

ITEM 6
ANNEX



SaferMK

Strategic Assessment work stream: Accounting for the absence of gangs in Milton Keynes

Steve Conway
June 2014



www.safermk.com

Executive summary

Following interest expressed by various elected members, SaferMK undertook research into the issue of gangs in Milton Keynes (MK).

Based upon interviews with local professionals, the primary finding was that at present, gangs do not exist in MK.

The interviews yielded several insights into historic quasi-gang issues; examples of good practice; and potential sources of future gang problems.

These insights informed the subsequent stage of research, involving interviews with MK young people, and focused on understanding the reasons for this absence of gangs. It is hoped that this clarification will contribute to preventing the development of gangs in the city in the future.

Background

At the March 2013 Community Safety Police and Crime Committee, the Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police (TVP) Sara Thornton gave a presentation to MK Councilors regarding the apparent absence of gangs in the city. Ms. Thornton mentioned that Milton Keynes was unique in being the only large metropolitan area in Thames Valley to have no identified gang activity.

Following this presentation, the issue of gangs was discussed at the SaferMK Partnership. SaferMK also received several enquiries from elected members regarding Community Safety knowledge of gangs. Further attention to this issue has been expressed by the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner, as well as in the form of questions raised at the MK Council Select Committee. Research into the issue of gangs in MK was highlighted as a recommendation in the 2013 SaferMK Strategic Assessment.

Detrimental implications of gang activity for the community

Gang activity negatively impacts individual gang-members, their friends and family as well as the wider community in several respects.

Gang affected young people are regularly exposed to and may subsequently become involved in a range of criminal activities including violent crime, sexual assault, robbery, burglary and drug offences. Added to this array of criminal activity, gang members tend to be prolific offenders.¹

Gang activity is closely related to issues affecting the wider community including anti-social behavior, drug/ alcohol consumption and violence. A 2011 Home Office report estimates that 22% of serious violence in London is gang related.²

The vast majority of gang members are thought to be male.³ However, any female associated with gangs (such as friends, partners and family members) may be adversely impacted in several respects.

¹ See 'Dying to Belong: An In-depth Review of Street Gangs in Britain – Executive Summary' report (exec summary), produced by the Centre for Social Justice, p5. Published by The Centre for Social Justice, London, 2009.

This document is available at:

<http://centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/UserStorage/pdf/Pdf%20Exec%20summaries/DyingtoBelong.pdf>

² See p3 of the 'Ending Gang and Youth Violence Report: A Cross-Government Report', p3. Published by The Home Office, London, 2011.

Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ending-gang-and-youth-violence-cross-government-report>

³ For example, the Home Office report into the 'Tackling Gangs Action Programme' found 98% of those gang members identified in their research were male. See Paul Dawson 'Monitoring data from the Tackling Gangs Action Programme'. Published by the Home Office, London, 2008. This document is available at:

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20080804123613/http://crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/violentstreet/violentstreet011.htm>

Female gang affiliates are thought to be implicated in holding/ concealing weapons for male members.⁴ Young women are particularly at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation, through sexual violence. Such exploitation may take a variety of forms including: sexual activity as part of an initiation process or in return for perceived status within a gang; sexual assault perpetrated upon the family of rival gang members as a form of retaliation; young women entrapping other gang affected females as victims of sexual assault.⁵

Milton Keynes demographic factors: population growth and urban development

According to the 2011 census, the population of Milton Keynes has increased by 17% since 2001 – placing the city as the 7th highest population growth nationally during the period (behind Manchester and 5 London Boroughs). The population of MK is projected to be the fastest growing in the South East of England in coming years. This continued expansion may in future herald the development of the Community Safety issues associated with larger metropolitan areas, such as gang activity. For example, research in America found the existence of gangs in 3,300 American cities – that is, any American city with a population above 250,000.⁶ The 2011 Milton Keynes population, according to the census was 249,900.⁷

To be clear, the United States has an entirely distinct set of social and economic issues to Britain, and as such no meaningful direct comparisons can be made. However, the American research would suggest a correlation between metropolitan size and the potential for the development of certain types of crime, including gang activity. If such a relationship does hold, community safety agencies would be best placed to be aware of both the conditions under which gangs develop, and the early indicators of gang activity, as a means of both intervention and prevention.

What then are the conditions and early indicators of gang activity? How do gangs subsequently develop? The following literature review aims to provide a brief overview of the current academic and UK government research on the issue.

Overview of current literature

Though the majority of the available literature on gangs focuses on the United States, this body of work nonetheless provides important insights regarding gang formation, structure and activity. There is a wide consensus throughout the academic literature that a prerequisite for gang development is material poverty and unemployment. This relationship has been found to consistently hold for both male and female gang involvement, irrespective of time and place.⁸ The UK Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Iain Duncan Smith has noted that gangs are ‘found in our *most* deprived and marginalised communities’.⁹

Since the emergence of crack-cocaine in impoverished parts of New York, Miami and Los Angeles in the 1980’s, street gangs have commonly been associated with drug dealing, and to a lesser extent illicit

⁴ See ‘Dying to Belong: An In-depth Review of Street Gangs in Britain’, produced by the Centre for Social Justice p4. Published by The Centre for Social Justice, London, 2009. This document is available at:

<http://centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/UserStorage/pdf/Pdf%20reports/DyingtoBelongFullReport.pdf>

⁵ See for example Carlene Firmin ‘The Female Voice In Violence Project: A study into the impacts of serious youth and gang violence on women and girls’ Report from think tank Race On The Agenda (ROTA), published by ROTA, London, 2010. This document is available at: http://www.rota.org.uk/content/rota-february-2010-female-voice-violence-project?q=webfm_send/26 Page 7 of the report notes that ‘...sexual violence takes place against a backdrop where girls have little peer support, where girls and boys are confused about consent and their own motivations for engaging in sex, and where young people have little to no understanding of coercion’.

Regarding impacts of gangs for women, see also H. Beckett et al ‘“It’s Wrong... But You Get Used To It”: A qualitative study of gang-associated sexual violence towards, and exploitation of, young people in England’. Published by Children’s Commissioner, 2013: Available at: http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_745

⁶ Papachristos, Andrew W. *Gang World*. Washington Post, Washington, March – April 2005, pp. 48-55.

⁷ See MKI Observatory data. <http://www.mkiobservatory.org.uk/page.aspx?id=1934&siteID=1026>

⁸ See p48 of Coughlin, Brenda C. and Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi. *The Urban Street Gang After 1970*. Featured in the Annual Review of Sociology, Vol 29 (2003), pp. 41-64. Published by Annual Reviews.

⁹ ‘Dying to Belong’ p9

entrepreneurial activities such as prostitution and extortion.¹⁰ However, several studies have found that a minority of gangs are in fact involved in drug dealing.¹¹ Of those gangs implicated in the drug trade, few are involved in an organised or systematic manner.¹²

A growing body of evidence suggests that the majority of youths who join gangs, are not motivated to do so as an opportunity to engage in illicit trades such as drug dealing. Rather the attraction of gang membership is more closely related to three factors: identity construction; the protection of neighbourhood territory; and to a lesser extent recreation.¹³ Although distinct, these issues are closely related and overlapping. For example, identity may be formed in reference to an affiliation with a geographical area or participation in a recreational pursuit.

This triad of contributing factors seems to hold for the UK. In 2009, the Centre for Social Justice published the Report 'Dying to Belong: An In-Depth Review of Street Gangs in Britain'. The report found that in those areas where underinvestment and high youth unemployment is particularly problematic, gang membership functions as a surrogate for the sense of identity, purpose and belonging usually provided by work.¹⁴

The issue of territory relates closely to that of identity. The concept of territory can refer to a physical space, but can also be understood as implicitly extending to encompassing the cultural sphere of influence encompassed within a geographical area. As such, strong assertions of a claim to territorial space tend to coincide with a sense that the space is under threat or at risk of invasion. Again, the 'Dying to Belong' report found this dynamic to apply to British gangs, noting that 'for many gangs, defending geographical territory – often a postcode – has become part of their *raison d'être*, an integral part of their identity'.¹⁵

A final distinct and important theme to emerge from the background literature concerns the growth of gangs: once gangs begin to emerge, more are likely to proliferate in response. For example, as a proto-gang begins laying claim to a territory, similar groups tend to rapidly solidify in neighboring areas in response to the perceived threat of encroachment on their own tacit territories. The incentive for forming such gang-like allegiances is increased when low level skirmishes escalate into overt violence. Perhaps the most harrowing implication of accounts of the early gang violence in New York's Bronx neighbourhood during the 1970's, is that as the violence escalated, the safest course of action for a young Bronx resident was to join a gang. Contemporary accounts make it clear that during this period, an unaffiliated young person was a clear target for violence; while gang-members at least had recourse to protection and retaliation.¹⁶ According to UK Home Office research published in 2008, 85% of young people who reported carrying a knife said they did so for protection. Conversely, 4% stated that their intention was to threaten someone, with only 1% actively planning to injure someone.¹⁷ This figure would lend support to the assertion that gang hostilities tend to result in an escalation of violence, and reinforces the importance of prevention and early intervention.

In summary, gangs are most likely to develop where extreme poverty exists alongside an unstable sense of identity; a feeling of encroachment on territory (both physical and cultural); and a lack of opportunities for leisure/ recreation. Conversely, where measures are in place to prevent the development of such issues, the impetus for gang development is reduced. Moreover, gangs tend to hasten the emergence

¹⁰ See p43 of *The Urban Street Gang After 1970*.

¹¹ See for example Klein, 1995, 'The American Street Gang: Its nature, Prevalence and Control', New York: Oxford University Press. See also Huff, 1996, 'The Criminal Behaviour of Gang Members and Non-Gang at-risk Youth', Featured in Huff, 1996, 'Gangs in America', Thousand Oaks Publishing, pp 75-102.

¹² See p50 of *Gang World*. Featured in 'Foreign Policy', published by Washington Post.

¹³ See p44 of *The Urban Street Gang After 1970*.

¹⁴ "It is no coincidence the highest prevalence of gangs is found in areas with the highest levels of general worklessness and youth unemployment: the gang is an alternative to mainstream employment, offering the same advantages". 'Dying to Belong', p7

¹⁵ 'Dying to Belong - Executive Summary', p7

¹⁶ See p48 of Chang, Jeff *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*. Published by Ebury Press, 2007.

¹⁷ See p14 of Roe, Stephen and Ashe, Jane. *Young People and Crime: Findings from the 2006 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey*. Home Office Statistical Bulletin (July 2008), London, 2008. This document is available at:

<http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/9140/1/hosb0908.pdf>

of more gangs; while gang aggression leads to an increasingly harmful cycle of escalating violence and retaliation.

The threefold rationale for undertaking research into the issue of gangs in MK therefore was: the interest expressed by various elected members; the multiple Community Safety implications of gang activity; and the demographic changes which increase the likelihood of community safety issues associated with larger cities.

Methodological issues

A guiding principle of all stages of the research was the need for awareness of the potentially sensationalist nature of the subject matter. For example, there was a risk that without such sensitivity, the research project itself could contribute to a sense that Community Safety agencies had already recognised the existence of gang activity in Milton Keynes. If, in response to this perception residents begin to label groups of youths as a gang, these youths may conform to the label.

In short, a cavalier approach could have inadvertently contributed to the creation of the very phenomenon under investigation. As such, a sensitive and nuanced approach was essential at every stage.

Defining 'Gangs'

Prior even to embarking on the preliminary stages of the research, it became clear that widely differing notions of what constitutes a 'gang' exist. For example, in some usages the term 'gang' may merely be a collective noun for a group of young people. If unresolved, such ambiguity risked severely undermining the validity and reliability of any findings. As such, before commencing research it was first necessary to establish a clear and comprehensive definition.

The current definition used by TVP states that a gang is:

"A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who: See themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group; Engage in a range of criminal activity and violence; Identify with or lay claim over territory; Have some form of identifying structural feature; Are in conflict with other, similar, gangs".¹⁸

A wealth of sociological and criminological work addresses the issue of adequately defining gangs.¹⁹ The working definition used by many researchers tends to be indebted to Thrasher in his seminal work 'The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago'.²⁰ There is a large degree of overlap between the definitions used in academic studies and that provided by TVP. However, the criterion *mode of conflict* is present in many sociological studies, but omitted in the TVP definition.

The mode of conflict which characterises a gang does not challenge the moral validity of the present social order. Gangs may be involved in violence or ASB, but they do not engage in such activities as an expression of rejection of the moral basis of the society. Though this issue may seem pedantry, it is in fact important in distinguishing gangs from politically/ ethically/ religiously orientated groups.

¹⁸ This definition is fairly widely used by local councils and police forces – for example, Oldham, London Boroughs and Manchester all make reference to this definition. It seems the origin of this definition is in the 'Dying to Belong' report from 2009 produced by the Centre for Social Justice.

¹⁹ Regarding the problems involved in defining gangs, See for example Bursik RJ and Grasmick HG, 1993. 'Neighbourhoods and Crime: The dimensions of Effective Community Control', New York: Lexington. Also see 'The Concept of Gang' by William R. Arnold, published in The Sociological Quarterly, VOL 7, No. 1 (Winter 1966), pp.59-75. Published by Wiley.

²⁰ Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*, 2nd edition., rev.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936, p.46. Thrasher's definition is: "...an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterised by the following types of behaviour: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behaviour is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory".

The definition used throughout this research is designed to consolidate the strengths of the academic literature with that presently used by TVP. For the purposes of this research, a group of young people was considered to qualify as a gang if it met all of the following criteria.

- (1) Evidence of group *identity*.
- (2) A *structure/ hierarchy* is in place.
- (3) Overt identification with, or assertion of claims to a geographical *territory*.
- (4) Engagement in *criminal or anti-social activity* (though this may be a minority-pursuit).
- (5) A *mode of conflict* which (when manifest), takes the form of antagonism against similar groups, police or the wider community; rather than challenging the moral validity of the present social order.

Methodology: Stage 1 research design

The research was divided into two stages. The first stage (addressed in the present document), aimed to interrogate the belief that Milton Keynes is currently free from gang activity. This hypothesis was investigated through qualitative interviews with local professionals.

In total, 20 such professionals were interviewed during late 2013, including: Family Centre staff, representatives of MK Equalities Council, Police Officers, members of the Youth Offender Team, Probation workers, representatives of Youth Services and Community Action MK. In the interests of confidentiality, the names of these individuals are not used in this report.

This approach was devised for three reasons. Firstly, all the professionals interviewed worked closely with the local community in their various capacities. As such, each had a valuable insight into community issues and relations.

Secondly, the interviewees all worked to some extent with communities from the more deprived areas of the city. As highlighted in the literature review, the wealth of studies from Britain and American are almost universally agreed on the high correlation between material deprivation and an increased likelihood of the development of gangs. A guiding premise of the research then, was that if gangs were to be found in MK, it would be in the more deprived parts of the city.²¹

Finally, this approach facilitated open and insightful discussions, without the risk of sensationalizing the potentially sensitive subject.

The interviews took an open-ended and semi-structured format. The purpose of the research and working definition were first explained, followed by an informal discussion regarding the professionals' insights into the issue locally. Although not anticipated when designing this research method, it transpired that several interviewees had worked previously in parts of the country with identified gang activity. These professionals therefore provided a valuable insight into differences between MK and their previous placements.

Findings

The fundamental finding to emerge from Stage One of the research, was a confirmation of the hypothesis that Milton Keynes is currently not affected by gang activity. No professional consulted for this research, identified any existing groups in Milton Keynes which conform to the stated definition of a gang. Several interviewees mentioned nebulous groups that matched one or more of the criteria – such as groups causing ASB or temporarily involved in low-level drug dealing. However, in all these examples at least one (and usually two or three) of the criteria stipulated in the definition were absent.

²¹ "Gangs are, unsurprisingly, most commonly found in... highly deprived areas". 'Dying to Belong', p26

Five distinct though overlapping themes emerged from the interviews with Local professionals, and are summarized below. As will be seen, these themes were highly valuable in directing the approach and focus of Stage Two, which attempts to explain the reasons for this absence.

Historic evidence/ examples of embryonic gang activity

Several of the interviewees discussed reports and evidence of historic nascent gang activity in MK during the period roughly spanning 2009-2010, which subsequently failed to develop. All were agreed that these 'historic quasi-gangs' had since disintegrated and no longer existed in any meaningful way.

Several such groups were mentioned by the local professionals. Each had developed a group name; and a loose affiliation with a territorial space which was often reflected in the selected name such as: the Fishermead Terror Squad; The Bunch of C****s; the Oldbrook Massive; the Purples; MK1s; as well as animosities between unspecified groups in the West Bletchley area.

In some cases there was anecdotal evidence that these groups had been in conflict with other similar groups, though due to the time lag and often sensationalist nature of self-reporting, this dynamic could not be substantiated. Indeed, this knowledge was largely based on local word of mouth reporting. As such, in many instances details of these groups were confused and sometimes contradictory. For example, according to some reports, the Fishermead Terror Squad was a group of white working class young men; while other reports stated that the group was entirely constituted of Somali males.

In many instances, the local professionals were of the impression that these quasi-gangs were no more than small and fairly innocuous groups of young people who had adopted a group name. Those interviewees who had previously had direct experience of these groups reported that they were limited to 4 or 5 individuals and involved in low level crime/ ASB. In particular, these interviewees noted that these groups had displayed no evidence of a clear structure/ hierarchy. There was a feeling amongst several of the local professionals that reports of these groups, particularly originating from local youths tended to be embellished and exaggerated. The perception significantly outweighed the reality.

An interviewee provided an insightful observation regarding the issue of self-reporting of gang involvement. This individual had previously been based in an extremely gang affected London borough, and noted that individuals from London unequivocally known to local agencies to be gang affiliated, would never make such an admission to any local professional. The paradox therefore, is that any individual claiming to be a gang member, probably is not.

These issues underline the methodological difficulty of reliably studying a phenomenon as potentially sensationalist as gangs.

Good practice which helped suppress such development

These discussions of earlier quasi-gang developments highlighted an insightful case, involving representatives from the MK Council Anti-Social Behavior (ASB) and Licensing teams, who worked in partnership to serve a closure order on a property in CMK. During a period of less than one month in 2010, this property had become the informal club-house for such a quasi-gang. This group had developed a collective name and a shared dress-code, as well as being implicated in low level violence. Some individuals had tattooed themselves with the group's name. Perhaps most significantly, two further groups emerged at this time – seemingly in reaction to the presence of the first. These reactionary groups also developed a name and dress-code. In the case of all three groups, it is unclear whether either a distinct hierarchy or criminal activity developed.

Due to concerns that a series of retaliations and escalations could ensue between these embryonic-gangs, the original group was evicted from the premise in the centre of MK. The effect was to rapidly dissipate the developing group identities and associated tensions of all three groups. The local professionals interviewed regarding this case noted that within a matter of weeks the groups which threatened to solidify into gangs, had dissolved.

As well as highlighting the rapid response of these agencies in defusing this situation, this case also underlines the salience of the territorial component of gang development. Where a perceived threat to territory was in place, other embryonic-gangs rapidly developed. Conversely, when deprived of a territorial basis around which to develop this shared identity, the original group fractured and dissolved - as did those groups which had formed in response. It is highly likely that such proactive and preventative initiatives have significantly contributed to the failure of gangs to develop in MK.

Hypotheses regarding the reasons for the absence of gangs in MK

The conversations with local professionals involved a series of thought provoking discussions regarding possible reasons for the failure of gangs to develop in the city. Three local professionals hypothesized that shootings which took place in Fishermead during May 2011, may have contributed to this absence. It was proposed that this tragic consequence of drug dealing and territorial violence, may have had a deterrent effect on the subsequent formation of gangs. In the time since this incident, there has been no further violence in Fishermead, which displays signs of strong community bonds and solidarity.²²

A second possible explanation for the absence of gangs proposed by the interviewees, relates to the decreasing levels of drug consumption in MK. This hypothesis is partially corroborated by the official police recorded figures, which record a 32.59% reduction in drug offences between the calendar years of 2011 and 2013. If there is a reduced demand for drugs, it would follow that the cluster of illegal activities which relate to this economy and encourage gang development may also have reduced.

A potential contributing factor to this decline of drug offences, relates to the rise nationally of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS). NPS are marketed as 'Legal Highs' or 'Research Chemicals', and are often labeled 'not for human consumption'. As such these substances circumvent the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act. Though NPS have strong and harmful narcotic effects, they are currently unlegislated and can therefore be bought legally through the internet or at physical premises.

Anecdotal reports suggest a possible shift in patterns of consumption in MK over recent years towards NPS. These substances are an emerging trend which have only begun to be measured in recent months. As such it is not possible to make reliable comparisons, either against other parts of the country or previous years. Recent data provided by Public Health England records that during the third quarter of 2013/14, Compass (the Young Peoples Drug and Alcohol service), engaged with a disproportionately high level of NPS users in MK. Nationally, 1% of Young People's Service users during this period reported NPS to be their first drug of choice. In MK this figure was 6%. These figures are extremely tentative, and doubtlessly do not provide a full picture of the problem. For example, because the statistics are based only on those in treatment, the figures may merely reflect varying degrees of success nationally in engaging with young people. However, a hypothetical shift in patterns of consumption towards unlegislated/ legal (though nonetheless highly dangerous) substances, may plausibly have the indirect effect of undermining the incentive for forming criminal distribution networks. Such networks tend to have many of the hallmarks of gangs (territorial affiliation, criminal activity, structure/ hierarchy), and therefore can precede a proliferation of fully fledged gangs.

However, as highlighted by the background literature on gang development, drug dealing tends to be a minority pursuit for gangs. As such, though the low levels of drug offences and the apparent rise of NPS may be one contributing factor, this issue does not fully account for the present absence of gangs in MK.

Interviewees from Probation stated that white males from a working class background, account for around 90% of their caseload. They noted that within this client base, there is very little evidence of racist attitudes. What prejudices do exist within this group seem to be focused on perceived 'benefit scroungers'.

²² SaferMK and its Partners dedicated considerable resources to the area, such as the Fishermead Action Partnership which developed a joint agency action plan.

This apparently low level of racist attitudes may be a contributing factor to the current absence of gangs in MK. Issues of perceived territorial invasion (in the overlapping senses of both physical and associated cultural territory), are closely related to the development of racist attitudes. In short, low levels of racism suggest a corresponding absence of the perceived invasion of cultural/ territorial space which is a strong causal factor in the development of gangs.

Potential sources of future problems

Although all the local professionals agreed that MK is presently free from gangs, three issues were highlighted which have the potential to contribute to future gang development.

Firstly, several MK estates have a disproportionate level of unemployment. The Milton Keynes Intelligence Observatory Social Atlas identifies 7 'Lower Super Output Areas' (LSOA) which fall within the 10% most deprived in England. Furthermore, the same report notes that 12 LSOA in MK fall within England's 10% most deprived for the measure 'income deprivation affecting children'.²³ As noted above, there is a consensus in the academic literature regarding such material deprivation and the increased likelihood of gang development.

Secondly, several local professionals noted an increasing pattern of closure of local facilities such as youth clubs in recent years. As such, some of the interviewees raised a concern that in the absence of sufficient sources of recreation, young people may in some cases resort to less wholesome activities.

Finally, some of the interviewees noted signs of a sharp rise in Methadone use, particularly in the more deprived estates. Although one of the first NPS to emerge, since 2010 Methadone has been classified as a class B drug.²⁴ A growing body of anecdotal evidence suggests that this substance – until recently unlegislated – is increasingly being dealt locally.

No interviewee believed that any of these issues would in isolation promote the development of gangs. However, the issues of unemployment and drugs in particular tend to accompany one another. For example, an interviewee based in Beanhill reported that in recent years, long term unemployed/ under-employed young people had resorted to using and dealing Methadone, both as a source of income and a recreational pursuit. In recent months a serious assault occurred in the area which was rumored locally to relate to Methadone debts. This worker believed that disputes over drug dealing territories could in future lead to the formation of organized/ hierarchical groups which may precipitate gang development.

General miscellaneous observations which directed the subsequent research

Seven of the local professionals interviewed for this research mentioned that in recent years, amongst some young people a reluctance to cross certain geographical borders was detectable. For example, four youth workers mentioned that at one stage, they found it difficult to convince young people from one part of town to attend youth group events in another area. Though they suspected that this reluctance related to intimidation, they were unable to establish any clear explanation or evidence. Areas where this reticence was particularly manifest were between West Bletchley and Lakes Estate; and to a much lesser extent in Beanhill, Coffeehall and Netherfield. It was noted that this concern apparently never extended to movement to and from Central MK. Around 2 or 3 years ago this trepidation apparently faded.

The reason for this resolution, like the original issues, was elusive. Some interviewees suspected that this phenomenon related to a perceived threat of violence which had dissipated. However, professionals from Community Action MK consulted in this research noted that in many cases this reluctance seems to relate to a fairly mundane ambivalence for other estates. They noted that people often express sentiments such as "I never go to that estate, it's boring and horrible down there". Moreover, these

²³ See pp9-11, available at: <http://www.mkiobservatory.org.uk/document.aspx?id=10168&siteID=1026>

²⁴ <http://www.talktofrank.com/drug/mephedrone>

sentiments tend not to be based on direct experience. As such, challenging such negative perceptions is a regular part of the work of the Community Action MK in encouraging greater community cohesion and solidarity. It is likely that this ongoing work has contributed in a subtle though meaningful way in preventing the development of inter-estate tensions.

This issue of young peoples' movement seemed to relate to notions of territory which often preclude gang formation. As such, consideration of the liberty and range of urban movement was identified as a priority for the second stage of the research.

Indeed, the intimate relationship between territory and gang formation which was highlighted in the background literature, was corroborated by the professional experience of one interviewee who had previously worked with young people in a neighbouring borough. This professional noted that the gang affected young people she came into contact with in this role invariably cited protection of, and disputes over geographical borders as the root of gang based animosities and conflicts.

Finally, a member of the YOT based in a neighbouring local authority agreed to be interviewed for this research. This neighbouring local authority is of similar size to MK is currently impacted by gang activity. Understanding the development of gangs in this area is therefore highly valuable for the purposes of early intervention and prevention in MK.

This neighbouring local authority's gang problem is particularly concentrated in two estates – Estate A and Estate B, which are of roughly equal size. Although the gangs are implicated in drug dealing, the nature of the conflict is largely territorial. Gang affiliation is based on residence in a particular postcode. Indeed, there is reason to believe that young people are tacitly affiliated with a given gang merely in virtue of being resident in a particular postcode. Despite only being separated by two much smaller estates, the young people living in Estate A and Estate B have very little cause for contact with one another. For example, in contrast to similar estates in MK, Estate A and B have mutually exclusive school catchment areas. This difference between this neighbouring local authority and MK catchment systems was identified therefore, as a further priority for Stage Two of the research.

Concluding remarks

The findings of this document are correct up to the conclusion of the research in early of 2014. In future issues may emerge which signal the embryonic stages of gang formation. The above analysis clearly highlights the importance of intelligence and resource sharing between partners, in resolving such nascent issues before they are able to develop.

Next Steps

The finding of primary importance to emerge from this initial stage was a confirmation of the hypothesis that MK is currently free from gangs. However, this initial stage was also highly valuable in yielding important insights which directed the subsequent stage of research.

The focus and purpose of this second stage therefore shifted from establishing *if* gangs exist in the city; to understanding *why* they do not exist at present. As such, this second stage involved open ended interviews with young people from across MK in an attempt to identify and understand the reasons for the lack of gangs. The findings of this final stage of the research will be detailed in a document to follow.



SaferMK

Strategic Assessment work stream: Accounting for the absence of gangs in Milton Keynes



www.safermk.com



Available in audio, large print,
Braille and other languages
Tel 01908 252080

SaferMK
Civic Offices
1 Saxon Gate East
Central Milton Keynes
MK9 3EJ

T 01908 252080
E safermk@milton-keynes.gov.uk
W www.safermk.com