

## Street crime and teenagers



ESRC SCHOOL BRIEFINGS

# Street fighting men

*Gangs may not be as well organised or cohesive as people think. Research from Manchester University suggests they may be very different from their stereotyped image. The gangs studied in an anonymous city by Judith Aldridge and Juanjo Medina were ethnically mixed and had no stable leadership.*



In the wake of successful police operations targeted at drug gangs it appeared that there was coordinated drug selling. Members sold mostly cannabis, but operated as individuals. The use of drugs, mainly cannabis, was widespread. The researchers hope their findings will help point the way to more effective responses to gang culture.

School failure was a common thread connecting members of gangs, which tended to evolve from adolescent friendship groups and to dissipate with landmarks of adulthood, such as parenthood or employment.

Most members were exposed to violence, but the researchers found little evidence for the common view that gang violence was related to drug markets. Instead, most violence was personal, and related to friends, romantic relationships and family. Although members spoke of gang loyalty, "we found that jealousy and debt motivated a considerable degree

of within-gang conflict". There was not much evidence of violent ethnic conflicts. Despite common perceptions, gangs were not dominated by boys from ethnic minorities – but gangs in areas with large black populations were more likely to be involved in gun violence. Additionally these gangs received more media, policy and police attention – a situation that brought in extra resources, but reinforced stereotypes.

The use of violence was viewed differently in different parts of the city. For instance, in one area, the masculinity of physical fights was valued, and resorting to guns was seen as 'cowardly'.

Overall, the researchers say the image of the gangster as trigger happy and keen to protect a tough reputation "contrasted with evidence showing that the gun was not the only way to resolve issues on the streets."

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