**Girls in gangs: how they are recruited, exploited and trapped**

<https://theconversation.com/girls-in-gangs-how-they-are-recruited-exploited-and-trapped-175369>

There has long been a misconception that gangs are made up of boys and young men, typically from ethnic minority groups and disadvantaged backgrounds. But the reality is very different.

Girls and young women from all demographics are targeted by gang members, and used to transport drugs and weapons from urban areas to rural locations and coastal towns.

Research in London’s [Waltham Forest](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322677141_From_Postcodes_to_Profits_Changes_in_gang_activity_in_Waltham_Forest) in 2018 found that “clean skins” – children, especially young women and girls, not previously known to police and statutory agencies and often from wealthier backgrounds – are being targeted by gangs.

When young women and girls are recognised as part of gangs, they tend to be viewed as willing participants, and judged according to sexist social norms and stereotypes. Their behaviours are interpreted as one of two extremes: they are either very violent, or immoral and sexually promiscuous. For example, so-called hooks or honey traps are commonly seen as perpetrators, willingly manipulating their sexuality to entice rival gang members or attract new ones.

[The truth](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/17488958211051513) is far more complex. Women and girls involved in gangs are often [both perpetrator and victim](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6akZmp_qkQE), actively recruiting other young people to avoid their own sexual and [criminal exploitation](https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9264/CBP-9264.pdf).

The limited public awareness of girls and young women in gangs is to the gang’s advantage. Absent from the statistics and viewed as deviant, they are [seldom seen](https://www.northlondonsocialwork.co.uk/news/we-must-protect-the-silent-and-invisible-youth/) and less often believed, which means they can more readily avoid detection. In this sense, girls and young women from diverse backgrounds are ideally placed to help gangs run their [profit making business model](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10610-019-09408-4).

Challenging these conceptions and improving public understanding about girls in gangs could help prevent more young women from being recruited and used to perpetuate criminal activity.

## Coercive control

A better way to understand the behaviour of girls and young women in gangs is the concept of [coercive control](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/17488958211051513). Historically associated with domestic abuse, coercive control is built on a foundation of trust, where the victim shares intimate experiences and information with the perpetrator, including personal dreams and fears. It is different from other forms of abuse, because abusers leverage the privileged and trusted information to exert influence or control over their victim.

The BBC documentary [Hidden Girls](https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0010dbw/hidden-girls), which I consulted on, describes first-hand accounts of the ways girls are recruited into gangs. Young men in gangs show an interest in or feign concern about young women and girls. They target these children and deliberately foster a dependency which leads to an emotional commitment.

In the hands of gang members, technology becomes a [tool for coercive control](https://www.northlondonsocialwork.co.uk/news/we-must-protect-the-silent-and-invisible-youth/). Gang members regularly use [social media](https://archive.voice-online.co.uk/article/girls-gangs-and-social-media) to recruit young women and girls from all backgrounds to parties. Here, they are plied with drink and drugs and sexually exploited, often by several gang members at a time. They are often too drunk to give consent or too frightened to say no, and the rape is filmed. Armed with evidence of the girl or young woman’s alleged promiscuity, gang members then threaten to expose them by posting the footage and their personal information on social media. These young women and girls are then bombarded with sexually explicit texts and phone calls from predatory strangers.



Mobile phones are an easy tool for gang members to maintain control over their victims. [Burdun Iliya / Shutterstock](https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/young-scared-worried-teenager-girl-holding-1285787740)

Technology can also be used to groom young women and girls by creating the impression of a romantic relationship. Once in the gang fold, this same technology is used to intimidate and maintain [round the clock surveillance](https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/tpp/jgbv/2020/00000004/00000002/art00007;jsessionid=1vffoncsf7pe1.x-ic-live-02). Equipped with their personal numbers, elder gang members are able to track young women and girls through GPS apps on their phones.

Always knowing where they are and able to text or call at any time, gang members can make demands at a moment’s notice, while monitoring the girls to check on their whereabouts and ensure they are following instructions. This creates the impression that the perpetrator is always present, even when he cannot be seen. This fear traps the girls in gang life and forces them to comply with the demands of gang members.

Gangs are targeting young women and girls from all backgrounds. The myths and stereotypes associated with gang demographics only serve to isolate these women and girls and keep them hidden. We need to recognise that all children are vulnerable to recruitment and that their decisions, however unwise, may be a consequence of fear and control. Rather than judge these young women and girls, it may be helpful to understand their behaviours as a strategy to manage their abuse and a tool to keep themselves safe.