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Criminalising the Other: challenging the race-gang nexus

PATRICK WILLIAMS

Abstract: Whilst criminologists, sociologists and policy-makers fuel a perennial debate over the existential value of the 'gang',[1] the Criminal Justice System (CJS) in England and Wales creeps further into the lives of marginalised and excluded young Black men who have been identified as 'gang-involved', a 'gang-concern' or 'associated' with a gang. Drawing on research commissioned by two North West (English) Local Authority Crime Reduction Partnerships, this article offers a unique insight into the problematic way that the term 'gang' is being appropriated and used by criminal justice agencies. The findings suggest that the 'gang' label legitimises the over-policing of Black people and communities and acts as an inhibitor to the reconciliation of other, more acute, socio-economic problems endured within Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. Inspired by the paper 'White sociology, black struggle',[2] this article is concerned with the problematising effects and the enduring features of the gang construct as a 'signifier' for Black men. More contentiously, it highlights the contribution of criminology to the Othering of young Black men, to show that the contemporary position of young Black men as significantly overrepresented and differentially treated within the CJS reflects a continuity with the idea of the 'Black folk devil' inherent within a burgeoning body of 'uncritical' criminology.

Keywords: Black men, criminology, folk devil, gangs, Manchester, othering, racialising discourse, riots

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Patrick Williams is a senior lecturer in Criminology at Manchester Metropolitan University who researches criminal justice policy, interventions and approaches and has written extensively on racial disproportionality and differential treatment in the criminal justice system.

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With increasing regularity, the 'gang' is invoked as an explanation for the emergence and prevalence of a range of contemporary crime-related (moral) panics, societal problems and harms. Recently, the increase in prison violence has been 'neatly' associated with the existence of 'gangs' in English prisons,[3] whilst the English disturbances of 2011, triggered by the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan by the Metropolitan police, were widely reported as co-ordinated and facilitated by, one must assume, a national network of gangs operating within different and diverse English cities.[4] The epidemic levels of violence perpetrated against girls and women are in part, explained by the weaponisation of rape by 'gang members' to target their rivals. Persistently, the 'gang' accounts for the reported high levels of drug dealing within inner-city areas and communities. And, as always, we are reliably informed that where the gang exists, violence persists. That this pervasive, commonsense and media-amplified construct of the 'gang' is accompanied by a dearth of reliable academic or criminal justice (CJ) evidence to support this ongoing pretence is a central concern of this article.[5]

I take as my central position that contemporary explanations for the gang are inadequate when considered outside of the structural context, social reality and continuity of racism(s). This conviction is premised upon the findings from two research studies into so-called 'gangs' undertaken within the North West of England, which offer an uncomfortable, yet more realistic, truth. Namely, the acquisition of the 'gang' term is not contingent upon the committal or perpetration of criminal acts or offending behaviours, but is rather indicative of an ever-expanding CJ state apparatus or 'gang industry' which labels particular individuals, groups and communities as problematic, and necessitating state intervention and control.[6] In this, it reflects a process and practice of 'othering' that I consider in more detail below.

The sociology of the Other

Sociology (and more latterly Criminology), as a discipline of modernity informed by enlightenment philosophy, has been criticised for creating racial hierarchies which have helped to 'institutionalise oppression and discrimination, through the production of the Others'.[7] For our purposes, 'othering' is defined as 'the process of attaching moral codes of inferiority to difference'.[8] From this viewpoint, it is a critical discursive tool for understanding discrimination and exclusion against individuals and/or groups based on their belonging to marginalised populations.[9] The Other has been appropriated by a number of academic disciplines, reflecting various methods of analysis and inquiry. However, it is accepted, first, that the identification of a group as the Other originates in social processes clearly linked to the cultural and political themes within specific societies. Second, the construct and social categorisation of the Other marks the 'normative boundaries' of the community and thus the appropriate methods of inclusion.[10] Otherisation, therefore, involves the perpetuation of dominant norms which results in the suppression of difference. For Spalek, those identities that reside outside of the moral

boundaries and 'regimes of power' are deemed the Other; that is, 'the devalued – and their voices and perspectives are largely suppressed'.[11]

A central aim of sociological research is an endeavour to comprehend the Other, born from a scholarly concern to understand difference. Controversially, Vidich and Lyman reference the more sinister origin of sociological research and its contribution to Europe's 'colonising strategy'.[12] They note how qualitative research (particularly in anthropology) is implicated within Europe's 'racist project'. The development of the approach is complicit in the cultural pathologisation and construction of Black people as the Other. Denzin and Lincoln show how research in its pursuit to understand the Other has become a 'metaphor for colonial knowledge' intrinsic to the development and legitimisation of European imperialism and colonialism.[13] Within the colonial context, research became the *objective* way of representing the 'dark skinned other to the white world'. Anthropologically, the 'ethnographic enterprise' saw excursions to foreign countries to study the culture, customs and habits of another human group. It is asserted that 'ethnographic reports of these groups were incorporated into the colonising strategy', informing the ways in which to control the 'foreign, deviant or troublesome Other'.[14]

Although less explicit, I want to argue that there remains a relationship between (social) research, governmental policies and regulatory strategies. Jenkins, in a discussion of the development of anthropological models, identifies the features which unwittingly distanced the 'them' from the 'us' and further distinguished the 'similarity between the different sorts of "them"'.[15] For Jenkins, this development was a distinctive feature of early social anthropology and was characteristic of the models that informed the study of the 'tribe'. In this context, the concept builds from an 'orthodox assumption' that primitive people were organised into tribal groups. Moreover, the tribe was conceived 'as a real, perduring social entity' and therefore was central to the theoretical and methodological development of anthropology. Crucially, these early conceptions resulted in a number of negative outcomes for the researched. First, the approach clearly demarcated the 'tribal' from the 'civilised' society in both 'commonsensical and analytical discourse'. Second, it provided early anthropologists with a means by which to understand the nature of non-civilised social organisation.[16] The disciplinary development and theoretical modelling of anthropology facilitated the theorisation of the Other through an assertion that the 'tribe' was 'biologically self-perpetuating' with members sharing basic cultural values. Such researchers illustrate the problematising tendencies of early, traditional qualitative research highlighting ambiguities between the integrationist aspirations, which inadvertently accentuate the outsider status of the Black post-war immigrant.

From sociology to the criminology of the Other

To develop this further, and to begin considering the utility of the concept of the Other within the discipline of criminology, othering facilitates the constitution of

'a judicial status and the socio-political condition of a group, designated by society as not belonging to its core values'.[17] Importantly, the mechanism of othering is applied to those who are deemed to pose a threat to the social order or who disturb the normative boundaries as a result of constructed signifiers such as race, sexual conduct, gender and other social, cultural and political attributes. For Ajzenstadt and Shapira:

> Marking the 'other' – the 'outsider' – as violating social and moral boundaries is thus a symbolic cultural code, according to which people and groups may be included in society and become a 'deserving' member, or may be excluded and regarded as 'undeserving'… [T]his classification process leads to the designation of a host of penal, social and legal practices of control.[18]

In 1982, Errol Lawrence and colleagues produced a seminal paper to challenge what they describe as 'White Sociology'[19] or what Keith termed 'Pathological sociology'.[20] With reference to the sociology of race relations, they warned that it was 'dangerous', abstracting and distorting Black people from their lived reality. For them, this sociology failed in its attempts to develop an adequate understanding of race relations and in essence remained 'irrelevant' to Black experience. In addition it was noted how this sociology 'constructed a pathology of Black life which informed not only the policy makers but commonsense understandings of race'.

It is, however, necessary to acknowledge the conceptual distinction between the construct of the Other as outsider and the construct of the Other that results in the imposition of state penal and legal regulation. Critically, this difference is communicated through the concept of the 'folk devil' attributed and applied to those people who are deemed to transcend moral boundaries and pose a threat to societal values.[21] Cohen centralises the role of the media in the transmission of symbols and cues concerning (outsider) groups whose behaviours, lifestyle traits and 'subculture' are presented as posing a threat to the norms of society. It is here that the 'outsider' is problematised through his/her invocation as the folk devil and thereby subject to state regulation through the criminal justice apparatus, further consolidating their negated status. This process was chronicled by Hall et al. in *Policing the Crisis* where the offence of 'street robbery' was recast as a crime largely committed by black youth. Put simply, *Policing the Crisis* explores the contextual parameters that facilitated the process through which race is constructed as a social and political relation signifying moral and social decline. The racialisation of street robbery as 'mugging' therefore becomes a discursive tool through which to articulate the dramatic economic and social changes of the period as related to young Black men.[22] Sadly, such processes are not simply a remnant of a by-gone age:

> through time and over space the dominant themes in racializing discourses fluctuate and contradict each other. The precise nature of 'Blackness' that is connoted evolves. In Britain, at a crude level, the succession of racist images of

> (gender-specific) Afro-Caribbean criminality have followed from the pimp of the 1950s, to the Black Power activist of the 1960s, to the mugger of the 1970s, to the rioter of the 1980s and, quite possibly, to the ultimate folk devil, the underworld 'Yardie' of the 1990s.[23]

As argued in the 'Myth of black criminality', Gilroy alerts us to the tendency of (left realist) writers on police and crime to 'obscure' the relevance of racism(s) for understanding the criminalised position of Black people in favour of explanations that delineate individual and cultural factors and pathology. In presenting his analysis, Gilroy utilised the emerging significance of 'alien violence' as an important tool in the hands of 'politicians and police officers'. Although his essay was written over thirty years ago, contemporary criminology continues within this tradition, the expression of which is delivered with a hegemonic fluidity that preserves the Black people and crime nexus. Thus, this now 'pathological criminology' locates the causes and onset of crime within a psychosocial praxis where a pathological culture facilitates the onset and maintenance of attitudes and beliefs that are intrinsic to the 'gang' and conducive to its continuance. Similarly, Alexander, in her excellent deconstruction of the Asian 'gang' notes the parallels with the pathologisation of African Caribbean young men yet correctly notes the differences in the processes of criminalisation of Asian communities and specifically young Muslim men.[24] Through her analysis, she detects a deeper emphasis upon discussions of the cultural – specifically cultural difference – as a media-infused strategy to represent the Asian 'gang' as a new problem. The accompanying discourse marks a shift away from a 'dualistic racist/anti-racist dialogue towards a more nuanced "new racist" discussion of nation and belonging'. 'Race' then becomes synonymous with moral and social decline, an 'absent-presence', a transcendental signifier for the imagery of urban decay, poverty, frustrated and problematic youth and the violent Asian 'gang'. We can detect this tendency within the analysis of Patterson's *Dark Strangers*, where she alludes to the unassimilable features of the Asian community due to their distinctive culture, 'their own religion, language and a considerable amount of internal organisation and control'.[25] Ironically, within the discipline of mainstream criminology, such factors are presented as 'protective', insulating young Asian men from the strain of mainstream society and the onset of offending behaviour and crime. Nowadays, these 'cultural differences' are deployed as a powerful substitute to explain young Asian men's involvement with 'gangs' as a device through which to vent generational strains.

Gilroy also noted how the system of criminal justice 'accommodates the principal institutional sites in which "race relations" are made and rendered intelligible as intractable problems of crime, disorder, violence and social pathology'.[26] The key contemporary feature of criminal justice policy is not simply the process of criminalisation, but its utility as a mechanism for managing social problems. The association of Black people with crime, and for our purposes the 'gang', is itself infused within the institutions of law and the construction of nationhood:

> [T]he ability of the law and the ideology of legality to express and represent the nation state and national unity precedes the identification of racially distinct crimes and criminals. The subject of law is also the subject of the nation. Law is primarily a national institution, and adherence to its rule symbolises the imagined community of the nation and expresses the fundamental unity and equality of its citizens.[27]

The criminal justice system and specifically the police then become the tools through which to manage and regulate the 'outsider'. It is this specific and direct move towards the Black criminal, which facilitates and legitimises these othering processes. To quote extensively from Amos et al.:

> the ideological potency of the discourses of youth and race in the signification of social instability and change is scarcely in doubt. The recent convergence between the views of senior conservative politicians, senior policemen, *sociologists*, state intellectuals in the race field and popular purveyors of commonsense racism in the media in which black youth are seen to comprise a simultaneous criminal and political threat to the social order of this country, invokes a powerful image of black youth as 'folk devil'. (Emphasis added)[28]

The following discussion will utilise the 'gang' as a resource or, as Katz and Jacobs-Jackson[29] suggest, a 'window', which allows us to see and to situate the predominance of criminologically induced 'false stereotypes' that (re)produce and maintain what I refer to as the race and gang nexus.

Towards the Black 'gang'

The relationship between the role of academic research and the mutterings of politicians is clearly not linear. However, it was insightful of Keith to note that 'it is important to realize that it was in no small way through these early academic exercises in "race relations sociology" that, in 1967, the Home Office called for the appointment of liaison officers to help overcome the "cultural barriers" between police and coloured communities.'[30] For our purpose, it is essential to situate the media as the institution, which erects and maintains culturally deviant 'barriers' and transmits the cultural pathology discourse of young Black and Asian people into the consciousness of the nation. Reminiscent of Wilkins' deviancy amplification spiral, the television and press mediates the negatively derived (moral) panic, of the Black 'folk devil', which once established and maintained necessitates a co-ordinated response from 'moral guardians'. It is within this spiral that the *public* call for a crackdown of the often distorted and exaggerated folk devil posing a real threat to the social order. In response, the *politician* shamelessly seeks political mileage from the emergent panic echoing the concerns of their electorate within a process of blame allocation with promises of new laws or the consolidation of old laws and strategies

to respond to the constructed threat. More widely, our moral entrepreneurs, realist criminologists, the police and control agency apparatus are enacted to reassure the public and deliver the politicians' calls for punitive zero-tolerance law enforcement to nullify the threat. Perversely, it is the social reaction to the mediated threat that perpetuates and amplifies the originally conceived moral panic. Within the broadcasted headlines and imagery presented by newspapers sits an uncomfortable image of violent crime simplistically attributed to Black and Asian people.

This is vividly illustrated through the front page of the *Manchester Evening News* (16 August 2007) which presented the predominantly black and brown faces of people who had been killed by guns since 1999 under the banner 'How Many More?'. Importantly, within the piece there is no reference to 'race'. The story is situated within a 'gangs' discourse providing the reader with an analytical, bite-sized short cut, away from the contextual and historical realities of each offence. Sarah Lester, the news editor, reports that 'in showing the faces, it made people see them [the victims] not just as "gang members", but people'. She continues that 'she was surprised at the impact it has had locally, to the extent where the Chief Constable [of Greater Manchester Police] has come up with half a million pounds to put into policing in the hotspot areas.' Despite the passionate plea of the *MEN* headline, Lester inadvertently reinforces the view that serious violent crime is in the main perpetrated by Black and Asian gangs in Manchester. This is finally cemented with the continuous reference to the hotspot areas of Moss Side, Hulme, Longsight and Old Trafford, which attributes the 'gang' with 'race' to the geographical areas predominated by Black and Asian people and communities. Yet, the significance of deviancy amplification is more evident where ministers and politicians enter the fray.

To develop this theme further, Alexander considers media representations and sound bites, which powerfully transmit the cultural deficiencies of the Black and Asian community. Among the examples highlighted are Tony Blair's 2007 response to a spate of serious youth violence offences in London when he declared that 'knife and gun murders in London were not being caused by poverty, but a distinctive black culture'.[31] Or, following a ministerial visit to Manchester, Chris Grayling, the Tory Justice Minister reported witnessing 'urban warfare' which prompted him to liken the 'streets of Moss Side to an episode of The Wire'.[32] Note that Grayling does not refer to race but symbolically and potently references the area of Moss Side, which has a predominant Black community. And then, following the English riots in 2011, we learn that 'the whites have become black, a particular sort of violent, destructive, nihilistic gangster culture has become the fashion … which is this Jamaica patois that has intruded in England. This is why so many of us have this sense of literally a foreign country.'[33] Finally, 'the east End is fast becoming a neighbourhood of ghettoes, a breeding ground of intolerance and violent frustrations … racial violence has been increasing for years, but the Asian gangs are a new phenomenon and the increasing frequency of their confrontations is a sign, many fear, of things to come.'[34]

A review of studies into UK 'gangs' unearths the proliferation of unstated associations between young Black men, youth violence and 'gangs'. In an attempt to rationalise the inappropriately titled *Die Another Day: a practitioner's review for preventing gang and weapon violence in London*, Jonathan Toy references Gunst's *Born Fi' Dead: a journey through the yardie posse underworld* on the 'rise and establishment of gang and gun crime in Jamaica'.[35] He goes on to state that the 'rise' was the result of a 'political power struggle that used the social and economic inequalities to breed generations of violent behaviour and as a result, generations of violent gangs'.[36] Or, again, an extremely influential publication produced by the Iain Duncan-Smith inspired think-tank the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) argues that the onset of gang-related offending behaviour relates to its proximity to a number of socio-economic and criminogenic cultural factors.[37] These factors are associated with the high prevalence of 'female headed households', the absence of legitimate opportunities, the overwhelming influence of anti-social and pro-criminal lifestyles including 'hip hop culture' particularised through gangster rap. And, in an attempt to smash through the 'criminological taboo' of Black youth and violent crime, Joseph and Gunter draw together the multiple complexities of the global economy, and the advent and dominance of neoliberal social and economic policies to show that the poor have become trapped within a cycle of deprivation and poverty. Significantly, within this construct, Black people find themselves 'shut out' of mainstream society and residing at the bottom of the economic ladder. The inevitable 'strain' that results from this powerlessness results in frustration and rage which facilitates the adoption of alternative social and cultural values that promote and normalise gang membership and violence.[38] It appears that, in being unafraid to confront the 'criminological taboo', Joseph and Gunter's ethnographic study illustrates the inadequacy of Black culture to adequately protect young Black people from the 'on road' culture of 'gangs' and the systemic socio-economic inequality that abounds in London.

To understand this 'pathological criminology', Garland posits that, within the discipline of Criminology a dualistic, ambivalent and polarised response to the offender has appeared, characterised by the development of a 'criminology of the other, of the threatening outcast, the fear-some stranger, the excluded and the embittered'.[39] The construct of the Other allows us a lens through which to begin to see and make sense of the sustained (re)constructions of Black and Asian males as folk devils – that, in turn, drives the perennial problem of their over-representation, throughout the criminal justice system of England and Wales. That this criminology informs social control and regulatory responses towards the 'outsider' and the 'stranger' has become central to the development of criminological discourses, which legitimise and render 'sensible' policies designed to discipline and further marginalise 'maladjusted' Black people and their families.[40] Such research alludes to the 'seductive' lifestyle of the 'gang' as a palliative to the 'strains' of residing in economically depressed communities characterised by pathological mothers, brothers or Others who, neglected by absent fathers and lacking legitimate

opportunities, are drawn to the gang. It is my contention that such factors offer at best, only a weak causal explanation for the majority of young people labelled by the police and other control agencies as 'gang-involved', gang-associated or on the periphery of gang-involvement

Establishing the race and gang nexus – a view from local research

In 2011, we were commissioned by the Northville 'Safer and Stronger' partnership board[41] to undertake a research study into what was described as an 'emergent' gang situation. The overall research aim was to assess the situation in Northville in relation to the extent and nature of violent gang activity. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, we employed a range of qualitative methods including in-depth interviews, focus groups, and observations of meetings and guided walks within the communities of investigation. The fieldwork resulted in recorded data from 120 participants (young people, community members [religious leaders and community 'elders'] and practitioners (including police officers, youth workers, members of the Violent Gangs Partnership, councillors and 'heads' of local race and equality groups). Those interviewed were initially identified by the partnership and the research team as the best positioned to provide information about Northville's current Violent Gang Strategy. Eleven focus groups were conducted involving sixty-eight young people. Participants were aged between 16 and 20 years old. On average, the focus groups involved six young people in each group. Overall, 98 per cent of those involved were from a BAME background. The interviews and focus groups consisted of questions around their experiences of living in Northville, what they viewed as the problems inherent in their communities, their opinions of the existence of gangs in Northville, their views on facilities for young people in Northville and police relations in the area.[42]

From the outset, the research highlighted an ambiguity in the definition of the gang, illustrated through a series of contradictions between the views of young people, community workers and stakeholders and the police. So, for young people (as expressed below) there were no gangs in Northville:

> I would define a gang as a group of people, individuals, about twenty people, from my own opinion. Like taking [area X] for instance, group of [area X] lads, making a name up for themselves. Going round, causing havoc in other places such as [area Y], and just distributing their name. Causing havoc, starting something. That's what I'd call gangs. Other than that no. I don't think there's any gang culture here. There's not any gangs is there, around Northville. [Young person]

Such views were opposed to those of the police who indicated the existence of 'gangs' and how it was configured within Northville: 'We've got gangs, they're just set-up differently. Northville is one gang!'

Of concern is the fact that the commissioners had, prior to the research, identified the (geographical) areas for scrutiny. What characterised these areas was not the incidence of gang behaviour (however defined) or violent crime; police recorded crime clearly showed the incidence of (serious) youth violence to be greater in other (non-selected) areas of Northville. What differentiated the (pre-selected) research areas was the focus upon the highly populated Asian areas in Northville:

> The problem is there's so many of them. You wouldn't get these problems (young people with very little to do, hanging about on the streets) in the white areas. They're hanging about on streets (or in cars) because they don't want to be at home. [Police officer]

In addition to the higher concentrations of Pakistani and Bangladeshi people, these communities were further characterised by high levels of social deprivation, with Northville being one of the most deprived local authority areas in England. Community workers highlighted what they deemed to be the central problems.

> [Area X] have the highest density of young people under the age of 21, a lot of the houses are overcrowded, on benefits, low-skilled jobs, they have the normal or what you would expect from an area that has experienced race riots and a very deprived area. These young people, they just don't have anything to do and we've heard this up and down the country, but young people within this particular area are particularly unique – the majority of people in these areas are Muslim, if you can imagine that this particular religion has been in the limelight, so they've not only got all the socio-economic things to deal with, they've not only got the cultural thing to deal with, we got the racial thing to deal with – they know they're a different colour to their counterparts in more affluent areas – and they've also got to deal with the fact that their identity as a Muslim is tarnished by things that are in the media. [Community member]

This brief summary of our research data suggested the conflation of a number of factors, which converged to facilitate the partnership's construction of a 'gang' problem. It is noteworthy that the research was commissioned in response to a number of high-profile incidents, which the partnership interpreted as indicative of an emergent gang problem. The fatal shooting of three young men augmented a view of an 'emergence of young males, aged between 12 and 26 years of age, who see street crime and the selling of drugs as acceptable'. The commissioning of 'evidence' so as to 'find' gangs increasingly legitimates the imposition of the gang label on a particular community to conjure simplistic commonsense explanations for the multiplicity of socio-economic deprivation endured in Northville.[43]

This strategy can be further illustrated through the commissioning of another research study, this time undertaken on behalf of Manchester City Council Community Safety Partnership and undertaken by the Probation Trust of Greater Manchester between 2011 and 2013.[44] The study emerged as part of the government's Ending Gangs and Youth Violence initiative, which was implemented in direct response to the 'English riots', perpetrated mainly in large cities of England in the summer of 2011. From the outset, ministers unashamedly attributed the 'riots' to the 'gang' and the persistence of serious youth violence (SYV).[45] This public declaration immediately abstracted and decontextualised the killing of Mark Duggan by the Metropolitan Police. To nullify the media panic which accompanied community reaction to the negative policing of Black communities, the government allocated '£10 million in early intervention work to support up to 30 areas that are most affected by Gangs and Youth Violence'. Of this investment, over £700,000 was allocated to Manchester, half of which was to be ring-fenced for local non-statutory organisations to work with those young people identified as engaged in gangs and SYV.[46] The central aim of this study was to build a *problem profile* 'to analyse the personal, socio-economic and criminogenic needs of young people involved in gangs and serious youth violence to inform the development of strategies and interventions to reduce the numbers of young people engaging in "gangs" and serious youth violence'.[47] By way of clarity, SYV referred to young people who had committed offences of murder, attempted murder, manslaughter, grievous bodily harm (GBH), actual bodily harm (ABH) and wounding. A gang was defined as a 'relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who see themselves (and are recognised by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is intrinsic to identity and practice'. There is an ongoing academic debate concerning the definition and construct of the UK gang.[48] It is not my intention to rehearse or even contribute to this futile task, due to the ongoing reality that, despite the absence of any agreed definition, 'gang makers' continue in their endeavour to utilise the 'gang' as a device that legitimises the criminalisation of untold numbers of young Black men.

By way of context, since 2004 there has been a trend towards the development of specialist (gun and) gang units throughout England and Wales. So, we have Trident in London, Ventura in Birmingham, Stealth in Nottingham, the Matrix in Liverpool, and the Xcalibre Task Force (XTF) in Manchester.[49] The development of such units reportedly correlates to the level of gun-, knife- and 'gang'-related offences perpetrated within these cities. A key feature of the police gang unit has been the development of gang-databases to capture the personal details and demographics of people identified as a gang concern, such databases being used to assist police in building up intelligence that can then inform policing and enforcement activity. It has previously been noted by Katz[50] that gang databases are utilised to assist in increased conviction rates for 'gang members' and to support the distribution of punitive disposals and sanctions as evidenced in the alacrity with which government policies are enacted to tackle gang and serious youth

violence.[51] For our purposes, that the police were able to provide the research team with a data-list of individuals identified as being gang-involved was an important and illuminating feature of this study.

Taken together, there were 210 individuals recorded on the XTF police gang database, with a further 303 young people identified as having perpetrated a serious violent offence. However, our analysis again highlighted a number of discrepancies, which resulted in only 58 per cent of those on the police database being eligible for inclusion in the study, due to the finding that not all individuals listed on the police gang database were gang-members. First, it was evident that the police database comprised individuals who were (a) defined as 'gang-members', (b) young people who were thought to be 'associated' with 'gang members', (c) individuals who were 'historically' considered to be 'gang-involved' and whose details were retained for 'intelligence' purposes (ex-gang members), and (d) people who were deemed to be 'at risk' of gang-related violence. In interview, one officer was keen to elaborate that 'association does not mean they are a gang member, it is important to emphasise this'. Second, the details of thirty-nine people (21 per cent) remained on the police gang database despite the fact they had not been convicted of any offence within the previous three years. Remarkably, there were no antecedents for a further forty individuals (21 per cent) on either the Police National Computer (PNC) or any other CJ case recording/monitoring database. The only credible explanation for this is that these people have never been convicted of a criminal offence. This simple analysis poses a serious challenge to the police narrative, which has preserved the Manchester 'gang' problem for over twenty years. Moreover, the reliability of police intelligence, which informs the operation and strategy of policing responses to the gang, is questionable. Our findings resulted in the identification of fifty-one individuals who the police regarded as 'active' gang members; the majority of these individuals were serving custodial sentences. Yet even the notion of 'active' was subject to the interpretation of individual officers. As one informed the research team, 'being prominently seen on the street … is active. He might not have done anything wrong but … he's putting himself forward as a target'. Notwithstanding the question of reliability inherent within the dataset, further questions arose when we considered the 'race' and ethnicity of the individuals who were registered on the police gang database.

The racialisation of 'gangs'

Remarkably, 89 per cent of individuals on the data-list belonged to a BAME group. Comparatively, less than a quarter (23 per cent) of those young people convicted of the serious violent offences of murder, attempted murder, manslaughter, actual bodily harm, grievous bodily harm and wounding belonged to a BAME group. Importantly, the harm perpetrated through SYV transcends racial, ethnic, gender, age and class lines. Violence in both its overt and hidden

forms does not discriminate and therefore this article is not concerned with simplistically attributing SYV to young white people. However, Neena Samota reminds us that contemporary narratives result in the 'ascription of the "gang" label to all groups of BME young men, while "defining out" acts of group based violence or criminal activity by majority white youth'.[52] Our findings then begin to challenge and rebut the oft-cited suggestion that the ethnic composition of the gang reflects the ethnic composition of those marginalised and economically depressed communities within which the gang resides.[53] The racialisation of the gang can no longer be simplistically associated with the perpetration or committal of serious offences. Within Manchester's context, there has been a significant reduction in the level of firearm discharges between 2004/05 and 2012/13. In 2004/05, there were 114 discharges, which rose to a peak of 146 in 2007/08 and then dramatically reduced to thirty in 2012/13. Comparatively, for 'gang-related' discharges there were forty discharges in 2004/05, which reduced to thirty-eight in 2007/08 and reduced further still to two discharges in 2012/13. Paradoxically, this reduction in firearms incidents has been accompanied by a reported growth in the number of 'gangs' across Manchester. A recent ACPO report suggests that there may now be some forty gangs across Greater Manchester.[54] Further, a recent report by The New Economy on behalf of the GM Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) envisaged that 'following their analysis they would expect to identify approximately 100 Urban Street Gangs'.[55]

As critical social scientists, we should be concerned with the processes and practices that facilitate the attribution of the 'gang' label to young Black people. It is evident that the police as 'definers of crime' resolve and subvert the aforementioned gang definition conundrum through the production of 'intelligence', which irrefutably informs policing responses to the gang.[56] This intelligence further conspires in 'evidence-based decision-making' produced by researchers who uncritically accept the police databases and lists of predominantly young Black men as the starting point of their studies. It is notable that John Pitts' study into the 'Reluctant Gangster' of Waltham Forest in London utilised the 'intelligence' gathered by the police.[57] Arguably and as shown above, reliance upon such sources of information can only serve to 'rationalise policing reconstructions of reality', especially when adopted within a 'neutral social science approach to the study of "gangs"'.[58] Reinforcing this point is the fact that Black people are overrepresented within stop and search figures and as found recently are more likely to be arrested than their white counterparts[59] and that the details of three-quarters of young Black men are estimated to be held on the National DNA register.[60] Despite significant reductions in the number of First Time Entrants to Young Offender Institutions, the proportion of young Black people entering them is increasing.[61] And 76 per cent of people convicted through the problematic doctrine of joint-enterprise are young Black men,[62] while the personal details of disproportionate numbers of young Black people, unbeknownst to them, populate police databases. Where we accept the social reality of policing and criminal justice practice which

results in the differential treatment of Black and Asian people throughout all stages of the criminal justice system, it is clearly untenable not to consider the racial composition of the gang as yet another feature of racist policing.[63]

…there's money in gangs

By way of demystifying the above contradictions, Hobbs noted that the definitional debates intrinsic to the 'gangs discourse' are overlaid with political considerations and the need to attract funding in difficult financial times. As such, 'the harder researchers look, the bigger the gang problem becomes'.[64] Further, during our research in Northville, one police officer remarked, 'the police do not put their money into tackling drugs, they put their money into guns and gangs'. Within this context, then, it is not inconceivable that the police and community stakeholders engage in a process of 'chasing gangs' as a strategy for attracting government funds and resources.[65] The UK's gang industry is contingent upon the maintenance of a discourse requiring the police and the wider CJ agencies, supported by co-opted voluntary and community sector organisations, to quantify the danger and 'risk' posed to members of the public. Further, within austere times, the criminal justice mantra that 'resources follow risk' serves to incentivise criminal justice agencies and voluntary and community sector organisations to adopt 'gang speak' and 'risk talk' to qualify for increasingly limited resources.[66] Similar to Kundnani's fascinating critique of the government's anti-radicalisation strategy subsumed under the Prevent agenda,[67] the allocation of government resources to tackle the post-riot 'gang' perpetrating SYV was contingent on the number of reported gang members in any given area of England and Wales.[68] Within this context, it is no exaggeration to assert that the gang as presented within the Manchester construct is a product of the CJS sustaining the gang narrative, or, as Fraser and Atkinson suggest, 'making up gangs'. The findings from our research show that the profile of the police-defined 'gang nominal' is demographically unrepresentative of those young people who perpetrate the majority of serious harms associated with youth violence in Manchester. Therefore police strategies conceptualised around a racialised construct of the 'gang' will never be effective in arresting levels of serious violence, but can only serve to 'perpetuate and legitimise the racist over-policing of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic young people and communities in England and Wales'.[69]

Conclusion

Still, the contemporary (re)construction of the gang continues unabated, subjecting untold numbers of young Black people to arbitrary, punitive, restrictive and coercive powers through an array of 'punishing partnerships'. That criminologists, voluntary and community sector organisations, CJ practitioners and community stakeholders do not treat the processes through which predominantly young Black men, their 'associates', their families and communities become

'flagged' as 'gang-involved' or a 'gang-concern' as problematic, is akin to the negligence in both academic theorising and social practice. For Katz and Jackson-Jacobs,

> When the police report that gangs are out there, one should not be too sure that they are and when researchers searching for gangs find that gangs cooperate in making an appearance, there is no less cause for suspicion and a new basis for ethical reflection.[70]

Similarly, with Hall's 'mugger', the 'gang' has been adopted as an explanatory device that transcends the entrenched social and structural problems experienced within Black and Asian communities. Refined and objectified through a pathological criminology, the gang sustains a post-war tradition of othering young Black people and the communities within which they reside. Reminiscent of the 'new racism', the gang exemplifies 'dog whistle' politics, a latent racialised signifier that subverts any acknowledgement of racism in its structural and institutionalised forms and feeds a burgeoning gang industry that disproportionately affects young Black men. The 'gang industry' is therefore sustained through the perpetuation of mythologies parading as research truths, which facilitate the continuity and the (re)construction of the Black folk devil. Sadly, the industry is sustained by a growing band of 'gang experts' and criminologists, insulated within their Higher Education departments, who are complicit in 'gang' knowledge production and evidence-making, faithfully serving the industry. It would be somewhat naïve not to acknowledge that serious violence does occur in Black and Asian communities within Manchester. However, Katz and Jackson-Jacobs remind us that 'short-lived acts of violence can generate gangs that live over generations'. It is perhaps this reality that sees the 'gang' label circularly applied by criminologists and gang-experts, the police and the wider CJ practitioners and a media informing community members and young people of the 'risks' ever-present. The 'empirically' validated application of the 'gang' label also renders 'violence or purported violence in the [Black and Asian] community comprehensible'. One need look no further than the recent 'Policing Global Cities: Gang Summit' hosted by the Mayor of London on 2 June 2014, which pulled together international 'city leaders and senior practitioners to explore and evaluate differing global approaches to gang prevention'. During a presentation by the Trident Gang Crime Command, delegates were informed that in London there are some 3,495 'gang' members held on the Trident Matrix (database) of whom 77.6 per cent identified as Black and Minority Ethnic (BME). In terms of 'risk of harm' posed by these gang members, over half (57 per cent) were assessed as 'within the lowest (green) status'. Subverted through the discourse of 'risk talk' and 'gang speak', the complex reality of inequality, discrimination and racialisation of our young people is concealed, replaced by a commonsense construct increasingly malleable and resistant to challenge.

Such racialising discourse continues through the 'gang', the 'radicalised' Muslim, the 'child sexual exploiters', emerging alongside the stubbornly resilient and older constructs of the 'mugger', the 'rioter' and the 'immigrant' all of which coalesce to legitimise and support the call for even more oppressive state interventions. Unfortunately, there is a currency in the gang member parading as a 'reformed citizen' through which the police feign success and secure future funding. In addition, an array of police 'products' are now sold through the gang industry resulting in the proliferation of community-based organisations who claim effectiveness in 'diverting' our young people from the periphery, those 'at risk' of gang involvement. Our schools are visited by 'community workers' accompanied by the ex-gang member who warns of the perils of 'gang involvement'. Collectively they are the gang-makers. The painful irony is that these community 'activists' and stakeholders stomp the same ground where previous 'folk devils' walked. That the state-directed gang-makers' self-perpetuating message is served to even younger groups of Black and Asian children must now surely be deemed as morally reprehensible.

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