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Diverting young men from gangs: a qualitative evaluation

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Abstract

Purpose – Serious organised crime (SOC) costs the UK billions of pounds every year and is associated with significant negative health, social and well-being outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate whether young people can be diverted from involvement in SOC using preventive intervention approaches.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on data collected from semi-structured interviews with practitioners involved in a six-month intervention which specifically aimed to divert “at risk” young people away from SOC involvement.

Findings – Themes arising from the analysis are: ~~first~~, risk and vulnerability factors associated with young people involved in organised crime; ~~second~~, what worked well during this intervention; ~~third~~, what outcomes, both hard and soft, were generated; as well as , ~~fourth~~, the specific challenges to the success of preventive programmes’ success.

Practical implications – Overall, the study highlights the problematic nature of diverting “at risk” youths from SOC and provides recommendations for future preventive intervention work in the field of SOC. Specifically, it suggests that longer-term interventions, targeted at younger children, may generate better behavioural outcomes if they focus on building trusting relationships with credible support workers (i.e. have lived experience of SOC).

Originality/value – With a growing body of evidence suggesting that young people are being increasingly exploited for organised criminal purposes, an approach which prevents involvement in SOC makes theoretical and economic sense. However, little research has empirically tested its utility in practice. This study seeks to address this gap.

Keywords Vulnerability, Early intervention, Prevention, Organized crime groups, Serious Organized Crime

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the UK there is growing evidence that more people are becoming involved in Serious organised crime (SOC) (National Crime Agency, NCA, 2018). Financially, SOC costs the UK £37bn a year (Home Office, 2018), but there are also wider implications as physical and psychological harm is generated within and across communities (Bullock *et al.*, 2013). Recently, a new threat has emerged. “County Lines” is a police term where urban gangs “use children and vulnerable people to move drugs and money” (Home Office, 2017, p. 1) to suburban areas, market and coastal towns using dedicated mobile phone lines or “deal lines”. The individual is exploited through manipulation techniques, enticement-based methods of compliance and violence or threats of violence (Home Office, 2017). Over three-quarters of police forces reported that young people involved in County Lines carried weapons (both knives and firearms), in addition to the occurrence of other crimes, such as assault, burglary, kidnapping, possession or use of acid or ammonia, serious or sexual violence (NCA, 2017).

The UK SOC strategy has prevention as a core theme. However, this is an undeveloped area with limited supporting research. This paper seeks to address this gap by qualitatively exploring an initiative which attempted to prevent young people from becoming involved in SOC, and to support those already involved in moving away from SOC. The current study thematically analysed eight interviews conducted with practitioners who were involved in this initiative to: first, evaluate how the programme was implemented; and second, identify the theoretical and practical issues that influenced the impact generated by the programme. The experiences and perspectives of these participants are used to suggest evidence-based recommendations for future work that aims to prevent and/or divert young people’s involvement in SOC.

Literature review

In order to prevent young people from becoming involved in SOC, an understanding of how they are drawn into such criminality is needed. Risk factors are those factors that increase the probability of delinquency and offending (Baglivio *et al.*, 2016; Farrington, 2015). They serve an explanatory and predictive role, frequently helping practitioners to both assess the risk of recidivism and design treatments to reduce reoffending (Ward and Fortune, 2016). Whilst evidence suggests that single risk factors can predict criminality, it is thought multiple risk factors cumulatively heighten the probability of becoming involved in crime (Put *et al.*, 2014). Research surrounding SOC risk factors remains relatively underdeveloped; however, youth gangs are generally considered a potential pathway to involvement. Some evidence indicates that the likelihood of gang membership is increased when the individual is male (Blanchette and Brown, 2006) and adolescent (Bennett and Holloway, 2004; Flood-Page *et al.*, 2000). Marshall *et al.* (2005) identified that the average age of street gang members is under 18 years old and that involvement typically occurs between 12 and 14 years of age.

Further risk factors of SOC involvement include criminal peers and family members (Marshall *et al.*, 2005), specifically, gang-affiliated siblings (Disley and Liddle, 2016; Medina *et al.*, 2013) and associating with pro-criminal role models (Aldridge and Medina, 2007; Sharp *et al.*, 2006). Marshall *et al.* (2005) highlighted the absence of strong male role models as a specific risk factor to future criminality, explaining that older organised crime group (OCG) members can exploit this gap by acting as surrogate fathers and confidantes.

Prior victimisation is also argued to be a risk factor of SOC involvement (Farrington, 2002), with victims of violence having an increased likelihood of offending (Marshall *et al.*, 2005; Youth Justice Board, 2004). Furthermore, experience of neglect and abuse (physical and/or sexual) has been reported to increase a young person's vulnerability to County Lines exploitation (Home Office, 2017; Farrington, 2002). Vulnerability has also been associated with mental health issues and drug use (NCA, 2017), an absence of safety and stability at home, living in care (Home Office, 2017) and going missing from home (The Children's Society, 2017).

Protective factors describe those factors thought to predict a lower probability of, or a decrease in, involvement in crime or violence (Dubow *et al.*, 2016). Research suggests that prosocial involvement, strong social support, strong attachments, positive attitude towards authority and strong commitment to school or work all act as protective factors against criminal involvement (Lodewijks *et al.*, 2010). Like risk factors, protective factors are thought to have a cumulative effect (Andershed *et al.*, 2016; Polaschek, 2017; Put *et al.*, 2014). However, the precise relationship between risk and protective factors is unclear (Youth Justice Board, 2005). Baglivio *et al.* (2016) asserted a need to focus on protective and promotive factors in order to aid the development of programmes and interventions designed to combat offending and recidivism (Lodewijks *et al.*, 2010).

Turning to interventions that aim to reduce offending behaviours, previous research has identified several key factors for successful engagement. These include, but are not limited to, tailored individual need-based approaches (Eadie and Canton, 2002) and family support (Brooks and Khan, 2015; Larkins and Wainwright, 2013). In particular, good relationships with the advisor and/or case worker are viewed as extremely important, specifically: the perceived level of care, listening, understanding (Phoenix and Kelly, 2013), trust and mutual respect (Evans *et al.*, 2006; Merton *et al.*, 2004). Buck (2017) highlighted the increasing use of "mentors" within the context of criminal justice interventions. Effective mentors have been found to have similar upbringing and experiences to their client, which enables the mentee to visualise a future without offending (Boyce *et al.*, 2009; Hunter and Kirby, 2011), allowing the mentor to act as a positive role model and facilitate diversion from gang involvement (Fletcher and Batty, 2012; Home Office, 2011).

Furthermore, the Home Office (2011) value the importance of “early intervention” in an effort to prevent gang and youth violence, adding their support for implementing interventions to children at primary school age, in addition to increasing parental awareness. The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) define early intervention as:

[...] taking action as soon as possible to tackle problems for children and families before they become more difficult to reverse (EIF, 2016).

The National Audit Office (NAO, 2013) argue the approach can generally materialise in three ways: first, primary prevention of the problems arising, usually delivered as universal policies, often through the medium of educational programmes; second, secondary early intervention approaches which target individuals or groups at high risk, or showing early signs of a problem (prior to crisis point), to try to stop it occurring; and third, tertiary early remedial treatment, which only intervenes once a problem is identified within an individual, to stop it getting worse.

In summary, the literature highlights several risk factors and protective factors that can facilitate or prevent SOC involvement; however, there is currently limited evidence-based research that demonstrates the utility of early intervention-based approaches for preventing and/or diverting involvement in SOC. This study seeks to take a qualitative approach to explore the challenges and successes of a targeted early intervention programme aimed at preventing young people from SOC involvement to generate evidence-based recommendations for future SOC prevention work.

Data and design

This study was part of a wider research project that included both qualitative and quantitative exploration of the intervention to understand the nuances of the generated impact. This paper deals solely with the qualitative aspect and relates to a set of interviews conducted with, mainly, practitioners involved in the running of the intervention (see Participants section). A brief overview of the intervention is described below to provide the reader with contextual understanding.

The intervention

The intervention was coordinated by one of the UK’s largest police forces and supported by a multi-agency group of practitioners. First, potential subjects of the intervention were identified using risk factors defined by Hope *et al.* (2016). To be included, the subject had to have familial links or close non-familial links to OCGs or organised crime (OC) activity. Other risk factors included living in a neighbourhood with known SOC activity, exposure to violence in the home, involvement in the criminal justice system, being excluded from school or not being in mainstream education and a history of substance abuse. Once referred, a “deep dive” was conducted on each subject. This stage brought together relevant agencies (i.e. police, local authority, education, etc.) to share information on the referred individuals. The outcome of the exercise was a detailed history of the subject, including agency interventions, which was recorded chronologically in electronic form. A total of 33 young people were initially identified.

Out of the 33 individuals identified and referred via the “deep dive” process, only four engaged in the intervention stage. Reasons for this, as put forward by the participants who were interviewed for this research study, will be explained in the results section. Due to poor engagement from the original individuals identified and referred via the “deep dive” process, practitioners referred different young people who they considered to be more appropriate to the preventive aims of the programme. In total, a cohort of 22 young people (all male) engaged with the six-month intervention stage between March and September 2016. The ages of these young men ranged between 13 and 18 years, with an average age

of 15.18 years (SD = 1.44). Out of the 22 individuals, 15 (68.2 per cent) had previously been victims of crime themselves. Similarly, 15 (68.2 per cent) were reported as being fully engaged in the programme, whilst the other seven individuals showed negligible interest and commitment. All 22 subjects were involved in criminal behaviour and linked with OCGs, with the number of recorded formal sanctions ranging between 0 and 7. There was a wide diversity of crime associated with the individuals, albeit violence was central, with assault observed in 77 per cent of the sample ($n=17$). This was followed by burglary ($n=15$, 68 per cent) and criminal damage ($n=11$, 50 per cent). There was one case of murder and three cases of rape or sexual assault.

Each of these individuals was provided with a “lead professional”, most often a youth worker who would mentor them. Interventions typically involved providing tangible support (i.e. support when applying for a driving licence), one-to-one monitoring and facilitation of education and/or work access; however, the intervention was tailored for each specific individual.

Participants

Eight participants (six males, two females) were interviewed to gain a range of perspectives of the programme. The sample included the lead professionals who were responsible for implementing the intervention with the young people. A breakdown of participant identification numbers (IDs) and role in the project is provided in Table I to give context to the quotes used. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained and each participant gave informed consent before being interviewed.

Materials

In order to conduct the analysis, the interviews were guided by a script and recorded in audio format using a Dictaphone. Qualitative data analysis software NVivo 10 (QSR International) was used to assist the qualitative analysis of the current studies and to create a transparent and “auditable footprint” (Sinkovics and Alfoldi, 2012, p. 5) of the analysis.

Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed and entered into NVivo 10. The transcripts were thematically analysed in both an inductive (being led by patterns that become apparent in the data set) and deductive (looking for specific concepts previously identified in the relevant literature) way. This was conducted in a number of stages: first, reading the transcripts and highlighting any quotes which were interesting, relevant and meaningful to the aims of the research; second, reviewing highlighted quotes to look for patterns across

Participant ID	Role in the programme
P1	Practitioner in SOC diversion in schools
P2	Strategic lead
P3	Strategic lead
P4	Project delivery
P5	Project delivery
P6	Youth worker
P7	Youth worker
P8	Parent

Note: SOC, Serious organised crime

Table I.
Participant context

participants, and third, categorising patterns in the data into themes and related sub-themes whereby quotes referring to the same concept, belief or idea are categorised together. To demonstrate the objectivity of the research method, analysis and conclusions, qualitative assessments were tested for inter-rater reliability. All instances of disagreement between raters were discussed and the coding system was adapted accordingly. The percentage of final agreement for initial independent coding of the data represented a fair level of agreement beyond that due to chance.

Results

The qualitative analysis of the eight interviews generated four main themes, each with a series of related sub-themes. The broad themes summarise:

- (1) the challenges associated with running preventive or diversionary initiatives;
- (2) observed and desired outcomes of this work;
- (3) risk factors identified for young people at risk of SOC involvement; and
- (4) reflections on what worked and recommendations for future projects.

Each of the themes and the related sub-themes will be discussed in turn and supportive quotes can be found in Table II.

Challenges

The challenges to the success of interventions and programmes which aim to divert young people from SOC involvement were discussed by all participants.

All participants described the level of the young people's involvement in SOC as a particular challenge to the success of the programme. The majority of the young people were already significantly involved in SOC, which contradicted participants' expectations of the targeted group to achieve the preventive aims. Four (50 per cent) participants said that the level of the cohort's involvement in SOC meant that the young people were difficult to initiate and maintain contact with due to their chaotic lifestyle, which increased the amount of time and cost needed to engage with them. Four (50 per cent) participants stated that some subjects' involvement in SOC was so entrenched that continued engagement with them posed too high of a risk to the practitioner's safety. For instance, one young person had threats made to his life by members of another OCG, which meant that anyone associated with them on this project (i.e. youth workers, apprenticeship tutors and other students enrolled on the same apprenticeship scheme) were also at risk.

One participant (P4) argued that by the age of 16, young people consider themselves as adults and therefore have become more difficult to influence in terms of their decision making. Instead, all participants suggested that future initiatives of this kind should be targeted at a younger group of people considered to be at risk of becoming involved in the future (i.e. young siblings of OCG members). Five (63 per cent) participants made recommendations for working with children of primary school age (11 years), to build resilience before the transition to secondary school and wider group choices.

The short-term nature of this project was described by five (63 per cent) participants as being a barrier to its success. Cases of successful engagement and positive outcomes were said to have resulted from additional work, separately funded, after the intervention had finished. Five (63 per cent) participants suggested that future work should focus on longer-term initiatives (minimum two years), with three (38 per cent) participants specifically stating that future programmes should be open ended (until the young person is ready, demonstrates resilience or until they turn 18).

Themes and sub-themes	Participants ^a	Frequency ^b	Sample data extracts
<i>Challenges</i>			
Level of SOC involvement	8	97	<p>“They were targeting the wrong group of people. This was about preventing people getting involved in OC. These young people were already in it, heavily involved [...] They were already carrying out serious assaults, so I didn’t want to get involved. For my safety” (P7)</p> <p>“All these hours we have paid for just disappeared – wasted visits, phonecalls, meetings” (P2)</p> <p>“We need to shift the interventions upstream. Looking at primary school level” (P3)</p> <p>“I think it needs to be longer with more intense support [...] Until you’ve helped him build that resilience so he can resist those temptations” (P6)</p>
Multi-agency challenges	6	34	<p>“There was a pressure on us from the funding providers to get them to a stage at x weeks into the project. With hindsight, we should have been honest and said they aren’t ready” (P2)</p> <p>“What I found with the police is that information sharing was all one way. We would have to report any offenses to them but we would never hear anything back” (P7)</p>
<i>Outcomes</i>			
Soft outcomes	5	12	<p>“A job or apprenticeship would be amazing but for this cohort, them consistently getting out of bed and having their needs met is much more of an outcome. [...] The fact that they are on time. They are smoking less weed than they did when they met you. He doesn’t swear at his mum when you’re around anymore. That’s the start of the success” (P4)</p>
Employment or education	3	12	<p>“From someone who wasn’t attending at all, really got them to engage in education” (P3)</p>
Organisational learning	4	49	<p>“In some respects, the success of the programme that is happening now is because of the failures in this one. Minds have changed. We can’t do what we did last time I think that is a success” (P4)</p> <p>“For me the revelation was the benefit was working with local providers, the youth providers” (P3)</p> <p>“With hindsight, you need a strong familiar link to form those bridges” (P2)</p>
Re-engagement with services	5	12	<p>“Reintroducing them to statutory services because I’m not going to be around indefinitely” (P7)</p>
<i>Risk factors</i>			
Criminality	6	17	<p>“Because of his criminal offending, was wanted by the police” (P2)</p>
Lacking positive role models	6	12	<p>“One had a dad in jail. One’s dad passed away. Another’s dad was homeless” (P6)</p> <p>“These young people, none had a dad. [...] And drug dealers are taking advantage of that” (P7)</p>
School absence	4	8	<p>“The kids were going to Pupil Referral Units, not school, and 70% not turning up there” (P4)</p>
Location	4	8	<p>“They all lived on the same estate. [...] Those estates are creating crime [...] Multiple generations who have been on benefits, smoked and drank and that is the only thing they have known” (P7)</p>

(continued)

Table II.
Themes and sub-themes with supportive narratives from the transcripts

Themes and sub-themes	Participants ^a	Frequency ^b	Sample data extracts
Poverty	3	7	<p>“Some kids don’t have any food in the house. There’s no electricity. So they rather hang around on the streets [...] The older ones will see that, see the vulnerability” (P1)</p> <p>“The only people they know, who actually have anything, are drug dealers. Everyone else is poor. [...] the only way they see to get it (money) is crime” (P7)</p>
Trauma	6	11	<p>“We probably didn’t appreciate that it was PTSD before but we are and we don’t know what to do with it. [...] The majority of gang members have mental health issues. It might be because they are smoking 10 joints a day, their parents are alcoholics, there is DV or because they watch their best friend get hit over the head with an axe. But they have got trauma” (P2)</p> <p>“A lot had experiences something quite traumatic early on in their life” (P6)</p>
<i>What worked?</i>			
Individual needs	6	14	<p>“There needs to be that reactive resource in place and we didn’t have it” (P2)</p> <p>“That flexibility – depending on the individual need of that young person” (P5)</p>
Support	8	26	<p>“Needs to be one to one [...] It’s about self-confidence and self-esteem. They have this perception that they are garbage” (P5)</p> <p>“If you can give them an idea of a future, you have more of a chance” (P1)</p> <p>“I asked them what job they could see themselves doing and he said lorry driver. I asked why, and he said, my next-door neighbour is the only person I know with a job and he’s a lorry driver” (P6)</p>
Relationship building	6	24	<p>“[...] they saw (youth worker) as a real friend” (P2)</p> <p>“I spend 3 hours a week with them but then they go back in to the family home. If they aren’t reinforcing what I’m saying to them, it’s pointless” (P7)</p>
The “right” youth worker	6	22	<p>“It needs a specialised person with a credible background” (P4)</p> <p>“My life was the same as theirs and I’m not doing too bad for myself – it gives them hope [...] They don’t see themselves as 14 year old kids so I didn’t work with them as children. You get a better response by treating them with maturity” (P7)</p>

Table II.

Notes: ^aNumber of participants referring to the sub-theme; ^bnumber of references to the sub-theme

A range of multi-agency challenges were discussed by six (75 per cent) participants. Four (50 per cent) participants said that conflict between agencies was apparent, which ranged from minor differences in opinion to higher-level disagreements resulting in partners removing their contribution to the programme and accusations of deceit across agencies. Three (38 per cent) participants identified there to be a conflict between expectations of the project (in terms of outcomes) and what was realistically achievable for this cohort, resources available and time scale. Two (25 per cent) participants suggested that an underlying pressure for progression towards employment outcomes, specifically from higher management levels, resulted in young people being pushed into interventions that they, in hindsight, were not yet ready for. Instances of poor communication and/or information sharing across different agencies were recalled by six (75 per cent) participants. The impact of miscommunications ranged from simple misunderstandings and missed opportunities for a fuller intelligence picture of a young person’s vulnerability and criminality, to an increased risk of harm to staff.

Outcomes

Participants described how, whilst significant change such as employment and desistance was not always observed, softer outcomes should not be underestimated. Five (63 per cent) participants recognised soft outcomes as changes in attitude, appearance and behaviour of the young people over the course of the project (i.e. more respectful to teachers or parents, swearing less, on time to appointments, with smarter haircuts and/or outfit choices). Soft outcomes like these were thought to reflect changes in perspectives towards community involvement and/or OC, which indicates resilience against future vulnerability to SOC involvement. These, seemingly small, changes were highlighted as being big outcomes for this particularly challenging cohort.

A young person getting a job or re-engaging with education occurred on three occasions (14 per cent). Two of those were the young people for whom additional work had been funded, potentially suggesting that a longer-term approach was beneficial for generating tangible employment/educational outcomes. Employment or education was described as being the main outcome goal of the programme in order to provide the young people with an attractive alternative route to financial gain (“the whole idea was to get them out of gangs and into work”, P4). This was discussed as being a positive thing to aspire to “on paper” but was more difficult to achieve in reality due to the level of existing SOC involvement associated with the cohort recruited.

Four (50 per cent) participants ~~specifically~~ discussed organisational learning to be an important outcome of the project and specified how it had impacted on their current and future ways of working. Furthermore, all participants discussed recommendations for future initiatives based on the learning gained through this programme. This learning centred around the need to focus on earlier intervention, longer interventions and recruitment of specialised youth workers. Six (75 per cent) participants discussed the need of using a familial link in the referral of a young person into future programmes. Doing so was predicted to increase engagement as trust is already established via the familial, reducing the time needed to establish a trusting relationship between the young person and a youth worker. All participants stated that future work should collaborate with schools, both in terms of the identification of vulnerability and/or trauma, and for intervention delivery. School was said to be the main source of stability in many of the young people’s lives so is thought to be an ideal collaborative space for this work.

An interesting outcome discussed was getting young people and their families to re-engage with other services (mainly statutory). It was explained that “at risk” families have often lost contact or developed distrust with statutory services and are therefore missing out on the support that is available to them. Getting them back into contact and establishing trusting relationships with other services was described by five (63 per cent) participants as an important step in improving the young person’s future resilience.

Risk factors

Based on their experiences, participants identified the factors that they believed combined to increase susceptibility to being at risk of SOC involvement. These were: criminality, lacking positive parental role models, location, poverty, non-attendance at school and trauma.

Six (75 per cent) participants cited significant involvement or association with criminality and drug use in this particular cohort, either via their own offending or a family member’s. Six (75 per cent) participants described a lack of positive role models or parental figures for these young people which was thought to put them at risk of exploitation by OCGs. Particularly, the absence of a father figure was stated to be common within this cohort. Four (50 per cent) participants stated that most of the cohort were not attending school. This was discussed as an indicator of a young person’s engagement or attitude towards statutory services as a whole, but was also explained as a risk in terms of free

time: if they are not in school five days a week, they have a lot more free time which could be exploited by OCGs for criminal activity.

Four (50 per cent) participants stated that living in an area or estate in which OCGs operated increased young people's chance of SOC involvement via two routes: first, a lack of alternative lifestyle choices for the young people who live there; and second, fear that non-involvement will result in physical repercussions from those who are involved in criminality within that area. Three (38 per cent) participants suggested that poverty increases vulnerability to exploitation due to increased lure of money in exchange for criminal activity.

Six (75 per cent) participants highlighted that trauma or exposure to traumatic sights, events and behaviours was evident in this cohort (i.e. significant bereavement, witnessing domestic violence within the home or witnessing extreme violence within their community). It was suggested that post traumatic stress disorder was apparent in some of the cohort which was demonstrated in their behavioural reactions to unknown triggers and/or self-medicating use of cannabis. Participants identified that this underlying trauma and any resulting mental health issues needs to be considered and supported in future interventions. Lastly, it was recommended that knowledge of a traumatic event occurring in a young person's life (i.e. a school teacher being told of a significant family bereavement) should be investigated quickly in order to offer support at an earlier stage to avoid trauma-related vulnerability escalating into criminal exploitation and activity.

What worked?

Factors that were found to be successful in engagement and/or generating successful outcomes were highlighted in order for evidence-based recommendations to be made for future practice.

Six (75 per cent) participants stated that work needs to be flexible and based on the individual needs and interests of that young person. All participants said that to offer support, one-to-one time between the young person and their youth worker should be included. This enables the development of a trusting relationship from which the youth worker can help the young person build their own resilience and self-esteem. Three (38 per cent) participants discussed how this cohort had low self-esteem and a belief that they had no future outside of criminality, perpetuated by a lack of visible alternative routes to success within their community. Five (63 per cent) participants stated that expanding the young people's horizons to see alternative paths and lifestyles is crucial to the success of any programme.

Prioritising building a relationship with the young person was discussed by six (75 per cent) participants. This should be built on trust and developed over time using consistent, credible and non-judgment-based support. Relationships with the young people's families were also viewed by six (75 per cent) participants as integral for lasting impact. Without the support of the family, the work that is done with the young person will not be ratified at home. Also, it was thought that initiating and maintaining contact with the young person becomes easier when the family are in support of the youth worker (i.e. telling the youth worker where the young person is if they do not turn up to a meeting, etc.).

Getting the right person to deliver the programme was considered by this sample to be critical to the success of any project. Six (75 per cent) participants indicated that whilst the youth worker does not need to be an ex-offender themselves, they need to have some sort of credible lived experience and understanding of the cohort's lives in an effort to connect with them from a place of shared experience. As a relevant role model, this was suggested to offer the young person an alternative route to a successful future away from criminality. Three (38 per cent) participants also discussed the importance of treating young people like adults, rather than children. In this, it was suggested that the consequences of OC involvement should be openly and honestly discussed with the young people to de-glamourise the idea with real and relatable examples.

Discussion

The UK government have begun to invest in proactive prevention techniques to tackling young people's increasing involvement in SOC (Home Office, 2013). However, early intervention approaches have limited research evidence to suggest they are effective at reducing the financial, social and individual impact of SOC. This study represents one of the first systematic efforts to explore the successes and challenges associated with an initiative which attempted to prevent young people from becoming involved in SOC. Whilst the initiative was led by the police, it involved a diverse number of other partners, including local government, social services and youth services. It was evident that agencies pooling information provided a much richer picture in relation to a need-based approach. The research found that whilst there was limited evidence of hard employment or educational outcomes across the cohort of young people targeted to receive the intervention, soft outcomes were observed in the majority of those who engaged. These included positive changes in attitude, behaviour and appearance, which were taken to signify increased resilience and self-belief. However, as a multi-agency approach, the programme was found to be problematic in terms of information sharing, joint decision making and coordinated intervention. In particular, such problems related to a lack of shared understanding of who the programme should be targeting, what the programme should be aiming to achieve, and what consistent information should be shared across agencies. Key findings in relation to recommendations for future early intervention-based programmes are discussed below.

Choosing the right subjects

It was clear that there was a disparity between the subjects initially identified and the preventive aims of the programme. This supports research which highlights problems of identifying who is deemed to be "at risk" of gang involvement, and thus appropriate for an intervention (Bullock and Tilley, 2008). Specifically, it was found that only four of the young people identified for inclusion at the outset, and for whom a "deep dive" had been completed, actually went on to receive the intervention. The initial cohort of subjects were unanimously agreed by participants of this study to be too far involved in SOC to achieve lasting preventive outcomes. Therefore, future work should agree a shared understanding of a targeted cohort that is appropriate and relevant for the aims of the programme, and this information should be communicated across the agencies. In reflection of the interview findings described above (see Results section), and in support of literature, it is suggested that future preventive interventions should target individuals who: first, are between 11 and 14 years old (Marshall *et al.*, 2005); second, are not yet currently involved in criminality but have an association to criminality, that is, sibling of an OCG member (Disley and Liddle, 2016) or some other vulnerability that makes them susceptible to SOC that can be evidenced by a practitioner; third, live in a location within which both SOC and poverty proliferates; fourth, have a high rate of absence from school or are excluded; and/or fifth, have experienced a significant victimisation or trauma in their lives, that is, bereavement or absence of a significant male (Farrington, 2002; Marshall *et al.*, 2005).

Focus on engagement

The experiences described by the participants of this study show how problematic implementation can be and how difficult these young people are to engage with, especially if they are already involved in SOC. Therefore, the long-term objective (preventing young people becoming involved in OC) should be supplemented by an aim to improve the engagement of young people at risk of OC, to generate more positive behaviour. Without effective engagement, significant time and resources can be lost and the initiative cannot progress. Focusing on an individual need-based approach to encourage engagement is supported by literature (Brooks and Khan, 2015). Furthermore, soft

outcomes such as behavioural changes (i.e. more respectful, less aggressive, etc.) may be linked to increased resilience, self-esteem and belief that they can aim for success outside of criminality. Therefore, it is useful to monitor engagement and soft outcomes as indicators to establish progress.

Prioritise relationship building

Based on these findings (see What Worked? section), and in support of previous research (Evans *et al.*, 2006; Merton *et al.*, 2004), interventions should focus on building a trusting relationship between the young person and a specialised youth worker with credibility (lived experience). Prosocial involvement like this which develops strong social support, as well as strong attachments and bonds, is found in the literature to be a protective factor, in that it helps develop a positive attitude towards intervention, authority and resilient personalities (Lodewijks *et al.*, 2010). This sample suggested that for relationships to be established, youth workers should treat the young person as an adult and be flexible to the needs and circumstances of the young person. A crucial element of successful relationships with this cohort was credibility: the participants in this study believed that youth workers should be able to connect with the young people via shared lived experiences in similar communities. This credibility is also useful in terms of communicating consequences of criminality, i.e., able to share the reality of prison (Phoenix and Kelly, 2013). This supports the work of past programmes (Boyce *et al.*, 2009; Buck, 2017; Fletcher and Batty, 2012; Hunter and Kirby, 2011). The participants in the current study advised that youth workers should also seek to develop trust with the family of the young person. Brooks and Khan (2015) found that young people who had mothers with less caring and more authoritative parenting styles were less inclined to engage in interventions and suggest this was because these parenting styles do not foster encouragement to develop self-determined goals or prosocial behaviours. Therefore, family buy-in can be key for engagement with the young person and help to endorse their learning and development.

Earlier intervention

Literature suggests that SOC involvement occurs between 12 and 14 years of age (Marshall *et al.*, 2005); therefore, the average age (15 years) of young people recruited into the intervention discussed in this study was beyond the scope of early intervention and into the prime years of SOC involvement. Generally, the participants concluded that this intervention was implemented at a tertiary level which came too late for this cohort; future programmes should aim for earlier intervention at a primary or secondary level which targets a younger cohort (between ages 11 and 14).

From an organisational learning perspective, practitioners within this sample suggested that future work should collaborate further with schools: both in terms of the identification of vulnerability and for intervention delivery. Programmes could collaborate with primary schools to deliver interventions which seek to build resilience and self-esteem to a broader at risk group. Simultaneously, there could be collaboration with teachers to identify early trauma and allocate primary early intervention support for their families if needed. Programmes could also work with secondary schools to identify particular young people with risk factors for SOC and collaboratively work to deliver individual need-based interventions within schools (thus, encouraging engagement within a stable environment whilst avoiding absence and risk of exclusion).

Longer-term interventions

These findings suggest prevention to be a long-term approach that needs support, rather than a short-term initiative. According to this sample, the short-term nature of this project

appeared to be a major barrier to its success, particularly considering the level of SOC that the cohort were already involved in and the complexities and trauma associated with this involvement. Cases of successful engagement and positive hard outcomes were said to have resulted from additional work, separately funded, after the intervention had finished. Based on the participants experiences, they recommend that future work should include much longer-term initiatives with a minimum period of two years but with a consideration of open-ended time parameters (until the young person demonstrates resilience or until they turn 18).

Conclusion

Unsurprisingly, as a pilot study, this programme generated many lessons for later improvement. Specifically, it could have been improved by being instigated with a younger cohort before their involvement in SOC. Further, future programmes should also include longer-term engagement plans (a minimum of two years). To change behaviour, interventions should focus on building a trusting relationship between the young person and a specialised youth worker with credibility. A specific mention is made to recommendations of collaborative work with both primary and secondary schools to identify trauma and deliver interventions within school. Also of importance is the recognition that to make a lasting impact the police could go further than generating arrests. As a 24-h available service, they are well placed to identify those youths who are vulnerable to serious crime (either as offenders or victims) and collaborate with partners to deliver more sustainable and effective solutions.

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