“Hunting Gruffalo with a blunderbuss: On the ethics of constructing and responding to English youth gangs”

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In this chapter, I outline a critique of recent English youth gang policy, focusing on how the issue has been formulated and also on the ethical role of the criminologist as evaluator and policy commentator. The discussion highlights methodological and evidential gaps at the heart of policy and argues for the more active, engaged role of the criminologist.

This chapter’s title derives, in part, from a pair of short policy essays (Shute, Medina and Aldridge 2012; Shute and Medina 2014) written as a critical response to a major piece of English & Welsh youth crime policy entitled Ending Gang and Youth Violence: A Cross-Government Report (HM Government 2011). Published in the political aftermath of serious urban rioting in major English cities, the report set out a youth-focused violence reduction strategy combining better co-ordination of existing policy levers with a small number of new proposals focused on suppression. Much of the initial report was problematic and, among other things, we criticised its partial and misleading construction of the gang ‘problem’, together with a complex and confusing mesh of poorly-described initiatives that did not seem amenable to evaluation. It seemed that a policy ‘blunderbuss’ – an indiscriminate, scattergun set of proposals – was being aimed at an imagined and convenient folk devil (the ‘gang member’) summoned into existence in a process analogous to that described in the feted children’s story The Gruffalo (Donaldson 1999). In the context of the time, this seemed particularly problematic given that rapid analysis of the riots (Guardian/LSE 2011) explicitly dismissed youth gangs as a causal factor and revealed an unusually wide age range of participants. We continue to feel that the shortcomings of the 2011 report and subsequent annual reports (HM Government 2012; 2013, 2015) say something important about the nature and limitations of late modern policy making in an era of financial austerity.

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1 At least one academic account has aimed to highlight the relevance of gangs during the riots, however, others have dismissed this argument as being assumed rather than demonstrated (Lea, 2013).
In this chapter, I rehearse and amplify a number of these arguments, choosing to stress their normative-ethical dimension. Reflecting on the relationship between academic research and policy construction is especially important, and I advance a normative position of ‘duty to expose and reduce harm’ that I argue should motivate criminological policy engagement despite the numerous obstacles that exist to ‘research utilisation’. I then apply this logic to *Ending Gang and Youth Violence* (hereafter, *EGYV*) as a case study that illustrates the potential harm consequent on rapid, partial, poorly described and unevaluated policy, arguing that this is as likely to obscure effective practice as it is to promote ineffectiveness and counter-productivity. I also suggest that the broader UK political context – at the time of writing, an unstable Coalition government making major budgetary cuts with uneven impact across populations – makes this form of policy-making increasingly likely, and introduces into it core characteristics (complexity, misdirection, invisibility) that render the role of the engaged criminologist more important than ever. To the extent that many Western governments find themselves in a similar financial-policy predicament at the time of writing, I hope to draw more general lessons regarding criminal justice policy in political context from what may at first seem a parochial and time-limited example.

**Policy, research and the ‘public’ role of the criminologist: towards a normative emphasis on harm reduction.**

Since Burawoy’s (2005) address to the American Sociological Association on the nature of and need for a ‘public sociology’, there has been a healthy discussion about the proper role of the criminologist in taking their methods and findings beyond the academy in ways that inform policy, practice and more general public discourse on crime. There is a rewarding literature in this area (see, for example, Chancer & McLaughlin 2007; Loader & Sparks 2011; Uggen & Inderbitzen 2010) that I will not review here but selectively allude to in relation to the process of policy making. I tend to agree with Tonry (2010) that ‘public’ and ‘policy’ criminology is something academics have always tried to do, albeit not always very well. But I go further by stating that criminologists have an essential and positive duty to engage critically with law and order policy for the following reasons:

First, crime presupposes intentional and socially-mediated harm, not only from the perspectives of the legislator and the enforcers of the criminal law, but also, perhaps, for many people much of the time in relation to a ‘core’ set of personal and property offences (van Kesteren et al 2013). Naturally, criminal prohibition is not co-terminous with
harm more broadly/thoughtfully conceived (Hillyard et al 2004; Pemberton 2007 on definitions) and it is the nature of the harm (physical, psychological, economic, cultural), the conditions of its imposition (intention or indifference), its relevant source (cultural, structural, organisational, individual) and target (victim, offender, bystander) that animates the rich, dynamic and contested field of criminological theory and practice; with one’s precise location within that field constituting to a great extent, the professional self-identify of the criminologist. What I want to emphasise here – echoing Uggen and Inderbitzen (2010; 726-727) – is that what attracts students to the discipline and keeps academics engaged in their subject matter is this principal Durkheimian interest in harm and its explication, and the fact that the interaction of one’s political convictions with methodological and theoretical preferences determines precisely how this is viewed, does not detract from this essential normative fact. Many of us do what we do, in other words, because we recognise harm and are committed to seeking politically supportable strategies for reducing it.

Second, criminologists are essentially interested not only in harm but in its reduction, that is, that something actively be done to recognise and limit harm. Even when that ‘something’ appears to be the imposition of further harms – for example criminal justice penalties applied to the offender – proponents tend to do so for future-oriented reasons of utility, requalification, or restoration, all of which are thought to be ways of reducing harm. Even purely retributive rationales for punishment can be argued in their essential ‘rightness’ to leave non-offending bystanders ‘feeling better’ that societal harm has not been tolerated. Again, one’s conception of the nature of harm is fundamental but it can be argued that much of the ‘core business’ of criminology, whether it is recognised as ‘public’ or not, is concerned with exposing hidden harms (for example, domestic violence, corporate and state crime), defining down or reframing supposed harms (for example, the decriminalisation and better regulation of drugs), arguing the best strategy for harm reduction (developmental, situational, criminal justice), or the proper focus and scope of intervention (from systemic macro-economic reform to the micro-economic decision making of individuals). While globalisation has necessitated a growing ‘transnational’ sensibility and a recognition of the role of a variety of social actors in governance (Shearing and Wood, 2003), that most criminologists still look to the nation state as the prime co-ordinating or monopolising executive agent to formulate, fund and enact harm reduction strategies. Even those interested in ‘state crime’, seldom propose anarchy or the absence of the state, merely that it does not abuse
its power and is held accountable for any abuses. In other words, then, if we do what we do to expose, explicate and reduce harm, we also look to government as a prime means of achieving the latter.

Third and finally, it follows from the above that criminologists should take an essential interest in examples of government policy – the use of public money to address ideologically inflected issues of socio-political interest – that directly and indirectly aim to reduce the harms associated with crime (Loader and Walker, 2007). Whether they are formally contracted to evaluate that policy or not, it seems to behove the criminologist to apply their training to comment on the overall premise and rationale of the programme, its theory of change, likelihood of success in its own and in other terms, its practical implementation and summary change claims. Even if one, as a critical criminologist, does not support the government of the day or elements of the overall political order it represents, the normative focus of the discipline should still ensure an essential duty to engage with policy, if only to point out a fundamental misguidedness. This normative stance can be taken one step further if one concedes that not to do so – to fail to engage in the assessment of harm reduction – risks a form of complicity in harm promotion. This can happen if a policy contains elements that are known to be counterproductive (for example, the various costs of increased use of prison, of stop-and-search, or of drug sanctions, outweighing the benefits), but also from lack of transparency and accountability, for example, where unevidenced claims of success are made due to lack of good evaluation data. Poor or no evaluation can be harmful in that it risks rejecting successful but obscured harm reduction as well as accepting the ineffective and the counterproductive. This is also harmful in that it is a culpable waste of public funds; the taxpayer ideally expects some form of palpable ‘return’ for their salary sacrifice and expects that governments will not use this to make a situation actively worse.

In short, I agree again with Uggen and Inderbitzen (2010; 743) that criminologists should be “acting to challenge false statements, question shoddy evidence, and debunk harmful myths and scare tactics” but also constructively to engage in taking their skills and knowledge beyond the academy and to positively shape policy and public discourse in the direction of harm reduction. Many, or even most of the criminological community would say that this is precisely what they do most of their time, whether it be in the classroom, or in their funded research and its dissemination. What I have tried to stress in this section, however, is the normative dimension of this activity: that
we do what we do to expose and explicate and reduce harm; that we look to government policy as a prime means of achieving harm reduction; and we therefore have a responsibility – a duty – to critically engage with that policy in order to assess its worth and to avoid complicity in harm promotion.

The contours of UK youth gang research and policy 1997-2011

I now turn to the application of the above principles to an analysis of a specific piece of criminal justice policy: Ending Gang and Youth Violence. I attempt this most directly in the next section, however, it is first necessary to contextualise EGYV in light of recent formative developments in politics, policy and scholarship. This is important, not only because it is precisely this detail that is excluded from the main report, but also because it makes clear just how ‘new’ recognition of youth gangs is in the English and Welsh context, and therefore how remarkable it is that it should become an important trope in contemporary crime and justice policy.

The first author (Shute 2013) has previously characterised the short history of constructing and responding to youth gangs in the UK in terms of C. Ronald Huff’s (1990) stage model of denial, over-reaction and mis-identification. Here I reframe elements of that analysis to fit with our overall concern with harm, and do so in a time-frame that begins in the late 1990s with the first British official usage of the term ‘gang’, and ends with the publication of EGYV.

Exposing and explicating the harm of youth gangs

Youth gangs been studied in the US for the best part of a century (Thrasher 1927), and while some academics (for example, Davies 1998) have argued that the phenomenon has, in fact, a venerable history in Britain, a sociological preference for sub-cultural explanations of youth group formations successfully impeded recognition of the applicability of an extensive American literature until the turn of the twenty-first century (see, e.g. Campbell & Muncer 1989). Perhaps conscious of a new police-led willingness to acknowledge gangs (see below), the picture began to change when, independently, academics in Wales and Scotland (Bennett & Holloway 2004; Smith & Bradshaw 2005) began to apply self-report survey methods to establish the prevalence of gang membership using

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2 I use the term ‘UK’ here in order to incorporate relevant findings from academic and policy analysis in Scotland. The nature of devolved governance, however, means that EGYV applies only to policy and practice in England and Wales, which is our prime focus.
varied samples and definitions. A scientific impetus here was to establish common definitions with American survey research in order to aid cross-national comparisons. This direction of development was also apparent in the establishment and influence of the US/European ‘Eur gang’ international research network (see Klein 2001) whose central concern with developing common methodologies led sympathetic researchers in Manchester to test them in a major government-backed survey (Sharp et al. 2006) and a research council funded ethnographic study (Aldridge et al. 2008). At the same time, researchers at the University of Bedfordshire, conducted a detailed mixed-methods study with a strong single-community focus (Waltham Forest, London; Pitts 2008) and critical work on definitions and nomenclature was being conducted (see Hallsworth & Young 2004) that usefully distinguished between youth gangs, organised criminal gangs and non-delinquent peer groups.

While much could be said about this lively and productive literature, I focus here on two key points of material relevance for our argument as it relates to EGYV. First, all empirical studies confirmed that gangs can be said to exist in the UK, and validated the basic American (now international) literature in that time in the gang is associated with a substantially increased risk of harm relative to time out of the gang and association with other youth group formations. As an example, Sharp and colleagues (2006) employed a modified ‘Eurogang’ definition3 in a representative English survey of around four thousand 10- to 19-year-olds and found: an overall prevalence of 6%; roughly equal participation of females, who tend to leave the gang earlier; variable age composition, with a peak age of involvement of 14–15; variable group size, high turnover rates and loose structure; variable ethnic composition reflecting broader neighbourhood demographics; and broader family and community conditions of multiple social exclusion. Nearly two thirds (63%) of the sample had committed an index criminal offence over the preceding year as opposed to 26% of non-gang youth; and gang members were two to four times more likely to be categorised as serious or frequent offenders, to have carried a knife or a gun, to have taken illegal drugs, and committed offences under the influence of alcohol. Youth gang members in England are also more likely to experience physical and gendered sexual violence (e.g., Pitts 2008).

3 ‘a durable street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity’. This definition has been found to have cross-national validity (see e.g. Decker and Weerman, 2005)
The second point to stress is that there exists considerable and ongoing disagreement among British (and international) gang researchers, for example, regarding definitions, methods and emphases of study, the importance of territory and group structural features, the centrality of violence to identity and reputation, and the processes and meaning of gang entry and exit (see e.g., Pitts 2012). An example might be to contrast the work of Aldridge and colleagues (2008) in an anonymised northern English urban setting – ‘Research City’ - with Pitts (2008) work in Waltham Forest, a Metropolitan Borough of London. While similarities probably outweigh differences, Aldridge and colleagues found that becoming involved in a gang entailed a subtle qualitative shift in existing peer and family relations, and that the groups had loose structure, limited vertical integration and a generally short active period; Pitts, by contrast stresses the ‘grooming’ of ‘reluctant’ socially marginalised youth who are recruited into a highly organised, differentiated and territorialised system linked to ‘glocal’ drug markets.

Policy and practice attempts to acknowledge and reduce harm

If, before the index period under consideration, few UK police forces were willing to admit to the existence of ‘US-style’ gangs (see Sanders 1994, cited in Bennett & Holloway 2004), the operational picture changed very quickly in the late 1990s. Greater Manchester Police led the way, with Stelfox (1998) reporting the problem of firearms being used by ‘gangs’ (undefined) in 16 UK police force areas; and Shropshire & McFarquar (2002) briefing the same force about the potential of multi-agency gang strategies to tackle escalating gun crime in the city. It is difficult to locate precisely how and why the police’s ontological shift of acceptance of the existence of gangs occurred, but it seems the construction focussed on very serious drug-related crime committed by older youths and young adults in primarily “Black” communities. Absent data, one can only speculate, but an important reason in the context of escalating firearm incidents may have been the increased relevance, perceived importance and success of ‘Operation Ceasefire’ (also known as the Boston Gun Project: Braga et al 2001), an American police co-ordinated multi-agency deterrence and suppression strategy aimed at reducing gang-related gun crime. While high-level youth crime policy was more concerned at this time with low-level anti-social behaviour (the Antisocial Behaviour Order or ‘ASBO’), police forces benefitting from greater public spending instigated five ‘Ceasefire-like’ gun and gang

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4 that is, a novel and unprecedented acknowledgement that gangs ‘exist’ as a concept and empirical entity that are thereby amenable to policy action
suppression operations in London, Manchester and other UK cities between 1999 and 2004 (HC Hansard, 15 November 2004). By the late 2000s, political priorities had shifted in light of high profile media treatment of a series of urban youth stabbings and shootings, and a racialised, conflated discourse of gangs, guns and knife crime was being endorsed at the highest level in speeches by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair (Wintour 2007). In the last three years of the Labour administration under Gordon Brown, a seemingly unstoppable law enforcement-led multiagency approach to suppression was strengthened in gang-specific Home Office initiatives (the Tackling Gangs Action Plan) and key policy documents (Tackling Gangs: A Practical Guide for Local Authorities, CRDPs and other Local Partners, Home Office 2008; Saving Lives, Reducing Harm, Protecting the Public, An Action Plan for Tackling Violence, HM Government 2008).

Academic and related commentary on the official harm reduction policy

What will be clear from the above is that during this period, British academic gang research and operational police work often seemed to be describing very different phenomena. There was perhaps some limited common agreement as to the species of harms done to and by ‘gangs’ and ‘gang members’, but survey work in particular suggested youth, low prevalence, high turnover, and elevated but often relatively petty offending, in contrast to police constructions which focussed on ‘heavy-end’ drugs and firearms offences committed by older Black and Mixed-Race figures involved in organised crime. This split in understanding also seemed to encourage a split in academic and related commentary. On the one hand, some academics shifted focus from the harm committed by gangs to the harms attendant on constructing and policing gangs. For example, Hallsworth & Young (2008) criticised a generally partial, inexact, media- and ideologically-driven set of operational working definitions; Ralphs et al (2009) pointed to the stigmatic and false labels applied to those identified by police ‘intelligence’ as gang-affiliated; and Bullock and Tilley (2008) found concrete evidence of both problems in a south Manchester explicitly ‘Ceasefire’ inspired policing initiative.

On the other hand, the greater compatibility of Pitt’s Waltham Forest gang work with police understanding of serious and organised drug and weapon-enabled offending, seemed to lead that construction to ‘win out’ in influencing policy, and it began to be featured heavily in the campaigning policy work of the centre-right think tank – the Centre for Social Justice - set up by the former leader of the Conservative Party Iain Duncan Smith. It’s 2009
report *Dying to Belong: An In-Depth Review of Street Gangs in Britain* supported a mixed portfolio of enforcement, intervention and prevention, and was associated further work on family-focussed initiatives (Allen & Duncan Smith 2008). Pearce and Pitts (2011) also conducted work at this time on female sexual victimisation in gangs for the Office of the Children’s Commissioner.

In sum then, the period 1997-2011 was an extraordinary period of activity where, in effect, gangs were given an absolute ontological status previously denied in the UK, and from this standing start, became the object of enquiry, rhetoric and action to finally appear at the forefront of high profile policy and practice on youth violence. It is fair to say that all who accepted the existence of gangs in this period also accepted that they were deserving of attention because, as both a dependent and independent variable, they are associated with a diverse range of harms. It is equally fair to say that the sometimes fundamental disagreements of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners as to the nature and source of those harms produced a contested and ideologically-charged field. Academic evidence was clearly being used by police to apprehend and reduce harm in law and order terms; however, further evidence was also accumulating of the dangers of doing so.

*Ending Gang and Youth Violence 2011 to 2015: A case study and critique.*

I now turn to the policy documents themselves as a case study of how harm is constructed, argued and evidenced in a particular political context. In the first section, I summarise something of the nature and content of the original (2011) policy report *Ending Gang and Youth Violence (EGYV)*, and amplify our initial reactions to it (Shute et al 2012). I then analyse the truth claims made in subsequent (2012, 2013a&b, 2015) progress documents. Finally, I add a coda in terms of observations regarding 2014-15 parliamentary review of the policy via the Home Office Affairs Select Committee, to which I and others contributed evidence. Our overall argument is that the policy strikes an ambivalent tone that is strongly reminiscent of David Garland’s (1996, 2000) ‘adaptations’ to the understood limits of the sovereign state, but that the nature of the weak and austerity-compromised Coalition government that created it also meant little new money and lent a somewhat desperate sense of ‘restate and recycle’ activity to the project. I claim that while the policy was not entirely un-evidenced in conception, it was extremely partial in what it took to be

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5 see footnote 4
relevant evidence, and, most culpably, did not concern itself with generating action that was capable of being adequately described or evaluated. Robust new evidence cannot, therefore, be produced. I contend that EGYV, in sum, exemplified only unreasoned activity over achievement, and actively risked a range of quite profound harms that may be felt well beyond the Coalition’s time in office. In so doing, I attempt to bring to bear all the observations on evidence and ethical duty to prevent harm that I have rehearsed above.


EGYV was published on November 1st 2011. Two points might be made for the non-British reader by way of context. First, the report was the first major piece of youth crime policy announced by the Coalition government – a combination of the centre-right Conservative Party and centrist Liberal Democrat Party – that emerged from the first hung (no overall majority) parliament in post-war Britain. After over a decade of economic deregulation and credit-driven growth under Tony Blair’s Labour party, the UK suffered a major recession and increase in sovereign debt as a result of the 2008 global ‘credit crash’. The Coalition government was more inclined to austerity than its predecessor and as result of the May 2010 election, the new Coalition’s agreed agenda focussed strongly on punitive public spending cuts in order to quickly reduce national debt.

A second contextual point relates to events immediately prior to the publication of EGYV. In the wake of a mishandled community protest at the police shooting to death of a young Black man, Mark Duggan, rioting began in the north London borough of Tottenham on the evening of August 6th 2011, spread to a number of other boroughs and English cities, ending in Greater Manchester on August 9th. Analysis indicated over 4000 arrests and 3000 court appearances; an argued role in 5 deaths; and an estimated £1 billion cross-sector ‘bill’ in insurance, compensation, criminal justice and lost revenue costs (Riots Communities and Victim Panel 2011). Quickly-produced criminal justice (Ministry of Justice 2011; 2012) and research data (Morell et al 2011; Guardian/LSE 2011; Lightowlers & Shute 2012; Lightowlers and Quirk 2015) indicated, inter alia, strong crime-deprivation links at both the area and individual level, a high prevalence of prior adverse criminal justice experiences (including proactive ‘stop and search’ policing), and strong evidence of punitive sentencing.
The report itself – a co-product of the Home Office and Department for Work and Pensions - was framed clearly in terms of a response to the riots, which were referred to by the departmental heads in the Ministerial Foreword (EGYV pages 3-4). In the two months between the riots and publication, the government convened three events consisting of representatives of Local Authorities, voluntary sector organisations working with gangs, and police. It also consulted with the Centre for Social Justice on the outcome of a similar event, held a ‘young persons’ roundtable’, and convened an ‘International Forum of Experts on Gangs’ to inform its deliberations. The policy product was an intended programme of activity that combined targeted co-ordination of existing measures across government with new gang-focussed measures: “We need to combine action to tackle the causes of gang and youth violence with tough enforcement to crack down on those that commit crime” (May pp3-4); “…intensive police action is needed to stop the violence and bring perpetrators to justice, but we must match this robust enforcement response with a robust offer of support to exit gang life, and an equally intensive prevention strategy” (Duncan-Smith p4). Five areas of activity were stressed (Executive Summary, pp 7-9). First, “Providing Support to local areas to tackle their youth violence problem”, involving the establishment of an EGYV Team and network of advisers to provide practical advice to gang affected communities; £10 million to improve the targeting of services in 30 such areas; and £1.2 million to improve services for young victims of sexual violence. Second, the report emphasised the need for better gang and violence Prevention via support for an existing early childhood intervention for socially deprived teenage mothers (Family Nurse Partnerships) and new advisory materials for parents and schools. Third, Pathways Out for established gang members were to be offered via emphasis on intensive tertiary intervention (Multisystemic Therapy), education and rehousing programmes, and diversion into support at the point of arrest or injury (hospital accident and emergency). Fourth, greater Punishment and Enforcement was intended via extended gang-injunctions, new mandatory sentences for knife-related and repeat serious violence, consultations on police curfew powers and new firearms offences, and a restated commitment to deport gang members who were not UK citizens. Finally, an emphasis was placed on Partnership Working, including guidelines on inter-agency data sharing and the co-location of relevant public services.

6 Home Secretary Teresa May: ‘One thing the riots in August did was to bring home to the entire country just how serious a problem gang and youth violence has now become’; Secretary of State for Work & Pensions Iain Duncan Smith: ‘In the immediate aftermath of August’s disorder the Prime Minister rightly called for a report into Britain’s street gangs’.
On the face of it, these measures seemed to offer a rapidly-formulated yet consultative and rational set of actions representing a tour de force of ‘evidence-based’, ‘joined-up’ government. We (my responding co-authors and I) did not and do not doubt the sense, goodwill or ability of many of those involved, and agree that many individual points and policies appear to be prima facie valid and reasonable. We also want to stress that we do not doubt the existence of youth gangs as we understand them nor of the existence and effects of serious youth violence on individuals and communities. In our early policy commentary (Shute et al 2012) what we regarded as objectionable was the studied manipulation of a real sense of crisis emanating from the riots to focus on a largely unrelated and diffuse set of policy scapegoats constructed around an intensely selective and partial view of ‘the evidence’. If the construction of the problem was problematic, so was a planned response that was so complex that it defied description, could not lend itself to a clear theory of change that linked inputs to outputs, and contained no clear plans for evaluation. We felt that the plans had real potential to be wasteful and even counterproductive and therefore took a critically normative stance in the spirit of harm reduction. I will now discuss these points in detail.

Two major sets of flaws can be described in the construction of the problem: a fallacious sense of crisis; and the selective use of evidence. Regarding the first of these, crisis is apparent in the language used in the Ministerial Foreword, in the clear linkage to the objectively ruinous costs of rioting, and in the interesting narrative use of harrowing fictional ‘life-stories’ of ideal-typical gang members (‘Boy X’; ‘Girl Y’) which personalise the abstract, and mix pathos with a sense of unfolding but preventable societal cost. This sense of crisis was no doubt felt by many observers in the wake of the riots, but to what extent could it be substantiated as a problem of youth violence in general or gang violence in particular? A Home Office Statistical Bulletin released one month before the riots (Chaplin et al 2011), revealed that nationally, police recorded incidents of violence had fallen by six percent relative to the previous year, after falls of between four and eight per cent for each of the preceding four years. Firearms offences were down by 13% on the preceding year and 37% down on 2005/6; and knife offences down ten per cent relative to the preceding two years. The same publication revealed violent crime as recorded by the British Crime Survey to be up six per cent relative to 2009/10 against an overall fall of 47% since its peak in 1995. Youth Justice statistics for the same period (Ministry of Justice 2012) revealed an overall drop of 33% in proven offences involving violence against the person between 2007/8 and 2010/11. Naturally, these are national trends that mask local
variation, but it is striking given the title of the report that none of the above statistics were cited and none at the local level. Regarding the August 2011 riots (Guardian/LSE 2011, pp21-23), swiftly organised qualitative interviewing revealed youth gang hostilities to be absent or explicitly dismissed in 270 participant accounts, and early Home Office analysis of the backgrounds of arrestees revealed that only 26% were aged 10-17 years, slightly less than the 28% found to be 25 years or older (Home Office 2011). The basic point is made: that the riots, disturbing and damaging as they were, were in no credible straightforward sense ‘gang’ or ‘youth’ phenomena; and that isolated high-profile and tragic cases of death aside, they occurred against a backdrop of long-term decreases in violence, and youth violence.

Regarding the selective use of evidence in EGYV, a number of points can be made. First, the same Home Office document just described noted (pp18-19 and table A15, p34) that 13% of riot arrestees could be described as ‘gang-affiliated’ by police definition only to admit in a compensation sentence and footnote that there existed no standard operational definition of ‘gang’ or ‘gang-affiliated’, meaning “estimates will not be directly comparable between forces and should be treated as indicative”. This is the first mention of the broader and fundamental ontological problem we made in our contextual section above. EGYV contains a definition of ‘gang’ inspired by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions own think-tank, the Centre for Social Justice, but there is no indication of the extent to which this was or could possibly be applied to police operational practices. In fact, British police generally rely on ‘gang intelligence’ gathered from ‘practice wisdom’, and from surveillance, self-report, police informers and partner agencies; it is inherently speculative and not easily amenable to the small range of social science operationalisations available (see Association of Police Officers 2007; Pitts 2008; Ralphs et al 2009). This being the case, the validity of EGYV’s reliance on police ‘gang’ statistics to make its case risks severely misleading the reader and reifies the concept without reference to the more nuanced and critical literature.

The emphasis on police operational constructions of the ‘gang’ is also seen in that of the 34 non-governmental attendees at a consultative ‘international forum of gang experts’, 24 (70%) were current or former senior police officers. The contested plurality of British gang research was represented at that meeting (and, as far as we were aware in the whole consultative process) by a single British gang researcher - John Pitts - and no reference was
drawn in *EGYV* to at least two pieces of academic research that might have challenged the understanding of the gang ‘problem’ no doubt voiced there. The first is the Sharp and colleagues’ (2006) analysis of Home Office generated data that found a low overall prevalence of gang membership (6%) as defined by a clear set of criteria, and where 37% of the sample had committed no offence in the preceding year, 66% had not committed a serious offence, 87% had not carried a knife, and 99% had not carried a gun. While still higher in prevalence than non-gang members, this set of findings tends to downplay the strong conflation of guns, gangs, knives and serious offending portrayed in *EGYV*. A second set of findings relates to Bullock and Tilley’s (2002; 2008) evaluation of an early example of a Manchester based multi-agency gang-reduction programme mixing welfarist and enforcement aims. The project began with a formal intention to repeat the kind of police-led co-ordinated suppression and deterrence model of Boston’s ‘Operation Ceasefire’, but disagreements among agencies as to the definition of ‘gang’ together with concerns about imparting stigma by applying the term led to programme ‘drift’ and an unsustainably large number of ‘eligible’ young people being identified. The authors concluded that absent a potentially unattainable consensus on assessment of ‘gang’ and hence (risk of) gang membership, policy should focus on behaviour and not social identity or risk counterproductive ‘net-widening’ and widespread labelling.

In addition to flaws in the basic construction of the policy problem, we also drew attention to problems with describing and understanding the *prescribed plan of action*. The most striking feature of *EGYV* is the sheer number of public and voluntary sector initiatives adduced as being relevant, effective or promising: we counted over 60 in an 84 page document in addition to four Bills spanning the activities of at least four government departments. This was deliberate, no doubt, in order to emphasise the degree of thought, consultation and co-ordination necessary in a multi-agency, multi-sectoral response and to showcase the quality of existing resources. Identifying, distinguishing, and even naming such a large number of potentially relevant initiatives is also problematic, however. First, it is clear that only a small number of these initiatives were substantively ‘new’ in that a service that did not previously exist was created, or existing services were given additional monies; in fact only those initiatives described under the *Providing Support* priority area clearly involved extra money. The amount explicitly committed – a total of £11.2 million – was not inconsiderable in absolute terms, but set against total UK public spending in 2010-11 of £697 billion, including £20 billion for the Home Office and Ministry of Justice combined (*Guardian Data Blog* 2012), this represented a very modest commitment. Like many initiatives in the report, the two flagship childhood/young adult
interventions named in the Prevention and Pathways Out – respectively, Family Nurse Partnerships and Multisystemic Therapy – were ‘existing commitments’ of the government. However, while both are high quality evidence-based programmes with a strong north American evidence base suggesting effectiveness in reducing behavioural problems, they were recommended before UK effectiveness data from full randomised controlled trials was available and have never been offered explicitly to gang members nor evaluated for their impact on gang membership (Shute 2008; 2013). No plans were announced to gather such data, so although promising, it is difficult to see how it would be possible to evidence impact on the youth gang ‘problem’. A third set of issues relates again to the selective use of evidence: EGYV-like local policy failures such as those described by Bullock and Tilley (2008) above are entirely omitted; and there was uncritical acceptance of the success of programmes that were not evaluated to high standards due to lack of resources for that purpose. One example is the Strathclyde Police’s Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV), a co-ordinated suppression, enforcement and exit programme. Success claims at the time of the publication of EGYV were built on a non-independent evaluation involving simple descriptive comparison of pre-post violence among a group of police-defined ‘gang members’ who engaged with the programme versus those who did not (Violence Reduction Unit 2011). Violence was also reduced in the comparison group\(^7\), meaning success could not confidently be attributed to the programme.

It could be argued that the only really concrete, achievable and clear set of intentions expressed in EGYV related to Punishment and Enforcement and Partnership Working: the latter due its technocratic nature; the former due to the inherent legislative advantage possessed by a government in power. Both sets of measures, however, tended towards greater surveillance, greater ‘intelligence-gathering’ and greater punishment and were not therefore ‘harm free’.

One final point to be made about the 2011 report and its action points relates to plans for evaluation. A further problem associated with citing so many potentially relevant initiatives is that their independent, additive and interactive effects as they operate in varied local contexts are extremely hard to evaluate with confidence (Shute et al 2012). The only evaluation plans referred to in EGYV (pp.60-61) relate to potential criminal justice and injury-related (hospital-derived) outcomes and ‘common-sense’ progress indicators at the individual, family and

\(^7\) a later quasi-experimental evaluation (Donnelly et al 2014) confirmed non-significantly greater reductions in the intervention versus comparison group, with reductions seen in both groups at 2-year follow-up. Significant reductions relative to comparison were seen for weapons carrying. None of these results were available at the time EGYV was published.
community level. While sensible, no hint of any research design is given, nor the recruitment of an independent evaluation team to oversee the process.

Overall then, EGYV emerged in a somewhat unique constellation of micro- and macro-level political contexts where chronic public anxieties over the economy were acutely overlain with intense debate in the wake of urban rioting on a wide-range of policy questions regarding social harm: concentrated social exclusion, youth crime, police-community relations and legal inequality. While the focus on harm seems proper, and the policy response expressed in EGYV seems focussed on harm-reduction, I have tried to argue here that rather like an impressionist painting, the report seems to make much more sense at a distance than close-up. When the detail is inspected closely in context with other publicly available research data, it seems that the sense of crisis it invokes could not be justified, that the construction of gangs and youth violence was largely police-led and made only by selectively ignoring evidence that inconveniently challenged it, and that, truly, a metaphorical ‘blunderbuss’ of mostly pre-existing policy was being advocated without any clear theory of change or plans for evaluation. We objected to this approach (Shute et al 2012) as both youth gang and policy evaluation researchers, and address the moral consequences of this predicament in the conclusion below. I first analyse follow-up documents to the main report.


As might be expected *Ending Gang and Youth Violence: One Year On* (2012) was to a great extent a ‘work in progress’ report that detailed activity in key areas, for example ‘Partnership working and information sharing’ which involved the EGYV Team conducting ‘peer reviews’ of relevant service provision in most of the 29 priority areas. Other areas of activity included advising a separate set of initiatives on the sexual exploitation of girls in gangs, and raising awareness of violence as a public health issue. Progress was in relation to *Punishment and Enforcement* (reframed as ‘the Criminal Justice response’) included the extension of gang injunctions to children aged 14-17 years, and the introduction of mandatory minimum sentences for weapon-carrying in a school. No further detail on evaluation was given.
Two further documents were released in December 2013: one by HM Government, *Ending Gang and Youth Violence: Annual report 2013*; and a Home Office evidence review, *Ending Gang and Youth Violence: Review 2012-13*. Both the tone and content of the annual report were similar to the previous year’s document and evidenced a significant amount of further activity in the redrawn/labelled priority areas. Notably strong success claims were made by the Home Secretary regarding overall effectiveness: ‘The initiative is working, the crimes that the programme aims to tackle are diminishing…the programme has led to more effective leadership and a greater sense of strategic direction. That has helped those on the frontline increase the effectiveness of their work. And that has contributed to the drop in youth violence’ (p6).

I invite the reader to assess this claim in the light of our (Shute & Medina 2014) critical response to the accompanying evidence review which had an explicit evaluation focus. The findings therein consisted principally of: an ‘in-house’ (Home Office) self-report online survey to community contacts in the 33\(^8\) pilot areas, an analysis of the ‘peer review’ process whereby EGYV Team members assessed local service provision, and an analysis of police-recorded violence in programme areas over the previous two years and in comparison to non-programme areas. A positive picture was drawn: pilot areas strongly appreciated the peer review process and more general assistance and strategic focus provided by EGYV; and general reductions in violence and weapon-use were evident in pilot areas.

In fairness to the authors of the report, the limitations of the methods employed are explicitly discussed and conclusions do not, in general, go beyond them. It is, however, worth enumerating them in order to further illustrate problems associated with the lack of attention to evaluation in the 2011 report.

A first point to make is that no independent evaluation was conducted, so the funders were also evaluators of their own policy using information gained directly from fundees with a strong stake in current and future funding. In the context of significant and ongoing budgetary cuts for Local Authorities (see below), it is not hard to see how, despite professionalism, objectivity and goodwill, a more positive picture of EGYV might have emerged than would have

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\(^8\) a further four sites had been added to the initial 29.
been the case had information been gathered by external researchers. Second, the two longitudinal surveys of community contacts and three attempts at telephone interview were not compulsory. In fact, only 10 out of 29 (34%) initially funded pilot areas completed both surveys, and 13 out of 29 (45%) provided an interview. Six trial areas ‘did not contribute to the research in any way’. It is unsurprising that busy practitioners do not always respond with enthusiasm to evaluation, however, it is surprising that participation was not made compulsory as a condition of funding. As admitted in the Review document, such a low return can only further limit/bias findings. Finally, underlining a point made earlier, selected police-recorded crimes of violence declined in project areas relative to the first year of programme implementation, however, this continued a trend seen in the year before that implementation, and, as we have seen from national data, a much longer reduction over the past five to twenty years. No individual-level data on gang membership, violence or gang-related violence was measured in any area.

The authors of the review (pp. 6-7) describe the considerable challenges of evaluating what is in effect a complex community initiative (Connell & Kubisch 1998) with great inter-site variation in context and practice. As in our 2014 article, we agree but argue that this is the nature of national policy shaped by and devolved to the local level, and had more time and effort been expended embedding evaluation plans in the initial 2011 report, a much more simple, targeted and theory-infused set of initiatives could have been implemented and directly evaluated using established longitudinal quasi-experimental comparisons of individuals in matched areas. In other words, the problems of evaluating EGYV could and should have been avoided, and severely limit the learning that can be taken from this complex and contested venture.

*Home Affairs Select Committee on Gangs and Youth Crime (2014-15)*

No annual report was published in 2014, however, a prominent parliamentary committee – the Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC9) – set up a review of EGYV in March of that year. The Committee system of the UK parliament selects issues of concern and/or importance by government department, subjects them to inquiry by collecting oral and written evidence and produces a report to which government is obliged to respond within two months of

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publication. It has no formal powers but is a form of retrospective accountability where prominent political figures are often publicly subject to difficult and direct questions. HASC sessions are minuted and all submitted evidence made publicly available.

Here, I add some brief observations attendant on my participation in and analysis of that process. In collaboration with fellow gang researchers, the authors collectively submitted written evidence as the ‘Manchester Gang Research Network’, which made constructively critical comments along the lines discussed here and that drew on the findings of major empirical gang projects (Medina et al 2013; Smithson et al 2013). Of 33 documents detailing written and oral evidence we formed the only independent academic contribution raising fundamental issues of definition, lack of evidence, and possible counter-productivity. Of the remaining 32 documents, 12 (37.5%) were from voluntary sector organisations involved with EGYV, eight (25%) from individual police officers or representatives of police gang initiatives (for example, Operation Trident in London), two from EGYV-engaged Local Authorities (London Boroughs of Hackney; and Lambeth), two from individual practitioners, and the remainder (n=8; 25%) from representatives of major posts and institutions (for example, the Minister for Crime Prevention, the Children’s Commissioner, Youth Justice Board, the London Mayor’s Office). Given the investment of virtually all of these actors in EGYV itself (not least, the Home Office and Centre for Social Justice), it is perhaps unsurprising that the ‘evidence’ is broadly supportive of the programme. However, no further empirical evidence was adduced, and we, the authors, found ourselves to be an academic minority of one.

In late February 2015, the HASC final report Gangs and Youth Crime: Thirteenth Report of Session 2014-15 was published. It is, to our mind, something of a ‘curate’s egg’, that is, not all bad. The first headline recommendation of the report stated: “The Home Office has spent over £10 million on its Ending Gang and Youth Violence programme, but has failed to effectively evaluate the project. The Home Office must undertake high-quality comparative evaluation in order to assess what works best in combating gang and youth crime and in identifying areas for improvement” (p.3), later adding “This will be vital in ensuring the ten new priority areas receive the full benefit of the programme” (p.8). This exceeded our expectations and, to our surprise, even invoked our contribution (pp. 7-8). However, the recommendation also sat alongside others, for example, the increased use of primary school
educational prevention and mentoring programmes, which, while intuitively appealing, have a somewhat equivocal evidence base (Esbensen et al 2012, Medina et al 2012). As ever, quite what ‘effective evaluation’ means in social scientific terms will be of fundamental importance to any successor policy.


Two weeks _after_ the HASC report (mid-March 2015), and immediately prior to submission of this chapter, the delayed 2014 annual report was published by HM Government. In structure and content, the document was broadly comparable to previous annual reports, and I here draw attention only to a subtle but possibly significant change in language, tone, and emphasis. Published two months before the UK General Election, and in the likelihood that the Conservative-dominated Coalition would not retain overall power, there was an understandably valedictory but reflective end-of-policy-cycle feel to the document. What was also notable was the absence of grandiose effectiveness claims, and a re-framing of success in ‘softer’, more processual terms: supporting and enabling local areas and services; better understanding gang dynamics, and its relation to organised criminal networks; strengthening regulation; and providing ‘improved communications with partners such as the police’ (pp.6-7, p.9). Whether these change were related to the criticisms voiced in the HASC report is unknown.

_Conclusions: The tricky moral business of policy engagement_  

I return at last to a discussion of the normative-ethical issues at the heart of our observations. I make three sets of points in relation to the nature and limitations of policy engagement with _Ending Gang and Youth Violence._

_Late modern law-and-order policy making in times of austerity_

David Garland (1996, 2000) suggested that, faced with chronically high crime levels as a normal social fact, the UK, like other western countries was learning to come to terms with the end of the ‘sovereignty myth’ – that government could guarantee internal security for its population. Though there are no doubt other interpretations of _EGYV_ in terms of risk, securitisation and ‘governing though crime’, we see the applicability of Garland’s analysis fifteen years on. True, crime in England and Wales has fallen considerably since 1995, however, it is still high by
historical standards and in comparison with many western jurisdictions. EGYV, for us, displays both adaptive and denial-based reactions to high crime as normal social fact. Elements of the programme are adaptive in that they draw on a rational, if heavily selective, evidence-base intended to ‘cool’ (Loader & Sparks 2010) a heated post-riot situation, and in doing so, invoke the ‘criminologies of the self’ that treat gang-members as rational calculators able to perceive and react to the sets of deterrents and incentives behind ‘Operation Ceasefire’ and related programmes. There is also very extensive evidence in EGYV of ‘responsibilisation’: suggesting that effectively addressing the issues should involve a drawing- in of a range of voluntary sector actors, NGOs and non-law-and-order agents\(^{10}\) to ‘network’ the response, rather than the State accepting primary responsibility for its own policy failings. At the same time, elements of the language and invocation of crisis displayed in the reports, together with its suppression-focused content more than hint at Garland’s ‘hysterical denial’ of this situation, and attempt to reaffirm the State’s ‘tough’\(^{11}\) role as final arbiter of justice and security.

I would, however, modify this analysis to suggest that law-and-order policy post-2008 is very clearly shaped by the context of public spending austerity and unstable Coalition government. I have argued that, despite the consultation, policy detail, celebration of initiatives and so forth, EGYV displays more activity than it does achievement; it’s main business is to advise, assess, monitor, co-ordinate and ‘govern at a distance’, not because it a preferred way of exercising power but because there is no money or political will to do otherwise. What is wholly absent from the reports is the financial reality of average year-on-year cuts to Home Office and Ministry of Justice departmental budgets of 5.6% and 8.1% respectively between 2010-11 and 2015-16 (Keynes & Tetlow 2014); and a 37% estimated real-terms reduction in Local Authority budgets over the same period (National Audit Office 2014). Regarding the ‘prevention’ focus of EGYV, it is also the case that spending on early education, childcare and child-centred community services fell by 25% between 2009-10 and 2012-13 (Lupton 2015). In this context, £10 million of extra EGYV money spread over two-years and thirty local sites is put firmly into perspective.

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\(^{10}\) As stated in the Ministerial Foreword of the original 2011 report, “Stopping such violence is not a task for the police alone. Teachers, doctors and youth workers all have a vital role to play….(p.4)”; “health visitors, GPs, teachers, A&E departments, local youth workers and Jobcentre Plus staff – need to be involved…(p.8)”

\(^{11}\) this term is used thirteen times in EGYV (2011)
From an ethical point of view, the main and primary issue facing policy makers at the time of writing is how credibly to claim an avowed interest in harm reduction when the services employed to do so are being disinvested to such an extent. It is this essential but undeclared/invisible normative point that frames all others, and that lurks behind every fine word and sentiment of EGYV. Granted, resources are scarce, perhaps more scarce than is often the case. That, however, makes it especially important that they should not be misused or wasted in needless ways.

The centrality of high quality research to effective harm reduction

Much of what I have argued proceeds from a strong normative position: that policy aimed at harm reduction, if it is to have any chance of success in anything other than symbolic terms, must be evidence-based from its inception, must specify the context and theory of change that links inputs to outcomes, and build-in robust evaluation that is capable of comprehending its effects. This has not happened in EGYV. This means that an extremely effective initiative or combination of initiatives, supremely well-suited to the needs of a proportion of local youths but with the potential to be generalised, may be overlooked because it cannot be evidenced. It also means that a poorly founded, ineffective programme that does little but create activity and consume time and public money, may be overlooked because it cannot be evidenced. It also means that a poorly founded, counterproductive programme that actively increases social harm ‘iatrogenically’ may be overlooked because it cannot be evidenced. It is likely that all three of these scenarios have occurred under the auspices of EGYV.

This emphasis on theory-led evaluation will no doubt be interpreted by some as an unrealistic, technocratic exercise in nit-picking that valorises the role of the (generally unglamorous) academic researcher. Perhaps. All I will say to this is to point out the extraordinary but obscured irony that a report nominally created as a response to the August 2011 riots should so favour US-style gang suppression projects when the initial ‘spark’ of those riots was the shooting to death of an unarmed Black man by officers from such a project. We might also point out the high ethnic disparities in stop-and-search in the UK (Hurrell 2013), the impact on perceived legitimacy and police co-operation of poor experiences of procedural justice (Hough et al 2010), and the net-widening and labelling fears attendant on vague gang definitions (Bullock & Tilley 2008). To not test for unintended effects such as these - among others - is not only immoral but highly inefficient in terms of heavily curtailed public funds. Theory-led, well evaluated policy is

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12 It should also be noted that in the run up to the UK General Election of 7th May 2015, both main political parties are committed to further public spending cuts over the lifetime of the next parliament.
the only ethical response. Political imperatives—genuine ones that are not merely political—involves substantial ethical elements, both in regard to how the issues in question are formulated, and in regard to how they are studied and addressed. Those projects are unavoidably ethical, whether or not there is explicit recognition of the fact.

The limits of a public criminology

I began this chapter by arguing that criminologists interested in harm reduction had an ethical duty to engage with policy aimed at doing precisely that; to not do so in one’s field of expertise risked complicity in harm production. What our experience of commenting on the foregoing case study confirms is Tonry’s (2010) conclusions that public criminology can influence policy and debate but that this is a noisily multivocal and contested process governed by timing, choice of subject, divergent understandings of ‘evidence’ and the fit of one’s research findings to developing official narratives that discount nuance and inconclusiveness. As he states, it also requires stamina and energy that few researchers possess. There are real and profound obstacles to the potential of a public criminology then at particular times and in particular contexts, however, I maintain that it is right to continue to do so, particularly in times of financial austerity when social harms escalate and the rational use of public funds is at a particular premium. Becker’s (1967) fundamentally moral-ethical question of ‘whose side are we on?’ has never been so relevant.

References


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