



Children's Voices

A review of evidence on the subjective wellbeing of children involved in gangs in England

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Acknowledgements

This report was commissioned by the Children's Commissioner's Office. It was written and researched by Kara Apland, Hannah Lawrence, Jeff Mesie and Elizabeth Yarrow at Coram.

Coram is the children's charity that has been supporting vulnerable children for almost 300 years, and is still finding new ways to help children in the UK and worldwide. Coram's vision is that every child has the best possible chance in life, and its mission is to develop, provide and promote best practice in the support of children and young people.

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Introduction

This paper reports the findings from an evidence review of the views, perspectives and experiences of children involved in gangs, on matters related to their subjective wellbeing.

The report forms part of a series of studies examining the subjective wellbeing of vulnerable groups of children in England. This series was produced as part of a larger project focused on improving evidence about childhood vulnerability.

Objectives of the review

The main objectives of the review were:

- > to identify, appraise and synthesize published qualitative evidence on the subjective wellbeing of children in detention in England
- > to draw out key findings and conclusions from the evidence, as well as identifying any important gaps.

Scope

The review was limited to the exploration of qualitative evidence concerning the subjective views and experiences of children in England, published from 2007 to 2017.

The review focused on studies that captured and presented the direct voices, and first-hand accounts, of children. Adult perspectives on childhood experiences, and studies with excessive mediation and intervention by the author interrupting children's accounts, were avoided or deprioritised. The team considered accounts by children of their own experiences, as well as their perceptions and reports of the experiences of their peers.

The review only considered literature containing evidence on the experiences and views of vulnerable children ages 17 years or under. Retrospective accounts of childhood, provided by adults from 18 years onwards, were generally avoided, due to the methodological limitations of such studies; however, decisions regarding the inclusion of studies containing retrospective accounts were made on a case-by-case basis (see Appendix 1: Quality appraisal tool).

Methodological criteria for the inclusion of studies were broad and flexible (see Appendix 1). There was no minimum sample size threshold for the inclusion of a study in the review; given the qualitative, personal and subjective focus of the research, diary studies of a single young person were considered eligible for review.

Finally, the review prioritised studies which had entailed the collection of primary data; secondary literature based on analysis of pre-existing data was generally avoided, except where this information was necessary to offset important gaps in primary evidence

Methodology

Rapid review approach

The ten week timetable for the project demanded the use of rapid review methodology. Whilst the review aimed to be as comprehensive as possible, strict time constraints necessitated placing limits on the numbers of articles reviewed, such that either:

- > thirteen items/publications were reviewed, or
- > saturation was achieved and two or more researchers agreed that continuation was unlikely to yield any new insights.

Search strategy and terms

A mixed search strategy was adopted, which included both manual and automated methods. Automated methods involved entering combinations of relevant search terms into databases, digital libraries and search engines. Given the rapid nature of the review a 'guided' approach was adopted to conducting automated searches: rather than systematically reviewing all hits resulting from a certain combination of search terms. Researchers scanned search results for relevant papers to review, and ran additional targeted searches when it appeared that all relevant papers had been retained. In addition, sources were accessed through bibliographies and works cited pages of shortlisted publications. Finally, particularly given the focused nature of the literature search, an independent expert was asked to identify any key papers that related to the subject.

Automated searches were conducted primarily on Campbell Collaboration, Google, Google Scholar and JSTOR. Searches included combinations of: a context related term (such as "England"), a population related term (such as "child"), a method related term (for example "qualitative") and a relevant indicator (for example "gang").

Researchers experimented with different combinations of search terms to obtain the most relevant set of results. The search terms and operators used were adjusted according to the requirements and restrictions of specific databases.

Search terms for children involved in gangs

Context related terms: England, UK, Britain

Population related terms: child*, young*, juvenile*, girl*, boy*, infant*, toddler, minor*, adolescent*, teen*, youth*, pre-pube*, pube*.

Methodology related terms: perspectives, views, voice*, qualitative

Relevant indicators: gang*, street*, illegal*, offen(d)*, anti-social, crim(inal)*, violence*
delinquen(cy)

Researchers conducted an initial scan of titles and abstracts to discard all immediately irrelevant hits. Items which appeared to meet basic relevance requirements were retrieved as full texts, and retained for further review.

Quality appraisal

Quality appraisal criteria (Appendix 1) were developed to as part of a quality appraisal tool to evaluate the relevance, coherence, methodological suitability, objectivity and ethics of each retained study. Those studies that failed to meet key quality criteria were excluded from the review.

Thirty studies were identified as potentially relevant to investigating the subjective wellbeing of children involved in gangs. Twenty-three of these were excluded during the quality appraisal process and seven studies were retained. Details about retained studies are included in Appendix 2: Profile of literature.

Synthesis of evidence and drafting the report

Subsequent to quality review, the team extracted and coded data on children’s subjective experiences and wellbeing from selected studies. This was done through the use of NVivo software.

Wherever possible, researchers prioritised coding direct quotes from children (rather than focusing on the language and analysis of study authors), in order to foreground children’s own articulations, views and perspectives of relevant matters.

Ethics

The study was shared with the chair of Coram’s Research Ethics Committee. The chair judged the project to be outside of the criteria for a full ethical review (for example there were no human subjects included in the study and no personal data was accessed).

The study was delivered in line with Coram’s safeguarding and data protection policies. The staff allocated to the review had enhanced disclosure and barring service (DBS) checks.

Limitations in the literature

In 2009 Young described the gang literature as “sparse” with few ethnographic studies. Since this date there has been more UK research about gangs and this increase in literature may have been promoted by the Government focus on gangs after the 2011 riots in England.

The review has identified sources focusing on girls’ experience of gangs and male gang members’ views about girls involved with gangs. Girls were seen as an “invisible group” in the literature up until the last few years (Young 2009). Limitations in the literature is also discussed in the Emerging themes section.

Children involved in gangs: definitions and subgroups

There were multiple described definitions of “a gang” discovered in the literature and consensus on what is meant by this term was lacking (Young 2009). In this report the following definition is used, which has been taken from the Centre for Social Justice in 2009. According to this definition, a gang is:

“A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who:

- (1) see themselves as a discernible group
- (2) engage in a range of criminal activity
- (3) identify or lay claim over territory
- (4) have some form of identifying structural feature
- (5) are in conflict with other, similar gangs.”

It has been estimated that 6% of young people aged ten to 19 years are gang members (British Crime and Justice Survey 2006). Based on the Office of National Statistics 2015 mid-year population figure this approximates to 373,000 ten to 19 year olds involved in gangs in England.

Children involved in gangs cannot be viewed as a mutually exclusive vulnerable group of children: children in gangs typically have multiple and intersecting forms of vulnerability.

Where these vulnerabilities cross over with other vulnerable groups of children included in the list of 32 groups that have been developed as part of the wider Children’s Commissioner’s measuring vulnerability project, this is noted and highlighted in the analysis where possible. The literature reveals that the vulnerabilities of children involved in gangs particularly intersect with children who are homeless (some gangs are only made up of children who live on the streets) (Smeaton 2009), children who have experienced abuse and trauma and children from non-intact families.

Findings

Young people's perception of a gang

There were varying views from children in the literature about what constituted a gang and whether they would class their involvement with a group of peers as gang membership. Some children resisted the use of the label "gang" completely. These children viewed their group of peers as "friendships" or "crews". This was especially true when their peer group had formed gradually over time:

"We're all just friends. We've known each other for a long time. We've grown up the same, like we know each other's family and stuff like that. We go to each other's 'ouses..." Young woman aged 14 to 20 (Young 2009)

"... I don't call it a gang; it's not really a gang but I wouldn't know how to define it. I really wouldn't. But it's like one or two days a week, depending upon what's happening, you go out with your pals, go to a pub, get pissed, start with a couple of lines of coke, go to a game and just do the bastards, know what I mean?" Young man, discussing his membership of a football firm (Smeaton 2009)

Some children did not label their peer group as a "gang" but recognised its "gang-like" qualities. One girl justified these activities on account of the disadvantage that she had experienced in her life:

"I'm not proud of myself for doing the crimes I've done. I wish I'd done well in school [...] and got a good job and money in the bank and not 'ave to go out and do bad things, but sometimes in life you just gotta do things cause you need stuff." Young woman aged 14 to 20 (Young 2009).

Other young people saw a distinction between groups and gangs based on the levels of violence inflicted on those outside of the gang:

"[real gangs] ave got a tag, that go 'round thinkin' they're bad and being 'orrible to people – like 'ang round and offend together. [...] They're 'orrible, d'you know what I mean? I've known them to do 'orrible things [...] like goin' round to an 'ouse and if there's a person in there they don't like, they stab 'im up; like be 'orrible to 'is children, be 'orrible to their mother and things like that! [...] They don't hurt each other, they're tight – they got each other's back. But if you hurt anyone in their gang you'd be in trouble." Young woman aged 14 to 20 (Young 2009).

Conversely, some children used the label "gang" as a badge of pride, to separate them from the "wannabee" young people. These children saw gang membership as much more than just territory and friendship, it was about loyalty, interests and attitude:

"When I hear people say about gangs, it makes me laugh because they're not a gang They're not dedicated to that gang; their heart's not set on their gang. ... (Where hearts are set on a gang) if there's a war going on between two gangs, they'll shoot until the last bullets are gone. It don't matter if there's eight men down there and six men down there, it will keep going 'cos that's what (some) gangs are about. They'll fight and they'll fight for their territory or their reputation cos' you've got to have reputation in a gang. So you've got this

new gang now and they've got to prove to other people and other gangs and word's got to get about on the street. ... If you take my gang, for instance, we need to obviously prove to other gangs that we ain't no pussy hole and we ain't gonna take no shit." Young man (Smeaton 2009)

"You've heard of the postcode thing, yeah? But for my gang it was more than that. It's about how we look, how we dress, what colours we wear, how we carry ourselves, how we act, what weapons we carry, what music we're into, how we treat one another and other people." Young man (Smeaton 2009)

"It's not turf, it's respect." 16 year old young man (Kintrea 2008).

Children's experiences of gang involvement

This section examines children's experiences of being in a gang. As explored below, included literature indicates that children's experiences in gangs varies according to their gender and status within the gang structure. Due to these complexities as well as: variations in different gang structures, the individual circumstances of different children, and the fundamental challenge in defining a gang, it can be difficult to find a common experience for children involved. Nevertheless, a number of common themes, emerge from the literature concerning children's experiences of gangs, including: control and manipulation of girls by male gang members, experiences of physical and sexual violence and lack of choice and opportunity emerge from children's voices.

Gendered dimensions of gang experience

"Boys are predators, girls are prey, innit?" 16 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

Girls were viewed as a disposable group that serviced the needs of male gang members. This view was held by both boys and girls. Young men and young women reported that girls were commonly victims of sexual violence. Girls were described using depersonalised terms, were not viewed as equals and were seen as serving the sexual and emotional needs of male gang members:

"But boys in gangs don't treat girls in gangs the same... They just treat 'em like anything innit. Cos they know really from your status, being in your gang, you can treat that girl however you want because if she runs away there's always gonna be a next girl that will come to you" 16 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

"They just get passed around the guys, that is mainly their role, yeah... and then from once they've been around the circle or like the gang or whatever, then they're no longer of use and you probably won't see them girls again, coz obviously their use has been, all that they've got to offer has been given... Yeah then they'll just, they'll see the next girl or whatever, or the next group of girls and the same thing will happen over and over and over again" 16 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

"Competition as to who can beat [have sex with] that ting first" 15 year old young man (Beckett 2013).

Gender and status within the gang

Children's individual positions within gangs were found to affect both boys' and girls' levels of vulnerability and exposure to violence and abuse. Status in the gang appeared to be a particularly important factor affecting girls' experience. For girls there were several levels in the gang hierarchy that they could occupy. The bottom strata of the hierarchy were "link" girls who were known to have casual sex with one or more of the male gang members. These "link" girls were most at risk from violence, exploitation and exposure to illegal activity and were spoken about in a disrespectful and hateful way by children. "Bitch", "ting", "junge", "sket", "ho", "skank" (Beckett 2013) were all words used to describe this group by both boys and girls. Girls described how they did not want to be associated with this "link" label:

"... a link is just trash" 15 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

"[Girl A]: ... I hate it when boys call you a ting, I hate it when boys call you 'boom', well that's not as bad but I still don't like it.

[Girl B]: I'm not a link and we're not doing a ting – no don't say that

[Girl C]: Boys like using the word 'link' cos it bigs them up, like yea I'm linking that, or I've done a ting with her already.

[Girl A]: We can't lie, we use it too, but I don't like being referred to as a link."
14 and 15 year old young women, focus group (Firmin 2011)

Being labelled and viewed as a "link" was found to affect how girls were viewed and treated by their peers, exposing them to experiences of (sexual) harassment and violence. In particular, being labelled a "ho" was perceived to remove a girl's right to withhold sexual consent and control over who they chose to have sex with:

"If she looks like a ho then the boys will treat her like a ho... and she has no choice but to accept how they're treating her ..." 17 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

"... If she's a slag, she ain't equal. Boys just treat her like shit and that's the only thing. Don't get your name around if you're not ready to get violated" 15 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

"It does depend on what type of girl you are. If you're easy to get, then you're easy to get. Everyone's got you straightaway. Cos if one member of the gang finds out a girl's easy to get, she'll get passed around" 14 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

"You can catch diseases, get called a slag, and then other people will be like ah go and have a go on her like she's been round the lot of us." 14 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

"Link" girls' experience of isolation transcended into other environments outside the gang. These girls were not only found to be rejected by their peers within the gang, but also by their peers in other situations, such as school:

"When they go back to school no-one really wants to talk to you cos you're known as a ho, and no-one really wants to associate themselves with a ho because then people think if she's hanging out with a ho she must be one as well" 15 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

By contrast if boys experienced high levels of sexual activity then this was viewed as positive factor and improved their reputation:

“Boys get rated and girls get slated. So basically could be the same age, girls and boys, they have sex, if anyone finds out, the boy will get ‘oooh, good boy, good boy’ but the girl will be like ‘oi, you’re a sket, you’re this, you’re that.” 14 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

Girls who were in a relationship with gang members, or who were the mother of a gang member’s child, were a level higher in the gang status grading. These girls were more respected and protected, (albeit less so than female family members such as gang members’ sisters or mothers): “they would know not to mess with my girlfriend” (16 year old young man, Beckett 2013); “wifey is different cos that’s what you wanna be, wifey material is decent ...” (15 year old young woman, Beckett 2013). There were, however, differing views from boys about the levels of protection they would offer to their girlfriends. For example:

“I’ve been in the situation before where a girl, like cos she’s done it [sex] for me she thinks that I’m protecting her now, so like this thing when someone’s come after her and she’s phoning my phone thinking that I’m going to protect her, and I’m thinking like you’re only that to me. You weren’t nothing to me, and like don’t think you’re protected because you wanted to do, I never told you” 16 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

“Relationship girls” protection within the gang was often fragile and dependent on the stability and longevity of their relationship with male gang members, and the slippage between “link” girls and “girlfriends” rendered their positions precarious:

“Like that’s my bit, which is a little bit different it’s in between wifey and link, you bit could know more than wifey could a business thing too, it’s like a bit on the side, like if your wifey’s had a baby and she’s feeling a bit sore he knows he’s got that one person he can go to.” 16 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

“Rape, tied up, tortured, other people looking for her cause they are looking for her boyfriend, kidnapped, girls that are in the gang can target her when she doesn’t even know that she was in a gang cos of what her boyfriend has been doing, you don’t realise but when it happens you realise, believe me.” 16 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

Young women described the male gang member as being in control of the relationship and that it was his decision as to whether the relationship continued:

“And they like pick and choose when they wanna see you, when it fits in with other stuff they’re doing, and then they see you and then they drop you as soon as they’re done with you, and don’t care about you.” 16 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

“Relationship” girls, as well as other female family members, were also found to be at risk of violence from rival gang members:

“Rape, tied up, tortured, other people looking for her cause they are looking for her boyfriend, kidnapped, girls that are in the gang can target her when she doesn’t even know that she was in a gang cos of what her boyfriend has been doing, you don’t realise but when it happens you realise, believe me.” 16 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

“Their problems are your problems and that’s it; if they’re looking to kill him they’re looking to kill you ... Girls get raped just cos of who they brother is and no-one will talk about it after”. 15 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

“... I got assaulted. I got punched in my face three times but I hit back as well because I know how to fight, so when I was punching him he just ran off, but I actually got assaulted because of who my brother was” 16 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

“Gangster girls” were at the apex of the female gang hierarchy. These girls adopted male personas and were not in danger from their peers. These girls reported a different type of relationship with male gang members than the other female positions within the gang. Their friendships with males were more relaxed and not exploitative, nor based on sexual relationships:

“...the boys like to ‘ave a good time....they mek you laff” Young women aged 14 to 20 (Young 2009)

“...none of the boys are good friends; they’re just people I see every now and then.” Young women aged 14 to 20 (Young 2009).

These girls reported more freedom and choice compared with the girls in other positions in the gang. Escape from boredom was cited as a reason that they wanted to be in a gang in contrast with “links” and “wifeys” who reported that they wanted to join the gang for protection, status and love.

Reasons for joining a gang

Children reported being in poor circumstances before joining a gang. Children described feelings of powerless, turbulent relationships with family, often underpinned by violence, and disenfranchisement from institutions such as schools and colleges. Lack of opportunity was also reported as a reason for joining a gang, stating, for example: “there was nothing else to do” (Smeaton 2009). One young person explained:

“They ain’t on the road because they wanna be. They’re on the road because they are trying to pass the time ... If you look at when young people get sucked into gangs, it’s 14 upwards ... if their mum’s not making money, how are they getting money? So there’s no other way to get money, but to turn to the streets.” 17 year old young woman (Young 2011)

Children described that the areas they grew up in as “shit ‘oles” (Young 2009) and underprivileged but maintained a strong loyalty to and identification with the area, and reported that “territory” was a significant reason for joining the gang:

“For me, it’s like letting someone know who you are or what area you come from. Yeah, just showing everyone in [area] and other boroughs about where you live and what goes on here.” 15 year old young man (Young 2011).

Some young people made a choice to join a gang and others saw it as an inevitability because of where they lived or family links:

“I don’t think people necessarily want to be part of a gang; I don’t want to be; it just happens. The whole reason I was part of it [the gang] was because of my postcode. You’re born into it, basically. ... It happens because you’re raised up in the wrong area and that’s it.” Young man (Smeaton 2009)

Peer pressure, violence and coercion were also found to be significant factors:

“Sometimes the people that you chill with want you to do certain things that you don’t want to do, but you have to do it because you’re part of that crew, you’re part of it.” 16 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

“And you’ve got all of them going, you fucking will do that, and then what are you meant to do? Get battered until you give in? You just do it.” 16 year old woman (Firmin 2011)

Several of the quotations from young people suggest that acquiring power, status and potentially material goods was a driver of joining a gang. For example:

“Reputation; reputation and not looking like an idiot.” Young man (Smeaton 2009)

“... I class myself as a Chav. I wear all the Burberry gear and all that. I still am (a Chav) to an extent but I’m not a nasty cunt any more. I’ve calmed down a lot I think it was just ‘cos they look different, they acted different; they acted like they were scared of you all the time so you thought ‘right, you’re scared of me so I’ll give you reason to be scared of me’. Not only that, I knew they always had hash on them so I was like ‘give us your hash, give us your mobile phone’. That’s how we had a good time.” Young man (Smeaton 2009).

Some girls indicated that they wanted to get involved in a relationship with a gang member to gain protection and also to be loved:

“It’s a fact of knowing nothing’s going to happen to you – nothing in this world is going to happen to you while you’ve got him as your boyfriend and I think that’s more security – and they buy you everything” 17 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

“... like they get really protective over ya and it’s like ah they care about me.” 15 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

Attraction to the “bad boy” image of masculinity projected by male gang youth was also reportedly a reason why girls became involved with gang members:

“If a boy’s doing a lot of crime on the roads, girls think it’s cool. So girls wouldn’t even care how he is on the inside, they just care because he’s got a name because his name’s on everybody’s lips. I’d say that’s what will attract a girl to a boy in a gang to be honest” 17 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

“Like if he could kill someone, or people thought he could, then yea I’m not gonna lie, he’s gonna be attractive to me.” 17 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

Despite these pull factors drawing young people into gangs, a number of young people spoke of the damage and dangers that characterise young people’s experiences within gangs, explaining how joining a gang could ruin young people’s life chances and cause an unsettled way of life:

“But that’s what gangs are about; gangs are fucked up.” Young man (Smeaton 2009)

“All the trouble you get into; get arrested, mostly every day. It’s not right.” Young man (Smeaton 2009)

“Basically if she settles for somebody who isn’t gang based, she’s going to be a lot better off. I’m not saying she’s going to be treated better by this guy, but she won’t get into too much trouble... the whole dominant male thing in gangs... there are people back from all the gangs round here who will get girls involved which then will mess up their lives if you know what I mean and they will become, as you say, sort of passed on to the next guy and the next and so on and its really terrible... I mean I’ve known girls who, not drastically young, but from at least the age of 12 who’ve had this kind of stuff happen to them” 16 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

One boy described developing a “survival mentality”, and emphasised the need for adaptability, given the adverse circumstances that characterise young people’s experiences in gangs:

“Whoever’s ‘on road’, they know this. They’ve gone through thinking about life’s messed up, so now they’re like ... boom! They’ve come to terms with it and they’re just adaptin’ to the situation and will do whatever they need to get through it.” 15 year old young man (Young 2011)

Experiences of violence

Children’s experiences of violence within gangs were found to be pervasive.

Sexual violence

Sexual violence towards girls was commonly reported by boys and girls. Incidents of rape by individual and multiple perpetrators were discussed. Sex within gangs was frequently typified by disrespect for, manipulation of and violence towards women. Girls were passed around the gang for sex like the male gang members’ property:

“Like the person can get raped or get passed on to their friend, or, like, fuck them and go, then pass them to their friend and that Boys go to meet, like, tell the girl to come meet them, and when they’re there, he doesn’t tell her that he’s with the other people, and so when she comes in the house and then, like, basically have sex with her, then he tells his friend to go in as well to have sex with the girl as well, and then they just start taking turns and that, and then sometimes the girl says stop, but they just carry on” 17 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

“So as we come out of the living room, we was in the hallway and I’ve knocked on the bathroom door and I was like ‘can I use the toilet please’ and there was a lad in there and I could hear a girl screaming, and I obviously go ‘open the door’ and he wouldn’t do it, so my boyfriend booted in the door, and when we went in there we found her bent across a bath backwards and him on top trying to kiss her and her top all ripped, and he is in a gang” 17 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

Reports of sex being used as a means of exerting male power and control of girls were frequent in young people’s accounts of sex, relationships and violence. For example:

“...It’s not about sex and relationships, it’s more about power, having that control” 16 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

“The girl like, she will see it as rape because she was getting forced. He will see it as ‘I’m in control, I’m the boss, this is what’s going to happen... He feels in control of the streets anyway so he’ll feel in control of anything ...” 15 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

When discussing real and hypothetical incidents of sexual violence, boys typically avoided using the label of “rape” and had a blurred understanding of what constituted sexual consent (viewing it as the absence of the word “no”):

“Not rape, it’s just like that girl had wanted it to happen, or not necessarily wanted it to happen but she basically asked for it but she didn’t ask for it, if you know what I mean Say I was talking to a girl and I’m saying to her this weekend I’m coming to your house, or asked her even not told her, and she was like yeah all right then. But I’m saying I’m coming with a couple of my friends and she’s like yeah all right then. If I got there and I was with seven people and she was just her and her friend and she let us all inside, we didn’t force our way inside she just let us inside... That’s basically her asking for it, innit, really... She could easily speak up really... We’re not rapists, we’re not gonna pin her down and have our way with her...” 16 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

“He will tell her to come meet him while he’s with all his friends...then she would come and then realise that the whole gang’s there and most of them will probably end up having sex with her as well, if it’s not his actual girl... the boy that tells the girl to come will try and convince her to have sex with all his other friends as well. He would go first and then he will just convince her after he’s finished to have sex with like second, the third, the fourth boy, the fifth and it goes on and on [the girl is] not really on it 100% but they will try persuade her so it’s like not really classed as rape if that makes sense, like they’re not raping her because she is allowing it. I’ve never known any of my friends to rape a girl but I’ve known of gang members that have like had sex with a girl one after other, another and so on but they persuade the girl first to make sure. She’s not coming to meet them to have sex with like ten boys but she’ll probably end up doing that cos she’s persuaded and cos she likes the first boy that she was with. She will probably do it for his sake because she wants to be with him or she likes him but the boy don’t really wanna be with her, he just wants sex” 16 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

Boys’ perceptions of issues of sexuality, power, and consent were sometimes distorted as evidenced by presentations of themselves as victims of sexual exploitation and manipulation, wielded by girls:

“They’ll just use their sexuality to manipulate us ... She could be planning to set me up or anything really. She could be planning anything. From when I was younger my cousin used to say to me, rule number one you never bring a girl back to your house, you never ever bring a girl back to where your family sleep, so I never use to bring girls there. When I used to link girls... either I go back to her house if it’s not in one of them areas, it happens in a park... From when I was younger people have been saying to me girls are just wicked” 16 year old male (Beckett 2013)

Young people also reported how male gang members may be pressured from other gang members to participate in acts of sexual violence, especially in group situations:

“I’ve done it before myself like, there’s been one girl there and she’s fully on it, she’s saying ‘all you’s can, all of you’s’ and there’s like six guys in a room ‘all of you’s’ and I’m thinking ‘no’. Yeah, I’ve seen, it’s horrible and I don’t like, I don’t like that stuff, man ‘cause the girl looks sad, oh it looks a mess after she’s gone...” 16 year old male (Beckett 2013)

“One of them told me that he couldn’t actually go through with it because the girl was crying and he didn’t wanna see that... But sometimes you have to do it. If you’re a boy you have to do it because if the guys see that you don’t wanna do it, that you’re scared or something, they’ll use that against you. Yeah, he felt pressured” 16 year old female (Beckett 2013)

Rape was found to be used strategically as a weapon against rival gangs, for example, a boy might rape a rival gang member’s sister to “disrespect him”, highlighting the sense of male ownership and entitlement over young female gang members, and the use and exchange of girls as property. Young people reported cases of girls being forced into having sex or forced into a relationship with rival gang members as “set ups” or “bait” to find out information from the other gang and/ or get revenge:

“Like, sometimes you have, trouble with the geezer, but at the same time, like, he’s got a sister or something like that, or, and then, kind of, like, you’re kind of like fucking his sister just to violate him, just to take the piss out of him, really. Obviously, that’s going to make the geezer more angry, knowing that you’re actually fucking his sister... Like, they can kidnap a person’s sister and threaten her and probably beat her up and that, and then make her sleep with you and that, or rape her, or they can get her family, like, one of the family members and then hold them for ransom or something like that” 17 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

“It’s like my best friend who had a relationship with someone and they didn’t know that he was in a gang... he was like about 18 and my friend’s like the same age as me, so 14 and 18... and he was getting her to do things like sleep with this person to see what he does – ‘see if he says anything about me. Get him to trust you and everything’ ... I was just really shocked when she told me that she actually did it because she was scared in case he did something to her. She said that she did it about three times with the same person and then came back and like this guy she slept with and her boyfriend ended up having a massive fight, like because obviously he’d begin to trust her and he was saying things about her boyfriend, so then she went back and told him what he was saying, they ended up fighting... I think this guy ended up getting stabbed or something but he’s still alive” 14 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

“That’s another way of setting up a boy. They could take photos of him doing stuff like licking a girl or have oral sex but with younger people, like boys shouldn’t be doing that, having oral sex with girls because it’s just, it’s not right... But if they do do it, they will try and keep it secret and not tell anyone as well, but some girls will like bait them – or taking pictures and then showing everyone” 16 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

“[Girl A]: Set-ups – like a girl from one gang they send her to go find someone from another gang and then they come and deal with him.

[Girl B]: Sometimes it’s not fair cos they put you up to do it.

[Girl A]: Like you literally don't have a choice about it, they will get you, they will kill you instead basically so you have to."

14 year old young women, focus group (Firmin 2011)

Sexual violence was also used as a punishment for girls:

"There was a girl who got gang raped. She lost drugs she was holding for her boyfriend. He'd given her a package to hold and there was a family gathering and the package went missing. She tried to tell the boy. She said 'I'll make it up to you; I'll do anything. So he said 'line up' and she said ok, but she didn't turn up and then she put on Facebook 'my ex-boyfriend's a waster'. So then he said 'meet me, lets beat' but he didn't go. He sent his boys and they raped her" 15 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

"One time a girl was going out with a boy from one gang and she slept with a boy from another gang and the boy found out ...so he told her to come to some house one time and at the house was 15 boys just waiting for that one girl and she had to sleep, have sex and give oral to all of them boys, like forced" 16 year old young woman (Beckett 2013).

The use of sex in exchange for protection and goods, including drugs, and the procurement and sale of girls in exchange for profit was also reported:

"My lot got girls off the street, give them drugs and then get them to sleep with the men – they've fed it them say for a few months and then they will get them to sleep with the men... but they take all the money off them and give them £10 and give them crack when they've just made a lot more than £10 from what they're doing" 17 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

"There's boys around the area that show up, like sell weed and everything, and if you don't have no money on you and you want to buy some, they would ask you if you want to do anything with them to get it for free... I remember the last time I asked them to give it to me on tick... the boy was about 20 years old and I was 14. I'm like 'I'm 14 – are you mad?' and he's like 'oh, come to the block, innit... I'll give you £10 worth of weed'" 16 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

Incidents of rape were seen as predominantly the fault of the woman by both boys and girls, particularly when girls were viewed as being sexually active. Girls who were raped were described as "wrong-ens" (Firmin 2011) and seen as "flaunting" their sexuality which led to them being perceived as undeserving of sympathy from peers. Even if children did not regard the rape to be the fault of the girl there was an acceptance that if a girl had previously had sexual relationships with gang members then they were expected to have sex with the other members of the gang:

"Well this was kind of her fault so ... well not her fault cos no-one deserves to get a rape but she started it... this girl set up a boy... he got beaten up really badly, like hospitalised so what they did, one day she was walking round where he was... and they saw her and they basically dragged her into a car and she was ...basically they raped her for what she did." 14 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

“They’re just looking to get raped...So if they get raped it’s their own fault, because they’re the ones flaunting it out there, there no point going grinding up on someone, it’s your fault basically”, 15 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

[Girl A]: There was a girl in our school, she’s not in this school no more, and she was gang-raped.

[Interviewer]: Whose fault was it?

[Girl A]: Hers.

[Girl B]: But this girl she still wears miniskirts and that after it happened.”

14- 15 year old young women, focus groups (Firmin 2011)

Not all young people, however, reported finding rape acceptable. Some children expressed abhorrence at this type of violence, and expressed empathy and concern for female victims of rape and sexual exploitation:

“There was a video sent round on Bebo, well there’s been a couple sent round, and there was a girl lying there in a bed, and one lad come and then he would leave. Another lad would come and he’d leave, and I felt sorry for the girl... She was just lying there. She wasn’t doing nothing, so you don’t know she’s been told ‘you got to lie there’ or you don’t know if she’s just said ‘yeah, do it’ 17 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

“This girl came to school upset really. She had sex with every boy in a gang just to be part of their gang, and it was really terrible when I heard about this, and I do remember, she came to school crying... I think it probably was under pressure, because she wanted to be a part of them and they gave her an option” 16 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

“I’ve never seen a girl get raped. I wouldn’t let a girl get raped. I’d punch the boy that raped her 100% because then I’d think just imagine if that was my mum or my little sister” 15 year old young man (Beckett 2013).

Physical violence

Children reported accounts of physical violence in all the studies reviewed. These accounts included fighting between gangs:

“I was about fourteen when I got my first proper scrap. I shat myself, I really did ‘cos they put me on with about six big boys. There was about twenty of us and more of them and I thought ‘this is suicide, it really is’. I was about the youngest there. Anyway, I ended up having a bottle put over the top of me head and I had to go to hospital and have stitches on the top of my head.” Young man (Smeaton 2009)

“... if he’s fighting [referring to a more violent friend], I wouldn’t just watch him fight, I’d join in ... I’ll get involved ‘cos I’m not going to stand there and see my friend getting rushed by somebody...” 17 year old young man (Young 2011)

“If you look at someone for three seconds constantly in the eye, that’s it! He’s coming over to you to ask you what you are looking at. People have been shot over looking at people.” 17 year old young man (Young 2011)

Girls were sometimes paid by male gang members to attack other girls, once again highlighting the control that the men exercised over these young women:

“It’s like when something happens with one of the guys...oh this girl cheated on me... can you sort this girl out. It’s like sometimes they’d come up to us... ‘Here’s 20 quid, go and beat up that girl’... the most I’ve ever been handed is £80, and I think that was to beat up three girls.” 14 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

Some young women, however, sparked fights with other girls because of “petty stuff” (Young 2011):

“I’m not gonna lie to you, I’ve beefed girls for looking at my sister the wrong way...” 16 year old young woman (Young 2011).

Other girls were less likely to react physically:

“Most girls don’t fight unless another be starting “screwing” and callin’ them names. Most girls argue over man dem and over who’s been lookin’ at who and saying this and dat’. This situation can something get outta’ and ...” 17 year old young woman (Young 2009).

Physical violence was reportedly fuelled by feelings of pride. Young people felt that they could not walk away if another young person had been violent (verbally or physically) towards them. This is not surprising considering the importance of reputation and status to the gang members. Violent retaliation was seen as an accepted and normal response that was an “ongoing cycle” (Young 2011):

“Retaliation is always a definite action that’s always taken. We can’t have them coming over here and doing that and we don’t do anything” 16 year old young man (Young 2011)

“You have to remember people bear grudges so things don’t always finish. They just stay for another time. [So] if I’m going to go for you then I might as well snuff you because I ain’t having you come back at me.” 16 year old young man (Young 2011)

“That’s not how it is. That’s. ... it [not reacting] will haunt you like, like a gash! Like you walked away from that beef, yeah. [It’s like] anyone could have her up, yeah. Certain things that’s gonna slip and they will call you ‘slipping’.” 15 year old young woman (Young 2011).

Pride was also found to be a driver of intimate partner violence:

“Cos they think like it takes away their pride, like if you’re with their friends and you’re a bit cheeky or you say something they don’t like they’ll drag you by your hair or something.” 15 year old young woman (Firmin 2011).

Access to institutions, help and support

Young people reported lacking trust and confidence in institutions and services and fear the consequences of telling their story because of risks to their safety and loyalty. Girls frequently expressed feelings of fear and anxiety about reporting their involvement in gangs, their experience of violence and their involvement in criminal activity. Girls stated that reporting these incidents would increase their risk of harm:

“She’ll be scared, they will make her not even wanna speak again, she probably would never speak again she’ll be that scared, she wouldn’t be able to tell no-one, it will be that bad. She wouldn’t know how to explain so...” 15 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

“She can (get help) but she shouldn’t, she would put herself in even more danger, she’s risking her life basically, because if anyone found out that she had been to the police about a gang then they’d be after her.” 14 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

“What would you report it [rape] for, that makes no sense. What’s the point of telling someone, only worse will happen to you. At the end of the day you’re fit, you’re healthy – move on!” 14 year old young woman.” (Firmin 2011).

Girls’ distrust of institutions transcended into schools. Girls indicated that they were not able to speak to teachers about their situation because of a fear of the information being inappropriately shared:

“... all teachers chat in the staff room; they say they won’t say anything and then the next thing you know the other teachers are looking at you and the whole school knows.” 15 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

“[Girl A]: I don’t have many teachers that I can talk to.”

“[Girl B]: Na all of mine are grasses.”

14 to 16 year old young women, focus group (Firmin 2011)

“If she’s saying it to someone, obviously you never know who they’ll talk to, pass it to someone and it just goes round and then that’s how everyone knows. Obviously you can only tell certain people your stuff.” Young women aged 13 to 28 (Firmin 2011)

“...it depends on what sort of information you’ve gone to tell them about. If you’ve gone and told the teacher that you are holding a gun for someone else, they’re going to have to call the police aren’t they. They’d [teachers] start ringing homes and that.... ‘cause they say it’s confidential and then one minute it’s not...telling your mum this, that and the other yeah. They just could phone your mum and go ‘hey, did you know? and you’re like what!?’” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

This lack of faith in institutions and information sharing presented a barrier to girls’ ability to exit gangs. There was also some confusion reported by girls about where to go to access help. Girls seemed to feel trapped in their circumstances with no way out. In particular, girls did not know where to go when they were victims of domestic violence (Firmin 2011):

“How do you get help? What do you do? Who do you get help from? Who do you go to and tell, ‘Yeah, I’ve got my boyfriend’s gun in my house?’ You can’t really tell no-one that.” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

Family and friends they could trust were seen as the first point of support:

“Their mum or their dad, that’s where they step in ... that’s where they’re meant to be. You don’t need no counsellor or nothing. You’ve got to think yeah back in 1800 did people have counsellors and that? Did cavemen go to counsellors if they had a problem? No.” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

“I feel like I can tell [my friend] anything and it’s stored there and it will never get repeated. You need to find someone who really can keep their mouth shut. Like people who know things and you’ve never heard them say.” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

“I only trust my friends and my family.” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

“If someone was doing drugs or anything or getting into trouble with gangs, they will more likely turn to their sister for help than their mother...I have an older brother, so if I got into trouble, I would tell him, because obviously I feel the sense of security because like he knows what can be done.” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

Girls believed that fathers played a more important role than mothers in supporting gang involved young people:

“Dads would do a better job than mums...I’m backing as a boy you’d look up to your dad and listen to him more than a mum...when my dad died that’s when I didn’t give a shit no more.” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

“It’s like your dad is your idol, when you’re a kid. He’s the person you look up to. Because he’s more powerful.” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

“[Fathers are] more direct, more abrupt about it. When my dad says something, I just do it. When my mum does, I just try and argue out of it.” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

Children felt strongly that they would not go to the police because of lack in faith of the support they would provide and because it would be present a risk to their safety and the service would not offer protection. Police were seen as unsympathetic to their situation:

“We don’t believe that police are there to help us... When I’ve seen my dad get arrested the police was hard on him, grips him up and push his hands behind his back and that, and it’s not like he’s resisting, they had him on the floor outside. There’s no need for that.” 16 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

“Let me give you an example of why people don’t [go to the police]. Because if you go to the police station and say ‘this gang member raped me’ that gang member might be found guilty and go to jail, but remember he’s part of a gang. So all the ones in the gang, 500 people, 400 people, will come back to you, to your house. Could go to your family’s house, you know. So you might as well keep it on the low and move on with your life innit... If you go to the police, that’s the wrong move. That’s the worst thing a person could do... It’ll come back cos with gangsters they got to win innit. They never give up” 17 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

“Ah no, if she wants to die go ahead.” 15 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

“If it was me personally, and I was in that situation, I wouldn’t go to the police...Not because of any relationship that I had with the police, but the fact is aftercare, yeah, as [he] said, there’s no aftercare. Understand? Maybe they say, ‘okay, you can move off to Bangladesh’.

Why are you really gonna wanna move to Bangladesh? Or they can change your description. You have to change your whole life some of the time just for them to get a case.” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

“You get nicked and then you get killed afterwards for snitching.” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

“If you are associated with a gang and you’re seen talking to the police you’ll get known as a grass for it.” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

Young women were reluctant to report their experience of rape and violence because they believed these accounts would not be taken seriously and would not be acted upon or treated confidentially. This reluctance was reinforced by the normalisation of sexual violence coupled with young women feeling blame for the violence they experienced:

“I’m used to it... It’s normal... It’s wrong, but you get used to it... Welcome to our generation” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Beckett 2013)

“They don’t concentrate on serious things. I got raped and when I finally spoke to the police about it they let him on bail and he came looking for me – why do they do that?” 17 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

“Like one of my friends, she got raped and she went to court and everything and the lad got let off and there was so much evidence... and now she is out there knowing that she’s going to bump into this lad. So there’s no point in going to the police even if it’s true, the police won’t lock up the person. They’ll lock people up over drugs and little silly things when there’s rapists and people out there and they’re not doing nothing... Like one of my other friends as well, she’s going through a court case at the moment with an attempt rape, and the lad is out on bail and she’s shit scared. She won’t leave her house or anything. She’s scared she’ll bump into him, and then like my ex-boyfriend, he got remanded for selling drugs, which selling drugs compared to attempt rape, there’s so much difference... Like it does confuse you sometimes when you look at like the seriousness between them both is completely different” 17 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

“I told someone something once and it just made everything worse. If I thought for one minute that it would help me then I’d talk but I know that it won’t so what’s the point? 15 years old young woman (Firmin 2011)

“What you gonna say, oh I’ve had drugs in my house but it’s because I’m scared. They don’t give a fuck, you still did it; how can you prove you didn’t want to? 17 year old woman (Firmin 2011)

Although some thought girls could go to the police if it was rape:

“I don’t deal with the police so obviously I’d say no, but if its rape I’d say yes she can ‘cos I don’t associate with rapists.” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

“She knows really and truly if she did get raped then she can go to the police.” Young women aged 13 to 28, focus group (Firmin 2011)

Sisters of gang members felt unable to disclose to professionals or seek support. Compared to girlfriends, sisters' choices had even greater restriction and it was never seen as acceptable to "snitch" on family.

"No one in my family would ever do that. If I done that to A (my sister) then I would be called a snitch for the rest of my life. If you go round now and ask every kid would they grass they would say no coz you would get called a snitch for the rest of your life. Even if your mum did it, you would still get called a snitch." 15 year old woman (Firmin 2011)

"Your brother is a whole other thing. He wouldn't really let anything happen to you and at the end of the day he'll always be your brother so you have to just stand by him." 14 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

"You can never snitch on family; that is not even an option to be honest." 16 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

"If it's your brother ...why would you tell other people, then you're gonna have no one left, you just don't do that to family." 17 year old young woman (Firmin 2011).

Exposure to risk behaviour

Children described several experiences of being exposed to risk behaviour including drugs, alcohol and illegal activity:

"I got passed a knife and weed as well cos I couldn't get searched. And they couldn't search me cos I was 13 when it happened, they would need my mum with me to take me down to the police station to strip-search me and they would need a female police officer so I got away with it" 17 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

"Say, like, one night we were going out, getting drunk and that, and then, like, say if a large group of people got together and then someone will say 'ah, I've got an idea, let's go down to [place name] and cause trouble' or 'go down a different area', that sometimes happens." 16 year old young man (Kintrea 2008)

"The elder boys kept putting powder up my nose and saying 'that's charlie'." Young man (Smeaton 2009).

Impact of gangs on experiences of other children

The Ralphps study (2009) considered how living in a gang-affected area affects young people who are not in gangs. Although the views in this study were not from children directly involved in a gang, they have been included in the review to gain insight into the wider impact on young people in these areas. Young people in the study noted that the presence of gangs in their area restricted their movement. This was often due to a fear of being mistaken for a gang member and being attacked:

"Yeah, if you go out of your own area, if you're dressed like some hot boy and that, black clothing and that, then people will attack you and that and they ask you questions." 16 year old young man (Ralphps 2009)

"There are loads of people that ain't gang members that get shot. [..] 'We've seen you speaking to so-and-so so we're coming for you.' [...] I think everyone's a target; every young

person in the area is a target really, if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time." 15 year old young man (Ralphs 2009)

Young people felt that they gained negative attention from the police for living in a gang-area and were often labelled as gang members. Children felt judged by this:

"'cause the police have said to me if you're seen speaking to a gang member, if they see you speaking to a gang member, automatically they put you in a gang. that like, these three gang members I spoke to. And then, like, if you say that I'm in a gang, if they see me speaking to a gang member now, who I speak to must be in a gang too and who they speak to. It's daft really." 16 year old young man (Ralphs 2009)

As a result the children in the study held a negative view of the police:

"Researcher: So how would you describe your relationship with the police, then?

[16 year old young man]: Bastards.

[14 year old young man]: Sort of like bastards.

[15 year-old young man]: Pests.

[15 year old young man]: Yeah.

[16 year old young man]: Like fucking cockroaches." (Ralphs 2009)

The young people in the study were concerned that their association with a gang-affected area, and the assumptions that people made about them being in a gang based on where they lived, would hamper their future education and employment prospects:

"Well, I've been like at Westside College, and all these teachers and that, they're all like from Westside [a suburban area], you know, all posh places like that. So when they go, 'Where are you from?' and then like you mention Belmont, they look at you weird, they judge you weird, because they're used to like, you know, the posh areas, being able to walk around the streets and all that. [Interviewer: So even when you're out of the area like that and you're in college, you think you get treated .. .?] If you mention where you're from, they will judge you, the same as other people would, where you are." 17 year old young man

Indicators of wellbeing

This section examines children's reports of their own wellbeing and the impact of the gang on this. The indicators of wellbeing that are explored are: self-esteem, hope and aspirations, agency and coping and feeling safe.

Self-esteem

Many boys discussed increased self-esteem and worth when joining the gang. The gang provided a sense of belonging, freedom and emotional and social support:

"People to talk to you, yeah, and people to help you in situations you don't understand. So gangs is related to like family. A gang and family is like, basically, the same thing except, the gang, you go out fighting and with family, you don't. ... It's just like a relationship with a family." Young man (Smeaton 2009)

"I always used to be on my own and didn't chat much. Now I talk a lot and see people"
Young man (Smeaton 2009)

"It made me feel older and it made me feel as if I was part of something. ... Other people would think 'keep away from him; he's a fucking lunatic'. ... People would keep away from me because they knew I was part of the firm." Young man (Smeaton 2009)

"I was well looked after. One of the big big boys looked after me so others left me alone. He took a liking to me 'cos he says he sees a lot of himself in me when he was younger: the aggression, the violence and the way I was brought up and the way I was treated and I didn't care about anybody but myself." Young man (Smeaton 2009).

Several male gang members talked of the gang providing a sense of freedom and a "buzz" that they enjoyed, which contrasted with the lack of opportunity that they experienced in their local area:

"The adrenalin rush, that's what you click onto as well. So you go through that peer pressure stage and then, once you get to doing the stuff, then you start getting a buzz out of it and then you start getting an adrenalin rush from it and you want to do it and do it again. It's like taking drugs, but then ... yeah, it's like that." 16 year old young man (Kintrea 2008)

"It's silly in a way but it's a great buzz after; it really is, I can't explain that." Young man, discussing his membership of a football firm (Smeaton 2009)

"Because at home with the proper family, you can't do anything; you can't go out cruising all night or stealing cars or motorbikes; but in a gang you can go out and do what the hell you want, basically; so it's freedom." Young man (Smeaton 2009)

Girls, in contrast, appeared to have lower levels of self-worth and their reports frequently references feeling powerless and controlled within the gang. Fear was often reported. Girls involved with gangs lacked choice and autonomy over their lives. Male gang members' treatment of girls as disposable objects was mirrored in the way that girls spoke about themselves.

"My ex sold me, well he used me to settle this issue he had with X, and it worked, that is how much I'm worth round here." 17 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

“... no dreams, no ambition, no drive; no nothing” young woman (Young 2011)

“The thing is you read the news ... they are always talking about the same areas, as if this stuff doesn’t affect us but it does. You feel so alone.” 16 year old young woman (Firmin 2009).

Hope and aspirations

Leaving a gang and the future

Children reported several reasons why they left a gang. Difficulties leaving a gang ranged from having to leave the area to organically moving on because of life changes. Some boys viewed it as a period in their lives and maturing, coupled with significant life events such as getting a job or having a baby, resulted in their departure from the gang:

“I’m older now, I’ve got a woman who’s got a kid and I need to show that kid what’s right and what’s wrong I work for these bigger boys now and they won’t take me seriously if they hear I’ve been getting into fights over silly stuff.” 15 year old boy (Smeaton 2009)

“Then I’ll have to stop [when I have a child]; I’ll have to stop everything” Young man (Smeaton 2009)

“It both was and wasn’t easy to leave. ... It was half and half. Some boys were like ‘aye, well on you go; you’ve done your time so off you go’ and others would try to get me to come back saying ‘what you fucking doing? You’re up there pal.’” Young man (Smeaton 2009)

“Because they get a life. They get to go down the pub, and they get more money.” 15 year old young man (Kintrea 2008)

“What’s the point in coming in with a bloody face with your kids, man? They’re gonna think something’s up, so they’ve stopped it, they’ve settled down.” 16 year old young man (Kintrea 2008)

Or children left because they believed it was having a negative impact on their lives:

“I’ve had to [leave]; especially at the moment; it’s not safe. ... There’s just too many people out to get everyone. ... It’s a general thing. You just don’t know what’s going to happen. It’s unpredictable, you know, and stuff could happen any time. ... Every time I go out, I have to think that something could happen, take that into consideration and carry my knife in case something does happen.” Young man (Smeaton 2009)

“[R: How/why did you get out of the gang] ...The boys committed a crime ...As a young female I wouldn’t want to go through that so I cut them off. [R: Was it a sexual offence?] Yes, against a very young girl. Three are in prison because of it. One is in a mental asylum cos he knew what he’d done was wrong. The other two don’t care ...” (16 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

Or children found a new life and motivation stemming from new opportunities such as employment:

“I didn’t think I had a future until I found this job so it’s all working out for me now. At the moment I’m working at X as a voluntary caretaker and getting involved with different people, meeting new people every day and working with disabled people. It’s just given me a chance to start my life all over again.” Young man (Smeaton 2009)

“There’s a new reputation for me to build on ...” Young man (Smeaton 2009)

“When I was with them, it was always like shit, drugs, police, drugs... I’m more relaxed [now in relationship with someone not in gang], I can finally do something with my life... I got dragged into carrying in the street. I’ve had a few thousand pounds worth of drugs in my handbag just walking around with them. I’ve had drugs in my house.... my houses have been raided before... my boyfriend had the key to my house and has stored bad stuff in there” 17 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

Agency and coping

Involvement in gangs and association with gang members led to restrictions in children’s choice and freedom. Girls spoke about the restrictions they faced around who they chose to associate or be in a relationship with:

“Like if you live in one area you can’t go into another part, and you can’t date someone from that other part.” 14 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

“No because I live here, I can’t go up X or X, you have to stay in ya area. So there is no point linking boys from those areas, I have to stick with my own.” 16 year old young woman (Firmin 2011)

“If she’s seen speaking to someone from other side someone would have punched her up or whatever, not like killed her, not like stabbed her or anything... You can’t affiliate with both sides. You can never just be neutral” 16 year old young man (Beckett 2013)

“I was with a guy from [****]. That’s the opposite gang. I tried to keep it like silent for a bit, but then in the end everyone found out so it was just like, I was like split in between the two. So it was like my family or him sorta thing... we just thought why shouldn’t we be together, d’you know what I mean, cos I wasn’t in a gang, I would never done anything like set people up or anything like that, I wasn’t like that... now cos I start seen with them they’re thinking oh she’s this, she’s that, she’s that and they think ah you’re shady, shady and he told me I mustn’t come back to [my area] else he’s gonna hit, box my face. And these are people that I grew up with. They put gang over everything, so they’re just like, no like they basically turned on me” 15 year old young woman (Beckett 2013)

Young people in general spoke about the limits of their movement within the local area:

[Boy A]: “Certain people keep to their own parts of the areas, like the top end ...”

[Boy B]: “That’s right, at the top, keeps to their own side. We won’t, we don’t mix with them lot there; we keep to our own side. If you look out that window, that’s us right up the top, there ... up the top end, they won’t mix with the bottom end of the estate.”

[Boy A]: “They clash – World War 3, innit?” Two 16 year old young men (Kintrea 2008)

Feelings of safety

Children reported that gang conflict would continue into places of support and safety such as supported housing, youth offending institutions, and women's refuges:

"I knew trouble was coming at me. I knew the first time I went into the showers [in the YOI], I was going to get it so on my first day in the nick, I walked up to the geezer I knew was the top dog and head butted him and messed his nose up. I did get a doing in the showers but I let people know I wasn't no pussy and most people respected that and left me alone." Young man (Smeaton 2009)

"He's got so many fucking girls that are scared of him that he could put them in all the refuges in X until he finds me." Young woman (Firmin 2011)

"I was in hostels for young people with other young people and all sorts would kick off. There was loads of gang stuff. 'Cos I was from one place and in one gang, I'd be fighting with kids who were in the hostels. I'd have to go somewhere else and the same thing would just happen again." Young man (Smeaton 2009)

"It is safer living [in supported housing] but everybody knows where I live 'cos they talk and that and I still have to watch my back. There's a negative of living here as my boys (others in his gang) aren't around me here but there's a positive 'cos anybody who comes looking for me ain't gonna get through reception But I would not say I am not a part of it no more; in some ways I am." Young man (Smeaton 2009).

Emerging themes

Several main themes emerged from the literature on the subjective wellbeing of children involved in gangs.

As there is no agreed structural definition of a UK gang it can be challenging to define what involvement in a gang looks like and what children's experiences are. Children who are involved in gangs are not exempt from other forms of vulnerability. The vulnerabilities associated with gang involvement intersect with several other risk factors that contribute to vulnerability, namely, being in insecure housing or homeless, experience of abuse and neglect and living in poverty.

The review has not revealed a consistent definition of a gang based on the voices of children. Some children identify it by the levels of violence and criminality involved, some view it as the attitudes and identity of the collective group. Some children wear the badge of being in a gang with pride whilst others reject the term to describe their informally formed group of friends.

This lack of clarity and understanding about what constitutes a gang may partly explain the limited literature that relates to children's reported experiences of involvement in them. Furthermore there are practical and methodological challenges for researchers aiming to capture the views of gangs. These include identifying, locating and contacting young people who are involved with a gang, especially for those gangs that are street-based. While some of the studies included in the review provided rich, qualitative data about young people's experiences of gangs they had a particular focus on a specific cohort or topic (such as Beckett's 2013 study into sexual exploitation in gangs or Smeaton's 2009 study of children who are homeless and in a gang) rather than the general exploration of how children feel about being in gang.

The review revealed that there was less literature available about the male perspective of gang involvement than was initially expected. Young men that were included and quoted in the studies rarely talked about their own personal experiences, rather they discussed other gang members or gang activity. Quantitative and deductive research had also been conducted in between 2007 and 2017 however this is not best suited for capturing and exploring in-depth information about children's subjective wellbeing.

Children did not always join gangs out of choice; some viewed it as an inevitability based on where they lived, others reported a lack of opportunity and status in society as push factors. This lack of opportunity and feeling of powerlessness was a commonly reported by young people.

Status within the gang was important for wellbeing and experience, especially for girls. A young person's experience of vulnerability in the gang varied and was affected by factors such as gender and gang structure.

Reports of sexual violence towards young women were frequent and extremely concerning. There was a lack of empathy for victims and limited understanding of what constituted consent and choice. This may have heightened the negative impact of this violence on girls. Boys were not always aware of the misogynistic undercurrents of youth gang cultures as demonstrated in their language about, treatment of and attitudes towards young women. Frequent reports of physical violence (male to female, female to female and between gangs) were also pervasive.

Children reported that they felt unable to speak to services for support and protection. In particular, young people would never access the police for help. The barriers for young people accessing support included: the risk of increased danger (being a “snitch”), lack of trust in professionals’ and institutions’ information sharing processes, not knowing where to go and loyalty to gang members. This affected children’s ability to leave a gang especially when gang culture and risk of violence from gangs penetrated into institutions designed to safeguard young people, such as supported housing and women’s refuges. Some young people did not make a conscious choice to leave a gang and reported that their departure was more organic or due to significant life changes, such as becoming a parent.

It is worth noting, however, that not all experiences of gang involvement were negative and completely detrimental to wellbeing. For some young people, the gang provided them with a sense of belonging, love, protection and “family” that they had not experienced in their lives before. For some boys, joining a gang reportedly provided them with some status within society, a feeling of power and freedom.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Quality appraisal tool

Summary Information	Criteria	Possible fields	Inclusion criteria (where applicable)
	Citation	Author, year, title, publisher, journal & issue, page numbers.	n/a
	Is the source publically available (published)?	Yes/No	Exclude if not publically available
	Publication year		Exclude if published before 2007
	Peer reviewed	Yes/No	n/a
	Did the study involve the collection of primary data?	Yes/No	Exclude if no
	Does the study contain information about children within England?	Yes/No	Exclude if no (unless the study contains information of significant relevance that is not identified elsewhere. If study is to be retained state reason.)
	Geographical scope of study	Multi-country; national; regional; sub-regional; single case	n/a
	Study type	Qualitative/quantitative/mixed methods	Exclude if study is exclusively quantitative

Relevance	What is the research question/purpose of the research?	[Open]	n/a
	Does the study/ source include information about the subjective wellbeing of one of our 'primary groups'?	Yes/No	Exclude if no
	Which primary group does the study address?	List primary group	n/a
	Does the study capture and present the views and experiences of children under the age of 17 years?	Yes/No	Exclude if no
	What is the age range of vulnerable children participating in the study?	[Open]	Exclude if none were 17 or younger Proceed with caution if studies include a mixed age group above and below 18 and comments are not attributed to ages
Methodology & methods	Are there any potential conflicts of interest? (i.e. related to the funding interests?)	Yes/No [Provide details]	Consider exclusion if yes
	Is it clear from the data source through what means evidence/ information/ data about children's views were collected?	Yes/No	Consider excluding if no
	Are the study design/ methods used appropriate to support	Yes/No	Consider exclusion if no (unless there is a compelling reason to retain the article)

the evidence, analysis and conclusions presented in the source?		and state the reason for this.)
Does the methodological approach appear to have been consciously adopted with awareness about the methodological choices made, and the implications of these?	Scale 1-5 with 5 being highest level of awareness	Consider excluding if score is 2 or below.
How inductive/observation-based is the methodological approach?	Scale 1-5 with 5 being the most inductive approach (e.g. grounded theory), and 1 being highly deductive.	Consider excluding if score is 2 or below.
Were the methods of data collection used appropriate to ensure that children were given an opportunity for genuine self-expression, (e.g. non-directive opportunities to say what is on their mind, free from pressure/coercion etc.)	Yes/ No/ not enough information about methods	Exclude if no Consider exclusion if 'not enough information about methods'
What is the mechanism through which the views of children have been documented and recorded?	[Provide details]	N/A
What is the context in which children were expressing their views,	[Provide details]	N/A (see inclusion criteria below)

	and the purposes for which the views were expressed?		
	How direct and authentic do you consider the presentation of children's voices to be?	(score from 1-6, 6 being the most direct presentation of children's views) Scoring criteria: 6. verbatim narrative 5. edited account 4. question and answer 3. use of selected quotations 2. paraphrasing/ interpretation of children's views 1. children's views are implied through secondary accounts, theoretical analysis and other means	Consider excluding if score is 2 or below.
	How were children accessed for the study?	[Open]	N/A
	What is the population from which children are drawn	[Open]	N/A
	Was the sample method appropriate to the purpose of the study	Yes/ No/ unclear	Exclude if no or unclear

	Is the study based on retrospective accounts of childhood by adults?	Yes/No [Provide details]	Consider exclusion if yes
	How many children are included in the study? (Sample size)	[Open]	N/A
	Are limitations discussed?	Yes/No [provide details]	Exclude if limitations are so significant that the evidence becomes highly questionable.
Ethics	Did the article undergo an ethical approval process? And was this approval granted?	Yes / no	Consider exclusion if no (and there is reason to believe there are ethical concerns)
	Do you have substantial concerns about the ethical implications of the research (effects on participants, researchers, etc.)?	Yes / no	Exclude if yes

Appendix 2: Profile of literature

A focused search was conducted of Campbell Collaboration, Google, Google Scholar and JSTOR. Searches were restricted to those published in the English language and publication from 2007. Relevant indicators included: gang*, “youth group*”, “gang member*”. The qualifying terms: experience* and qualitative were also used. Citation lists were hand-searched for additional papers.

Following this 30 papers were shortlisted as potentially relevant (at March 2017). These were assessed using the screening quality appraisal process (Appendix 1). Twenty-three studies were excluded during the quality appraisal process:

- > Twelve were excluded due to relevance (no primary data from children about their subjective wellbeing)
- > Five were excluded because they were solely quantitative studies
- > Five were excluded due to methodological weakness (the ages of the sample were not discussed, the method of data collection was not clear, the voice of the child was not authentic)
- > One was excluded because it was a journal article based on a grey literature study already

Seven studies remained within scope. Of these seven studies, six were qualitative and one used mixed methods. The qualitative studies, and the qualitative aspect of the mixed study, used interviews and focus groups with children to gather their views.

Four studies were peer reviewed and three were grey literature. The grey literature consisted of one OCC study with University of Bedfordshire, one from a collaboration of organisations including Catch 22, Race on the Agenda and Platform 51 and one from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The four peer reviewed studies were journal articles from Housing, Care and Support and Youth Justice and Journal of Youth Studies and one was a book chapter (see References).

Grey literature

- > **Beckett 2013** was a purely qualitative piece that focused on girls’ experiences of sexual violence in the gang. This piece was rich in information about children’s subjective views. The sample size of this study was 150 and ages ranged from 13 to 28. Only quotes from children aged 18 and under were extracted and analysed for this report
- > **Firmin 2011** was also a qualitative study. This study focused on the female voice in gangs and their experience of violence in three regions- Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. The sample size of the study was 349. The ages of the participants ranged from 13 to 60. Only quotes from girls in the study were extracted and have been used in this report. Quotes from men have been excluded because, although 62% of the sample were aged under 18, the top age range included in the study was 40 to 60 therefore the authenticity of the children’s voice is weak. Furthermore, quotes are not labelled with an age so quotes from children cannot be singled out
- > **Kintrea 2008** was a qualitative study that explored the nature of territoriality in the UK. Young people aged 11 to 30 were involved in focus groups in regions across the UK.

Peer review

- > **Ralphs 2009** was a qualitative piece of research that aimed to understand the experiences of young people in gang affected areas. The regional study used focus groups and interviews with 107 young people (age range not specified but quotes labelled with ages and only quotes from children were extracted)
- > **Smeaton 2009** focused on “detached” children (not living with their family) and their experience of gangs. One hundred and three children and young people participated in the research. All of those in the research experienced being “detached” before the age of 16. Some young people were still were this age when participating in the research and others were over 16 and were offering a retrospective perspective
- > **Young 2011** was also a mixed methods study but largely qualitative. The report combines three research studies examining the extent of gang membership in the UK. One hundred and eleven young people were interviewed between the ages of 14 and 18
- > **Young 2009** was a mixed methods study. The qualitative component of the research used interviews with 25 young women. The study focuses on girl gangs and female violence. The ages of the young women range from 14 to 20. Quotes in the study were sometimes not labelled with the young person’s age therefore in these instances the quote was used and the age range has been stated



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