that the balance between enforcement and diversion is determined partly by where someone sits on the Matrix. As one participant explained, there is:

... almost a zero-tolerance approach to those [red] individuals. So, if they're seen on the streets they're stopped and searched. If they're caught with cannabis it's not, "Okay, we'll give you a warning," they're arrested for it.¹ Then, I think it's a balance... across the IGT. So, from the police perspective, if they've got intel that they're dealing drugs or that they're involved in any criminal activity, they'll continue with their enforcement angle on that, but they will also be aware that we are engaging with them and around whether they're positively engaging or not, because we share that at tasking all the time and at our more strategic meetings, etc. So, I suppose there is that balance. (C2)

The Matrix is also influential in the way it interfaces with other risk assessment instruments. The CSE risk assessment provides one example. As one participant explained: 'Level two is where someone has been injured as part of gang activity... they might have been attacked or you know, run over or stabbed. And then Level three is really entrenched, that you're on the gang's matrix' (E1). The Matrix's RAG ratings and the ways in which they are determined are therefore implicated in other forms of assessment, and as such shape outcomes outside the immediate purview of the Matrix itself.

Though many IGT members accepted that the Gangs Matrix is an imperfect tool used in a selective, intelligent manner, more substantial conceptual and operational concerns were also raised during interviews. Several participants noted that the Matrix was largely unhelpful for tracking drug offences, including county lines activity, if these did not involve violent acts. This view was not shared by all participants, however, with one participant proposing that county lines (and drug dealing more generally) is not necessarily a gang issue at all (A1). A related concern was that, by prioritising violence, the Matrix is skewed in the direction of gang 'youngers'; several participants made the point – which finds support in the gangs research literature (Densely 2014) – that gang evolution tends to see 'elders' engage in less violence, and hence feature less prominently on the Gangs Matrix (A1; D3; E1). Indeed, one police officer suggested that it be rebranded as the Serious Youth Violence Matrix (A4). Thus, while the focus on high-risk cases (F1) was justified in terms of minimising short-term risk, other people implicated in violent acts, though they may be more entrenched in gang activity, would not be targeted by the IGT. Likewise, for those agencies concerned with early intervention, a young person's appearance on the Matrix would suggest the optimal moment for intervention had already passed.

One IGT member highlighted the issue of sexual violence: 'Madness, madness. How can we say that this member of a gang, or whatever, is not more violent, when they've committed multiple gang rapes? I just find that mad' (A7).² For another participant, the very categorization of youth offenders into 'High', 'Medium' or 'Low' Risk groups was described as 'not viable' on the grounds that it was too general (F2).

Definitional issues also related to moped crime and, more specifically, the question of whether groups committing theft while riding mopeds constituted gangs. A spike in the number of moped 'gangs' was noted by a number of interviewees (C2; D2), but other participants explained that these so-called 'snatch nominals' were being targeted by a different team (A1). One participant noted that, if groups of non-violent 'snatch nominals', a 'high proportion' of which comprise 'working-class white boys', do not qualify as gangs (as far as the Gangs Matrix and IGT are concerned), institutional norms may be reproducing racialised notions of crime – that is, reinforcing a damaging stereotype of gangs as black and violent vs. acquisitive criminal groups as white and non-violent (C3).³

¹The MPS team responsible for the central administration of the Gangs Matrix queried this comment, noting that simply being on the matrix or a red nominal is not sufficient justification to stop. MPS policy dictates that there must be grounds at the time for a search to take place.

²The MPS team responsible for the central administration of the Gangs Matrix noted that all sexual offences are scored on the database. Rape is one of the highest scoring offences, on a par with GBH Wounding, which includes stabbings. More than one rape results in classification as a high amber nominal (without any other scoring) and three rapes results in classification as a red nominal.

³The MPS team responsible for the central administration of the Gangs Matrix noted that robbery, weapons or violence on moped attract scoring on the Matrix, but theft snatches and dipping (pickpocketing) do not because the Matrix has always been focused on violence.

The ethno-racial composition of the MPS Matrix featured heavily in the Amnesty report. The ethno-racial composition of the Islington Gangs Matrix was discussed by a number of participants. There was disagreement here, with one participant (A2) noting that the Black and Minority Ethnic (BaME) composition of the MPS Gangs Matrix is reflected in Islington, while another stated that there are more white offenders and victims of SYV in Islington and hence on the Islington Matrix (A3). One IGT member expressed their discomfort with the racial composition of the Matrix together with the implication that ‘society is safe ... (as) it’s just black people or people from black and ethnic communities that are stabbing each other’ (B3). The concern is that the structural-cultural effect of the Matrix might be to distance and obfuscate: dealing in abstracts such as ‘red’ and ‘amber’ nominals glosses over distinctive individual characteristics and circumstances, while the perception that the majority of these nominals are non-white makes risk and harm the preserve of local BaME communities.

The Matrix has been criticised not just around information sharing and data protection (ICO 2018), but also for the possibility of an algorithmically-driven database being used to code common-sense assumptions about gang and gang-related activity in supposedly neutral and objective terms. The recent lawsuit filed against the Boston Police Department on the basis of its points-system and compiling of ‘gang packets’ might sound a note of caution here (Bentancourt 2018).

A parallel between the Boston case and the generation of Matrix-related intelligence is the monitoring of drill music videos uploaded to social media sites like YouTube. Participants noted that these videos are monitored for inflammatory material, as well as ‘who’s got their face out there’ (E2), and the determination of gang affiliation (A6). The mainstreaming of drill music – the genre has grown significantly in terms of both consumption and production in the last two years (Adegoke 2018) – has obvious implications for this kind of monitoring activity. With more young people seeking to mimic the branding and presentational orthodoxies of drill collectives/‘gangs’ (Dymoke 2017), using this material to identify gangs and gang membership and, on a more basic level, the identification of this genre with gang activity itself, becomes problematic.

The Gangs Matrix is a police-led tool that is used differently across different police areas, and it became clear from the interviews that it is viewed as most problematic by non-police partners. There were also identifiable differences between more and less senior members of the IGT relating to perceptions of the role and use of the Gangs Matrix. It is significant, given its controversy, that as the IGT has evolved and its scope expanded, its use of the Gangs Matrix has diminished.

Based on concerns raised in the Amnesty International, the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) began an investigation in October 2017 which found that that inconsistency in the use of the Matrix across London’s 32 Boroughs had resulted in multiple and serious breaches of data protection laws. The ICO issued an Enforcement Notice in late 2018, requiring the MPS to make necessary changes within six months. The Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) undertook a thorough review of the Gangs Matrix, which was published in December 2018 (MOPAC, 2018). The review recommended ‘a comprehensive overhaul of the Matrix Operating Model both to restore trust in the Matrix and also to bring it into line with data protection legislation’, to be completed by December 2019. While it stressed the importance of the database for reducing violent crime, the review also flagged the disproportionate representation of young black males, the lack of community trust in the Matrix, and widespread misunderstanding among non-police practitioners around the aims and purpose of the Matrix.

Recommendations

Data Sources: re-examine the role and use of the Gang’s Matrix and its interaction with other databases in the work of the IGT.

9. Areas of Consensus Around Tackling SYV in Islington

9.1 Timeframe

There were many areas of consensus among the IGT members interviewed, one of which concerned the timeframe of IGT impact. Despite the shared imperative to reduce short-term risks, members agreed that outcomes should be measured on multiple levels that also include the medium-to-long-term.

9.2 Co-location

There was a clear consensus around the multiple benefits of co-location. One such benefit is clarity and accountability around tasking (E1). For one police officer, this means accountability is ‘built in’ to IGT procedures: ‘what happens downstairs is something’s given to someone, in the hand, and they take it there and then and they are all coming back the next day and they’re reporting back on it, so there’s a lot of accountability around it’ (A3).

The co-presence of experts also means delivers added value for respective services and agencies. Speaking about the safeguarding of gang-affected young women, participants highlighted the access to services, including location-specific databases, that otherwise wouldn’t be available (B1, B3). For another participant, this sharing of space and information enables more accurate estimates of risk (E1), while police officers not only benefit directly from other IGT members’ trusting relationships with young people (A3), but also see young people develop a better understanding of the benefits of working with police (at one remove) as a result. Another participant explained:

Well, now they’re like, “OK, so we know you’re not a police officer, but you’re well in there with the police, aren’t you?” Yeah ... But that’s OK because that means when you get in trouble, we can act, these things happen. So I am really clear with them about... all the different professions I work with and why (B2).

10. Areas of Disagreement or Confusion

When asked about the most challenging aspects of their work and the obstacles they face, IGT members identified a number of areas. These broadly relate to institutional tensions, communication and information sharing, (non-)statutory powers, remit, and resources.

10.1 Partnership working: institutional tensions

The most obvious institutional tensions related to possible disconnects between an individual’s role within the IGT and the wider institutional culture and priorities of their direct employer. As one participant, ‘I don’t really have anything to do with *my employer*, it’s kind of a weird post that, although I’m paid by them, they don’t actually have anything to do with my role really’ (B3). Non-police participants also identified some aspects of ‘police culture’ that jarred with the IGT’s mission, at least during the Team’s early days. Participants reported that building trust between police and non-police members was challenging during this period, but that within six months positive relationships had been cemented and were working well (C1). The trust which was a prerequisite of effective information sharing required a change in mind-sets across the IGT. As one participant explained:

...youth workers, the street youth workers, in the same way as the police were quite protective ... so are the street youth workers in particular, because it’s primary that they knowledge share. So, it wasn’t just a one-way process in terms of the police not sharing (C1).

Interviewees reported that once mindsets had been adapted, a ‘conversations overcome everything’ ethos spread across the IGT (D2). Furthermore, co-location facilitated the building of trust through more informal information sharing (D2).

Police participants also reported that trusting relationships took time to develop. One officer explained that, even in the context of information sharing and the collaborative management of

risk and responsibility, the police still ‘owned’ the risk that passed through the IGT (A₃). A lingering sense of institutional territoriality and priority also seemed to influence communication flows and decision-making in the IGT’s early days. As one participant recalled:

So, it wasn’t that we moved in and everything was hunky dory. There was a lot of information sharing. We were moving into the police’s space and obviously there’s a lot of confidential information discussed. So, that took quite a long time in terms of having a real cultural shifting in how we worked and who we worked with and that was from both sides. (C₂)

Inter-agency dynamics have also caused some frustration and/or confusion, often surrounding incompatible timeframes and, by extension, differing perceptions of urgency and prioritisation. One participant described a lack of understanding on the part of some IGT colleagues regarding the time-consuming nature of network analysis (A₁), with another highlighting issues which resulted from members ‘not moving at the same pace’ (E₁). The origin of these issues in institutional procedures and protocols was demonstrated in the case of missing persons. As one IGT member explained:

With social care, we have a protocol to follow, we have a missing [person] protocol... and it doesn’t always fit with the way the Police’s protocol is... So it is a lot of the time we are... we do spend a lot of time trying to get updates from Police. Sometimes it will overlap with gangs, we’ve got a young person who’s been missing for about two months (E₁).

Tension can also arise in the case of agency workers outside of the IGT being asked to refer a young person. One participant explained that any delay or obstruction here could affect not only IGT dynamics but also influence the young person in question (C₂). Conversely, there is also a need to guard against the perception that once a case is taken on by the IGT, the buck has effectively been passed and the sending agency can close the case (C₁).

Other issues concerned particular agencies, foremost among which were CSC case management and the Probation Service. We should stress that all participants set their remarks about probation services in the context of the funding cuts and restructuring. Also, several participants noted that it was the relatively smooth information sharing taking place elsewhere within the IGT that threw the comparably cumbersome and under-resourced processes of probation agencies into relief. One participant explained:

Looking at probation. So, information sharing with probation, and I think you’re aware of the split between probation and the [CYPS], and I think there’re under huge amounts of pressure in terms of caseloads, risk, etc. and particularly for our cohort of individuals who are high risk on the Matrix that we’re working with. Somehow information sharing, because they’re not ... probation are not co-located with us, so that’s a real challenge for us (C₁).

Numerous participants flagged the importance of the probation service for the IGT’s work, and their declining role within the team, as a result of diminishing resources in a context of privatisation and austerity, was a source of widespread concern. The comparative disembodiedness of probation represents a blockage in the IGT’s information sharing, meaning relevant information pertaining to high-risk individuals can be missed. A police officer put it as follows: ‘before we had someone who... knew all the probation officers and was able to get hold of them and stuff, or able to find out information about licences and all those sorts of things which are quite important’ (D₁). One participant described the post-restructuring working conditions faced by probation workers as ‘very challenging’, with caseloads as high as 60 and rising rates of repeat offending damaging staff morale (F₂). This, it was suggested, contributed to a lack of joined-up action in IGT output.

Housing agencies were also identified as important to the work of the IGT but, due to limited engagement with the team, potential sources of delay and confusion. As with probation services, interviewees were keen to stress that it was housing procedures, rather than personnel, that could be problematic. As one IGT member explained, ‘because I’ve got such a high caseload of cases

where they do need imminent housing support, it's like... if they've got any arrears or anything like that, it really slows the process down. So I think that's a definite barrier' (B4). Another participant described how a housing representative would attend only one monthly meeting (D1), a frustrating lack of presence given the importance of housing in effecting change. And another noted:

... what we know is that if we don't support young people and families into stable and secure and safe places, then we can't do any meaningful work. So, we need to look at basic needs before we even touch on looking at their thinking or behaviour and challenging their cognitive thinking. So, we need to go back to basics, and also housing is a huge achievement (C1).

A housing strength is that Islington is one of the London authorities that has a reciprocal housing arrangement in place for young people and families who need moving from Islington to another area because of SYV and/or gang-related issues. There is also an assessment procedure for families from other boroughs who require rehousing support in Islington. This does not mean that every request for rehousing will be fulfilled. Nevertheless, the process is beneficial to the IGT because of the complexity and high need of some of the cases it must manage.

10.2 Communication/Information sharing

As already noted, while IGT members were unanimous in their prioritisation of safeguarding, there was less agreement on the most effective way to go about safeguarding young people in difference contexts and circumstances. Issues surrounding communication and information sharing largely concerned limits on what could be shared between agencies and practical challenges to collaboration. Several participants explained that information sharing within the IGT is not, and cannot be, limitless. In many cases agencies have to weigh concerns relating to confidentiality against the obligation to share information with partner agencies (A5; B1; B4; C1). Importantly, blockages in information sharing can lead to duplication, as explained by one participant:

So, like, everything from their name, the amount of times they see them per week, stuff like that, they can't disclose to anybody. It's like literally unless you work with that young person, that's the only way you're going to know that these guys are even working with them. And, you know, I understand why they have to do that because obviously their kind of work, was, I think it was on a trial kind of basis, I think it was partly funded by the NHS, but it's like, you know, when you've got that sort of thing going on, you can't really get any intel. It makes it really difficult for you to kind of really do anything meaningful with the young person. You don't know whether you're duplicating work and that sort of thing, yeah (B4).

Participants also flagged the possibility that a certain agency may withhold information that contradicted other IGT sources, which could generate tension (A5). With many IGT workers explaining the principles of information sharing to young people, there was always the possibility that some individuals will similarly withhold information (B1).

An enduring set of challenges around perceived lack of communication, intelligence gathering and the physical layout of workplaces was also described. Though the possibility of receiving live data via an online application was mooted by one participant, they complained about the time-lapse between a critical incident taking place and intelligence being elicited. Another frequently cited problem was the uneven nature of intelligence sources (C2), with this issue being particularly acute when it came to the structure of local gangs (A1). A lack of communication from police over big initiatives like Trident and operations relating to organised crime was also highlighted, with one participant stating:

... there could be a big operation going on up here that we won't necessarily know about, and so it's happened and then ... and like Trident, you know Trident were coming into the borough to do some operations? The gangs unit would probably be aware that it's happening, but won't know the details of it until it's happened (C2).

Although co-location afforded many benefits with regard to information sharing, the sharing of physical space could complicate the dissemination of sensitive information (A5). Another practical issue was possible turnover in IGT personnel. Even if the composition of the IGT remained constant in terms of the agencies represented, significant ‘catch up’ was required should any personnel changes occur. Unfortunately, these changes, particularly in relation to the police, were more likely in a transient and austere financial climate, as described by one participant: ‘given the huge, huge changes in the Met... it’s so transient at the moment with police officers, they come and go so, so quickly’ (A7). The kind of comprehensive, tailor-made ‘safety plans’ and strategic intelligence envisaged by another participant would only be possible once these obstacles to information sharing had been removed (C4).

Recommendations

Information Sharing: clarify the agency-specific and legal constraints around information sharing within the IGT and between Boroughs to address perceived asymmetries.

10.3 Statutory vs. non-statutory powers

Many participants discussed the uneven spread of statutory powers within the IGT, with only the police, probation and social workers possessing these. The asymmetry between probation and other members of the IGT on this issue was a particular concern for one Team member:

‘I think because they’re a statutory service and they work with the over 18s at certain points. So, if they want to call a professionals meeting, they call it. We can’t call it, because we’re not statutory. So, it’s all managed like that’ (C1).

An IGT colleague described the difficulty of harmonising their own statutory responsibilities and powers with the services provided by other IGT members:

... we make that referral decision on an individual basis of who that young person is and often, you know, they have got excellent relationships with IGT workers... And we would say, “Do you know what, social care, you take a sort of back seat in this role, you maybe focus on the mum’s issues with housing or benefit problems or the younger ones in the home and [the IGT workers] will do that bit of work”. But it’s managing lots of highly intelligent, highly skilled practitioners that all want to [help], you know, and it’s managing it in a way that’s right for the young person. Yeah, sometimes the young person can get lost in that (E1).

The absence of statutory powers wasn’t understood as a shortcoming in the eyes of some IGT members. One opined that young people are more likely to opt-in if there are no sanctions or penalties attached to their non-engagement (C3). Others felt that such sanctions are needed:

I mean, the kids, they have to agree to see you, or the parents have to agree... They don’t have to see me, so sometimes [the key challenge] is getting them to agree to see me, or their parents to agree for me to see the young people (B3).

10.4 Remit

Concerns about the IGT's remit were linked to the composition of the Team, how this shapes its overall mission, and how equipped members feel they are for early intervention. Other challenges related to the division of labour across the IGT as well as the combination of tasks included in agency workloads.

Some participants described how over-professionalization and 'too much specialisation' adversely affected the IGT's work, particularly during the Team's early days. As a police officer explained: 'I think it's probably ... it's too specialist and it's coming to the kids too late' (A2).

Some remit-related issues impact on services and resources. One participant explained that while very good links exist within the Team itself, elements of the IGT's remit that overlap with other multi-agency teams can lead to a short-term depletion of resources: 'If the young person is linked to county lines, we'll get less of that service because... you know, ICT is co-located here but the drug supply doesn't encompass it, it doesn't feature as much' (A1). The spreading of county lines across the remits of various teams was identified as an important matter in itself, particularly given that these drug lines are a priority objective in Islington's Youth Crime Strategy. A related issue was the need for cases involving missing persons connected to county lines to be treated as a safeguarding issue, with one participant noting: 'we still need to work to a place where we take county lines missing young people as a safeguarding matter rather than their own choice to go off and run drugs if you like' (E1). A more basic question over the IGT's division of labour concerned the perception that the Team's police contingent 'does enforcement' and the partnership 'does safeguarding'. As one police officer described:

So it's more from an enforcement viewpoint I see it, and at strategy meetings where you all go along to, it's definitely more about safeguarding, I think, which is good, because I think that is where as police we don't get too involved. We're more trying to focus on the criminality aspect and going in and dealing with the offences (A5).

The same officer explained the difficulty of police officers combining safeguarding with enforcement, and mooted the possibility of 'keeping our unit completely separate from safeguarding and having a 'safeguarding young people' gangs unit that goes on the social worker visits, that does those things. Because I think they find that difficult, and we find that difficult as well' (A5). As one participant explained, the combination of these functions could also be confusing for young people, with the advice given to offenders arising from the division between 'an enforcement perspective' and 'a rehabilitation perspective' being perceived as 'mixed messages'.

10.5 Resources

Participants also described the difficulties of working in a context of austerity and an uncertain funding environment. The fact that IGT funding is drawn from a number of sources – with funding for different posts necessarily coming from different places – generates a degree of volatility and uncertainty. While one participant emphasised that 'lots of resource has gone into IGT' (D2) and that funding was protected until 2020 (C1), another spoke of 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' (D3). Furthermore, a police officer described how the principle of 'additionality' underpins the Team's multi-agency approach, but also presents challenges regarding funding:

Those roles didn't exist before... you know, the Social Worker sat in the IGT – that's not a role that exists somewhere else, that is the IGT Social Worker. Same for Mental Health, same for YOS, same for third sector. So, it costs all those people's salaries and it costs the space (A2).

One participant stressed that, although current levels of trust and information sharing are high, they are dependent on all agencies being properly staffed and resourced (B1). For this IGT member, resentment among (remaining) probation staff directed at the well-resourced IGT could be problematic: ‘I think there’s been a general thing, we have, we have the time and the resources to support these young people and they don’t, and I think there’s a bit of resentment maybe, a little bit’ (B1). The restructuring of Community Safety, changes in leadership within Islington, and funding cuts faced by agencies outside the IGT have made the Team’s work harder. One participant explained that funding cuts tend to create shortcomings in universal services around the detection of special educational needs, drug addiction and mental health issues (B2).

The relationship between mental health, diagnostic thresholds and available provision was a particular concern for another participant, who noted that most gang-affected young people who have mental health issues do not meet the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services threshold. As a result: “They kind of fall into the middle ground that they don’t meet CAMHS threshold, they’re not obviously completely fine, they’re in the middle and there is nothing for them” (B3). This point should be considered in the context of the borough having a higher diagnosable mental health disorder rate (14% of 5 to 16-year olds) than the national average (Camden and Islington Public Health Report 2015).

11. What Success Looks Like

11.1 Describing success

The IGT’s challenges with respect to the measurement of outcomes were neatly summarised by one participant: ‘I would say something I know that we’re trying really hard to do at the moment is, now the IGT is up-and-running, and has been for a while, is evidencing outcomes. And a huge piece of work is evidencing outcomes, evaluation’ (A7). For a police officer, the prospect of adopting a public health approach to SYV was attractive primarily because of the long-term outlook it afforded:

... we don’t traditionally work in long-term timeframes in this country. So clearly, politically and also within the police, people work in relatively short posting periods or election runs or whatever, so that’s the longer term. We’re all talking about the public health approach at the moment, which is the long, long term. Great. Someone can actually really demonstrate what the public health approach is (A4).

Given that substantive outcomes often cannot be evidenced for some time, immediate measures of success are modest and relative. As another police officer described, ‘to get someone like that just doing one thing, just going to a meeting once a week – that’s actually a big win’ (A2). For one participant, success must be viewed in relative terms: ‘we try and measure small steps as well as the stats’ (C1). This view was supported by another of the Team’s police officers, who argued that notions of success needed to take the magnitude of the challenge into account (A6). In practical terms, it is unlikely that a young person’s rehabilitation will be linear (C2).

IGT members tended to define success according to their individual or agency’s brief. For some participants, statistics cannot be relied upon to capture success; case studies are needed to convey the qualitative side of a positive outcome (C1; C2). For those working with gang-affected young women, success involves building trust and brokering relationships with others in a position to help (B2), while for others success means generating high quality information, and does not necessarily concern how that information is acted on by partners (A1).

11.2 Quantifying success

Not all measures of success are qualitative. The IGT’s quarterly reports include measures of the Team’s performance against the Islington Youth and Community Service’s 12 objectives (labelled ‘A’ to ‘L’). In 2017/18 the Team enjoyed considerable effectiveness across many of these stated objectives, with measured outcomes including:

- A 67% reduction in cohort arrest rates (arrests per person);
- A 5% reduction in the proportion of the cohort arrested;
- A 67% reduction in MPS Gangs Matrix Harm Score (since referral date) for individuals exiting the IGT;
- An 8.5% reduction in the number of knife crime with injury offences in Islington where the victim was aged between 1 and 24 and excluding domestic abuse (versus an increase of 2.9% across London).
- Twenty-nine members of the cohort were supported into Education, Training or Employment (ETE); and
- Forty-three members of the cohort were supported to access safe and stable accommodation.

By comparison, the number of young people/young adults who underwent mental health assessment – just seven of the cohort – was disappointing, though partly explained by the absence of the Team’s psychologist between April 2017 and January 2018 (see also section 12.1 below) and the reluctance of some service users to engage in such a service.

Furthermore, a number of the Team’s objectives are notable given the issues raised elsewhere in the report. Objective C), to ‘Reduce young people’s involvement in gangs/Reduce MPS Gang matrix risk level of individuals in scope’, invites the IGT to measure success in terms of the number of young people (still) listed on the Gangs Matrix and a reduction in nominals’ harm scores. This objective further embeds the Gangs Matrix in the work of the IGT and makes questions over its operationalisation and interaction with other data sources more pressing. Some IGT members queried its appropriateness as a measure of success. As one participant noted: ‘for me it’s not about the Matrix, it’s not about going from red, amber, green, to the next level down – so the next level down to being off the matrix. That is only one indicator of positive outcome’ (A7). Objective E), to ‘Improve compliance with orders/licences’, underlines the importance of working effectively with probation agencies when, as participants made clear, this is difficult to achieve. Also, with one report noting ‘an increase in young people who are involved in gang-related offending of drug supply and going missing as opposed to the violent territory-based gang-related offending’, the usefulness of developing an integrated approach to county lines and missing persons is underscored.

Individual agencies have their own methods of quantifying success. Victim Support, for example, used a seven-point ‘Star Project Programme’ system to measure outcomes relating to education, work and wellbeing. (B4). Police officers highlighted reductions in knife crime (in the context of increases across London [A2]) and the financial savings resulting from fewer murder investigations as success indicators: ‘...it’s about 500 grand a year. It’s not cheap. It’s a lot cheaper than investigating a murder which is... it’s an opportunity cost but it’s £1.8million-ish is the figure that’s sort of agreed’ (A2). These various measures of success were tempered by one IGT member who described an increase in the number of young people (under 18) arrested for murder, stating: ‘I’ve definitely seen an increase in the ones that have been arrested for murder ... I started in 2015 and I maybe would see one, two a year and it’s now, you know, one a month and it’s quite, there is, yeah, big increase in that’ (B3).

11.3 Issues

It is of course difficult to harmonise measurement of outcomes when various agencies maintain different norms – for example, Victim Support will not accept case studies (B4). Managing expectations and establishing consensus in this regard can be challenging (C1). One possible solution was outlined as follows:

...how do we have an established performance and evaluation framework? This would be... we have a performance team. So, how can we bring the IGT into that, but also so that we can then evidence all of the fantastic work that they do, and the outcomes for young people. Because councils, the performance frameworks that we have at the moment, don’t always do that. So, it’s sort of establishing also a consistency to evaluation as well (A7).

Also, despite all the measures alluded to thus far, even putatively successful operations do not address the upstream origins and/or organised crime element of gang activity, a fact underlined by a police officer:

And I don't think we've solved the issue by any means but we certainly pushed it further underground from a member of the public's point of view, where if Mr Smith wanted to go and deal with drugs, it would be out of wherever he's come from on a pedal cycle as quickly as he could, deal with drugs and back off (A6).

Furthermore, existing measures do not take account of outcomes relating to the wider community. As one participant put it: 'the other important thing that we need to evidence is the success of the team as a whole, and the purpose of it. So, moving away from the outcomes for young people, what difference are we making in communities to professionals, etc.' (A7).

Recommendations

Effectiveness: develop an integrated framework for measuring 'effectiveness' that systematically incorporates multiple indicators within the partnership.

12. What is Missing From the IGT?

12.1 Institutional absences and deficits

The key absences identified by participants were representatives of housing and education services. Housing services were described as conspicuous by their absence because of their importance to IGT work (see section 10.1 above). A representative from education was called for by three members of the IGT representing different agencies (B1; B3; B4), though a specific stage of education (11 to 18) was alluded to in only one of these instances (B1). Another IGT member stressed the need for a counsellor as well as a psychologist (B3). This was interesting given that counselling seemed to be available through one of the IGT's member agencies, but not offered to members of IGT cohorts as standard. The absence of a psychologist from the IGT for long periods may have contributed to the sense that mental health has been marginalised in relation to other diagnostic issues. A related innovation concerned training provision around trauma, and particularly family trauma. As explained by one participant: 'they just see, you know, they see the bad side, day in, day out, what they don't necessarily see is the trauma that young kids see ... Yeah, so that kind of, maybe some training around that would be helpful' (B3). A police officer suggested Early Help could be involved here, given that this service deals with 'troubled families' and young children while also having access to relevant databases, which could enhance IGT work (A3).

For other team members the shortage of youth workers reinforces an unhealthy power relationship between young people and authority. As one participant put it, young people 'end up with probation, with YOS, you know, the police land them with social workers, these are all professionals, people in power, where the power dynamic has them at the bottom' (B2). Similarly, a police officer called for more provision and innovation around youth diversion services (A4). Those carrying out social and youth work themselves put the ball back in the police's court, mooted the possibility of dedicated 'issue' police officers who would be in situ for the medium-to-long term around particular issues, such as exploitation and county lines (E1; E2). It was proposed that a more focused approach at this level could lead to a rolling out of 'gang-related interventions' with young people. One participant described how such an innovation might work: 'with the younger ones it's more about how we're doing specific gang-related interventions with them, with the hope that the social worker will be able to continue that. It's as much working with the social worker and the professional network as it is with that individual' (C2).

12.2 Capacity-building and Co-production

Capacity building and the need to forge better connections outside the IGT were discussed by many participants. Given the shift in focus to a younger cohort, better engagement with younger children was required and, by extension, more efficient early flag and subsequent intervention systems. As a police officer explained, 'Because unfortunately by the time you get to 10, 11, it's almost too late' (A6). More school- and teacher-focused work could be conducted, especially in primary schools (A2; A4; C2). A police officer stressed that this would not necessarily entail blanket 'awareness' sessions at primary and junior schools, but should reflect the need to target 'at-risk' young people early and decisively, with social services retaining primary responsibility (A6; C2). That said, the development of provision for long-term engagement with young people, ranging from six months to several years in duration, was noted as an important ongoing objective by one participant (C2).

Many participants suggested that better connections with both the families of targeted young people and the wider community needed to be cultivated (A4; C3). For one police officer this will require a return to neighbourhood policing, with more officers gathering local intelligence. The most useful questions researchers can answer in this setting, the officer elaborated, are: What do young people think of the police? Under what circumstances might they be more prepared to engage? What do they think of being labelled as gang members? What do they think of gang membership?' (A3).

The desire to foster links with the local community chimes with a Home Office recommendation from 2012 to 'engage with communities to ascertain whether services are appropriate to gang and youth violence' (Home Office 2012). Another police officer suggested involving influential local figures in a Community Intervention Team for this purpose: 'so your community intervention team for want of a better phrase, which is something which we're trying to get off the ground here at the moment ... So you know, these are people that are really important as a voice and another angle to get into some of these kids and try and divert them' (A4).

For another participant better engagement would entail 'co-production':

I also think we're trying to sort of embed more co-production ... I think with young people and families and communities. I think for Islington... that's something we probably haven't focused on enough in this area... and I'm really keen for that to be a part of the IGT as well (A7).

Other issues include the need for better support for family members (parents, siblings and partners) and around CSE (B1), plus the need to raise awareness of the IGT and its work, together with specific procedures including the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in relation to Modern Day Slavery (B2). Indeed, as well as its encompassing of CSE, a police officer stated that the new Modern Slavery legislation was seen as 'a real opportunity' to combat county lines (A4).

Recommendations

Community Links: work with young people, educational services and the wider population to build stronger community links and co-produce a safer Islington.

13. Challenges for the Future

13.1 Resourcing

One participant spoke of the difficulty of keeping morale high in an uncertain funding climate (C1), particularly given the importance of continuity at the level of personnel, not just agencies, and relatedly, a continued reliance on personal networks (E1). It is difficult to give assurances to team members about the relative security of funding while guarding against notions of favouritism or, as an IGT case worker put it, the IGT being perceived as ‘a spoilt child’. Another case worker extrapolated from their experiences with probation agencies: ‘maybe services do... they get quite resentful of, “Oh, there’s money going that way but we’re sort of going without,” and I do think that we will experience the same sort of struggles that other people do’ (B1).

The fact that different IGT positions are funded by different organisations complicates matters (C1), with some positions being reviewed annually and others being afforded greater (relative) security (B4). The varying timeframes of organisations and their particular criteria and/or thresholds concerning positive outcomes could have an important bearing on the security of the IGT going forward (B4).

Recommendations

Resources: leverage resources within other parts of Islington Council (skills, culture, employability), private and FE/HE sectors to enhance young people’s life chances.

13.2 Institutional change

Uncertainty about funding translates into almost constant institutional change. For the IGT’s police officers, work had been made more challenging by the creation of Basic Command Units and the merging of Islington and Camden as policing jurisdictions. As one officer described: ‘Camden and Islington, albeit they’re politically similar, they’re not particularly stylistically similar, they didn’t necessarily want to work in the same way. Camden believe they have different problems, certainly different budget streams, different priorities, slightly different leanings. So that is a big challenge’ (A2). One participant outlined the resource-allocation implications of the merger:

They merged with Camden last year, so our resource in Islington was reduced ... And then what if the resource all goes over the Camden, because of a murder for example, then because they’re not resourcing in terms of proactiveness... The police are already aware of that and where they can they continue to resource both, but they have to put in resource where priorities are (C1).

Many participants echoed the Home Office in emphasising the need for better cross-borough information sharing. However, as alluded to above, this is difficult given the institutional asymmetry between Islington and Camden.

In a challenging funding climate where unmanageable caseloads and worker burnout are a real concern (C1; F1), there is a need to consistently underline the role of IGT to other agencies. As one participant explained:

It’s senior management being really clear about that, but also staff as well saying, “This is what we’re offering. This is the service... there’s definitely work there. I don’t think it’s firmly established. I think with some of our colleagues and partners it is, but with others it needs to be reiterated and those discussions need to happen going forward (C1).

Meeting these challenges will involve remaining innovative while clarifying the remit of the IGT. As already noted, clarity of purpose and remit is vital lest a misguided perception of ‘success’ invites a larger and potentially unworkable brief (C1). One participant noted the possibility of addressing the various interfaces between gangs, CSE, and county lines: ‘We’re trying to develop a model where it all sits under the same remit, missing, exploitation, gangs, CSE, sexually harmful behaviour, all under that one remit’ (E1). This sort of further integration may increase efficiency and avoid the kind of duplication described by one IGT member: ‘We know that we talk about the same people at each panel, we have for ages. And every time we try and make one more strategic, one more case base, we tend to come back to ‘oh we’re still talking about the same young people in different meetings’ (A7).

For other participants, it was important to reconcile striving for the ‘reduction of risk’ with the acknowledgment that ‘risk is dynamic’ (C2; E1). This might include refining notions of, and the ability to measure, ‘impactful activities’, as a case worker suggested (C4), and making all agencies aware that information can be shared without divulging the identities of young people with the aim of reducing duplication:

They don’t realise that there’s a level where you can protect your source, for a young person that you’re working with ... information sharing, information gathering, is something we need to work on... Any information that’s given to police is evaluated according to whether it’s a source that’s provided information before, how reliable they are and who it can be shared with. And you don’t even need to have that young person’s name on there (A1).

13.3 Legislative change

Legislation pertaining to the handling of information may also represent a challenge. A recent Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) report issued an Enforcement Notice to the MPS on the grounds that the Gangs Matrix breached the provisions of the 1988 Data Protection Act, while the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) meant the IGT was unable to determine whether there had been a reduction in the percentage of its cohort that had been arrested (Objective B). Taking greater account of this legislation and its impact on determining objectives as well as measuring success will be necessary going forward.

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