

# EXPLOITATION OF GIRLS BY GANGS FACT SHEET

## Definition

- The Home Office defines a gang as “a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who: see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group; engage in criminal activity and violence; and may lay claim over territory (this is not necessary geographical territory but can include an illegal economy territory); have some form of identifying structural feature; may be in conflict with other, similar gangs”.
- In Royal Greenwich, the gang ‘picture’ in the borough is dominated by an Organised Criminal Network who are actively involved in supply of Class A drugs across the country; therefore the definition of an Organised Criminal Network needs to be taken into account.
- An Organised Criminal Network is defined by Hallsworth and Young as “a group of individuals for whom involvement in crime is for personal gain”. The gain is mostly measured in financial terms, although it could be otherwise, such as sexual gratification as with child paedophile rings. For most Organised Criminal Networks crime is their ‘occupation’. A criminal network differs from a gang in that:
  - It owns or controls the means of illegal production.
  - Its primary motivation is for personal gain (financial or otherwise), not for status.
  - It is a group that keeps breaking the law to make money.
  - This law-breaking is causing harm to the community, or is a problem internationally (e.g. people trafficking).
  - Violence is used in order to make money.
  - They are running an illegal business (e.g. drug trafficking).
- The Home Office has worked with partner agencies to develop the following definition of a female at risk of exploitation by gangs, based on the evidence of the girls and young women: “a woman or girl who is a family member of or in an intimate relationship with a gang nominal”. It is recognised that this definition does not capture all women and girls who may be affected by gangs, relationships are not always intimate, and family members may not always be affected; however, it is a useful starting point. It is also important to note that girls can occupy active roles within gangs in their own right, but are also vulnerable to exploitation. There have been no ‘girl gangs’ identified in Royal Greenwich.
- The issues affecting women and girls exploited by or involved in gangs can include:
  - Being directly involved in offending (often under coercion), including hiding weapons and drugs for partners, brothers or associates, fraud, “honey traps”, set ups, violence, robbery, shoplifting etc.
  - Experiencing domestic and sexual violence/exploitation from gang members, including when exploitation is used as a weapon between rival gangs.
- Sexual exploitation of under 18 year olds by gang members is Child Sexual Exploitation.

## Key Drivers and Risk Factors

- In the United Kingdom, academic research on gang membership is sparse and there are few studies that illustrate the experience of young women and gangs. One study that does consider female membership is *Reluctant Gangsters: Youth Gangs in Waltham Forest* (Pitts, 2007). Through the testimonies of male gang members, Pitts highlights the gendered nature of gang membership. In this study, young women, or ‘girlfriends’, are said to be attracted to the gang because of the ‘glamour’ and ‘celebrity’ they believe they will find within the group. As bit part players, they occupy auxiliary roles, are often sexually exploited, sometimes in exchange for drugs. The relationships with male members tend to be abusive; one of dominance and submission. Some senior gang members pass their girlfriends around to lower ranking members and sometimes to the whole group at the same time.

- University of Bedfordshire research identified certain features of sexual exploitation that are unique to or exacerbated by the gang environment, such as:
  - Pressure to engage in sexual activity.
  - Engagement in sexual activity due to fear of force, violence (physical and/or sexual) and intimidation.
  - The recording and distribution of images of sexual activity via mobile technology.
  - Sex as initiation into the gang.
  - Sex in return for (perceived) status or protection.
  - Sex as a means of achieving material gain.
  - Young women 'setting up' people in other gangs.
  - Cases of rape (single and multiple perpetrator) and other sexual assaults as punishment, a weapon in conflict and/or for sexual gratification.
- The exploitation of girls by male gang members is not always for sex, but can involve other exploitative roles within an Organised Criminal Network, such as carrying/storing weapons, transporting drugs, information trading, honey traps, hiring rental cars, money laundering and banking.
- There are a wide range of risk factors that increase the likelihood of girls joining gangs, including:
  - Association with anti-social or gang-involved peers.
  - Peer rejection or victimisation.
  - Parental imprisonment, substance misuse, domestic abuse or poor mental health.
  - Experiences of victimisation (such as sexual abuse, maltreatment, bullying, witnessing or experiencing domestic violence).
  - Experiences of neglect, poor quality family attachments and social bonds.
  - Histories of running away.
  - Poor educational performance and exclusion from school.
  - Involvement in sexually risky or harmful behaviour.
  - Diagnosis of a mental health problem, a history of self-harming or risk of suicide, sleeping or eating disorders.
  - Feeling unsafe or marginalised in their neighbourhood.
  - Poor self-esteem.
  - Bereavement and loss.

## **Local and National Picture**

### **National**

- Nationally, there is limited information on the numbers of people involved in gangs, particularly young women.
- The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation In Gangs and Groups found that, between August 2010 to October 2011, there were 2,409 confirmed victims of Child Sexual Exploitation in either gangs or groups.
- University of Bedfordshire research into gang-associated sexual exploitation and sexual violence between young people in gang-affected neighbourhoods found that the perpetrators are predominantly male and victims are predominantly female, and it usually takes place between people who are known to each other.

### **Local**

- Gangs mapping of young people aged under 18 in 2013/14 identified 105 young people who were evidenced as being involved with gangs, 15 of whom were females and all had been discussed at the Child Sexual Exploitation Multi-Agency Panel. A further 30 females were also suspected of being involved with gangs but were unable to be included in the

mapping due to unsubstantiated evidence.

- Some young females involved with gangs in Royal Greenwich are girlfriends of active gang members (one a teenage parent) and others have made disclosures of sexual assault by a gang member. They were also identified as receiving financial rewards (new clothes, money etc.).
- Analysis has shown a strong link between girls, gangs, Child Sexual Exploitation and missing children. Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013, 35 young women went missing from home, and of these, 9 were involved in gangs and 8 of those were also victims of sexual exploitation.
- During the period September 2013 to August 2014, the Her Centre has provided support to 30 clients as part of their New Leaf project. Of these 30, 7 were involved, or possibly involved, in gangs.

### Resources for Professionals

- Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre: Information and resources for teachers. [www.thinkuknow.co.uk/teachers/](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/teachers/)
- New Thinking About Women and Criminal Justice: Review by the Griffins Society (February 2011). Available [here](#).
- Non Violent Resistance: The parenting programme addresses violent, destructive and harmful behaviours in children and adolescents, by restoring individual strength and self-respect in parents. It also supports caring and respectful relationships in the family and wider communities.
- If Only Someone Had Listened: Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups Final Report November 2013. Available [here](#).
- Strategic Framework for Responding to Gang-Associated Women and Girls: Developed by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime to support London boroughs and agencies in devising their strategic and operational responses to young women and girls involved in or associated to criminal gangs (November 2013). Available [here](#).
- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) Helpline: 24 hour helpline offering advice and support for anybody with concerns about a child. 0800 5000 or [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

### Services for Victims

- Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre: Help and advice for children and young people. [www.thinkuknow.co.uk](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk)
- New Leaf/Her Centre: Provides support and advocacy for victims aged 13-19 residing in Royal Greenwich. [www.hercentre.org](http://www.hercentre.org)
- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Gangs Helpline: Anyone worried about a young person involved in, or at risk from, gangs can call 0808 800 5000 or email [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk).
- Greenwich Domestic Violence and Abuse Services: Provides a specialist Information Line, outreach and accommodation services for women and children experiencing domestic abuse. [www.gdva.org.uk](http://www.gdva.org.uk)
- Her Centre: Provides support and advocacy for victims residing in Royal Greenwich. 0203 260 7772 or [www.hercentre.org](http://www.hercentre.org)

- Metropolitan Police Service Community Safety Unit: Every London borough has a team of specially trained officers whose task is to investigate crimes of domestic abuse. Available [here](#).
- Victim Support: Provides emotional support and practical information for all victims of crime. 0808 1689 111 or [www.victimsupport.org.uk](http://www.victimsupport.org.uk)
- Childline (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children): 24 hour helpline for young people. 0800 1111 or [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

### **Further Information**

This information has been taken from the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2015-18. For more information contact the Safer Communities Team on 020 8921 8396 or [community-safety@royalgreenwich.gov.uk](mailto:community-safety@royalgreenwich.gov.uk)