Risk Factors and Preventive Factors in Studies of Juvenile Delinquency*

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Introduction

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Many European countries are confronted with an aggravated problem of gang crime and increasing violence in the streets. Street shootings and violence have lifted youth gangs to the top of the political agenda, and strategies to mitigate the problems are urgently needed.

This is the first policy brief in a series of three that brings together findings from a scientific literature review on the problem of juvenile delinquency and gang crime. This first briefing provides the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings for policy reactions to the problem of gang crime. In a second brief, concepts in "social prevention" will be examined in more detail in regard to social institutions such as family, schooling, religion, ethnicity and public health. The final brief proposes a coherent strategy to tackle problems in relation to gang crime in urban areas. A *multi-agency approach* as "the coordinated response of public sector agencies to address crime" (Wakefield and Fleming, 2009) is argued to be suitable to prevent young people from joining street gangs and to inhibit the formation of youth gangs more generally.

This series of policy briefs draws on findings from recent international research projects on youth gangs, namely the International Self-Report Delinquency Study (ISRD), the EUROGANG research programme, and the TRANSGANG research programme. ISRD is probably the most comprehensive juvenile self-report study of the last two decades. Researchers in 45 nations worldwide have recently joined the 4th sweep of this standardised data collection on juvenile delinquency and victimisation. The EUROGANG programme, founded in 1998, is an international network of American and European researchers who aim to

"inform the development of effective local, national, and international responses to emerging youth crime and violence issues". The TRANSGANG Project is a solution focused research project that highlights mediation processes in the work with youth groups as an alternative solution to gang crime.

These international research projects have worked out sound policy recommendations and therefore provide the basic material for our summary of good practices. In this policy brief we will use findings from the first study whereas the other two will be used in the next briefs of the series.

A social response to juvenile delinquency

There are several political strategies to tackle the problem of juvenile gang crime, and very broadly we can distinguish a deterrence approach and a social prevention approach. Strategies of deterrence are based on the idea of 'rational choice'; they regard offenders as rational utility-maximizing individuals and suggest an increase of surveillance, higher penalties, strict sanctioning and reducing opportunities for crime by changing the immediate situational environment. Proponents of this "managerialist approach" prefer short-term solutions over long-term welfare strategies, low-cost interventions over large-scale social programmes and market-driven public-private partnerships over social welfare institutions (Garland, 2000, 2001).

Deterrence, surveillance, sanctions and opportunity reduction versus social crime prevention and understanding social conditions of youth crime

In contrast, social crime prevention has been defined as "aims to strengthen socialization agencies and community institutions in order to influence those groups that are most at risk of offending" (Bright, 1991: 64; quoted in: Hughes 1998: 20). Social prevention tries to reduce the likelihood that individuals or groups will include crime in their repertoire of behaviours by strengthening informal and institutionally based incentives to be law abiding (Sutton et al., 2008: 22).

Whereas the proponents of social engineering search for new technologies to control gang crime, social prevention protagonists seek to understand the social conditions in a society that allow youth groups to engage in criminal activities. This search for social conditions, however, is a serious matter, as it requires the study of the social complexity of juvenile delinquency before the political implications can be worked out.

In the following, some of the cornerstones in social research on juvenile delinquency are outlined and particular risk factors in the social development of young people are highlighted.

Understanding gang crime

Juvenile delinquency and gang crime have been a focus of the social sciences for almost a century. From the early 20th century until today, research has passed through various political and ideological eras with significant effects on objectives, methodologies and conclusions. At most times, juvenile delinquency was studied to understand the meanings of social and cultural behaviour and see the world "through the eyes" of young people involved in crime. For example, in Frederic Thrasher's long-term study of 1.313 street gangs across the city of Chicago, crime and delinquency was seen as a by-product of population density, overcrowded streets and poverty (Thrasher, 1927/1947).

With the formal establishment of a *sociology of deviance* in the 1960s, observational methods were superseded by theory-driven empirical analyses of structure and agency within the subcultures of youth gangs. The prevailing theoretical concepts were: (1) anomie, or the disparity between the 'cultural goal' of economic success and the unequal distribution of 'legitimate means' of attaining this goal; (2) strain in terms of marginalisation and status frustration among working-class people; and (3) *labelling and social constructionism*, nurtured by the mass media blamed for causing a "moral panic" about youth cultures.

Anomie, strain, subcultures, status frustration, labelling

Working in the emerging subject of a sociology of deviance, Albert Cohen argued in *Delinquent Boys – The Culture of the Gang* (Cohen, 1955) that structural and institutionalised inequality brought on an experience of collective strain, which then induced similarly excluded individuals to establish "group standards" in opposition to mainstream values in society. The recognition denied in the wider society can be compensated and achieved within a subculture, where the gang offers a sense of belonging and status:

"*Being denied access to, or wilfully disregarding, the formal values of mainstream society, an alternative subculture is created in which individuals may be successful – in terms of violence, crime, and hedonism*" (Cohen, 1955: 55; quoted in Fraser, 2017: 67).

At other times, studies on youth gangs took a critical, sometimes Neo-Marxist, view and explicitly pointed to issues of power relations, class, gender, ethnicity and social inequalities that determine the identity of gang members in different environments.

The argument of structural inequalities, social exclusion and discrimination culminated in a critical view that presented young delinquents as victims of

political power relations. The radical political demands that followed from the labelling perspective were the call for de-criminalisation of certain offences, minimal intervention by the police, diversion and abolitionism in penal systems.

Administrative data and large-scale surveys; social control, prevention, intervention

From the 1980s onward, the field of gang research has increasingly turned away from cultural studies and became a major focus of the rising academic discipline of criminology and criminal justice. This also meant a shift in focus, from qualitative ethnographic approaches of social contexts in which gangs were established, to studying the causes and correlates of gang membership in large-scale surveys. Quantitative surveys helped investigate the dark figure of crime and establish causal relationships between gang affiliation and other social factors such as personality, family background, schooling, and leisure activities. The theoretical focus also shifted from a socio-political critique of living conditions, to institutions of social control, prevention and early intervention. A concise analysis of administrative data (official crime statistics), self-report and survey data can offer policy recommendations that consider factors that may allow or hinder young people from joining youth gangs.

Pathways towards prevention

Drifting in and out of deviancy

Drift, informal social control, turning points, and risk factors

The theoretical pathway from understanding gang crime to prevention and intervention can be laid out as follows: Rather than concentrating on purely *interactionist* and *interpretivist* approaches and also avoiding a *radical* critique of social systems on a macro-societal level, we may follow a *realist* approach in order to offer a valid solution to the problem of gang crime. We may start from the concept of *drift* (Matza, 1964), which rejects the static view of theories of subcultures and instead contends that life-courses are neither predetermined nor culturally inherited. In his classic study *Delinquency and Drift* (1964), David Matza argued that most young people do not spend all of their time together with young offenders, but also at home, at school, at work, and maybe in a sports club. In each setting, juveniles are exposed to different role-structures, norms and values. Therefore, delinquency tends to be transient and intermittent, and juveniles may temporarily drift away from law-abiding norms into situations where delinquency is the dominant form of conduct. It follows that if juveniles drift between conventional and criminal activities, there is hope that the norms in non-delinquent social environments are strong enough to eventually take control in the overall normative structure of young people's action.

Social control theory

Therefore, what is needed is not only a theory about why youths are pushed into delinquency, but also a better understanding about what prevents adolescents from joining gangs. In other words, there is no need to identify the factors that motivate youths to commit delinquent acts, but rather we should ask: Why do youths conform to the laws? A number of researchers have focused on the mechanisms that restrain individuals from becoming involved in deviant, delinquent and criminal behaviour. One of the most celebrated proponents of *social control theory*, Travis Hirschi (1969), was concerned with identifying the factors that lead to social conformity. Hirschi argued that the reason people do not engage in deviance or crime is because we have *social bonds to conformity* that keep us from engaging in unacceptable activities. There are four elements of social bonding as the core condition for conformity: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. These elements will now be presented as they are significant to later deduce prevention strategies.

Attachment, commitment, involvement, belief – and self-control

Attachment is the affectionate component; it suggests that an emotional relationship with others, usually parents and other family members, but also friends we look up to, plays a significant role and guide our actions. A strong attachment may help young people to re-consider their plans before carrying out a crime in order to avoid personal disappointment. Caring about what significant people (role models) would say if they found out is a vital element of social control.

Commitment is the rational component that causes young people to weigh costs and benefits of deviant behaviour. Those who have more to lose will less likely engage in delinquency. The risk of losing a job, losing a partner, or losing a position in a sports club acts as an important factor of social control.

Involvement is the practical component of time management. Involvement in conventional activities functions as a distraction from getting involved in deviant activities. The more time is spent engaged in conforming activities such as doing sports, artwork, reading etc., the less time there is available to deviate and cause trouble. Hirschi's argument here is that "idle hands are the devil's workshop" (Hirschi, 1969: 187).

Belief is the moral component. This simply refers to the degree of agreement with rules and norms of society as a control factor. A feeling of moral obligation and respect for societal norms and values prevent young people from breaking rules.

Hirschi has, of course, found relationships between these components, as for example, the more time someone spends in a sports club, the more he or she will feel attached to team-mates and possibly to coaches, the more they will have to lose, the more they will respect the rules of conduct, and the less time they will find to engage in street fights. At this point we can only speculate whether engaging in religious and spiritual practices will have a similar bonding (and controlling) effect.

Interestingly, and somewhat surprisingly, Travis Hirschi worked out a new version of control theory 20 years later when he teamed up with his colleagues Michael Gottfredson (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). In their empirical research they reduced the causes of delinquency to one single characteristic: self-control, or "the differential tendency of people to avoid criminal acts whatever the circumstances in which they find themselves" (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 87).

Life-course criminology and risk factors for criminal careers

Life-course criminology identifies the potential for turning points in criminal careers.

This idea of a dynamic socialisation process was also pursued by Sampson and Laub (1995). They argued that informal social controls are the key to understanding why individuals engage in crime, why they persist, and why they stop. Adverse conditions of informal social control in criminal careers are effective at different stages during personal development: A lack of bonding in the family, school failure, delinquent peers, social deprivation and unemployment are significant risk factors for developing criminal careers. Accordingly, social institutions, employment, and the formation of loving relationships offer potential *turning points* in the trajectories of young people during their transition to adulthood. Together with other factors such as change in routine activities and cognitive change, a change in social control seems to be the crucial condition for desistance in crime and delinquency.

More recently, research is conducted that aims to identify certain risk factors for juveniles to join gangs. As Carlsson and Sarnecki (2016) contend, risk factors have two features: they come in clusters - social arrangements such as family, school, neighbourhood etc. are meshed up; and risk factors are cumulative – the more risk factors an individual is exposed to, the higher the risk of offending.

- Psychological factors: A hyperactivity-impulsivity-attention deficit is predictive of future offending. Also, low intelligence, low school achievement, learning disabilities, anxiety, early aggressiveness are strong predictors of early onset of criminal offending.

- Broken homes: Socio-economic status and large family size, but more importantly how families function in terms of poor parental supervision, harsh and inconsistent discipline, abuse, maltreatment and neglect, family conflict, and parent's own problems such as crime, substance abuse, mental illness, poverty.
- Peer factors: Proximity and association with delinquent peers and siblings, gang membership and "differential association" (Sutherland, 1939).
- School factors: Learning difficulties and low achievement, truancy, dropping out or being expelled from school. Also, schools have a strong effect of social control in terms of quality of schooling ("effective schools"): Classroom management, high teacher expectations, teachers as positive role models, positive feedback and treatment of students, good working conditions for staff and students, shared staff-students activities.
- Neighbourhood and community effects: Economic deprivation, disorder and incivilities, poor neighbourhood integration, availability of firearms, level of gang activity.

In life-course criminology it is argued that criminal careers are the result of an accumulation of a number of risk factors, including individual, psychological, social and economic factors. The study of correlation of these and other risk factors in relation to delinquency have become the special focus of large-scale quantitative research projects in recent times.

Empirical evidence from a recent youth study on delinquency

The ISRD Study is the largest juvenile self-report study worldwide

The International Self-Report Delinquency Study (ISRD) is typical for large-scale surveys on delinquency and victimisation in the positivist tradition of the 21st century. It is dedicated "to describe and explain adolescents' experiences with crime and victimisation, to test criminological theories, and to develop recommendations for prevention and interventions" (ISRD Network, 2020). It incorporates a number of theoretical concepts cited above, including social disorganisation, strain, social control, social learning and opportunity-based theories. The study started with a first survey sweep in 1991, followed up in a second round (2005-2008) and a third round (2012-2019). A fourth round of data collection is in preparation. The ISRD Study is an international collaborative long-term project on victimisation and delinquency among adolescents at the age of 12 to 17 years (Junger-Tas et al., 2003).

With publications of the third sweep still on the way[‡], we will here present findings from the second sweep, which was conducted between 2006 and 2008 in 30 mostly European countries, the United States, Caribbean and South American countries (Haymoz et al., 2013; Gatti et al., 2011).

In a standardised school-based sampling procedure, more than 67.000 young people in schools in selected small towns (10.000 to 75.000 inhabitants), medium-size cities (120,000 inhabitants +/- 20%), and large cities (about 500.000 inhabitants) completed the questionnaire. Gatti et al. (2011) point out that city samples are not representative on a national level. The sample for this analysis included 40.678 pupils in grades 7 to 9 in 62 cities in 30 countries.

In an analysis that focused particularly on the relation between membership in youth groups and prevalence of delinquency, violence, alcohol consumption and drug use, researchers used the following definition for gangs: "Any durable, street-oriented youth group whose own identity includes involvement in illegal activity" (Klein et al., 2001). However, it has been pointed out that the term 'gang' is particularly ambiguous in European countries. The authors found that "among youths who considered their group to be a gang, about half (56%) stated that their group did not engage in illegal activities and claimed that their group did not consider such activities acceptable (53%)" (Gatti et al., 2011: 3). Therefore, a scale with six questions has been constructed for further multi-level logistic analysis of the data:

1. Do you have a group of friends?
2. How long has this group existed? (>3 months)
3. Does this group spend a lot of time together in public places?
4. Is doing illegal things accepted by your group?
5. Do people in your group actually do illegal things together?
6. Do you consider your group to be a gang?

15% consider their group of friends to be a gang, but only 4,4% fit the scale of 6 variables according to the definition.

Descriptive analysis showed that almost 2/3 of the respondents stated that they belong to a stable peer group. Half of the respondents indicated that they spent a lot of time together in public places. Doing illegal things by the group was accepted by only 1/5 of the respondents. On average, 15% explicitly consider their group to be a gang.

Based on this gang-scale, it was found that the percentage of youths who responded affirmatively *to all six questions*, and who can therefore be regarded as a "gang" (or as the authors prefer to say: "deviant youth group") proved to be 4.4% of the overall sample (Gatti et al., 2011).

‡   Publications on the third sweep of ISRD by Enzmann et al. (2017) and Marshall et al. (2015) mainly focus on methodological issues and on questions of victimization rather than offending or gang crime.

An analysis of demographic control variables showed that gang membership (according to the definition used) is composed of more males than females, more juveniles from non-complete family backgrounds than complete families, and more migrant background than native background.

Table 1: Prevalence Rate (%) of Deviant Youth Group Membership by Gender, Grade, Immigration, and Family Composition (N = 40.678)

Gender (%)		Family (%)		Grade (%)			Migration (%)		
male	female	Com-plete	Non-com-plete	7th	8th	9th	Native	First genera-tion	Second genera-tion
5,9	3,0	4,1	5,1	3,5	4,1	5,4	4,0	4,8	5,8

Source: Gatti et al. (2011: 5)

A second study that analysed a smaller sample of 29.099 pupils from 19 European countries taken from the same ISRD survey data (Haymoz et al., 2013) conducted a multi-variate analysis of risk factors using the following co-variates for youth gang membership:

- *Individual characteristics*: level of self-control (Grasmick et al., 1993); stressful life events; violent attitudes; involvement in constructive activities; and delinquent behaviour in the past 12 months
- *Family*: parental monitoring
- *School*: relative school achievement; school attachment
- *Peers*: unstructured time spent with friends; friends intimidate people
- *Community*: neighbourhood problems

The analysis of risk factors showed that 90% of respondents who show all risk factors for gang-membership in all five domains (individual, family, school, peers, community) were involved in a youth-gang. This not only confirms the validity of the scale, but also shows that the accumulation of these risk factors is a valid predictor for gang involvement.

In a multilevel logistic analysis, the Variance Partitioning Coefficient (VPC) indicated that, compared to the individual level, the country level seems to have little impact on gang participation. Except "low school achievement", all predictors for gang membership appeared significant across the entire sample. "Delinquent history", "unstructured time spent with friends" and "friends intimidate people" appeared to be the strongest single predictors of gang membership. The sample showed no difference between males and females, but older individuals appeared to have a higher likelihood to join youth gangs.

So did young people from non-migrant background, which is perhaps in contrast to what is often implied by media reports.

Risk factors are examined: Personality traits, family composition, school achievement, peer-groups, and the community in neighbourhoods.

The authors concluded that there is considerable consistency in gang prevalence both within and across regions in Europe. Also, gang membership is closely tied to delinquency and peer factors, whilst measures of the school domain are rarely significant. The authors also stated that, whilst they could not eliminate methodological variation across countries, they could successfully control for a considerable portion of it, so that they regarded their analysis as "the most valid multi-country depiction to date". The authors stated that their results seemed to support, to some extent, social disorganization theory through the moderate showing of neighbourhood problems and for self-control theory. On the other hand, factors supporting social bond and strain theories appeared to be less important in their analysis. The authors suggested future research by studying dynamics of gang-joining, and to further assess geographic variation in gang-membership across countries.

Finally, the authors suggested targeting prevention programmes and policies towards young people with high risk factors and to design these policies with an aim to lower their individual risk of gang membership.

Concluding remarks

In this policy brief we reviewed the research about youth delinquency and differentiated ways to approach the social phenomenon of gang crime. Throughout the 20th century until today, researchers have used concepts such as subculture, strain, status frustration, anomie, and labelling to describe and explain the formation of youth gangs. The analysis showed that

- researchers followed **different ideologies** according to the socio-political circumstances at the time. Youth gangs were either studied as a cultural phenomenon, as a response to economic, social, racial or gendered inequalities embedded in structural conditions of society, and in terms of individual and social risk factors that can be identified.
- Research on youth gangs have either taken an **interpretivist stance**, using participant observation and other ethnographic methods that help understand the motivations and particular codes of conduct of youths in gangs, or a more positivist stance that is closely associated with the utilitarian question of 'what works in prevention of youth gangs?'.
- This latter perspective has guided research in the last decades in investigating **risk factors and preventive factors** that are significant for criminal persistence and desistance over the life-course.

Interventions aim to interrupt and compensate a series of accumulated risk factors and aim to prepare social conditions for youths to lead a life without crime.

The ISRD Study addresses deficits in social control such as poor family relationships ("broken homes"), school drop-out, delinquent peer-groups, and offers ideas on how to address juveniles in their social environment and in the wider social circumstances.

Based on the findings of this first literature review, the following policy recommendations can be made:

Interventions shall address several social institutions that can influence the life-course of young people. As young people trend to drift and shift between different social environments there are a number of opportunities to initiate turning points in family life, at school, in sport clubs, and in the local community.

Interventions should be designed with creativity to

- establish a strong attachment with positive role models
- elaborate social programmes that allow juveniles to be committed to an accumulation of achievements in life
- involve young people in meaningful activities other than "hanging around"
- influence their moral convictions that guide their actions.

Social programmes need to make an offer in various local settings such as schools, sports, music, religion, arts and craftwork to support adolescents to better cope with stress, status frustration and stigmatisation.

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