

## **It's scouse soldier's lad init! An examination of contemporary street gangs on Merseyside**

### **Abstract**

The paper will discuss the emergence of the contemporary Street Gang on Merseyside. In terms of gang scholarship in the UK, Merseyside has been greatly neglected despite regular reports in national mainstream media that suggest Merseyside street gangs represent some of the most criminally active and violent in the UK. The paper's main aim is to provide scholars with a review of what limited existing contemporary gang literature there is covering Merseyside. This includes Smithson, Christmann, Armitage, Monchuk, Whitehead and Rogerson, 2009; Hesketh, 2018 and Robinson; 2018. The paper will firstly provide a review of the literature with the second part of the paper specifically devoted to the three studies carried out on Merseyside between 2009 and 2018. This will include highlighting the methods and analysis used and a discussion of the key findings, territoriality and identity, belonging through dress, the allure of risk-taking as motivation for joining a street gang, Merseyside gang structures and the impact of county lines, the extent and nature of gang involvement on Merseyside as well as vulnerability to joining a street gang. This latter aspect will be structured by applying the five domains of risk and protection. The paper will conclude with observations and include some recommendations surrounding the future situation on Merseyside calling for more research to be undertaken in the region.

**Keywords:** Deviant Street Group (DSG), County Lines, Criminal Child Exploitation (CCE), Blacked Out, Adult Organised Crime Groups (AOCGs), Deviant Entrepreneurship

## **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the lack of scholarly research into street gangs and a lesser extent, organised crime on Merseyside. Thomas (2017) reported the regions gang network as consisting of 200 organised gangs involving 3000 offenders and their associates and that such groups range from low level thugs involved in anti-social behaviour to those with international connections. Yet despite this situation being further fuelled by the emergence of the county lines phenomenon, there has been very little academic attention paid to the region. The paper will start with a review of the literature before focusing on a discussion of the only three pieces of in-depth research carried out on Merseyside from 2009-2018, they include Smithson, Christmann, Armitage, Monchuk, Whitehead and Rogerson, 2009; Hesketh, 2018 and Robinson; 2018. After an overview of the methods of each study, the paper will discuss a montage of key findings drawn from each study. This includes territoriality and identity, belonging through dress, the allure of risk-taking as motivation for joining a street gang, Merseyside gang structures and the impact of county lines, the extent and nature of gang involvement on Merseyside as well as vulnerability to joining a street gang. In particular, this latter aspect will be structured by applying the five domains of risk and protection.

## **Literature review**

### **The rise of the contemporary deviant street group on Merseyside: A short historical overview**

Although street gangs on Merseyside can be traced back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Macilwee, 2007), its contemporary gang history began in the early 1980s, a time when high levels of poverty and unemployment predictably saw the rise of organised crime and with it the growth of an underground economy based on the supply of drugs particularly heroin or 'smack' as it was termed by the city's locals at that time. This, in turn, prompted the emergence of several high-profile crime figures in the city where violent disputes over territory made weekly headline stories in the local press and on television. Such media

attention and exposure increased the involvement of young people around the streets of the more deprived areas of Liverpool, quickly transcending into a gang problem with the spotlight focusing heavily on two opposing street gangs, the “Crocky Crew” in Croxteth and the “Nogga Dog” in nearby Norris Green. The increased involvement of young people in these two street gangs and the rivalry that followed culminated in August 2007 with the shooting of an innocent eleven-year-old boy, Rhys Jones. Even today, in 2021, some fourteen years later, this tragic incident is still seen as a pivotal moment in tracing a contemporary history of gang culture on Merseyside (Hackman, 2010).

### **Merseyside, street gangs and organised crime**

For the benefit of overseas readers, Merseyside is a Metropolitan county located in the North West of England. With a population of 1.4 million, the area is divided up into five boroughs: Liverpool Knowsley, St Helens, Sefton and the Wirral, the latter of which is situated on the west side of the river Mersey. For most of the twentieth century, poverty as a result of chronic unemployment and social exclusion has made the boroughs some of the most deprived in the UK. In particular, it was during the 1970s-1990s a period that included the rise of the first British woman Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, that Merseyside suffered one of the most debilitating periods in its history. Rapid industrial decline and urban decay coupled with high rates of unemployment which culminated in the Toxteth riots in July 1981 had brought a government recommendation of managed decline. With such deprivation and poverty, criminality unsurprisingly became linked (Webster and Kingston, 2014), and from this context, Merseyside has a long history. It is a port and as such has been one of the UK’s main points of entry for illegal drug running activity from as far off as Morocco and Columbia for several decades.

Since the Rhys Jones killing, other street gangs on Merseyside have emerged beyond Croxteth (Hackman, 2010). While it is often difficult to gain access to reliable official information involving both street gangs and Adult Organised Crime Groups (AOCGs), since information surrounding such groups is usually subject to ongoing police investigations and can be exempt from any FOIA application, Thomas (2017) reported that Merseyside Police

had identified “as many as 193 ‘organised crime group’s’ and gangs manned by 2,989 gang members of 30 these, 189 members have been designated as leading protagonists in the perpetuation of gang activity with a further 384 as ‘significant figures’. Broken down into the local boroughs, half of the 193 are known to be based around the city centre area in the borough of Liverpool itself with 32 connected to Knowsley, 29 in Sefton, 16 in St Helens and 17 across the River Mersey on the Wirral. Examples across each borough include Toxteth, Liverpool borough (‘Somali Warriors’, ‘Park Road Edz’), Huyton (‘Dovy Edz’, ‘Baki-Edz’, ‘Hillside Edz’, ‘Moss Edz’ and ‘Longi Boyz’) Knowsley and Liverpool borough, Bootle (‘Fernhill Crew’, ‘Linacre Crew’) Sefton borough. Each name highlights the strong ties put on residential place and space which have become integral to both personal and social identity. Moreover, importantly it heavily emphasises the real impact of austerity over the last twelve years resulting in the cutting of youth services and leading to chronic poverty and lack of real legitimate opportunity.

Today, a high proportion of criminality on Merseyside takes the form of street gangs and AOCGs involved in drugs and gun-related violent crime. In the summer of 2020, senior officers at the National Crime Agency (NCA) analysed messages from EncroChat, an encrypted chat service as part of the UK’s largest law-enforcement initiative, “*Operation Venetic*”. They found that 70% of all links to weapons examined could be traced back to the northwest of England and in particular Merseyside (Townsend, R. July, 2020).

### **The media and the use of the gang label**

The media’s relentless pursuit of the street gang as a contemporary moral panic has inevitably seen the steady establishment of the ‘gang’ label in the UK over the last fifteen years without little thought to the definitional fragility of the term. This has been primarily in response to incidents that have escalated naturally in parallel with the increasing number of reports of ‘*Anti-Social Behaviour*’, ‘*Yobs*’ (a term much favoured by the Liverpool Echo) ‘*Hoodies*’, and most recently *knife crime*. In many ways, this media overindulgent use of the term has inadvertently glamourised street gang culture for young people. Such has been the regularity of the reporting incidents as ‘gang related’ compelled one journalist, Carol

Midgley writing in the Times as early as 2008 to claim that there has indeed been ‘a certain Hollywoodization of gangs by the British media’ (2008, p.5). Moreover, in an online article for the Daily Mail entitled ‘*The guns go quiet over the Mersey: how 321 police officers in Liverpool slashed firearm crime*’ Rose, D (April, 2010) appears to reinforce this media shaping assertion with particular attention to Merseyside, commenting that the then Chief Constable of Merseyside, Sir Jon Murphy noted, “that individuals didn’t realise they were a gang in Norris Green [Liverpool] until the media said they were”. Yet, in highlighting what is the most obvious irony for many gang researchers adopting empirical approaches, Smithson et al. (2009) have commented that a great majority of definitions have placed focus on the importance of ‘self-identification’; yet very few young people who are interviewed as street gang members view themselves as being part of a gang. In reality, the use of the term by practitioners and indeed regular use by the media is only adding to coherence and identity with the actual label creating the very situation it sought to challenge. In a similar vein, Hesketh (2018) also found that participants involved in street gangs refused to acknowledge the idea of gang involvement, preferring to use terms like ‘the boyz’ and where such participation involved deviant entrepreneurial pursuits mainly taking the form of drug dealing, the business-like term of ‘firm’ was used.

Interestingly, as a result of the impact of county lines, something that has greatly intensified the entrepreneurial transition of deviant groups (Hesketh and Robinson, 2019), the term gang has started to become more loosely applied to deviant groups of all ages by Merseyside agencies including the police. As a result, there is now a plethora of terms such as street gangs, drug dealing gangs, organised crime gangs (as opposed to what they are AOCGs). Thus, such is the liberal use of the term, that it is now adding to greater confusion regarding definitional boundaries. Moreover, Hesketh (2018) has observed, perhaps the most ironic aspect that appears to have gone unnoticed within UK gang scholarship (with exception to Smithson et al., 2009), that the quickest way for a researcher to lose credibility with participant involved in a street gang, (most certainly on Merseyside) is to in fact use the term ‘gang’ in any part of an interview.

## **Gang scholarship covering Merseyside**

Like many areas of the UK, Merseyside has seen the re-emergence of street gangs, yet in terms of scholarship, the location has been greatly neglected. In attempting to catalogue street gang prevalence on Merseyside, only three major pieces of in-depth research have been carried out. The first contemporary studies were carried out by Smithson et al. (2009) which addressed the extent and nature of young people's involvement in gangs and guns in Liverpool. This was followed by two studies, in the first instance, Hesketh which explored differences between those young people who became street gang members compared to those of similar background in similar locations who did not, and secondly, Robinson (2018) who focused on examining Criminal Child Exploitation (CCE) within street/drug gangs on Merseyside. The paper will now outline each study starting with an overview of the methods and analysis employed in each study and then provide a combined discussion of key findings.

## **Methods**

### **Definitions**

Definitional frailty has always been one of the main contentious issues in gang scholarship with long-standing debate over what most research literature refers to as 'gang/s', despite the paradox that many young people who become involved in group offending do not necessarily see themselves as a 'gang' (Smithson et al., 2009<sup>1</sup>). This is particularly so on Merseyside and it is for this reason, that Hesketh (2018) attempted to move away from the debate by using the term "Deviant Street Group" (DSG). This followed the criteria conceived by a group of academics known as the Euro-Gang Research Network (EGRN, Weerman et al.<sup>2</sup>, 2009). The rationale for this choice is that at the time of research, firstly, it was the

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<sup>1</sup> The Smithson et al. (2009) study did not use any form of gang definition rather emphasised the need for practitioners to use caution in the use of the term.

<sup>2</sup> A street gang ... is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity (Weerman et al., 2009; p. 20).

closest scholars have come to an agreed generic definition, secondly, it is a viable and problem-relevant definition and thirdly it encapsulates the most frequently observed researcher cited characteristics that make up the phenomenon known as a 'gang'. That is street orientation, youthfulness, durability (more than three months) and involvement in deviance and criminality which forms part of a group's identity. Thus, those selected to take part in the study by Hesketh (2018) self-reported being in groups (who have existed for three months or more) who assemble away from the home and the workplace. Such participants who were aged 18-25 (youthfulness) also cited involvement with such groups in deviance/criminality which became part of the overall identity of the group. In contrast, while Robinson (2018) followed a definition used by the Centre for Social Justice<sup>3</sup> which she noted appeared to be appropriate for the groups the young people described in her research, she was also cautious to acknowledge that the particular definition was conceived by a predominantly right-wing think tank.

Smithson et al. (2009)

Smithson et al.'s (2009) research, utilised a mixed-methods approach using desk-based literature review, a review of relevant documentation derived from the DISARM partnership<sup>4</sup>, interviews with senior officers from Merseyside Police's Matrix team (n=4) and DISARM Partnership practitioners (n=12), senior youth service representatives (n=2) and youth workers (n=3). Narrative style interviews were also carried out with young people age between 16 and 29 years old (n=29 male, n=1 female). This latter sample was derived from a variety of sources that included referrals from North Liverpool Youth Offending Service (YOS), referrals from North Liverpool Probation Service (NOMS), referrals

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<sup>3</sup> Centre for Social Justice gang definition: A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who (1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, (2) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence, (3) identify with or lay claim over territory, (4) have some form of identifying structural feature, and (5) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs.

<sup>4</sup> DISARM: Liverpool's strategic multi-agency partnership aimed at dismantling gun and knife crime as well as gang violence. Agencies involved include Youth Services, Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT), Neighbourhood management.

from Positive Futures and referrals from Hindley Prison. All of the young people interviewed originated from areas of Norris Green, Croxteth, Anfield, Walton, Kirkdale and Everton. The researchers did attempt to engage with other young people through youth centres and volunteering as detached youth workers but this proved unsuccessful. Moreover, Observations of Joint Agency Group (JAG), and Multi-Agency Response to Guns and Gangs (MARGG) together with the creation of profiles for all of North Liverpool's gun crime nominals which at the time amounted to n=26 was also included.

Hesketh (2018)

Hesketh's (2018) study involved firstly, a systematic approach to the review of the literature. Building further on this, a hybrid method for data collection and analysis was then developed. This consisted of Biographic Narrative Inductive Method (BNIM, Wengraf, 2001; Hesketh, 2014; 2019) as the means of data collection. The subsequent interview schedules were divided into two parts, the Single Question Inducing Narrative (SQUIN, sub-session 1.) and the Return to Narrative (sub-session 2.). The sample<sup>5</sup> 44 young men between 18 to 25 years of age who had been involved in street gangs actively (n=26) and formally as well as a sample of young men who had completely abstained from street gang membership (n=18). The analysis took the form of Grounded Theory Method (GTM), Strauss and Corbin (1990) which involved an examination on three levels. Data was obtained through participants. Data collected in relation to both samples derived from a combination of sources. These were divided into five potential outlets:

1. The third sector and training organisations
2. Youth organisations
3. The local authority and housing associations
4. The criminal justice system:
5. The researchers own network of personal professional contacts: working in the third sector acting as a point of contact

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<sup>5</sup> The original sample involved 54 with ten participants being young women. Time constraints however meant that only the larger sample of young men could be analysed.



Out of all five potential sources, only two, third sector organisations (charities) and the researchers own network of personal professional contacts proved fruitful. Concerning the latter, the network of personal, professional contacts took the form of practitioners known to the researcher. This was through professional involvement (paid and unpaid work) within the third sector to help recruit participants. The former relates to the third sector, charity service providers of reparation training, working with first time young offenders (gang-related). Participants in the study were drawn from all five of Merseyside's boroughs and included areas of Stockbridge Village (Knowsley), Huyton (Knowsley), Bootle (Sefton), Birkenhead (Wirral), Kensington and Anfield (Liverpool) and St Helens (St Helens).

Robinson (2018)

Robinsons (2018) study focusing on Criminal Child Exploitation (CCE), street gangs and county lines involved data collection through a semi-structured interview schedule. A sample of young people (n=18) between 14-20 years of age who had direct involvement in county lines operations was obtained through:

1. Liverpool Youth Offending Service (YOS),
2. Young Offenders Institutions (YOIs) and
3. Alternative provision

In addition, a further sample of first-line practitioners (n=28) from Merseyside Police, Connexions and Liverpool YOS was also obtained. Thematic Analysis (TA, Braun and Clarke, 2006) through six stages provided the means of analysis.

## Key Findings

### **Merseyside street gangs: identity through dress and the territorial ties that bind**

Addressing the issue of territoriality and young people, Kintrea, Bannister, Pickering, Reid and Suzuki (2008) have observed that ‘territorial behaviour emerged where young people’s identity was closely associated with their neighbourhoods and they gained respect from representing them’. Moreover, Kintrea et al. (2008) noted that in particular, young men aged in their 20s showed territorial behaviour, particularly where it was associated with street gangs and criminality. Location, however, is just one of the basic elements that form a street gang. In defining a deviant street group, the Euro-gang network (Weerman et al., 2009) distinguishes between definers and descriptors. While a definer is a basic element that can describe a group as a street gang, descriptors they argue form the individual aspects that distinguish one street gang from another as such, they argue descriptors can include: age, gender, location and clothing. However, in challenging the idea of clothing being a descriptor, on Merseyside, Hesketh (2018) observed that within many areas embedded within the five boroughs, young people preferred to be dressed in all black attire with some of the participants describing this as being ‘*blackened out*’, in effect de-individualised (Zimbardo, 2011). As one participant explained, “we do it cos it makes it more difficult for the bizzies [police] to identify us”. Importantly, as Zimbardo also contends, such blending also allows for behaviour to be further liberated to the extent that any internal moral dilemma that might arise in individual thinking is eliminated. For this process, Hesketh (2018) identified a combination of black North Face all-terrain hooded jackets, with tracksuit suit bottoms and topped off with Nike Air Max One/Ten trainers. These were in many cases used as a primary generic street gang identifier as oppose to a descriptor for an individual group. These brands have not only contributed to the creation of this distinctive identity in effect a potential master status<sup>6</sup>, but has also become part of the motivation of being a street gang member. The early writing of Cashmore (198:57) still aptly sums up the

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<sup>6</sup>Master status: a term used in sociology to refer to the status of greatest importance in an individual’s life. It can be bestowed on an individual or the individual can apply it (examples include economic standing, ethnicity, mental health). In this paper, the author contends that on Merseyside where street gangs are concerned, clothing has become in effect a component of the master status of street gang members.

importance of dress within groups and subcultures by commenting “You can’t create a youth culture by yourself; unless others identify you as either one of ‘us’ or one of ‘them’”. Interestingly, street gang member participants in Hesketh’s (2018) study also highlighted another aspect of being able to blend in with others. As Clarke (2003) notes, with “de-individuation, comes much greater freedom and a reduction of personal moral accountability (Bandura, 1990, 2002). The theory is that in a large crowd each person is nameless and personal responsibility is diffused, as each is faceless and anonymous” (p. 93).

### **Feeling the part of a risk-taker**

In his early work, covering the inner dark drives of criminality and risk-taking, Katz (1988) contends that part of the allure of criminality is not just the actual crime itself, but also most importantly, in the preparation and the run-up to committing the act. It is argued that such allure can also extend to projecting a street identity and that by actually dressing the part of a street gang member, such individuals can derive a form of criminal (almost erotic) physiological pleasure (Katz, 1988; Ferrel and Sanders 1995; Presdee, 2000). Drawing on parallels from Hebdige’s (1979) observations, it is further asserted that such young people who mirror this militaristic all-black dress, are projecting a symbolic violation of the social order in true ‘*semiotic*<sup>7</sup> *guerrilla*’ of style warfare. To this extent, writing about the power of dress in street gangs and territoriality on Merseyside, Hackman (2010, p.59) observes “tracksuit-clad youths fight over grey council estate litter-strewn patches of turf others are desperate to get away from”. Moreover, according to Hesketh (2018) such impression management of representation, is not just expressed in attire, but also overlapped in the marking of territory through graffiti which talked of ‘*street soldiers*’, whose condemnation for state law enforcement was projected through the simple tag of *FTM* (‘*Fuck the Matrix*<sup>8</sup>’). Taken from a cultural criminological perspective, such uniformity, coupled with ways of talking<sup>9</sup> also add a very strong, hegemonically masculine and emblematic appeal. In sum,

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<sup>7</sup> Semiotics: the study of signs and how signs communicate meaning.

<sup>8</sup> The Matrix: is Merseyside’s anti-gun and gang crime disruption unit.

<sup>9</sup> The study has noted that males on Merseyside and particularly street gang members, the use of the word ‘*lad*’ and/or ‘*lid*’ (as in ‘*kid*’ virtually after every sentence to convey a form of masculine synergy).

the last fifteen years have seen such dress/style and language emerge, its sub-cultural pattern much in line with Ferrell and Sanders (1995) observations that:

To speak of a criminal subculture is to recognize not only an association of people, but a network of symbols, meaning, and knowledge. Members of a criminal subculture learn and negotiate 'motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes;' develop elaborate conventions of language, appearance, and presentation of self; and in so doing participate, to greater or lesser degrees, in a subculture, a collective way of life (p. 4).

### **Merseyside gang structures and the impact of county lines**

In their work examining guns and gang violence, Smithson et al. (2009) identified two distinct types of street gang. In the first instance, there were the “loosely interlinked informal peer groups engaged in anti-social behaviour, crime and violence” (2009:7). This type of group, it was observed had no hierarchy or recognisable structure. It was simply a case of individuals knowing each other as a result of school or locality (restricted friendship networks, Hesketh, 2018) who would thus congregate in specific key locations such as the local shopping area or around a nearby pub. Secondly, there was a gradually emerging “structured and hierarchical criminal group that operated within the illegal drugs market” (2009:7). This type of group it was noted had ties to organised crime in the city. Both of these observations were consistent with the findings of Hesketh (2018) who like Smithson et al. (2009) asserts that within Merseyside, a clear distinction can be made between Loosely-knit, relatively informal peer transitional groups involved in vandalism and low-level criminality (Burglary and Taking Without Consent (TWOCING) street-level drug dealing) and more structured forms of street gang linked to AOCGs. Importantly, however, in looking at these two groups further, Hesketh (2018) observed that participants involved in street gangs in areas such as Anfield, Kensington and Bootle, areas closer to the vibrant night-time economy of the city centre and the high demand for drugs as part of that economy, spoke of what was identified as a form of '*deviant entrepreneurship*' (Hesketh, 2018; Hesketh and Robinson, 2019) which will be discussed later in the paper.

In 2016, the government introduced what was billed as a “refreshed” initiative that replaced the “Ending Gangs and Youth Violence (EGYV)” programme (2013). Called the “Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation (EGVE)” programme, the policy identified A form of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) linked to Smithson’s (2009) and Hesketh’s (2018) structured street gang descriptions called county lines. Hesketh and Robinson (2019) argue that such an important aspect further adds to the phenomenon of deviant entrepreneurship and provides yet more significant evidence of a transition of such structured groups towards more criminal business model networks based on influence from AOCGs.

On Merseyside, as part of this transition to fully exploit the county lines market, the concern has focused on street gangs developing grooming skills that have concentrated on children as young as twelve with no criminal record, so called ‘clean skins’ who have been identified as the most vulnerable. Moreover, parents have also been targeted being offered incentives such as the payment of Sky TV bills and new designer clothes in return for offspring being used as drug mules. Debt bondage has also become a much-used tactic to draw in a young person, for example, the dealer providing forty bags of cocaine (‘lemo<sup>10</sup>’) for the young person to sell. Then, on return with a full night’s takings, the young person is told they had been given an exaggerated higher number of bags. As a consequence of this imaginary negligent surplus loss or theft, the young person is then committed to making up the deficit through more selling and deliveries.

### **The extent and nature of gang involvement on Merseyside**

Smithson et al. (2009) found that in terms of gang and indeed gun involvement in Liverpool, this was determined by how a gang was defined. Smithson et al.’s findings suggested that there existed forms of street gangs, who did match commonly accepted definitions of what is described as youth gangs. That is, they were street-based and who did engage in crime, anti-social behaviour and violence together. The research also found evidence of rivalry

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<sup>10</sup> On Merseyside, the term ‘lemo’ has become a highly popular reference used by both dealers and their punnies (punters) for cocaine. It has replaced the now aging term that emerged around 2010 to 2013 of ‘beak’ although this can be still be heard in some areas of Merseyside.

between groups and that some did have access to and were prepared to use firearms. Moreover, Smithson et al. (2009) found that geography dictated group structure with many of the participants describing low level, disorganised groups that were limited to small geographical areas. However, the researchers did find evidence of more structured local hierarchical groups in the areas of Anfield, Everton and Kirkdale. Regarding such groups, Smithson et al. (2009) comment that these could be better explained as family firms rather than street gangs. Interestingly, geography was observed to be a significant factor in Hesketh's (2018) study which found a marked difference where neighbourhood risk was concerned, the researchers noted that the nearer street gang prevalent areas were to the city centre, the more recognition there appeared to be of the financial potential of recreational narcotics. One of the major themes Hesketh's (2018) study identified what was termed '*deviant entrepreneurship*<sup>11</sup>' (Hesketh and Robinson, 2019). Here, Hesketh observed that groups became more business orientated as a result of the direct influence of adult organised crime which in some cases were associated with or embedded within crime families. This business model was reflected in the language used within-participant narrative ('firms of boys' as opposed to gangs or crews, 'serving punny's' selling drugs to users). It is a factor that had also been observed in earlier work by Densley (2013), who claims that young people have identified a financial niche in the street gangs, as community contraband carriers for bigger and darker figures in organised crime, as Densley has observed, "the gang now represents both 'crime that is organized' and 'organized crime'" (p.518).

This has been further reinforced on Merseyside by the findings of Robinson (2018) which covers this emerging dimension within street gangs, focused around county lines. Robinson has made several observations surrounding exploitation within deviant entrepreneurial business models. These have included young people being paid a commission in drugs (cannabis) for selling a supply, the use of the social media platform, Snapchat to lure young people into carrying out drug supplying tasks and manipulation of young people into debt

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<sup>11</sup> In defining deviant entrepreneurship, Hesketh (2018) also observed that the boundaries that separated criminality and employment were becoming blurred in the eyes of disenfranchised young people, that, criminality was being neutralised into a form of employment ('grafting', 'graft', 'grafts').

bondage. Moreover, Merseyside Police have identified the grooming of parents who have had bills paid and clothes bought by dealers in return for children, some as young as 12 being used as drug carriers and door delivery agents.

### **Vulnerability to joining a street gang on Merseyside**

In cataloguing key aspects of vulnerability (in effect risk factors) that influenced young people in areas of Merseyside to join street gangs, while Robinson (2018) focused predominantly on exploitation processes existing within OCGs and street gangs, Hesketh's (2018) observations reinforce the earlier work of Smithson et al. (2009) whose research findings "emphasise the cumulative impact of multiple risk factors, with multiple deficits across the five developmental domains (family, neighbourhood/community, school, individual and peers) increasing the involvement with guns and gangs" (p.7). Like Hesketh (2018), Smithson et al. (2009:32) also contend that "The most comprehensive method of establishing risk factors for gang membership is longitudinal study. Longitudinal studies enable the examination of the time course of events and circumstances".

#### **Family:**

In examining the family domain, Hesketh (2018) highlighted a lack of quality and bonding in the parent/child relationship evident in the young people who chose to join street gangs. Further, in keeping with the theme of bonding, street gang participants, focused, not so much on being a product of a single-parent household, but on the presence of an inappropriate parent in the form of an older male acting as a surrogate. Specifically, participants reflected on the quality of patriarchal parenting skills, which they deemed were neither sufficient nor morally appropriate to carry out the role of a father. It is an observation that was further supported in an article for the Mail Online; Clark (2008) cites 2008 Ofsted inspectors report on under-achievement by white boys from low-income homes. She observes that the report recommended that teachers should take on the mantle of father figure role models with the aim to correctly socialising young boys. Interestingly, Hesketh's (2018) study noted that many of the street gang participants across

all the Liverpool City Region<sup>12</sup>, had described having a good, up-close and personal rapport with a favourite teacher all of whom had been male. Hesketh also found evidence for the street gang acting as a surrogate family. This is a theory that has suggested that surrogate family dynamics within street gangs play a large role in the recruitment and involvement of young people. In the Smithson et al. (2009) study, poor parenting and parental supervision was found to be a key concern with practitioners suggesting that parents should also be the subject of interventions. However, Smithson et al. (2009) also noted that some responses from young people also indicated that family relationships can be a protective factor when changes result in increased responsibility. Smithson et al. (2009) like Hesketh (2018) also observed that young people were actually concerned about the consequences of their actions on parents as well as families they themselves had started through relationships. This would seem to provide further strong evidence for the considerable amount of research that has identified 'push' and 'pull' factors leading to street gang membership joining and desistance (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011:12). In this case, specifically pull factors that "make persistence in that social [street gang] environment unappealing ... Pull factors, alternatively are circumstances or situations that attract individuals to alternative routes ... toward new activities and pathways".

## School

In examining school risk factors, Shute (2008) identifies two levels of risk within the context of school. Firstly, *school individual-level risk factors*, represent the main focus for researchers and include lack of positive motivation towards the school work ethic, attendance and commitment to academically achieve. This may be linked to overall family attitude towards education. A further connection can also be marginalised neighbourhoods and peer friendship networks formed in such communities where deviance, criminality and gang membership are prevalent and normalised to an almost broken windows (Kelling and Wilson, 1982) level. As Estrada, Jr., Gilreath, Astor and Benbenishty (2014) comment "it is logical to assume that street gangs could become a normal part of a school culture if the

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<sup>12</sup> The Liverpool City Region is an economic and political area of England centred on Liverpool. It incorporates the local authority boroughs of Halton, Knowsley, Sefton, St Helens, and Wirral.



school is nested in a gang area or in a catchment area of regions that have many teen gang members” (p. 230). The Second level Shute identifies is *school-level risk factors* for which Shute (2008) observes ‘are properties of the institution that affect all attending pupils regardless of their commitment, for example, average class size, the extent of extracurricular activity, bullying prevalence’ (p. 24). They also include negative labelling by teachers (Ebsensen et al., 1993).

Concerning Merseyside, Hesketh (2018) found evidence of factors operating on both of Shute’s levels. That is, many of the young people interviewed showed a very limited interest when discussing education, pointing towards the lack of upward mobility of former known educationally conforming school peers. Others simply compared the money earned dealing drugs with a legitimate income of individuals they knew in employment. Moreover, families lack of interest in education was also noted to be a contributing factor in addition to early victimisation through bullying which compelled some of the participants to act as ‘class clown’ to gain popularity. In essence, the school represents the first opportunity to make peer connections, on Merseyside, the location of the school can be a determinant in whether a young person will join a street gang.

The research found that school peers for many of the street gang members became social facilitators for acquaintanceships forged with older deviant peers on the streets. In all of the cases, the learning establishment was located in a deprived area with high levels of criminality and anti-social behaviour. This observation was particularly reinforced by street gang participants who possessed what was termed in Hesketh’s study as a ‘restricted friendship network’. Restricted friendship networks involve young people developing friendships and acquaintanceships initially at school that continued at the street (the area) level. As a consequence, the values and beliefs that a young person possessed appeared to be one-dimensional and became bound over time. Constant reinforcement came from peers who shared the same views. Put simply the study noted that young disenfranchised people who have restricted friendship networks have no opportunity to meet and develop diverse social capital from beyond the area in which they live, as such this over a prolonged

period can contribute to network poverty<sup>13</sup> (Hesketh and Box, 2020). In summing up this situation, one participant commented: “it was on my doorstep, I had no choice”. Interestingly, Irwin-Rodgers and Harding (2014) have explored a link between young people’s involvement in street gangs (what they term urban street gangs) and their attitudes to and behaviour in school. The authors conducted fieldwork in five alternative provision schools concentrated in three large cities in England and applied the lens of social field theory. Their analysis highlighted that although pupil gang involvement can raise significant issues for schools, particularly around violence and educational engagement, such prevailing orthodoxy of street gang involved members and negative school behaviour can be challenged. Irwin-Rodgers and Harding (2018:463) comment:

There is nothing inevitable about the internal logic of a gang social field permeating a school’s gates. Young people involved in gangs do not typically spend their entire waking hours wedded to a ‘gang member’ identity—if they are given the opportunity to transition away from the gang social field when they enter the school gates, they will often embrace it.

While the earlier work of Smithson et al. (2009) did not specifically examine the domain of school, they did find a significant link between school expulsion and escalation of gang activity and violent behaviour. Similarly, Robinson (2018) also noted a significance between school exclusion vulnerability to street gangs and CCE.

### Individual

In the individual domain, Smithson’s et al. (2009) study highlighted the role of illegal drugs, the research team found that although none of the participants admitted involvement with class A drugs, practically all of the sample spoke of smoking cannabis. Widespread use and distribution of cannabis were also observed by Hesketh (2018). Added to this, was the pressure many young people experiences trying to develop an identity in locations that greatly lacked legitimate opportunities. From this perspective, the residential area became integral to social identity. When reflecting on personal situations, some of the street gang

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<sup>13</sup> Network poverty: the inability of socially excluded individuals to make positive connections as a result of lack of access to legitimately productive human networks in the residential environment.

participants spoke of experiences that impacted on self-esteem. Together, all of these issues increased the risk of spending more time out on the street surrounded by and thus, potentially involved in street gangs. Further, Robinson's (2018) study noted that in enlisting young people to carry drugs within the county lines network, gang recruiters would often focus on providing a sense of identity to vulnerable young people with promises of gifts in the form of designer items.

Importantly, linked to the individual risk domain, was narrative that appeared to overlap into the theory of criminological edgework and the intrinsic value and allure of criminal risk-taking activity. This Hesketh's (2018) study observed to be in two forms. Firstly, direct edgework, ranged from the adrenalin rush gained before (in the run-up to) and during the acts themselves to thoughts associated with the acts post-event (Katz, 1988), coupled with the actual status of being part of a known rogue element and the intimidatory status projected with the community, this latter aspect was seen as a highly motivating factor for being part of a street gang on Merseyside. In effect, direct edgework was seen as a form of self-liberation and empowerment from the mundane banality and official restrictions of exclusion. Secondly, there was also a narrative focusing on the image of being bad and the alleged female attraction to it, which the study terms 'vicarious edgework' (K. Corteen, 2014, personal communication, 11 February). Here, participants described young women<sup>14</sup> being attracted to the 'scally' (bad boy) type of male who associated with the local street gang while not wanting to be directly involved themselves. During interviews with a sample of young women not included the research, such observations were later confirmed, with testimony suggesting that domestic responsibilities from a prior relationship (young children, having rented accommodation etc.) prevented such direct involvement, thus, the excitement from risk-taking was being derived vicariously. In sum, in considering both forms of criminological edgework together, the study noted a lack of interventions that addressed this highly inductive form of internal motivation towards street gangs and their members from both sexes.

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<sup>14</sup> During the original data-collecting stage, the study involved a total of 55 interviews n=11 of which involved young women, half of whom had been involved with young men who had been US members. During these interviews, the researcher noted a narrative which confirmed the observations of male participants regarding a vicarious edgework effect.

## Peer

Where narrative focusing on peers was concerned, Smithson et al., (2009) emphasised the importance of peer pressure in young people's decision to become involved in street gangs. From this perspective, Smithson et al., (2009) describe a situation that is akin to Sutherlands (1939) early work covering differential association, that is, young people born into an environment that is predominantly crime prevalent and exposed regularly to deviant group behaviour will inevitably adopt the same behaviour. As Smithson et al. (2009: 39) comment "nobody wants to be different". With the themes of exposure and regularity still in mind, Hesketh's (2018) study observed, what he termed as "restricted friendship networks" that all of the street gang participants appeared to derive their friendships from two main sources, in the first instance, friendships forged at school and secondly, those developed in the street (residential area). Regarding school friendships, Hesketh (2018) noted these tended to act as conduits for further acquaintances made on the street. Such acquaintanceships appeared to be more fixed and durable, resulting in values, beliefs and mores becoming bounded around the idea of deviance in groups and the dominant pro-crime mindset within participants residential area. As a result of school and street friendship networks, street gang participants tended to look towards these peer friendship networks for support. From this context, there was a line of thought where the emphasis appeared to be on unity and power in numbers. Being a street gang member meant being able to bond together as one peer unit in what some saw as a traditional '*them (the state, the police) versus us*' running narrative. Something that had been visually reinforced and nurtured from within the environment since early adolescence.

## Neighbourhood/community

In describing neighbourhoods and community risk, Shute (2008) asserts 'area crime rates are predicted by indices of poverty and marginality, and by factors that reduce opportunities for neighbourly interaction (such as residential mobility) and impair the realisation of common goals and values' (p. 25). Areas with high levels of crime, poor housing, visible deterioration through vandalism and graffiti provide the veritable

ingredients for this type of risk since, in most instances' deviance, criminality including street gang membership has become normalised (Kelling and Wilson, 1996). However, as Shute (2008) also notes, "the relationship between crime and social process is likely to be bidirectional" (p. 25). That is, such criminogenic/ street gang prevalence impacting on innocent members of communities and their use of place and space. Thus it can be argued will be as a result of labelling by officials and outsiders whose liberal use of gang terminology creates a 'tar-with-the-same-brush' effect as Ralphs et al.'s, (2009) research would suggest. On Merseyside, Smithson et al. (2009) observed practitioners' references to disorganised communities or insular communities that "fostered fierce local attachments". In similar vein, Hesketh (2018) also found that many of the communities involving the Merseyside boroughs covered in the study were very insular with high levels of bonding and inadequate bridging. One of the main consequences as a result of lack of bridging that Hesketh found was that young people had become starved of value and belief diversity since friendship networks had become restricted to making acquaintances from the school and the residential streets. As a result, over time values had become bound and focused on what was a dominant mindset fixed around anti-social behaviour and criminality as a form of escapism from social exclusion. With such insularity emerges the notion of territoriality or as Smithson et al. (2009:36) noted "territory that needed protecting from incursion by others".

## **Conclusion**

The paper has sought to bring attention to the lack of scholarship regarding street gangs and a less extent adult organised crime groups on Merseyside. Despite being one of the most crime prolific locations in the UK, over the last 15 years, there has been very little attempt to empirically investigate its street gang problem. The paper has noted just three in-depth studies that have been completed covering Merseyside, Smithson et al. (2009); Robinson (2018); and Hesketh (2018). All three research studies suggests that like many locations in the UK, exclusion coupled with the influence of drugs has not only sustained street gangs and exacerbated violence on Merseyside but also created strong links between

young people involved in street gangs and adult organised crime groups in boroughs closer to the high-time economy of Liverpool city centre.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the work of Smithson et al. (2009), Hesketh (2018) and Robinson (2018), the paper recognises some of the challenges faced by local agencies on Merseyside and attempts to set out several recommendations. Such proposals, however, could also be considered and transferred to other street gang-related locations around the UK. Firstly, one of the key observations that have been noted by all three research studies (Smithson et al., 2009; Hesketh, 2018; and Robinson, 2018) was the lack of intervention programmes aimed at specifically tackling street gangs on Merseyside. Like scholarly contribution, the region has been starved of projects aimed at supporting vulnerable young people. However, at the time of writing (May 2021), this has started to be addressed mainly as a result of the emergence of county lines, with organisations such as Local Solutions and St Giles Trust starting to establish mentoring interventions aimed at targeting young people involved in CCE diverting young people away from direct and indirect involvement with street gangs.

Other recommendations include:

On the whole, increased efforts to try and contain the problem with the use of police enforcement tactics should only be targeted at the most problematic street gang-involved young people especially those linked with the use of weapons (Smithson et al., 2009) and adult organised crime groups. At best, such approaches can only be seen in the context of damage limitation and can create resentment of the police if applied to the majority of young people in a community as a whole. This is particularly so with stop and search that is used in a confrontational manner (Smithson et al. 2009). Emphasis should be placed on long-term cultural change through multi-agency working starting with critical early intervention approaches. Moreover, the focus should be on greater investment in and less budget-cutting of grass-roots organisations and youth services involved with excluded

communities. Like other areas around the UK, there is no quick-fix solution to the issue of street gangs and organised crime on Merseyside.

Disengaging completely from the 'gang' label and distinguishing different types of criminal groups

Since the re-emergence of the 'gang' label by the British media over a decade ago, there has been very little evidence of central government, local authorities or law enforcement attempting to stand back and disengage from the term. This is despite both its definitional frailties and the dangers of using labels in marginalised communities. Further, such willingness to embrace the label has fuelled a media's moral panic campaign, of a country "plagued by urban street gangs". With this in mind and from the perspective of Merseyside, Hesketh (2018) has noted a similar local media trend, in particular by the local evening newspaper, the Liverpool Echo. In focusing on this particular aspect, while also bearing in mind the need for reporting freedoms, the paper recommends a dialogue between the law enforcement community and local media news sources about the language used to report incidents involving young people. In particular, those that are deemed to be 'gang' related. The paper recommends that in reporting street gang-related incidents, a considerable reining in of the provocative 'gang'/'gang member' terms. In areas of London, a reduction of the use of the gang/gang member label has been underway since 2005 with the widespread use of 'disengaged young person' and 'disengaged young people' (Lambert Council, personal communication, June 19; 2015). However, while these terms are effective in reducing the appeal of anti-social behaviour or violent youth crime to young people, they still imply that the blame for such incidents will rest solely on the young people themselves without considering the effects of marginalisation on them. Instead, Hesketh (2018) suggests the use of 'disenfranchised young people' or 'disenfranchised young person'. Such terms are proportionately less emotively challenging and most importantly unappealing to youth culture. The terms also represent more accurate accounts for what is being reported. Moreover, as this paper has observed, the earlier work of Smithson et al. (2009), has noted that the majority of young people on Merseyside involved in gangs do not use and will not accept the terms 'gang'/'gang member' they thus concluded that both

policymakers and partitioners had overused the terms<sup>15</sup>. In sum, by using such terms law enforcement, in particular, may indeed be inadvertently creating the very problem they are trying to stop. This also suggests a need to distinguish between different types of crime group instead of using the term gang loosely as Smithson et al. (2009) have recommended. That is, interventions should adopt a different approach with young people who have been linked with organised criminal groups compared to those who have been identified as being connected to loosely structured networks commonly seen in the form of street-corner gangs.

#### A need for greater Cross-Borough Collaboration

As part of the partnership with local authorities, it would be in the best interest of Merseyside Police and partners to host/chair a meeting at regular intervals involving representatives from ASB units from all borough councils to discuss evidence of best practice and to share intelligence borough-wide (Hesketh, 2018). While this paper concedes that different authorities have different problems; it is now a case of what can or cannot be transferred to other areas, an exercise that can only be achieved through greater cross-borough dialogue. Additional representatives from the other multi-agency organisations that make up the safer community partnership could further enhance this. Ideally, a good objective would be to develop this into some form of city thematic group with the added input of social science academics from the universities on Merseyside. It should be noted, however, that in recent times, there have been productive attempts to address this with the emergence of the Violence Reduction Partnerships (VRPs, formally, Violence Reduction Units, VRUs). In 2019, the Home Office announced that it would provide £35 million to 18 Crime Commissioners in areas worst affected by violence to establish VRUs with a further £35 million provided in 2020/21. These partnerships have fully embraced the idea of multi-agency responsibility bringing together health, local authorities, probation and community organisations.

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<sup>15</sup> At the time of writing (May 2021) the author has observed that recently, some police officers on Merseyside have been using the term 'gang' quite loosely to describe many forms of deviant/crime groups. In one instance, this included adult organised crime groups.



### A Failure to Evaluate the Effectiveness of US Influenced Approaches

In addressing the issue of evaluation of interventions, all three studies (Smithson, et al., 2009; Hesketh, 2018 and Robinson) have noted the great majority of projects aimed at young people's involvement with street gangs and organised crime stemming from the United States (US) which should be treated with caution in terms of transferability. From a UK wide level, presently there is very little evidence to suggest that the UK is evolving towards a US gang-style problem. While Hesketh (2018) recommends more holistic, homegrown local approaches that address the intrinsic needs of disenfranchised young people. Smithson et al. (2009) earlier work has suggested multi-agency and multi-modal approaches that encompass components of Spergal and Curry's (1995) comprehensive gang model. That is a mixture of suppression (catch and convict), social intervention (rehabilitative), social opportunities (prevent and deter), community mobilisation and organisational change.

Again, linked to this, is the need for greater restraint in the use of the term 'gang'. Interestingly, Fraser (2017) has observed the contribution of critical gang literature. This has continually emphasised a prerequisite for both central and local government to consider community biographies when developing gang and youth crime focused policy. Such methods should also emphasise exploring the potential for social mixing/bridging for young people. This could be achieved via activities both inside and outside of residential locality as a protective factor covering both peer and neighbourhood domains. From this perspective, Hesketh and Box (2020) have found that getting young people away from deviant peers to interact with other young people and adults beyond residential locality can be decisive in diverting individuals away from not only street gang involvement but also the need to entwine identity with territory. Interestingly, the earlier Smithson et al. (2009) research made two critical observations to justify this latter assertion. Firstly, that "while young people did not feel pressured by peers to become involved in gangs and guns, the influence of delinquent peers was paramount" (p. 101) and secondly, that "the closed environments that many of the young people occupied often generated a strong identification, local loyalty and sense of belonging. This promoted territorial disputes

between rival groups, acting as an escalator to more serious forms of crime and violence” (p. 102).

A need to counter criminological edgework risk-taking behaviour in young people

The paper has observed increasing concern with the issue of risk-taking behaviour as a form of escapism and self-empowerment (Hesketh, 2018). As a risk factor in the individual domain, this has been somewhat neglected in comparison to other individual risk factors such as conduct disorders. In the long-term, this issue may potentially have more profound social-psycho implications that go beyond the remit and expertise of this paper. Thus, this paper calls for further in-depth research into this area, since only from further inquiry can effective intervention be integrated into multi-agency policy.

The question of how an individual, who experiences criminal risk-taking behaviour as pleasurable and intrinsically rewarding, can be brought back to the normality and banality of life in a marginalised community must be addressed. This is even more so if such toxic behaviour is reinforced by extrinsic rewards of high income through deviant entrepreneurship, identity and status in the community. Also linked to this was the phenomenon of ‘vicarious edgework’ (Corteen, 2014). The paper notes that while this observation is taken mainly from the narrative of male street gang participants and a small minority of young women, the paper recommends that further research be carried out primarily to establish both the validity and if proven, the extent of such phenomenon since this may have serious implications embedded within issues of exploitation and domestic abuse.

The need to address the issue of gender perception

Based on the narrative reflections of street gang members taken from Hesketh’s (2018) study, on the subject of females, the paper has noted, that virtually all of the young men who took part in the research, described young single women using phrases that were both derogatory and highly disrespectful. Based on these observations, the paper recommends some form of gender education (both early years onwards) aimed at addressing the issues of sexual identity, gender empowerment and roles, relations and respect. Particular emphasis should be placed on the issues of equality and mutual respect, especially

concerning how young women are seen and treated within the community, since like vicarious edgework, this may have underlying implications for the perpetuation of violence in a domestic setting in later adult life. It should however be recognised that Merseyside schools have identified issues related to gender perception and have started tackle this head on.

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