Parenting and gangs: Risk, resilience and effective support

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PARENTING AND YOUTH GANGS: RISK, RESILIENCE AND EFFECTIVE SUPPORT

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Executive Summary

1. This review was commissioned with the aim of informing the development of services to families with children potentially or actually involved in youth gangs. It has three aims:

   - to provide a clear understanding of the nature of the ‘gang problem’, in particular, the extent to which youth gang members are involved in serious offending.
   - to understand the aspects of family circumstances and parenting practices that predict both youth gang involvement and serious offending.
   - to identify effective family-level interventions that reduce the risk of serious offending and gang association for affected children and young people.

Describing the problem

2. Despite fundamental issues relating to definition and measurement, it is meaningful to speak of youth gangs existing outside large American cities, and specifically in the UK and Manchester contexts.

3. There are well-described, serious and negative consequences of gang involvement, most particularly for the youth, but also for families and the community at large. These consequences justify concern and action to prevent and reduce gang-related offending.

4. Studying the variation in the structural and behavioural characteristics of gangs belies stereotyped ‘gangsta’ images:

   - gang membership is often very hazily defined by gang members; and entry/exit are unclear processes with no definable criteria
   - gang involvement tends to be a short-lived adolescent phenomenon
   - young women are substantially involved but ‘mature out’ earlier
   - ethnic mix is broadly representative of the area of residence
   - gangs often approximate to loose friendship and kin networks whose offending is sporadic, varied and seldom of a highly organised nature

5. Above all, it is clear that of the very many young people who become involved in offending during adolescence, only a proportion join gangs, a proportion of whom commit offences, a proportion of which are serious offences. The amplificatory effects of gang involvement on offending should not be interpreted as meaning ‘all gang members are serious and violent offenders’ and there are dangers in basing official responses on such an assumption.

6. Given the above, it is arguably much more important to focus on actual offending behaviour as a source of concern and a rationale for intervention than it is to focus on real or imagined gang status.
Explaining the problem

7. There are many limitations to the reviewed literature: it is predominantly US-focussed, affected by substantial variations in study design and variable measurement, and much less established in relation to the gang literature than it is in relation to general and serious delinquency.

8. While gang membership and serious adolescent offending are not coterminous, there is substantial overlap in the risk factors for both. Children who display multiple risk factors in multiple domains (individual, family, peer, school, community) are at a substantially higher risk of developing persistent behavioural problems and for joining gangs.

9. Having gang members in the family, as friends, as schoolmates, and in the community all raise risk for involvement. Given this, and the behavioural focus recommended at point 6, it may make practical sense to view ‘risk for gang membership’ as ‘presenting with actual problem behaviour’ plus one or more of these factors.

10. With regard to families, it is clear that in addition to passing on genetically influenced risk and resilience to individual children (e.g., in relation to temperament), parenting practices are variable, multifaceted and strongly affected by neighbourhood and household context. Important factors in both contexts include: the presence of violence and drug-use; the availability of emotional and practical support; and levels of material sufficiency. Parenting practices, including disciplinary style and modelled attitudes and behaviour influence the developing child’s ability to function socially and their commitment to doing well at school. Most importantly, parental attachment seems to influence the initial attractiveness of anti-social peers, and competent structuring, monitoring and supervision practices reduces the opportunities to be influenced by them. These variables (particularly levels of parental supervision) strongly predict both adolescent gang membership and associated offending.

11. While stronger and more consistently supported risk-factors exist in other domains at particular ages (for example delinquent peer effects in adolescence), parents as the major early-life influences on children, seem to be a reasonable focus for support with the aim of reducing both delinquency and gang involvement. At the same time, the complexity of development and interdependence of risk domains means that the effects of targeting one (i.e., the family) domain are likely to be limited.

Reducing the problem

11. Despite the acknowledged importance of family-level variables in presenting risk for gang-joining, family intervention components are peripheral-to-non-existent in ‘typical’ gang reduction programmes, where detached youth work, community organisation and co-ordinated suppression remain the most common responses.
12. Families with children actually involved in gangs or ‘at risk’ of gang involvement are most likely to be helped by providing support that deals with currently occurring behavioural problems, including offending. There are many such programmes, however, a review of the evaluation research literature consistently identifies five interventions as being effective:

- Nurse Family Partnerships
- The Incredible Years
- Functional Family Therapy
- Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care
- Multisystemic Therapy

13. The programmes share a number of characteristics:

- A strong theoretical rationale based in social learning theory and embedded within broader family-systems and social-ecological perspectives
- A stress on improving family communication (relational family variables) and/or behavioural management skills (structuring variable such as disciplining and monitoring)
- Tackling multiple risks by attempting to link families to broader sources of formal and informal support
- Delivery in home or community settings
- High levels of training from accredited bodies and close attention to programme integrity
- High quality evaluations that show reliable benefits over time and across treatment settings.
- Cost effectiveness: the programmes save more money in terms of problems prevented than they cost to set up and run.

14. While the interventions have proven effectiveness, candidate families may be difficult to engage, both initially and during the intervention as they frequently experience a sense of guilt and stigmatisation at being labelled a ‘bad parent’. Extensive work is needed both before and during the intervention in order to overcome these barriers.

**Recommendations**

1. Policy makers, service providers, and law enforcement should pay close attention to the problems of definition and not equate real or apparent gang membership with serious offending; or conflate it with the offending of non-gang peer groups.

2. Care should be taken when recommending intervention on the grounds of an as-yet poorly defined notion of ‘risk for gang membership’. As the risk-factor literature does not distinguish clearly between pathways for gang involvement and for serious adolescent offending, a functional approach to understanding ‘risk of gang membership’ may be to treat it as ‘actual problem behaviour in the index child/adolescent’ but where having gang members amongst close family and friends is seen to pose additional risk and to provide a rationale for prioritising support.
3. Multiply marginalised young parents, including those with a recent history of gang-related offending, may benefit from intensive early support; Nurse Family Partnerships are recommended.

4. Having current or ex-gang members amongst close family and friends offers a strong additional rationale for intervening with the families of children who are presenting with overt behavioural problems; Incredible Years is recommended for the families of younger children, with Functional Family Therapy or MTFC as an option for more focussed support.

5. Being in a gang offers a strong additional rationale for intervening with the families of adolescents who are presenting with overt offending problems; Multisystemic Therapy, by virtue of it’s comprehensive nature and evidence base, is particularly recommended, with MTFC an option.

6. Evaluations of family interventions aimed at the behaviour of children should include gang membership (defined by Eurogang method) as an outcome in addition to offending.

7. In the context of multiple marginality, new or intensive family interventions are likely to need extensive preparatory work that tackles misconceptions of services, denial of problems, and fear of blame and stigmatisation. Equally hard work must be put into avoiding programme drop-out.

8. Manchester, via it’s various multi-agency fora (Manchester Parenting Board, Manchester Multi-agency Gang Strategy, Manchester Crime Reduction Partnership) is in a strong position to implement a comprehensive gang-reduction strategy that includes the family systems interventions. A focussed, co-ordinated and evidence-based approach is highly recommended.

9. The recommended interventions may be necessary but are certainly not sufficient to eradicate the problems of gangs and serious youth offending. Care should be taken to avoid placing undue responsibility or expectation on vulnerable families. Additionally, any broader ‘gang-reduction’ strategy needs to be linked to a more fundamental social-exclusion reduction strategy.
1. Introduction: Aims & structure of the review

Manchester City Council, in conjunction with partner agencies, has an established track record of providing co-ordinated strategies and services in the areas of parenting support and in tackling youthful and gang-related crime. This review was commissioned in 2007 by the Council with the aim of informing the further development of services to families with children potentially or actually involved in youth gangs. The review has three specific aims:

- The first, set out in chapter 2, is to explore the gang research literature in order to provide a clear understanding of the nature of the problem, in particular, the extent to which youth gang members are involved in serious offending.

- The second aim, set out chapter 3, is to explore the developmental criminological literature in order to understand what aspects of family circumstances and parenting practices predict both youth gang involvement and serious offending.

- The third aim, set out in chapter 4, is to survey the intervention and evaluation research literatures in order to identify effective family-level interventions that reduce the risk of serious offending and gang association for affected children.

The review concludes by arguing that well-delivered and evaluated family interventions are likely to help reduce gang-related offending but only as part of a multi-agency strategy to tackle the broader determinants of the phenomenon.
2. Describing the problem: Youth gangs and their consequences

This chapter aims to describe some of the key characteristics of youth gangs, and while there are a number of thorny methodological problems that guard against firm conclusions, a number of broad observations can be made regarding their prevalence, structural characteristics and typical consequences, including offending. A fundamental tenet of gang research is that while every youth gang is unique, they possess common attributes that render them a coherent object of study. Accordingly, and whilst acknowledging the disproportionate influence of US research, we will focus on gangs and the gang literature as a whole as opposed to a narrow concentration on the handful of British studies.

2.1 A note on the definition of ‘gang’

It is with some understatement that Klein & Maxson (2006, p.3) discuss the ‘difficult definitional issue’ in relation to youth gangs. The issue of definition is fundamental to all discourse in the area. Agreed, precise terms permit meaningful assessments of the extent and nature of the ‘problem’; they make possible detailed comparisons of data across time and place; they generate data that can be used to build better theory and to design and evaluate ameliorative interventions; and can help to highlight media distortions, unhelpful conflations and public misunderstandings (Ball & Curry, 1995; Esbensen et al, 2001; Vigil, 2002).

In the eight decades since Frederic Thrasher’s (1927) pioneering research, however, there have been numerous attempts at definition (Klein, 1971, 1995a; Miller, 1980; Short, 1996) with major progress – the ‘Eurogang’ approach – made only in the last decade. The Eurogang project is a joint American and European initiative of leading gang researchers who, since their formation in 1997, have met regularly to create a common research agenda founded on a common definition of youth gangs. This definition bears repeating:

‘any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of it’s group identity’

The five identified sets of characteristics – durability, street orientation, youth, illegal behaviour and group identity – are deemed to be necessary and sufficient ‘definers’ of the youth gang, with all other characteristics (structure, dress, slang, etc) seen as ‘descriptors’ of variation in the basic unit of study (Klein & Maxson, ibid, p4).

Importantly, the defining characteristics have been translated into ‘diagnostic’ survey questions that are being used in ongoing studies to generate comparable cross national and trend data. The Eurogang approach hold promise for the near future, however, any discussion of gang characteristics and properties must contend with the many sources of confusion and error in the existing evidence base. It is to these that we now turn.

1 Unhappily, the harmony in definition does not extend to an agreed term for the resulting group. ‘Youth gang’ and ‘street gang’ are used interchangeably, and for those who find the ‘gang label’ too loaded with meaning, ‘delinquent (or troublesome) youth group’ is an accepted alternative.
2.2 Further methodological issues & key characteristics

The first methodological issue relates to data source. Information on gangs is generated from official (generally police) data, and from qualitative and quantitative academic research.

Police data, often in the form of purpose-built databases of accumulated intelligence, have the advantages of being numerous, ongoing and accurately reflecting local service activity and operational priorities. The data is limited, however, by this very local variation (rendering cross-force comparison difficult), by the fact that incident data may relate to only those crimes that are reported and recorded (and those ‘uncovered’ by proactive policing), and, crucially, by the operational definition of ‘gang’ and ‘gang member’. While practices vary, definitions are generally based on the self-nomination of persons arrested and/or convicted of specific offences; and on the attributions of officers based on interviews and surveillance.

This is undoubtedly a rational approach, however, a number of researchers have expressed concerns relating to the long-term retention of intelligence on ex-gang members and the inclusion of people suspected of involvement simply on the basis of association (Aldridge & Medina, 2008; Esbensen et al, 2001; Bullock & Tilley, 2008). Moreover, police data delivers a partial and distorted view of gang phenomena, focussing on the most serious crimes committed by older, male, minority ethnic, urban youth (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Prevalence estimates are rare to non-existent in the UK, however, annual national surveys of police in the US suggest a large post-war increase in the number and geographic spread of gangs, with mean estimates over the last decade of around 750,000 members in 25,000 gangs in 2000 cities (National Youth Gang Center, 2008).

Qualitative academic research data is generated via ethnography in gang-active communities and includes participant observation, interviews and focus groups with local actors, including gang members (see, e.g., Aldridge & Medina, 2008; Anderson, 1999; Mares, 2001; Vigil, 2007). Such data, though limited by the ‘outsider’ status of the researcher and problems with access and informant bias, contributes to a rich and nuanced picture of life in and around the gang that often challenges stereotypes, for example, exposing the mundane nature of gang life (Klein, 1995a), the role of families (Vigil, 2007), female membership (Moore, 1991), and the contested, fuzzy concept of ‘membership’ per se (Aldridge & Medina, 2008). While invaluable, ethnographic data necessarily concentrates on the particular features of the studied (usually high-risk, gang-active) community and is not constituted to make generalisable statements, for example, in relation to prevalence estimates or the common features of all gangs.

The method of choice for making these kind of statements is the self-report survey yielding quantitative data. While it is generally accepted that well-designed and administered surveys generate valid data, comparisons across place and time are complicated by two further methodological issues, specifically restrictiveness of definition and sample representativeness (Klein & Maxson, 2006).

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2 Though see recent unpublished reports of around 170 gangs in London (Metropolitan Police Service, 2007) and a similar number in Glasgow (Strathclyde Police Violence Reduction Unit, 2007)
The first issue forces a return to the contested debate over definitions and whether self-nomination (an affirmative answer to the simple question ‘are you in a gang?’) or a more objective multi-item ‘funnelling’ procedure (the Eurogang approach) is most appropriate. A number of recent studies illustrate the variation in prevalence estimates that can result from varying survey definitions. Esbensen and colleagues (2001) in a school-based study of around 6000 American 13-15 year olds, obtained prevalence estimates associated with the following increasingly restrictive definitions: ‘ever in a gang’ (17%); ‘currently in a gang’ (9%); ‘currently in a gang that commits illegal acts’ (8%); ‘currently in a gang that commits illegal acts and has leaders, signs or colours’ (5%); core member of such a gang (2%). Similarly, Sharp and colleagues (2006), in their analysis of around 4000 10-19 year olds taking part in the England & Wales Offending and Criminal Justice Survey (OCJS), found prevalence estimates ranging from 10% (least restrictive definition relating to self-nomination) to 2% (most restrictive definition relating to fulfilment of five Eurogang-inspired criteria).

The second methodological issue - sample representativeness – affects prevalence estimates such that non-representative, higher-risk samples show inflated rates of involvement compared to nationally representative samples. Sharp et al’s (2006) study is an example of the latter, with an American equivalent (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999) suggesting a 5% prevalence rate amongst 9000 12-16 year olds. A further perennial limitation of survey based methods is the problem of bias due to non-participation. This may be a particular issue in commonly conducted school-based surveys where the gang-involved are more likely to be absent through truanting or exclusion.

It will be clear from this brief discussion that the seemingly straightforward task of defining and studying gangs is fraught with qualification and disagreement; and it can seem at times as though confident descriptions can only be at the level of the individual study. However, the survey-derived literature, including a recent and authoritative review of research (Klein & Maxson, 2006), supports a number of broad conclusions:

- gangs are found wherever researchers look for them: in North America; in Central America (Medina & Mateu-Gelabert, 2007); in Africa & Asia (see Covey, 2003); in Europe (Klein et al, 2001; Decker & Weerman, 2005); in the UK (Marshall et al, 2005; see text box 1 below for individual studies); and in Manchester (Bullock & Tilley, 2002; Mares, 2001)

- most young people do not join gangs. Klein & Maxson’s review supports the following prevalence estimates: self-report studies using unrestricted definitions and non-representative, higher-risk samples (6-30%); restricted definitions with higher risk-samples (13-18%); restricted definitions with representative samples (6-8%). Sharp et al (2006) estimate a 6% prevalence.

- in contrast to police data and in support of ethnographic research, self-report studies show young women to be involved in gangs at a prevalence rate roughly half that of males. Sharp et al (2006) found an equal rate of involvement (6%) across all age categories, however, females were more likely to be involved at younger ages (e.g., 6% vs. 3% males at age 12-13; 1% vs. 3% males at age 18-19). Single-sex groups were relatively rare (12% of groups were ‘all boys’; 4% ‘all girls’).
the ethnic characteristics of gangs tend to reflect the general population of the areas from which they are drawn. Sharp et al (2006), found that 68% of gang involved youth were members of ethnically homogeneous groups (60% White only; 3% Black only; 5% Asian only) with 31% ethnically mixed.


gangs tend to have high turnover, ephemeral leadership and very loose organisation. Based on American data, Klein & Maxson (2006), identify a five-fold typology based on different combinations of the following structural characteristics: presence of sub-groups, size, age range, duration of existence, territoriality, and versatility of offending. The model classified a high percentage of the gangs studied. Two gang types that approximate to media stereotypes - ‘traditional’ (large, long-established, territorial, criminally versatile, large age-range) and ‘specialty’ (smaller, less durable, criminally specialist, e.g., in relation to drug selling) gangs are comparatively rare. Both types have been described in Manchester (Mares, 2001; Bullock & Tilley, 2002). Recent attempts have been made to develop typologies in the UK context (Pitts, 2007).

Text box 1: Selected UK studies on youth gangs: Brief details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle authors (date), place of study</th>
<th>a) broad aim</th>
<th>b) key data sources</th>
<th>c) key areas of findings</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mares (2001), Manchester</td>
<td>a) ethnographic analysis of local youth gangs, b) participant observation in South Manchester communities, interviews with gang members, residents, police, c) historical development of local gangs; structural and behavioural characteristics.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bullock &amp; Tilley (2002), Manchester</td>
<td>a) An analysis of local needs regarding gun and gang-related crime with the aim of developing a targeted crime reduction strategy, b) Police data on gun-related incidents and individuals, interview sample of suspected gang members, practitioner focus groups; social service files, c) geographic concentration of gangs and shooting, similarity of perpetrators &amp; victims, versatility of criminal behaviour, prevalence &amp; reasons for gun-carrying.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bennett &amp; Holloway (2004), England &amp; Wales</td>
<td>a) estimation of prevalence and nature of youth gangs, b) cross-sectional self-report survey of 2666 arrestees aged 17+ in the NEW-ADAM study, c) 4% ‘current’, 11% ‘past’ gang members; demographic, offending &amp; drug-use characteristics.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Smith &amp; Bradshaw (2005), Bradshaw (2005), Edinburgh</td>
<td>a) estimation of prevalence and nature of youth gangs, b) longitudinal self-report data from 3207 young people surveyed at age 13, 16 &amp; 17, c) stable, low prevalence (&lt;5%) in gangs with structural features (name and/or sign), declining prevalence without such features (18% at age 13, around 2% aged 17); demographic, offending &amp; substance-use characteristics.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharp, Aldridge &amp; Medina (2006), England &amp; Wales</td>
<td>a) estimation of prevalence and nature of youth gangs, b) computer assisted interviews of 3827 youth aged 10-19, c) prevalence, demographic &amp; offending characteristics; see text, above for details.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pitts (2007), Waltham Forest, London</td>
<td>a) analysis of the emergence &amp; character of ‘armed youth gangs’ in the area, recommendations for gang reduction strategy, b) analysis of varied official data, semi-structured interviews with official agencies, residents, gang and non-gang youth, c) typology, based on structure &amp; behaviour, social impacts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aldridge &amp; Medina (2008), ‘Research City’,</td>
<td>a) description and analysis of youth gang activity, b) participant observation; interviews with gang members, ‘gang associates’ and key informants; focus groups with non-gang youth, parents and community residents, c) structural &amp; behavioural characteristics, participation in the formal economy, official responses</td>
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2.3 Known consequences of gang involvement

So far, we have only discussed the issue of the membership status of an individual with regards to a group with defined characteristics. In this sense, we have been
discussing gang membership as a ‘dependent variable’: an outcome to be described and explained. We now make an important logical shift and discuss gang involvement as an ‘independent variable’, that is, a variable exerting effects on a further set of dependent/outcome variables. The basic question is ‘accepting that gang members are at higher that normal risk of harmful behavioural & social outcomes due to their multiple social exclusion (section 2.3), does gang involvement place them at an even greater risk?’ This type of question requires longitudinal data that is capable of describing life circumstances before, during and after gang involvement. Criminological gang-focussed studies of this kind are rare in the UK (though see Smith & Bradshaw’s (2005) analysis of the Edinburgh Study dataset), and, as in so many areas, most detailed analyses have been conducted on North American datasets, particularly from the Rochester, Pittsburgh, Denver, Seattle and Montreal longitudinal studies (respectively, Thornberry et al, 2003; Gordon et al, 2004; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Hawkins et al, 1992; Gatti et al, 2005).

**Offending:** The ‘Eurogang’ definition explicitly refers to the importance of illegality for group identity, which is not the same as referring to the behaviour of individual members, and it is to be expected that there is variation in offending within individual gangs as well as in comparison to non-gang youth. Having said this, the delinquent behaviour that is defining the group must be committed by people within it and a number of general points can be made about the offending of gang members.

First, virtually every piece of gang research conducted shows that members commit more crime than non gang members regardless of whether the measure of offending is derived from self-report methods or official data and whether the gang membership relates to ‘current’ or ‘lifetime’ status (Klein & Maxson, 2006, ch. 2 for a review). This holds for research across time and place, for both female as well as male members (Klein & Maxson, *ibid*) and for more serious and violent delinquency as well as for petty offending, drug-use and precocious (underage) behaviour such drinking, smoking, and sexual intercourse (Thornberry et al, 2003). For example, with regard to offending in a representative UK dataset, Sharp et al (2006) reported that 63% of gang-involved youth had committed a ‘core’ offence (robbery, assault, burglary, criminal damage, thefts from or of cars and drugs sales) in the last year compared to 26% of non-members. Gang members were also more likely to be categorised as ‘serious’ offenders³ (34% vs. 13%), ‘frequent’ offenders⁴ (28% vs. 7%), to have used any drug (45% vs. 15%) and been involved in an alcohol-related incident (25% vs. 6%).

These figures confirm the importance of youth gangs in generating disproportionate amounts of crime and nuisance behaviour relative to their prevalence in the population, however, there are a number of important qualifiers. First, survey studies do not generally make a distinction between whether offences are committed in the context of the gang or elsewhere (for example on one’s own or with non-gang friends) and it is possible that this exaggerates the influence of gang status. Second, it is clear that status as a youthful offender is not coterminous with status as a gang member: 37% of gang members in Sharp et al’s study had not committed a core offence in the last year; and 26% of non-gang respondents had committed such an offence.

³ defined as committing one of the following in the past 12 months: theft of vehicle, burglary, robbery, theft from the person, assault with injury, selling Class A drugs.
⁴ defined as committing 6 or more offences in the previous year.
Furthermore, across offence type, no gang member prevalence figure reaches 100% and no non-gang figure reaches 0%. This type of finding is obscured in many research studies that only report summary statistics (for example, comparisons of mean number of offences for gang and non-gang members) but the fact that there may be substantial numbers of non-offending gang members in a given sample raises important issues for preventative interventions justified on the basis of gang status as opposed to offending behaviour (Bullock & Tilley, 2008).

Accepting this, the rationale for intervention may be strongest in relation to the effect of gang membership on most members and important findings in this area have emerged from recent longitudinal analyses. These analyses are prefigured by a broader theoretical debate in criminology as to whether time-stable aspect of an individual’s personality (for example, impulsiveness, anger & suspicion, low empathy) are more important for explaining variation in offending than features of the environment such as life events, family, school or neighbourhood context, and peer group (Nagin & Paternoster, 1991). In relation to gangs, the debate translates into whether high offending rates are due to: already highly delinquent individuals choosing to spend time together (‘selection’); to criminogenic group processes in the gang that cause offending in previously non-delinquent individuals (‘facilitation’); or to a mixture of the two (‘enhancement’) (Thornberry et al, 1993; 2003). Differences in study design may account for some variation in results, however, strong evidence has emerged for the ‘facilitation’ model and for the ‘enhancement’ model where facilitation effects are stronger then selection effects. In other words, young people who enter gangs are, to an extent, more delinquent than those who do not, and during the relatively short time that young people are members (over half of the Rochester sample were involved for a year or less), their offending increases markedly, and then reduces on exit to a lower level that is often still higher than non-gang peers.

These findings have been repeated in a British context with longitudinal data on over 3000 adolescents followed from 13 to 17 (Smith & Bradshaw, 2005; Bradshaw, 2005). More sophisticated analyses show that the amplificatory effect of gang membership holds even if one takes into account the fact that associating with delinquent peers is a strong independent risk-factor for offending (Thornberry et al, 2003); in other words, during their time in the gang, delinquents members offend more than non-gang delinquents.

A full explanation of the facilitative effects of gangs is beyond the scope of this review, however, researchers have speculated that the following factors are important: 1) the importance of the group for offering status, identity and companionship for socially-excluded, status-less individuals, 2) at a time in development when attachments to peers and therefore susceptibility to peer-group influence (e.g., social learning, conformity) is at it’s strongest; and 3) where offending is not only tolerated but exerts a cohesive, unifying effect via shared risks, loyalty and the need for secrecy (Moffitt, 1993; Warr, 2002; Moore & Vigil, 1989; Moore, 2002).

Other consequences. Increasing interest is being shown in the strong positive empirical relationship between youthful offending and risk of violent victimisation (Smith, 2004; Smith & Ecob, 2008). Adolescence may be a period of raised general risk for victimisation (Acosta et al, 2001) but recent analyses with gang-involved samples not only confirm the cross-sectional relationship with offending but suggest
the same type of ‘enhancement’ effects described above (Peterson et al 2004; Taylor et al, 2007). This is sadly ironic considering that a frequently expressed reason for joining gangs is for protection (Peterson et al, ibid). The amplificatory effect is likely to be due to gangs affording increased opportunities for both inter- and intra-gang conflict and may extend well beyond the period of membership due to the enduring nature of reputation and association (Taylor et al, 2007). Victimisation may be of a more frequently of a sexual nature for female members (e.g., Miller, 1998; Venkatesh, 1998).

Gang involvement also seems to increase risks for further social exclusion as indexed by future employment prospects, poverty, family dysfunction (including unwanted and teenage pregnancy) and drug abuse (Hagedorn, 1988; Moore, 1991; Thornberry et al, 2003, though see Levitt & Venkatesh, 2001 regarding selection effects).

Finally, the effects of gangs and gang violence on the communities in which members reside has been researched in the American context (Lane, 2002; Lane & Meeker, 2003) with the conclusion that it can contribute significantly to resident’s fear of crime, restrict their movement and cause other precautionary activity, such as increasing home security.

2.4 Conclusion: Reasonable concerns and nuanced understanding

Our brief review of some basic aspects of the gang literature makes three clear points. First, that despite fundamental issues relating to definition and measurement, it is meaningful to speak of youth gangs existing outside large American cities, and specifically in the UK and Manchester contexts. Second, that there are well-described, serious and negative consequences of gang involvement, most particularly for the youth, but also for community at large. Both of these points justify concern and action to prevent and reduce gang activity. However, a third and final point relates to the variation in both structural and behavioural characteristics of gangs that belies stereotyped ‘gangsta’ images and easy association/conflation with gun crime and drugs markets. It is clear that both entry and exit from a gang are unclear processes with no definable criteria; it is equally clear that, for most, gang involvement tends to be a short-lived adolescent phenomenon; with young women substantially involved but ‘maturing out’ earlier; and ethnic mix being broadly representative of the area of residence. Above all, it is clear that of the very many young people who become involved in offending during adolescence (Farrington, 1986; Wilson, et al, 2006), only a proportion join gangs, a proportion of whom commit offences, a proportion of which are serious offences. The well-evidenced amplificatory effects of gang involvement on offending should not be interpreted as meaning ‘all gang members are serious and violent offenders’ and there are likely to be dangers in basing official responses on such an assumption. The distinction between social (gang) status and overt (offending) behaviour is a theme to which we will return in later chapters.
3. Explaining the problem: Families as a source of risk and resilience

Describing a social problem is the first step on the road to explaining and understanding it, and it is to this task that we now turn. This chapter details some of the requirements of a ‘good’ and accurate explanation together with the very considerable obstacles that exist in generating such an explanation for complex social phenomena. Accepting the ambiguity regarding the object of study (are we trying to explain gang membership, serious offending, or gang-related serious offending?), we then survey the ‘risk-factor’ literature to give a sense of the building blocks of a credible and coherent explanation. Starting with a stimulating and varied literature on family-level and parenting factors, we compare and contrast the various sources of risk and resilience that predict both gang membership and serious adolescent offending. We conclude by stating the contextualised and circumscribed importance of families that logically provides a rationale for focussed support.

3.1 Conceptual & evidential issues

3.1.1 Explaining or predicting gang activity?

The urge to understand the *causes* of gang involvement, or indeed any social problem, is an understandable one: fundamental understanding suggests fundamental action which can reduce or even eradicate a problem. But a causal statement is a very strong one; it specifies that whenever a set of antecedent conditions exists, an outcome has a near-inevitable chance of occurring (Rutter, 1995; Rutter et al, 2001). A key problem for gang research, in common with the greater part of criminological and social science research, is that we have neither the data nor the possibility of generating the data (ethically) to make such statements. Much of criminology is still therefore ‘stuck in the risk-factor stage’ (Moffitt & Caspi, 2006; see also Farrington, 2003; Rutter, 2003b) and only able to make weaker, probabilistic statements. Borrowing from public health and health promotion, the terms ‘risk’ and ‘risk-factor’ have become increasingly well-understood and used within UK social policy in recent years (France & Utting, 2005) and ‘risk-focussed prevention’ a paradigm of programme design and evaluation (Farrington, 2000). A risk-factor is any variable which has a documented predictive association with a given harmful outcome; the presence of the former increases the likelihood of the latter. Risk-factors are useful in the sense that they can form the basis for developing speculative causal theories and for designing interventions based on that theory. There are, however, a number of basic issues with this approach that need to be understood before we are able to draw strong conclusions from a literature.

First, longitudinal data is preferable in order to understand the proper temporal relationship between the risk-factor and the outcome: an explanatory variable cannot logically succeed an outcome (thus solving ‘chicken and egg’ problems of causality). Longitudinal studies are expensive, however, and the relatively small number of gang-relevant studies worldwide is small, which limits the ability to generalise.

Second, risk-factors only describe statistical associations with an outcome and say nothing about the causal processes and mechanisms that lead from risk to outcome; researchers need to construct these processes by interpreting findings, supplementing
them with convergent evidence from other areas (for example, qualitative studies), and by translating them into theories that produce testable hypotheses.

Third, all predictions about future outcomes based on the presence of risk-factors have an often substantial level of error and inaccuracy associated with them (Robins, 1979; Blackburn, 1995). This is partly due to inevitable error in design and measurement, partly due to the ‘base rate’ of the outcome in question (rare events are harder to predict) and partly due to the varying and complex patterns of interactions a given variable might have with other risk and protective factors. An interaction occurs where a variable only exerts an effect on an outcome in the presence of another variable, for example, Caspi and colleagues (1993) found that early menarche in young New Zealand women was only associated with a higher risk of conduct disorder in mixed sex schools; neither variable on its own predicted offending. Protective factors are not simply low levels of a risk-factor (Klein & Maxson, 2006 use the term ‘low risk’ here) but reduce the risk of a harmful outcome in the presence of other risk-factors. Thus children brought up in violent neighbourhoods may escape violence via strong attachment to education. Rather less is known about protective factors and the associated concept of resilience in criminology, than is known about risk (Farrington, 2000; Armstrong et al, 2005).

Four brief but important additional points can be made regarding risk factors. First, it is recognised that risk is ‘cumulative’: the greater the number of risk-factors present in a person’s background, the greater the risk of the harmful outcome (Thornberry, 1998; and colleagues, 2001). Second, and following the seminal work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Hawkins et al (1992), risk is usually considered to operate in a range of interlocking ecological ‘domains’, that is, spheres of the person’s life. In criminological research, these domains are usually conceived to be the individual, the family, school, peer context and neighbourhood. Thus, outcomes are a product of the complex interactions between risk and protective variables at each of these explanatory levels. Third, each part of the system under study is conceived to actively effect the other; thus individuals are affected for the better or worse by the social contexts in which they find themselves but also react to them and, in turn, are part of changing them for the better or worse. This is the principle of interactionalism (Thornberry, 1998). Finally, there are likely to be a number of different developmental paths that lead to the same undesired outcome and it may be that some variables pose greater risks at particular ages - a kind of interaction between age and a given risk-factor (Lipsey & Derzon, 1998; Loeber & Farrington, 2001a).

3.1.2 Comparing and contrasting risk-factors for gang membership and delinquency.

Here we return to a fundamental distinction made in an earlier section: the difference between treating gang member status as an outcome (dependent variable) and an explanatory (independent) variable. Describing the risk factors for gang membership implies the former approach; we are trying to predict social status, not offending behaviour. The difficulty with this separation is that, in common with a range of co-occurring adverse physical, mental health and social outcomes (Anderson et al, 2001; Bynner, 2001), there seems to be substantial overlap in the variables that predict both gang membership and offending (Howell & Egley, 2005). In fact, many researchers see gang membership as just one of many steps in a longer-term trajectory of worsening behaviour (Loeber et al, 1993; Howell & Egley, 2005) As we shall see, the
extent of this overlap and the implications for developing common risk assessment tools and intervention strategies is a moot point, with some gang researchers strongly arguing for separate measure and approaches (Klein & Maxson, 2006: 160-161). However, because there is overlap, and because the risk-factor literature in relation to gang status is far less well-established than that for the prediction of delinquency, we will compare and contrast the key risk factors for both, concentrating preferentially on the family domain.

Space considerations do not permit us to discuss individual studies in any great detail and we will concentrate on a number of recent selective reviews of risk-factors for gang joining (Howell & Egley, 2005; Klein & Maxson, 2006 Thornberry, 1998; 2003); and relating to both general (Farrington, 2007) and serious delinquency (Lipsey & Derzon, 1998). Howell & Egley’s (2005) paper is a selective review of risk-factors from prospective (North American) longitudinal studies and uses them to synthesise a developmental model (fig. 1, see end of this section) that specifies the links between variables at different ages. Klein & Maxson’s (2006) book chapter presents a selective review of 19 cross-sectional and longitudinal studies that yield risk-factors for gang joining. A summary of their findings are reproduced in table 1. Thornberry’s (1998) chapter is a selective review with a section relating to the Rochester Developmental Study; the 2003 book section is an elaboration of this. Farrington’s (2007) chapter is a selective review of childhood risk factors for antisocial behaviour. Lipsey & Derzon’s (1998) paper is a meta-analytic review of 34 prospective longitudinal studies focussing on predictors of violent and serious offending between the ages of 15-25. The authors produce a summary table of risk-factors at ages 6-11 and 12-14 years ranked by predictive strength (table 2).
Table 1: Risk-factors, by domain and consistency of evidence for gang membership. Source: Klein & Maxson (2006: 144-146).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk factor by domain</th>
<th>Consistently supported</th>
<th>Mostly supported</th>
<th>Inconclusive</th>
<th>Mostly not supported</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INDIVIDUAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative life events</td>
<td>X (3,0,0)*</td>
<td></td>
<td>X (3,0,7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>internalising behaviour (anxiety/withdrawal)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X (2,1,3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>externalising behaviour (non-delinquent problem behaviour)</td>
<td>X (12,0,0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>delinquent beliefs</td>
<td>X (6,1,2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conventional activities</td>
<td>X (2,1,3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attitudes to the future</td>
<td>X (1,2,2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>FAMILY</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>poverty/disadvantage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X (2,2,6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>structure (single parent)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X (4,1,6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attachment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X (4,2,6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parental supervision</td>
<td>X (8,0,4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parenting style/hostile</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X (3,4,3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family environment</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family deviance</td>
<td>X (2,1,2)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SCHOOL</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>commitment/aspirations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X (5,4,2)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>attachment</td>
<td>X (2,2,2)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>achievement</td>
<td>X (4,0,3)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>unsafe environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X (1,0,4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PEERS</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>characteristics</td>
<td>X (14,0,0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affective dimensions</td>
<td>X (6,2,3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NEIGHBOURHOOD</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area crime</td>
<td>X (2,2,3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminogenic indicators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X (3,1,5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* numbers in brackets refer, respectively, to the number of studies reviewed in which there were significant (p<0.05), inconclusive and non-significant differences between gang and non-gang members on a given dimension. Thus, for the indicated cell, 3 studies included measures of negative life events; all three found significant differences, with zero studies inconclusive or non-significant, yielding an overall conclusion of ‘consistent support’ for this risk-factor.
Table 2. Risk-factors at age 6-11 and 12-14 of serious and violent offending at age 15-25. Source: Lipsey & Derzon, 1998: 97

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranked group</th>
<th>Age 6-11 predictor</th>
<th>Age 12-14 predictor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1 (strongest)| General offences (I)*  
Substance use (I) | Social ties (P)  
Antisocial peers (P) |
| 2            | Gender: male(I)  
Family SES (F)  
Antisocial parents (F) | General offences (I) |
| 3            | Aggression (I)  
Ethnicity (I) | Aggression (I)  
School attitude/performance (S)  
Psychological conditions (I)  
Parent-child relations (F)  
Gender: male (I)  
Physical violence (I) |
| 4            | Psychological conditions (I)  
Parent-child relations (F)  
Social ties (P)  
Problem behaviour (I)  
School attitude/performance (S)  
Medical/physical (I)  
IQ (I) | Antisocial parents (F)  
Person crimes (I)  
Problem behaviour (I)  
IQ (I) |
| 5 (weakest) | Broken home (F)  
Abusive parents (F)  
Antisocial peers (P) | Broken home (F)  
Family SES (F)  
Abusive parents (F)  
Other family characteristics (F)  
Substance use (I)  
Ethnicity (I) |

Variables within each rank group are themselves ranked according to strength of association with violent or serious delinquency.
* Letter in parenthesis refers to risk domain: (I)ndividual; (F)amily; (P)eer; (S)chool

3.2 Family-level and parenting risk factors

3.2.1 Delinquency as an outcome

There is a very substantial literature relating aspects of family circumstances and parenting practices to the development of serious and violent adolescent offending. Here we shall refer to three clusters of variables: structural, structuring and relational dimensions.

Structural variables are taken to refer to both the location of the family in the wider social structure (e.g., their material circumstances) and to the structure of the family in terms of the characteristics of the people the child is habitually exposed to. Family poverty, particularly in the context of bringing up younger children has been found to predict later antisocial behaviour (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998). This is likely to be an indirect effect in the sense that financial and related stresses are known to impair parenting practices which themselves are risk factors for later offending (Conger et al, 1992; 1994). A range of aspects of family structure are also frequently shown to be independent risk-factors for persistent offending: single (particularly female) parenthood, teenage parenthood and large family size (Morash, 1989; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998; Farrington & Loeber, 1999). To an extent, all of these variables may index overstretched parental emotional and material resources, which may exert stress on parenting practices in much the same way as material poverty. A rather weaker risk factor pertains to parental separation or ‘broken homes’; it seems
that the existence of parental conflict underlies this association and that, correspondingly, separation can actually improve the situation for the index child (Juby & Farrington, 2001; Haas, 2004). Family criminality is the final robust structural risk factor frequently identified in ‘classic’ American and UK longitudinal studies, with father-son and male sibling relations showing the strongest associations (McCord, 1977; Farrington et al, 1996; 2001). Less is known about the most accurate interpretation of this link: heritability, modelling of pro-criminal attitudes and behaviour, shared risky environments, poorer parenting, or a mixture of some or all of these factors are possible (Farrington, 2007).

**Structuring** family variables are taken here to mean aspects of parenting practice that regulate rule-based interactions and that lend structure to the child’s day, whether in or out of the parent’s company. They are partly referred to in table 2. under the banner of ‘parent-child relations’. A voluminous and venerable literature exists to suggest that, separately and combined, harsh, physically punitive, erratic and inconsistent disciplining strongly predict future antisocial behaviour (Glueck & Glueck, 1950; West & Farrington, 1973; McCord, 1979; Holmes et al, 2001). This follows from orthodox social learning theory (e.g., Patterson, 1982) in that the child finds it difficult to contingently learn clear and positive behavioural standards and, with regard to harsh punishment, learns physical aggression as a strategy for resolving conflict. The second set of structuring factors relate to parental involvement and parental supervision/monitoring (also subsumed under ‘parent-child relations’ for Lipsey & Derzon, 1998). The former variable refers to the amount and quality of child-parent activity, with father’s (lack of) involvement in son’s leisure activities presenting the stronger risk (Farrington & Hawkins, 1991). Supervision, traditionally conceived as the extent to which the parent knows about and controls the child’s ‘out of sight’ activities and associations, is perhaps the strongest and most consistent structuring risk-factor (Dishion & McMahon, 1998; Farrington & Loeber, 1999; Pettit et al, 1999). While recent work has questioned whether parental monitoring is a misnomer as it says more about the child’s willingness to disclose personal information than the parent’s controlling abilities (Laird et al, 2003; Stattin & Kerr, 2000; Warr, 2007), the variable is thought to be particularly important during early adolescence via it’s limiting of opportunities to socialise with delinquent peers (Warr, 1993; 2002).

The final set of parenting risk factors considered here we will term **relational** factors and refer to the quality of attachment with the child (captured by Lipsey & Derzon in table 2. as part of the ‘parent-child relations’ variable). Attachment is an old, psychodynamically-influenced construct (Bowlby, 1951) but captures the importance of emotional closeness and warmth for the child’s socio-emotional development and general behavioural adjustment (Bates, 1988; Booth et al, 1994). Variables relating to this construct are modest predictors of antisocial behaviour (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). Taken to extremes (and linked to harsh parenting practices), outright abuse and neglect are stronger predictors of delinquency (Widom & Ames, 1994; Brezina, 1998). Recent evidence from the Dunedin (New Zealand) longitudinal study suggests that a subset of children may have a genetic vulnerability to parent-induced stress of this nature: evidence of a potentially important gene-environment interaction (Jaffee et al, 2004).

**3.2.2 Gang membership as an outcome.**
There are several possible interpretations of the family-level gang risk factor literature and there is arguably a strong need for more systematic reviews of the consistency of findings and relative strength of associations across well-conducted studies. On the one hand, evidence exists for a positive predictive relationship between virtually every dimension of family circumstances and parenting practices mentioned in the preceding section. Thus, as an illustration:

**Structural dimension**
- Family poverty (Bradshaw, 2005; Hill et al, 1999; Moore, 1991)
- Single parenthood (Esbensen & Dechenes, 1998; Thornberry, 2003)
- Parental conflict (Le Blanc & Lanctot, 1998)
- Large family size (Bowker & Klein, 1983)
- Relatives in gang/family ‘criminality’ (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Whitlock, 2002)

**Structuring dimension**
- Counterproductive disciplining practices (Winfree et al, 1994; Miller, 2001)
- Low monitoring & supervision (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Gatti et al, 2005)
- Low family involvement (Friedman et al, 1975)

**Relational dimension**
- Low attachment (Campbell, 1990; Cox, 1996; Eitle et al, 2004)
- Child maltreatment/abuse (Thornberry et al, 2003)

From this, it could be taken that the family risk factors for both adolescent offending and gang joining are identical (Thornberry, 1998). While Howell & Egley (2005) do not quite state this, they have sufficient confidence in the evidence base to put forward their integrative developmental model acknowledging many of these variables. A contrasting view comes from Klein & Maxson (2006), who show (table 1) that, often many studies, do not consistently support the above constructs with the notable exception of parental supervision. Eight out of the twelve reviewed studies carried out in the US (eg. Hill, 1999), UK (Bradshaw, 2005), and the Netherlands (Esbensen & Weerman, 2005) found positive predictive evidence for this construct.

Insights into the role of parenting and family may also be gained from member’s self-reported justifications for joining gangs. Klein & Maxson (2006: 156-160) in their review of the US literature, suggest that there is considerable variation across studies due to differences in method (free response vs. researcher-provided choices), however, a common reason for joining is having family members already in the gang (Thornberry, 2003; Maxson & Whitlock, 2002). Having peers in the gang, a need for protection, and material or status advantage are also common reasons, however, the involvement of older sibling and cousins has consistently been found to be a risk-factor for membership in older gang studies (Cohen et al, 1994; Curry & Spergel, 1992; Moore, 1991; Nirdorf, 1988; reviewed in Thornberry, 1998: 151). Becoming involved with gangs may, for some, be a fairly simple extension of associating with existing gang-involved friends and family.

A final, and potentially important set of insights into relevant family processes is given in recent ethnographic research. In his recent (2007) book ‘The Projects: Gang
& Non-Gang Families in East Los Angeles’, Diego Vigil reviews ten years of relevant fieldwork in the ‘Cuatro Flats’ housing project. The area is multiply deprived, with a high crime rate and a long history of ‘traditional’ gang involvement (Klein & Maxson, 2006), largely composed of Mexican and Mexican-American youth. The nature of the community and its gangs clearly limits generalisation both within the US and certainly in relation to the UK, however, a number of case studies vividly illustrate the family characteristics and processes that either unintentionally promote or inhibit gang joining. These insights are also valuable because the families of gang and non-gang youth have very similar demographic characteristics, in terms of structure, poverty, migration and work histories. Drawing conclusions from his fieldwork, Vigil summarises the key family factors that ‘push’ youth from families and into gangs as: permissive and authoritarian parenting; absent and abusive men; and lack of family social ties (Vigil, 2007: 164-176). Thus parental supervision and involvement tended to be low, with a preponderance of either harsh and ‘deterrent’ (fear) based disciplining or an absence of disciplining as the parent ‘gave up’ on their child, viewing them fatalistically as ‘uncontrollable’ or in relation to unhelpful stereotypes (‘boys will be boys’: p.167). Vigil notes denial both of community gang and crime problems and of their children’s involvement in them as characteristic of mother’s accounts (p.167). A number of case studies describe how un- or periodically involved fathers and other male partners can pose problems due to conflict (including outright, overt abuse) when they are present and emotional disruption when they leave. The author also notes the frequent community isolation of the mothers and parents of the gang-involved, including little interaction with neighbours and community groups. Together, the conditions of the household conspire to make it an unrewarding, upsetting, even dangerous environment that ‘pushes’ children onto the street where they are simultaneously ‘pulled’ by the promise of companionship, identity, structure, purpose and other perceived qualities of the gang. In effect, the child is seeking a ‘surrogate’ family and experiencing formative socialisation on the street as opposed to in the home (Vigil, ibid).

In contrast, families whose children resisted joining gangs more often attempted to instil discipline in their children by reasoning with them (stating and explaining ‘house’ rules), by emphasising positive reasons for obeying parents (love and respect) and by consistently applying non-physical punishment, such as grounding. They also spent much more time structuring the family day, including organising sit-down family meals and joint leisure activities, and by giving children responsibility, for example, for chores and child-minding (p.144). This concern with structuring also extended to encouraging children to get involved in extracurricular, after-school activities (church, sports, military cadets) and mothers modelled this same behaviour by volunteering in community life. These are no doubt ‘ideal’ descriptions but Vigil’s view seems to be consistent with much of the above literature in that well-supported and resilient families more often offer an emotionally warm and organised home life that, in conjunction with educational and extracurricular commitment, strongly reduces the value of and (crucially) opportunity to engage in ‘street socialisation’ with gang members.

3.3 Linked risk domains

3.3.1 Individual-level risk factors
Delinquency as the outcome: The developmental criminology and psychopathology literatures have achieved a degree of consensus regarding individual level risk-factors for serious and violent adolescent offending and three clusters of variables are relevant. The first cluster relates to early childhood problem behaviour (particularly aggression) and precocious involvement in offending and substance use. It may be more sensible to view later offending as continuity in earlier problem behaviour, rather than as a risk-factor (although other’s reactions to the early problem may intensify them), however, this cluster present the most robust set of predictors of chronic, serious and violent offending (Loeber et al, 1993). Children who exhibit externalising problems are more likely to be have psychiatric diagnoses of ‘conduct disorder’ and ‘oppositional defiant disorder’ (Rutter & Hagell, 1998) and to exhibit problem behaviour throughout life (Moffitt, 2003; Lahey, 1999). The second cluster of risk-factors relates to aspects of temperament & personality (‘psychological conditions’ in Lipsey & Derzon’s (1998) categorisation), including impulsiveness, hyperactivity, frequent experience of negative emotions, and low empathy. Children with low self-control, poor concentration and high levels of activity are more likely to be diagnosed with ‘attention-deficit’ related conditions, which may themselves be co-morbid with the above mentioned disorders (Farrington, 2007). Finally, low intelligence and poor social cognitive skills predict later offending (Farrington, *ibid*), the former perhaps being related to school failure; and both risk-factors contributing towards poor/egocentric decision-making and problem-solving in social situations.

Gang membership as the outcome: Most longitudinal studies in this area only recruit participants in late childhood or early adolescence (for example, the Montreal study began data collection at age 10) and so cannot easily report on risk-factors that have strong effects in childhood. However, it is clear from both featured reviews, that earlier behavioural problems, including conduct disorder (Lahey et al, 1999), hyperactivity (e.g., Craig et al, 2002), precocious ‘adult’ behaviour including early dating (Thornberry et al, 2003), underage sexual activity (e.g., Bjerregard & Smith, 1993), marijuana and alcohol use (e.g., Hill et al, 1999) and both general & violent offending (e.g., Curry et al, 2002; Hill et al, 1999, respectively) predict gang involvement. These findings fit with the modest selection effects discussed in earlier sections. Possessing values, attitudes and beliefs that are tolerant of offending also consistently predict gang joining (e.g., Esbensen, Huizinga & Weiher, 1993; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Thornberry, 1998), as does experience of earlier negative life events such as school exclusion (Thornberry et al, 2003). In sum, there is good evidence to suggest substantial overlap in individual-level *behavioural* risk factors across the two sets of outcomes. Evidence of predictive relationships is not only consistent across studies, it also offers some of the statistically strong and important associations.

3.3.2 Peer effects

Delinquency as the outcome: Lipsey & Derzon’s (1998) meta-analysis suggests that the influence of peers is a relatively minor risk factor in young children (note ‘social ties’ in table 2 also refers to a set of peer-related variables: social activities and low popularity) but evidence suggests that the reactions of pro-social children to their already more antisocial peers plays a part in the maintenance of problem behaviour. This is because antisocial children are often excluded from play, which both limits
their opportunities to develop pro-social skills and increases the likelihood that similarly-rejected children will associate (Laird et al, 2001; Moffitt, 1993). The above review also confirms that association with delinquent peers (and related measures) becomes, by far, the most important risk-factor for both general and more serious offending during adolescence, and to a great extent, youthful offending is group offending (Gendreau et al, 1996; Keenan et al, 1995; Warr, 2002). Studies of the social interactions of delinquent youth confirm the tenets of orthodox learning theory: peers are more likely to model and reward antisocial attitudes and behaviour, and to punish pro-social behaviour (Buehler et al, 1966; Matsueda & Anderson, 1998; Wright et al, 2001). According to some authors, delinquent, risk-taking and adult-like behaviours (e.g., underage drinking, smoking, sex, etc) may have an increased value in the ‘maturity gap’ years between puberty onset and the transition into adulthood (Moffitt, 1993; 2003) and this, combined, with an increased general reliance on peer groups for identity and status, may account for the some of the greater susceptibility to group processes (learning, conformity) that in turn explain increased offending prevalence during the teen years (see also Warr, 2002). Importantly, and as hinted at in the preceding section, parental practices may be key here, with the degree of parental attachment determining the initial attraction to delinquent peers; and level of supervision determining the opportunities to associate with them (Warr, 1993; 2005).

An equally important feature of offending in adolescence is it’s transience and there is both widespread and marked desistance in the late teens and early twenties (references). This is generally explained by shifts in social context and a common sensitivity to the changing patterns of delinquent risk and reward with age: peer attachment becomes less strong, peer association less frequent, and the consequences of offending more incompatible with adult roles and responsibilities (Moffitt; 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Gang membership as the outcome: Clearly a gang is, by definition, a peer network, and so to suggest that delinquent friends are a risk factor for gang membership risks tautology. However, as we have seen via the ‘facilitation’ effects described above, being in a gang adds extra risk for delinquent behaviour above and beyond that offered by mixing with delinquent peers. One unresolved question is to what extent this is due to the same group processes (learning, conformity) that operate in non-gang groups but with more exaggerated risks and rewards, or to different processes, where the gang fulfils a particular set of emotional needs and encourages particularly strong loyalties (Klein & Maxson, 2006, p.). Nevertheless, both table 1 and older reviews (e.g., Thornberry, 1998) reveal that delinquent peers are, by some distance, the most significant and consistently reported predictor of gang membership.

3.3.3 School-level risk factors

Delinquency as the outcome: It is important to distinguish between individual-level and school-level risk-factors. The former refers to an individual’s attitudinal and behavioural orientation towards school (for example, the extent to which they value good grades or are frequent attenders) together with their objective levels of achievement. School-level risk factors are properties of the institution that affect all attending pupils regardless of their commitment, for example, average class size, extent of extracurricular activity, bullying prevalence, or management regime and ‘ethos’ (Rutter, 1983). Delinquency studies generally focus exclusively on individual-level variables and find a number that increase risk for both general and serious
delinquency (Hawkins et al, 1998). These include: low commitment to education (Hirschi, 1969; Catalano & Hawkins, 1996), low educational and work aspirations (references); poor academic achievement (though this may be mediated by low intelligence or personality characteristics that make it difficult to attend in class: Farrington, 2007), and truancy (Farrington, 1989a).

**Gang membership as the outcome:** Evidence exists to support a link between the presence of virtually all of the individual-level variables discussed above and a raised risk for gang membership (Thornberry, 1998 for a review). Future gang members are also more likely than non-gang joiners to have been negatively labelled by teachers, (Huizinga et al, 1993), which may be due to the child’s behaviour or to the mis-application of labels derived from older siblings in the same school. Having other gang members as classmates also emerged as a unique risk-factor for membership (Curry & Spergel, 1992). Klein & Maxson (2006; table 1) offer a far more equivocal view, with the balance of selected studies offering only inconsistent support for this set of variables.

### 3.3.3 Neighbourhood context

**Delinquency as the outcome:** The attempt to understand the social conditions and processes that define high-crime communities is central to the development of criminology as a discipline, and, indeed some of the earliest gang research was part of the ‘Chicago School’ of ecological criminology (Thrasher, 1927; 1936). The task of explaining why communities vary in their crime rate is a conceptually different task to explaining why individuals living there develop problems with delinquency, but, briefly, area crime rates are predicted by indices of poverty and social marginality, and by factors that reduce opportunities for neighbourly interaction (such as residential mobility) and impair the realisation of common goals and values (Bottoms, 2007; Sampson et al, 2002). Sampson & colleagues (1997) in a well-cited multi-level study of Chicago neighbourhoods found that ‘collective efficacy’ - a combination of quality of social ties and shared willingness to regulate youthful street behaviour – predicted variation in neighbourhood violent crime rates over and above the effects of poverty; in other words, levels of collective efficacy explained why similarly poor neighbourhoods had different crime rates. The relationship between crime and social process is likely to be bidirectional in that the former may arise from the latter but then further reduce resident’s ability to defend their community, for example, when the threat of violence produces fear, social withdrawal and ‘no-go’ areas (Lane, 2002). Wikstrom & Loeber (1997) have also shown how neighbourhood problems can interact with individual-level risk factors: children with high levels of individual risk are likely to develop antisocial behaviour regardless of where they live, however, low-risk children are much more likely to develop problems if they lived in a high-risk neighbourhood.

**Gang membership as the outcome:** Gangs arise in conditions of extreme and varied social exclusion or ‘multiple marginality’ (Fagan 1996; Thornberry et al. 2003; Vigil 2002) and the communities in which they are most active tend to typify the poor, socially disorganised archetypes described above. One distinguishing characteristic of (particularly, American) gangs may be the enhanced symbolic significance of neighbourhood as ‘territory’ or ‘turf’: as a central component of group identity; and a source of both pride and conflict with other gangs (Vigil, 2007). While indices such as
community crime rate (Thornberry et al, 2003), poverty (Hill et al, 1999), and social disorganisation (Thornberry, 1998) have been found to be risk factors for gang membership in a number of studies, the evidence is again equivocal: explanations of the variation in gang activity across similarly poor and disorganised areas is not yet well understood (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Another, perhaps obvious, yet important source of risk for gang membership is the simple fact of gang existence in the neighbourhood of residence (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Nirdorf, 1988).

3.3.4 A note on gender
It will be noted that we have not considered gender as an individual-level risk factor, despite the fact that there is a higher prevalence of all types of externalising disorder at all ages, with the gap particularly large in childhood and particularly narrow during early adolescence (Moffitt, 1993). A full discussion is beyond the scope of this review (though see Moffitt et al, 2001) but for now, we will note that (male) gender is primarily a marker for ‘risk’ but in and of itself cannot explain variation in offending. Likewise, we have not discussed whether patterns of risk factors differ across gender. This is a considered decision: many of the featured studies concentrate predominantly or exclusively on males and so less is known about females. However, studies that do consider patterning across the sexes find few systematic differences (Thornberry et al, 2003; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Moffitt et al, 2001).

3.4 Conclusions: The explanatory scope of families and parenting
There are many limitations to the reviewed literature: it is predominantly US-focussed, affected by substantial variations in study design and variable measurement, and much less established in relation to the gang literature than it is in relation to general and serious delinquency. A number of substantive conclusions can be made, however. First, while gang membership and serious adolescent offending are not coterminous, there is substantial overlap in the risk factors for both, and a well-documented relationship between the two. Children who display multiple risk factors in multiple domains are at a substantially higher risk of developing persistent behavioural problems and for joining gangs (Thornberry, 1998; 2003). Put another way, there do not seem to be obvious risk-factors that uniquely predict gang membership, though, given that having existing gang members in the family (e.g., Cohen et al, 1994), as friends (Winfree et al, 1994), as schoolmates (e.g., Curry & Spergel, 1992) and in the community (Nirdorf, 1988) all present risk, it may make a certain amount of practical sense to view ‘risk for gang membership’ as ‘presenting with actual problem behaviour’ plus one or more of these factors. Klein & Maxson (2006: 150) would not support this view and advocate separately developed risk assessment and preventative interventions based on the strongest predictors of gang involvement, such as ‘characteristics of peer networks…externalising behaviours, positive attitudes toward delinquency, and parental supervision practices’ (2006: 148-149). Their view, (like the present author’s) is, however, based on a non-systematic assessment of a selected literature base and the question of the degree of overlap in prediction and assessment should be seen as an empirical one, with meta-analyses needed to resolve differences in position. A stronger view, with clear relevance is cited by Howell in a (1998) review of gang interventions:

‘Because separate causal pathways to gang participation versus non-gang serious and violent offending have not been identified, programs found to be
effective or promising for preventing and reducing serious and violent delinquency in general may hold promise in combating gang delinquency and violence’ (Howell, 1998, p. 302).

A second set of points relate to complexity: both delinquency and gang involvement result from the dynamic developmental competition of risk and protective influences across interacting domains. Conceptual (and, as yet, speculative) models like that put forward by Howell & Egley (2005) in fig. 1 are needed to capture this complexity. With regard to families, it is clear that, in addition to passing on genetically influenced risk and resilience to individual children (e.g., in relation to temperament), parenting practices are variable, multifaceted and strongly affected by neighbourhood and household context. Important factors in both contexts include: the presence of violence and drug-use; the availability of emotional and practical support; and levels of material sufficiency. Parenting practices, including disciplinary style and modelled attitudes and behaviour influence the developing child’s ability to function socially and their commitment to doing well at school. Most importantly, parental attachment seems to influence the initial attractiveness of anti-social peers, and competent structuring, monitoring and supervision practices reduces the opportunities to be influenced by them. While stronger and more consistently supported risk-factors exist in other domains at particular ages (for example delinquent peer effects in adolescence), parents as the major early-life influences on children, seem to be a reasonable focus for support with the aim of reducing both delinquency and gang involvement. At the same time, the complexity of development and interdependence of risk domains means that the likely effect of targeting aspects of functioning in just one (e.g., the family) domain are likely to be limited in their impact.

Figure 1: A developmental model of gang membership. Source: Howard & Egley (2005, p340).
4. Reducing the problem: Supporting parents of ‘at-risk’ & gang-involved youth

In common with the speculative ‘causal’ theories to which they give rise, knowledge of risk-factors for a given outcome is imperfect; and all risk-assessment tools misclassify a proportion of the assessed as false positives (deemed at risk, but are actually not) and false negatives (not deemed at risk, but actually are). It follows then, that even the most sophisticated interventions based on the reduction of known risk-factors will also be imperfect, that is, only partially successful. Over and above imperfect theoretical knowledge, interventions of course, succeed or fail for many other reasons to do with ‘patient’, ‘therapist’ and their interaction. These factors suggest caution against unrealistically high expectations of interventions, and we bear this in mind as we ask in this chapter ‘what types of intervention are likely to benefit parents of children at risk of, or already involved in, gangs?’. We begin by noting variations in the types of family intervention available. After noting the importance of evaluation research for demonstrating effectiveness, we then review the place of family interventions in the gang reduction literature. Because - echoing Howell’s quote in the preceding section - we are also concerned with the serious behavioural and offending problems of gang members, we selectively review the effectiveness literature in this general area.

4.1 Approaches to and variation in family intervention

Our review is in relation to discrete outcomes, however, it is worth noting that ‘parenting support’ of various kinds and with regard to a wide range of child and family outcomes, has become an extremely popular policy vehicle here in the UK and elsewhere (France & Utting, 2005). Excellent general reviews of the variation in provision (e.g., Clarke & Churchill, 2007) and effectiveness (Moran et al, 2004) are available. Here, we will confine ourselves to a few relevant remarks.

4.1.1 General approach

Most interventions, family or otherwise, can be located within a broad population health approach and are: ‘primary level’ (universal, delivered to entire populations regardless of risk); ‘secondary level’ (targeted at a defined ‘at risk’ sub-population) or ‘tertiary level’ (targeted at individuals with established problems). It is worth noting here, that most of the interventions reviewed below are either secondary or tertiary level, and thus ‘risk-focussed’ (Farrington, 2007). Primary level interventions can sometimes be difficult to justify on cost and efficiency grounds as only a proportion of the entire population will develop the outcome in question. One final point regarding this approach to classification is that, in practice, there may a blurring between secondary and tertiary boundaries as interventions for ‘at risk’ individuals are aimed at both tackling existing problems (e.g., childhood aggression) and at preventing future escalation of that behaviour (e.g., violent adolescent offending).

Many of the family interventions reviewed below are also classifiable as ‘developmental’ interventions under Tonry & Farrington’s (1995) 4-fold model of crime prevention. Developmental interventions aim to prevent crime in the individual by reducing early-life sources of risk in various domains. This is in contrast to community prevention (where change is effected by modifying local social conditions and institutions); situational prevention (‘designing out’ crime opportunities via better
security and surveillance); and *criminal justice* prevention (via deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation, restoration, etc). Again, discrete interventions may straddle several categories, for example, a post-1998 Crime & Disorder Act ‘Parenting Order’ is simultaneously a criminal justice and a developmental prevention measure.

### 4.1.2 Further dimensions of variation

Family interventions also differ along the following dimensions (see Clarke & Churchill, 2007, ch. 2):

- **Manner of working**, for example, simple provision of information to families, group-based classes or more targeted work with individual families
- **Target(s) of interventions**, for example, involving work with the index (targeted) child, parents, or whole family. ‘Targeting’ can also relate to the selection criteria for intervention.
- **Setting**. Interventions can be delivered in a range of settings including the home, community or clinical/institutional settings
- **Theoretical/therapeutic approach**. This is perhaps the most important consideration. Most of the effective interventions reviewed below may be classified as either behaviourally- or relationship-focussed. As outlined in the above section on family-level risk factors, many early child behavioural problems can be explained to an extent by social learning and attachment theory, that is, parents ineffectively praise and punish their children or have emotionally disrupted and disruptive relationships. Risk-focussed family interventions tend to focus on re-shaping the child’s behaviour through teaching parents more effective behaviour management and/or improving the quality of communication between parent and child. Relationship focussed components often involve work with the family unit as a whole whereas behaviourally-focussed components often work *indirectly* with the target child/young person by working *directly* with the parent(s). Several interventions include both approaches and we will discuss these in greater detail below.

There is potentially much more to write under each of the above headings and, indeed, many other dimensions of variation to consider (for example staffing, training, management, etc) but we have covered the most relevant points in sufficient depth. We now make a brief but important detour to consider how we distinguish between effective and ineffective interventions.

### 4.2 Effective interventions and their characteristics

A combination of advances in scientific review techniques (specifically systematic and meta-analytic reviews) and a recently expressed aim in the UK and elsewhere of implementing more ‘smart’ or ‘evidence-based’ policy has fed the burgeoning science of evaluation research and created a huge literature relating to the effectiveness of social programmes. This has a number of beneficial consequences. Principally, it emphasises the need for high quality evaluation designs to be built into interventions in order that effectiveness can be demonstrated. This is important, not only for judging success but for answering questions with theoretical and practical significance like:
• ‘what works?’ (successfully and cost-effectively reduced problem outcomes).
• ‘for whom?’ (characteristics of people who show/don’t show the greatest/least improvements)
• ‘under what conditions?’ (aspects of the service associated with success)

This is helpful for informing theory (hypotheses can be tested and falsified as part of the evaluation) but is also for planning future interventions so that, with reference to previous studies, they contain ‘features likely to succeed’ (Maguire, 2004). It is worth pausing briefly to consider some of these features in relation to parenting support (Moran et al, 2004) and offending behaviour programmes (Andrews & Bonta, 2006; Maguire, 2004). Despite differences in targets, outcomes and client-groups, some important similarities emerge (table 3).

Table 3. Comparison of ‘features of likely to succeed’ in offending behaviour and parenting support interventions (adapted from Maguire, 2004, 153-4 and Moran et al, 2004, 7-8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OFFENDING BEHAVIOUR PROGRAMMES</th>
<th>PARENTING SUPPORT PROGRAMMES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a clear, empirically defensible theory of crime that is translated into programme content, together with concrete, measurable outcomes.</td>
<td>a strong theory-base and clearly articulated model of mechanism of change; have measurable, concrete objectives as well as overarching aims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a robust assessment of risk-level, with associated levels of support based on that risk; medium to high risk individuals are prioritised.</td>
<td>targeted interventions (specific populations or individuals at risk) to tackle complex types of parenting difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>programmes that have breadth: work in varying ways (e.g., teaching, role-play, practical skills, group work, mentoring), across a range of risk-factors and settings.</td>
<td>interventions using more than one method of delivery (i.e., multi-component interventions); that work in parallel (not necessarily at the same time) with parents, families and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsivity: services that form affirming, rule-bound, collaborative therapeutic relationships, and incorporate cognitive &amp; behavioural methods</td>
<td>behavioural interventions focussing on parenting skill; ‘cognitive’ interventions for changing beliefs, attitudes and self-perceptions about parenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>integrity: clear (preferably manualised) and detailed descriptions of service components; and highly quality staff that deliver the service as intended and do not deviate (dilute) the intended intervention.</td>
<td>interventions that have manualised programmes where the core programme is carefully structured and controlled to maintain ‘programme integrity’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community base, where practicable (i.e., not with high risk or ‘dangerous’ offenders), interventions tend to be more effective in ‘natural’ community setting, including the family.</td>
<td>individual work, where problems are severe or entrenched or parents are not ready/able to work in a group, often including an element of home visiting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One implication of these similarities is that, despite the variation in interventions described in the preceding section, core features may predict success across client group and outcome. As we shall see, all the recommended family interventions below possess these broad features. One broader implication of the evaluation research literature from which they arise, is that we now have robust review tools that assist in the definition and selection of effective interventions. We will make use of these tools in the following sections as we select from the many studies in both the gang and delinquency reduction literature.

4.2 Parents & families in gang reduction programmes.

An important and early conclusion from a survey of the gang reduction literature is that family interventions are rare and tend not to be integral to often more comprehensive programmes. This being the case, there is merit in briefly discussing ‘typical’ approaches to gang reduction, before turning to ‘atypical’ approaches. It is important to note that, in contrast to the individual orientation of much of the risk-
factor literature, many gang reduction programmes aim to change not only individuals but also groups (the gangs themselves) and entire communities; and evaluation of outcomes is often at many levels.

4.2.1 Typical approaches to gang reduction
Howell (2000), in an exhaustive review of American gang reduction initiatives, distinguishes between a number of broad approaches, and we will briefly discuss four of them: prevention, intervention, suppression and comprehensive approaches. Prevention programmes generally refer to primary but more often secondary level interventions (although ‘at risk’ seems often to be operationalised as ‘living in an area where gangs are active’) and include detached youth work, provision of community facilities (e.g., after-school clubs) as an alternative to street ‘hanging’ and school-based programmes. One very well-cited example of the latter is the GREAT (Gang Resistance Education And Training) programme in which police officers deliver a 9-week course to middle school students, teaching sets of skills (e.g., ‘conflict resolution’, ‘meeting basic needs’, ‘responsibility’) that aim to promote resilience to gangs. Despite some initially positive results in the 11-site evaluation study regarding anti-gang and pro-police attitudes (Esbensen et al, 1997; 2000), longer-term assessments found no effects on gang membership or delinquency (Esbensen et al, 2004).

Intervention strategies generally equate to tertiary-level prevention and vary even more widely in their methods, including therapeutic work with incarcerated gang members, street-level inter-gang mediation and crisis intervention and, again, detached youth work. One famous example of the latter strategy features two contrasting projects devised by Malcolm Klein (1968, 1971). In the first, working with gangs as groups served to increase cohesiveness which was associated with both a growth of the gang and increased offending. In the second, working with individuals (via therapy and training) reduced cohesiveness and arrest rates. This positive effect decayed after the programme ceased.

Suppression efforts tend to be of a criminal justice nature and focus on ‘whole community’ gang crime reduction via police crackdowns, increased surveillance, and deterrence-based communication campaigns. One notorious example of this is ‘Operation Hammer’ in south Los Angeles (Klein, 1995a) where a large scale crackdown resulted in around 1400 arrests, mostly of non-gang members who were virtually all released without charge. A rather more sophisticated exercise in ‘problem oriented policing’ is the well-cited Boston Gun Project (‘Operation Ceasefire’ - Kennedy et al, 1996; Braga, 2001) where a detailed assessment of local needs resulted in an effective police-led multi-agency deterrence strategy. The approach was advocated for Manchester in the early 2000s although more recent writing suggests some drift in aims (Bullock & Tilley, 2002; 2008).

Finally, the modern US trend is to invest heavily in comprehensive programmes that combine prevention, intervention and suppression efforts. One example is the OJJDP\(^5\) Comprehensive Gang Model (or ‘Spergel model’) that attempts to engage entire communities via five ‘core strategies’: community mobilisation; provision of social opportunities; social intervention (mostly street work); gang suppression; and

\(^5\) Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (a sub-office of the US Department of Justice)
organisational development. While many authors (including Howell) hailed this approach as a major step forward, Klein & Maxson (2006) consider inadequate programme design and implementation to be responsible for equivocal early results in pilot programmes; and they class it as a ‘failed programme’.

4.2.2 Focus on families in gang reduction programmes
Frequent referral to families in the preceding section is conspicuous by its absence and prefigures findings in this section to a great extent. In order to identify effective family interventions that aim to reduce gang activity, a number of recent reviews of the gang reduction literature were consulted (Butler et al, 2004; Esbensen, 2000; Howell, 1998, 2000; Klein & Maxson, 2006, chapter 3) and we shall refer to consistencies across these and two relevant meta-analytic reviews of effectiveness (Welsh & Hoshi, 2002; Sherman et al, 1997). Three key sets of points can be made.

First, that despite numerous systematic efforts to reduce US gang problems since 1936 (Thrasher’s Chicago ‘Boy’s Club’) utilising very many methods and expending millions of US dollars, very few programmes have been evaluated, either at all, or in a way that permits one to draw strong conclusions regarding effectiveness. Only three studies reach the standards for inclusion in Welsh & Hoshi’s (2002) meta-analysis of gang prevention programmes and only nine further studies are included in their separate analysis of gang interventions (in practice, a mixture of intervention, suppression and comprehensive strategies).

The second major point is that, of those that are included in meta-analyses, none of the gang prevention and only three of the gang intervention studies refer to parents or families as programme components: Miller (1962); Klein (1968); and Gold & Matlick (1974). Miller’s (1962) ‘MidCity’ project in Boston prioritised detached youth work and community organisation but made available psychodynamic ‘chronic family problem’ counselling available to parents of gang members. ‘Family counselling’ (Klein, 1968) and ‘parental education’ (Gold & Matlick, 1974) were also peripheral components of more youth-directed projects. Versions of Spergel’s (1997) comprehensive model also allow for family interventions as one of multiple programme components.

The third and perhaps most salient point is that, of the four studies that permit analysis of effectiveness and include some form of family treatment component, two had no or very minor effects on gang offending (Miller 1962; Gold & Matlick, 1974), one had positive effects (Spergel, 1997), but was so comprehensive, it is almost impossible to attribute success to the family component, and one, famously, led to an increase in gang offending (Klein, 1968), though for reasons unrelated to parenting (see above). Almost identical conclusions to the three cited here can be found in Sherman and colleagues’ earlier (1997) meta-analysis.

There is little evidence from meta-analytic studies, therefore, that parenting support of any kind is an integral part of either gang reduction programmes per se or of effective gang reduction programmes. This view is reinforced by other more selective and narrative reviews cited at the beginning of this section and a final set of points can be made regarding effective gang prevention. The only regularly cited prevention programme with a family component that has achieved success in reducing future gang membership is Tremblay and colleagues’ (1996) Montreal Preventive Treatment
Program. In this programme for children showing disruptive behaviour at kindergarten, a combination of parent training (focusing on behaviour management) and child training (focusing on development of social skills and self-control) reduced behavioural problems in the short term and reduced delinquency, substance use and gang membership at age 15. It will be noted that this secondary intervention was aimed at children manifesting actual problem behaviour and was not designed as a gang reduction programme per se. It will also be noted that, unlike most delinquency prevention programmes, gang membership was included as an outcome.

This finding, combined with both the general lack of effectiveness of ‘typical’ gang reduction programmes and absence of family interventions, reinforces the view (echoing Howell’s earlier quote) that prevention and intervention efforts should focus on overt problem behaviour and not real or apparent gang status. We now turn to this more confident and fundamentally family-focussed literature.

4.3 Parents & families in delinquency reduction programmes.

4.3.1 Key issues in the selection of studies.

What follows is not intended to be an exhaustive review of all possible effective interventions, or even a systematic review of promising interventions. An attempt, in the context of a sprawling literature, is made to ‘cut to the chase’ by identifying a limited range of studies that fulfil important criteria:

- have a family or family-and-child focus
- focus on the reduction of existing behavioural problems or prevention of escalation of those problems
- work across multiple risk domains
- have been repeatedly shown to be effective in high quality evaluation research
- have been or are about to be piloted in the UK

We draw on a number of meta-analytic reviews of effectiveness (Farrington & Welsh, 2002, 2003; Sherman et al, 1997; Welsh & Farrington, 2006; Wolfenden et al, 2002), on the influential ‘Blueprints for Violence Programme’ at the University of Boulder at Colorado (Elliott, 1998) and on varied selective reviews, ranging in focus from general parenting support (Moran et al, 2004) to the prevention anti-social personality disorder (Utting et al, 2007).

4.3.2 Programmes of proven effectiveness. A total of five programmes are identified as being amongst the best and most consistently evidenced in the literature. They are:

1. Nurse Family Partnerships (Olds, 1986; 1998)
2. The Incredible Years (Webster-Stratton, 1984; 2001)
4. Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (Chamberlain, 1998; 2007)
5. Multisystemic Therapy (Henggeler et al, 1998)

We will discuss each programme in turn in relation to their content and effectiveness and with regard to the relevant age-bands and targeted risk domains. The latter two dimensions are represented in table 4 below.
Table 4. Five ‘model’ family interventions by age-range and risk domain tackled

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>RISK DOMAIN TACKLED</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
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<td>6-11</td>
<td>2, 3, 4</td>
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<td>12-14</td>
<td>5, 3, 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>5, 3, 4</td>
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Key: 1 = nurse family partnership; 2 = Incredible Years Systems; 3 = functional family therapy; 4 = multidimensional foster care; 5 = multisystemic therapy.

4.3.2.1 Nurse Family Partnerships

The Nurse Family Partnership (NFP) programme has been developed over the last twenty-five years by the American academic David Olds and colleagues (1986; 1998) and is, in essence, an intensive home visiting programme delivered to vulnerable first-time mothers and their children. The programme has three primary goals: to improve pregnancy outcomes; to improve child health and development and to improve parents’ economic self-sufficiency. NFP is delivered to selected families by a highly trained nursing professional who visits predominantly weekly-to fortnightly from early on in pregnancy until the end of the second year of the child’s life. Each visit is meticulously planned and recorded and lasts sixty to ninety minutes. After initial risk assessments, tailored interventions are devised that focus on changing health behaviour (e.g., smoking and drug use), parenting behaviour (promoting relationship warmth and regulation of the child’s behaviour) and on developing both informal (friends and family) and formal (service) support. Realistic and incremental goal-setting in relation to target behaviours is a strong feature of the programme. Nurses have low caseloads (typically 20-25) and are supervised and supported in small teams by a manager.

NFP has been rigorously evaluated to high standards in three American sites: Elmira (Olds et al, 1986; 1997; 2003); Memphis (Kitzman et al, 1997; 2000); and Denver (Olds et al, 2002; 2004b). The evaluations differ mainly in terms of sample characteristics (e.g., size, predominant ethnicity) and we will concentrate here on findings from the original Elmira study and it’s fifteen year follow-up. In this study, 400 predominantly White, socio-economically disadvantaged, teenage first-time mothers were randomly allocated to one of four treatment conditions: intensive home visits during pregnancy; intensive visits during pregnancy and up to 24 months postpartum; or control (either no home visits with developmental screening or this plus free transportation to pre- and postnatal check-ups). Families receiving the full service experienced a range of significant short, medium and long-term benefits compared to controls, including: reductions in prenatal poor diet and smoking; reductions in the incidence of child abuse and neglect; and improved maternal life chances (fewer unwanted pregnancies, better work record, less reliance on welfare) at fifteen-year follow up (Olds et al, 1986; 1997; 1998). Home-visited mothers also reported fewer arrests, convictions and substance abuse problems at the later follow-up. Some of the more dramatic findings are in relation to child behavioural outcomes aged fifteen: in addition to reductions in the prevalence of precocious smoking,
drinking and drug use, children of home-visited mothers exhibited 56% fewer arrests and 81% fewer convictions relative to controls (Olds et al, 2003). These well-cited results were achieved in optimum conditions in a very different service context to the UK. Both more recent evaluations in Memphis and Denver are showing positive results, however, and NFP is currently being piloted in 10 UK sites (including Manchester), with a further 20 pilots planned for the near future (DH, 2007; 2008). The UK is, naturally, one of the very few countries offering a statutory universal health visiting service, however, NFP (confusingly termed ‘Family Nurse Partnerships (FNP)’ in the UK) is being delivered as a secondary intervention to some of the most socially excluded families (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2006, 2007).

4.3.2.2 Incredible Years
The Incredible Years Series (IYS) is a set of comprehensive programmes developed over twenty-five years by Carol Webster-Stratton and colleagues (Webster-Stratton, 2001). The programmes aim to reduce aggression and conduct disorder problems and improve social competence in children aged 2-12. Services are delivered to groups of either children, parents or teachers, often in community or school settings and teach a variety of skills via ‘videotape’ modelling (footage of parent-child interactions illustrating different parenting styles) and associated group work. The ‘Basic’ programme is intended for parents of children aged 2-7 years; it is delivered by trained staff and composed of 12-14, two-and-a-half hour sessions with groups of 10-14 parents; work topics include effective behaviour management, play and learning; and problem solving. ‘Advance’ classes are available for parents with additional family risk factors (e.g., poor mental health, partner conflict). A related parent training programme is available for parents of older children and for teachers who learn behaviour management strategies for the classroom setting. Finally, direct training with referred children is available and focuses on developing pro-social skills (Webster-Stratton, 2001). Webster-Stratton & Hammond (1997) suggest that effectiveness is increased when parent and child training are combined in the index family. IYS has been implemented and evaluated to high standards in the US, UK, Norway and Canada (Webster-Stratton, 2001; Utting et al, 2007 for a review). In the UK, effectiveness studies in Oxford (Patterson et al, 2002), London (Scott et al, 2006) and several Welsh sites (Hutchings et al, 2006) support the general conclusion that the programmes produce significant gains in reducing child conduct problems and improving social competence. The programmes are also offered to a growing number of families in Manchester via its co-ordinated Parenting Strategy (Manchester City Council, 2006).

4.3.2.3 Functional Family Therapy

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6 NFP is aimed at vulnerable and poor teenage mothers, a description that may fit a proportion of young women involved in or associated with youth gangs and who are at an elevated risk of unplanned and teenage pregnancy (Thornberry et al, 2003, p.174). NFP may be particularly recommended, therefore, for first-time mothers who are ex-gang members or still retain gang affiliations. In order to be consistent with the previous assertion that intervention is more confidently recommended on the basis of actual behaviour as opposed to social (gang) status, a further necessary criterion may be that one or both parents have themselves been involved in gang-related offending. The long-term preventative potential for reducing problem behaviour in children also recommends the programme.
Functional Family Therapy (FFT) is a family systems programme developed over a number of decades by James Alexander and colleagues in Utah (Barton & Alexander, 1980; Alexander et al, 1998). The programme is suitable for the families of young people aged 11-18 who are already involved in both minor and serious offending and so straddles the distinction between secondary and tertiary intervention approaches. FFT aims to improve both structuring (supervision and effective discipline) and relational aspects of family functioning, with strong emphasis on reducing ‘defensive’ (hostile & critical) communication patterns and promoting ‘supportive communications’ (favouring active listening, turn-taking and empathy). The programme is of variable intensity (typically 8-12 hours but occasionally as long as 30 hours) and delivered over a 3-month period in home or clinic settings by trained practitioners engaging individual family units. Therapeutic content consists of moving the family through a number of distinct stages: a preparatory stage designed to promote engagement and motivation and convince the family that change is possible; assessment and behaviour change including communication training, parenting, problem solving and conflict management skills; and generalisation where newly reinforced skills are applied to a range of real-world situations.

Effectiveness research has generally been small-scale and US-focussed but has generally delivered marked positive effects with both minor and serious delinquents (Alexander & Parson, 1973; Barton et al, 1985; Gordon et al, 1995). In the former study, 99 families of relatively minor delinquents aged 13-16 were allocated to either FFT, alternative treatments or control; in addition to better family communication, re-offending rates amongst the FFT group were significantly lower (26% vs. 47-73% for other groups) at 18months. Additionally, and illustrating the power of the family systems approach, siblings of the FFT index juvenile had significantly fewer court contacts at follow-up than siblings in other conditions (20% vs. 40-63%; Klein et al, 1977). In other words, the gains with regard to communication and parental management of behaviour had generalised to other children. Utting and colleagues (2007, p. 78) describe the recent adaptation of FFT to a UK setting as a court-mandated disposal for the parents of young offenders (‘Parenting Wisely’: Gordon & Kacir, 1997; Gordon, 2000; Utting et al, 2007 for a review). 

4.3.2.4 Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC)
MTFC is best associated with Chamberlain & colleagues (1998; 2003) but grows out of the influential Oregon Social Learning Centre and the pioneering work of Gerald Patterson. Patterson (1982, 1997) has applied social learning theory to the development of behavioural parent management training (PMT) programmes that are the ‘method of choice’ for virtually all of the programmes reviewed in this section. The PMT approach, based on an analysis of parent-child interactions, suggests that child behaviour problems are often the product of coercive processes whereby disruptive behaviour is a learned (rewarded) strategy for evading parental control. PMT-based treatments attempt to break this cycle by teaching parents to set and effectively reinforce positive behaviour and ignore negative behaviour. MTFC is suitable for children and young people with overt behavioural and offending problems and is an effective alternative to residential treatment. Referred children are assigned to live with trained foster carers for 6-9 months who, via PMT methods, contingently re-shape disruptive behaviour and also provide very high levels of supervision in the home, school and community. Biological parents are also trained in the same methods.
so that the index child can eventually return home to the same positive environment. Finally, index children themselves receive direct therapeutic training.

The nature of this mixed secondary/tertiary intervention means that evaluations tend to be small scale, however, findings are consistently positive and significant reductions in criminal justice contacts have been observed for both chronic male and female delinquents (Chamberlain & Reid, 1998; Leve et al, 2005). Follow-up of the Chamberlain & Reid (1998) study of 79 males aged 12-16 randomly assigned to MTFC or group therapy, also showed that the MTFC group had significantly fewer associations with delinquent peers. MTFC is currently being piloted for adolescents in eighteen Local Authority sites in the UK with services for children being planned in a further six (DfES, 2008). Both implementation and evaluation are taking place in Manchester.

4.3.2.5 Multisystemic Therapy (MST)

MST is associated with the work of Scott Henggeler and colleagues at the Medical University of South Carolina (Henggeler et al, 1998). In many ways, it represents the most intensive and ambitious multi-modal, multi-setting intervention covered in this section but it is also one of the better supported and effective. MST is delivered to the families of serious delinquents aged 12-17 by a dedicated worker who is available twenty-four hours a day for advice and support and has direct therapeutic contact for around 60 hours over four months. Workers have low caseloads (5-6 at any one time) and small teams (3 practitioners plus a supervisor) work with around 50 families per year. The approach is truly systemic and sees the adolescent’s offending as being multiply determined by risk factors in all five risk domains reviewed in section 3. Initial assessments are made of these risks and tailored solutions created that focus predominantly on building both relational and structuring parenting skills (via PMT techniques) but that also help remove obstacles to their acquisition, for example, by treating parental mental health problems and by building informal support from family, friends and neighbours. Effective and collaborative parent-school relations are also built and individual therapy offered to the index adolescent.

MST has been evaluated to high standards in the US, Canada and Norway (see Utting et al, 2007 for a review) and is about to be piloted in 10 demonstration sites across the UK, including Trafford in Greater Manchester (Cabinet Office, 2008). With some dissent (Littell, 2005), the programme is widely acknowledged to be effective in: reducing offending, aggressive behaviour and arrest; reducing time in out-of-home placements (e.g., care setting); reducing delinquent peer associations; and improve parenting skills and family functioning (Curtis, Ronan & Borduin, 2004). The programme aims to bring lasting benefits by identifying and reducing risk factors in the ‘natural’ community setting and long-term reductions in offending have been identified over thirteen years after the original treatment (Schaeffer & Borduin, 2005).

4.4 Conclusions: Filling the evidence gap on gang membership reduction

The science of designing, delivering and evaluating risk-focussed prevention and intervention has developed enormously over the last three decades and we are now in a much better position to comment on ‘what works’ questions in relation to a given outcome. We have seen that, despite the acknowledged importance of family-level variables in presenting risk for gang-joining, family intervention components are
peripheral (at best) in ‘typical’ gang reduction programmes where suppression remains the modal response. For this reason, and because it may be more justifiable to offer intervention on the basis of behaviour than group affiliation, we have concentrated on identifying effective family interventions for reducing childhood behavioural problems and adolescent offending. The identified studies were selected as they represent five of the most consistently cited effective programmes in the literature. Despite variations in age-appropriateness, they share common characteristics, including:

- A strong theoretical rationale based in social learning theory and embedded within broader family-systems and social-ecological perspectives
- A stress on improving family communication (relational family variables) and behavioural management skills (structuring variable such as disciplining and monitoring)
- Tackling multiple risks by attempting to link families to broader sources of formal and informal support
- Delivery in home or community settings
- High levels of training from accredited bodies and close attention to programme integrity
- High quality evaluations that show reliable benefits over time and across treatment settings.
- Cost effectiveness: programmes save more money in terms of dealing with prevented problems than they cost to set up and run.

It will be noted that many of these characteristics correspond to the characteristics of effective offending behaviour programmes discussed earlier (Maguire, 2004).

A number of findings from the reviewed interventions bear repeating. First, as shown in FFT evaluation, the family systems approach may generalise its effects beyond the index child to other children in the family who may be at current or future risk of offending; these programmes may therefore be a particularly efficient method of prevention. Second, and in particular relation to MTFC and MST that are delivered in adolescence, programmes directly improve supervision practices and reduce delinquent associations; variables found be strongly predictive of both offending and gang membership.

Finally, we have concentrated on selecting and describing recommended programmes and with a focus on consistently positive findings. This does not mean that each of the projects will successfully engage all families and there are well-described difficulties, both in engaging parents of offending children and preventing them from dropping out when enrolled (Moran et al, 2004; Clarke & Churchill, 2007, 51-55 for a review). A more detailed review of MST that included drop-outs (i.e., based on ‘intention to treat’ as opposed to ‘programme completers’) found less promising results (Littell, 2005). Kane (2007, cited in Clarke & Churchill, ibid, 55-56) also describes a number of common issues and parental concerns that need to be overcome in interventions for children with behavioural problems. These include: a sense of lost control, guilt and stigmatisation at having to accept help which is tantamount to admitting parenting failure; lack of partner support was also an important issues and fathers are less likely to attend such classes (Ghate & Ramella, 2002). While family support was generally
very successful at challenging early fears, it is clear that a great deal of sensitive preparatory work may be necessary to even begin engaging with some families.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 General summary

We have seen that, despite the disproportionate focus on US gang discourse, and formidable problems of varying definitions, data source and study methods, it is both possible and meaningful to speak of youth gangs across the world, Europe, the UK and in Manchester. The varying pictures of gang involved youth that emerge guard against easy stereotypes, however, it is clear that being a gang member significantly amplifies the risk of various adverse outcomes, including serious and violent offending. We have noted, however, that gang membership and serious adolescent offending are not synonymous and, given the haziness of defining membership (not least by gang members themselves), care should be taken when applying unnecessary and potentially stigmatic labels to non- or minor-offending youth suspected of gang affiliation. Equally, interventions justified on the grounds of suspected or actual gang involvement alone are problematic and it may be much more defensible to focus on the overt problem behaviour (Bullock & Tilley, 2008). This approach also avoids a de-prioritisation of offending committed by non-gang members in gang-affected communities.

This distinction between gang member status and offending behaviour is sustained in our exploration of both the risk factor and intervention literature. A great deal more is known about patterns of risk associated with the development of behavioural problems than is known about risks for gang entry, but there is little evidence to suggest different or unique risks for the latter ‘outcome’. A functional approach may be to treat ‘risk of gang membership’ as ‘actual problem behaviour in the index child/adolescent’ but where having gang members amongst close family and friends is seen to pose additional risk and to provide a rationale for prioritising support. One important exception to this focus on the child’s behaviour may be in infancy, where high quality services like the Nurse Family Partnership may be offered on the basis the behaviour of vulnerable parents, including those who have a history of gang-related offending.

Gang involvement, like chronic and serious offending, seems to be predicted by risk-factors in multiple domains that interact over the whole of the person’s young life. Families, on the one hand, seem a sensible focus for intervention efforts as they compose one major domain or risk and resilience and are also tightly linked to other risk domains. Families with higher levels of material and emotional support more often offer an emotionally warm and organised home life that, in conjunction with educational and extracurricular commitment, strongly reduces the value of and (crucially) opportunity to engage in ‘street socialisation’ with gang members. Effective, non-violent parent management practices are also important for stating and enforcing house rules and for preventing the early problem behaviour that is in itself a risk for gang membership. Selected secondary and tertiary-level family systems interventions may effectively nurture these skills where they are lacking. On the other hand, knowledge of the ‘multiple marginality’ of communities in which gangs arise
and the broader macro-social forces that produce and sustain that marginality suggest that focusing on one risk domain in isolation is likely to be inadequate in itself. We should resist ‘over-responsibilising’ parents or giving the impression that complex social problems can be rectified by ‘fixing’ individuals (Vigil, 2007).

If we want to reduce gang activity in communities, it is likely that a locally-tailored comprehensive community model is necessary but it is suggested that a key preventative and intervention component of this approach should be family systems therapies aimed at the reduction of overt problem behaviour. Community-based age-appropriate approaches are recommended because they not only reduce offending but do so by bolstering family functioning (disciplining, supervision) and reducing delinquent peer activity; the most important risk factors for both adolescent offending and gang membership in the literature.

5.2 Recommendations

1. Policy makers, service providers, and law enforcement should pay close attention to the problems of definition and not equate real or apparent gang membership with serious offending; or conflate it with the offending of non-gang peer groups.

2. Care should be taken when recommending intervention on the grounds of an as-yet poorly defined notion of ‘risk for gang membership’. As the risk-factor literature does not distinguish clearly between pathways for gang involvement and for serious adolescent offending, a functional approach to understanding ‘risk of gang membership’ may be to treat it as ‘actual problem behaviour in the index child/adolescent’ but where having gang members amongst close family and friends is seen to pose additional risk and to provide a rationale for prioritising support.

3. Multiply marginalised young parents, including those with a recent history of gang-related offending, may benefit from intensive early support; Nurse Family Partnerships are recommended.

4. Having current or ex-gang members amongst close family and friends offers a strong additional rationale for intervening with the families of children who are presenting with overt behavioural problems; Incredible Years is recommended for the families of younger children, with Functional Family Therapy or MTFC as an option for more focussed support.

5. Being in a gang offers a strong additional rationale for intervening with the families of adolescents who are presenting with overt offending problems; Multisystemic Therapy, by virtue of its comprehensive nature and evidence base, is particularly recommended, with MTFC an option.

6. Evaluations of family interventions aimed at the behaviour of children should include gang membership (defined by Eurogang method) as an outcome in addition to offending.

7. In the context of multiple marginality, new or intensive family interventions are likely to need extensive preparatory work that tackles misconceptions of services,
denial of problems, and fear of blame and stigmatisation (Vigil, 2007; Kane, 2007). Equally hard work must be put into avoiding programme drop-out.

8. Manchester, via it’s various multi-agency fora (Manchester Parenting Board, Manchester Multi-agency Gang Strategy, Manchester Crime Reduction Partnership) is in a strong position to implement a comprehensive gang-reduction strategy that includes the family systems interventions. A focussed, co-ordinated and evidence-based approach is highly recommended.

9. The recommended interventions may be necessary but are certainly not sufficient to eradicate the problems of gangs and serious youth offending. Care should be taken to avoid placing undue responsibility or expectation on vulnerable families. Additionally, any broader ‘gang-reduction’ strategy needs to be linked to a more fundamental social-exclusion reduction strategy.
References


