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Drugs, Gangs, and Social Media in Provincial England

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Abstract

One summer in a small English town, a group of youths fatally attacked another over his affiliation to a rival 'gang' before posting the footage on social media as a warning. The case shocked the small town, and highlighted the presence of gangs outside of the major urban areas that tend to be prioritised in the literature. When these areas are considered within the literature, it is most often through the paradigm of county lines, with the focus on the 'invasive' groups engaging in this trade, often overlooking the role of 'home grown' crime groups. Subsequently, this research seeks to answer the following questions: What do street gangs in the United Kingdom look like outside major urban areas and how do these groups use social media? Through the completion of a series of in-depth interviews, that were complemented with analysis of secondary sources including non-public and police files in 'Countyshire' (pseudonym) this paper reveals a number of key findings. Gangs outside major urban areas are just as sophisticated and criminally motivated as their urban counterparts, and that through attempts to control the drugs trade, they begin to display dimensions of rudimentary criminal governance. Additionally, this paper through a focus on social media, has shown how these technologies have benefitted gangs, with expressive use facilitating and establishing reputations for violence and success. Social media use has also been instrumental, allowing direct engagement in the drugs trade and the recruitment of young people into and eventual control within gangs.

Keywords Street Gangs · Organised Crime · Drugs · Social Media · County Lines · Violence · Youth Crime

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Introduction

Influenced by the case outlined in the abstract, this paper sets out to understand how street gangs look outside the major urban areas predominant in the literature and consider how these gangs utilise social media. This study was set in the English county of 'Countyshire' (pseudonym) in which interviews, case file analysis, and field visits were made to the towns of 'Northford' and 'Southford' (pseudonyms), as well as smaller towns and villages to understand the local gang landscape and answer the research questions. In doing so it makes three main contributions. Firstly, street gangs in the semi-rural Countyshire are just as criminally motivated and sophisticated as their urban counterparts. Secondly, this paper highlights that through attempts to control the drugs trade, local groups begin to display dimensions of rudimentary criminal governance (Varese, 2017). Finally, it shows that social media has both expressive and instrumental value for street gangs and in doing so this paper adds to a growing field of literature that discusses social media in relation to youth-based violence. Following this introduction, this paper will dive into a review of the existing literature, setting the context for why a study of street gangs outside major urban areas, and social media use is valuable. Following this it will consider the methodology used; outlining the fieldwork site, and justifying the methods used. It will then provide an overview of the gangs in the County, looking at how these have developed and their involvement in the drugs trade. Following this it will look at social media use in-depth before concluding and situating the study within the existing literature.

Research questions:

- What do gangs outside major urban areas look like in the United Kingdom?
- How do these groups use social media?

Literature Review

Young people are often incorrectly labelled as 'gang' members by law enforcement (Fraser & Atkinson, 2014) and politicians (Fraser et al., 2021) reflecting wider labelling processes (Becker, 1996), folk devils, and moral panics (Cohen, 2011). As such, in attempting to understand gangs there runs the risk of stigmatisation if the concept is poorly defined. In this study, I will utilise Densley's description (2013) which he employed in his ethnographic study of gangs in London, which is as follows:

> "self-formed associations of peers that have adopted a common name and other discernible 'conventional' or 'symbolic' signals of membership…. are comprised of individuals who recognize themselves (and are recognized by others) as being 'members' of a 'gang' who individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal activity… they are not fully open to the public and much of the information concerning their business remains confined within the group … [and] disputes within the group cannot be settled by an external 'third party' as established by the rule of law." (Densley, 2013; 6).

In contrast, organised crime groups differ from street gangs in their attempts to "regulate and control the production and distribution of a given commodity or service unlawfully" (Varese, 2017; p.45) and can be considered more than just market participants.

In his study of youth gangs in London over a ten-year period, Pitts (2008) provides a compelling challenge to the consensus that Britain was characterised by resistant youth subcultures and not violent street gangs (Whittaker et al., 2020b; 1). Considering the impact of globalisation on the drugs trade, Pitts (2008) details how the proliferation of drugs in London has seen street gangs evolve into more serious and organised entities. Densley (2013) develops on the criminal nature of British street gangs with his detailed ethnographic study of youth violence in London. Significant is Densley's development of gang evolution as a theory, in which he methodically highlights four stages of gang evolution: (1) recreational, (2) crime, (3) enterprise, and (4) governance. Densley's model is invaluable and considers how gangs can move from recreational social groupings to organised criminal groups that attempt to dominate and control a given domain. Whittaker et al. (2020a) study of gangs in Waltham Forest, London, and McLean's study in Scotland (2018), also provide insightful empirical examples of gang evolution and highlight the more organised and criminal focused nature of contemporary street gangs in the United Kingdom. Greater involvement in the drugs trade, especially county lines drug dealing, is posited as a potential source for the evolution of street gangs (Pitts, 2019). The county lines[1] model is characterised by more widespread and systematic exploitation of vulnerable young people and adults, either in the form of child criminal exploitation or often in practices of cuckooing (Windle et al., 2020). It is a practice motivated by profit maximisation, with many county lines operations establishing themselves in areas for extended periods of times to ensure a 24/7 supply for vulnerable users (Coomber & Moyle, 2018). As a model, it poses challenges for policing responses, with an ambiguity around the victim-offender dichotomy of those involved (McLean et al., 2020), with many participants seeing their involvement as autonomous and financially and status motivated (Robinson et al., 2019; Irwin Rogers, 2019). What characterises the literature on street gangs in the United Kingdom is the overwhelming focus on urban areas, with studies on London (Densley, 2013, 2014; Harding, 2014; Reid, 2023; Pitts, 2008, 2019; Whittaker et al., 2020a; Windle & Briggs, 2015), Merseyside (Hesketh, 2021; Robinson et al., 2019), Glasgow (Fraser, 2013, 2015; McLean, 2018; Miller, 2024), an English 'city' (Aldridge & Medina-Ariza, 2008), and six smaller cities in differing regions (Bannister et al., 2013). This paper seeks to address this imbalance and add to a limited literature on organised criminality outside urban areas, which has included studies in Derbyshire (Campana & Varese, 2018), Essex (Windle, 2013), and areas affected by county lines (Coomber & Moyle, 2018; McLean et al., 2020; Windle et al., 2020).

Social media is arguably one of the most significant developments of the 21st century, and its use permeates all realms of modern life. However, the literature has been slow to recognise and react to this fundamental change and how it has affected the gang environment. Often attention to how gangs utilise social media has been based around expressive use. Urbanik and Haggerty (2018) and Stuart (2020), in their respective studies of Toronto

[1] County lines refers to the practice of "gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal line". They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons." (Home Office, 2018; p.48).

and Chicago, found social media sites to be expressive platforms vital in upholding representations of hypermasculinity in line with the 'code of the street' (Anderson, 1999). Moving beyond the North American context prominent in the literature, Storrod and Densley's study of youth gangs in the United Kingdom (2017), highlights that social media use is both expressive (in terms of establishing reputations) and instrumental (in terms of engagement in the drugs trade). Morselli and Décary-Hétu (2013) additionally highlight the reputational benefits that can come from social media use but stress that social media is likely to reflect individual, rather than group dynamics. Furthermore, they find that social media is not proactively used to recruit new members but is used to advertise their activities and reflects a convergence setting which attracts individuals that would not have previously been exposed to this environment. Drill music is a subgenre of hip-hop that has its origins in the United States characterised by a heavy beat and themes of violence and criminal activity and has become somewhat of a modern folk devil in the United Kingdom (Fatsis, 2019; Ilan, 2020). We cannot ignore that links between drill music and criminality have occurred, yet to claim that all those that partake in drill music are involved in or are related to criminality and gangs would be counterproductive. However, I refute claims that drill music broadcasts but does not cause violent crime (Fatsis, 2019; p.1301) and should be treated as fictive (Schwarze & Fatsis, 2022). Both in my work, as I will show, and in drill music more generally, threats within music videos have become more specific and targeted (Hancox, 2018), and this has led music videos challenging the credibility of those rapped about (Pinkey & Robinson-Edwards, 2018) something that sees retaliation to save face. There has been some attention to which types of gangs use social media. Whittaker et al. (2020b) identify a disparity between "traditionalists", who, as already established groups, shun social media which offers them few gains and represents a greater risk, and "digitalists" who embrace social media as a vital tool in their attempts to build reputations. They found that divides also exist along age lines, with young gang members more confident and proficient in the use of social media, a finding also highlighted by Harding (2014) in his study of street gangs in London. Finally, there has been some, but limited consideration of how social media has affected street gangs, with Densley (2020) highlighting how it has created new incentives and transformed relationships with territory and other gangs.

Methodology

Countyshire (pseudonym) is a medium-sized county in England, with a population of at least half a million people[2]. There exist two main towns in the County, the county town of Northford, and the larger town of Southford (pseudonym), with the rest of the County made up of small towns and rural communities. The closeness of these two towns and the impact this has had on gangs and organised crime was prominent during the research process, with the towns being twenty miles apart and fifteen minutes journey by rail. The County is considered a transport hub, with major motorways and roads traversing its edges and good rail connections, highlighted in being instrumental in the rise of the county lines drug dealing method. There exists some light industry, but with changing employment patterns the service industry is prominent.

[2] Exact figure removed to maintain confidentiality.

Fieldwork in Countyshire involved semi-structured interviews with fourteen respondents from a range of backgrounds and experiences over the summer months of 2021. In total, there were six interviews with gang-intervention specialists who worked for a local charity, five interviews with police officers and police analysts, and three interviews with safeguarding professionals. This wide variety of participants allowed for a detailed understanding of the situation from an array of perspectives. These participants will be known as PO (police officer), PA (police analyst), CP (charity professional) and SP (safeguarding professional). Participants were identified through a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling and were chosen due to their expertise and differing perspectives. Utilising solely the voices of practitioners has its limitations, namely the occurrence of diverging understandings between gang members and practitioners even if these practitioners have a good understanding of the local context and close relationships with gang involved young people (Decker & Kempf-Leonard, 1991; Windle & Briggs, 2015). The academic lineage of ethnographic studies of gangs is well established (Densley, 2013; Fraser, 2015) yet Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and ethical conundrums that occur when dealing with criminally involved young people ensured that detailed in-situ fieldwork would not be possible. Subsequently, I was not able to build the necessary connections with gang members in the research setting, and thus represents a sampling limitation and potential bias in which secondary perspectives are only offered. However, this limitation is overcome with the variety of perspectives I sought in the process of my research, of which some charity professionals were former gang involved young people[3]. Additionally, repeated visits to Countyshire were completed, and work with young people, of whom many were gang involved[4], ensured that observations and understandings of the local gang scene were furthered.

I complemented my interview-based research with an analysis of existing data, much of which came in the form of drill music videos and news reports, but also police data and intelligence. Trusted relationships were established with law enforcement to obtain many of these resources. In the process of this I received and analysed over nineteen intelligence reports relating to groups in the County and one detailed strategic intelligence report focusing on the drugs trade and gang involved young people. The reports revealed sixteen gangs and three Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) in Countyshire. It was decided that these three OCGs would be included in my data set because, as will be highlighted, the distinction between street gangs and OCGs is blurred in Countyshire, and these specific OCGs started out as street gangs, reflecting notions of gang evolution (Densley, 2014; McLean, 2018; Whittaker et al., 2020a). These reports were used as they were valuable for understanding the background of all suspected members, the crimes they had been suspected and convicted of committing, as well as information about the group, such as the quantity and types of drugs they were suspected of supplying. A more comprehensive overview of these reports can be seen in Appendix B. In text, these reports are referred to as CF and then a number, for example CF-2 refers to casefile two. There are a number of limitations to the use of police generated data, and as Windle and Silke (2019) highlight this kind of data can be manipulated to show the success of a particular policy, can be limited by only the partial understanding of events by law enforcement, or can differ from organised crime reali-

[3] The gatekeeper used to access this group disclosed this, however, was keen not to reveal which members of the charity had been gang involved for privacy reasons.

[4] This work was outside the parameters of the research and as such, interviews were not carried out with these young people.

ties as law enforcement interpretations are shaped by the media, political rhetoric, or their own institutional or cultural viewpoint. Campana and Varese (2022a) highlight that police records can be useful for when contextualising interactions between offenders in relation to a specific activity such as drug dealing, however, they also raise limitations around validity and reliability, namely resource constraints, changing policing priorities, and enforcement levels. Despite this, police recorded events can be valued because of the richness they offer, with the records accessed for this record totalling hundreds of pages of data.

In total, I analysed the lyrics of over fifteen drill music videos locally, but also considered some of the imagery of videos, helping me understand demographic and socio-economic contexts of the street gangs. To ensure maximum transparency in my work, I corresponded drill videos and the names of groups with local practitioners whilst also cross-referencing videos with news reports in which those that had performed in drill music were also found to have been involved in gang related criminality. Videos were chosen by searching for known gang related drill artists on YouTube, of which names were provided to me by participants. From this I was able to snowball and find additional videos which were often linked – on the same channel or through recommended videos and then cross referenced with participants. These videos ranged from around ten thousand views up to a video that had nearly one hundred and thirty thousand views. Engagement in these videos ranged from a couple of hundred 'likes' up to over a thousand 'likes', however comments rarely were above fifty, even for some of the more popular videos. These comments generally expressed support for the group with no evidence of gang conflict manifesting in these spaces. Some comments also expressed support for imprisoned gang members who had appeared in the videos, requesting that they are released. In any incidences in which gang links were not clear they were omitted from the research. In utilising drill music, I followed Gambetta's (1993) advice regarding the symbolism of Mafias, in which he claimed that symbols can be considered in three forms. Firstly, taken on face value and considered unproblematically, secondly, rejected completely and disregarded as fiction, or thirdly, a middle ground approach, with an acknowledgement that myth can lead to reality (Gambetta, 1993; 129). Triangulation was ensured through engagement with a range of written and visual sources, of both public and private nature, and with interview participants from different backgrounds, subsequently reducing biases particular to just one type of data.

Throughout the process I prioritised data from primary sources, namely interviews, with my choice not to widely utilise secondary social media data raising limitations to my study. The reasoning for this was twofold, firstly, most social media data exists on hidden platforms and accessing this would be both difficult and ethically challenging. Secondly, for data that was openly available, this was often of poor quality, and frequently had tenuous links to gangs. With a desire to avoid stigmatizing and stereotyping individuals (Aldridge et al., 2013) this approach was, except in clear instances, avoided. Like other scholars, I also recognise that I can only present a snapshot of the local context (Densley, 2011) and as the dynamics of criminal groupings are shaped by the social and economic structures of the communities they exist in, the generalisability of my research is made more difficult. Despite this, I am confident that my research is accurate in its findings.

I took a deductive approach to the research, with preconceived themes based off my literature review and prior knowledge. Once I had familiarised myself with the police intelligence reports and interview transcripts, I coded the data. These codes related to gang structure, personal characteristics of members, drugs, exploitation, wider criminality, rela-

tionships, social media, and technology. Following this I generated the following themes: social media, criminality, and gang structure and personal characteristics. Due to the sensitive nature of research focusing on gangs, confidentiality was paramount throughout, with names replaced by pseudonyms and participants granted confidentiality. These protocols were put in place as part of my ethics clearance by the university. This was a necessary requirement that protected participants from potential harms arising from discussing gangs and organised crime in a small English county. Because of this, there are some secondary sources, both in-text and within the bibliography, that have had identifying information redacted. Furthermore, this research went through university ethical clearance, and to protect participants, information sheets and written consent forms were reviewed and signed by all those that took part, allowing them to make an informed choice regarding their involvement in the research.

However, it is acknowledged, given the rich descriptions and case studies used, that it is impossible to keep research completely anonymous. It was decided that these descriptions and case studies were necessary to provide a context to the research setting and local dynamics, that similarly to Harding's ethnography of South London gangs (2014), are vital in understanding the social field. In completing the study, there is a risk along with all gang research, that communities, ethnic minority groups, and young people may be unintentionally stereotyped (Aldridge et al., 2013), whilst also inadvertently creating or strengthening the existence of street gangs (Klein, 2001). The use of pseudonyms and confidentially with participants has allowed me to consider the localised context without directly stigmatising individuals and communities.

Gangs in Countyshire

As groups merge, develop and decline, and with their hidden nature, it can be hard to reach approximate numbers of gangs in an area. At the time of research (summer 2021), it was confirmed to me that there existed eighteen mapped gangs and OCGs in the County, eight in Southford, six in Northford, one across both Northford and Southford, and three in areas outside these two towns. The strong link Countyshire groups have with gangs and OCGs from places outside the County, predominantly from London, must also be noted. The history of gangs and OCGs in the County was less clear. Some participants, particularly police, stressed that gangs in their current format are a relatively new phenomena, and with the exception of two street gangs based around rival housing estates in Southford, the vast majority of group-based violence in the early 2000s and the years prior came from football hooliganism, with Southford Town's 'firm' well known for their violence nationally. Alternatively, one participant based in Northford, highlighted the historical presence of street gangs in both towns, and predominantly based around coloured bandanas. Their involvement in criminality was reportedly minimal, formed mainly around anti-social behaviour and defence of territory reflecting the more recreational nature of street gangs articulated in the literature (Densley, 2013; Fraser, 2015).

Gangs in Countyshire display a clear hierarchical structure, with a small number of 'elders' at the top, followed by 'youngers' in the middle and 'runners' at the bottom. Older and more established members of gangs, often aged between eighteen and their early twenties, are known as 'elders' and occupy more stable positions in the gang, involved in the

wholesale purchase of drugs, and often acting as a 'line holder' responsible for managing the remote sale of drugs via a mobile phone. Below this sit 'youngers' who are often aged between sixteen and eighteen and have been in the gang for a number of years and who may run the street retail operation, as well as acting as a conduit between 'elders' and the final category 'runners'. 'Runners' are the lowest in the hierarchy and the most disposable to more senior members of the gang. Generally, under the age of sixteen, they will be tasked with selling drugs on the street, occupying 'trap' houses, and moving drugs. They are often the most visible elements of street gangs and therefore the most vulnerable to violence from rival groups and arrest from police. These categories aren't always fixed, and in one instance, following the arrest of some elders, younger members of the group attempted to take over the gang (CF-14). Identifying how many members are in a gang was considered challenging for local police, and therefore accurate figures for all gangs were missing. Generally, there existed between seven and ten key members and up to 20 'periphery' members. These 'periphery' members were mostly young 'runners' and vulnerable drug users who may be used to sell or store drugs on behalf of the group. In some instances, these 'periphery' members can graduate into key members. As well as being hierarchical, gangs are also structured along familial (CF-1, CF-5, CF-9, CF-16), and ethnic lines (CF-8, CF-10), something that is beneficial in enhancing cooperation and reducing opportunistic behaviour within contexts of illegality (Campana & Varese, 2022b). There were only three OCGs in the data set, of which structure could only be identified from two. However, it was clear that OCGs are smaller with three (CF-18) and four key members (CF-17), and a handful of additional individuals playing bit part roles. As a result, these groups were not structured in the same hierarchical way as street gangs in the County.

When it comes to personal characteristics of gangs and OCGs, few details were provided by case files and interviews. However, certain characteristics can be gleamed. Firstly, groups are almost entirely male, with one group appearing to use a female to recruit young male runners (CF-15). Interviews also made it clear that females may be on the periphery of gangs, but in an exploitative role, either criminally or sexually (SP2, SP3, CP3, CP5). Gangs are young, ranging from thirteen to twenty-three, but mostly around the age of fifteen to seventeen. In contrast, OCGs were older, ranging from mid-twenties to early-forties. Countyshire is a diverse area, and this was reflected in crime groups. One gang was made up predominantly of black males, something reflected in their name (CF-2), one was predominantly made up of males of South Asian heritage (CF-5) whilst two were entirely White British (CF-10, CF-7), reflecting their location in two small market towns, that unlike Southford and Northford lacked ethnic diversity. However, for the most part, gangs and OCGs in Countyshire were of mixed ethnicity with white European, white British, and South Asian heritage evidenced in the same gangs (CF-11, CF- 14, CF-15, CF-16, CF-17, CF-18).

The primary industry for gangs in Countyshire was engagement in the drugs trade. The illicit drugs trade in the United Kingdom is worth an estimated £9.4 billion annually (Home Office, 2020) and consists of a series of intersecting local and regional markets that differ in operational and production methods (Kirby & Peal, 2015; Pearson & Hobbs, 2001). Countyshire, despite its size, has a significant illicit drugs market, with gangs in Countyshire using social media to deal cocaine and cannabis, with the crack cocaine and heroin market dominated by vulnerable users who rely on conventional methods of communication (PO2, SP1, and CF-20). Locally, it has been recognised that the drugs market has changed in recent

years, with increases in the number of young people involved in drugs supply, the emergence of 'New Psychoactive Substances' such as spice in the local prison, and the increased potency of cannabis, and widespread and normalised use of higher purity substances such as cocaine (CF-20). Research participants who worked with young people were keen to point out that cannabis was frequently recreationally smoked by exploited young people, with dealing often undertaken to fund habits, "the majority of our young people find themselves dealing class As… crack cocaine and heroin predominantly, in terms of young people's usage, it's cannabis." (SP1).

Countyshire has faced significant issues with county lines, and historically saw groups from London establish themselves in Countyshire and attempt to dominate the local drugs market. Yet, as local gangs have identified the potential lure from supply, the County now faces an even greater problem with the existence of county lines coming in and out of Countyshire (PO1 & CF-20). Around ten groups were believed to be running lines, both within and outside the County. County lines is a profit maximising tactic, and this focus on profit sees high levels of exploitation, and the model often preys on vulnerable young people, moving them across the country and putting them at significant risk in the process (Windle & Briggs, 2015; Windle et al., 2020). In Countyshire, this exploitation saw physical attacks on gang members (PO1, SP1, SP2, and CF-8, CF-16) or against siblings and families of gang nominals (SP1), through forcing the children of vulnerable drug users to deal drugs to ensure the safety of their parents (PO2) or through debt bondage (CF-8), which has seen young drug runners robbed by their own gang whilst carrying significant amounts of cash or illicit substances and subsequently forced to work to pay off their debt (SP1). Some young people involved in gangs in the County were involved for financial reasons (CF-5) and often focus is placed on the young people involved as victims, yet often those involved do not see themselves as such and partake of their own volition to achieve financial and status rewards (Robinson et al., 2019), something that muddles criminal justice responses with an unclear victim-offender status. Irwin-Rogers (2019) in his study of gang involved young people in London also proposes a similar finding, with the young people in his study's engagement in the drugs trade, not out of coercion, but rather through a desire for fast money. As well as county lines, around seven groups focused solely on local supply (CF-2, CF-4, CF-5, CF-8, CF-9, 10, CF-16) although these groups often came into conflict with others, often those running lines into their respective dealing areas (CF-20), at times this also led to mergers and friendly relationships (CF-2, CF-6, CF-8). Another indication of close relationships between groups was the sharing of 'runners' both locally and outside the County (CF-3, CF-9, CF-14). In contrast, OCGs in the County were more likely to be involved in wholesale supply, (CF-17, CF-18, CF-19) with one group making upwards of £1 million annually (CF-18). One street gang in Southford was also involved in wholesale supply and believed to be supplying five-to-ten kilograms of cocaine a week to other gangs in the town (CF-15).

Nearly all participants stressed that gangs have become more organised in the County, developing a business acumen focused on the illicit drugs market, a finding reflected in the wider literature (Densley, 2013; Whittaker et al., 2020a). As one participant claimed, gangs in the County have become "much more organised, very much more business-like, adapting very quickly, they adapt very quickly to what is going on locally." (SP1). What was repeatedly highlighted throughout the interview process was the close links between street gangs and organised crime groups, "those gangs become OCGs, then the younger element becomes the visible gang, and then [they] transition through the group of ending" (PO2).

The notion of the street gang acting as a visible element of an OCG was raised, and in describing one Southford group I was told: "you have the top OCG layer, that are involved in the importation level of drugs, then the money man, who will hide the money, then the person below will facilitate the cars through a dodgy hire car company, then the street level, where the gangs are mapped." (PO1). Analysis of case files reveal a different story with gangs and OCGs being distant with their closeness for the most part representing instrumental cooperation around drugs supply rather than an amalgamation of street gangs by OCGs. There were a handful of exceptions to this, with some gang 'elders' splintering away to form separate but closely linked groups that controlled the street gangs underneath them but operated at the wholesale level (CF-6, CF-12, CF-13, CF-15). To add to the complexity, many OCGs in the County were also involved in retail supply, using vulnerable drug users to sell drugs on the street (CF-17, CF-18) rather than focused solely on wholesale supply to other groups typical of OCGs.

It is within the drugs trade that gangs in Countyshire begin display elements of criminal governance, typical of organised crime as per academic definitions (Varese, 2017), with a tit-for-tat gang war between two rival groups in the summer of 2017 resulting in a violent kidnapping, drive by shootings, and a series of violent attacks using machetes and knives (CF-20); and a filmed fatal attack on a sixteen-year-old boy having its origins in a dispute over control of the local drugs market (CF-16). Groups seeking to govern will often engage in incidents that seek to project fear in communities (Holligan et al., 2021) something that includes violence in public houses and leisure areas (Campana & Varese, 2018; Windle, 2013). In Countyshire, this has been evidenced with gang related violence in the night-time economy and in local shopping centres, as well as gang violence to outsiders, with violence against homeless individuals and vulnerable drug users routinely filmed and disseminated online (PA3). However, criminal governance over the legal economy and communities was not evidenced in the County.

These events all point to two key findings. Firstly, gangs in Countyshire are just as criminally sophisticated as their urban counterparts, and secondly, through attempts to control the drugs trade, they begin to display dimensions of rudimentary criminal governance (Varese, 2017).

From Street Corner to Social Media?

Drill music is arguably one of the most controversial aspects of contemporary youth culture in the United Kingdom, something that has seen a sustained and often misguided focus by law enforcement (Fatsis, 2019; Ilan, 2020; Pinkey & Robinson-Edwards, 2018). For many practitioners, the link between drill music and serious youth violence is a complex one. A popular form of youth culture, not all that listen to, or are involved in drill music engage in gang activity. In conversations with professionals in Countyshire, the localised nature combined with specific and detailed threats in local drill videos offers an antagonistic potential, as one professional put it to me, "Northford is a big place, but it's also a very small place, you would do very well to stay clear of people looking for you if they wanted to get their hands on you." (SP2). In an online sphere, in which individuals are encouraged to follow through on threats, the situation can soon escalate; "if you read the lyrics, it is glorifying violence, goading the opposition, glamourising attacks that have been carried out, and I

think when you put that within the context of, you're part of a gang, and you're trying to make a name for yourself, it sort of becomes a powder keg" (PA1).

In Countyshire, this accusation has gained traction, with a local drill artist murdered in 2014, in what was claimed retaliation after a provocation in a prior drill song. In 2018, a sixteen-year-old boy was also murdered in an attack in which members of a Northford-based gang recorded a drill music video in which they described "getting" the victim in question. Case files reveal that drill music was used by groups to routinely call our rivals, goading them with violence (CF-2, CF-6, CF-11, CF-15). The violent nature of drill music is evidenced when considering lyrics, with analysis from Countyshire based groups confirming this;

"Put blades in necks… search and destroy your friends… gonna put death in endz"[5]

"Sawn of, 5 mm…. make a man stop breathing, body get put in a freezer…… grim reaper and 15 inch in a bag."[6]

"*Multiple weapons … Kids don't see remorse, put it in the chest, put it in the lungs…*"[7]

The development of violent identities from drill music can be a form of external marketing (Harding, 2014), ensuring the group develops a reputation for violence, preferred as a reputation allows groups to economise on actual violence (Campana & Varese, 2018). If we consider drill music as external marketing for a gang (Harding, 2014), vital in its business operations, then we must also consider wider expressive activities in this light also. One of the most transparent ways social media has affected the gang environment is in the expressive actions of gangs which "show gang pride and demonstrate the group is adept at defending their turf, avenging past injuries, and so on." (Storrod & Densley, 2017; 679). In relation to social media, this has seen groups from Countyshire record and upload content that predominantly highlights their violent capabilities and the monetary gains from their engagement in the illicit drugs trade. Analysis of wider social media sites including Instagram and TikTok reveals that street gangs are increasingly using social media sites in expressive ways, as seen in the County; "people just pose pictures of themselves with a big wad of cash, and a big old zombie knife, a lot of that is the bravado, and trying to portray an image of themselves being involved in that lifestyle." (PA1).

Participants highlighted that this is likely to influence young people, creating the impression that the 'gang' lifestyle involved making large sums of money and driving fast cars. Violent and daring potential is valued within the gang environment, and brash taunting on social media applications such as Snapchat and Houseparty (CF-8, CF-15) have been used by rival groups in Southford to instigate further violence (PA2). In another instance, violence was encouraged when a Southford based gang nominal circulated a leaked police file disclosing someone who had acted as a police informant on Snapchat, outing the individual as a 'snitch' (CF-5). Reflective of "calling bluffs" (Stuart, 2020), in which rival gangs

[5] Lyrics from Northford based street gang, those in the video were later convicted of the murder of a sixteen-year-old male. Lyrics (not included to maintain confidentiality) relate directly to "getting" the victim in question and were referenced in court proceedings.

[6] Lyrics from a Northford based street gang.

[7] Lyrics from a Northford based street gang that has a number of connections with other criminal groups.

publicly taunt each other and encourage rivals to act in accordance with their claims of violence it represents "edgework", a form of voluntary risk taking (Lyng, 2005), in which gang nominals knowingly antagonise situations online to highlight their indifference to risk and ultimately demonstrate their bravado (Urbanik & Haggerty, 2018). This notion of edgework is reflected in Countyshire, and many gang-affected young people enjoyed the infamy that came with social media police appeals involving themselves, people they know, or their 'gang' (CP3). Parallels can be drawn with signalling theory, and in reflecting other parts of the United Kingdom (Hamill, 2011), these high-risk behaviours may act as hard to fake signals of one's toughness and status as a gang member. Furthermore, these expressive activities can act as a code (Gambetta, 2009), vital in fostering cooperation and trust between criminal groups.

Violence has always been a preserve of gang involved young people, a way of affirming identities, testing boundaries, and challenging social norms (Anderson, 1999), but with the pervasive nature of social media and smartphones it is emboldened, ensuring that "everything is filmed, and it glorifies it, especially when it is sent to their mates" (PA1). One case that saw a young person fatally attacked highlighted this, and the video of the attack was viewed widely, having a significant impact on young people locally (SP2). In another instance, when a member of one gang (CF-16) was caught in a rival's territory, he was set upon and beaten up by a rival gang and the incident was filmed and disseminated on social media to humiliate the victim (CF-8). One participant highlighted how even historically violence was filmed, explaining how an attack between two historic and well-established Southford gangs in the mid-2000s was filmed and uploaded onto Bebo, a now defunct social media site (PO2). Yet in the social media era, the filming of violence elongates and expands the meaning of an ephemeral event (Ferrell et al., 2001; 177), producing status and exposure amongst peers whilst also escalating gang violence, with revenge sought to reclaim pride and selfhood in the face of repeated humiliation and victimization that occurs with every share, watch and like (Densley, 2013).

Drill music can be considered a form of 'storytelling' within gangs, which allows members to make sense of their actions and activities (Lauger, 2014), strengthening bonds and cohesion within a group. Gang affected young people talk about violence more than they engage in it (Storrod & Densley, 2017) and it can act as a means of identity construction and maintenance (Hobbs, 2013; Lauger & Densley, 2018). Subsequently, discussion of violence in the form of drill music, can strengthen identities and act as a form of impression management (Goffman, 1959), in which gang nominals attempt to create and influence perceptions of themselves. In this light, drill music, and its ability to create and uphold reputations of violence, can be used for instrumental purposes, such as entering new illicit markets (Storrod & Densley, 2017).

Social media has also influenced the recruitment of young people into gangs in Countyshire. The advent of social media, aided by austerity which has seen the "pool of availability" expand (Harding, 2020), has allowed gang members to identify vulnerable young people online and target them accordingly. Participants all suggested that gangs were more than likely attempting to recruit via social media, and likely via Snapchat, with the hidden and encrypted nature of social media ensuring that discovering what is going on, even when phones are seized, is difficult. This use of social media was also suggested as an explanation for the rise in 'clean skins' (PA1, SP3), in which young people from atypical backgrounds are recruited into gangs. These 'clean skins' are primarily children under the age of sixteen

with 'clean' criminal records, and have not, or are not regularly in contact with safeguarding teams and social services (SP2, SP3). A previous tactic by gangs was to recruit young females to act as 'clean skins', but as policing became aware of this tactic gangs adapted, and this approach was not as common (PO2). A common approach was to make sure that those recruited as 'clean skins' had complete school uniforms and their appearance "looked after" so to avoid attention of school authorities who might often pick up on young people being exploited due to the multiple disadvantages they faced (SP2, SP3). Although there was no known evidence locally, a trend noticed nationally is the use of primarily white middle-class young people often attending private schools in running drugs, exploited as they are less likely identified as 'drug running' by the police (Ofsted, 2018). Social media has helped with the direct recruitment of young people, with one charity professional highlighting the use of Yubo, a live-streaming application aimed at those aged thirteen to seventeen, and prominent in the grooming of young people (CP3). Additionally, the process of "deets and squares" also sees gangs openly recruit on encrypted applications, encouraging young people to help launder money (CP2/3/4). Interviews with police revealed the existence of young people contacting gang 'elders' over Snapchat, asking if they can deal in a specific location in order to make money (PA2). Sometimes recruitment is indirect, with gangs using social media in expressive ways, which have influenced young people. Highlighted was the case of a vulnerable young person who was moved across the country to escape gang involvement in their hometown already knowing about the existing gangs in Countyshire prior to arriving, all through social media (CP3). However, despite this emergence of social media as a valuable tool in the recruitment of young people into gangs, many of the demand factors that are present have remained constant.

Once within the gang, social media is used to control, predominantly through filmed violence in order to provide an additional layer of humiliation for the victim (CP5). A police analyst described how kidnap-like videos of people held against their will were broadcast on Snapchat if an individual had failed to do what they were asked or had lost money (PA2). I was also told, and case files detailed videos of vulnerable young people, having been degraded or humiliated (CF-14). Videos showing individuals kissing the feet of rival gang members having been beaten up was highlighted (CF-16) and usually involved teenage boys (SP2), especially humiliating within the hypermasculine environment of the gang. These forms of filmed humiliation reflect the notion of 'information as hostage' (Gambetta, 2009), with the threat of revealing compromising information used to coerce and force individuals, and ultimately foster cooperation.

Recent reporting suggests that illicit substances are prominent on social media sites, with one in four sixteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds in the United Kingdom surveyed reported seeing illicit drugs advertised on social media (McCulloch & Furlong, 2019). Worryingly, findings highlight that social media has normalised drugs amongst young people, with social media's algorithmic functions more likely to recommend similar accounts, further exposing young people to illicit substances online. Wider literature has also pointed to the use of social media in the supply of illicit substances, acting as a way to access an array of substances and dealers (Moyle et al., 2019). This was a finding reiterated by multiple participants and case files (CF-12, CF-13) in Countyshire, who highlighted that social media sites and applications such as Snapchat and WhatsApp are predominantly used to sell Class B, and less addictive Class A substances (CP3/4/5). Participants highlighted that social media was used as advertising for gangs and was viewed as a big problem in the County; "Snap-

chat in particular, where people are openly advertising, they're open and they've got things to sell, that's massive." (SP1). It was not clear in interviews how illicit substances sold via social media are delivered in Countyshire. The academic literature around this offers differing perspectives, with claims that social media helps facilitate transactions, but dealing takes place in person (Moyle et al., 2019), whilst also pointing to postal service drug supply, especially prominent in rural localities which sees online purchased drugs sent remotely (Matthews et al., 2023). This appeared not to resonate with participants, with police officers interviewed being unaware, and case files not revealing cases of postal drugs supply in the County.

Conclusion

In line with much of the literature, street gangs in Countyshire are sophisticated and are heavily involved in the drugs trade (see Densley, 2013; Whittaker et al., 2020a; Pitts, 2008), in contrast to some of the more recreational street gangs seen elsewhere in the United Kingdom (Fraser, 2015; Miller, 2024). Furthermore, there appears to be conceptual overlap between street gangs and organised crime groups in Countyshire, with evidence of street gangs displaying elements of criminal governance by seeking to regulate the drugs market locally, resulting in a series of violent episodes. This paper also sheds light on the characteristics and structures of gangs outside major urban areas. Revealing that gangs in Countyshire are hierarchically structured with three distinct roles; 'elders', 'youngers', and 'runners'; are small - being no larger than ten key members; and young - with members no older than their early twenties. Finally, gangs also reflected the diverse nature of society, and of Countyshire, and most gangs were ethnically diverse, with few ethnically homogenous gangs.

When it comes to gangs in Countyshire, social media has had a significant impact. In line with other scholars (Stuart, 2020; Storrod & Densley, 2017; Urbanik & Haggerty, 2018), I find that expressive social media use is instrumental within the gang environment, vital in creating and establishing reputations for violence and success which feed into tangible benefits for the gang in the long run. My contribution is also in highlighting the instrumental use of social media by gang members. I show that in Countyshire, social media platforms like Snapchat have become invaluable tools for engagement in the illicit drugs trade. Furthermore, county lines have also been dominant in Countyshire, and social media, and wider mobile technologies have allowed for a professionalisation of this practice and an expansion into new areas and territories in the name of profit. I also find that social media has played a role in the recruitment of young people into gangs in the County. Sometimes, this is direct via "deets and squares", but often this is indirect, in which expressive acts create convergence settings (Morselli & Décary-Hétu, 2013) that see young people directly engage with gang members online. Once within the gang, social media has also allowed for greater control and coordination over members, with filmed violence and humiliation used to coerce young people within and on the fringes of gang involvement.

This paper presents the findings from a small study and highlights how social media has an influential role within gang environments. Future work should expand on this to better understand these dynamics and ultimately work to safeguard young people at the fringes of gang involvement. Future work should also consider in greater depth the impact of street

gangs outside major urban areas that have been prioritised in the literature. This paper also raises some important methodological questions; and future studies should attempt to engage in ethnographic approaches with young people to understand in greater depth how they are using social media within the gang environment. Despite occasional government rhetoric around the ban of social media for young people, it is unlikely to go away anytime soon, if at all. Instead, from a policy and practice position, young people should be educated about the dangers of social media from a perspective that seeks to inform rather than alarm. Furthermore, young people should have better and more contemporary drugs education, that again should be informative and helpful, rather than alarmist and moralising. However, ultimately more should be done to look after the most vulnerable young people in our society. For the young people involved in gangs in Countyshire, data and interviews revealed the multiple levels of marginality they faced. For many young men particularly in the County, devoid of meaningful legitimate employment and value in society, gang life is a suitable and desired alternative. This requires deep structural change, that goes beyond the service and dedication that many of the outreach workers, teachers, and social workers do with the limited resources they have.

Appendix A: List of Participants

Participant Code	Participant Type	Participant Location
PO1	Police Officer (Senior Detective)	Southford
PO2	Police Officer (Detective)	Southford
PA1	Police Analyst	Southford
PA2	Police Analyst	Northford
PA3	Police Analyst	Northford
SP1	Safeguarding Professional	Southford
SP2	Safeguarding Professional	Northford
SP3	Safeguarding Professional	Northford
CP1	Charity Professional	Northford
CP2	Charity Professional	Southford
CP3	Charity Professional	Southford
CP4	Charity Professional	Southford
CP5	Charity Professional	Rural
CP6	Charity Professional	Rural

Appendix B: List of Gangs and OCGs in Countyshire

The following data was provided by Countyshire Police and includes the gangs and organised crime groups mapped in the area at the time of fieldwork. This data was redacted to removed sensitive information and as such comprehensive claims cannot be made about the personal characteristics of individual members. In this context, drugs supply refers to local supply and/or retail dealing.

Code	*Gang Name*	*Location*	*Activities*
CF-1	Gang Alpha	Southford	Drug supply, county lines, firearms, knife crime.
CF-2	Gang Bravo	Northford	Drug supply, county lines, child sexual exploitation, street robbery, knife crime.
CF-3	Gang Charlie	Southford	Drug supply, sharing of 'runners' with other gangs, violence.

Code	*Gang Name*	*Location*	*Activities*
CF-4	Gang Delta	Southford	Local drugs supply, knife crime.
CF-5	Gang Echo	Southford	Drugs supply, county lines, firearms, child criminal exploitation, knife crime.
CF-6	Gang Foxtrot	Southford	Drugs supply, county lines, child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, street robberies, violent attacks.
CF-7	Gang Golf	Rural	Drugs supply, county lines, knife crime.
CF-8	Gang Hotel	Northford	Drugs supply, child criminal exploitation, knife crime, child criminal exploitation.
CF-9	Gang India	Southford	Local drugs supply, sharing of 'runners', knife crime.
CF-10	Gang Juliet	Rural	Local drugs supply, organised burglaries, street robberies, knife crime.
CF-11	Gang Kilo	Northford	Drugs supply, county lines, knife crime.
CF-12 and CF-13	Gang Lima	Southford	Drugs supply, child sexual exploitation, firearms.
CF-14	Gang Mike	Rural	Drugs supply, sharing of 'runners', child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation, knife crime, street robberies.
CF-15	Gang November	Southford	Drugs supply, county lines, wholesale supply, sexual violence.
CF-16	Gang Oscar	Northford	Drugs supply, county lines, child criminal exploitation.
CF-17	OCG Papa	Northford	Drugs supply, wholesale supply, county lines.
CF-18	OCG Quebec	Northford	Drugs supply, wholesale supply, county lines.
CF-19	OCG Romeo	Northford/Southford	Wholesale supply, money laundering, breeding of dangerous dogs.
CF-20	N/A – Strategic Drugs Report – Countyshire Police	Countyshire	N/A

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