**What makes young people get involved with street gangs in London? A study of the perceived risk factors**

***Abstract***

**Aims:** This study examined the perceived determinants of street gang-related antisocial behaviour and crime of young people in a deprived and ethnically diverse community in London.

**Methods:** 26 participants were recruited from two youth centres (one sport and one art-based program) from the borough of Tower Hamlets. Participants took part in four focus groups organised into two youth (N=14) and two adult (N=12) sub-groups. The focus group questions explored participants’ understanding of their community and social environment, their social interaction with the local young people and youth gangs. Data was analysed using a thematic approach and key factors associated with youth street gang involvement were identified.

**Results:** Participants highlighted a series of determinants, which were centred on social predispositions and psychological factors. Associated risk factors were heavily embedded in the racial and religious tensions within the borough.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, context-specific to the individual communities' risk factors should be identified prior to the development and implementation of intervention strategies to enhance their potential for impact.

***Keywords***

London, youth violence, knife crime, county lines, street gangs

**Word Count:** 10, 178

1. **Introduction**
   1. **Social issues in London**

London is one of the world’s most culturally and socioeconomically diverse cities in the world and is unique in terms of its density of population and local governance. These characteristics bring distinctive challenges to young people in the city. The youth experience across London’s socioeconomically deprived areas is plagued with an array of social issues including: homicide, knife & gun crime, robbery, and in more-recent years potential exploitation through ‘County Lines’ drug trades – all of which are heavily-linked to street and organised gangs based in the cities socioeconomically deprived communities (J. Densley et al., 2020; McLean et al., 2020; Whittaker et al., 2018a). In conjunction with these aforementioned issues, London has also observed a continued reduction in youth support services with an overall cut of 46 per cent in budgets since 2011-12 (Berry, 2019) – leaving young Londoners more vulnerable and less supported than ever. The London Riots in 2011 was also a significant turning point for young people across London (Lewis et al., 2011) as it caused a significant shift in the government’s approach to policing. As opposed to attributing the riots to the social exclusion and deprivation experienced by communities across London, a ‘concerted, all-out war on gangs and gang culture’ (Densley, 2013) was declared by the current Prime Minister. This diminished the government of any responsibility and ultimately, further alienated young people from socioeconomically deprived communities across London.

Whilst it is important to highlight that it is in-fact a minority of young people who are involved in street gang-related activity, the issues associated with street gangs has a devastating impact on the lives of countless young people (who may not be directly involved) across London, whilst also leaving profound and long-lasting scars on the families, friends and communities affected. In the ‘Serious Violence Strategy’ report produced by Her Majesty's Government in 2018, serious violence was defined as “specific types of crime such as homicide, knife crime, and gun crime and areas of criminality where serious violence or its threat is inherent, such as in gangs and county lines drug dealing.” This also includes other crime threats faced in some areas of the country such as the use of corrosive substances as a weapon. Over 70% of young people in London are directly exposed to serious violence at least once a month and 90% are exposed to serious violence at least once a week – through music, TV, and/or social media (The Youth Violence Commission, 2018). 38% of young people know at least one person who sells drugs and 40% agree that it is easy to buy illegal drugs where they live. Findings from the ‘Youth Voice Survey’ conducted in 2018 also highlighted the prevalence of exposure to street gang crime and knife possession – all of which create big problems for young people growing up in the capital, in schools and within their local areas of residence (Ramshaw et al., 2018).

* 1. **Gang culture in the UK**

The term ‘gang’ is contested and controversial in the UK context, often being identified as “problematic” by contributing to the further marginalization and isolate some ethnic minority communities (Fraser & Atkinson, 2014; Smithson et al., 2013) but a definition is essential to the understanding of all groups, regardless of their name or primary activities and goals – particularly for this study. Gang culture in the UK has significantly evolved over the past 10 years (Densley 2012; Densley et al. 2020; Whittaker et al. 2020) and this was strongly considered by the authors in the development of this study. Initially, this study was solely concerned with the ‘street gangs’ (Klein & Maxson, 2001) as opposed to ‘criminal gangs’ or ‘crime firms’ that come together just to commit a criminal act and then disband (Vigil 2003; Weerman et al. 2009). ‘Street gangs’ have four defining descriptors: durability (of at least several months), street orientation (away from the home, work and school), youthfulness (average age in adolescence or early twenties), and identity via illegal activity (delinquent or criminal activity is part of the group's essence).

Historically, street gangs in the UK (specifically London) were centred around neighbourhood-based peer groups, external threats with a small focus on financial commitments, according to Densley in (2012) however since then, gangs in the UK have evolved into more organized and profit-oriented entities (Whittaker et al. 2020). The drug market in London has become extremely over-saturated, leading gangs (originally based in London) to expand their business networks to capitalise on drugs markets in smaller UK towns in ‘county lines’ (Hesketh & Robinson, 2019; McLean et al., 2020). The significant shift in business model has also impacted the type and motive behind violent acts between gangs in London. In Whittaker and colleagues' (2020) 10-year comparison of gang activity in the London borough of Waltham Forest, violence had evolved from being an “expressive means of reinforcing gang identity” to being “used as an instrumental means of protecting business interests”. This new operating model of street gangs in London has in-turn led to a significant reduction in the visibility and presence of these groups across the city (McLean, 2019), making them harder to mediate/police, and creating ongoing issues for local authorities, and community members in particular. According to Weerman and colleagues (2009), “a street gang (or troublesome youth group corresponding to a street gang elsewhere) is any durable, street-orientated youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity”. This definition has been adopted and the authors’ work has been well cited by UK-based gang research publications including; Hesketh & Robinson, 2019 and Storrod & Densley, 2017.

* 1. **Why join a gang in London?**

Firstly, it must be understood that joining a gang for a young person in London is not an easy, step-by-step process and a prospect that not all young people are afforded. Gangs in London are often selective in their approach to recruitment so in order for a young person to become involved with local street gangs, they would be subject to a screening process where their willingness to partake in street gang activity is assessed (Densley 2012). The over-arching issues for some young people across London are the social constructs (or disadvantages) that significantly impact their decision-making throughout their adolescent years such as: under-resourced youth services, increasing rates of child poverty & inequality, significant cuts to policing, unsafe & deprived housing environments, as well as extremely limited access to well-paid employment opportunities (Berry 2019; Irwin-Rogers and Billingham 2020; Whittaker et al. 2018). Individuals facing the above issues are more-vulnerable as this increased vulnerability often leaves them with less attachments and stability – steering them into more-delinquent activities (Densley 2012). Street gangs and their chosen activities are true reflection of level of deprivation these gangs reside in. This was further supported by Kirchmaier, Machin, and Villa-Llera's report (2020) on gangs and knife crime in London, where a clear link between gang territories: a lack of opportunities, high levels of unemployment, lower levels of education, social housing, and a higher percentage of lone parents was evident.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and YouTube have become staples in youth culture, playing an integral role in the lives of young people, with the vast majority of teenagers using smartphones and tablets to access online platforms throughout their waking hours (Richards et al., 2015). The role of social media has also grown as a key risk factor for street gang involvement (in the UK and internationally) as it is often used as a recruitment tool through the glorification and documentation of activities occurring on the streets, display of power/dominance, collective mourning of deceased peers, and the disrespect of opposing street gang members (Fernández-Planells et al., 2021; Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney, 2017; Lauger & Densley, 2018; Pawelz & Elvers, 2018; Whittaker, Densley, & Moser, 2020). There is a growing argument that the emergence of “Drill music” in the UK has contributed to the rise in youth violence across London (Fatsis, 2019; Harkness, 2013; Johnson & Schell-busey, 2016; Pinkney & Robinson-Edwards, 2018). Drill music is a subgenre of Chicago hip-hop (Harkness, 2013), has spread to major cities in the UK and is often utilised by gang members to send threats, promote gang culture and flaunt illegal substances through the production of music videos broadcasted on YouTube (Pinkney & Robinson-Edwards, 2018). Despite the possible link between “drill music” and youth violence, Kleinberg and McFarlane (2020) identified no meaningful relationship between drill music and ‘real-life’ violence when compared to three kinds of police-recorded violent crime data in London – highlighting a significant flaw in the drill-youth violence correlation. Whilst “drill music” is often policed quite harshly in the UK (Fatsis, 2019), this genre of music is often used as a platform for those in gangs to openly express gang rivalry and the lifestyles they lead as a result of street gang involvement (Pinkney & Robinson-Edwards, 2018). This form of expression was referred to as “a rich, visceral, unforgiving cry for help with a mass global audience” in the Youth Violence Commission Final Report (Irwin-Rogers & Billingham, 2020) and it can be argued that “drill music” highlights the required support, intervention and education needs of young people in and around street gangs.

* 1. **Perception v Reality**

Unlike criminal acts that can be clearly defined by law & legislation, antisocial behaviour (ASB) is often subjective, context-specific and cannot be understood by merely counting ‘incidents’ (Upson, 2006). Diverse behaviours may affect and be categorised by people differently, for instance the sight of large gatherings of youths or riding bicycles around the local area may come across as a gang of youths whereas some members in the community may associate this with just a group of friends. Victoria Heap's (2010) work on public perceptions of ASB also highlights the integral role that ‘perception’ has in the crime reduction landscape. Street gang research also places a lot of emphasis on perception is often heavily-dependent on self-reported measures. Getting young people to ‘self-nominate’ as gang members has become common practice and has been identified as a reliable and valid method to distinguish gang youth as well as having others ‘vouch’ for the membership status of their peers (Densley, 2013; Densley et al., 2020). This perception-based approach adopted by gang researchers speaks directly to the expressive qualities of not only gangs but young people in general, as well as their ‘beliefs and social rules’ (Gibbons et al., 2007). Young people living and attending schools in communities where street gang activity is prevalent are often well-aware of the issues they face, often referred to ‘experts in their own lives’ (Storrod & Densley, 2017). Whilst some young people may live in communities where street gang activity is reducing (according to statistics), they may still be subject to low levels of perceived safety in their communities – indicating a clear conflict between the perception of the young person and their reality. The importance of perception goes beyond young people as adults in the community who are responsible for educating, policing, and engaging with young people may be influenced by social attitudes (Egan et al., 2013; Harradine et al., 2004) – significantly impacting their ability to fulfil their roles in society.

Understanding people’s perceptions of youth street gang involvement is a basis for policy development and practices for reducing the negative impacts of street gangs and their associated crime and ASB by highlighting issues and potential trends that could be investigated further, nationally or locally.

* 1. **The Present Study**

This study will aim to explore some of the perceived risk factors for criminal acts as well as antisocial behaviour (ASB) associated with street-gang involvement using a multi-informant approach, examining individual, peer, and youth worker perspectives on these issues in Tower Hamlets.

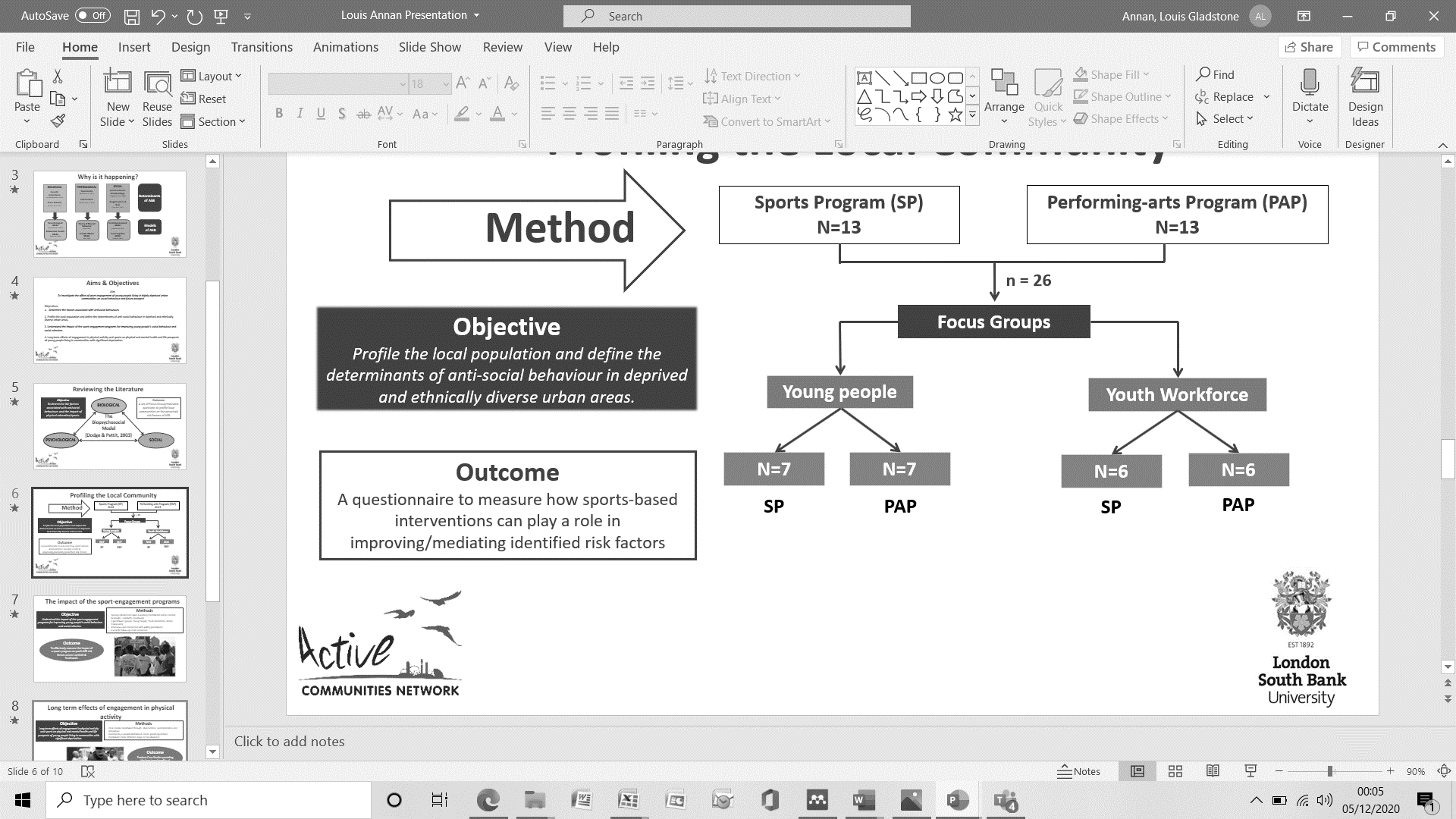
Tower Hamlets is a London borough with a population of 324,745 residents in east London, England and is the second most densely populated local authority area in the country (Tower Hamlets 2020). The number of employed people in the borough increased, improvements in school performance were also observed, and Tower Hamlets became significantly less deprived between 2015 and 2019 however, 60% of the borough still within the 30% most deprived parts of England (Tower Hamlets 2020b). At the same time, 27.3% of children in Tower Hamlets were in relative low-income families in 2018/19 which was the highest rate in London and well above the average for Great Britain with 72% of all children being in a family that received either child tax credit or working tax credit (Tower Hamlets 2020b). Although it was consistently highlighted throughout this study that significant financial cuts were made for both mainstream and specialist services in Tower Hamlets, analysis of the impact of this on young people, their families, and members of the wider community was beyond the scope of this study. Tower Hamlets has also witnessed an increase in serious youth violence across the borough since August 2010. Despite this steady increase, gun-related and knife-related crime is relatively low compared with other London Boroughs. The majority of those accused of serious youth violence are Asian males with many of these individuals being linked to disputes between different postcodes. Serious youth violence in the borough involves a higher proportion of Asian youths than would be found elsewhere in London due to the demographics of the borough. Of those accused of serious youth violence aged 10–19 years, 67% offended in a group of two or more (Syeda, 2015).

Common themes amongst street gang research conducted in various parts of the UK are the context-specific issues that play a vital role in the magnitude and type of street gang activities taking place in respective areas (Haylock et al., 2020; Hesketh, 2019; Whittaker, Densley, Cheston, et al., 2020) – expressing the need for specific approaches to both: research and intervention strategies addressing these issues. The present study aimed to expand on previous findings to investigate why young people from Tower Hamlets join street-gangs to derive practical recommendations for future interventions tackling issues such as: youth violence, and involvement in ‘county lines’. Using focus groups with young people from low-socioeconomic communities and members of the local youth workforce, this study intends to address this gap in knowledge by exploring the perceived risk factors of street gang involvement, ASB, and crime.

1. **Materials and methods**
   1. **Participants**

A convenience sample of 26 participants, consisting of 14 young people, and 12 youth workforce members (illustrated in figure 1) were recruited from two youth programs based in the London borough of Tower Hamlets engaging young people through sport or performing arts activities. Across the sample of young people, two focus groups were conducted, and were split into their respective sub-groups – ‘sports’ or ‘arts’ programs. The ‘young people’ sample was comprised of young people (15.2±0.8 years old, 14-16 years age range, 13 males, 1 female) who; lived, went to school, and/or attending after-school programs in Tower Hamlets. The youth workforce sample was also split into ‘sports’ and ‘arts’ sub-groups with participants and was comprised of young adults (24.8±2.1 years old, 20-30 years age range, 8 males, 4 females) who were employed as youth workers and primarily based in Tower Hamlets. The overall sample included 94% Tower Hamlets residents of mixed ethnic origin (71% Bangladeshi, 17% Black African, 4% White British, and 6% mixed/other). Structuring the study around the pre-existing social/work groups facilitated the discussion and the participants’ ability to challenge each other in the focus groups freely due to shared experiences, displayed comfort and familiarity (Gill et al., 2008).

**Figure 1. Methodology flow chart**



* 1. **Procedure**

The initial focus groups schedule was developed based on current literature around street-gangs (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Bennett & Holloway, 2004), as well as the researchers experience with different program deliverers in the area. The initial schedule was piloted using two focus groups conducted with 14–16-year-olds from Lambeth and Southwark boroughs (boroughs similar in socio-economic context). The pilot used open-ended questions to identify key-discussion points and topics to inform the development of the main FGs’ schedule.

The pilot study provided an opportunity to identify an appropriate line of questioning and type of language used in the focus groups highlighting the importance to a less-direct approach when discussing street gangs as *‘Young People’* were reluctant to speak about such issues openly in front of their peers at times. Whilst the pilot did provide the authors with some insights to street gang involvement, it was apparent that young people were reluctant to speak on such issues when questions were directed at them – significantly informing the way questions were designed by the main study, taking a more-indirect approach to investigating street gang involvement. The questions were centred on the perspectives and experiences of the *‘Young People’* around their relationships and interactions with their parents, with older members in the community and local police, their perception of environment safety, community deprivation, peer and media influences as well as of street gang culture in their local area, with no questions being asking young people about their own individual activity. Two focus groups were then carried out with *‘Youth Workforce’* members delivering the ‘*Sport’* and ‘*Arts’* programs and two groups involved ‘*Young People’* attending the 2 studied programs. The 4 groups followed similar schedule of questions providing a semi-structured framework (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009) for qualitative, thematic analyses of the data – illustrated in table 1.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Focus** | **Example Questions** | |
| ***Young People*** | ***Youth Workforce*** |
| Diversity | *“Do you feel like your community is diverse? Why/Why not?”* | *“Do you feel like the young people from this community are diverse? Why/Why not?”* |
| Ageism | *“How do you feel about the older members in your community? Why?* | *“How do the young people mix/integrate with older members in their community? Why do you think this is?”* |
| Perceived safety | *“Do you feel safe in your area? Why/Why not?”* | *“Do you think like the young people you work with are safe in their area? Why/Why not?”* |
| Community deprivation | *“What activities are available to you and your friends? Do you think it is enough?”* | *“What activities are made available to the young people in the local community? Do you think it is enough?”* |
| Street gangs | *“Why do you think young people join gangs in your community?”* | *“Why do you think young people join gangs in this community?”* |
| Media influences | *“How much does social media/music impact your life? Why?”* | *“How impactful is social media/music on the young people you work with? Why?”* |
| Peer influences | *“How much do your friends impact your life? Why?”* | *“How much do you feel the young people you work with are influenced by their peers? Why?”* |

**Table 1. Focus group sample questions**

The researchers aimed to identify and clarify the participants’ perceptions, explore what is important to them (Kitzinger, 1995) and provide opportunities for participants to discuss amongst peers with common interests any perceived challenges (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). Each group consisted of six to eight participants and lasted 40-60 minutes.

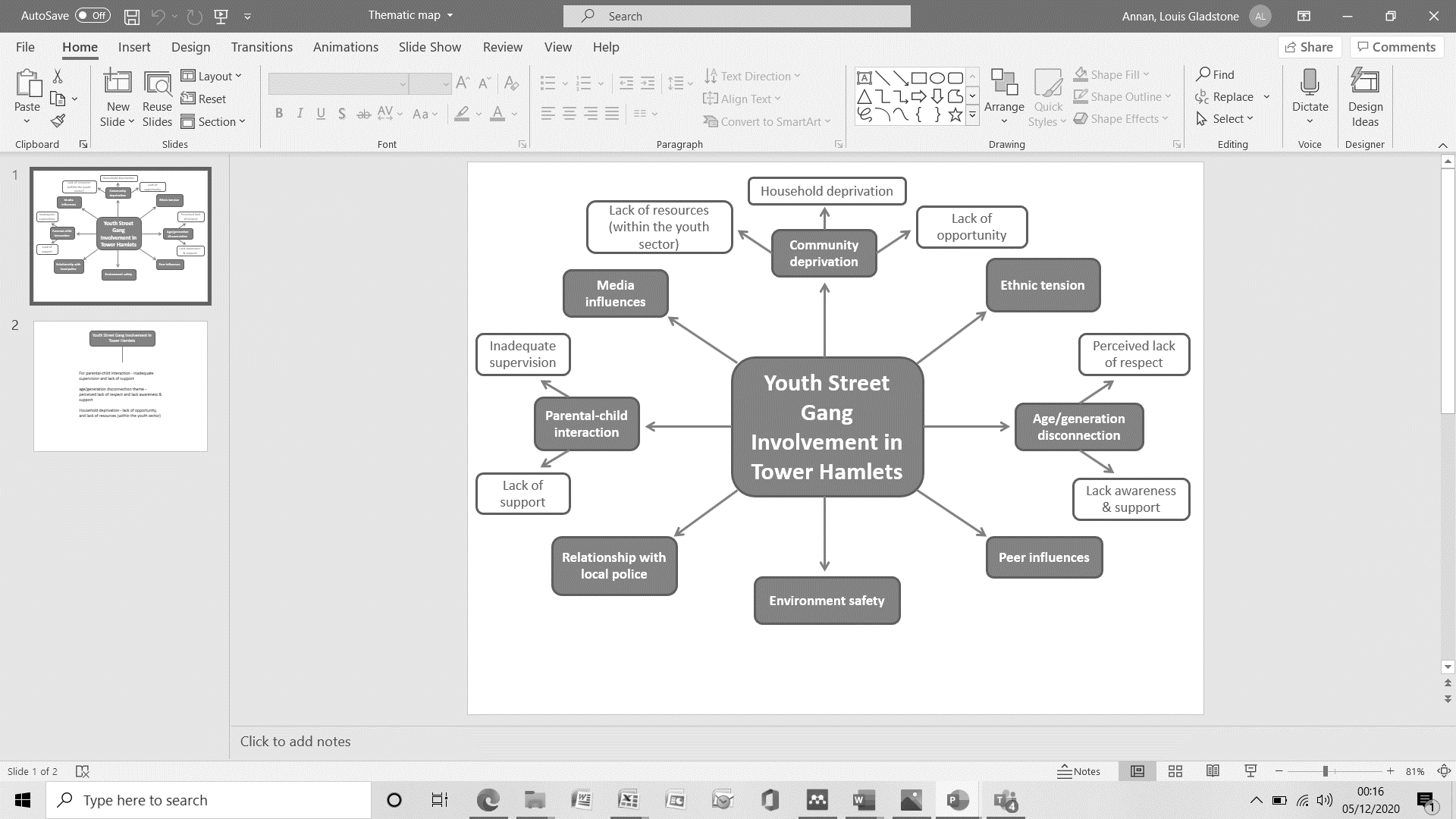
* 1. **Data Analysis**

The discussions were audio recorded and the participants were anonymised through pseudonyms. NVIVO software was used to facilitate thematic coding. A six-phase analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted to draw out common themes and meanings within each focus group data: (1) The records were transcribed verbatim. (2) The transcripts were read and re-read to ensure researcher’s familiarity with the content. (3) Codes were generated in line with the primary research aims. (4) The codes were grouped together into ‘themes’ after being reviewed by the research team. (5) Themes were reviewed and refined with some being discarded due to a lack of quotes/discussion (less than two quotes) around the topic and others grouped together before being defined and named. Conversations around wider-social issues such as: nationalism and religion provided inconclusive data that was not relevant to the topic of street gang involvement and thus, were removed as themes. (6) Specific data items were selected to illustrate the themes and relate them to previous literature.

1. **Results**

The analysis of the focus group data revealed eight predominant themes: *parental-child interaction & support*, *age/generation disconnection*, *environment safety*, *community deprivation*, *peer influences*, *media influences*, *relationship with local police*, and *ethnic tension*. Sub-themes were also identified relating to each theme (figure 2).

**Figure 2. Perceived risk factors for youth street gang involvement (Themes & Sub-themes)**



* 1. **Parental-child interaction & support**

This theme was perceived across all four focus groups as a key risk factor that impacted one’s decision to join a gang. Whilst different issues were raised, ‘inadequate supervision’ and ‘lack of support’ were heavily discussed amongst the ‘*Young People’* and ‘*Youth Workforce’* sub-groups.

Inadequate supervision appeared to be a prevalent concern for ‘*Young People’* within this community. A member of the ‘Youth Workforce’ from the performing arts program indicated:

…if their parents aren’t watching them or don’t care then they’ll just join a gang (...) Sometimes we know more about the kids we work with than their parents. *(Youth workforce – performing arts program)*

This was a general consensus amongst the four different groups, often this was attributed to the hectic work-schedules of parents and their inability to invest time in their child as they would like to or should be:

As much as I love my mum, she’s not really there for me because she’s either working or focusing on my younger siblings. (*Young person – performing arts program*)

I very rarely get a chance to see or hear from any of the parents. I know a lot of the kids we work with come from difficult backgrounds and parents may be subject to heavy work commitments to make ends meet. (*Youth workforce – sports program*)

Inadequate parental supervision is likely due to the low socioeconomic status of the families and the overall austerity across the borough (Tower Hamlets, 2018). However, some members of the *sport* youth group attributed it also to a genuine lack of parental interest/support, with some parents even attempting to discourage their children from engaging with the program:

It’s very hard to keep that consistent engagement with the young person if the parents/guardians aren’t on board (for whatever reasons). (*Youth workforce – performing arts program*)

This was a discussion point across both focus groups with the young people as theyfelt that the little (if any) support from their families often led them or their peers to engage in activities accepted by some of their more-delinquent peers. Some young people even suggested that engagement in gang-related activities came from “unsupportive families” and felt that this was a key factor for their peers joining street gangs and engaging in related ASB and/or crime:

I’ve got some friends who are gang-members, and they have no one at home supporting or helping them with anything…money, schoolwork, general life support – their parents just don’t give it to them for some reason. (*Young person – sports program*)

Sometimes it’s about family background too…if your parents aren’t watching you or don’t care then it’s an easier decision to just join a gang cause at least you’ll be around some people that do care. *(Young person – performing arts program)*

This was echoed by members of the youth workforce:

Despite working with some great kids, we very rarely get to meet their family members. We do have some that come to the centre to our youth showcases and other events but I don’t feel like we see the parents enough. *(Youth workforce – performing arts program)*

We’ve tried to organise a few friendly (football) matches with other clubs but needed parental consent and some of our kids couldn’t come because their parents wouldn’t sign the forms. It’s sad really, these boys just want to play football and stay out of trouble but their parents don’t support them enough. *(Youth workforce – sports program)*

The above findings agree with and upgrade the work done by Esbensen and colleagues (2009) with a sample of young people from 11 US cities to identify risk factors for violent offending and gang membership. Both data sets point to a significant link between parental monitoring and management, gang membership and violent offending. Similarly, clear link between (lack of) parental engagement and youth street gang involvement was identified in various communities across the world through the development of the Euro-gang program (Weerman et al., 2009). The aspect highlighted in the current study by all four groups was that such issues were rather attributed mainly to the parent’s inability to support rather than their lack of willingness.

* 1. **Age/Generation disconnection**

The disconnection between young people and the older community members was also heavily discussed across all four groups with a *perceived lack of respect*, and *awareness and support from elders* emerging as sub-themes.

* + 1. *Perceived lack of respect*

Young people from both programs felt that they are alienated by many older members in their community, which strained the inter-generational relationship:

We can feel their energy towards us. It’s like they can’t stand us because we’re different to how they were at our age. If they don’t like or respect us, why should we show respect back? (*Young person – sports program*)

Young people from both programs were mindful of this “covert disrespect”, which lead them into seeking respect/approval from their delinquent peers by engaging in gang-related activities:

When the elders in our community don’t show us respect, the only people we feel respected by is our friends. Some of the guys who get involved with things on the roads show me the most respect and love which is why it’s easy to fall into that life. (*Young person – performing arts program*)

Yet, this ‘lack of respect’ from elders motivated some young people to engage in positive activities in the hopes of changing elders’ attitude:

I always try to show the older members of my church that we’re not all bad…I’m going to college, play football and stay focused so I hope to change their view on us by doing positive things. (*Young person – sports program*)

There was debate amongst the youth workforce regarding this lack of respect that young people feel with some of the youth workforce were aware of this lack of respect but attributed to both young people and the older members in the community:

I think there is lack of respect going both ways – young people don’t respect the elders and vice versa. Especially in this centre (Langdon Park) we see it, when other people’s parents are in the building the young people show no regard for this and this can cause friction. *(Youth workforce – arts program)*

However this was opposed by other youth workforce members who solely blamed the adults:

I personally feel the issue is the adults, I feel that maybe if they approached the young people in a different way then they wouldn’t react as harshly/disrespectfully as they do now. *(Youth workforce – arts program)*

The discussion around this topic attributed the lack of respect from the older community members to a lack of awareness of what the young people engage in, leaving them often feel alienated by their communities. The impact of disenfranchisement has been previously highlighted in Antrobus' report (2009) on youth street gang culture across the UK. Marginalised youth are often targeted by older members within street gangs. Our findings highlight the perceived lack of respect for young people in this community which appeared to often push young people towards creating their own communities and support networks, sometimes by forming or joining local street gangs.

* + 1. *Lack of awareness & support from elders*

The *lack of parental support* also extended to the wider community. Throughout the discussion with each group, it was reiterated that the elders in their lives were not always supportive of local youth programs:

We’ve lost a lot of our young people to local gangs simply because we don’t have much backing from their parents and other adults across this community. It’s hard to convince a young person to engage in positive things if we are the only one supporting them. **(***Youth workforce – performing arts program*)

Older members in the community are quite removed from young people’s lives. The participants saw this as a key issue, not just related to street gang involvement, but to youth culture as a whole in this community. These finds were in-line with Antrobus' (2009) and Hesketh's (2018) work highlighting that young people living in low socioeconmic communities sometimes feel excluded from mainstream society, leading them to create an alternative space with their own value system and sometimes deviating to criminal acts. The present findings help to understand further the process that can lead young people to street gang involvement by providing some context to the disenfranchisement of young people, how they perceive their relationships with older members in the community and how the youth workforcecould *“bridge the gap”* between the young and older people in the family and community.

* 1. **Environment safety**

Another identified risk factor for street gang membership was how unsafe the young people felt in the community without the protection of a gang:

Some young people join gangs because it makes them feel safe. It’s dangerous out here and if you have people to defend you then you’re good. (*Young person – performing arts program*)

The lack of perceived safety can often lead to involvement with street gangs in the pursuit of protection, a key risk factor also found for youth gang membership in the US (Howell & Egley, 2005). A youth workforce member from the performing arts program suggested that this fear could be attributed to *“traumatic experience of being robbed, hurt, and stabbed”.* Interestingly, a young participant also spoke of an increased feeling of safety after becoming part of the sport’s program, a point agreed across the whole Sport group:

…it (the program) gives me a chance to be around some good people and enjoy myself without worrying about my safety...everyone likes playing football whether you’re in a gang or not, so I feel respected by some of the guys that are in gangs because I play football with them sometimes. (*Young person – sports program*)

Although not being exempt from youth violence in their community, the young participants in the sport’sprogram perceived their levels of safety higher compared to participants in the performing arts program. This supports previous findings showing that sports-based interventions delivered across the UK with the scope to create “sanctioned” spaces for young people improve their perceived levels of safety (Kelly, 2013). The football sessions delivered to the young people in the sport’s group involved a wider audience thus providing opportunity for integration between gang- and non-gang affiliated youth. This integration appeared to enhance their perceived safety by making friends with gang-members in the community:

I think so (young people can travel to other estates/areas and be safe), particularly among the younger groups because they mix and come to different sessions across Tower Hamlets and they come with no issues. Football has a way of connecting people, anyone can play with anyone. *(Youth workforce – sports program)*

However, this feeling of safety was not apparent for some young people according to some of the discussions with the performing arts groups:

Issues escalate very quickly around here so some of the YP we work with feel the need to attach their name to a gang just in case they get into problems they can’t deal with alone. (*Youth workforce – performing arts program*)

Certain young people may feel safe in specific areas – like on a couple streets or one specific estate due to affiliations but they feel very unsafe in other parts. We often get feedback from young people about travelling to our 6 centres and how they are unable to due to their safety being at risk. *(Youth workforce – performing arts program)*

These findings allow the exploration of the impact of social networks/groups created by youth programs produce and how they can produce notable differences in levels of perceived safety for young people. This is an important point considering the raising levels of fear amongst the young people exposed to increased violence from street gangs across London (Ramshaw et al., 2018) knife carrying (Antrobus, 2009), and media (Whittaker et al., 2018). The importance of developing positive social networks through sport and how it can prevent youth victimization and gang involvement has been highlighted in previous work on sports-based programs (Spruit et al., 2018).

* 1. **Community deprivation**

*Community deprivation* was often mentioned in all 4 groups as a key risk factor for youth involvement in gangs and related activities, particularly those that involved generating income for the young people (i.e., drug dealing & robbery/theft). Several key sub-themes emerged including *household deprivation*, *lack of opportunity*, and *lack of resources*.

* + 1. *Household deprivation*

The analysis indicated that young people seemed inclined to join gangs to improve their personal financial status:

(…) most people do it for money. They think joining a gang will allow them to sell drugs and make more money. A lot of us come from financial struggle from young. You grow up and want nice things and if you see a way to make money, it’s difficult to say no. (*Young person – sports program*)

Across both youth groups, ‘drug dealing’ was often rationalised. Despite realising this is an illegal way of making money, young people felt that it was sometimes the only way to help with theirs or their parents/family financial situation:

Once you see the money, it’s hard to stop. We want nice things too and if our parents can’t afford to get those things for us, we have to do things to get them. (*Young person – performing arts program*)

The issue of household deprivation was often used as a catalyst for older members of these street gangs to recruit young, vulnerable people in the local community, this was agreed upon among both groups from the youth workforce:

I think the drug dealing stuff is hard to stop. Older guys in the area recruit or groom these kids and pray on the fact that they don’t have much money to send them out of London to sell drugs in the countryside. Some of these kids aren’t even legal to work so we can’t even offer them any kind of money or job. *(Youth workforce – performing arts program)*

Despite most of our boys being good boys, we’ve definitely had a few go missing for a bit and it’s sad because we all know where they’ve gone – to sell drugs outside London (‘county lines)’. There’s nothing we can do as coaches. Most of us come from poor backgrounds ourselves so we understand why they do it, most of them don’t just want money, they need it. *(Youth workforce – sports program)*

County lines drug dealing is a new and rapidly evolving illicit drug supply model which sees urban drug dealers cross police borders to exploit provincial drug markets and is renowned for exploiting vulnerable children and young people to take part in these drug trades (Densley et al., 2020; Hesketh & Robinson, 2019). These findings clearly highlight the issue of county lines in this particular community and the helplessness that members of the youth workforce feel to address this issue.

* + 1. *Lack of opportunities*

Across the different participant groups it was agreed that young people are often stereotyped due to their age as well as their ethnicity/race, often leading them not to gain access to as many opportunities as they should:

They don’t get as much opportunities in the workforce because of their ethnicity and often feel like they are bottom of the list. (*Youth workforce – performing arts program)*

It’s no secret young people are often stigmatised and painted with the same brush as some of their troublesome peers. People are reluctant to give them opportunities and this can’t be good for them. *(Youth workforce – sports program)*

This lack of opportunity in an already-deprived community appears to sometimes steer local young people towards gang membership (more-specifically drug dealing) not just due to the financial issues but also due to feelings of low self-efficacy:

There’s not really much for us to do or to aspire to round here. You have Canary Wharf just there with all the nice buildings but that ain’t for us. (*Young person – sports program*)

You could be walking home from school and see an expensive car drive past coming from Canary Wharf or something. The only way a lot of us can see ourselves making that kind of money to drive cars like that is by trapping (selling drugs) ‘cause I personally don’t know anyone from round here that gets opportunities to work in Canary Wharf. *(Young person – performing arts program)*

Low self-efficacy and poverty are known to make young peoplevulnerable to being groomed by older gang members (McLean et al., 2020). Our explored ‘low self-efficacy’ as a psychological factor associated with street gang involvement and drug dealing. Both ‘household deprivation’ and ‘lack of opportunities’ in the community push disenfranchised young people into getting involved with drug dealing as a substitute for employment. These emerging themes challenge youth organisations to design interventions considering such issues since young people across London require more than just activities to take part in, and seek opportunities to progress in employment and/or education (Hesketh & Robinson, 2019).

* + 1. *Lack of resources (within the youth sector)*

The youth workforcefrom both groups also pointed to the lack of resources available to the youth workers due to significant cuts made across the sector as a whole (Green, 2017):

Funding has decreased since the times I started coaching. It’s hard for us to stick in these jobs as well cause the money isn’t right and our positions aren’t secure which affects the kids because they just feel like we leave them (…). (*Youth workforce – sports program*)

This centre is a one-off, if you take Spotlight out of the equation I personally can’t name any other youth services or provisions in the community. Aside from links centre, I don’t there would be anything available for the young people. *(Youth workforce – sports program)*

Some young people were also aware of the under-resourced services that they access:

There’s not really planned activities like this…we can go to the park or cage and kick ball but there’s not a lot of planned activities because of that, everyone wants to come here so these lot (the staff) always seem over-worked and tired. There’s always a person leaving so the money can’t be great. *(Young people – performing arts program)*

Sometimes when we lose equipment it takes ages to get it back, the coaches are like big brothers to us but we know the people with the money behind our programs and sessions don’t really care like that because they don’t invest money into us. *(Young people – sports program)*

Further, the youth workforce spoke of the lack of sustainability and career development prospects, which may deter young people in the community to aspire to work in the youth sector. The low number of resources spent on frontline provision was highlighted in our study as directly linked with some of the issues.The lack of continuity and quality in service experienced across England and Wales (YMCA, 2020) and London (Berry, 2019) is a key risk factor for young people joining street gangs and engaging in youth violence, highlighted in the Youth Violence Commissions’ final report (Irwin-Rogers & Billingham, 2020). Taken together with present findings this evidence illustrates the significant link between high-quality youth services and reduction in serious youth violence across the UK. The frontline-staff retention and the need to focus on resource issues are essential to make youth services consistent and effective.

* 1. **Peer influences**

Previous work has identified that influences from delinquent peers, low prosocial peer commitment and delinquent peer commitment (Esbensenet al., 2009) are prevalent risk factors for youth street-gang involvement. Our data across all focus groups also suggest that young people often follow the actions and decisions of their peers:

I think in Tower Hamlets a lot of kids will join gangs based on what their peers from their culture are doing (…). *(Youth workforce - performing arts program)*

Some young people join gangs to attain a higher quality of life and feel important within their neighbourhood. However, some members of both youth groups indicated that having friends in gangs-doesn’t necessarily lead to young people joining gangs:

Just because we may have friends who are in gangs doesn’t mean we will join. I play football and all my friends respect and don’t try to push me into anything I don’t want to do. I think it’s always down to the person and whatever things they might have going on in their life. (*Young person – sports program*)

Findings did identify ‘peer influences’ as risk factors for street gang involvement for some young people and highlighted the need for a case-by-case approach when exploring ‘peer influences’ as not all young people are heavily influenced by their friends/social groups. Previous work among youth in the UK identified an indirect relationship between ‘deviant peer pressures’ and gang involvement highlighting their complex relationship with other socio-environmental factors for predicting youth gang involvement (Alleyne & Wood, 2014). The current study sheds further light on the complicated nature of the ‘peer influences’ and the dependence of their impact on other social factors such the type of activities undertaken by peers as well as on the person.

* 1. **Media influences**

Young people in the studied community are also exposed to the gang lifestyle and culture through the increased media coverage of youth gang violence across London in recent years (Politowski, 2016), and an array of media outlets - film (Przemieniecki, 2005), social media (Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney, 2017) and more-recently through ‘drill’ music (Pinkney & Robinson-Edwards, 2018). Despite previous research finding only a small yet significant association between adolescent violent media exposure and crime (Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005), media influence was a prevalent topic discussed in all four groups:

The music doesn’t help…they hear the music and try and copy what they hear. A lot of the artists they listen to or watch are from all over London talking about what they do with their gang. (*Youth workforce - performing arts program*)

Some young people in this community admire what some of the music artists can accomplish, which attracts some young people to street gangs with the hopes of working their way up and “getting out” of their communities like some of these artists did. Our findings are supported by previous research suggesting that both social media and music can serve as a catalyst for some cases of youth violence (Fatsis, 2019; Pinkney & Robinson-Edwards, 2018). Majority of the young people in this study appeared to aspire to the success of their favourite local artists rather than feel influenced by their music to engage/further engage in violent/criminal acts.

It’s not really the music, we don’t all want to rap but we all want rap money. I’m not really trying to be famous but if I can make the same money as some of the top rappers then I’ll be calm (happy). *(Young person – sports program)*

‘Drill music’ was a topic of discussion amongst the four groups, with one young person explaining how this genre of music can lead to some young people following the actions expressed on the songs by the music artists:

The music sounds good and everyone loves the rappers in the ‘ends’ so I can see why people would want to follow-fashion…They might be doing wrong or even speaking on things they shouldn’t but look where it gets some of them, they end up changing their lives forever and getting out (of the community) (…). (*Young person – performing arts program*)

However, this music can also create fear and moral panic amongst some of the young people in this community:

When you see and hear what some of the gangs from other areas are on, it makes you not want to travel around…The music doesn’t make me want to get involved, it makes me want to just stick to my football (…). *(Young person - performing arts program)*

Evidently, the lifestyles glamorised in drill music videos do not appeal to all young peopleas shown by previous studies (Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney, 2017). Our data indicates that daily exposure to social media content that displays or incites serious violence can operate as a catalyst for youth violence but only for a small minority of young people. The level of fear it incites can also serve as a protective factor against youth gang membership:

All you hear is them lot brag about ‘scoring points’ (killing someone) on each other or how much money they make from their (drug) lines. Sometimes you just want to make sure you’re cool with the right guys, so you don’t get caught up (…). *(Young person - performing arts program)*

The issue with using social media as a tool to brandish gang related criminal acts and other types of antisocial behaviour as well as to recruit young vulnerable people in this community was also raised by the youth workforce groups:

I feel like some of the young people see certain things on Insta (Instagram) or Snap (Snapchat), they believe what they see and want to get involved in similar things without knowing the repercussions of it (…). *(Youth workforce – sports program)*

Young people witnessing/experiencing traumatic events occurring in their communities are particularly susceptible to recruitment through social media. Both youth groups in this study were reluctant to speak on any social media-related issues, they certainly knew more on the topic than they were willing to share. The lack of sufficient information and perspectives prevented the formulation of robust conclusions.

* 1. **Relationship with Police**

The relationship between young people in the community and the local police was discussed across all four groups. Young people often felt stereotyped and unnecessarily harassed:

We don’t trust the police; they assume you’re a gang member if you dress a certain way or have a certain skin colour (…) I get stopped and searched monthly and all I do is kick ball. *(Young person – sports program)*

This was a general theme amongst the two focus groups conducted with the young people as none of them were able to recall any positive interactions with local police officers. The *youth workforce* members also reflected on this perception:

I think the police aren’t just racially stereotypical, but they just generally give young people a hard time. This makes our jobs quite difficult because although our roles as youth workers is to bridge the gap between the police and young people it is also quite hard to rationalise how the police behave because we sometimes don’t agree with what they (the Police) do. *(Youth workforce – performing arts program)*

Young people felt that this lack of trust rather facilitates their involvement with street gangs:

There’s been a few times when I’ve had issues and going to the police is pointless, so I’ve got some of my guys to handle it for me instead. The police don’t really help us round here. *(Young person – sports program)*

This strained relationship between the police and some young people in the area makes it difficult to police youth street gang-related issues and address other issues young peopleface. It builds a serious barrier to change, including a “wall of silence” when crimes are committed. The recent Youth Violence Commission's final report (Irwin-Rogers & Billingham, 2020) helps explain our findings by attributing this tension to the significantly high rates of stop and search disproportionately imposed on young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Such actions ultimately erode many young people’s trust and confidence in the police (Irwin-Rogers & Billingham, 2020).

* 1. **Ethnic tension**

A context-specific theme that emerged from the focus group discussions was the conflict between Bengali and Somali groups within the borough of Tower Hamlets and its significant impact on the community:

Yeah, it's fair to say my Bengali community hardly mix with others and its sad but true…I try to convince other young members, but their parents don’t allow them. *(Youth workforce – performing arts program)*

This segregation as result of the conflict was apparent in some of the sessions conducted across the borough:

When we started delivering the Celtic program it was delivered by Bengali coaches and all the kids attending were from the Bengali community (apart from a few) which for me at first was baffling. And what you tend to see is if there are Somali coaches then its Somali kids attending (….). And even down to the football teams, there was a Bengali team that only allowed 3 non-Bengali kids playing for your team. *(Youth workforce – sports program).*

Young people across the two groups went onto speak on the ethnic tension within the borough:

I feel like the Bengalis really dominate the ends (community). Most of the issues round here are between them and sometimes the Somali community. Obviously Tower Hamlets is predominantly Asians so that’s probably why *(Young person – sports program).*

Let’s be honest, most of the drug stuff is run by the Bengalis round here. You might get a few black or white boys trapping (selling drugs) but I think we all know who does the real stuff. They have real wars as well, it’s mad but they keep it between them really so they don’t really trouble us, they seem to always be beefing (fighting) the Somalis though. *(Young person – performing arts program).*

It was apparent that the conflict between the Somali and Bengali community within the borough was a significant issue that both young people and members of the youth workforce were well aware of. These findings reveal the potential of cultural conflicts to segregate members of the community and highlight the some of the issues previously reported on in Jebin Syeda's report *'Ending Groups, Gangs and Serious Youth Violence Strategy'(2015)*. Consequently, this affects the experiences of the young people and hinders the ability of youth organisations to mediate street gang involvement and other social issues within the community. This theme also highlights the importance of prior community profiling to identify context-specific issues and define effective youth programs. Historically sport has displayed the ability to address racial and ethnic conflict on a global scale (Giulianotti, 2011) and more-recently, on a local level across the UK in Taylor and colleagues' (2015) review of the social impacts of culture and sport. This also indicates the potential for sports programsto serve as a tool to improve ethnic integration.

1. **Discussion**

Eight main themes were identified as perceived risks in gang involvement, antisocial behaviour and crime among young people within the community of Tower Hamlets: parental monitoring & interest, age/generation disconnections, environment safety, deprivation (community & household), peer and media influences, ethnic tension, as well as relationship with police.

The ‘perciveved’ risk factors were those highlighted in the present study whereas the ‘known’ risk factors were those highlighted in previous research on street gang involvement. Whilst our study was in-line with previous work, it was important to highlight the differences in percpetion between amongst the groups and how these percieved risk factors potentially influenced the behaviour of the young people.

Young people and the youth workforce groups generally agreed on the emerging themes. The youth and adults’ perspectives misaligned mainly on the magnitude of street gang culture as well as disagreeing on the impact of peer and media influences. Young peopleperceived the street gang involvement in their area to be somewhat normal, whilst members of the youth workforce felt that it was extremely high. The more-relaxed approach to street gangs displayed by the young people also points to their gradual desensitization through constant exposure to the sights, sounds, and emotions of violence and other street gang-related activities, both: posted online (Fernández-Planells et al., 2021; Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney, 2017; Pawelz & Elvers, 2018; Pinkney & Robinson-Edwards, 2018), and in-person (Densley et al., 2020; Irwin-Rogers & Billingham, 2020; Tower Hamlets, 2018). Whilst the young people displayed a more-nonchalant attitude towards street gangs, the youth workforce were comprised of young adults who had been working and living this community for a multitude of years, and thus had a more-informed and stark approach to the issues caused by street gangs – reflected in the increase in such activity over the years (Syeda, 2015). This difference in age and experience would further-explain the contrasting perspectives towards street gang culture in Tower Hamlets and highlights the potential need for more small-group or individual projects for young people to help bridge the two perspectives.

Conversations around peer and media influences were also misaligned between the sample of young people and youth workforce members. Whilst members of the youth workforce were convinced that both influences from peers as well as media influences such as; social media and music videos were key risk factors for street gang involvement, the young people opposed this idea. Media has been a fast-growing commodity in gang research, with it being suggested as being a tool “to gain reputation and territorial expansion” (Whittaker, Densley, & Moser, 2020) which was highlighted in discussions with members of the youth workforce however this was not a concept agreed upon by the young people who felt that the content they were exposed to via the social media and music videos, in-fact served as a deterrent for street gang involvement. It was highlighted that young people often aspire to lead the successful lifestyles that local rap stars achieve and not to act out the lyrics they hear in their songs. Previous work from Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney (2017) supported this, identifying that many young people attempt to launch careers as music artists as a means of escaping life ‘on road’ as opposed to getting involved with street gangs, which speaks to the opportunities that media outlets like YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok can create for young people. More specifically, there was a disagreement between the wo sample groups about how music impacted young peoples’ actions. The youth workforce was in agreeance that music was often a cause for youth violence in the borough whereas the young people opposed this. The young people did not dismiss music as a potential ‘catalyst’ for violence due to the specificity of some of the lyrics, often taunting opposing gangs but highlighting that the decision ultimately came down to the individual – further supported by Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney (2017).

This contrast in perception between the generations is important to note, and could be explored further to help developing an understanding how mutual empathy and comprehension of social issues between age groups might be improved in the Tower Hamlets community. The present study placed a significant amount of emphasis on the perception of young people and members of the youth workforce as we considered perception to be of significant importance. The young people in this community are required to navigate an array of social issues in Tower Hamlets and the dynamic continuity between person perception and action highlights how perceived risk factors can directly influence their reaction to such issues (Freeman et al., 2012). There has been evidence to suggest that perception and action are very-much interwoven and interdependent (Hommel et al., 2016), hence our decision to place significant emphasis on the perceived risk factors and not the known factors identified by previous research findings on street gangs. The young people in this study continuously referred to happenings they had experienced, witnessed, or heard about as opposed to statistics about issues such as; serious violence, drug dealing, and/or other street gang related issues – generating their thoughts and actions from how they perceived these issues. Whilst crime statistics are important for monitoring and policing, they appeared to place very little, if any, significance to the young people’s thoughts and perceptions – highlighting the importance on perceived risk factors as opposed to known factors. The exploratory nature investigated the perceived risk factors and provides an opportunity for future research to investigate the link between perceived risk factors, youth action, and/or how youth programs can address the how young people perceive their environment.

1. **Limitations**

This study contributes to the literature on the youth experience in London by providing a rare snapshot of the variety of social issues that impact young people in Tower Hamlets and how they serve as risk factors for getting involved with street gang-related activity. However, there are some methodological limitations that future studies in this area could address. Firstly, the blurred lines when it comes to street gang involvement made it difficult to identify whether the recruited youth were members of a gang or not and why they were sometimes reluctant to share experiences and opinions openly. Whilst valuable information was shared around the social issues for young peoplewithin Tower Hamlets, it remained unclear as to whether it was based on first-hand experience of gang membership or represents merely an observer’s perspective. Secondly, whilst the primary focus of this study was to identify the context-specific risk factors for street gang involvement in Tower Hamlets, this in-turn limited the generalizability of the results to other boroughs and communities across London. A multi-site approach testing this methodology in other boroughs across London would allow for results that are more generalizable. Thirdly, the participants in this study were predominantly male. Further research engaging more female participants may shed more light on the risk factors associated with girl’s involvement in street gangs and antisocial behaviour (Bell, 2009). Youth programs specifically designed for young females in the community, marketed through local schools and colleges should be developed to boost female engagement. These would allow identifying any gender-specific risk factors associated with street gang involvement.

Historically, an array of theoretical and methodological problems have hindered the development of adequate knowledge about street gangs (Craig et al., 2002). A significant methodological limitation for this study was that it solely relied on self-report data from young people and practitioners’ on their perceptions of the nature of gangs in Tower Hamlets. The young people recruited for this study were all attending youth programs delivered across Tower Hamlets, lived in the area or surrounding communities, and were able to provide a snapshot of the youth landscape. However, it was unclear as to how involved the young people were in street gangs as they were not willing to disclose this information – putting the accuracy of the discussions around street gangs in question. All of the practitioners taking part worked locally on youth programs and to this extent were knowledgeable informants for youth culture. However, it is possible that some practitioner-reported views were limited in scope by the particular focus, area or specialism of the respondent and therefore did not accurately reflect the gang situation in Tower Hamlets. The above highlights the need for more other types of data to be used for future research however it was not within the scope of the study to collect more-objective information regarding the nature of gangs (such as police intelligence, recorded crime data or hospital admission statistics). While self-reported measures are insufficient, alone, as a basis for policy development, the study was intended to highlight issues and potential trends that could be investigated further, nationally or locally using a mixed methods approach.

Despite these limitations, the current study produced valuable insights on the risk factors for street gang involvement, their complex relationship and the need for community-specific profiling in order to understand how the community-specific social issues can impact the lives of local young people and their decision to engage in antisocial behaviour and/or crime associated with street gangs.

1. **Conclusion**

From the focus group discussions, the main risk factors associated with youth street gang involvement in Tower Hamlets appear related to the available support networks rather than the individual. The greatest issues in the studied area were found to be community context-specific and related to austerity and infrastructural deficiencies. Hence, social issues such as policing, availability of opportunities and communal support should be dealt with prior to tackling issues within the individuals. The revealed complex relationships between these some of the risk factors should be considered in future research. Superior effectiveness and impact of sports youth programs on these risk factors was found. A further key finding were the differing perspectives of young people and adults on the scale of local gang membership, antisocial behaviours and crime. This highlighted the need for sustained engagement of experienced youth workforce for building lasting relationships with the local young people and community. These findings have direct practical implications and can inform the design and the implementation of future youth engagement strategies delivered in the Tower Hamlets community.

* 1. *Practical Implications*

Several practical implications on how the youth programs delivered in local communities can more effectively tackle street gang involvement, as well as it’s related antisocial behaviour and criminal acts have emerged from our findings and observations. Addressing the identified factors from the focus groups, future youth programs should aim to:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***Risk Factor*** | ***Practical Implication*** |
| *Parent-child interaction & support*  *Age/generation disconnection* | Involve parents and wider community members in the co-production and delivery of youth programs to facilitate more positive and supportive relationship with the young people. |
| *Community deprivation* | Provide pathways to employment and education for young people to negate their need for engaging in illegal money-making activities.  Maintain lasting relationships with young people by ensuring sustainability of the activities and continuity of youth services through long-term strategies and secure funding for operation and delivery. |
| *Levels of safety* | Address concerns with environmental safety by aiming delivery in closer to home venues. |
| *Relationship with local police* | Incorporate initiatives that bring young people and local police together to help improve trust. |
| *Peer influences* | ‘Champion’ local young people who make positive lifestyle choices on a consistent basis, celebrating young peoples’ success stories to highlight their more-positive peers. |
| *Media influences* | Organisations should aim to avoid alienating young peoples’ interests (like music or other types of media) and better-support young people through music and other media opportunities. |
| *Ethnic tension*  **Table 4. Practical Implications** | Identify acute social issues (racial, religious, cultural etc.) and, if existing, work with individual groups while developing and implementing educational programs to foster social cohesion. |

1. **Acknowledgements**

We wish to acknowledge London South Bank University and the Active Communities Network (ACN) for supporting this research study with a PhD scholarship. We are also grateful to our participants, the Spotlight Youth Centre for granting permission to undertake this research, and to their staff who assisted data collection.

1. **Declaration of Interest Statement**

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

1. **References**

Alleyne, E., & Wood, J. L. (2010). Gang involvement: psychological and behavioral characteristics of gang members, peripheral youth, and nongang youth. *Aggressive Behavior*, *36*(6), 423–436. https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.20360

Antrobus, S. (2009). *Dying to Belong* (Issue February).

Bell, K. E. (2009). Gender and Gangs: A Quantitative Comparison. *Crime & Delinquency*, *55*(3), 363–387.

Bennett, T., & Holloway, K. (2004). Gang membership, drugs and crime in the UK. *British Journal of Criminology*, *44*(3), 305–323. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azh025

Berry, S. (2017). *London’s lost youth services: The dramatic disappearance of support and facilities for young people in London*. *January 2017*, 0–9. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/london\_lost\_youth\_services\_sian\_berry\_jan2017.pdf

Berry, S. (2019). *London’s Lost Youth Services*. *January*, 0–9. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/london\_lost\_youth\_services\_sian\_berry\_jan2017.pdf

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Browne, K. D., & Hamilton-Giachritsis, C. (2005). The influence of violent media on children and adolescents: a public-health approach. *Lancet*, *365*, 702–710.

Commission, T. Y. V. (2018). *Interim Report - July 2018* (Issue July).

Craig, W. M., Vitaro, F., Gagnon, C., & Tremblay, R. E. (2002). The Road to Gang Membership: Characteristics of Male Gang and Nongang Members from Ages 10 to 14. *Social Development*, *11*(1), 53–68.

Densley, J. A. (2012a). Street gang recruitment: Signaling, screening, and selection. *Social Problems*, *59*(3), 301–321. https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2012.59.3.301

Densley, J. A. (2012b). The organisation of london’s street gangs. *Global Crime*, *13*(1), 42–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2011.632497

Densley, J. A. (2013). How Gangs Work. *How Gangs Work*, *January 2013*. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137271518

Densley, J. A., Deuchar, R., & Harding, S. (2020). An Introduction to Gangs and Serious Youth Violence in the United Kingdom. *Youth Justice*, *20*(1–2), 3–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473225420902848

Densley, J., Deuchar, R., & Harding, S. (2020). An Introduction to Gangs and Serious Youth Violence in the United Kingdom. *Youth Justice*, *20*(1–2), 3–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473225420902848

Disley, E., & Liddle, M. (2016). Local perspectives in Ending Gang and Youth Violence areas: Perceptions of the nature of urban street gangs. In *Local perspectives in Ending Gang and Youth Violence areas: Perceptions of the nature of urban street gangs* (Issue January). https://doi.org/10.7249/rr876

Egan, M., Neary, J., Keenan, P. J., & Bond, L. (2013). Perceptions of antisocial behaviour and negative attitudes towards young people: focus group evidence from adult residents of disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods (Glasgow, UK). *Journal of Youth Studies*, *16*(5), 612–627. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2012.733809

Esbensen, F., Peterson, D., Taylor, T. J., & Freng, A. (2009). Similarities and Differences in Risk Factors for Violent Offending and Gang Membership. *The Australian New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, *42*(3), 310–335.

Fatsis, L. (2019). Policing the beats: The criminalisation of UK drill and grime music by the London Metropolitan Police. *Sociological Review*, *67*(6), 1300–1316. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119842480

Fernández-Planells, A., Orduña-Malea, E., & Feixa Pàmpols, C. (2021). Gangs and social media: A systematic literature review and an identification of future challenges, risks and recommendations. *New Media and Society*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444821994490

Fraser, A., & Atkinson, C. (2014). Making Up Gangs: Looping, Labelling and the New Politics of Intelligence-led Policing. *Youth Justice*, *14*(2), 154–170. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473225414529047

Freeman, J. B., Ambady, N., Midgley, K. J., & Holcomb, P. J. (2012). Potential Evidence for Dynamic Continuity. *Social Neuroscience*, *6*(2), 139–155. https://doi.org/10.1080/17470919.2010.490674.The

Gibbons, J. A., Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.2307/2070079

Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E., & Chadwick, B. (2008). Methods of data collection in qualitative research: Interviews and focus groups. *British Dental Journal*, *204*(6), 291–295. https://doi.org/10.1038/bdj.2008.192

Giulianotti, R. (2011). Sport, peacemaking and conflict resolution: A contextual analysis and modelling of the sport, development and peace sector. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *34*(2), 207–228. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2010.522245

Government, H. (2018). *Serious violence strategy*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-strategy

Green, S. (2017). *London’s lost youth services*.

Harkness, G. (2013). Gangs and gangsta rap in Chicago: A microscenes perspective. *Poetics*, *41*(2), 151–176. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2013.01.001

Harradine, S., Kodz, J., Lemetti, F., & Jones, B. (2004). *Defining and measuring anti-social behaviour Economic Analysis and Modelling Defining and measuring anti-social behaviour*. 22. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/116655/dpr26.pdf

Haylock, S., Boshari, T., Alexander, E. C., Kumar, A., Manikam, L., & Pinder, R. (2020). Risk factors associated with knife-crime in United Kingdom among young people aged 10-24 years: A systematic review. *BMC Public Health*, *20*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09498-4

Heap, V. (2010). *Understanding public perceptions of anti-social behaviour: Problems and policy responses*.

Hesketh, R. F. (2018). *A critical exploration of why some individuals with similar backgrounds do or do not become involved in deviant street groups and the potential implications for their future life choices* [University of Chester]. https://doi.org/10.1051/matecconf/201712107005

Hesketh, R. F. (2019). Joining gangs: living on the edge? *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice*, *5*(4), 280–294. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCRPP-07-2019-0052

Hesketh, R. F., & Robinson, G. (2019). Grafting: “the boyz” just doing business? Deviant entrepreneurship in street gangs. *Safer Communities*, *18*(2), 54–63. https://doi.org/10.1108/SC-05-2019-0016

Hommel, B., Brown, S. B. R. E., & Nattkemper, D. (2016). Perception and Action. In *Human Action Control* (pp. 75–107). Springer, Cham.

Howell, J. C., & Egley, A. (2005). Moving Risk Factors into Developmental Theories of Gang Membership. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, *3*(4), 334–354. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204005278679

Irwin-Rogers, K., & Billingham, L. (2020). *Final Report* (Issue July).

Irwin-Rogers, K., & Pinkney, C. (2017). Social Media as a Catalyst and Trigger for Youth Violence. In *Catch 22*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kim-garst/social-media-as-a-catalys\_b\_3197544.html

Johnson, J. D., & Schell-busey, N. M. (2016). Old Message in a New Bottle: Taking Gang Rivalries Online Through Rap Battle Music Videos on YouTube. *Journal of Qualitative Criminal Justice & Criminology*, *4*(1), 42–81.

Kelly, L. (2013). Sports-Based Interventions and the Local Governance of Youth Crime and Antisocial Behavior. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *37*(3), 261–283. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723512467193

Kidd, P. S., & Parshall, M. B. (2000). Getting the Focus and the Group: Enhancing Analytical Rigor in Focus Group Research. *Qualitative Health Research*, *10*(3), 293–308.

Kirchmaier, T., Machin, S. J., & Villa-Llera, C. (2020). *Gangs and knife crime in London* (Issue January).

Kitzinger, J. (1995). Introducing focus groups. *BMJ*, *11*(1995), 299–302.

Klein, M. W., & Maxson, C. L. (2001). *Gang Structures, Crime Patterns, and Police Responses*.

Kleinberg, B., & McFarlane, P. (2020). Violent music vs violence and music: Drill rap and violent crime in London. *CoRR*, *abs/2004.0*, 1–11.

Lauger, T. R., & Densley, J. A. (2018). Broadcasting Badness: Violence, Identity, and Performance in the Online Gang Rap Scene. *Justice Quarterly*, *35*(5), 816–841. https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2017.1341542

Lewis, P., Newburn, T., Taylor, M., Mcgillivray, C., Greenhill, A., Frayman, H., & Proctor, R. (2011). Reading the riots: investigating England’s summer of disorder. *The Guardian*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199259908.003.0001

London Borough of Tower Hamlets. (2018). *Gangs and Serious Youth Violence*. *March*, 1–28.

London Borough of Tower Hamlets. (2020a). *Borough Profile: Chapter 1 (Population)*.

London Borough of Tower Hamlets. (2020b). *Borough Profile: Chapter 4 (Poverty)*.

Lubans, D. R., Plotnikoff, R. C., & Lubans, N. J. (2012). Review: A systematic review of the impact of physical activity programmes on social and emotional well-being in at-risk youth. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, *17*(1), 2–13. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-3588.2011.00623.x

Mayor’s Office for Policing And Crime (MOPAC). (2014). *Identifying the Strategic Ambitions for London: Gangs and Serious Youth Violence: findings from the literature review and consultation*.

Mayor’s Office for Policing And Crime (MOPAC). (2017). *A Safer City for All Londoners*. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/draft\_police\_and\_crime\_plan\_for\_london\_2017-2021\_-\_consultation\_document.pdf

McLean, R. (2019). Understanding and policing gangs. In *Cumberland Lodge Police Conference* (Issue June). www.cumberlandlodge.ac.uk/resources-publications/understanding-policing-gangs-briefing

McLean, R., Robinson, G., & Densley, J. A. (2020). *County Lines: Criminal Networks and Evolving Drug Markets in Britain*. Springer.

Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Dickinson, W. B., Leech, N. L., & Zoran, A. G. (2009). A Qualitative Framework for Collecting and Analyzing Data in Focus Group Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *8*(3), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800301

Pawelz, J., & Elvers, P. (2018). The Digital Hood of Urban Violence: Exploring Functionalities of Social Media and Music Among Gangs. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, *34*(4), 442–459. https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986218787735

Pinkney, C., & Robinson-Edwards, S. (2018). Gangs, music and the mediatisation of crime: expressions, violations and validations. *Safer Communities*, *17*(2), 103–118. https://doi.org/10.1108/SC-01-2017-0004

Politowski, B. (2016). *Gangs and Serious Youth Violence*.

Przemieniecki, C. J. (2005). Gang Behavior and Movies: Do Hollywood Gang Films Influence Violent Gang Behavior? *Journal of Gang Research*, *12*(2), 41–70.

Ramshaw, N., Charleton, B., & Dawson, P. (2018). Youth Voice Survey Report. In *MOPAC Evidence and Insight* (Issue December).

Richards, D., Caldwell, P. H. Y., & Go, H. (2015). Impact of social media on the health of children and young people. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, *51*(12), 1152–1157. https://doi.org/10.1111/jpc.13023

Sandford, R., Armour, K., & Warmington, P. (2006). Re-engaging disaffected youth through physical activity programmes. *British Educational Research Journal*, *32*(2), 251–271. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920600569164

Scrimshaw, S. C. (2018). The violence virus: A community response to reducing youth violence in London. In *The London Community Foundation*. http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial\_opinion/oped/articles/2007/04/22/the\_violence\_virus/

Smithson, H., Ralphs, R., & Williams, P. (2013). Used and abused the problematic usage of gang terminology in the united kingdom and its implications for ethnic minority youth. *British Journal of Criminology*, *53*(1), 113–128. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azs046

Spruit, A., Hoffenaar, P., van der Put, C., van Vugt, E., & Stams, G. J. (2018). The effect of a sport-based intervention to prevent juvenile delinquency in at-risk adolescents. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *94*(May), 689–698. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.09.013

Storrod, M. L., & Densley, J. A. (2017). ‘Going viral’ and ‘Going country’: The expressive and instrumental activities of street gangs on social media. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *20*(6), 677–696. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1260694

Syeda, J. (2015). *Ending groups, gangs and serious youth violence strategy: April 2015-2018*. http://democracy.towerhamlets.gov.uk/mgConvert2PDF.aspx?ID=74658

Taylor, P., Davies, L., Wells, P., Gilbertson, J., & Tayleur, W. (2015). A review of the Social Impacts of Culture and Sport. In *Case: The Culture and Sport Evidence Programme* (Issue March).

The Youth Violence Commission. (2018). *Interim Report - July 2018*.

Tower Hamlets. (2018). *Borough Profile - Social Care*.

Upson, A. (2006). *Perceptions and experience of anti-social behaviour: Findings from the 2004/05 British Crime Survey British Crime Survey*. https://doi.org/10.1037/e567152011-001

Weerman, F. M., Maxson, C. L., Esbensen, F., Aldridge, J., Medina, J., & Van Gemert, F. (2009). *Eurogang program manual: Background, development, and use of the Eurogang instruments in multi-site, multi-method comparative research*.

Whittaker, A., Cheston, L., Tyrell, T., Higgins, M., Felix-Baptiste, C., & Havard, T. (2018a). *From Postcodes to Profit: How gangs have changed in Waltham Forest*. www.lsbu.ac.uk

Whittaker, A., Cheston, L., Tyrell, T., Higgins, M., Felix-Baptiste, C., & Havard, T. (2018b). *From Postcodes to Profit*. www.lsbu.ac.uk

Whittaker, A., Densley, J. A., & Moser, K. S. (2020). No two gangs are alike: The digital divide in street gangs’ differential adaptations to social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *110*(April), 106403. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106403

Whittaker, A., Densley, J., Cheston, L., Tyrell, T., Higgins, M., Felix-Baptiste, C., & Havard, T. (2020). Reluctant Gangsters Revisited: The Evolution of Gangs from Postcodes to Profits. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, *26*(1). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-019-09408-4

Wood, M. (2004). *Perceptions and experience of antisocial behaviour: Findings from the 2003/2004 British Crime Survey*.

YMCA. (2020). *Out of Service* (Issue January).