

Submitted to the Graduate Studies Committee for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (D.Phil.) in Sociology



**UNDER THE HOOD:
THE MECHANICS OF LONDON'S
STREET GANGS**

JAMES A. DENSLEY

ST. ANTONY'S COLLEGE
OSS ID: 257018

**84,000 WORDS
306 PAGES**

**TRINITY TERM
2011**

ABSTRACT

UNDER THE HOOD: THE MECHANICS OF LONDON'S STREET GANGS

James A. Densley
St. Antony's College
Doctor of Philosophy (D.Phil.) in Sociology
Trinity Term, 2011

Based upon two years of ethnographic fieldwork in London, England, which incorporated nearly 200 interviews with gang members, gang associates, and police officers, among others, this thesis addresses three questions presently unresolved in the street gangs literature: What is the business of gangs? How are gangs organised? And how do gangs recruit? With regard the business of gangs, this thesis illustrates how recreation, crime, enterprise, and extra-legal governance represent sequential stages in the evolutionary cycle of London's street gangs. Gang member testimony emphasises how gangs typically begin life as neighbourhood-based peer groups, but also how, in response to external threats and financial commitments, gangs grow to incorporate street-level drugs distribution businesses that very much resemble the multi-level marketing structure of direct-sales companies. People join gangs to make money, achieve status, and obtain protection. Gangs engage in turf wars, acquire violent resources, and develop hierarchical structures in order to maintain provision of these desirable goods and services. Gang organisation, in turn, becomes a function of gang business.

To better understand the nature and extent of gang organisation, this thesis moves on to discuss the presence of subgroups, hierarchy and leadership, pecuniary and non-pecuniary incentives, rules, responsibilities, and restrictions, and consequences for absconding within gangs. It further presents how, in order to convey reputation and achieve intimidation, gangs seek association with elements of popular culture that help promote their image. Finally, through the novel application of signalling theory to the gang recruitment process, this thesis demonstrates how gangs face a primary trust dilemma in their uncertainty over the quality of recruits. Given that none of the trust-warranting properties for gang membership can be readily discovered from observation, gangs look for observable signs correlated with these properties. Gangs face a secondary trust dilemma in their uncertainty over the reliability of signs because certain agents (e.g., police informants, rival gang members, and adventure-seekers) have incentives to mimic them. To overcome their informational asymmetry gangs thus screen for signs that are too costly for mimics to fake but affordable for the genuine article. The thesis concludes with a discussion of gang desistance and intervention in the context of escalating youth violence in London.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis represents the culmination of two years of ethnographic fieldwork interspersed between nearly four years of desk research. It reflects the sometimes-arduous journey from London's concrete streets to its corridors of power, and back again. From classrooms to courtrooms, homes to hospitals, Parliament to police stations, universities to Young Offender's Institutions, this was a unique and exhilarating project, made possible in part due to funds from the Department of Sociology, University of Oxford, St. Antony's College, and the United States Corporation for National and Community Service.

I received assistance and comments from many people in preparing this thesis. First and foremost, my sincere thanks to the nearly 200 individuals that agreed to be interviewed and observed during the fieldwork, but cannot be named because of my promise to preserve their anonymity. This would be a bound volume of blank pages were it not for your courage, dedication, honesty, and insight. For this, I am grateful beyond words.

The present study was inspired and informed by my experiences teaching in the New York City public schools from 2005 to 2007. My heartfelt thanks go to the students and staff of University Neighborhood Middle School in Manhattan's Lower East Side for reminding me always of why this research matters.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to Heather Hamill for her dedicated supervision and comments on earlier drafts, and to Diego Gambetta and Federico Varese for their thoughtful and thought-provoking feedback during my transfer and confirmation of status processes. Their collective input has significantly improved this thesis. My thanks also to Gabriella Elgenius and Valeria Pizzini-Gambetta, for advice in general, and observations on **Chapter 5** in particular.

Andrew Shipley and Alex Sutherland both read early drafts and furnished invaluable sources, comments, and criticisms that resulted in important revisions. Thomas Grund and Christina Furr challenged me to look at my data in new and exciting ways. Aylish O'Driscoll offered a new perspective on events portrayed in **Chapter 5**. Declan Hill provided important counsel and encouragement, not least during a memorable afternoon at the Emirates Stadium.

Portions of this work were presented at the 2011 Inter-Ivy and Sorensen Memorial Sociology Conference (Department of Sociology, Harvard University); 2010 Annual Postgraduate Criminology Conference (Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge); 2010 American Sociological Association Annual Meeting (Hilton Atlanta); 2009 Workshop on Recruitment into Extra-Legal Organizations (Nuffield College, University of Oxford); 2009 Independent Advisory Group Masterclass (New Scotland Yard, London); 2008 Advanced Qualitative Research Methods Seminars (Department of Sociology, University of Oxford); and 2008 Probationary Research Student Seminars (Department of Sociology, University of Oxford). I am deeply grateful to all those in attendance who gave advice and input, especially Michel

Anteby and Elizabeth Hansen from Harvard Business School who provided extensive comments as discussants during the 2011 Inter-Ivy and Sorensen Memorial Sociology Conference.

I am hugely indebted to Wolfgang Deicke and my undergraduate tutors for sowing the seeds of my post-graduate study at the University of Oxford; my colleagues at the “Growing Against Gangs” project—Allen Davis and Nick Mason—for putting theory into practice; Geoff Pearson for never shying away from a challenge; and Diane Perrin for an ear and a slice of homemade cake, whenever I needed it most.

My sincere thanks to Jim Faber, Joyce Miyamoto, Carly Miyamoto, and Ev Martinez for their unwavering support; Jo and Phil Hurst for their vigilant collecting of secondary sources; my parents and biggest fans, Jan and Andrew Densley, for a lifetime of encouragement; and last but by no means least, my wife/financier/proof-reader, Emily Faber-Densley, for putting up with me during this entire process.

As usual, the responsibility for the contents of this thesis lies solely with the author. All mistakes are mine.

This thesis is dedicated to my son, Alexander James Densley, who was born in March 2010 while I was in the throws of writing up the research. May he grow up to live in a world free from gangs.

James A. Densley
Oxford, 2011

gang |gaŋg|

noun

1. an organised group of criminals
 - a group of young people involved in petty crime or violence
 - Informal. a group of people, esp. young people, who regularly associate together

business |'biznis|

noun

1. a person's regular occupation, profession, or trade
 - an activity that someone is engaged in
 - a person's concern
 - work that has to be done or matters that have to be attended to
2. the practice of making one's living by engaging in commerce
 - trade considered in terms of its volume or profitability
 - a commercial house or firm

organisation |,ôrgəni'zāshən|

noun

1. the action of organising something
 - the structure or arrangement of related or connected items
 - an efficient and orderly approach to tasks
2. an organised body of people with a particular purpose, esp. a business, society, association, etc.

recruitment |ri'kroŏtmənt|

noun

the action of enlisting new people in the armed forces

- the action of finding new people to join an organisation or support a cause

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Every city in the world always has a gang, a street gang, or the so-called outcasts.

—Jimi Hendrix

What is the business of gangs? How are gangs organised? How do gangs recruit? My aim in this thesis is to answer these central questions as they pertain to street gangs in London, England. For much of the twentieth century, gangs were considered a peculiarly American problem (Klein et al., 2001). The past three decades, however, have witnessed the emergence of “mostly ethnic street gangs involved in the sale of drugs with strong intergang rivalry and high levels of street violence” across several large British cities (Mares, 2001: 154). In terms of structure and culture, such gangs strongly resemble U.S. crack-dealing gangs (Klein, 2001), not least because aspiring British gangsters look at gang culture popularised in the media and adapt their style to local conditions. The Home Affairs Committee (2009: 21) reports that a “proportionally higher number of gangs” with “a greater sense of territorialism” amongst them have redefined existing territorial rivalries along London’s “sheer number of postcode areas” and “natural geographical boundaries”. What were once after-school altercations between rival peer groups have in recent years degenerated into a series of high profile “gang-related” beatings, stabbings, and shootings (Toy, 2008: 13).

Gang-related youth violence is the biggest threat facing the capital after terrorism, says former Metropolitan Police Service (hereafter “MPS”) Commissioner Sir Ian

Blair.¹ Yet the nature and extent of this threat remains unknown because renewed academic attention on gangs has focused more on suppressing them than on understanding them (Sharp et al., 2006). Indeed, while there is a lot of “talk” about gangs in England (see Hallsworth & Young, 2008), there is very little empirical work on the topic (c.f., Mares, 2001; Aldridge et al., 2008; Pitts, 2008; Hallsworth & Silverstone, 2009). This thesis aims to begin to fill this gap and in doing so move beyond “talking about talkers”. Published herein are the findings from two years of “fundamentally inductive” ethnographic fieldwork (Hagedorn, 2008: xxiii), which entailed listening critically to the voices of gang members and gang associates in an attempt to understand the world from their perspective. To ensure the validity of interpretations, this thesis also presents interview data derived from the friends, relatives, and romantic partners of gang members; youths not affiliated with gangs but living in gang set space; and a series of key informants on gangs, such as police officers and youth workers. The combined outcome is a nuanced account of the dynamics and internal mechanics of London’s street gangs, including their business, organisation, and recruitment. Before we venture any further, however, let me first ensure we are speaking the same language when it comes to gangs.

1.1 WHAT IS A GANG?

I am of the view that *describing* gangs should take precedence over *defining* gangs. After nearly a century of gang scholarship, still no consensus exists as to what constitutes a gang and who qualifies as a gang member (for reviews, see Horowitz,

¹ *The Times*, 28 March 2008.

1990; Decker & Kempf-Leonard, 1991; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Ball & Curry, 1995; Bjerregaard, 2002; Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2004). Even the acclaimed “consensus Eurogang definition” (Klein, 2006: 129), which was agreed upon by over 100 gang research scholars in the United States and Europe, erroneously treats outcomes (e.g., durability) and strategies (e.g., street orientation) as invariable features.² The problem is that no two gangs are exactly alike in form or function (Thrasher, 1927a). Gangs are “dynamic, flexible and ever-changing” (Sanders, 1994: xi). Gangs are context specific (Hagedorn, 2008). Suffice it to say, “while description can always be augmented by new knowledge and fresh insights” (Pitts, 2008: 5), “definitions often obscure problematic areas and may not encourage the development of new questions” (Horowitz, 1990: 38).

By way of description, the groups in this study described henceforth as “gangs” adhere to the following criteria: (1) they are self-formed associations of peers that have adopted a common name and other discernable symbols of membership (e.g., colours of allegiance); (2) they are comprised of individuals who recognise each other as being “members” of a “gang”; (3) they are not fully open to the public and much of the information concerning their business remains confined within the group;³ (4) they are characterised by internal enforcement of operational social codes (i.e., dispute resolution is an internalised cost); and (5) they are involved in illegal activity. This adumbration is sufficiently general to capture the essence of the groups described in this study. As a distinct empirical case it is entirely conceivable that the

² Being “street oriented”, that is “spending a lot of time outside home, work, and school—often in streets, in malls, in parks, in cars, and so on” (Klein, 2006: 130), for instance, may simply be a variable attribute that depends on the business of the gang (i.e., street-level drug-dealing) or, indeed, the season, “with colder weather restricting activity and warmer weather encouraging it” (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991: 6).

³ In Sánchez-Jankowski’s (1991: 28) words, gangs are “quasi-private” and “quasi-secretive” organisations.

gangs described in this study differ from the gangs described in others. In pragmatic terms, the “gangs” concept is best judged by its utility when put to some defined aim. This brings us to the central research questions of the thesis.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The original aim of this research was to undertake a systematic study of gang recruitment. Upon commencing the fieldwork, however, I realised that to truly appreciate entry into gangs I first had to understand the occupation and organisation of gang members. The following questions thus directed the data collection for the study and the structure of this thesis:

1. What is the business of gangs?
 - a. To what extent are gangs recreational or criminal groups?
 - b. Do gangs seek to regulate and control the production and distribution of one or more given commodities or services unlawfully?
 - c. If so, which commodities or services?
2. How are gangs organised?
 - a. Are gangs hierarchically organised with lines of authority?
 - b. To what extent does gang organisation interact with gang business?
 - c. What internal and external constraints effect gang organisation?
 - d. How do gangs maintain organisational cohesion and deter defection?
 - e. How do gangs advertise their presence and broadcast their reputation without disclosing incriminating evidence regarding gang business?
3. How do gangs recruit?
 - a. Why, in any given pool of individuals with similar sociological profiles and motivations, do only some people gain entry into gangs?
 - b. What are the features of those who volunteer to join a gang?
 - c. How do gangs select among those volunteers?

The remainder of this chapter locates these central questions within the broader research tradition of existing gang scholarship. Britain lacks a tradition of gang research to parallel that conducted in the United States, thus I refer primarily to

American sources.⁴ Suffice it to say, this is by no means an exhaustive literature review (see instead, Klein, 1995; Hobbs, 1997; Coughlin & Venkatesh, 2003; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003; Vigil, 2003; Hallsworth & Young, 2006). Work I consider to be both representative and relevant is included with a view to exposing the lacunae in the literature that the present study aspires to fill.

1.2 GANG BUSINESS

What is the business of gangs? The literature offers four possible answers. The first posits that gangs function primarily as social or recreational groups that enable individuals to engage in “exaggerated versions of typical adolescent behavior”, such as disobeying their parents (Huff: 1989: 530). Fagan (1989: 649) identifies the existence of “party gangs” who are mainly involved in drinking and drug use, for example, and “social gangs” that use drugs and commit petty acts of vandalism. Similarly, Huff’s (1989: 528) study of Ohio gangs describes some “informal hedonistic gangs” that like to party and engage in opportunistic minor property crimes to “feed their habits”. Klein and Maxson (2006: 69) synthesise the argument for recreational gangs as follows:

⁴ The body of literature in the United Kingdom does not constitute a robust theoretical or empirical framework from which to launch the present investigation. Early attempts to apply U.S. delinquency theory to the British post-war context resulted not in the discovery of juvenile *gangs* but in neighbourhood- and style-based youth *subculture* movements, very much steeped in the traditions of their parent culture (for a review, see Campbell and Muncer, 1989). One exception is Patrick (1973: 169), who discovered violent activity of a territorial nature conducted by gangs with recognisable leadership and specific roles for participants in Glasgow, Scotland. Recognising his work as a bit of an anomaly, Patrick describes “long traditions of slum housing and violence” in Glasgow, which he considers “conducive to ganging”. Nevertheless, Klein et al. (2001: xii) contend that some scholars remain in a perpetual state of “denial” about gangs. Based on 2002/03 data derived largely from a general household survey (which excludes under 16s and crimes such as murder and manslaughter), for instance, Hallsworth and Young (2008: 177) maintain that the “empirical case” for gangs in Britain remains unproven. The time is nigh to revisit and revise this conceptualisation.

First and foremost, we need to recognize that gang members spend much more time hangin' than bangin'. While observers of gangs note that talk about past and future crime exploits are the coin of the realm of gang membership ... the activity that generates our attention to gangs encompasses a fairly narrow slice of the typical gang member's day or night.

Adults may think of peaceable association in small subgroups as a waste of time, but research suggests that the everyday practice of "doing nothing" can be an intense and busy period for gang members, indeed an opportunity either to visibly mark their turf or cut loose and bond over common experiences and prohibited substances (Vigil & Long, 1990; Padilla, 1992). Partying likewise operates to maintain and enhance the cohesion of the group (Vigil, 1988; Moore, 1991). A variation on this theme is the idea that gangs operate as spiritual or social movements that develop their own rituals, texts, symbols, and ideologies directly in relationship to their members' own needs (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004).

Thrasher's (1927a: 46) seminal ethnographic account of 1,313 gangs in Chicago first highlighted how gang organisation is shaped through interaction in social settings. According to Thrasher, gangs form "spontaneously" but require "planning" and frequent "face to face" relations to develop. Gangs move "through space as a unit" and eventually meet some hostile element that precipitates conflict. Conflict, in turn, helps integrate the group. The result, Thrasher elucidates, "is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, *esprit de corps*, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory". Gangs, in Thrasher's view, are transitional phenomena associated with adolescent "rites of passage". All childhood "playgroups" are potential gangs (30). The transformation from playgroup to gang simply occurs when youths encounter others who oppose or display disapproval for their group, which may or may not stem from delinquent activities.

For Thrasher (1927a: 37), the gang was “interstitial” in as much that it was both a “manifestation of the period of adjustment between childhood and maturity” and a product of the “in-between” areas where formal institutions failed to take hold and flourish in ways that make sense to youth, particularly in transitional segments of the city. Thrasher was careful not to include law-violating behaviour in his definition of the gang, arguing instead that gangs “facilitate” delinquency. In this tradition, certain contemporary scholars continue to consider criminal inclination to be more a function or outcome of gang involvement (Short, 1990). The vast majority, however, argue that illegal activities are integral to the *raison d’être* of the group (Miller, 1975; Knox, 1994; Klein, 1995; Hallsworth & Young, 2006). Simply put, crime is the business of gangs.

This second view of what gangs do was borne out of a belief that gangs in the post-war era had become significantly more violent, which in turn promoted a notable shift in criminological research emphasis—what Pitts (2008: 10) describes as a “correctional turn” from gang etiology to gang control. Rather than analysing the phenomena, scholars sought to raise awareness of the dangers of gangs. Miller’s (1975: 121) highly influential gang definition is typical of this period:

[A] self-formed association of peers, bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other organizational features, who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes which generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility, or type of enterprise.

Miller’s key elements of criminality, durability, territoriality, and structure, feature prominently in the majority of academic gang definitions still in use (e.g., Klein,

2006: 129). His statement also appealed to U.S. law enforcement agencies as a foundation upon which they could begin to conceptualise and indeed legislate against gangs. Gang membership in the United States soon became illegal in and of itself, for instance, from which we may infer that gangs are characterised by crimes of association independent from and complementary to a penchant for collective criminal behaviour. No doubt crime committed by gang members is extensive (ranging from vandalism and acquisitive crime to rape and murder), and significantly exceeds that committed by non-gang youth (Esbensen et al, 1993; Thornberry, et al., 1993; Battin, et al., 1998; Huff, 1998). Yet, Miller also speaks to another aspect of the business of gangs worthy of exploration: enterprise.

As the twentieth century advanced, research indicated that gangs had become less age-limited and more economically motivated in character (Miller et al., 1978; Hagedorn, 1988; Sullivan, 1989). Drugs and the “‘fast’ money circulating in drug markets” appeared more attractive to youths than the general camaraderie of gang membership (Curtis, 2003: 45). As providers of illegal goods and services, gangs no longer resembled social groups with little permanence or stability, but rather “enduring social phenomena” (Yearwood, 2007: 838). Scholars thus developed the third view that gangs function as enterprises and gang members present as entrepreneurs who operate under conditions of illegality (Mieczkowski, 1986; Skolnick et al., 1988; Taylor, 1990; Padilla, 1991; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Bourgois, 2003). Skolnick et al. (1988: 4) memorably described gangs as “entrepreneurial”, for example, and “organized solely for the purpose of distributing drugs”. This body of work presented the notion of gang members not as violent sociopaths (the dominant criminological proposition of the time, see Yablonsky,

1997), but rather “rugged individualists, braving an unpredictable frontier where fortune, fame, and destruction are all just around the corner” (Bourgois, 1989: 637).

Research in this tradition indicates that gangs evolve from relatively disorganised neighbourhood groups into more corporate entities in response to powerful incentives and a commitment to financial goals (Taylor, 1990; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000). The fourth and final perspective takes this idea to its logical conclusion, arguing that enterprising gangs aspire to govern territories or markets and thus achieve monopoly (Chin, 1996; Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000; Sobel & Osoba, 2009). In this view, gangs seek to establish territorial monopolies because illegal entrepreneurs operate in an environment otherwise characterised by uncertainty, where regulation to ensure order and protect individual rights is absent. Once a monopoly is secured, it then breeds violence because large monopolistic entities cannot allow competition (Gambetta, 1993; Chu, 2000; Varese, 2001; Hill, 2003). The issue is whether or not, once gangs seek to own or control the means of illegal production, they relinquish gang status entirely and become something altogether more sinister and difficult to deter: organised crime groups (Schelling, 1971; Dixit, 2004; Varese, 2010).

In **Chapter 3** I explore whether or not the true business of gangs is recreation, crime, enterprise, or extra-legal governance. I present the case of each one of these elements to be considered as sequential stages in the evolutionary cycle of gangs. Governance is essentially the highest stage of gang evolution because it provides space for the other three elements to coexist. I dedicate much of the chapter to explaining economic activity within gangs and how modern street gangs operate primarily as street-level drugs distribution businesses that very much resemble the multi-level marketing

structure of direct-selling companies. I argue that to ensure the longevity of illegal enterprise gangs engage in turf wars, acquire violent resources, and develop hierarchical structures. Gang business and gang organisation are thus inextricably linked. Gang business (with its prerequisite skills, attributes, and attitudes), moreover, dictates who and how gangs recruit.

1.3 GANG ORGANISATION

As discussed above, our knowledge of the reasons why gang members “do what they do” is limited. The question is, are gangs as organisations causal or contingent factors in gang business? In **Chapter 4** I explore this query as part of a broader answer to my second central question: *how are gangs organised?* Gangs were long considered an American anomaly in part because of a narrow understanding of gang organisation and structure (Klein, 2001), whereby the absence of Miller’s (1975) key organisational features (discussed above) marked the absence of juvenile gangs. Following early unsuccessful attempts to extrapolate gangs from the American to the British context (e.g., Scott, 1956; Downes, 1966; Gibbens & Ahrenfeldt, 1966; Parker, 1974), delinquent group structure in Britain was proclaimed as “more fluid and less tangible” than in the United States (Downes, 1966: 122).⁵ Violent activity of a territorial nature conducted by “gangs” with recognisable leadership and specific roles for participants became the exception not the rule (Patrick, 1973; O’Hagan, 1976). Britain instead had its own unique neighbourhood- and style-based youth

⁵ The main pattern of association among youths in London’s East End according to Downes (1966) was the street-corner group of four or five, with a few individuals at the margins. Although these groups persisted over time and almost invariably possessed a dominant personality, all other supposed characteristics of the gang were absent.

subculture movements (for a review, see Campbell & Muncer, 1989) and so advanced what Klein (2001: 10) describes as the “Eurogang paradox”: the denial that there are “American-style” gangs in Europe, based on a “typical” American gang with functional role division and chain of command, a model that is far from universally typical of gangs in America.

To help resolve the Eurogang paradox and enhance comparative street gang research, Klein (2006) later developed his “consensus Eurogang definition” in conjunction with a comprehensive gang “typology” that is “based upon the six structural characteristics of size, sub-grouping, age range, duration, territoriality and crime versatility” (Klein & Maxson, 2006: 419). The typology is yet to be tested as a true empirical measure of gang behaviour, however, because it is also based upon a sample of police officers who occupy a specific, often antagonistic, role in relation to gangs and gang members (Decker et al., 2008). As Pitts (2008: 13) observes, the “traditional” and “neo-traditional” gangs described in the typology also “presume a ‘tradition’ which is peculiarly North American” and not entirely applicable in other contexts. Given that the “compressed” and “collective” gangs are said to lack the “distinguishing characteristics of other gangs” (Klein, 2001: 16), moreover, it is unclear whether or not they are gangs at all.

In an attempt to capture the apparent variation in gang organisation, scholars often locate gangs within articulated typologies that adumbrate variation in terms of major activity, level of organisation, history or stage of development, degree of permanency, categories of membership, criminal component, and extensiveness of rules and rituals. These organisational classifications suggest a “bewildering array, complexity, and

variability of structures” (Spergel, 2005: 79) with gangs described according to all manner of adjectives, from diffuse to solidified to conventionalised (Thrasher, 1927a); from delinquent to violent to social (Yablonsky, 1966); from criminal to conflict to retreatist (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960); from fighting to moneymaking (Rosenbaum & Grant, 1983); from social to party to serious delinquent to incipient (Fagan, 1989); from hedonistic to instrumental to predatory (Huff, 1989); from scavenger to territorial to corporate (Taylor, 1990); from vertical to horizontal to influential (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991); from traditional to neotraditional to compressed to collective to speciality (Klein & Maxson, 2006); and from criminal adult-dependent to criminal non-adult dependent to barrio-territorial to transitional (Valdez, 2003). The result is a confusing amalgam of gang “types”, which taken together conceal more than they reveal.

From their earliest conceptualisation (Thrasher, 1927a), scholars have also located gangs on continuums of other like groups. Gordon’s (2000) youth movements, youth groups, criminal groups, wannabe groups, street gangs, and criminal business organisations, and Hallsworth and Young’s (2004) “urban collectivities” (e.g., peer groups, gangs, and organised crime groups) are two recent examples.

Part of the problem with group spectrums and gang typologies is that it is often difficult to see where the gang ends and the organised crime group begins—the “association of criminals” and “criminal association” are conjoined (Morselli, 2009). Hallsworth and Young’s (2004: 13) typology is perhaps the most influential in Britain today, for example, yet it narrowly conceptualises organised crime as that committed by groups of individuals for whom involvement in crime is for “personal gain”. Based

upon systematic content analysis of 115 definitions, Varese (2010: 14) argues that organised crime is much more than this and in fact “attempts to regulate and control the production and distribution of a given commodity or service unlawfully”. Varese goes on to illustrate how the drug selling “gang” famously described by Levitt and Venkatesh (2000) actually fits the description of an organised crime group in as much that it offers a variety of tangible illegal goods and services to its patrons and aspires to be the sole suppliers of them in a given domain. Indeed, while it often assumed that gang “turf” helps to distinguish gangs from other criminal groups, Varese (2011), like Gambetta (1993) before him, demonstrates that territory is a primary resource of organised crime. By some accounts, therefore, gangs simultaneously fit the criteria of “crime that is organised” (i.e., involving cooperation, division of labour, planning, and specialisation) and “organised crime”, which are conceptually distinct (Schelling, 1971: 73-4).

Suffice it to say, gang organisation is one of the least understood concepts in the literature on gangs—so much so that Decker et al. (2008) refer to it simply as a “black box”. The surrounding debate is essentially dichotomous: there are those who argue gangs are organised and those who argue gangs are not. In the former view, gangs are formal-rational organisations, often hierarchical, which deliberately arrange their financial activities and embrace group goals associated with member recruitment, illegal enterprise, and territory maintenance and expansion (Mieczkowski, 1986; Skolnick et al., 1988; Taylor, 1990; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Padilla, 1991; Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000). According to this view, the organisational and structural features of gangs are typically seen in the area of drug sales (for a discussion, see Bjerregaard, 2010), albeit not exclusively, with research also dedicated to the community

organisation of gangs (Venkatesh, 1997) and the capacity of gangs to organise homicide (Decker & Curry, 2002).

The opposing view, by contrast, propounds that gangs are seldom well organised and gang members routinely act independently of their gangs across the criminal spectrum, including drug sales. Purveyors of this perspective submit that while gangs may be united in opposition and in their use of what Gambetta (2009b: xix) usefully describes as “conventional and other symbolic signals” (e.g., colours and hand gestures), they are limited in their efforts to organise because gangs are susceptible to random violence and their members are developmentally too young and too conspicuous to engage in true business-like activity (Hagedorn, 1988; Fagan, 1989; Maxson et al., 1992; Klein, 1995; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hallsworth & Silverstone, 2009). Hagedorn (1994), for example, rejects the notion of gangs as organised drug distributors and instead portrays gang members as “freelance” drug dealers. Morselli (2009) lends support for this claim in as much that gang members are seen to participate in a number of different crime groups outside of their own gangs. Gang members also typically spend their earnings from crime on individual short-term concerns, as opposed to reinvesting profits back into their gangs (Klein, 1995).

Klein (1971) asserts that the absence of any formal organisation and leadership structure, coupled with the internal conflicts of gang members themselves, compromises overall group solidarity within gangs. Among Los Angeles gangs he found cohesiveness, which he later referred to as the “quintessential group process” (Klein, 1995: 43), to be more a product of external mechanisms than of internal

sources, notably the “active group programming, ... anti-police attitudes, and ... total commitment” of professional gang interventionists (Klein, 1995: 45).⁶ The “cafeteria-style crime” perpetrated by gang members, moreover, ran contrary to the idea of a purposive well-orchestrated specialization among gangs, with the implication that gangs better resembled the disorganised, spontaneous, and temporal features of youth culture than they did more formalised adult structures (Klein, 1995: 22).

Given that “human relationships form the least common denominator for organised crime” (McIllwain, 1999: 319), there is an alternative social network perspective on gang organisation. Social network analysis (hereafter “SNA”) has a long history in gang research (Short & Strodbeck, 1965; Klein & Crawford, 1967) and with technological advancements it has become increasingly sophisticated (Sarnecki, 2001; Fleisher, 2005; Papachristos, 2006, 2009). Such a framework can now account for structural arrangements ranging from the simple to the complex. As Papachristos (2006: 100) observes, “[t]he gang is a social network consisting of members who interact at given points in time and space”. Such interactions range from animosity to friendship, from kinship to fighting, and from passive “hanging out” to active co-offending (Papachristos, 2006). The problem is that SNA thus often implies that all those connected to gang members are gang members, which is patently not the case (see **Chapter 2**). To paint the landscape in such broad strokes risks leaving gang organisation even more open to interpretation, particularly from those that would over-emphasise the scale of gangs to bring state resources to eliminate them (see

⁶ Yablonsky (1959: 112) was similarly critical of the group assumptions built into conventional street work with gangs, noting that group structure, “which formerly did not exist”, could easily be projected onto delinquent gangs through usual notions and expectations about “gangs as groups” as derived from popular media sources. Yablonsky (1959: 108) indeed rejected the notion of the gang as a structured entity, arguing instead that delinquent gangs were better characterised as “near groups”, situated somewhere between messy mobs and well-structured aggregates with deliberate aims.

Densley, 2011). As gangs themselves begin to utilise social networking websites to coordinate their activities, moreover, the lines between the myths and realities of gang organisation become even more blurred (Howell, 2007).

The absence of consensus around the question of gang organisation suggests that there may well exist multiple gang structures. Nevertheless, in **Chapter 4** I aspire to present a framework befitting the present state of gang organisation in London. I examine the presence and nature of subgroups, hierarchy and leadership, incentives, rules and regulations, punishment for violating the rules, symbols of membership, additional responsibilities that “membership” confers upon individuals, and (in **Chapter 6**) the consequences for absconding, which are all measures implicated in prior research for establishing the extent of gang organisation (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Decker et al., 1998; Peterson et al., 2001; Decker et al., 2008). I discuss gang organisation on three levels: internal, external, and symbolic, with a view to better understanding the context and constraints of recruitment and the ways in which gangs interact with their local and larger communities to advertise their brand and presence. I demonstrate how gangs rationally seek association with elements of popular culture that help promote their image and how they borrow symbols which best convey reputation and achieve intimidation. The symbolic organisation of gangs, in turn, becomes a necessary component of their actual physical organisation; which holds important implications for how we conceptualise gangs in the future.

1.4 GANG RECRUITMENT

My aim in **Chapter 5** is to comprehend how gangs actually function and operate through concentration on one particular aspect of their organisation: recruitment. As outlined below, existing studies have broadly identified the antecedents of gang membership (i.e., the profiles and motivations of gang members), but little is known about how enrolment actually happens, the selection processes, and to what extent it relies on volunteers or is the result of coercion. We essentially understand the origins of gangs and *why* certain individuals do or do not join them, but not *how* those that do go about securing membership. I attempt to remedy this gap through the novel application of signalling theory to the central question, *how do gangs recruit?* Herein I explore the phenomenon of gang recruitment from both a “supply” and “demand” perspective by addressing two sub-questions: what are the features of those who volunteer to join a gang, and how do gangs select those volunteers?

1.4.i Profile of a gang member

There is considerable evidence to suggest that gang members are at an increased risk of school dropout, violent victimisation, imprisonment, and early death (Thornberry, 1998; Curry et al., 2002; Peterson et al., 2004; Gatti et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2007). These high individual costs to join a gang suggest that gang members are either highly motivated or have very little to lose, and possibly both. As Johnstone (1983: 283–284) observes, gang membership is “an extreme form of social adjustment that only some boys [and girls] in gang neighbourhoods will be willing to make ... if conventional social attachments are strong, in other words, the costs of gang involvement are simply too high”. Much of the extant literature thus draws attention

to the types of persons who find the costs of gang involvement suitably affordable.

Following Thrasher's (1927a) dictum that gangs are understandable only if one appreciates how they are enmeshed in specific, local contexts, Sánchez-Jankowski (1991: 23–6), for example, argues forcefully that gang members are drawn from the lower class slums of the inner cities and that the conditions of life lead to people growing up in these areas having a particular set of character traits, which constitute what he terms “defiant individualism”. These attributes are competitiveness, mistrust, self-reliance, emotional detachment, a survival instinct, a social Darwinist worldview and a defiant air. Sánchez-Jankowski reports that this static and shared characterisation was “forced” upon him by repeated observations of gang members over a long period. He invokes it repeatedly to account for almost all aspects of gang behaviour, particularly to explain personal motivations for joining gangs.

Sánchez-Jankowski's (1991: 23) theory that “defiant individualism” as a type of “social character” links socioeconomic environments characterised by fierce competition for scarce resources to involvement in delinquent gangs. He ties socioeconomic forces to the development of particular personality traits and attitudes at the individual level, which motivate and sustain gang involvement. In the opinion of Sánchez-Jankowski (1991: 29), gangs appeal to defiant individualists because they comprise the very means and tools used to achieve dominant goals, notably access to illegal markets. Gangs are “organized defiant individualism” and this determines what they do and how they do it. How such “defiant individualists” can be trusted to cooperate with each other as part of an articulated gang, however, is unclear.

While the theory of defiant individualism makes intuitive sense, Sánchez-Jankowski provides little empirical support for it. The degree of specificity with which traits such as “social Darwinist worldview” are described does not go much beyond what is given above. Moreover, even if one were to accept the premise of the defiant individual, it is difficult given Sánchez-Jankowski’s data to determine the causality between the personality traits and gang participation (Sullivan, 1994). Individuals who join gangs come from different ethnic and familial backgrounds. As such, it is possible that defiant individualist traits “are gained from the entry into gangs rather than being the prerequisites for their entry” (Ehsan, 1992: 130). Furthermore, according to some researchers, many youths in low-income or marginal areas share defiant individualist traits yet do not become gang members (Klein, 1995).

A similar criticism applies to the “risk factor” approach to understanding gang affiliation (Lipsey & Derzon 1998). Risk factors, which may by regression analysis help predict gang membership potential among individuals, are typically organised according to five developmental domains: individual, family, peer group, school, and community. For example:

Youth who grow up in more disorganized neighborhoods; who come from impoverished, distressed families; who do poorly in school and have low attachment to school and teachers; who associate with delinquent peers; and engage in various forms of problem behaviors are at increased risk for becoming gang members (Thornberry, 1998: 157).

Our knowledge of risk factors as either causal or contingent is quite unrefined, however, and our assessment of specific traits as “maladaptive” is very much contextually dependent. Even if we accept that risk factors identified in the United States transfer directly over to the British context, it is insufficient to suggest that gang members come from lower-income areas, minority populations, homes

characterised by absent parents, and so forth, because most youths from such areas, groups, and families, do *not* join gangs. As Klein (1995: 75–6) observes, “[t]here is a selection process that results in 1 percent, or 5 percent, or 10 or even 20 percent of gang-age youths choosing the gang option while the majority select themselves out”. Participation in gangs is “selective”, because “most youths avoid gang life” (Fagan, 1990: 207). This begs another question; why do some youths select into gangs while others do not?

1.4.ii Existing theories of gang involvement

There are essentially five overarching (and overlapping) explanations for gang involvement. Each explains some of the variance, but not all of it. First, “control theory” (Hirschi, 1969; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) emphasises gang desistance and the irreducibly complex factors that “prevent” or “protect” young people from joining gangs. Psychologists often use the term “resilience” to refer to the cumulative effect of these “protective factors”, which can be seen as being the opposite of the “risk factors” described above (Silvestri et al., 2009: 17). Examples include the strength of one’s affectional attachments to conventional persons and social institutions or level of control over opportunities for deviant and conventional activities.

The remaining four theories focus either on the attractiveness of gangs and the perceived advantages of gang membership (known as “pull factors”) or on the economic, social, and political forces that propel youth toward gang involvement (known as “push factors”) (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996: 65). The second theory of

gang involvement, for instance, expounds that youths join gangs as a result of natural association, which is to say that gangs evolve out of regular adolescent peer groups and the normal features of street life in socially disorganised neighbourhoods otherwise characterised by an absence of regulating social institutions (Thrasher, 1927a; Shaw & McKay, 1943; Sampson & Groves, 1989). In this view, gangs are held together either by “adversarial relations” with outside groups (Suttles, 1972: 98) or the desire of their members’ to create order out of the condition of “community disorganization” (Thrasher, 1926: 7).⁷

Wilson’s (1987, 1996) account of the African-American underclass is often credited with single-handedly renewing interest in the social disorganisation perspective on gangs. The argument goes that structural forces, such as reduced public service expenditure, widespread deindustrialisation, and increased “social and spatial polarisation” (Sassen, 2007: 113), produce external constraints that not only limit the options and opportunities available to youth living in certain neighbourhoods, but also contribute to an oppositional culture that enables gangs to take hold and flourish in these neighbourhoods as never before. As gangs become an “institutionalized” feature of some poverty communities they help reproduce a particular lifestyle that is viewed as economically viable (Hagedorn, 1988: 10). Based on fieldwork in London, Pitts (2008: 106) offers an important addendum to this theory, positing that gang affiliation is better understood in terms of “intimidation and coercion”. For Pitts, gang membership is a pragmatic, albeit involuntary or “reluctant”, response to the threat of violent victimisation inherent in gang-affected communities.

⁷ Of course, what may look like a disorganised world to us on the outside may in fact be highly—albeit differently—organised from the perspective of those on the inside (see Whyte 1955; Suttles, 1968).

The third theory of gang membership posits that young people join gangs in response to the strains of accommodating (or failing to accommodate) the myriad middle-class norms and values appropriated by conventional social institutions (Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Short & Strodtbeck, 1965; Moore et al., 1978). In this view, subordinate youths mount a collective rebellion against the “middle-class measuring rod” (Cohen, 1955: 84) by establishing a distinct delinquent subculture within which they are able to define their own non-utilitarian, hedonistic, and present-oriented standards for success (standards such as toughness and fighting ability that they can more readily achieve). A variation on this theory suggests that gang involvement is merely an extension of working-class culture (Miller, 1958).

The fourth theory proposes that people join gangs to fulfil the basic psychosocial aspects of adolescent development: attachment, autonomy, sexuality, intimacy, achievement (rank or “respect”), and identity (see Vigil, 1988; Horowitz, 1990; Goldstein, 1991; Baccaglini, 1993; Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 2003). Some proponents of this theory advance the notion that individuals join gangs as part of the developmental process of constructing a personal identity or as the result of a breakdown in that process (see Block & Niederhoffer, 1958; Yablonsky, 1966). Others assert that because few other recreational and vocational alternatives exist, the street simply provides an alternative socialisation path for youths who experience “multiple marginality” from mainstream cultural and institutional life (Vigil, 1988: 9). For individuals with family stresses, for instance, gangs may serve as surrogate family networks or “fictive kin” (Stack, 1974: 30).

The final theory advances the premise that young people join gangs to achieve opportunities for recreation, rebellion, and excitement. This view presupposes that crime in general is “seductive” and gang membership in particular holds its own special “thrills” (Katz, 1988: 53). Individual gang involvement thus results from a search for moral transcendence and a feeling of righteousness in the face of ordinary and monotonous living where realistic exit strategies are restricted. Matza (1964) offers a variation on this theme, arguing that individual gang members may be only partially committed to countercultural norms. As such, they are free to “drift in” and “drift out” of delinquency commensurate to their desire to transform the mundane routine activities of everyday life into a site and space of excitement.

A limitation of the theories outlined above is that they “are really theories about delinquency and not theories about gangs” (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991: 21). Even when applied to gangs, they really only account for the structures and processes which promote gang membership, not the mechanisms which account for how gangs themselves actually function and operate. A common theme among existing theories is that youths believe gangs will provide them with things they could not otherwise obtain. The inherent assumption is that individuals are easily drawn into, and then easily accepted by, gangs: a willingness to join automatically translates to membership. I believe (for reasons outlined below) that this is far too simplistic of a view. Recruitment is actually an organisational problem, the solution to which is built upon the following theoretical assumptions.

First, gangs provide no written contract for membership, but rather rely upon norms of trust and reciprocity in their daily interactions. By trust, I mean it is characteristic

or predictable for someone to fulfil their side of a bargain, even when they do not fear punishment, repeated interactions, or damage to their personal reputation (Bacharach & Gambetta, 2001). As Seligman (1997: 13) argues, “the existence of trust is an essential component of all enduring social relationships”. However, “trust networks that stop recruiting new, committed individuals shrivel in no more than a single generation” (Tilly, 2006: 22). To further complicate matters, gangs operate in a world in which trust is an even scarcer commodity than in normal business life, and in which breaches of trust have far-reaching, even fatal, consequences (Van Dyne & Levi, 2005). Gang members use violence and violate the law. This begs the question, how do gangs identify and trust similarly inclined individuals in order to engage in sustainable cooperative endeavours?

Second, as “quasi-private” and “quasi-secretive” groups (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991: 28), street gangs are constrained in their ability to openly advertise for new members. For obvious reasons, gangs cannot post vacancies at Job Centre Plus or in the classified section of the newspaper. They also cannot outsource the job of checking credentials to a recruiting agency because “references” differ in the world of the gang. This begs the question, how does recruitment into gangs actually happen?

Third, although gangs offer payoffs to motivate potential recruits, gangs, like legitimate organisations, are constrained in terms of economic and social endowments (Weinstein, 2005). In pragmatic terms, if gangs are oversubscribed they cannot adequately perform the services necessary to meet the needs of their members (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Venkatesh, 1997). As a consequence, gangs must work within their means to contain the number of people sharing their selective incentives

for membership, including pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits. This begs the question, how do gangs determine whether or not new members intend to invest into their organisation and further its aims or merely “free ride” (Olson, 1965) and consume out of it?

Fourth, and related, not all potential recruits are of the same value to gangs. Gangs cannot possibly be satisfied with just any available warm body or turn a blind eye to the intentions of so-called “reluctant gangsters” (Pitts, 2008). The reason is that the consequences of selecting the “wrong” type of recruit are simply too high. Gangs risk jeopardising the value of their hard-earned collective criminal repute by endorsing someone who is unfit for purpose. Gangs also risk infiltration on behalf of rival gangs and law enforcement. Simply stated, gangs cannot admit anyone and everyone into their ranks because of the potential for mimicry and betrayal (see below). The persistent threat of violent sanctions within gangs may well offset said mimicry and betrayal, but so too does rational thinking in recruitment. This begs the question; how do gangs ensure only the strongest applicants survive to become fully-fledged gang members?

I believe the constraints described above hold important implications for both who and how gangs recruit. The bottom line is that selectivity as it pertains to gangs is in practice a two way process: people do not only choose gangs, but gangs also choose people.

1.4.iii Selection into gangs

The literature offers some support for this proposition. Sánchez-Jankowski (1991: 47–59) documents how recruitment becomes a central activity of gangs, how gangs examine the character and commitment of prospective members, and how gangs employ a wide range of recruitment strategies to attract new members, from obligation and coercion to seduction and subterfuge. Klein (2006: 129) likewise observes how gangs are “durable” with respect to the group over time despite rapid turnover of gang members due to incarceration, injury, and untimely death (Decker & Lauritsen, 1996). Generally speaking, however, gang scholars neglect the very real constraints within which the gang recruitment process occurs, focusing instead on indoctrination rituals, which—if they even exist—vary with circumstance (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996: 69). Initiation rites, which apparently range from enduring or inflicting a physical or sexual assault to undertaking a gang-assigned “hit”, are no doubt required to join certain gangs at particular times (Spergel, 1995: 91). But initiation rites only ever serve as a symbolic gesture of matriculation into gang life; they mark not the beginning of the recruitment process, but the end.

To account for a strong positive gang-delinquency association, moreover, scholars have advanced a “selection model” which emphasises the selective affiliation processes that take place among youths prior to gang formation (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen et al., 1993; Thornberry et al., 1993, 1998; Battin, et al., 1998; Zhang et al., 1999; Lacourse et al., 2003; Gordon et al., 2004; Gatti et al., 2005). This model assumes that gangs recruit candidates who, like the gangs themselves, are already delinquent, or at least have a high propensity for delinquency. In a recent review of the literature, however, Thornberry et al. (2003) found no

empirical support for this proposition. Longitudinal studies of gangs indeed generally provide more support for the “social facilitation” model (Battin et al., 1998; Thornberry et al., 2003; Gordon et al., 2004), which emphasises the “differential association” (Sutherland, 1947: 6–8) or “social learning” (Akers, 1973) processes that take place within gangs and among gang members.

As Thrasher (1927a: 369) first observed, gang members are actors and agents in their own lives, but the problem of “demoralization” is inherent to gang life and only accelerates over time. In his words, “the gang boy ... often undergoes a rather dramatic evolution, passing through a series of stages, each growing out of the preceding”. The present research addresses the mechanics of the gang that engender delinquency in this tradition, but what if delinquency *per se* was not the criterion upon which selection into gangs was premised?

Much of what is important for gangs to know about potential recruits is not easily knowable (Gambetta, 2009a: 169). Gangs cannot know simply by looking at a person whether or not he or she is trustworthy and thus fully committed to gang life (and the certain types of behaviour that will be useful in gang life). Gangs cannot openly read the intentions of potential recruits. Gangs may not even know the true identity of the person volunteering his or her services.

Gangs can, however, perceive other things about potential recruits. Gangs can judge the ethnicity of a person. Gangs can hear what a potential recruit says and how he or she says it. Gangs can observe how a person moves or dresses, whether he or she has scars or tattoos, and with whom such person hangs out. Gangs can notice what a

person does and can gather information on what such person has or has not done in the gang's absence. Of course, what a gang perceives may at times convey no information about the properties that concern them. Gangs may also misinterpret an innocuous gesture as evidence of a given property. Still, as Gambetta (2009a: 169) observes, "our best chance to find out something about people's unobservable properties is by establishing a connection between their perceivable features and their unobservable properties ... whenever interests are potentially at odds, this connection is the object of signalling theory".

1.4.iv Signalling theory

The study of recruitment into gangs lends itself to signalling theory. Signalling theory, a branch of game theory, is an emergent part of analytical sociology (for a discussion, see Gambetta, 2009a). Gambetta and Hamill (2005) adopt the theory, for example, to explain how taxi drivers in New York and Belfast establish their customers' trustworthiness. Biggs (2005) describes how communicative suffering may signal commitment in the context of protest. Gambetta (2009b) utilises signalling theory to account for how criminals communicate. And, most recently, Hamill (2011) describes the seemingly irrational response of the "hoods" to punishment administered by paramilitaries in Northern Ireland as a signal of toughness and status.

Earlier examples, however, can be observed in as diverse of fields as microeconomics (Spence, 1974; Kreps & Sobel 1994), biology (Zahavi & Zahavi, 1997), anthropology (Sosis & Bressler, 2003), and political science (Fearon, 1997; Weinstein, 2005). With

regard to the latter, Weinstein (2005) even evokes signalling theory in the context of recruitment, citing sustained periods of unpaid study and training for rebel insurgents as examples of costly behaviour that produce credibility. Krueger and Maleckova (2003) similarly describe how high levels of educational attainment signal commitment to terrorist causes.

Signalling theory is concerned in part with understanding how agents obtain adequate information at low cost. Michael Spence's (1974) work around the informational aspects of labour markets is perhaps its most famous application. Spence observed that differences in employees' productive capabilities were not immediately evident to their employers at time of hire. But rather than fully assessing applicants' "human capital" through real world tests (which are costly in terms of time and resources), employers instead interpreted the information that they could more easily obtain (e.g., educational credentials and school prestige), applying what they have learned from past experience to infer the "conditional probability of competence" of an individual (Blaug 1976: 846). To overcome their information asymmetry, Spence thus inferred, employers were recruiting employees based upon available "signals".

Signalling theory is also concerned with why certain signals are reliable and others are not. It looks at how the signal is related to the quality it represents and the elements of the signal or the surrounding community that keep it reliable (Gambetta & Hamill, 2005). In biology, Zahavi and Zahavi's (1997) "handicap principle", for instance, contends that for signals to be reliable they must be costly in the domain of the quality being signalled. The most famous example of this is the male peacock, whose large and colourful tail requires extra energy to carry and display, but also

earns him the most mating opportunities because it indicates how capable he is. A Thomson gazelle's stotting (jumping up and down) to deter the pursuit of a cheetah is likewise an honest signal because it increases risk of predation and wastes hard-earned stamina and strength.

Strategic costs or "handicaps" thus ensure not that information is conveyed but rather that the signal is perceived as honest (Grafen, 1990). Language, technology, and culture of course give humans greater latitude in signal construction and manipulation, including veiling or enhancing signs. Veblen (1899: 60), an early ancestor of signalling theory, observed how seemingly irrational excessive acts and expenditures functioned as displays of status, wealth, and power, among the "leisure class". Veblen wrote that the "wastefulness" of such acts was an integral part of their display—it ensured some associated cost beyond what one would spend for reasons of utility. Mauss's (1924) and Bourdieu's (1977) insights on competitive gift giving and the acquisition of prestige, respectively, likewise unintentionally evoke signalling theory.

If we conceive of gang recruitment as a game we see that it meets the necessary conditions for the occurrence of a genuine signalling episode, as identified by Bliege Bird and Smith (2005). First, there exists within-group variance in some unobservable property: there is an informational asymmetry. Potential recruits hold hidden information, which may for the gang result in mistaken selection and is costly and in some cases impossible for the gang to obtain. Second, the gang can benefit from reliable information about such variance. No gang wants to mistakenly recruit a gang member who is uncooperative or secretly working for the police. Third, higher quality

signallers can benefit from accurately broadcasting this information, but lower-quality signallers have the potential to achieve benefits at the expense of recipients through deception. Not only do gangs offer a number of selective incentives for membership, but also the reputation of the gang is a common asset, which benefits all members. And fourth, the cost or benefit to the signaller of sending the signal is correlated with the signaller's quality. I shall elaborate upon this final point below.

1.4.v Signs and signals

Bacharach and Gambetta (2001) argue that people's perceivable features come in two forms: signs and signals. The relationship between the two is complex, and a crucial distinction exists. First, "signals are the stuff of purposive communication. Signals are any observable features of an agent that are *intentionally displayed* for the purpose of altering the probability the receiver assigns to a certain state of affairs or 'event'" (Gambetta, 2009b: xv). This "event" can be anything, but usually refers to something that: (1) is not easily observable; (2) the receiver wants to know about; and (3) the signaller whether truthfully or otherwise would like the receiver to believe. Gambetta (2009b: xv) observes that the "features" of an agent that make up a signal could also be anything: "they include parts or aspects of his body, pieces of behaviour by him, and his appurtenances". Examples include gait, manner of speech, and dress.

Signs, by contrast, do not require a purposive agent; they may be involuntary or even unconscious. Gambetta (2009b: xv) elucidates, signs "can be anything in the environment that is perceptible and that by being perceived modifies our beliefs about

something or someone”. They are signals kept in abeyance, which is to say that signs are the substance of signals that signallers who are aware of playing a strategic game, such as recruitment into a gang, can choose to display. A sign typically becomes a signal when a signaller takes steps to show the sign. To reveal his “war wounds”, for instance, a gang member must first take off his shirt. We cannot assume, however, that all signs are read. As Gambetta (2009b) explains, we may not realise that a sign is informing others of something about us until someone responds in a way that makes us aware, at which point, we may choose to display it intentionally thus rendering it a signal. Decker and Van Winkle (1996: 75) provide the following example:

Wearing gang clothes, flashing gang signs, and affecting other outward signs of gang behaviour are ... ways to become encapsulated in the role of gang member, especially through the perceptions of others, who, when they see the external symbols of membership respond as if the person was a member.

Of course, “[t]he production of signs can take place for any number of reasons, and only sometimes that reason is to produce a signal deliberately” (Gambetta, 2009b: xv). Whether or not a particular feature becomes a signal or remains a sign is certainly contextually and temporally dependent.

1.4.vi Mimics and mimicry

As they strive to reduce the informational disadvantage faced in their pursuit of the “right type” of recruit, a further consideration for gangs is whether or not a sign is a genuine sign of a certain property or if it is a mimicked sign. As Bacharach and Gambetta (2001: 155n13) observe, “a mimic of a property [k] is a person who does not have the property and deliberately displays m [the sign] in order to be taken to

have k by another”.⁸ Case in point: during my previous career as a middle-school teacher in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, one of my students permanently scarred his left cheek with a butter knife from the cafeteria because he desired a “battle scar” to display as a signal of dangerousness in order to expedite his acceptance among older gang members. The school faculty (my student’s unintended audience) viewed this episode of deliberate self-harm as a signal that the student was afflicted with mental illness. The other middle-school students (my student’s intended audience) read the act simply as a signal that, in Gambetta’s (2009b: 119) apt words, “If I am crazy enough to do this to myself, imagine what I can do to you”. The scar thus attracted the gang’s attention, but after some “due diligence” on their part my student was exposed for the fraud he really was. The implication is thus that the observable features are sometimes not enough: some signals are simply counterfeit.

Given the kudos attached to gang membership in some circles and the deference afforded to gang members, so-called “wannabes” are known to impersonate gang members either to impress or intimidate others (Monti, 1994). The risk to gangs is of course that such impostors misrepresent them, tarnish their reputation, or worse, inadvertently implicate them. The infamous Los Angeles Crip who as a boy wore a reversible jacket—Blood-red exterior with Crip-blue lining—to negotiate the risks inherent in walking between rival Bloods and Crips neighbourhoods in South Central Los Angeles is a sound example of a mimic. Indeed, this individual later learned and fraudulently adopted the signals necessary to deceive the Crips into recruiting him, only to turn informant for the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation. Through

⁸ This framework is applicable also to “negative mimicry” or camouflage (Gambetta & Hamill, 2005: 8).

intelligence, surveillance, wires and detailed records, he helped incarcerate over 130 of his gang colleagues (see Lawson, 2008).

Street gangs are comprised primarily of teenagers (Klein, 1995). As such, their risk of infiltration from undercover police officers is low when compared to adult criminal organisations.⁹ Nevertheless, mimicry is a genuine concern for gangs: prospective gang members can easily be the stooges of rival gangs or police “covert human intelligence sources”.¹⁰ Mimics (“snakes” or “snitches” in gang parlance) can be highly motivated, not least by the desire for revenge, profit, or the offer of police help to reduce a potential prison sentence (which also presents the opportunity to forge a positive relationship with an adult figure, something rare in the lives of many gang members). The MPS paid a total £1,863,074 to people with information on criminal activity in the financial year 2008/9. Most informants earned between £50 and £2,000 for vital intelligence leading to an arrest, although a disclosure leading to recovery of a firearm was worth £10,000 or more.¹¹ One active source handler told me that sources can “earn more per annum than senior Met (MPS) officers”, with “carte blanche” to continue their criminal activities. If crime pays then it seems mimicry pays more.

⁹ The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 require that new constables be at least 18 years of age upon joining the police service, from which we may infer that those agents adept at undercover work are simply too old to insert themselves into a gang.

¹⁰ The 2000 Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) provides a statutory basis for the authorisation and use by public authorities of covert surveillance and “covert human intelligence sources”. Under section 26(8) a person is a “source” if: (a) he establishes or maintains a personal or other relationship with a person for the covert purpose of facilitating the doing of anything falling within paragraph (b) or (c); (b) he covertly uses such a relationship to obtain information or to provide access to any information to another person; or (c) he covertly discloses information obtained by the use of such a relationship or as a consequence of the existence of such a relationship. In some instances, the tasking given to a source will not require them to establish a personal or other relationship for a covert purpose, but rather to present purely factual information, for example, about the layout of commercial premises.

¹¹ *BBC News*, 29 July 2009. To avoid scrutiny from their criminal colleagues, some sources are paid on a week-on-week basis or awarded gifts valued at commensurate amounts.

One of the fundamental principles of signalling theory is that a signal will be reliable when for honest signallers the benefits outweigh the costs while for dishonest signallers the costs outweigh the benefits (Bacharach & Gambetta, 2001). In the words of Zahavi and Zahavi (1997: xiv; also quoted by Biggs, 2005), “in order to be effective, signals have to be reliable; in order to be reliable, signals have to be costly”. Costs are material and immaterial, immediate or deferred. In this thesis I assume that when screening prospective members, gangs look “for signs that are too costly for a mimic to fake but affordable for the genuine article, given the benefit that each can expect in the situation”. Gangs will certainly “not be erratic in the signs they watch for or easily satisfied by cheaply mimickable ones” (Gambetta & Hamill, 2005: 11).

Based on the schema outlined by Bacharach and Gambetta (2001), prospective entrants into a gang are either *bona fide* “models” or dishonest “mimics”, both of whom are senders of signals, whereas the gang, the receiver of signals, must avoid becoming the “dupe”. The main result in signalling theory is that:

[T]here is a solution in which at least some truth is transmitted, provided that among the possible signals is one, *s*, which is cheap enough to emit, relatively to the benefit, for signallers who have *k*, but costly enough to emit, relatively to the benefit, for those who do not. If *s* is too costly to fake for all or most non-*k* signallers then observing *s* is good evidence that the signaller has *k*. (Gambetta, 2009a: 172)

On the one hand, if the cost relationship is such that all and only *k* signallers can afford to emit *s*, the “equilibrium in which they do so is called, alternatively, ‘discriminating’ ‘separating’ or ‘sorting’. In this equilibrium signals are unambiguous, and the receiver is perfectly informed” (Gambetta, 2009b: xviii). In other words, by being able to emit *s* all those with *k* will be perfectly sorted from those without *k*. Signs such as DNA are indeed uniquely attached to the bearer and impossible for the

mimic to reproduce, regardless of payoffs (Gambetta & Hamill, 2005).¹² On the other hand, if the cost relationship is such that both *k* and non-*k* signallers can afford to emit *s* relative to their respective benefits, this equilibrium is said to be “pooling” (Gambetta, 2009b: xviii). In short, *s* informs the receiver of nothing more than they already knew and simply should be discounted. The problem is that in life signals are rarely only separating or only pooling: they are “semi-sorting”. As a consequence, in the competitive game of gang recruitment it is likely that no single sign suffices and gangs look for clusters of signs that, if pointing in the same direction, may together come close to discriminating between recruits.

In **Chapter 5** I apply signalling theory to the strategies gangs and their prospective members adopt during the recruitment process and addresses one of the most crucial unanswered questions in the literature on street gangs: why, in any given pool of individuals with similar sociological profiles and motivations, do only some gain entry into gangs? I have outlined above how gangs face a primary trust dilemma in their uncertainty over the quality of recruits. Given that none of the desirable properties for gang membership (e.g., trustworthiness) can be readily discovered from observation, gangs look for observable signs correlated with these properties. Gangs then face a secondary trust dilemma in their uncertainty over the reliability of signs because certain agents (e.g., police informants, rival gang members, and adventure-seekers) might mimic them. As such, gangs look for signs that are too costly for mimics to fake but affordable for the genuine article. I posit that gangs do not rely simply on enforcing contract compliance ex-post through violent sanctions, but rather gangs overcome their informational handicap ex-ante by screening and selecting

¹² In the underworld, homicide is a perfectly discriminating signal because an undercover agent would never commit a murder just to prove that he or she can be trusted (Gambetta, 2009b).

among prospective members based on “cost-discriminating” signs and signals (Gambetta, 2009b: 8).

1.5. GANG DESISTANCE

In **Chapter 6**, I briefly investigate how individuals extricate themselves from gang membership. Given the youthfulness of gangs, gang membership is often considered a transitory state. In other words, youth who enter gangs must exit them. The reason is that longitudinal research in a variety of settings indicates that the majority (approx. 55% to 69%) of gang members remain so for one year or less (Esbensen et al., 1993; Thornberry et al., 1993; Hill et al., 2001). The problem with such studies, however, is that serious gang members are typically not represented in school-based surveys because they dropout, are too old to attend school, or are simply excluded from such surveys due to their embedment in gangs and their engagement in crime and analogous acts (Hughes, 2005). Longitudinal surveys also include such essentialist and all-encompassing definitions of gang membership that anyone who has even attended a school or partaken in a night on the town with their friends might qualify.¹³ Suffice it to say, the mechanisms behind gang desistance are poorly understood.

Qualitative studies have offered important insights. Thrasher (1927a) found that the social networks of gang members could remain in existence after they left the gang, but that the tie of “gang member” often gave way to one based on friendship, political

¹³ According to Gatti et al. (2005: 1180), for example, anyone in the past 12 months who has been “part of a group or gang that did reprehensible acts” qualifies as a gang member. For Bendixen et al. (2006: 94), “a member of a group or gang that has bullied or pestered other people” or “a member of a group or gang that has drunk alcohol and then been noisy and rowdy” is equally culpable.

alliance, commerce, or another social relation. Thrasher indeed portrayed gangs as being in continuous flux and flow, with constantly shifting internal alliances, membership and participatory structures, although there was identifiable stability in the types of areas that promoted gangs and the spheres of activity in which the gang was involved. Hagedorn (1988: 5) similarly observed that gangs underwent “natural splintering processes” as gang members aged and moved into different roles within gangs. For Thrasher (1927a: 170), sex as associated with love and marriage was “the chief disintegrating force in the gang”. Getting married and having children, in other words, was a key component of what Matza (1964: 22) terms “maturational reform”.

Decker and Lauritsen’s (2002) study of former gang members in St. Louis is perhaps the most comprehensive on gang desistance. Their results indicated that gang members either left their gangs abruptly or gradually departed. In the former scenario, gang members would sever all ties with gang associates and thus reduce criminal opportunities, whereas in the latter scenario, gang members would “simply drift away” from their gangs (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002: 66). The process of gang desistance, they argued, was characterised by an accrual of perceptions, which ran contrary to supposed purpose of gangs, such as the victimisation of friends or increasing commitment to natal family. Suffice it to say, multiple factors interact in “succession” during gang exit, much as push and pull factors combine during gang entry (Vigil, 1998: 109).

The literature further suggests that the process of desistance may depend on the internal structure of the gang in question (e.g., extent of subgroups, ratio of core to periphery members) and the level of engagement of a given gang member within his

or her gang. Periphery members of a gang, for instance, may find it easier to drift in and out of the group because of weaker ties to other gang members and less allegiance to the group (Horowitz 1983; Hagedorn, 1994; Spergel, 1995; Starbuck et al., 2001). Klein's (1971) seminal research in Los Angeles indeed found that core members are much more involved in gang activities and better integrated into the group than periphery associates, which made it more difficult for them to leave. As Gerrard (1964: 361) posits, core gang members simply "need" their gangs more than they need anyone else.

In line with previous chapters on gang business, organisation, and recruitment, I argue that regardless of one's position within gangs, gangs are obliged to let their members "retire" under certain conditions because at the end of the day an unhappy or reluctant gang member is a potentially disruptive or unproductive gang member. In other words, the gang neither wants nor needs them. These conditions stipulate that retirees remain passively loyal to their gangs even after they have left and that gang members possess a valid "excuse" for their wanting to leave, such as religious conversion, which can be sold to the wider community in order to save face. The same concerns over secrecy that ensure gangs are meticulous in recruitment guarantee that they are rigorous in their demands of members who want to leave. Desistance, therefore, becomes a "process" very much like recruitment. This is a view consummate with Bushway et al. (2001), among others. In the end, gang members may have multiple reasons for wanting to desist but the crux of the matter is how they demonstrate their intent to desist in a manner that is acceptable to the gang at large.

1.6 PREVIEW

This thesis is organised over six chapters. A detailed discussion of my data sources and methods follows in **Chapter 2**. I am a strong believer that methods should be open to the reader and that qualitative research “needs more, not less, emphasis on the methods used because there is no established, traditional way of organising and reporting the work” (Shipman, 1997: x). For this reason, I describe the research process from conception to design, implementation to documentation, including important practical and ethical considerations. I also present my sample and sampling procedure, the parameters of the research site and my experiences while in the field. The substantive analytical work begins in **Chapter 3** with an investigation into the business of gangs. In **Chapter 4** I examine gang organisation before moving on to discuss gang recruitment in relation to signalling theory in **Chapter 5**. Finally, in the **Conclusion**, I reflect upon both the overall processes and particulars of the study, draw parallels between street gangs and other extra-legal groups, and advance some implications for policy, practice, and further academic inquiry. This final chapter further situates the thesis in the context of escalating youth violence in London and asks timely questions about avenues for gang desistance and intervention.

Without further ado, let us enter the world of London’s street gangs.

CHAPTER 2

DATA SOURCES AND METHODS

If you just learn a single trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.

(Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*)

As Atticus Finch, the protagonist of Harper Lee's (1960) Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, explains to his daughter, Scout, the best way to understand others is to suspend what you think you know about them and see the world through their eyes. In this tradition, the present research represents the culmination of two years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between January 2008 and January 2010. The data is derived primarily from 198 in-depth interviews conducted between January 2008 and August 2009 with a snowball sample of self-nominated "gang members" and their criminal collaborators (hereafter "gang associates"); the friends, relatives, and partners of gang members (hereafter "gang affiliates"); young people not affiliated with gangs but living in, or adjacent to, gang-affected communities (hereafter "young people"); and other "key informants", such as police officers and youth workers.

Table 2.1. Total interview sample (N=198)

Category of interviewee	N	%
Gang member	52	26
Gang associate	17	9
Gang affiliate	15	8
Young person	27	14
Key informant	87	44
Total	198	100

Source: Author's compilation.

All 198 interviewees contributed to the research both as reporters on themselves and on other actors. Interview data are complemented by countless unstructured conversations and observational hours on gang turf, which provide a wide base of information. Given the potential conflict between “words and deeds” (Deutscher, 1966), the claim to authenticity in research is said to rest upon the method of interview *and* observation (Pearson, 1993). Interviews look for consistency *within* accounts, whereas observation helps look for consistency *between* accounts and actions (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). Admittedly, my observation of gang members’ domestic lives and their interaction with family and friends outside of the gang was limited. Following Venkatesh (1998: 694), the present study thus focuses on aspects of the relations of gang members with their “local and larger community” but does not “explicate their everyday lives in any full sense”.

My research questions and sample groups lent themselves to qualitative methods. There is neither the scope nor intention to discuss the myriad strengths and limitations of such methods in detail here (for a discussion, see Arksey & Knight, 1999). Suffice it to say, “[q]ualitative research is not looking for principles that are true all the time and in all conditions, like the laws of physics; rather the goal is understanding of specific circumstances, how and why things actually happen in a complex world” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995: 38). Knowledge in qualitative research is conditional and situational. As such, there is limited scope for generalisation (DeVaus, 2001). This is unfortunate, but given Hedström’s (2005: 15) argument that “[h]uman agency seems to render such [universal] laws highly implausible in the social and cultural sciences”, perhaps it is wrong to assume that a general statement or concept obtained by inference from specific cases can be achieved with any methodology. I do not wish to

suggest that large numbers do not count (they do), but rather “it is in the details that human complexity is better examined and understood” (Vigil, 2003: 237).

The use of fieldwork techniques to study gangs is one of the most established traditions in sociology, in part because of the absence of reliable existing datasets (Thrasher, 1927a; Shaw & McKay, 1943; Whyte, 1955; Short & Srodtbeck, 1974; Moore, 1978, 1991; Hagedorn, 1988; Vigil, 1988; Anderson, 1990; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Bourgois, 2003; Venkatesh, 2008). The general approach requires the researcher to: (1) be present in the community and neighbourhood where the gangs under study operate; (2) be in frequent contact with gang members on their own turf; (3) take into account the actor’s perspective and to understand the view of the world held by those in the gang; and (4) use native terms and categories in articulating this perspective (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1996). The present research is characterised by all of these features.

2.1 THE RESEARCH SETTING

My fieldwork was concentrated in six of Greater London’s 32 boroughs: Croydon, Hackney, Haringey, Lambeth, Lewisham, and Southwark.¹ Selection of my fieldwork sites began with the MPS unpublished 2007 *Pan-London Gang Profile* (which in 2007 identified a total 171 gangs in London; one quarter of which were involved in murder) and by locating geographic areas recognised both in the media and in the

¹ Brent, Camden, Greenwich, and Waltham Forest were also initially approached as potential fieldwork sites but a combination of restricted access and local research fatigue prompted me to scale back the research (gangs in Waltham Forest, for example, had already received academic attention: see Pitts, 2007).

literature as being inhabited by gangs and with a history of cross-border offending related to them.² According to the *Pan-London Gang Profile*, for example, Hackney is populated with the greatest number of gangs (N=22) and is one of the top five London boroughs where gangs are causing the greatest level of “harm” through crime and violence.³

Geographic and demographic data for the six specific research boroughs are provided in **Figure 2.1** and **Table 2.2** below. As can be observed, my fieldwork was concentrated in some of the most severely deprived local authority areas in the country, which is fitting with the literature on the etiological roots of gang formation (see Thrasher, 1927a; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Cartwright & Howard, 1966; Short & Strodtbeck, 1974; Vigil, 1988; Sampson & Groves, 1989). Five “Diamond Initiative” districts,⁴ four members of the “Network Alliance”,⁵ four “Operation Connect”,⁶ and

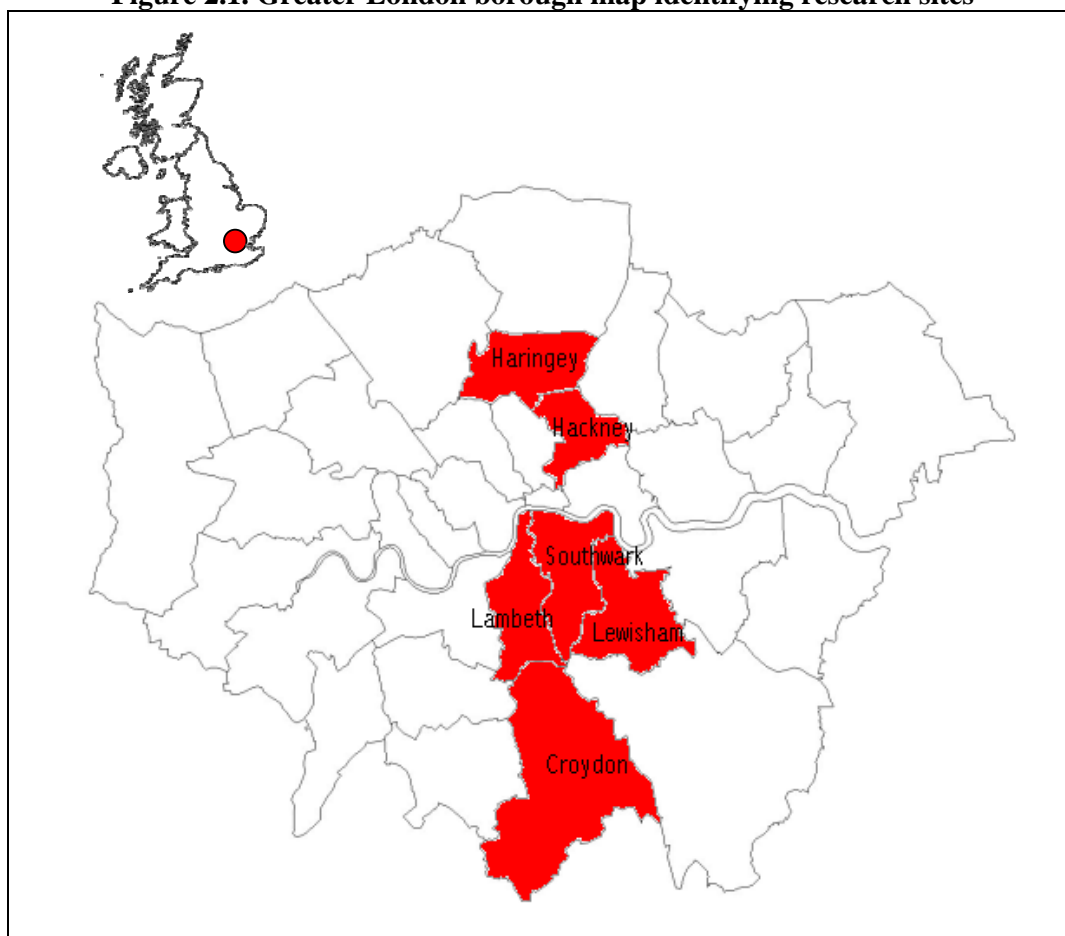
² The Metropolitan Police Authority (2007) suspects that the actual number of gangs could be even greater as this figure is based purely on police intelligence. The *Pan-London Gang Profile* is derived from a survey of all 32 Borough Intelligence Units in London combined with information from the Criminal Networks Prioritisation Matrix in the Specialist Crime Directorate. In 2007, the *Evening Standard* published the names of 257 London gangs as obtained from documents “leaked” by analysts at Scotland Yard’s Specialist Crime Directorate (SCD). This list was later removed as parts were incorrectly copied from an open gang website and thus benign groups “posturing” on the Internet were included. Cindy Butts, deputy chairman of the MPA, acknowledged, “[g]angs have always been there but there has been a huge increase in gang activity in the past few years. Agencies, including the police, have taken a long time to wake up to the problem so gangs have grown and become stronger” (*Evening Standard*, 24 August 2007). I suspect, based on my fieldwork, that the actual number of active gangs in London is around 70% of the MPS figure, because some gangs on the list no longer exist and certain allegiances, sub-sets, or cliques within gangs are mistakenly counted as separate entities (see **Chapter 3**).

³ This is in part symptomatic of the fact that the borough has invested a great deal of time and resources in understanding and tackling their gang problem. An executive commission produced by Lambeth borough council in 2008 in fact found that there were potentially 40 named gangs in the borough, concluding that Lambeth had supplanted Hackney as London’s principal gangs “hotspot”. Closer inspection reveals that many of these “gangs” are simply allegiances, sub-sets or cliques within gangs. My fieldwork suggests that Lambeth has 12 gangs proper, the majority of which may be described as “Trident-based”; that is, black African-Caribbean gangs engaged in gun crime and drug offences. For 2007–08, the borough of Lambeth was also first in the MPS for incidents of homicide, rape, and robbery, second after Hackney both for gun-enabled crime in general and shootings in particular, and third after Southwark for episodes of Grievous Bodily Harm (*Safer Lambeth Partnership Board Minutes*, 13 November 2007).

⁴ A scheme being piloted by police, probation, and local authority partners to help address the cycle of recidivism in the capital by targeting released prisoners not ordinarily subject to statutory supervision.

five out of six “priority” boroughs for Operation Trident are represented.⁷ Approximately 40% of the 116 teenage homicides in London occurring between January 2005 and December 2010 were perpetrated within my fieldwork sites.⁸

Figure 2.1. Greater London borough map identifying research sites



Source: Author's compilation.

⁵ A “multi-agency programme set up in 2006 to develop long-term, effective solutions to serious violence, including gang-related issues” across six inner London boroughs (Jacobson & Burrell, 2007: ii). As my research inquiries began in late 2007, the Home Secretary adopted the original incarnation of the *Network Alliance*, entitled the “Five Boroughs Alliance”, as London’s pilot gangs project. The Five Boroughs Alliance brought together the MPS, and the councils of the represented boroughs, local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRP), the Home Office, Probation Service, and the Government Office for London, to deliver integrated schemes. The *Network Alliance* presented an established network, which helped facilitate access to interviewees, but was only one of many contact lists pursued throughout my fieldwork.

⁶ An MPS operation set up in 2010 to target violent offenders who are linked to gang activity.

⁷ An MPS operation set up in 2001 to prevent and investigate all shootings within London’s black communities.

⁸ Approximately 87% of the victims were males. The average age of victims was 16.9.

Table 2.2. Demographic statistics for the research setting

Location	Area sq mi	Population ¹	Pop Density ¹	Deprivation ²	% BME ¹	% Under 18 ¹	Total gangs ³	Teen homicides ⁴	Initiatives ⁵	Postcode catchments
London	659	8,278,251	12,331/sq mi	-	40	25	171	116	-	-
Croydon	33.6	339,500	10,163/sq mi	125	28	21	4 (2%)	7 (6%)	C, D, N	CRO, SE16, SE19, SE25
Hackney	7.4	209,700	28,495/ sq mi	2	56	25	22 (13)	7 (6)	C, D, T	E2, E5, E8, E9, E15, EC2, N1, N16
Haringey	11.4	224,700	19,668/ sq mi	18	33	24	5 (3)	5 (4)	C, T	N4, N6, N8, N10, N15, N17
Lambeth	10.4	273,200	26,382/ sq mi	19	38	20	12 (7)	10 (9)	C, D, N, T	SE1, SE11, SE19, SE24, SE27, SW2, SW4, SW8
Lewisham	13.6	258,500	19,047/ sq mi	39	34	25	6 (4)	4 (3)	D, N, T	SE3, SE4, SE6, SE8, SE12, SE13, SE14, SE21, SE23, SE26
Southwark	11.1	274,400	24,633/ sq mi	26	38	22	5 (3)	11 (9)	D, N, T	SE1, SE5, SE15, SE16, SE17, SE21, SE22

1. Source: 2001 Census. BME = Black and minority ethnic.

2. Rank in terms of average deprivation out of the 354 local authorities in England, where “1” is the most deprived. The English Indices of Deprivation 2007 (ID, 2007) are the Government’s official measure of multiple deprivation at small “Super Output Area” level, based on a variety of indicators which are combined into seven domains: income; employment; health deprivation and disability; education, skills and training; barriers to housing and services; crime; and living environment. These seven domain indices are then further combined to form the overall Index of Multiple Deprivation (for a discussion, see:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/neighbourhoodrenewal/deprivation/>). Hackney is 1% most deprived borough in the country, Haringey and Lambeth 5% most deprived, Lewisham and Southwark 10% most deprived, and Croydon 25% most deprived.

3. Source: MPS 2007 Pan London Gang Profile

4. Teenage homicides involving the use of a gun or a knife in London from January 2005 to December 2010 inclusive. Source: Unpublished MPS data

5. C=Operation Connect; D=Diamond Initiative; N=Network Alliance; T=Operation Trident

2.2 THE SAMPLE

2.2.i Gang members and associates

I interviewed 52 gang members in total over 12 different gangs. As a measure of their legitimacy, all 12 gangs feature in the police *Pan-London Gang Profile*. The reader is advised that some gangs are discussed in more detail than others in the thesis, which reflects both the level of access I was afforded and the amount of secondary data available with respect to such gangs. In addition to police data, for instance, I relied upon a range of cultural sources for verbal, visual, and written descriptions of gang argot, names, territories, rivalries, and alliances.⁹ Unsurprisingly, some gangs have a greater public profile than others.

I am confident the individuals described as “gang members” in this study really are members of a gang. The process of “self-nomination” carried little inherent risk to them because belonging to a gang in Britain is not illegal in and of itself, unlike in the United States. As supported by a large number of gang studies using diverse methodologies, “self-nomination” is also the most powerful measure of gang membership (Esbensen et al., 1993; Maxson & Klein, 1994; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). As Curry and Decker (1998: 6) suggest, “simply asking individuals whether or not they belong to a gang—‘claiming’ in gang talk—is the best means of identifying who is a gang member”. Part of the reason is that “for many gang members, and for those fully committed ones ... the gang becomes a ‘master identity’. What is done to

⁹ Including web pages and popular social networking sites used by gang members (e.g., Bebo, Facebook, MySpace), media produced and promoted by gang members, and an open source website and chat forum created specifically for discussion about and amongst gang members (<http://www.gangsinlondon.co.uk/>).

it, for it, and with it becomes a source of self-reinforcement” (Klein, 2001: 10). Of course individuals posing as gang members to appropriate the status and glamour of so-called “gang culture” are known to unexpectedly penetrate research samples premised entirely on self-nomination (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996: 41). For this reason, I installed additional checks and balances, as follows.

First, all “gang members” successfully answered a series of screening questions concerning the overall orientation of the gang they were claiming. While it is possible that sufficient evidence to pass this test could be garnered from secondary sources, I doubt a young person would research gangs in detail enough simply to be able to participate in an interview with me. Interviewees were not paid for their participation in the study, which means there was little monetary incentive for them to pose as gang members.¹⁰ Second, they were each vouched for by another gang member as well as, in most cases, police, partner agencies, or community information. The mug shots of some of my interviewees even featured on gang anacapa charts, which adorned the walls of local police stations I attended.¹¹

¹⁰ I occasionally paid for reasonable travel expenses and a few snacks and beverages. My decision not to remunerate was based both on my limited financial resources (this study was largely self-funded) and my not wishing to place interviewees under any perceived obligation to answer my questions. It also reduced the likelihood that my money would be used without my knowledge for illegal purposes. During my fieldwork, I politely declined interviews with three individuals who offered to tell me everything I wanted to know “for the right price”. While this somewhat conservative approach probably caused me to decline some potentially interesting interviews, at times with higher-ranking gang members, it ensured I did not compromise any agreed ethical standards.

¹¹ The police keep detailed records (including photographs) of gang members, and although I never divulged to law enforcement the names of my interviewees, these data were valuable in confirming the gang identities of some of my interviewees. The introduction into central intelligence systems of definitions and “flags” for gangs and gang members’ post-2007 has indeed helped the MPS to distinguish gang members from non-gang members and, to some extent, core gang members from periphery gang associates. Police information, however, often fails to reflect changes in gang affiliation by individuals and curtails gang membership to a simple dichotomy (member versus non-member), which although virtuous from a measurement standpoint, overlooks important substantive variation in *levels* of membership (Curry et al., 2002).

Given the above, a “gang member” is defined henceforth as an individual who identified himself or herself as being a member of a gang (such as through verbal statements, tattoos, correspondence or graffiti) *and* who had this identity corroborated by other gang members. Gang identity—the sense of belonging to a gang—means that members are aware of their participation in the gang and know the identities of other gang members. It also implies that gang members have a sense of the boundaries of their gangs (i.e., who belongs and who does not belong). Despite what the intelligence community and rival gangs may think, fraternising with gang members is not enough.

To elaborate, the boundaries of gangs are “common knowledge” to those on the inside, as distinguished from the common sharing of information (Chwe, 2001: 13). Membership only exists when several gang members share this piece of information, are very conscious of the fact that they share it, and know that the others are aware of their consciousness. As one of my interviewees explained: “If you’re in, you’re in, you don’t have to talk about it ... if you’ve got your respect, you don’t need to say anything, don’t need to show off, people don’t like that. ... The one’s who are showing off have something to prove” (Exodus). In other words, gang membership is perhaps best expressed as a never-ending list of statements about “knowing”: “I know, and I know that you know, and I know that you know that I know” *et cetera* (Chwe, 2001: 13). This is broadly analogous to the way in which Mafiosi distinguish between connected guys (“friend of mine”) and made members (“friend of ours”) (Pistone, 1989: 156).

There is a lot of activity at the boundaries of gangs. Gang members not only socialise with other gang members, but also with peers who neither see themselves as gang

members nor share the same “normative and behavioural orientation towards crime” (Aldridge et al., 2007: 17). On the other hand, some peers are very much involved in the criminal doings of gangs. Others are prospective gang members, who have displayed, through conduct or behaviour, a specific desire or intent to join a gang. They are people who neither recognise themselves nor are recognised by others as *bona fide* “gang members” but nevertheless offend with gang members and are associated with them through police, partner agencies, or community information. I interviewed 17 such people during my fieldwork, described hereafter as “gang associates”.

The relationship between the 12 gangs, 52 gang members, and 17 gang associates is presented in **Table 2.3** below, together with some demographic data on the interviewees. Aggregate detail is provided in **Table 2.4**. For reasons of anonymity, both gangs and gang members alike are identified by pseudonyms. The names are derived from popular comic book figures, but the reader is advised to not read into them, not least because they are allocated at random. These names merely pay tribute to the fact that gangs in London draw inspiration from a variety of American cultural sources (see **Chapter 4**). I am not trying to convey any “superhuman” traits in my sample, but by using names as opposed to numbers the reader can better identify each speaker as a person. Names are listed in the order in which they were interviewed within each individual gang, giving some indication of the extent of the chain-referral process. An index of names also appears in **Appendix D**, which is provided so that individual contributions to the thesis can be quantified and quotations can be easily located. Interviewees that were interviewed more than once are naturally quoted more, not least because they were typically the main brokers into the wider group.

Table 2.3. Demographic information for sample of gang members and associates (N=69). *Source: Author's compilation.*

#	Name	Status, seniority <i>Younger<Elder<I.C.</i>	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Years in gang	Retired	Prison	Other Affiliations	Interview taped	Interviewee revisited
“BROTHERHOOD” GANG, CROYDON											
1	Mystique	Associate	14	F	Mixed	1–3				X	X
2	Pyro	Member, Younger	15	M	Black British	1–3				X	X
3	Toad	Member, Younger	15	M	Black British	1–3				X	
4	Magneto	Member, Inner Circle	18	M	Black British	4–6			Knights		
5	Polaris	Associate	16	F	Black British	1–3					
6	Quicksilver	Member, Elder	17	M	Black British	1–3		X			
7	Sabretooth	Member, Elder	17	M	Black British	1–3					
“MARAUDERS” GANG, CROYDON											
8	Gambit	Member, Inner Circle	30	M	Black British	7–9	X	X	Knights	X	X
9	Sunfire	Member, Elder	20	F	Black British	4–6	X		Knights	X	X
10	Malice	Associate	19	F	Black Caribbean	1–3		X			
11	Sinister	Member, Inner Circle	22	M	Black Caribbean	4–6		X		X	
12	Harpoon	Member, Inner Circle	24	M	Black British	4–6					
13	Riptide	Member, Elder	24	M	Black British	4–6					
14	Vertigo	Member, Elder	19	M	Black British	4–6					
“EXCALIBUR” GANG, HACKNEY											
15	Juggernaut	Member, Inner Circle	26	M	Black African	>10	X	X		X	X
16	Nightcrawler	Member, Elder	19	M	Black British	4–6					
17	Thunderbird	Associate	25	M	Black Caribbean	1–3				X	X
18	Wolfsbane	Associate	24	M	Asian British	1–3					
19	Havoc	Member, Elder	20	M	Black British	4–6					
20	Shadowcat	Associate	32	F	Black British	7–9	X	X		X	X
21	Psylocke	Associate	26	F	Black African	4–6	X				
“QUEENS” GANG, HACKNEY											

#	Name	Status, seniority <i>Younger<Elder<I.C.</i>	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Years in gang	Retired	Prison	Other Affiliations	Interview taped	Interviewee revisited
22	Dazzler	Member, Elder	16	F	Black British	1-3				X	
23	Jubilee	Member, Younger	16	F	Black British	1-3				X	
24	Sage	Member, Elder	19	F	Black British	1-3		X		X	
25	Magma	Member, Younger	15	F	Black British	1-3				X	
26	Pixie	Member, Elder	17	F	Black British	1-3				X	
“JUSTICE” GANG, HARINGEY											
27	Flash	Member, Elder	17	M	Black Caribbean	1-3					
28	Lantern	Member, Younger	15	M	Black Caribbean	1-3					X
29	Marvel	Member, Younger	16	M	Black British	1-3		X			X
30	Arrow	Associate	15	M	Black Caribbean	1-3					
31	Aquaman	Associate	15	M	Black British	1-3					
32	Plasticman	Member, Younger	14	M	Black British	1-3					
“THUNDERBOLTS” GANG, HARINGEY											
33	Vulcan	Member, Elder	17	M	Black British	1-3				X	
34	Mirage	Associate	20	F	Mixed	4-6				X	
“ACOLYTES” GANG, LAMBETH											
35	Chrome	Member, Younger	17	M	Black British	1-3					X
36	Tempo	Associate	15	M	Black British	<1					
37	Frenzy	Associate	18	M	Black British	1-3					
38	Exodus	Member, Elder	18	M	Black Caribbean	1-3		X			
39	Colossus	Member, Younger	18	M	Black Caribbean	1-3					
“AVENGERS” GANG, LAMBETH											
40	Hulk	Member, Inner Circle	24	M	Black Caribbean	4-6					X
41	Ironman	Member, Inner Circle	20	M	Black Caribbean	4-6		X			
42	Wasp	Member, Inner Circle	21	M	Black Caribbean	4-6					X
43	Antman	Member, Elder	19	M	Black African	1-3					
44	Thor	Member, Elder	19	M	Black African	1-3		X			
45	Captain A	Member, Elder	20	M	Black African	1-3					

#	Name	Status, seniority <i>Younger<Elder<I.C.</i>	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Years in gang	Retired	Prison	Other Affiliations	Interview taped	Interviewee revisited
46	Falcon	Member, Younger	17	M	Black British	1-3			Acolytes		
47	Hawkeye	Member, Younger	17	M	Black British	1-3			Acolytes		
48	Hercules	Member, Elder	19	M	Black African	1-3		X			
“GENERATION X” GANG, LAMBETH											
49	Xavier	Member, Elder	19	M	Black African	4-6	X			X	X
50	Wolverine	Member, Elder	20	M	Black British	4-6				X	
51	Rogue	Associate	19	F	Mixed	1-3				X	X
52	Storm	Associate	18	F	Black British	1-3				X	
53	Cyclops	Member, Elder	19	M	Black African	1-3	X	X		X	
54	Iceman	Member, Elder	18	M	Black British	1-3				X	
55	Angel	Member, Younger	17	M	Black British	1-3				X	
56	Beast	Member, Elder	19	M	Black British	1-3				X	
57	Phoenix	Associate	16	F	Black British	<1				X	
“KNIGHTS” GANG, LAMBETH											
58	Daredevil	Member, Elder	19	M	Black African	1-3	X			X	X
59	Kingpin	Member, Inner Circle	25	M	Black Caribbean	>10		X		X	
60	Bullseye	Member, Inner Circle	26	M	Black British	>10		X	Avengers		
“INVADERS” GANG, LEWISHAM											
61	Scorpion	Member, Elder	25	M	Black African	4-6	X			X	X
62	Octopus	Member, Inner Circle	28	M	Black African	7-9		X			
63	Lizard	Member, Elder	24	M	Black British	7-9					
64	Goblin	Member, Elder	19	M	Black British	4-6		X			
“SINISTERS” GANG, SOUTHWARK											
65	Electro	Member, Elder	33	M	Black Caribbean	4-6	X	X		X	X
66	Calypso	Member, Elder	34	F	Black Caribbean	>10	X	X			
67	Mysterio	Member, Younger	15	M	Mixed	1-3				X	X
68	Vulture	Associate	16	M	Black Caribbean	1-3				X	X
69	Sandman	Associate	13	M	Black Caribbean	<1					

Table 2.4. Aggregate demographic information (N=69)

Characteristic / trait (either observed or self reported)	Gang Member	Gang Associate	Total
<i>N (%)</i>	52 (100%)	17 (100%)	69 (100%)
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	45 (87)	8 (47)	53 (77)
Female	7 (13)	9 (53)	16 (23)
<i>Ethnic group</i>			
Black or Black British*	51 (98)	13 (76)	64 (93)
Asian or Asian British†	–	1 (6)	1 (1)
Mixed Race‡	1 (2)	3 (18)	4 (6)
<i>Age range</i>			
12–14	1 (2)	2 (12)	3 (4)
15–17	17 (33)	6 (35)	23 (33)
18–20	20 (38)	5 (29)	25 (36)
21–23	3 (6)	–	3 (4)
23–25	6 (12)	2 (12)	8 (12)
26 and above	5 (10)	2 (12)	7 (10)
<i>Locality (London borough)</i>			
Croydon	11 (21)	3 (18)	14 (20)
Hackney	8 (15)	4 (24)	12 (17)
Haringey	5 (10)	3 (18)	08 (12)
Lambeth	21 (40)	5 (29)	26 (38)
Lewisham	4 (8)	–	4 (6)
Southwark	3 (6)	2 (12)	5 (7)
<i>Highest position held within the gang</i>			
Younger (or equivalent)	13 (25)	–	13 (19)
Elder (or equivalent)	28 (54)	–	28 (41)
Inner circle (or equivalent)	11 (21)	–	11 (16)
Associate	–	17 (100)	17 (25)
<i>Longevity of gang association (years)</i>			
≤ 1	–	3 (18)	3 (4)
1–3	29 (56)	11 (65)	40 (58)
4–6	17 (33)	01 (6)	18 (26)
6–9	2 (4)	2 (12)	4 (6)
≥ 10	4 (8)	–	4 (6)

*Notes: * Black African (including Somali), Black Caribbean, and other Black backgrounds; † Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and other South Asian backgrounds; ‡ denotes in all cases White and Black Caribbean.*

Source: Author's compilation.

As can be observed, 53 (77%) of the total 69 gang members and associates are male, which is appropriate given that London's gangs are predominantly or even exclusively male (see **Chapter 4**). In an attempt to capture the complex male-female relations within and without gangs, however, five "girl gang" members, two female gang members, and nine female associates that provided ancillary services for male gangs also comprise the sample.¹²

The mean age of my respondents was 19.7 (range: 13–34) with a three to four year average period of serious gang association (range: nine months to 14 years). Variation based on age and longevity of gang involvement was important for achieving an accurate understanding of gang behaviour at all levels of the organisation: from the top down and bottom up.¹³ Younger interviewees were typically prospective gang members or recently acquired gang "youngsters", well placed to discuss initial recruiting mechanisms. Older interviewees, by contrast, were generally "youngsters" competing for "elder" status, established gang "elders", or "inner circle" gang members in leadership positions, all able to reflect upon temporal change, strategic decision-making, and organisational mobility within their gangs (for a detailed discussion of these categories, see **Chapter 4**). Interviewees listed as "retired" were no longer active in their gangs and thus offered a retrospective account of gang life. Gangs that were emergent at the time of my fieldwork were often characterised by more transient membership than those gangs that were more established. Six

¹² According to Coughlin and Venkatesh (2003: 46), "[g]irl gang is the conventional terminology in contemporary research (by male and female researchers and feminists alike). Male-only and male-dominated gangs have typically been referred to simply as gangs, whereas female-only and female-dominated gangs are gender marked with the diminutive 'girl'".

¹³ The peak age for gang-related victims and offenders in London was 19 in 2006, down from 24 in 2004, with "a substantial number of individuals being much younger than this" (MPS, 2007). The decision to join a gang indeed occurs primarily between the ages 12 and 15 and "newer gangs tend to be comprised of younger members" (Bullock & Tilley, 2002: 27).

interviewees claimed allegiance to more than one gang or had maintained multiple associations over time.

Young people with a cultural background associated with the Census category “Black or Black British” are disproportionately represented in the sample. Given that “some criminologists have criticised the ethnographic tradition of ‘sampling’ primarily or exclusively ethnic minority gangs because doing so may reinforce the notion that gangs are solely an ethnic minority problem”, it is prudent to outline the reasons for this distribution (Aldridge et al., 2008: 35).

First, London’s gangs are drawn predominantly from black and minority ethnic communities, with 50% of gangs comprised “mainly of African-Caribbean members” (MPS, 2007: 6).¹⁴ Gangs in London are typically estate-based and principally a reflection of the ethnic composition of those estates (Young et al., 2007). Lewisham has the highest proportion of black Caribbean residents of any local authority in the country, followed by Lambeth and Hackney, respectively, while the largest African settlements are in Southwark. According to census data, London as a whole is home to more than two thirds (69%) of the black population in England and Wales.

Second, it was much safer for me to access black gang members than it was to access gang members from other racial and ethnic groups. Current resources, particularly from the voluntary and community sector involved in gang intervention and prevention in London, are almost exclusively focused on the black community (MPA, 2007). Given that distinctive minority language practices are used as a means to

¹⁴ The term “mainly” is used because there are few *single* ethnicity gangs in London (Pitts, 2007). As for the remaining 50%, “MPS intelligence systems are not configured to identify whether these are newly arrived migrants or British born” (MPA, 2007).

construct and reinforce gang affiliations (Mendoza-Denton, 2007), my linguistic capabilities also prohibited communication with gang members drawn from Turkish and Eastern European gangs in north London; Hispanic gangs in south London; Bangladeshi, Filipino and Vietnamese gangs in east London; and Indian, Pakistani, and Bengali gangs around the city centre (MPS, 2007). As the MPA (2007) observe, “[t]he different cultural make up of gangs means that each one operates in a different manner, consequently each gang needs a bespoke plan to facilitate proper engagement”.

Gang members and associates in general had negative formal education experiences and limited success in the legitimate labour market. Only 17% of those eligible reported completing any post-16 education, nearly 40% had never worked, and most of those that had worked were employed only in unskilled or manual occupations. Many if not most of the sample had experienced a chaotic childhood and had been processed through various points of the criminal justice system. Common experiences included a disrupted family life (e.g., parental abandonment, separation, or death), a residential history characterised by multiple moves, and time spent either in care or in custody. They also shared long and complex histories of violence and victimisation.

During my time in the field, I met many people that had suffered direct and indirect violent experiences but did not join gangs. Some indeed became involved in peace and protest work or simply did nothing. Nevertheless, the narratives of the 69 gang members and associates reveal that 19 (28%) had previously been threatened with guns, nine had been shot at and three actually had been shot; 55 (81%) had previously been threatened with knives and other weapons, 28 (41%) had been stabbed, and nine

had been injured with other weapons; 41 (60%) had been robbed; and one (1%) had been kidnapped. Sunfire, a female gang member, recalled one particularly gruesome experience:

I was beaten up ... with a bottle nine times in the back of my head. ... [B]ottled nine times before it bust on my head, there was a great crack on my head. Nine times ... because it wasn't cracking on my head that's the only reason why she carried on, do you see what I'm trying to say? She bottled me nine times and I actually felt it nine times. I will never forget it.

All 69 gang members and associates reported that they had family or friends who had been shot, stabbed, or injured and at least seven reported that they had family or friends who had died as a result of such violence. Magneto, for example, disclosed the following: "I've had one proper deep, like friend killed and two school friends that I used to go school with killed. So altogether three school friends dead".

Nineteen of the 69 gang members and associates had previously spent time in custody, either in an adult prison or young offenders' institution. Free offenders and incarcerated offenders are not necessarily qualitatively distinct or mutually exclusive groups (Copes & Hochstetler, 2010). It would be quite inaccurate to depict all previously incarcerated gang members as unsuccessful or less capable criminals, not least because this undermines the role of prison in the lives of gang members (see **Chapter 4** and **Chapter 5**). It further implies that an unusually large number of "successful" criminals operate undetected. What is clear from my fieldwork is that the 69 gang members and associates had committed many more offences than they had been apprehended for or charged with. As such, even those who had been in prison had also spent large portions of their time as active and free offenders.

The full offending history of the 69 gang members and associates is not known but

the quotation below highlights the extent to which some of my interviewees had committed to a life of crime:

I was really deep in it. I was in the deep end of the deepest that you could get, knives, gun crime, everything, right. Carrying guns, going on, going on moves with big men, like, to rob places and everything like that. I was in deep. I was shotting (selling drugs), I was selling drugs, I was selling class As. Burglary, stolen vehicles and whatever. You name it, I done it.

(Cyclops)

Information gathered during the interviews indicates that at least 55 (80%) of the 69 gang members and associates had committed violence against the person (including, abduction/kidnapping, assault police officer, common assault, actual bodily harm, grievous bodily harm, indictable firearms offences, threat or conspiracy to murder), 49 (71%) had been involved in robberies, and 44 (64%) had possessed illegal drugs with the intent to supply. Other crimes included domestic burglary, fraud and forgery, theft and handling stolen goods, vehicle theft and unauthorised taking, motoring offences, and public order, such as affray, drunk and disorderly, and violent disorder.

2.2.ii Overcoming data limitations

The above is of course all self-reported crime data, which is notoriously unreliable (Hughes, 2005). A common criticism of interview-based gang studies is indeed that, despite being the most direct source of information, gang youth are often either too compliant or too recalcitrant to be taken at face value (Spergel, 1990). On the one hand, gang members are skilled in the language of the professionals with whom they come into contact: the language about them, not the language their experience lives in

(Hallsworth & Young, 2008).¹⁵ On the other hand, gang members' general "mistrust or wariness" of others exacerbates the possibility of understatement, exaggeration, concealment, or outright deception, which exists in any conversation (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991: 24). Of course in any research, "[w]hat people say ... is shaped in part by their own personal agendas—by what they would like to get out of participating in the interview, what messages they would like the world to hear, and what their present political loyalties dictate they should say" (Weinstein, 2007: 355). Perhaps the articulated state of gang organisation simply implies that some gang youth lack perspective on the true nature and extent of gang activities.

In the spirit of transparency, I wish to acknowledge a further limitation in the data, which is that I rely largely upon retrospective accounts of my interviewees' motivations for joining and leaving gangs and their experiences while within them. The problem with retrospective accounts is of course that they are contingent upon memory, which is selective and fades with time (Sudman & Bradburn, 1973). Generally speaking, salient events are recalled more easily than events that are frequent or mundane. With hindsight most people also tend to rationalise their motivations. The experience of actually having been in gangs, in other words, likely affects how gang members think about gangs. There is evidence from work on recruitment to social movements, for example, that people present their decisions to join as being more ideologically motivated than they were at the time (see Viterna, 2006). Gang members are not necessarily ideologically motivated but they have

¹⁵ Some gang members have even undergone training or cognitive behavioural therapy (such as within a prison setting), which shapes the composition of their language. Answers to common questions may also have been rehearsed previously in police interrogations, sentence planning meetings, parole board reviews, *et cetera* (Brookman, 2010).

brought into a mindset that might not have been present at the start of the joining process.

To mitigate gang member “mythologizing” (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996: 49) and my literally interpreting their “audience-pleasing war stories” (Klein, 1995: 190), I relied upon behaviour either observed or corroborated by others. Patience and persistence was the key. I visited most of my interviewees on multiple occasions and spent extended periods on their time and on their turf. I demonstrated my interest in their life stories but was careful not to impose any of my own preconceptions about gangs upon them. I also had gatekeepers and earlier respondents verify that I was neither an undercover police officer nor government official in advance of all initial encounters.

I spent weeks hanging out in some communities before ever really asking a question. This, combined with my decision not to pay interviewees, helped build trust and distance my work from that of the busy television producers and journalists who entered the field around the same time but worked toward an immediate deadline and specific story. Journalists are renowned among gang members for remunerating their subjects (sometimes by throwing lavish parties), staging conflict, and encouraging certain newsworthy behaviours, including the use of stereotypical gang “costumes” and the brandishing of weapons.¹⁶ Take, for example, the words of Daredevil, an elder in the Knights gang:

[Journalists] just go in there all guns blazing and think ‘oh we know everything ‘cus we talked to the people that are involved in gangs’ but really they’re talking to a bunch of wannabes that don’t know nothing. They’ve never seen a gun or been on an estate in their life but you’re talking to them about gang life? And you’re paying them! They don’t know nothing.

¹⁶ *BBC News*, 10 January 2009.

I truly believe my interviewees felt genuine ownership of their narratives and in turn I received an honest portrayal of their lives. Nineteen of the 69 gang members and associates, for instance, were revisited over time and some of those 19 interviewees revised prior statements once they came to know me better. Daredevil added:

If you just wrote your book from what you've heard, like from all these conferences and so-called experts, people would not take that serious. People would read the first page and think, 'where did you get this from?', bam and not read it. But, 'cus you've heard what we have to say and you're going to quote us, you've got proof, like bam, people are going to think 'yeah, he did his research, he spoke to so and so, he spoke to gang members and he's got his research properly'. So people will take this serious.

The University of Oxford brand further helped distinguish my study from any previous, primarily journalistic, research in which some of my interviewees had taken part.

2.2.iii Affiliates, the unaffiliated, and key informants

In addition to gang members and associates, I interviewed 15 non-criminal associates of gangs, identified henceforth as "gang affiliates". Gang affiliates were distinct from gang associates in as much that they did not actively/consciously participate in criminal or delinquent gang pursuits. They were the friends, relatives, and current or former girlfriends/partners of gang members who I interviewed in an attempt to understand the sphere of influence of gangs. They were referred to me through parent contact and support groups, parents' evenings at local schools, and other relevant forums. Many of them spoke of having spent a period of time blissfully ignorant of their gang affiliation, even when they benefited from it through financial

compensation or local social recognition. Two gang affiliates still remained in a state of “denial” and were unwilling to recognise or admit that their child was anything more than peripherally involved in gangs because of the stigma attached to the label. Xavier, a Generation X gang elder, offered the following insight into why parents might become indifferent or incurious about the gang-related activity of their children:

You see young boys give their mum money and she knows what they’re doing. She knows that they’re selling drugs. Do you see what I’m trying to say? Because your parents love you, they keep a blind eye to it. They know what you’re doing or they have a slight feeling what you’re doing but when a person’s in love, they see a person for how they’d like them to be rather than how they really are.

Indeed, although 12 of the gang affiliates outright condemned gang membership, three of them surprisingly advocated for it as a route to redress and economic advancement (see **Chapter 3**). Five of the total 15 gang affiliates had lost loved ones to gang violence, while two, simply by way of their relationship to a gang member, had experienced violence at the hands of rivals seeking to provoke or extract revenge upon the gang and its members.

In an attempt to ensure the validity of interpretations and provide a nuanced account of gang behaviour, focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 27 “young people” not affiliated with gangs but living in, or adjacent to, gang neighbourhoods. The mean age of this group was 18 (range 15–21). Twenty-four of the 27 young people had simply made the conscious decision not to actively participate in gangs, while three self-identified as having been excluded or rejected from gang association. Seven of the 27 young people had been victims of gang intimidation or violence in the past. Eight of the 27 were college students involved in grassroots campaigns against

gang-related, gun-assisted, and knife-enabled crimes. Five of the 27 young people were members of benign “peer groups” on the fringes of offending or collectively involved in delinquency (Hallsworth & Young, 2006: 64). Repetition of several key themes and interpretations during the cross-case comparisons indicates the possibility that many young people grapple with similar issues and share similar experiences regardless of gang membership.

An additional 87 interviews were conducted with individuals who had experience working with gangs and young people and/or were in possession of intelligence pertaining to specific gang activity. I utilised local CDRP (as established by the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act) among the police, local authorities, probation service, health authorities, the voluntary sector, and local residents and businesses, to access these “key informants”. Of course such individuals provided information about the phenomena from their specific position vis-à-vis youth gangs, which may or may not have introduced sources of bias. Actors may have conformed to duty expectations, for instance. The data are treated with this recognition in mind, not as a source that is simply a *better* reflection of reality when different from that collected from other interviewees. In short, each facet of the data collection is recognised as contributing a particular set of information to the study (Weerman et al., 2009).

Table 2.5 below details the sample of “key informants” by institution or role. Many of the key informants were operational or strategic stakeholders who had active knowledge of their localities and direct contact with young people. Interviews with them were often conducted *en route* to accessing gang members and other young people, not least because in many cases key informants saw my interviewing them as

an opportunity to first screen me before referring others for interview. Key informants thus served as vital “gatekeepers”, that is, “individuals in an organisation that have the power to grant or withhold access to people or situations for the purposes of research” (Burgess, 1984: 48). In the absence of key informants occupying such a position within an organisation, as was the case in some public settings involving gangs, I simply befriended community elders, church pastors, and small business owners, who in turn sponsored my entry into the group or acted as guarantors of my safety and legitimacy within the community. As one key informant (KI II) advised me: “If you want to know gangs, you’ve got to know every hairdresser, every barber, every DeeJay ... the youth workers, the faith workers, the networkers, the movers and the shakers in the community. They can help you”.

Table 2.5. Breakdown of “key informant” sample by institution (N=87)

Institution	Detail	N	%
Law enforcement	MPS, MPA, and SOCA representatives	28	32
Youth Justice	Lawyers, YOS, YOT, and CPS representatives	8	9
Secure estate	Probation officers, HMYOI, and MOJ representatives	6	7
Third sector	Voluntary and community organisations (including faith-based groups), community leaders, and youth engagement and outreach workers ¹⁷	13	15
Education	Teachers, head-teachers, learning mentors, and PRU/“short stay” school staff	9	10
Health and social care	NHS practitioners, ¹⁸ social workers, housing officers, and community wardens	8	9
Politics	Elected representatives	3	3
Media	Professional filmmakers and journalists who had experience documenting gangs and serious youth violence	7	8
Academia	Leading researchers in the field	5	6
		Total	87 100

Source: Author’s compilation.

See **Appendix A** for a full list of acronyms and abbreviations.

¹⁷ Including ex-offenders who had obtained their credentials while in prison or out on licence.

¹⁸ Includes a trauma surgeon with experience attending to victims of gun and knife crime.

2.3 ACCESS

The primary obstacle to gang research is most obviously access. First, the criminal nature of gang activity ensures it generally remains hidden from public view.¹⁹ Second, there is a code of silence and protection from outsiders that prevails among gang members (see **Chapter 3**). Third, gang members are a small, albeit significant, minority of young people.²⁰ Bennett and Holloway (2004: 313) extrapolate, for instance, that there are only 20,000 active gang members in Britain, with a confidence level of plus or minus 5,000. They acknowledge that this is likely an underestimate given that their data is based only on those gang members aged 17 and above in the arrestee population from 1999–2002. Nevertheless, this figure is still less than 0.2% of the approximately 11 million children and young people in Britain.

Venkatesh's (2008) now infamous encounter with gang members in the stairwell of a Chicago housing project perhaps best illustrates how naïve and dangerous it is to approach gang members at random and announce, "I am a sociologist and I want to study you" (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991: 9). In order to identify gang members and establish multiple safe points of entry into their world, I opted instead for the tried and

¹⁹ By "going native" (Monti, 1992: 326), researchers often succumb to their own "seductive interest" (Punch, 1979: 16) in gangs. Sánchez-Jankowski (1991: 24), for example, physically fought his subjects in order to gain their approval, which is certainly "not an ethically acceptable way of doing research, even if the results had proved interesting" (Sullivan, 1994: 1642).

²⁰ The true scale of gangs and gang members is unknown, in part because the agencies that engage with them lack consistent data collection and sharing protocols (Hughes, 2005). Law enforcement and court records in particular are routinely criticised for being "incomplete, inaccurate, confusing, conflicting, [and] outdated" (Hughes, 2005: 103). Based on a Home Office estimate (Squires et al., 2008: 43) of only 356 total gang members in London, for example, each of the 171 gangs identified by the MPS in the 2007 *Pan-London Gang Profile* would enjoy a roster of around two people. This would not, by the Home Office's own definition (see Sharp et al., 2006), constitute a gang. Pitts (2007: 74) estimates that in the London borough of Waltham Forest alone, around 600–700 young people aged 10–29 are directly involved in gang activity, which in turn "adversely affect" over 8,000 friends and family members (approximately 4% of the borough population), not to mention all those "professionals directly and indirectly involved with and affected by gangs". The MPS have also separately identified the 420 "most serious gang members" in south London, 150 of which are currently in custody (House of Commons, Home Affairs Committee, 2009: 86).

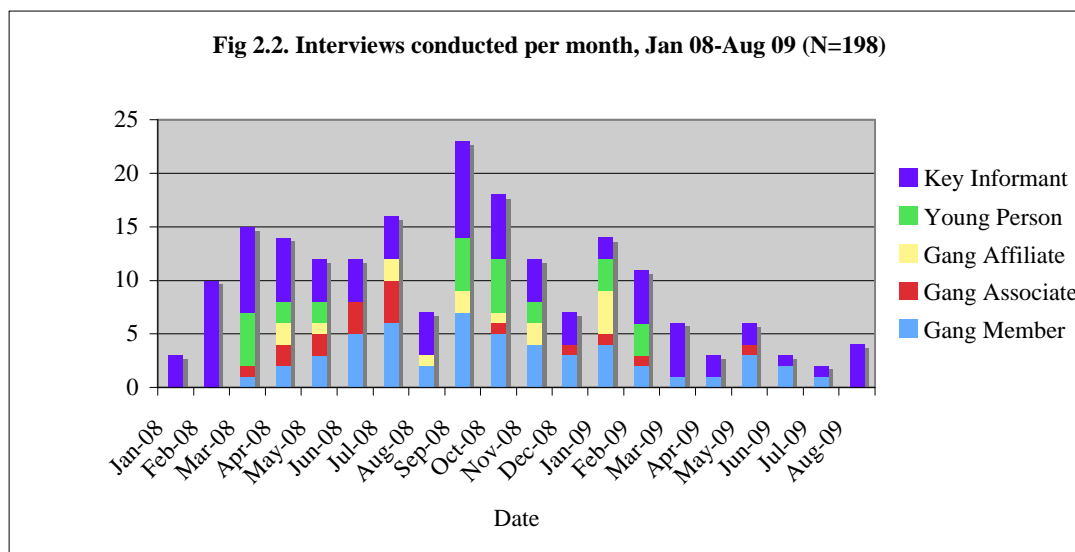
tested “chain referral” method (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Chain referral sampling is a technique commonly employed in field studies of gangs and other “hidden populations” (Lee, 1993: 45). As Decker and Van Winkle (1996: 37) note, “this procedure begins by initiating contacts with individuals close to the issue being studied and ‘snowballing’ out from these initial contacts to include others in their social circle”. The “vouching” intrinsic to snowball sampling also enables earlier respondents to verify the legitimacy of others as “gang members” and their eligibility for interview, a central concern in all field studies (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996: 41).

Selection effects are somewhat inherent to gang research. Gang members referred by other gang members, for example, are not necessarily representative of gang youth—they are screened and selected both consciously and unconsciously by the individual making the referral. Gang members referred by a particular agency are likewise not at all representative of gang youth—statutory services often work only with tangential gang members referred to them by other agencies (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). It can be difficult to move across a large number of networks of gangs, moreover, for “gangs are, by definition, self contained networks with antagonisms toward other networks” (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996: 40). The result is that “interviews are often with self-nominated gang members who refer the researcher to their friends, who look a lot like them” (Hagedorn, 2001: 52).

As Blaxter et al. (1996: 145) note, “research is the art of the feasible”. To achieve sufficient variation of gang members and avoid a continuous stream of friends and allies, I consciously asked my interviewees to identify and nominate individuals who not only met the relevant research criteria but also were *different* to them in particular

ways, as described above (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). I also worked with multiple unrelated gatekeepers and regularly “restarted” the snowball sample with different gangs in different localities across my fieldwork site.

My sample evolved from initial contacts through the continuous process of negotiation and renegotiation toward a point of informational “saturation” (Agar, 1996: 135). As is common with snowball sampling, the pace of the study was anything but orderly (see **Figure 2.2**). In some instances, it was difficult to initiate the first few contacts in a given locality, only to be inundated with interviewees later. In other instances, referrals arrived thick and fast, but quickly tailed off. During the months of August and December, for example, progress was often curtailed because of personal vacations. Toward the end of my fieldwork I thus moved toward more purposive/theoretical sampling to ensure variation and representative coverage, which is common in qualitative research. As such, cases were selected based on some appropriate characteristic required of the sample members (i.e., gang membership or association) and because they were considered most representative of the population of interest as a whole. I finished interviewing in August 2009 but remained in the field for four additional months observing, fact checking, and corroborating my findings. During this time I also corresponded with my previous interviewees via email and telephone. Aside from the pressures of writing up my research, part of the reason for my finally leaving the field was the birth of my son in March 2010.



Source: Author's compilation.

Several intermediaries were involved in accessing some interviewees. The process of connecting with Gambit, for instance, illustrates the unique nature of particular contact chains. In November 2007 I attended a lecture delivered by American civil rights activist the Reverend Jesse Jackson in Oxford. There I met a consultant who upon learning about my research kindly introduced me via email to someone working within the Home Office's Violent Crime Unit. This individual subsequently arranged for me to meet with a senior police officer that invited me through an intermediary to present my research proposal to a Youth Justice Board (YJB) practitioner forum. A local authority policy manager present at this event went on to refer me to the head of youth charity operating in south London, who in turn scheduled my meeting with Gambit. Introductions were safely made and contact information was exchanged. Six months and six people to obtain one interview: a case of going through all six degrees of separation.²¹

²¹ Many of these intermediaries were of course also interviewed and are included in the sample of "key informants" for the present study.

As noted above, opportunities arose out of my fieldwork that introduced me to a range of new contacts and interviewees. I was involved in a project to adapt the U.S. Gangs Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) programme for a British audience, for instance, which apprised me of a social network spanning both sides of the Atlantic and admittance to a range of primary and secondary schools sites in London.²² I also participated in a number of community-based gang intervention programmes, not least to demonstrate my commitment to the cause and the extent of the community relationships I had built. One such programme ran over a number of weeks in the spring of 2008, and acquainted me with a group of approximately 25 teenagers, many of whom were attending to fulfil the requirements of sentences, orders, and agreements supervised by the local probation service or YOT. Through informal conversation with this group I gained knowledge of some of the distinctive language and customs of gang members, which in turn helped inform the design of my interview questions. Some of these young people even went on to participate in the study as interviewees and to refer their friends and associates to me.

Accessing certain key informants was at times just as arduous as accessing gang members and associates. First, it was costly in terms of time and resources to contact those who were remote, not conventionally listed, or accessible only through agents and administrators. I canvassed in person and via email, letter, and telephone, organisations throughout London who worked with young people either involved in gangs or at risk of association. To attract the attention and interest of the most influential individuals, I frequently attended conferences, workshops, events, and community-based discussion forums throughout the country. Second, meetings were

²² GREAT is a school-based, law enforcement officer-instructed classroom curriculum administered by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), a component of the Office of Justice Programs (OJP), U.S. Department of Justice.

often rescheduled at short notice or conducted in multiple sittings to accommodate annual leave entitlements and hectic personal and professional calendars. During my fieldwork, a small number of contacts even switched roles or changed jobs entirely, which relinquished them of their authority to broker access to young people for interview as arranged. One contact sadly lost his father on the morning of our first scheduled meeting. Two others were involved in separate accidents that required lengthy hospitalisation and rehabilitation. Virtually all contacts promised greater access to gangs and gang members than they actually delivered. To ensure my fieldwork continued uninterrupted I thus accessed multiple networks and maintained a variety of separate contact lists. Overall, this approach maximised the breadth of data collected, while providing an important check on internal validity.

Once contact had been made it of course had to be sustained. This required me to establish trust with individuals and within organisations, some of whom were “research wary” and concerned that their participation in the study would tacitly announce a “gang problem” within their local community (Aldridge et al., 2008: 37). The onus typically placed upon me was to prove I “cared” about young people, had a genuine desire to make a difference, and was not just “another” researcher exploiting the gang issue to advance my career (Aldridge et al., 2008: 38).²³ My experiences as a middle school teacher in the South Bronx and Lower East Side of New York City certainly helped my claim to authenticity in this regard.²⁴ My teaching credentials, moreover, generally reassured my contacts that I was adept at engaging and working

²³ Heightened media and research attention focused on “gangs” within the research site resulted in many of my gatekeepers being inundated with similar requests to interview young people.

²⁴ I even utilised the access afforded me as a certified teacher to negotiate admittance to relevant networks of fellow educationalists.

with young people.²⁵ Access to young people was of course predicated on my receiving clearance from the national Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). Access to prisons was likewise contingent on me passing a Police National Computer (PNC) background check.

Accessing MPS personnel and data specifically required me to register the present study with their “Strategic Research Unit” and present a research overview to the steering group of the Network Alliance. The MPS, in return, courteously agreed to uphold my commitment to preserving the anonymity and confidentiality of all research participants, including offenders. This was important as full disclosure ran the risk of countless unforeseen consequences, the least of which would have been the interruption of the research (see **Section 2.5**).

I interviewed at length law enforcement personnel ranging in service and experience from three to 30 years. These police informants were approached at strategic (Chief Superintendent, Superintendent, Chief Inspector), operational (Inspector, Sergeant, Constable), and civilian (Police Community Support Officer, MPS Intelligence Bureau) rank levels both as observers and as potential infiltrators of gangs. Officers were located across the service in Borough Operational Command Units, such as in Criminal Investigation Departments (CID) and Safer Neighbourhood Teams (SNT), but also within Central Operations (CO), Specialist Operations (SO), and the Specialist Crime Directorate (SCD).²⁶ Given that the police not only conventionally disrupt gang activities, but also recruit gang members as confidential informants

²⁵ I hold a Master’s degree in teaching with an emphasis in “middle childhood education” and “students with disabilities”. I am licensed to teach in New York and Minnesota.

²⁶ Specifically, CO19, CO20, SO6, SO15, SCD1, SCD2, SCD3, SCD7, and SCD8. See **Appendix A** for a full list of acronyms and abbreviations.

and/or cooperating witnesses, some officers contributed to the study as “covert human intelligence source” handlers and covert surveillance specialists.

The MPS interviews were conducted in a variety of settings, from offices at New Scotland Yard and the Territorial Policing Headquarters in Westminster, to station canteens and local coffee shops across the research site. MPS interviewees provided privileged information about trends in gang activity and avenues for locating gang members. In some instances, they furnished confidential lists of the names of gangs and their estimated sizes. In return, I addressed, where possible, their questions regarding general issues about gangs and provided access to gang research from other scholars. To supplement my interview data, I also attended intelligence briefings, participated in relevant police-led training sessions and workshops, and went out on patrol with officers (which required me to sign a waiver and wear a MPS issue armoured vest). Attaching myself to the officers that felt comfortable for me to do so provided the opportunity to learn more about the relationship between the police and the policed.²⁷ It also facilitated my visiting recent crime scenes to better appreciate the spatial distribution of gang activity. Time spent with officers informally during social gatherings further enabled me to build trust, which was essential for ensuring entrée into the famously guarded police establishment (Punch, 1979, 1986).

2.4 DATA COLLECTION

I was conscious during my fieldwork that my values, preconceptions, or even physical

²⁷ So as not to compromise my standing with the latter group, I claimed no formal affiliation to the police and always identified myself as an academic researcher.

characteristics were potentially potent sources of bias. My experiences as a teacher appropriately moderated my affect. Teaching also lent me some credibility with young people, particularly those fascinated by American gang culture and for whom my living and working in New York City was a source of prestige. Gang members likely accepted me because they did not perceive me as a threat.²⁸ I was so different from them (white, married, educated, middle class) that my interest in their lives was peculiar enough to intrigue. I was also young enough to relate to them as young people and physically fit enough to conduct my interviews *in situ*. Having lived in a number of multicultural cities (Leicester, London, Minneapolis, New York, Oxford), “speaking and interacting with those from different ethnic backgrounds was not novel” (Sanders, 2005: 25). But as a male, I concur with Venkatesh (1998) that my exposure to the lives of the women I met was perhaps somewhat circumscribed.

My interview schedule was very much a working document; the exploratory nature of qualitative research lent itself to some hypothesis generation and the discovery of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It was nonetheless developed based on the advice and input of my supervisor, Heather Hamill, and the research instruments designed by the “Eurogang Program of Research”, which consist of questions drawn from a number of studies of juvenile delinquency and gangs (Weerman et al., 2009). It was also developed based on my learning as a teacher—that although young people often have a short-attention span and can be hesitant of highly-structured and directed discussion, they are enthusiastic conversationalists, particularly when their own lives are under discussion (Slavin, 2006). In short, gang members like to talk about

²⁸ Young black men primarily fear being attacked by someone of the same ethnicity. In the period from 2002 to 2005, in 74.2% of homicide cases with a suspect where the victim was black, the perpetrator was also black (Home Affairs Committee, 2007: 16–17).

themselves and their experiences.

Over time, questions that were unlikely to contribute toward answering my research questions were eliminated. Those that remained were arranged in a coherent and logically progressive sequence, piloted and revised accordingly. The final semi-structured interview format and specific series of questions I hoped to have answered is located in the **Appendix B**. The mix of convergent and divergent questions provided a greater structure for comparability over that of entirely unstructured interviews (Kitchin & Tate, 2000).

In conducting many of the key informant interviews, little documentation was needed beyond a topic outline based on the “Eurogang Research Program Expert Survey” (Weerman et al., 2009) or “aide-me moiré” containing a few brief, very general questions (Arksey & Knight, 1999: 96). My initial key informant interviews during the first three months of 2008, however, were particularly important for developing probes and prompts, which supplemented the core questions as a means to seek further elaboration, clarification, specific examples and so on. These interviews, which I initially approached as a pilot study to test the feasibility of my fieldwork, were also important in raising my awareness of potential follow-up questions and where scenarios or hypothetical situations could be introduced in an attempt to elicit specific information and/or bring to life respondents’ previous experiences (Walters, 2003).

As Rubin and Rubin (1995: 12) suggest, “[t]he researcher’s empathy, sensitivity, humour and sincerity are important tools for the research”. The evolution of

conversation with all parties was in practice much more open-ended than anticipated. Interviews ranged from short exchanges to over five hours in length, with an average duration of approximately two hours. The reflexivity of the interview design helped in my building rapport with respondents. In the words of Thrasher (1928: 245):

[By rapport it] is meant that condition of mutual responsiveness which encourages free interchange of confidences and promotes sympathetic understanding without the interposition of formal explanations and qualifications. It involves a community of experience which provides a common universe of discourse and common sentiments and attitudes. Practically it means that those *en rapport* interpret each other's behavior by signs and more subtle suggestions which often escape the casual outside observer because of his lack of the common experience which makes the rapport possible.

Interviewees were indeed encouraged to openly express the validity of their experiences within their personal “frame of reference” (Kitchin & Tate, 2000: 214).

In an attempt to reduce my interviewees' prior inhibitions, all interviews were conducted in a relatively informal manner. Interviews were also performed in pre-arranged public and/or neutral “safe” settings, including, in the case of follow-up interviews, interviewees' homes. Venues included classrooms, offices, and conference rooms generously provided by local stakeholders, as well as cafés, pubs, fast-food restaurants, parks, playgrounds, parked cars, and even the alcoves and stairwells of tower blocks. Where possible I made a conscious effort to provide refreshments for my interviewees and to sit at their level to avoid any visible status divide.

Where interviews were recorded verbatim, it was with the complete knowledge and permission of the interviewee. Digital audio files were transcribed, anonymised, and

coded thematically.²⁹ Given the topics under investigation, however, it was not always possible or appropriate to record my interviews. Some interviews developed quickly at times or in places where the use of visible electronic equipment would have been risky or would have compromised the candidness of the interviewee. Some interviewees simply requested not to be recorded. I relied on extensive note taking in all such instances, supplemented at the earliest opportunity with any contextual information that was difficult to document at the time, either because the production of substantial written notes while engaged in conversation interfered with the flow of the interview or was distracting for both myself and the interviewee (Hibberd & Bennett, 1990).³⁰

As Powney and Watts (1987: 139) contend, “one of the most basic rules of interviewing is that the most interesting material emerges when the recorder is switched off”. I filled five 210x148mm (A5) fine ruled notebooks with field notes in total, which I stored in a locked cabinet at my home to provide sufficient data security. My research subjects grew so accustomed to my writing in a journal while “in the field” that I am confident such behaviour was taken-for-granted as the work of an academic and thus had little influence on surrounding affairs (Burgess, 1984). The reader must be aware, however, that all quotations recorded by hand and reported in the thesis are not strictly verbatim. Instead, quotations derived from paper and pencil

²⁹ Following Aldridge and Medina (2008), all original non-anonymised versions of the data, including the voice recordings of interviews, were erased from both the original storage device and the computer hard drive once transcription had occurred. Anonymised transcripts, a data source of some 400,000 words, were password protected and encrypted using recommended encryption software in an attempt to better safeguard interviewees’ anonymity and confidentiality. The digital key to my informants’ details was stored separately on an external computer hard drive. Paper printouts were kept to an absolute minimum (forced in part by the early death of my home printer) and shredded after use by an industrial crosscutting paper shredder.

³⁰ These additional notes later proved useful for identifying patterns in my fieldwork data.

interviews are “very close to verbatim and in no way distort the respondent’s language or intentions” (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991: 17).

2.5 ETHICS

I entered my fieldwork conscious of the behaviour-modifying effects of social investigation (see Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939) and thus maintained transparency in the research process throughout its duration, including my goals and intentions regarding the use of data collected. I also made no attempt to conceal my identity as a doctoral research student, both in my initial appeals for volunteers and in my written and verbal communication with participants. All participants had their privacy protected through the practice of “informed consent”, which prevents observation of private behaviour without the explicit and fully informed permission of the person being interviewed or observed (Burgess, 1984: 200).³¹ I am confident given the decisional power of my interviewees that those who agreed to participate were reasonably prepared to discuss the questions and subject matter in which I was interested. Interviewees were all given the opportunity to read through the interview schedule and pose their own questions. They were also informed that their participation was voluntary, that they were free to withdraw at any time, and that they could decline to answer any question. At no point were my interviewees exposed to unnecessary stress, manipulation, or personal risk.

³¹ Participation in the present study was contingent only on active verbal consent as opposed to active written consent. For gang members, police officers, the violently victimised, *et cetera*, lending one’s signature to an official consent form is a routine procedure that can evoke feelings of anxiety, fear, and suspicion (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

Although all interviewees were requested to not provide specific details of criminal activity (e.g., dates, addresses, and victim identification), and, in the case of gang members and associates, asked not to discuss the details of any planned offences, my fieldwork did introduce me to behaviour that society considers both delinquent and criminal. In the spirit of similar research, I adopted a stance of neutrality toward such behaviour (see Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Varese, 2001; Venkatesh, 2008; Hamill, 2011). While this was uncomfortable for me at times, “[i]t must be obvious, that unless one is able to take this position, sociological research cannot be done on groups such as gangs ... that research leaves out a critical part of the phenomenon” (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991: 16). I also took comfort in the fact that most crime goes unreported to the police and therefore I really only learned about things that others knew and could have reported if they were so inclined.

Although no clear consensus exists on a complete set of ethical rules to be followed when conducting research involving human subjects, a general rule is that parents or guardians of children under the age of 16 are required to consent to their child’s participation in research (Arksey & Knight, 1999). This was achieved in four cases, but in six others key informants agreed to act *in loco parentis* to “oversee the consent process, talk with the young people involved about the study/risks/etc., answer their questions, and ensure their rights are protected” (Weerman et al., 2009: 15). This was a necessary shortcut, not least because the “[r]elatives of active gang members who are unaware of that membership are not easily identified for the purposes of a study or interventions” (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996: 44). To target parents because their child was an active gang member (in effect providing them with knowledge that they may not otherwise have), moreover, would violate any commitment to preserving

interviewees' anonymity. Given the safeguards already in place for doctoral research at the University of Oxford (e.g., transfer and confirmation of status, approval of the Central University Research Ethics Committee, administrative and supervisor oversight), I deemed it unnecessary to introduce additional safeguards to protect children from questions about subject matter they regularly confront in school, in the media, at home, and in their peer groups (Esbensen et al., 1996).³²

2.6 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

For ease of analysis, all 69 gang members and associates are identified by the pseudonyms presented above. All other interviewees have been allocated a "role" code as follows, which is accompanied by an identifying Roman numeral that corresponds to the order in which they were originally interviewed:

GA = Gang affiliate

YP = Young person without gang affiliation

KI = Key informant

Opinion is divided as to the extent to which researchers should try to conceal the identity of those already in the public eye, as some degree of exposure is to be expected (Arksey & Knight, 1999). Many of my key informants were indeed accustomed to speaking on the record and welcomed having their views publicly reported and attributed. Nevertheless, the privacy and confidentiality of public

³² The 1989 Children's Act in Britain and Article 12 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child both advocate actively involving children in issues that affect them.

organisations and their representatives has been guaranteed because the information provided to me was not necessarily accessible in the public domain.

Any data presented in descriptive form represent generalised patterns that came out of my fieldwork. Any idiosyncrasies noted in relation to these generalised patterns are identified as such. As Sánchez-Jankowski (1991: 17) notes, “[t]he reader should assume that what is being described is a social pattern that was consistently observed unless otherwise stated”. Quotations are employed throughout the text as examples of these patterns or idiosyncrasies. We move now to **Chapter 3**, which addresses my first central question: what is the business of gangs?

CHAPTER 3

GANG BUSINESS

A feast is made for laughter, wine maketh merry: but money answereth all things.

(Ecclesiastes, 10:19)

Reputation of power, is Power; because it draweth with it the adhaerence of those that need protection.

(Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*)

This chapter is dedicated to unravelling the business of gangs: what gangs do and how they do it. I begin by examining my interviewees' motivations for gang membership; motivation provides an important context for understanding the key functions of gangs. I then present in succession the evidence for gangs to be conceptualised as recreational, criminal, and entrepreneurial groups. Finally, I discuss the resources needed to sustain a criminal enterprise and then analyse the relationship between gangs and organised crime to determine whether or not gangs constitute systems of extra-legal governance.

3.1 MOTIVATIONS FOR GANG MEMBERSHIP

One way to understand the business of gangs is to focus on the reasons why gang members joined gangs, because in theory there should be some overlap between the ends and means. This section focuses primarily (albeit not exclusively) on the question of what influenced my interviewees to join an *existing* gang because in most cases they faced a situation in which a gang was already present in their area. As

discussed throughout this chapter, the above is an important caveat because emergent gangs look very different from established gangs. Gang members were individually asked to name their primary and secondary motivations for gang association both in terms of “pull” or “push” factors, which is a popular typology in the gangs literature (see Decker & Van Winkle, 1996: 65). These self-reported reasons for joining, presented in **Table 3.1** and expanded upon below, provide an insight into rationalisations for participation in gangs.

As can be observed, all 52 interviewees were motivated by personal concerns and private grievances as opposed to ideological goals. The assumption inherent in all responses was that given the selective incentives offered by gangs, people inside of them generally live better than those outside. Interviewees reported pecuniary motives above all others, closely followed by the desire for “protection”.¹ In other words, my interviewees joined gangs because they believed gangs offered them the organisation they needed to: (1) fulfil their personal objectives, through the business deals of the gang and the useful contacts it offered; and (2) negotiate social spaces, which they perceive to be unsafe.² There was also some indication of victims becoming perpetrators wanting to take control of justice. A “critical incident” (Ferguson et al., 2008: 133), such as an attack upon themselves or their family members, at times precipitated a period of reflection among my interviewees, which resulted in their

¹ This is protection “writ small” and as it pertains to protection from bullying and other gangs, the elimination of competitors, and, in some cases, the intimidation of lawful right holders. Unlike mafias, street gangs do not seek to govern both the under- and upper- worlds (Gambetta, 1993). Gangs are ill equipped to supply protection “writ large” (e.g., services like local dispute settlement; protection in relation to informally-obtained credit and the retrieval of loans; protection against police harassment; and the intimidation of customers, workers, and trade unionists for the benefit of employers) because both their organisation and membership are too young and they have not yet acquired the adequate resources (see Varese, 2011: 6). Indeed, to access these services, gang members must themselves pay protection money to people above them in the criminal food chain (see **Section 3.6**).

² These two points are commensurate with the literature (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Knox, 1994; Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1995; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Pitts, 2008).

decision to join. As one key informant quipped: “Today’s victim is tomorrow’s perpetrator seeking revenge” (KI LXXXVII).

Table 3.1. Self-reported reasons for joining a gang (N=52)

Pull Factor	Primary Motivation		Secondary Motivation	
	N	%	N	%
Money	29	56	14	27
Protection	12	23	22	42
Peer affirmation / status / “respect”	5	10	9	17
Existing relationship / friendship / familial connection	5	10	4	8
Revenge / retribution	1	2	2	4
Excitement / rebellion	-	-	1	2
Total	52	100	52	100
Push Factor				
Poverty / dearth of opportunity	30	58	13	25
Living in a gang-affected area / area perceived to be unsafe	14	27	27	52
Absence of family / supervision	5	10	7	13
Boredom / nothing else to do	3	6	5	10
Total	52	100	52	100

Source: Author’s compilation.

As can be observed, pull and push factors naturally overlap (i.e., the pull of money corresponds with the push of poverty). The role that existing family and friendship ties play in gang recruitment is theoretically distinct and thus addressed in detail in **Chapter 5**. Below, I focus only on the three most common (and what I believe are the most important) pull factors for gang involvement.

3.1.i Money

Gang members make money in a variety of ways, not all of them illegal. Much as Aldridge et al. (2007: 19) found in their study of gang members in an undisclosed English city, most of my interviewees had legitimate earnings through paid employment, state benefits, and student grants, while others relied on “income in kind”, such as living with others without paying rent, for daily survival. A small number of interviewees had also qualified as “youth workers” via private accreditation and diploma mills in order to exploit the now burgeoning gangs intervention industry, demonstrate a legitimate source of income, and better account for any time spent hanging around on estates with gang members.

The vast majority of my interviewees’ income was derived from criminal ventures. To make ends meet, my sample engaged in what Sánchez-Jankowski (1991: 132) describes as “crude economic activity”. A handful of interviewees made money selling pirated music and movies, for example, but in this age of streaming content over the Internet, they said revenues were significantly down. Less than a quarter of the 52 interviewees sold other stolen or counterfeit goods, but they also bemoaned the fact that financial returns were tied to the variable quality of the merchandise. Around a third of gang members participated in rudimentary domestic burglaries, noting that multi-occupancy student houses could in principal yield scores of high value, portable, and easy to dispose of electrical items (e.g., laptop computers and mobile phones), but in practice, the declining costs of traditional household goods had eroded profits.

Nearly all interviewees had committed street robberies at some time, but monetary gain from street crime was also minimal. Although children en-route home from school or drunken adults alighting from anonymous drinking establishments onto public transport were easy robbery targets for my interviewees, the proceeds were barely enough to obtain the necessary accoutrements, such as jewellery and trainers, which kept them ahead of their peers in the competition for social esteem. As Flash observed: “You rob a phone it’s cash straight up. But you get five pound here, ten pound there. And what, these shoes [cost] £100, this jacket [cost] £300. That’s a lot of phones”. The risks inherent in such overt criminal displays were further cause for concern:

Back in the day when I first started, that’s, that was the thing, you gotta rob someone for a nice phone or like a fiver or, or stuff like that. Now robbing people for that will just get you sent to gaol for, for nothing. Now, unless you’re, if you’re going to go to gaol for robbing someone, you’re going to rob someone for like a hundred grand or like £10,000 worth of crack or weed or whatever. That’s why people, that’s when people are going to rob someone. They’re not going to rob someone for a phone or nothing, that’s petty, that’s rubbish to them.

(Electro)

Despite the above, street crime was common amongst my interviewees and, in order to gain the reputation sought through its perpetration, it was often violent. I thus agree with Pitts’ (2007, 2008) assessment that respect and recognition are far greater incentives for the more overt criminal activity of gang members than monetary gain.

Gang members perform many of the activities described above independent of their gangs. Why then do individuals join gangs to make money? The answer, as we shall see later, lies in the nature and extent of gangs’ illegal drugs enterprise. Indeed, the most common “surreptitious source of income” (Ruggiero, 2000: 47) for my interviewees was narcotics sales. And narcotics sales, as described in detail in **Section**

3.4.ii, are seen as providing a more lucrative source of income than any of the activities described above.

3.1.ii Respect and status

Money and status enjoy a symbiotic relationship. On the one hand, individuals join gangs to make money and that money enables them to purchase things, which in turn boosts their status among peers. On the other hand, individuals join gangs for status, but to achieve optimal social standing in our consumer culture they must earn and spend money. The proceeds of crime in theory could provide gang members “with the means to buy their way up and out” of their immediate neighbourhood and social situation, “but because this is where they find their most appreciative audience, this seldom happens” (Pitts & Palmer, 2006: 14). Gang members’ conspicuous consumption habits indeed challenge the very notion that gangs are inherently antisocial. My interviewees spent their takings primarily on short-term concerns, notably consumer electronics, designer clothing, nights out in London’s West End, women (including prostitutes), and luxury German saloon cars. As Juggernaut observed:

You just spend money on nonsense, you spend like, a £1,000 on a jacket, do you know what I mean? Money just gets spunked on absolutely nothing. You might go out and spend £300, £400, £500 at a club. You know, you go out and buy the most expensive bottle of champagne, you know, instead of buying just shots of drinks, you’ll buy the whole bottle. Yeah, they call it ‘quick money’ ‘cus it goes quick.

Some interviewees even spoke of having lived financially in the present because they simply did not expect to live long enough to enjoy their money in the future. Life in

the gang is all about keeping up appearances or, in gang parlance, demonstrating “swagger” (style). Gang members often come to define themselves by what they possess. Harpoon, for example, lived in a dingy one-bedroom council flat with his mum and two siblings, yet he drove an £35,000 Audi Q7 3.0 TDI Quattro S sports utility vehicle.³ I was sitting in the passenger seat of this car when I inquired about the carets conspicuously wrapped around his wrist and neck. He replied: “The bling bling is all just show, you feel me. I heard you was coming so I wore it”.

Respect, which Anderson (1999: 33) defines as being “treated right or granted the deference one deserves”, forms the core of an individual’s self-esteem. As young black men, a number of my interviewees saw little hope in attaining status and respect, indeed demonstrating worth and competence, through legitimate means. They described how “people like them” continued to experience disproportionate educational underachievement and disaffection, accompanied by high levels of school exclusion, which were both symptoms and causes of socio-economic disadvantage.

The comments of Lizard are representative these views:

Being black is nuts, the odds are against us, man. People push us in the corner and force us to do things and then when we do, they go on like they are shocked and better than us. I refuse to go to work to get paid shit and treated like shit. Look at my mum and how hard she works and it doesn’t get her anywhere. Fuck asking, I’m taking. I’m like Robin Hood. Take from the rich to feed the poor.

Few opportunities existed on social housing estates for broader participation in community life (e.g., after-school groups, volunteer organisations, and supervised

³ At first I was sceptical whether or not this really was Harpoon’s car because gang members are renowned for using hire cars to deceive police and enhance their image. It turns out, however, that Harpoon would be unable to borrow this car even if he was so inclined—when I inquired out of curiosity into hiring a similar car from the local Avis “Prestige” rental company, the nice young lady on the telephone informed me that at 27 years old I was too young to be insured. Harpoon was at the time only 24. The car number plate was also personalised.

sports), which meant that street-oriented peer groups dominated social roles for my interviewees. Gangs became a status vehicle through which they could pursue and achieve the positive regard of other youths and co-construct a social system based on what it means to be “respected”. Of course gangs are self-referential, an “echo chamber” or enclosed space for producing reverberation of peer affirmation. As Kubrin (2005: 362) explains, “[a]lternatives to conventional status attainment are thus limited to manifestations of physical power or domination, verbal agility, or displays of material wealth”. The aggressive campaign for status and “search for respect” (Bourgois, 2003) on the streets becomes “the only game in town” (Anderson, 1999: 94). And to be a true player you have to join a gang.

3.1.iii Protection

For many of my interviewees, gang membership was a rational adaptation to the perennial threat of violence that was present in their communities; a threat that at the time of my fieldwork had been conflated by the nature and number of high profile youth homicides. When Billy Cox, 15, was gunned down in his bedroom on Valentine’s Day 2007, for instance, he became the third teenage boy shot dead in south London in just 11 days. He followed James Smartt-Ford, 16, killed in front of hundreds of people attending a disco at Streatham ice arena on February 3, and Michael Dosunmu, 15, shot in the early hours of February 6, as he lay in bed at home in Peckham. These murders sparked fear over gangs and “nihilistic anarchy” (to use Prime Minister David Cameron’s words)⁴ on London’s streets not seen since the 2000

⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 25 August 2007.

murder of ten-year-old Damilola Taylor was attributed to associates of the “Young Peckham Boys street gang”.⁵ As one key informant observed:

The game has changed. Gangs will now kill you in public with your family and friends watching. They will run up in a man’s house and assassinate him while he’s asleep. The home used to be a sanctuary but now nothing is off limits. Kids are sleeping in body armour for fear of being shot in their beds. They feel like they can never be alone. They must always watch their back because someone’s out there waiting for them to slip.

(KI XLII)

The proximate presence of these threats, both real and perceived, increases support for gangs and enables them to successfully persuade others that they belong to and protect the community. One interviewee, a resident of the Fenwick estate where Billy Cox died, explained:

It’s too dangerous for kids to play outside ‘round here. Parents see their children with gang members on the estate but don’t say anything because it’s better to be on the inside than on the outside. It’s better the devil you know than the devil you don’t.

(GA VIII)

During my fieldwork, this was a common sentiment among parents, particularly those residing in black communities that were historically “over-policed and to a large extent under-protected” (Macpherson, 1999: 312).

A general lack of confidence in and resentment of law enforcement due to repeated searches and militaristic police patrols contributed in part to my interviewees seeking alternative forms of redress through gangs:

The police is all about numbers. They’re not about anything else. If there’s like a 10 per cent decrease in crime on the streets, then they’re all right with that regardless of whether things are actually any safer or not. Out here you’re not living under police protection. No matter how many times the police said they’ll protect you, they’re not going to protect you. So we find

⁵ *BBC News*, 9 August 2006.

our own protection. We protect our own ... 'cus the police ain't doing shit for us, we police ourselves. We equip ourselves with tools to protect ourselves, you understand? We're a phone call away. Where the police? Police just tell you to go file a report.

(Chrome)

You're automatically stereotyped. It's like all black people are criminals. [The police] got this policy where, more than three [people in a group], you're considered a gang so you automatically get stopped. ... After a time, you feel like, 'oh we a gang now? Okay, we'll show you gang'.

(Xavier)

Me personally, I've had a bad experience with the police before as well so it makes you just hate them. It makes you want to do the opposite of what they want. So basically they kind of like trigger your desire to be part of this [gang]. Yeah. It's their attitude 'cus sometimes there's things that the police do that are totally unnecessary. It's like, you're walking, you're walking, you've just come back from college minding your business and suddenly the bully van pulls up and 10 of them jump out all yelling and screaming. You're put up against the wall, they put their hands in your pockets. 'Jump'. I've got my work in my bag, they chuck things out, there's nothing in it. Search it, there's nothing on you and then they just leave it all there, 'sorry'.

(Frenzy)

That gangs become integrated through conflict with and recognition from police is a longstanding theme of the gang literature (Thrasher, 1927a; Hagedorn, 1988; Klein, 1995; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). Among gang members, the police were often portrayed as “the biggest gang”. Some police officers I met even naïvely described themselves as part of “the biggest gang” (KI LXVI). The MPS Territorial Support Group, which conducts the vast majority of stops under Section One of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, and Section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000, is now affectionately known among gang youth as the “Take, Smash, Grab” or “boy dem”; a reference to the way in which officers supposedly “boy” (“bully”) alleged gang members into submission (KI LXVI). Faced with such circumstances, many of my interviewees sought out gang involvement as a form of self-preservation in a world where conventional protection was seen either as not available or perhaps not applicable to them.

3.1.iv Motivations and beyond

The section above outlined the conventional gang recruitment story by presenting key individual motivations for gang membership. In **Chapter 5**, I present the untold story of how gangs themselves resolve who gets to carry their name, because at the end of the day gangs decide whether they want to extend an invitation to an individual and not the other way around. Nonetheless, my data suggest that gangs exert two types of social power that attract youth: (1) coercive power, that is the threat or actual use of force and violence; and (2) the power to pay, buy, or impress, and to delegate status and rank to its members. This is highly consistent with the work of Knox (1994). It appears people join gangs primarily for money, status, and protection. The questions now are whether and how gangs truly provide such things. This speaks to the business of gangs. Having outlined the reasons why my interviewees joined gangs, we turn now to what it is gangs actually do. The remainder of this chapter will explore whether or not the true business of gangs is recreation, crime, enterprise, and/or extra-legal governance.

3.2 TOWARD THE BUSINESS OF GANGS

I argue below that the above four categories of gang “business” (i.e., recreation, crime, enterprise, and governance) essentially represent stages through which gangs progress in sequence, but at different speeds. Gangs evolve from adolescent peer

groups and the normal features of street life in their respective neighbourhoods. Consistent with the literature, they are held together by conflict with other neighbourhoods and groups, including police (Thrasher, 1927a; Suttles, 1972; Hagedorn, 1988), but also the fun and excitement associated with delinquent behaviour (Katz, 1988). As gang members mature, however, a life of self-absorption and debauchery gives way to the need to pay rent and put food on the table. Crime becomes the means not the end. Gangs recruit new members into subordinate positions, expand their operations, and focus their efforts on making money. Over time, the running of the enterprise is left to the second-generation gang members and their own subordinates, while the founding members focus on establishing a social system for subsequent generations to work within. Finally, once they acquire the necessary resources, gangs reach their highest stage of development and come to resemble not just “crime that is organised” but “organised crime” proper (see Schelling, 1971: 73-4).

To elaborate, gangs start out as purely recreational groups but over time they attain different functions, thus expanding the menu of goods and services they can offer their members and customers. The four stages of recreation, crime, enterprise, and governance are not mutually exclusive, but rather each stage builds upon the previous. If one were to think of a gang as a house, the “recreational” stage is the foundation. Even before the foundation is poured, however, the site is graded and excavated (youths gather and form relationships), the foundation lay out according to the plot map (local territory), and rough plumbing (norms of association) is installed and inspected. Only after this preparatory work is done can the foundation be poured (members self-identify as a gang). If we were to continue this metaphor, “crime”

marks the addition of the framing. This is when the house (that is, the gang) starts looking like a house. During this phase, all of the home's interior (roles) and exterior walls (boundaries) and the stairs (incentives) are framed. To keep the weather out (or outsiders, in the case of gangs), the sheathing (hierarchy and leadership), roof (rules and regulations), shingles (punishment for violating the rules), exterior doors and windows (symbols of membership) are installed. I speak more about these features in **Chapter 4**. Next, "enterprise" corresponds with the installation of the guts of the home—the plumbing (suppliers), mechanical (finances), and electrical (people). Finally, "governance" sees the addition of the insulation, stucco or drywall. First the walls are insulated (the appropriate resources of intelligence and secrecy, violence, reputation, and technology, are acquired) then the drywall is fastened to the studs, textured, and painted over (gangs become institutionalised). With the appropriate exterior and interior finishes, the house is complete—the gang is an organised crime group.

Of course, without sufficient resources a house cannot be completed. Some fail inspection. Others get foreclosed on. Some burn down. Others get burglarised. The housing metaphor above is merely illustrative, but it is true to say that some gangs reach completion while others remain unfinished. Some developments stagnate. Others collapse entirely. Of the 12 gangs in my sample, for example, not one remains solely recreational but two (Queens and Thunderbolts) are still making the transition from crime to enterprise, which reflects in part their gender composition and shorter life span, respectively. Five of the 12 gangs present as mature criminal enterprises with tendencies for ordering exchange (Acolytes, Brotherhood, Generation X, Justice, Sinisters). The remaining five attempt to regulate the production and distribution of

one or more given commodities or services unlawfully (Avengers, Excalibur, Knights, Invaders, Marauders).

3.3 RECREATION

Bearing in mind that money, status, and protection were the primary motivations for gang membership among my interviewees, we can almost eliminate the notion that gangs are purely recreational groups. Rather, gangs start out as recreational groups. Indeed, the vast majority of my interviewees spoke of their reasons for joining an *existing* gang and not of creating their own gang of peers. The *origin* of these gangs was a different story. They were born out of familial connections and friendships formed in local schools, communities, and, in some instances, Mosques and Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which cater to devout congregations drawn from different ethnic groups. Ethnic minorities and young immigrants occupying an expatriate identity banded together around a common cultural heritage, shared experiences of cultural estrangement, and in response to repeat, sometimes racist, bullying and victimisation at school or on the street. Says Xavier:

The only thing that's keeping us together in the middle is our situations. That's what brought us together as a group in the first place is our situations. Either a single parent, no dad or no mum, or nobody just don't care about you and you're just out on the street living by yourself and you feel to have some associations to get ahead. So it's just our situations that brought us together.

With weak family ties in London or, in some cases, no reference group at all because their parents remained abroad, these youngsters formed gangs as a means of social support.

Membership within these gangs was not governed by strict rules and rituals, but rather occurred as a consequence of shared history. Members were simply friends who enjoyed similar interests, life trajectories, and experiences, not least the same spaces (schools and neighbourhoods). Scorpion described the rather innocuous origins of the “Invaders”, for example, as follows: “My older cousins basically started up this gang, which were just their peers from school. They started up this gang, soon it got a name and reputation, and it went on from there”. Gang names, in turn, were often derived from these spaces, regardless of whether they are imposed from within or without. As Bullseye explained, “If you’re from Clapham, you’re a ‘Clap Town Kid’”. The group provided activities and a social life. Sometimes these activities were delinquent, but if so, they were opportunistic and rarely acquisitive (e.g., fighting or acts of petty vandalism). Such delinquent “adventures” or “exercises” were rewards in and of themselves; they offered reprieve from boredom and released endorphins in the brain, which in turn created a “natural high” among participants (KI VII). Alcohol and cannabis, the use of which further constituted delinquent behaviour, then supplemented these feelings of exhilaration brought on by pain, danger, or other forms of stress. Early gangs were in essence social gangs.

The social aspect of gangs persists even when they evolve over time and through the stages outlined below. Consistent with Klein and Maxson’s (2006: 69) observation that “gang members spend much more time hangin’ than bangin’”, my interviewees spent vast amounts of their time “jamming about” or “hanging-out” together in their gangs. Such activity typically involved nothing more than sitting around listening to music, “spitting” rap lyrics, hustling girls, drinking alcohol, smoking cannabis, and

sharing stories—acts indistinguishable from those untaken by many adolescent peer groups.⁶ Wolverine outlined the average “day in the life” of a gang member as follows:

You sleep through the morning because you are out late and there’s nothing to get up for. There’s no set time for anything. You wake up, go out, meet your friends in wherever they hanging out, sit on the block. If it’s a weekend you’ll probably hear about a party, a house party or a party in a hall. You call as many people as you can and that’s it, you go.

A small number of interviewees even prioritised the social support and peer affirmation that gangs could offer in the absence of the family. These individuals characterised their gangs as surrogate “family” networks, using that exact term to describe them.⁷ Captain A was typical of this group: “People out here seems to find more love outside than in their own families. ... We were family in a sense of I could sit in their [gang members’] houses, laugh with them, talk to them, they’d drive me around and sometimes they’d even give me pocket money”. Overwhelmingly, however, gangs offered something more: a route to economic advancement.

Despite the weakened condition of the family in some gang-affected communities, for example, the vast majority of my interviewees appeared far more committed to their natal families than to their gangs. Life in the gang simply provided a means of contributing to the household. With his father in gaol and mother and grandparents working all hours to make ends meet (or at times perpetually incapacitated and intoxicated), Xavier, for example, assumed the role of “man of the house” at a young age. He explained, “I just needed to get more money and help my family. I wanted to buy a house, move my mum off the estate so she didn’t have to struggle no more”.

⁶ Even so-called “recreational” cannabis use is common among young people, for the drug is considered a “social lubricant” during times of collective relaxation (Vigil, 1988: 126).

⁷ Of course for some interviewees, gangs were quite literally “family” in the sense that parents, siblings, uncles, and cousins were fellow gang members.

Money mattered more to him than fraternity. He added that if had wanted to just “hang out and play Playstation” he would have joined a “youth club”.

Full participation in the social life of the gang also requires money. Gang members cannot frequent nightclubs, dine at restaurants, attend parties, gamble, drink alcohol, use drugs, *et cetera*, without paying their way. Suffice it to say, gangs may start as recreational groups and maintain their social role as they develop, but true gangs are more than recreational outfits.

3.4 CRIME

Although gangs begin life as recreational groups, crime and violence can quickly become intrinsic to group identity and practice. The precise mechanisms are unclear, but appear to be a mix of personal aspirations and interests coupled with the presence of external threats. Adolescence has long been associated with heightened rates of delinquent or criminal behaviour. American psychologist and educator G. Stanley Hall (1904: 404), who is widely accredited with bringing the term “adolescence” into common parlance, even argued “a period of semi-criminality is normal for all healthy [adolescents]”. Hall described adolescence as inherently a time of peak emotional turmoil, “suggestive of some ancient period of storm and stress” (xiii). Hall added that the legacy of storm and stress was “particularly evident in adolescents’ tendency to question and contradict their parents, in their mood disruptions, and in their propensity for reckless and antisocial behavior” (Arnett, 1999: 318).

Culture influences how individuals express and experience adolescent storm and stress. By engaging in criminal acts, for instance, my interviewees became people of “respect” in street cultures where respect was everything. Crime was rebellious and exciting. Other youths began to fear them. Girls were suddenly attracted to them. The only problem was that crime also attracted other criminals (in the form of rival gang members) and law enforcement. Gangs thus had incentives good and bad to strengthen their internal structures and become both much more cohesive in order to survive. As Wolverine explained:

We was committing crimes so we sat down together, it was like a meeting, I suppose and we just gave each other names and it started like that. Because it was not like socialising, it was actually going out to commit crime and do stuff. We was premeditating what we was doing before it happened. Planning it up.

Indeed, gangs at this stage often change their names to better reflect their criminal components. Once Elijah Kerr and the infamous “Younger 28s” gang graduated onto “steaming”, whereby they would rush into a store, bank, or betting shop, taking the till and whatever else they could find, or onto train carriages to rob passengers at knifepoint, for example, they were renamed “PDC” (Peel Dem Crew), “which has its roots in the Jamaican ‘peel dem’, meaning to ‘rip them off’ or ‘steal from them’” and better described the extent of their activities at the time.⁸ PDC grew throughout the 1990s to control much of the crack dealing in south London (Pritchard, 2008).⁹

The literature shows how external threats are important for provoking gang solidarity (Thrasher, 1927a; Short & Strodtbeck, 1965; Klein, 1971; Suttles, 1972; Hagedorn, 1988; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). People who cannot protect themselves

⁸ *The Guardian*, 25 February 2007.

⁹ The Wandsworth-based “SUK” (Stick ‘em Up Kids) share a similar descriptive name.

individually generally feel more secure in gangs because an attack on one is an attack on all and thus results in group retaliation. Hawkeye argued that when youths “come together and get tooled up ... literally tooled up—screwdrivers, spanners, cleavers, bats, hammers, whatever they can get their hands on”, against a common enemy they form an “unbreakable bond”. Gang membership, he added, was all about “strength in numbers”. The literature likewise indicates that the mere act of an individual categorising themselves as a member of a group is sufficient to lead them to display “in-group” favouritism (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). By positively differentiating their “in-group” from any comparison “out-group” that rests outside the bounds of intimacy, gang members achieve positive self-esteem. Favouritism also creates a fascinating double standard (Merton, 1968). While gang members view the traits of their own gang as virtuous they often perceive those same traits as vices in rival groups. During my fieldwork, insiders would describe aggressive gangs as assertive, for example, whereas outsiders would describe them as callous.

With little or no established collective reputation, gangs in this stage typically encourage their members to participate in “active street duties”, which help promote the fearlessness and ferociousness of the gang. New members are asked to rob and steal, for example, and to encroach upon rival territory, as Daredevil recalls:

[The gang] was just a group of friends from the area that just wanted, that went around to different areas causing the hype and then they just called each other a name from what they heard from a film and it's just started from there, then it just got bigger and bigger and bigger. ... We just [started] like doing unnecessary stuff like going to areas and causing problems because we knew we had the older lot had our back so basically we were fearless with anyone. So we used to go out to different areas, gang up, 'we're hard, we're blah, blah, blah', robbing people, starting fights, taking peoples' girls, that stuff. It's part of the buzz really. It just, when you know you've got people that will do anything for you, that will back you up if you were in any problem, you, you feel untouchable so you thought like you can go to this

place and be like bam, 'I'm here and you can't do me, nothing'. So it's part of the buzz and the hype.

Gang rivalries at this stage are really nothing more than manifestations of existing tensions between adjacent schools and neighbourhoods and, in some cases, urban music collectives that battle lyrically with each other.¹⁰ According to my interviewees, early gang turf wars were less about expansion and more about one-upmanship. There are home videos posted online, for instance, which focus entirely on the fact that members of one gang dare walk through the turf of another and deface their street signs. Exodus noted:

Like Peckham youths will come through Brixton, like 'yeah we can walk through Brixton' or Brixton used to go to Peckham and say 'yeah we can walk through Peckham' and it's like this is basically the boroughs will find a disrespect for and then they'll do something about it.

When dealing with parochial adolescents, however, things often turn personal. Gang member A sleeps with the girlfriend of gang member B. Gang member B unwittingly robs the little cousin of gang member C. Gang member C posts embarrassing photos of gang member D on the Internet. Indeed, in this digital age of instant messaging and perfect remembering what were once minor annoyances for gang members become public relations disasters. Gangs, in turn, become embroiled in a series of unresolved tit-for-tat rows, which, in respect of adolescent storm and stress, escalate into lethal violence. Events such as those listed above are the source of some of the most bitter and long-standing gang rivalries in London, yet because so much bloodshed has since past no one can remember what they are really fighting for.

¹⁰ This explains in part why music is so closely intertwined with the group identities of gangs (see **Chapter 4** and Stevens et al., 2009, for a discussion).

As discussed above, gangs evolve in part due to a high level of pre-existing violence in their communities. Gangs also evolve in response to a commitment to financial goals. In simple terms, as gang members mature out of adolescence, “bank balance” and the pursuit of material wealth supersede the desire for “street credit”:

When I first joined we weren't really on the making money thing, we were just like getting our name around, going around different areas going yeah, we're [gang name], don't fuck with us. But then as we got older we just started getting more organised, just working on money, like dealing drugs and stuff, just, we just wanted to make money, that was it.

(Scorpion)

When gang members work in syndicate, for instance, robberies may be carried out not only to enhance individual and collective gang reputations, but also to generate a “preliminary accumulation of funds”, which eventually could be invested back into criminal commodities such as drugs and guns (Ruggiero, 2000: 51). Hercules explained that once word gets around of “stockpiling”, robbing independent drug dealers in their homes is potentially very lucrative for gang members both in terms of “cash and stash”. Drug dealers are also in no position to call the police to settle their disputes. Juggernaut described one such robbery as follows:

Balaclava up with four other guys ... [we] comes in the house, gunbucks [the drug dealer]. Ties him with duct tape. ‘Where's the money? Where's the money?’ You know, tortures him, all the rest of it, gets all his drugs and all his money ... 200 grand that he's been saving for a rainy day.

Cash-in-transit robberies represent a similarly high-risk, high-reward venture for subgroups of gang members. Subgroups of three or four gang members will use stolen, “pool” (that is, shared vehicles registered under the name of a “clean” gang affiliate), or hire cars to tail Group 4 Securicor vans from depots in and around London (most notably, Vauxhall) until they reach retailers, banks, or petrol stations. Two (sometimes three) gang members wearing balaclavas will then approach the

delivery driver and overwhelm him with punches and kicks while he is in the process of replenishing automated teller machines with cash cassettes. On occasion threats involving knives or firearms are made, which compel the driver to hand over the cash box. The remaining gang member stays in the car as designated driver and lookout, thus facilitating a quick getaway.

Similar tactics are used for coordinated armed robberies of bookmakers and betting shops. Gang members will then use either gravity (i.e., throwing the box from the top of a block of flats) or handheld tools to pry open cash boxes. In one high profile case, twelve “Terror Zone” gang members from Lambeth stole £817,000 in under a year. They utilised ticket machines at train stations to launder security dye stained notes obtained over 19 separate robberies. Gang members would purchase cheap fares, pay with high denomination stolen cash, and simply pocket the “clean change”.¹¹

Despite the above, entry into the drugs business has by far the greatest influence upon gang structure and activity. In the recreational and criminal stages, gangs are like start-up companies with limited operating histories and narrow employee benefits. The founders themselves maintain these gangs. Gang value is based entirely on intangible assets, or what is known as “intellectual property” in legitimate markets. The first recruits to gangs enter at the ground floor and essentially receive the equivalent of pre-Initial Public Offering stock options. They join, in other words, because they see high potential return on their investment, but their investment is extremely high-risk because if the gang ceases being competitive and goes bankrupt, all stock options become worthless.

¹¹ *Daily Mail*, 22 May 2010.

A lot can go wrong during the recreation and crime stages. The target audience can reject the gang's "product". Another gang can come up with a "better idea". Key members of the gang can lose interest or end up dead or incarcerated. On the other hand, a lot can go right. The community can embrace the gang. The gang can connect with upwardly mobile criminals. Rival gangs can falter. In the latter scenario, the gang essentially "goes public" and the original investors are rewarded. The overall forecast for the gang changes, however, because the gang stops dealing in hypotheticals and counterfactuals and starts dealing in tangible goods and services (e.g., access to suppliers, greater prestige, more deferential treatment). Recruits, in turn, may no longer be investors willing to defer gratification, but rather consumers seeking immediate gratification without any of the costs. For the first time, people go to the gang as opposed to the gang going to the people. It is during the transition from crime to enterprise, therefore, that recruitment becomes a central concern for gangs.

I deal with the mechanics of recruitment in **Chapter 5**. The point I wish to make here is that once gangs become enterprises they also become more selective and sophisticated in recruitment—gang members stop recruiting their peers and begin recruiting subordinates. In business terms, the founding members, or "inner circle", become the directors or implementing senior officers. The first recruits, or "elders", become the managers and supervisors. The next generation, or "youngers", become the workers. And the business itself becomes drugs. I discuss these roles in detail below and again in **Chapter 4**.

3.5 ENTERPRISE

Like Sánchez-Jankowski (1991), I found the primary activity of gangs to be economic. Forty-one (79%) of 52 gang member interviewees explicitly characterised their gangs as remunerative drugs “businesses”, for example:

We are in competition as a business with other businesses, i.e., other gangs, other businesses for products, for opening hours, for size, for price, you understand? We are the competition, for security, for all of those things. Why do you think that young people be tolerant about getting employment? They find the ideas difficult to grasp because in the business they're involved in they get a credit line, a company phone, company car, bodyguards, you know, and these are all metaphorical statements.

(Electro)

Once you have the money to buy the drugs and distribute it, you are doing business. That's how I see it. ... If it's drug dealing, it's business ... you have to be there, you have to be there on the spot, come correct every time ... you have to start from the ground, it's hard. Just like working in Tesco's, stacking shelf and wanting to become a manager, working your way up. That's how it is. ... You got to put in the time, the effort, everything. Everything, just like how you do it in a 9 to 5 job. You have to be consistent, just like any other job.

(Xavier)

Scholars still in “denial” about British gangs (e.g., Hallsworth & Young, 2008) will no doubt disagree with this assessment, but there is support for it in the literature. Pitts (2007), for example, describes drug dealing as the major preoccupation of gangs in Waltham Forest. According to Aldridge et al. (2007: 19), “most” gang members in research city “were involved to some degree in [drug] dealing”. Three-quarters of the gangs profiled in Stelfox's (1998) study—albeit based on a postal survey of police forces in the United Kingdom—were likewise embroiled in some form of drug dealing. Existing unpublished MPS intelligence also shows that approximately 80% percent of London's 171 gangs participate in street level drug dealing and individuals who have links to gangs are believed to be responsible for 16% of London's total drug

supply.¹²

Within gangs, I found that the drugs business very much resembles the multi-level marketing structure of direct-selling companies such as Amway and Avon.¹³ Gang elders, as independent representatives of the gang, first develop the organisation by generating sales and building an active customer base. Once demand exceeds supply, elders proactively build and mentor their own “downline” (to use the direct-selling jargon) of distributors (youngers), who in time build their own distinct customer bases, thereby expanding the overall gang organisation.

During the recreation and crime stages, gang business is largely “expressive” and involves all gang members together. House parties, petty vandalism, and coordinated “raids” on rival gang turf, for example, help reinforce group fidelity and solidarity, even though there is little direct instrumental gain for those involved.¹⁴ During the enterprise stage, however, this all changes. The business of gangs now occurs within the context of subgroups. Individual gang elders are supplied by superior inner circle gang members who “make their living” simply by “selling guns or selling big pieces ... of drugs ... on credit with strings attached” (Wolverine). The inner circle is generally astute about their criminal exploits; they often take appropriate steps to

¹² Despite accounting for 11% of Londoners, black people of all ages accounted for 67% of those accused of supplying crack cocaine and almost 40% of those found in possession of the drug during 2003-04. Arrest referral statistics for the same period indicate also that almost half of arrestees who reported using crack cocaine but no other drug were black (Home Affairs Committee, 2007: 18).

¹³ Amway is a private American direct-selling company and manufacturer that uses network marketing to sell health, beauty, and home care products. Avon Products, Inc. is a public American multi-level marketing company, which traditionally uses both door-to-door sales people (“Avon ladies”) and brochures to advertise its line of cosmetics. In addition to selling, both companies offer representatives the ability to be involved in network marketing or “leadership” programmes, whereby representatives recruit, mentor, and train others.

¹⁴ Decker and Van Winkle (1996: 105) make a similar observation regarding American gang activity.

safeguard their true identities from clients and gang colleagues, such as by hiding behind their “street names” and by keeping multiple addresses:

If you're young and you're in a gang you cannot let anyone know where you live. You only can meet the people that you're with 24/7 every day, the people you've known the longest, yeah, know where you live. Because when you're young, people like to come to your house. ... But when you're old you can get killed outside the house, that's the difference. They'll probably come out with 10, 15 people and beat you up. And obviously that's distressing your mum. Yeah, if you've got a little sister, that's distressing your little sister. And if you're in a gang and you're high up you can't stay in the house and watch TV. They'll just do whatever they're doing outside the house inside your house. You have to come outside and confront them. ... So you're going to be fighting in front of your mum, your little sister, that's how it is and if you're getting beaten up with a pole, you're getting beaten up with a pole and that's how it is. Do you see what I'm trying to say? That's the reality of it. Yeah, so, you can't let no one know where you live. Yeah, you can't or you'd be in problems, yeah, because if the rival gang finds out where you live, they'll go to your house. And there's nothing that you can do.

(Sunfire)

Gang elders purchase from their inner circle small- to mid-sized drugs quantities on demand (see **Section 3.5.ii**). They either work alone or pool their resources in pairs to make a larger initial drugs buy. Elders then employ two or three youngsters below them to work what was known colloquially as the “drugs line”. Thor explained:

When the elders start a drug line business they get people to work on it and just pay them like £100 a week just to sit there and sell their drugs. That's it. They're 14 and they're getting £100 a week for nothing. Their parents are giving them money on top so they're coming to school with the freshest trainers everyday, they don't care. One hundred pounds is a lot to a little kid. For standing round giving like a fiend, what, two little rocks? That's it. Easy money.

The “line” refers to the client list, which is unique to each individual gang member. More clients equals more income potential, not least because it is easier to find new customers through existing networks of drug users than to establish new networks (Wilson & Stevens, 2008).

Complete lists of trusted users are stored on mobile phone sim cards akin to the Rolodexes of business executives. This explains in part why gang members often maintain multiple telephone numbers: one for family and friends, one for other gang members, and one for clients. Elders supply their youngers through a series of “blind drops”; whereby they strategically place drugs quotas wrapped in plastic bags into loose masonry, overflow pipes, toilet tanks, receptacle chambers, car wheel arches, *et cetera*, in advance. Directions are then sent via the encrypted network of Blackberry’s instant-message service, or, in the case of the Avengers, instructions recorded on MP3 players. Economic transactions are arranged by telephone, but mobile handsets are routinely changed in order to combat police surveillance (a trick some interviewees said they learned by watching the hit television series *The Wire*). As Psylocke explained:

[The elders] just drop off what they need to drop off and then they’re off to whatever they’re doing. Everything is hand delivered. They use pay as you go phones with no contract. They don’t use text messages. They don’t come on the street with the lower ground dealers.

Gang elders rarely handle the contraband in which they deal and really only carry weapons about their person in the minutes before they intend to use them. As a consequence, police accept that disrupting them poses a real challenge: “We know who [the elders] are and what they’re doing, but they’re like fucking David Copperfield. A call comes in or you swear you’ve just seen them with something, but when you stop and search them, they’re clean, it’s gone. It just vanished into thin air” (KI LX). Gang elders are indeed often savvy at deception and schooled in basic counter-surveillance. One member of the Avengers is even known to instruct subordinate gang members to dress like him and form a phalanx around him when out in the community. He takes deliberately complex routes to get to where he is going

and even conceals dustbin-liners full of clothes around his home estate in order to regularly change his appearance. Hercules confirmed: “He just does everything smart. He’ll do something and disappear”.

Youngers work the line either as “runners” responsible for collecting debts and delivering drugs to customers (on foot, on bicycles, or on mopeds disguised as pizza delivery vehicles), or as “shotters” responsible for selling drugs at street level. Nightcrawler added that some youngers are even sent out “on assignment” to explore “new markets” in areas where they are unknown to police.¹⁵ For their efforts, they receive a small wage or cut of the profits. As explored below, income variation between elders and youngers appears “highly skewed”, perhaps even similar in proportion to the wage disparity found in legal franchises and the gang famously documented by Levitt and Venkatesh (2000: 786).

Despite the cooperation and division of labour required during some transactions (e.g., somebody to hold the money, somebody to hold the drugs, somebody to sell the drugs, and somebody to keep watch), I saw drug sales as fundamentally an individual or small-group activity, not coordinated by the collective gang. The gang instead provides the reputational and criminogenic resources to sustain the enterprise (see **Section 3.6**). Elders earn income both from the retail mark-up on any drugs they sell personally and the sales volume they and their downline generate, as articulated by Juggernaut:

[As an elder] you can more sit back and make money. You’ve got everyone else running about for you. And even if you’re not doing something you’re

¹⁵ Principal targets are commuter cities with vibrant night time economies in East Anglia, the Midlands, and the “Home Counties” of southeast England that border London.

taking a cut out of something else, you know what I mean? You go out there and earn money trying to stay as much below the radar as possible. You're literally putting bits on people to say, 'Ok, well, I need you to go out and, you know, you've built up a line'. You know, you've got cats phoning that line, 'all right, here's the line, you go out, you sell the drugs. I'll give you the drugs, just go out and sell it. Yeah? This is what you're getting for a week', yeah? So they've got a weekly wage, which might be something like £500, but they're making five, six grand ... for you. ... Yeah, they're getting, like, a 10% cut out of it. You know, or there's a percentage that they get out of what's made. Peanuts compared to what, you know, your taking home for yourself. So they're getting a sum of money at the end of the week plus, you know, you're sat, you might be at home. Those are the kids you like because they're entrepreneurs. Sometimes they don't even know that they're working for me or working for me second or third hand. All you're doing is literally, now and again you come, you meet them, you drop the bits on them and you're in, you're out. The best way to put it to you is like the director or CEO of a company. Or like a General in the Army. He doesn't need to be out there on the front line but he still has the troops doing the work.

The pyramid business model thus requires some degree of succession planning, whereby elders watch out for promising youngsters to take their place once they assume a lower profile but exact a higher profit margin (see **Chapter 4**). One key informant (KI LIII), for example, told me the story of an 11-year-old who saved up his pocket money to purchase boxes of candy bars at wholesale, which he then sold individually in and around his school at considerable "mark up". After offloading his sweetie supply, he invested the profits into a small cannabis buy, which he similarly "flipped" into a greater surplus. He developed a client list of schoolchildren and used the confectionery business as a front for his drugs distribution venture. He was subsequently "taken on" by his drugs supplier, a gang elder who sought to develop a route into the untapped schools market.

3.5.i Supply

The rise of drug-selling gangs in London coincided with a number of important changes to the structure and nature of traditional organised crime. Following the installation of sophisticated antitheft technologies (e.g., closed-circuit television (hereafter “CCTV”) cameras and digital time-delay locks) in banks and transit vehicles, small firms of professional criminals identified the “business” of illicit drugs as a less hazardous and infinitely more profitable alternative to the heists and “one-off blags”, which previously defined their careers (Pitts, 2007: 21). One of my key informants, an ex-convict from London’s east end who served time on counterfeiting conspiracy charges, explained:

It ain’t easy being a criminal nowadays. Look around, there’s CCTV everywhere. Increased security, surveillance, forensic analysis, CSI (Crime Scene Investigation) shit. I paid a cheque into the bank yesterday and it took 15 minutes to fill out all the fucking paperwork. The world has changed. It ain’t like the old days. Big Brother’s watching. That’s why drugs are so appealing. If you’re smart there’s no need to get your hands dirty.

(KI XVIII)

By the late 1980s drugs were flooding into the capital as a result of increased mobility and the slow decline of a maintenance model of drugs bought on medical prescription. Drugs offered a “new way of making money that required no getaway car and ran less risk of informers” (Campbell, 1990: 5), which was important in the aftermath of the “supergrass” era.¹⁶ An added advantage was also that there was no victim running to the police. To the contrary, the “victims” were literally lining up to score their next high.

¹⁶ Derived from the cockney rhyming slang “grass” for grasshopper, meaning copper (police officer) or shopper (informer), the term “supergrass” was coined by journalists in the early 1970s to describe those police informants from the city’s underworld who testified against former associates in a series of high-profile mass trials (Greer, 2000).

Drug networks often follow immigrant flows (Hagedorn, 2008). Around this time, Jamaica's armed political gangs began exporting their violent trade in crack cocaine from the garrison communities of Kingston, Jamaica, to areas of Caribbean settlement in the southern United States and Great Britain. Displaced by the ubiquitous "war on drugs", Jamaican "Yardies"¹⁷ immigrated to the London boroughs of Hackney, Haringey, Southwark, and Lambeth and captured local drug markets, often violently (McLagan, 2006). In the summer of 1991, almost daily shooting incidents occurred in Brixton, including a gun battle near a children's playground (Thompson, 1995). Increased police presence merely displaced the problem to neighbouring Clapham, where, in 1993, Yardie gunmen murdered Police Constable Patrick Dunne in cold blood.¹⁸ As journalist Tony Thompson (1995: 58) once wrote, the Yardies' "willingness to display and use guns has virtually forced other criminals, black and white, to do the same, or risk being ripped off or shot dead by their Yardie counterparts".

The Yardies modelled a ruthlessly violent gang culture for local youths, the remnants of which can still be observed in gang members' use of military terminology and the presence of Jamaican gang subsidiaries in London, such as the Shower Posse and Shower Chicks in Peckham (Pitts, 2007). Perhaps their greatest influence, however, was in opening up a new unregulated market in illicit and extremely valuable product. Unlike the blags of yesteryear, the drugs business required a "relatively elaborate division of labour within a large workforce, that must maintain and protect the supply chain; market, package and distribute the product, protect the key players, silence would-be whistle blowers, collect debts and ensure contract compliance" (Pitts, 2007:

¹⁷ A slang term originally bestowed upon the occupants of government "yards" in the Trenchtown housing projects.

¹⁸ *Telegraph*, 18 February 2006.

22). Crack cocaine in particular was “a product that was bought by people who didn’t have the resources for buying multiple hits, and didn’t have places to store it without it being stolen, so that the number of transactions involved became very large” (Blumstein, 1995: 10). This gave rise to the recruitment of lots of people, and strikingly, lots of young people, who had not been in the market as sellers before. Street corner youth thus became the street level workforce, or “shop floor”, of the international drugs business and “gang-based social organization” (Castells, 1997: 57).

Gang members rely upon better-established and acquainted adult “business criminals” (Dorn et al., 2005: 38) for access to criminal commodities. In some cases, the illegal drug distribution business necessitates contact with business criminals from across London as part of the upstream and downstream supply chains. It does not always start this way. When gangs are new to the drugs business, small-time independent drug dealers often provide the only viable supply source. Once gangs develop their organisation, however, gang members become privileged customers and acquire the means to buy in bulk and go above their original supplier to their supplier and so on. Providing senior gang members are discrete and pay on time, they can establish a symbiotic relationship with adult business criminals. These business criminals are local wholesalers or so-called “middle-level” drugs distributors, who occupy a strategic position linking “upper” (importation and wholesale) and “lower” (retail) levels of the drugs market (Pearson & Hobbs, 2001: vi).

Suppliers are a scarce resource at wholesale level; having access to multiple suppliers improves the opportunities of individual gangs to maintain and expand their supply.

Juggernaut elaborated:

I wouldn't say I knew exactly where the stock [of drugs] was coming from. I knew sort of like, some of the people that we had to meet were at the top, like, you have some of the Turkish mafia who you go and get like your heroin from. ... They're grownups. Yeah, they're serious organised crime. We dealt as well with, not only myself personally but the family dealt with the Adams family. Yet again, they're very, very serious organised crime. You know, they're the modern day Krays, do you know what I mean? ... You get certain things from where people tell you. ... I mean, under table number 25 and, you know, you get someone else to hand over the cash and go there. 'Okay, that's where it is'. But you go down and you meet, like, you got some of the Russian mafia as well like, or you get Eastern Europeans now. You meet them down in the docks, you get stuff down there. ... They might have containers on the docks, I, ask no questions, get told no lies, you know what I mean? You know, when it comes to some of the drugs, like, you go and meet some of these old white dudes in the country that's grown it and he comes and shows you, 'Here's my, you know, greenhouse full of bloody skunk weed'.

Daredevil had less details, a reflection of his more subordinate position, but likewise confirmed: “[We] get the drugs from like a bigger family or big people that live outside of London”. Business criminals, in turn, are known to enlist young men and women associated with gangs to serve as couriers in a simple cocaine market structure that involves direct importation from the Caribbean. Electro described to me how “drugs mules” conceal on transatlantic flights small quantities of cocaine in their baggage or about their person by “secreting it in body passages” and swallowing it in grape-sized latex rubber packages. The appeal for some, he added, was not just the “easy money” but the promise of “an all-expenses paid holiday”:

Every time he paid us, he'd only pay us half, though. So we'd get the money for the end the last job and half for the next. The idea was he wanted to keep us on. ... There was a job that came up ... it was to bring some drugs back, drugs about my person, yeah, so from St. Lucia. ... He gave us a proper little shack ... a terraced house in the hills ... we had a swimming pool, a Jacuzzi, it was a proper pad, it weren't none of them wood shack things. . . . It

weren't even in an hotel, it was proper, you know, and he sent mans around to, like, look after us. We had drivers, if we wanted to go anywhere. ... We went to the clubs, we had all night, you know, we went to so many strip clubs. There was on strip club we went in called Solid Gold and like the queue in that place was unreal. We just walked straight past them all.

These "adventurers" in the drug trade often accept but do not fully understand the risks inherent in drug trafficking because they either enjoy the excitement or feel that they have little alternative (Dorn et al., 2005: 38). Electro was indeed consumed with family debt when he ventured out to St. Lucia, but never even made it past Customs and Immigration at Heathrow airport. He served eight years in prison for trafficking two kilos of cocaine.

3.5.ii Demand

Gang elders typically deal within lower-risk private networks. Buyers and sellers know each other and routinely cooperate in arranging illegal transactions that occur inside private settings, such as pre-booked hotel rooms, homes, or cars (sometimes parked at motorway service stations).¹⁹ The most-profitable customers are addicted wealthy professionals, because they are both discreet and reliable. Gang youngsters, by contrast, more often work within higher-risk public networks, which involve making sales to buyers in public settings such as streets and parks, or in semi-private spaces, such as bars, nightclubs, stores, hallways and common areas of buildings. Before the police shut them down in 2008, for instance, members of the Acolytes gang sold drugs out of an unmanned laundrette, concealing small quantities of product in their laundry and behind tumble driers and change machines.

¹⁹ By purchasing in a supplier's home everyone knows that the gang knows where to go if they get cheated.

Youngers put time in at street level for the same reasons any drug-dealer does: to develop useful contacts, establish a reputation as someone of strength and integrity, and to identify and exploit opportunities for preferment (Wilson & Stevens, 2008). As Vertigo mused: “You’ve got to work with your skills, you feel me. Every person has skills. Certain man learn maths through drugs ... in school they don’t learn maths but on the road they learn maths. We got 14 year olds like accountants”. Youngers maximise their profits through the number of transactions and customers served. The risks are greater, however, because deals are much more overt and buyers and sellers may not know each other personally. As susceptible as they are to undercover police “test purchases”, youngers typically carry drugs in their mouths so they can quickly swallow them. Based on knowledge of Crown Prosecution Service guidelines,²⁰ they generally sell just a few drug “wraps” or “rocks” at a time before going back to the alcoves and stairwells of their estates to pick up more. People who walk around with large quantities of product on them also become priority robbery targets. To avoid a reputation as someone always in possession, but also remind others of their role in a bigger organisation, youngers will instead tell new and unfamiliar customers that they first need to go visit a “friend” in order to fulfil their order.

The cannabis and cocaine markets are conducive to a degree of commercial individualism because both substances suit diverse lifestyles and attract a variety of social groups (Ruggiero, 2000). Different forms of cannabis come from different parts of the plant and have different strengths. Hashish or “Hash” is the commonest form found on gang estates, which is resin scraped or rubbed from the dried plant and then

²⁰ Being caught with 20 rocks of crack is enough to secure a conviction for “possession with intent to supply” (PWIT), which carries a much harsher sentence than possession alone.

pressed into brown/black blocks. It is mostly imported from Morocco, Pakistan, the Lebanon and Afghanistan. Herbal cannabis, by contrast, is made from the chopped, dried leaves of the plant and is imported from Africa, South America, Thailand and the West Indies.²¹ Herbal cannabis is usually not as strong as the resin form, although some particularly strong herbal forms with high levels of tetrahydrocannabinol (e.g., “skunk”) are cultivated in Holland and Britain. Hash costs around £80 per ounce or £16 for an eighth of an ounce. Herbal cannabis costs anything from £70 per ounce to £140 for strong strains such as skunk. Heavy and regular cannabis users use approximately an eighth of an ounce per day.

Even greater sums of money can be made from the sale of cocaine and “free base” crack cocaine. Cocaine comes from Central America through British entrepreneurs based in Spain and Colombians based in south London (Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007). In the capital, cocaine tends to sell for £45 a gram or £25 a half gram, although high-quality “Peruvian” cocaine (50% plus purity) can sell for up to £60 per gram and low-quality “budget” cocaine (under 20% purity) retails at as little as £25 per gram. According to Drugscope, Britain’s leading independent centre of information and expertise on drugs, a gram of cocaine makes between 10 and 20 lines for snorting, which will last two people anything from a couple of hours to a whole night, depending on the strength of the drug and the users’ appetite and tolerance for it.²² The average price per line is thus around £3. Profits are considerably enlarged when gang members “wash up” the cocaine themselves to make crack. A single “rock” of crack the size of a raisin and weighing about 0.2 grams, for instance, retails at around

²¹ Some herbal cannabis is cultivated in Britain, sometimes on a large scale to sell but usually by individuals in amateurish attic spaces or greenhouses for their own use. These individuals are rarely gang members.

²² <http://www.drugscope.org.uk/resources/drugsearch/drugsearchpages/cocaineandcrack>

£20. Slivers from the rock weighing approximately 0.08 grams sell for approximately £10.

Most drugs are “cut” with other substances to increase their volume and thus the suppliers’ profits. By the time a drug reaches street level it can be less than 10% pure. If inner circle gang members pool their resources they can collectively trade one kilo of cocaine every month, buying from white British middlemen at approximately £18,000 per kilo or £5,000 for a nine-bar unit. This is then cut and sold on to individual gang elders in ounce or multi-ounce units at approximately £700 per ounce (equivalent to £24,500 plus per kilo) or in crack form at approximately £3,000 per ounce (equivalent to £105,000 plus per kilo). Gang elders cut again and then sell on through their youngers at £40 per gram (equivalent to £40,000 per kilo) or in crack form at £20 per rock (equivalent to £100,000 per kilo). Gang elders may similarly purchase from Turkish and Albanian distributors or white British middlemen heroin at £33,000 a kilo, which is cut with cheaper agents before being sold on the street for the £45 a gram (equivalent of £45,000 per kilo). Heroin indeed comes from Afghanistan through Turkish and South Asian networks based here (Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007).

Success in the drugs business depends on acquiring the funds to make bigger drugs purchases. Generating better sales than the person above you in the food chain should lead to promotion, that is, an ability to go directly to the person who supplies your supplier. As Havoc explained:

The more you buy the less the mark-up, and that comes down more with time when your supplier trusts you. It still comes down to money. Money is

power. If you can dead the connect (buy the entire drugs supply), then people start to have to come to you. You become the man.

Magneto described the process of starting small and working up to something big as follows:

Say I buy one ounce of skunk from a dealer for £120. There is 28 grams in one ounce. An eighth is three and a half grams. Now, an eighth is £20 and, well I sell eight of them, that's £160. That's £40 profit. So, I flip this three times, I have £120 profit meaning I now buy two ounces. Now every deal I'm making at least £80 profit. Some of this has to go back in, like on scales [to weigh the drugs], and bags to sell, but you know what I mean. Do this five, six, seven times ... and you have enough to move up a level. Now, the dealer is getting to know you better and you're buying bigger bits so he'll probably give you a deal. So, you buy a half box, that's nearly £200 profit on every £450 invested. You see, it soon adds up. But where before you were just selling to your friends or people at school, now you might be setting up a line and having others sell for you. The next level is a quarter K. Nine ounces. That's, wait my phone has a calculator ... that's 250 grams ... 72 eighths, at £20 each, that's £1400, so over £600 profit. Do that a couple times and you move up again, this time to a half K. From that point on, you're nearly doubling your money each time. Then it gets serious.

Things are rarely so uniform, not least because gang members may consume drugs supplies before they are sold or accept other forms of payment (e.g., consumer goods, firearms, sex), but for ease of understanding the above has been translated into table format (**Table 3.2**) below. As can be observed, the greater the quantity of drugs purchased, the greater profit potential. Juggernaut, probably the most "successful" gang member I interviewed, said that in his prime "he was earning, like, a couple of grand every day" from a combination of personal sales and the work of his downline.

Table 3.2. Estimated skunk cannabis sales

Weight	Buy (£)	Conversion	Sell (£)	Profit (£)	Margin
1/8 ounce (3.5g)	20	-	-	-	-
1 ounce (28g)	120	8 x 20	160	40	33%
4 ounces (112g)	450	32 x 20	640	190	42%
9 ounces (250g)	800	72 x 20	1440	640	80%
18 ounces (500g)	1500	144 x 20	2880	1380	92%
35 ounces (1000g)	2800	280 x 20	5600	2800	100%

1/8 ounce represents the “baseline” typical individual usage

Source: Magneto

With the above said, my interviewees typically overestimated the scale of their drug dealing operations. Amounts quoted often referred to revenue rather than income. During my fieldwork, youngers were eager to pull thick rolls of banknotes out of their trouser pockets to illustrate a typical “night’s work”, but reticent to disclose how much was owed and had to be kicked back up to their elders. The following statement from Thunderbird is representative of how many of my interviewees discussed their profits in vague terms: “We’re entrepreneurs, we work hard for it bruv. Youngers be making a grand a week shotting. Do you even earn a grand a week? Getting them out of the game is like telling someone working at Merrill Lynch to quit and go work at Sainsbury’s”. In the words of Aldridge et al. (2007: 5), income also “fluctuated” and usually “tended not to result in financial stability”. Gang members who reported the highest earnings (e.g., Calypso, Gambit, Electro, Juggernaut, Kingpin, Octopus) had nearly always spent time in prison as a result.

Despite having large amounts of cash at times, gang members are unable to transform cash into wealth. The highest individual net worth I recall during my fieldwork was £40,000 cash hidden in shoeboxes under a bed. Admittedly, this was a lot of money for a kid with no qualifications and little employment prospects—it would easily

eclipse my student loan debt. Yet to paraphrase Levitt and Venkatesh (2000), the individual in question still lived at home with his mum. The money was needed to satisfy the consumer demands of gang life and to support out of work family members. Yes, the bedroom was adorned with a large flat-screen television and stacked ceiling high with boxes of Nike and Adidas trainers, but these reasonably expensive items seemed incongruous in a council flat with threadbare carpets, broken fittings, and a mattress on the floor to sleep on. The problem for gang members is that unless they know the right people and pay the right price, drug money is not easily laundered. Only the most senior gang members have the human and social capital to launder profits through casinos, pawnbrokers, money couriers, small bank deposits, and remittances transferred using money service businesses such as Western Union. One gang member interviewee simply deposited cash into the bank account of a wealthy private school girl he was dating and had known since primary school. The others, however, kept their money in a personal safe, fearful daily of robbery or police raid.

3.6 GOVERNANCE

Gangs offer a number of rational advantages for youths interested in shottin, “such as protection, a controlled territory in which to sell, rules that proscribe turning in a fellow gang member, and a wealth of market information” (Curry & Decker, 1998: 85). Wolfsbane explained that most gangs also have the economic capacity to “front” drugs or let their members pay on “consignment”, meaning that there is an agreement to pay after the drugs are sold. Instalment buying enables individual gang members to

begin selling drugs or to make a profit quicker than they ever could if they were independent of the gang. It is also much safer to enter this market as part of a gang (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991). Gangs have “both the will and the mechanism” to use violence in order to keep competing drug sales from interfering with their members’ earnings (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996: 74). For example, weapons are often pooled among gang members: “All the older lot had at least, from what I know, they had at least four guns. There was one point where I saw a black bag full of guns, I mean from pistols to shotguns and semi-autos all in one big black bag that they shared out when needed” (Daredevil).²³

Are the gangs owners of the means of criminal production? No. Drug markets are segmented. As discussed, above the street gangs but below the importers and international wholesalers reside the national wholesalers and heads of local criminal families, some of whom have been in business for decades and some of whom operate from within the prison system.²⁴ These indigenous groups enjoy open access to the drugs market and those who service it (Pearson & Hobbs, 2001). Some of them, such as the Adams family or Clerkenwell Crime Syndicate from north London, qualify as mafias in as much that they are a type of organised crime group that attempts to control the supply of protection in a given territory (Varese, 2010). Terrance Adams, head of the Adams family, is currently serving seven years in prison for money laundering. During his trial, Andrew Mitchell QC, prosecuting, described him as “one of the country’s most feared and revered organised criminals. He comes with a

²³ So-called “pool cars” are likewise left uninsured, untaxed on estates for use by gang members.

²⁴ *The Guardian*, 13 July 2009.

pedigree, as one of a family whose name had a currency all of its own in the underworld”.²⁵

Mitchell elaborated that Terrance Adams “protected the family name from use by others and was prepared to order the use of violence to achieve this end”.²⁶ One of my sources during the fieldwork indeed likened Terry Adams to Lord Voldemort from the *Harry Potter* series—“He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named”—inasmuch that those working for him in the family’s range of criminal franchises rarely if ever disclosed his name for fear of reprisals (KI LX).²⁷ But illustrating how the worlds of gang members and advanced business criminals intersect, the Adams family allegedly contracted “muscle” from local gangs as additional manpower to murder informants and competitors (Thompson, 1995). They also put a price on the heads of the three youths convicted for the 2008 murder of schoolboy Ben Kinsella because, in the words of Prosecutor Nicholas Hilliard QC, “they weren’t happy with a killing on the streets of their area”.²⁸ In secret recordings made by police after his arrest, one of boys is heard telling his accomplices: “The family have got big money down. They have put money on whoever was involved heads”. He adds, “The Adams family’s right-hand man wants to speak to me”. As the youths were gaoled for life in June 2009, the Old Bailey heard that they would be “marked men” in prison.²⁹

According to Jon Murphy, Association of Chief Police Officers National Coordinator for Serious Organised Crime, “[s]erious and organised crime ... is not an abstract

²⁵ *The Independent*, 10 March 2007.

²⁶ *The Independent*, 10 March 2007.

²⁷ For a discussion on the protection of criminal trademarks such as family names, see Gambetta (2009b, Chapter 8).

²⁸ *Daily Mail*, 11 June 2009.

²⁹ *Daily Mail*, 11 June 2009.

phenomenon—the drugs are dealt, firearms used and acquisitive crime committed in local neighbourhoods”.³⁰ He added, “the harms of organised crime play out in communities in the U.K. every day. The reality is that a lot of antisocial behaviour, burglary and vehicle crime people suffer in neighbourhoods is probably linked to organised crime”.³¹ I want to explore this notion further. Although gangs are not the owners of the means of criminal production, they are suppliers of illegal goods and services and thus part of a broader species of organised crime group (Varese, 2001, 2010, 2011). First, as described above, gangs sell drugs to customers. Second, gang members themselves receive protection on gang turf and are granted ready access to suppliers of criminal commodities. In **Chapter 4**, I describe how gang members also gain stable alliances with other gangs (which both reduce the risk of predation and provide avenues for dispute resolution) and opportunities for advancement. These are *real* goods and services, albeit largely illegal, and gangs typically aspire to be the sole suppliers of them in a given domain. In order to regulate distribution of said goods and services, for instance, gangs invest in a special set of “resources” (Gambetta, 1993: Chapter 2), as follows.

3.6.i Territory

As discussed, gangs in their embryonic stages typically lay *claim* to turf, but only when they evolve beyond criminal enterprise do they seek to *control* it. If gang “set space” (that is, the “actual area within the neighborhood where gang members come together as a gang” (Tita et al., 2005: 280)) is a platform for gang-related recreational and criminal activity, it is also the dimension within which gang enterprise plays out.

³⁰ *The Times*, 25 April 2009.

³¹ *The Guardian*, 13 July 2009.

Members of the Avengers gang, for instance, only really deal in and around the brick-built quad-shaped flats of a labyrinthine ex-council estate, which is comprised of some 900 flats and maisonettes and now managed by a large housing association. The estate has long held a reputation for drugs and arms dealing. Gang members have ripped out CCTV cameras, smashed lights, and tampered with electromagnetic locks and intercom systems on communal doors to help conceal and expedite their nocturnal deals in the alcoves and stairwells. They have also modified attic and floor spaces, electrical boxes, emergency access ladders, and service cupboards in communal areas in order to hide sealed plastic bags which contain drugs, knives, and other contraband, and to make these items difficult to attribute to any one specific gang member. Recent estate searches by police and the housing authority recovered a number of firearms, knives, and wraps of cannabis and crack cocaine. Here drug and firearm offences are daily occurrences that go largely unreported either for fear of reprisals or because victims do not want their own conduct scrutinised.

In this neighbourhood, the Avengers enjoy exclusive possession or control of the *distribution* (as distinct from the *supply*) of drugs and firearms. During my fieldwork, moreover, there was also some evidence that the gang was extorting small business owners who operated on their turf (a barber, café owner, and newsagent, respectively).³² The Avengers, in essence, have achieved a local “monopoly” and at time of writing they are seeking to govern neighbouring markets. Gang members in general actively patrol and police territorial boundaries because the act of someone from a rival gang or postcode “caught slipping” (entering their territory), Tempo observed, is seen as an affront to the gang’s power and reputation. And by increasing

³² So-called “street taxes” likewise provide revenue of the Chicago gang studied by Levitt and Venkatesh (2000: 766).

territory, gangs substantially reduce competition. This explains in part why gang members often reconstruct their social worlds in sensational ways, slaying rightfully in defence of territories prescribed as “sovereign empires”, which must—like the nation state—be defended from incursions by outsiders (Hallsworth & Young, 2006: 31). Quicksilver, for example, was adamant that all “trespassers” on his turf be duly punished:

This is my house. These are my endz (“neighbourhood”). Would you let someone break into your house? That’s disrespect. You disrespect my endz, I’ll come down on you hard. This is my house, my rules. Everyone ‘round here knows if you cross this one road, it is death. Your life is on the line.

Street corners are optimal places for gang members to congregate, not least because they are partially illuminated by streetlamps at night. Control of desirable street corners increases a gang member’s proximity to potential customers in any open-air drug market, resulting in greater financial advancement and prestige within the criminal fraternity. From the corner, gang members can visibly police their borders and monitor friends, foes, and “feds” (police) in approaching pedestrian and vehicular traffic.³³ I recall many times during the fieldwork hearing gang members whistle down from estate balconies to give notice to others of police presence. Gangs are also often quicker than the police to respond to the presence of external threats or strangers. I recall once standing on the corner talking with a group of gang members when one of them received a telephone call from a “lookout” positioned at the window of an adjacent building: he had watched our entire conversation and demanded to know who I was and what I was doing there.

³³ There are no “federal agents” in Britain, thus the use of the term “Feds” to mean police is another example of total image capture by media portrayals of American gang life (see **Chapter 4**).

3.6.ii Intelligence and secrecy

Gangs require an informational advantage to stay one step ahead of rivals and the law. I have known gang members to listen in on police scanners and conduct research on the Internet regarding basic police surveillance techniques, the function of different police units, and the meaning of police shoulder boards and identification numbers. On one occasion an interviewee showed me a record of officer shift patterns and the make, model, and registration number of supposedly “unmarked” police cars. He described updating these data as part of his “job”. Elders routinely send their youngers out on errands of reconnaissance and surveillance with prepaid mobile phones and walkie-talkies, sometimes in hire cars but mostly on bicycles and mopeds, which are better for negotiating the alleyways and back streets of estates.³⁴ Indeed, gang youngers may think the BMX their elder gave them was a gift to reward their loyalty, but in most cases the bike is a tool for business, which deters excuses for missed appointments.

Much like Gambetta (1993) observes with the mafia, a gang’s capacity for information gathering is part of its reputation. A gang’s reputation, in turn, is intricately tied to its control and influence within the local and larger community (see **Chapter 5** for a discussion of how this relates to recruitment). Given the threat of rival gangs and sense of territoriality, gang members typically demonstrate far less mobility outside of their immediate surroundings than non-gang members.³⁵ As a consequence, gang members depend upon the community for information. During my

³⁴ Gang members in some instances are sent out simply to divert police attention from the more serious offence being carried out.

³⁵ Indeed, some of my interviewees claimed never to have even seen the London Eye (a landmark Ferris wheel situated on the banks of the River Thames) despite hailing from the same borough in which it is located.

fieldwork, I learned about gangs paying local residents to act as “sentinels” and gangs corrupting police and local authority employees (including CCTV operators) so that they “turn a blind eye” to certain gang activities and provide early warning of new suppression efforts (KI XLII). On some gang estates, prominent local figures above suspicion (“clean skins” in police parlance) provided personal alibis, safe houses, and stash houses for gang members, which forced police to conduct more resource-intensive coordinated raids in an effort to tackle gangs. On other gang estates, elders befriended nightclub door staff through local gyms and sports clubs in order to obtain valuable information and ensure clemency during personal security checks.³⁶ Without these resources, gang enterprise would have become untenable.

Gambetta (1993: 36) argues that information goes “hand in hand” with secrecy. Gang members are hardly renowned for living pious lives, but there is certainly one Old Testament passage that resonates with them: “He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction” (Proverbs 13:3.X). Silence is scrupulously observed among gang members because secrecy furthers business and ensures longevity for gangs. Gang members must demonstrate a command of the “code” of the street/gang context (Anderson, 1999), which in turn becomes a signal to dissuade others from challenging their loyalty and commitment. A key component of this code, Gambit explained, was the ability to “keep schtum” and thus maintain a “wall of silence” around the gang. Gang members, he joked, practice “teenage omertà”, a mafia-inspired code of silence about criminal activity, which confounds police investigations and guarantees protection from prosecution or conviction. My fieldwork indeed suggests that even the youngest gang members are

³⁶ Given that bouncers control how and when people enter and exit a particular venue, indeed who is even permitted admission, gangs often consider them to be important strategic allies (Hobbs, 2005). Attendance of certain venues can also enhance the reputation of individual gang members.

experts at intimidating witnesses, delaying identity parades, and finding ways to postpone court hearings (from asking for medical reports on their own fitness to plead to simply failing to show up). Each of these actions, in turn, reinforces the image of gang members as people who refuse to give evidence to the authorities and use whatever means necessary to “bust the case” (beat the justice system).

While secrecy helps prevent detection from law enforcement, secrecy also precludes open advertisement and creates asymmetrical information. There is no external mechanism (e.g., an oversight committee) to ensure honesty in the drugs trade. This, in turn, fosters a lack of trust between drug dealers and their clients. Instead, gangs must be self-enforcing, based on reputation considerations.³⁷ Where trust is especially fragile or breaks down completely, violence (or the credible threat thereof) is a highly valued resource that is utilised to ensure that transactions are honoured and completed (Gambetta, 1993).

3.6.iii Violence

Violence is necessary to gangs (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967). In Sánchez-Jankowski's (1991: 139) words, “violence is the currency of life and becomes the currency of the economy of the gang”. First, it holds intrinsic value: gangs use violence to maintain proper behaviour by the membership because gang members who deviate cannot be sanctioned through conventional means (see **Chapter 4**). Violence also holds extrinsic value: gangs use it to settle disputes, protect members

³⁷ See **Chapter 4** where I describe how gangs sustain fear and spread their reputation through symbolic means.

and the neighbourhood against social predators (in the absence of full police protection in marginal areas), and ensure the maintenance and expansion of business practices which, because they are illegal, cannot be protected by law:

This ain't no thing where we stand here like we own this piece of concrete and kill you just because you live five minutes this way or that. But if you come violate what we've created ... what we doing here ... the thing we got going on here, then there's trouble.

(Vertigo)

We don't just go around shooting people. This is about money. It's all about money.

(Hulk)

As Hales et al. (2006: 65) observe, “[i]llegal drugs markets by definition operate outside of the regulated legal economy, and therefore exclude participants from conventional risk management strategies such as calling the police, taking out insurance, and using legally enforceable contracts”. Drugs buyers may be undercover police officers; promises to pay may be broken (these are criminals, after all); trusted contacts may be gaoled and rivals get shopped. Stable partnerships reduce these risks. Violence, or the convincing threat of violence, reduces them further.

Gangs are not conventionally restrained from taking action, which is advantageous not only in illegal markets, but also in community settings that may not have reliable access to official or bureaucratic state means of action (as a result of history, money, and social standing). This explains in part why gangs are seen as a valid source of protection (see **Section 3.1**). Gangs want the community to see them as cooperative and responsive because the community essentially validates the existence of gangs. Gangs cannot afford to sacrifice community support (or tolerance at the very least), because, as discussed above, the community provides an invaluable source of information (see also, Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Venkatesh, 1997). As discussed in

Chapter 5, the community also provides the next generation of recruits into gangs. The mother of one gang member told me: “It’s easy to forget sometimes but gang members are just children, they’re our sons [and daughters]” (GA XI). Gangs return the favour by policing the community and by dispensing what Vertigo described to me as “quick justice” on those that unduly prey upon community members. Gang repertoires for “quick justice” include the use of caustic soda,³⁸ “weapon dogs” (dogs sectioned under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991),³⁹ electric irons, kettles, and jugs of boiling hot water (“jugging” in gang parlance),⁴⁰ not to mention knives and firearms.⁴¹ From the perspective of community members either unfamiliar or unsatisfied with due process and rule of law, sometimes the ends justify these means.

Gang members use “systemic violence” (Goldstein, 1985: 497) to both protect drug markets when they are threatened and prevent others from setting up in competition with established drug dealers. Electro, for example, described one gang’s response to someone trying to cheat him and go at it alone:

He took the money that I was supposed to have been owed and rather than give it to my sister to help her pay the rent and whatever else, he tried to set himself up with a cocaine dealer. But, of course, the people that run the area didn’t like the idea that this little kid was going to try and, and also he had no-one to have his back, now, did he? So apparently he got beaten up quite savagely and they took the drugs back and the cash anyway. What an idiot.

Suffice it to say, while individuals can and do enter the drugs market, it is much less risky to do so as part of a gang. As discussed, gangs strive to be the sole distributors of drugs in a given territory and thus fight for control and a monopoly on violence.

³⁸ *The Guardian*, 19 January 2009.

³⁹ *The Guardian*, 17 February 2010.

⁴⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 17 May 2002.

⁴¹ Some of these methods may be deliberately employed by gangs to evade harsher prison sentences for gun and knife offences.

Monopolies actually limit violence, not least because they reduce the range of possibilities for rivals to fight with each other (i.e., monopolies ensure gangs keep within their borders). The competition that precedes monopoly, however, is characteristically brutal and bloody.⁴² Indeed, I would suspect that gangs are most violent during the transition from crime to enterprise or from enterprise to governance because at these stages of development violent reputations are not yet upheld as sacrosanct. Generally speaking, reality comes before reputation.

Violent reputations save on the costs involved with identically reproducing said asset or property. As Varese (2006: 107) observes, “violence has a property that other commodities lack: a reputation for effective violence allows the ‘producers’ to save on the actual display (production) of the good itself”. Gang members rely on the reputation of their gangs for making good on their threats. To elaborate, the violence capital of individual gang members may vary, but if a gang holds a reputation for violence established by years of violence displayed by multiple gang members, then every member of that gang benefits from a reputation acquired by the efforts of others. Others impute a high probability of being violent to a new gang younger, therefore, not necessarily because he himself has demonstrated violent tendencies (although the evidence provided in **Chapter 5** would suggest that he probably has), but simply because he is a gang member. The level of violence perpetrated by gangs in the past, in other words, ensures that few dare challenge individual gang members in the present. As Xavier observed:

⁴² The works of Levitt and Venkatesh (2000), Starbuck et al. (2001), and Sobel and Osoba (2009), for example, suggest that for gangs caught in ongoing cycles of violent retaliation, a significant reduction in harm is really only achievable once one gang secures a monopoly over a particular market or territory (thus reducing the incentive to aggressively police borders) and when profit potential from cooperation outweighs traditional gang loyalties.

That's the fear that people are facing out there and that's why so many guns and knives are getting too high out there. The police can't protect you. Because if this person get rid of me, he ain't going to go to gaol, he'll go to, you go into remand for a couple of years but then the case will get shut down because there's not enough evidence, so 'we're going to have to let the person go. We can't keep him too long'. ... The police say to us, 'we'll protect you, just come to court, we'll make you speak behind the glass, no one will know'. They can't protect you for shit. For a young person, from this estate or from this particular place, if you're going to make them do something like that, at least remove them. Remove the whole family, because you know once they go to court and stand there and say 'yeah, he done it', if they go back to the estate, you know exactly, their house is probably burned down or their little sister be getting raped.

Individual gang members, in turn, guard the collective reputation of the gang itself. Such is why the costs of entry into gangs are high—gang members must regulate what outsiders are able (or disposed) to say about them and their gangs (see **Chapter 5**).

3.6.iv Technology

Gangs invest in technology both to further their businesses and enhance their reputations. I have already mentioned the use of cell phones, text messages, and MP3s in coordinating gang business. Gang members also chat and hang out on social networking websites (e.g., Bebo, Facebook, and MySpace), buy and sell goods and services via online auction sites, transfer monies via PayPal and equivalent facilities, organise gatherings, and transmit arcane clues and “anonymous coded messages” via chat rooms and synchronous conferencing protocols (KI XLI). Gang youngsters in particular use web pages and social networking sites to broadcast illegal exploits, threaten rivals, honour gaoled members, and mourn “fallen soldiers” killed by rival

gangs.⁴³ Gang insignia, tattoos, graffiti tags, colours and clothing often are embedded in each site. Some sites even include online surveys which invite visitors to rank local gangs based on their reputation for “running the south” or to vote on which gang members have “shanked up the most ppl” (“stabbed the most people”).⁴⁴ This all adds to individual gang reputations.

Exclusive gang websites operate as virtual turf. Their primary function is to promote the brand and showcase “strength in numbers” to deter and intimidate rivals. The practice is tantamount to the way in which some individuals collect “friends” on Facebook to build self-esteem and exaggerate their popularity.⁴⁵ As one interviewee observed:

Imagine your gang has 50 ‘friends’ on Facebook but your closest rival has 1,000. Would you go down there and start a fight with them? And for young people not already affiliated, which gang do you think they’re most likely to join? It’s a popularity contest.

(KI XI)

As Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004: 92) observe, “mythmaking is one of the central activities of ... gangs. ... The central myth is that the gang exists”.⁴⁶ Gangs enjoy a much larger Internet presence than actual physical presence. They create myths most particularly around what has been termed “Big Gang Theory”, in which “gang members’ exaggerate their strength, numbers and cohesion either for self-defence or

⁴³ *Daily Mail*, 21 February 2007.

⁴⁴ <http://www.bebo.com/Profile.jsp?MemberId=4374249210&ShowSims=Y>

⁴⁵ In short, users compete with one another to rack up more online friends than anyone else, listing them in the same way that they might show off stamps in a stamp collection. The practice of collecting friends is dubbed “MySpace whoring” and has spawned the parallel phenomenon of “de-friending” as a means of severing relationships; that is, publicly removing from your list of “friends” the names of those whom you no longer wish to associate with. *The Times*, 11 September 2007.

⁴⁶ The idea of mythmaking should not deter us from the fact that the gangs do exist, inasmuch as they are recognised by their members and others as being real and play a part in structuring the attitudes, fears and offending behaviours of these people.

to enhance their reputation” (Alexander, 2008: 11). The Internet is one of the most effective conduits for gang mythmaking because it transcends territorial boundaries.

Motor vehicles are another, albeit older, piece of technology that enable gangs to travel outside of their borders. When coupled with firearms, motor vehicles also provide a dangerous alternative to “on-foot hit-and-run forays” in the form of drive-by shootings (Howell, 1998: 2). This brings us to perhaps the most important tool in gang business: firearms. As Iceman notes:

The minute someone starts getting rich off of shottin, they buy a bigger bag [of drugs], and they buy a bigger gun to protect the bigger bag ... when you getting that type of money, there's consequences that come with it. Like Biggie (the late American rapper “The Notorious B.I.G.”) says, ‘more money, more problems’.

Given that Britain has some of the tightest gun control legislation in the world,⁴⁷ gang members rely on a segment of adult business criminals (“armourers” in gang parlance) for access to firearms. As Beast observed:

Yeah, it's young black boys carrying the guns and using them, but it's old white men, businessmen, Essex boys, Russians, Lithuanians, supplying and converting them. We don't do that. You need special lathes and tools. These are professionals, guys who know how a gun works, it's components and that.

Former army sergeant Paul Alexander, for example, was gaoled indefinitely in 2009 for supplying gangs with “assassination kits” and other weapons linked to a murder, four attempted murders and an armed robbery.⁴⁸ His military background was perhaps no coincidence:

⁴⁷ Illegal firearms possession carries a five-year minimum sentence, although in 2005 only about 40% of those convicted received the full sentence.

⁴⁸ *The Times*, 22 September 2009.

This country is highly secured, yeah. You can't get nothing through this country unless you got someone working on the inside ... like at the airport side of things. Because there ain't no way on this earth, yeah, someone like myself or a gang member like myself is going to travel to a country to pick up a gun and get it through the system here. When I used to go and get whatever ... it's Army soldiers, people that have been through war and, or people that have got their connections to them things. ... You can go to them and buy them, buy off them. Because guns, yeah, come in fresh box. There ain't no way in this country you're going to get a gun in a fresh box with bullets fresh. ... The amount of things that I've seen, it's ridiculous.

(Xavier)

When it comes to guns and that, even from the Army. Very, very easy. ... High ranking officers as well. High-ranking officers have got me in their houses. ... You've got to remember last year [the military] lost quite a few arms.

(Juggernaut)

Just after these quotes were obtained, Shane Pleasant and Ben Whitfield, two former soldiers of the Third Battalion, Yorkshire Regiment, went on record that weapons could be easily obtained in Iraq or Afghanistan, either by buying or stealing from locals and foreign police, and that the practice was common in the British army. The two men were among seven soldiers from the Yorkshire Regiment who were found guilty of being involved in an international gun smuggling ring.⁴⁹

I recall once a female gang associate (GA IV) mocking my "street ignorance" with the line, "do you know how easy it is to get a gun in Brixton?" Turns out, not as easy as she would have myself and others believe. Youths like to talk guns. I learned from some interviewees how Berettas, Baikals, and Glocks were made from high-tensile plastic, for example, which made them lighter, quieter, and more durable than most handguns. Some interviewees even claimed to have "seen" Israeli Uzi submachine guns and U.S. Military Armament Corporation Model (MAC) 10 and 11 submachine pistols on the streets. At the end of the day, however, advanced business criminals

⁴⁹ *BBC News*, 25 April 2008.

hold all the aces (shotguns are the exception because they are the domain of gypsy traveller communities). I am convinced that new “clean” weapons without a criminal or forensic history remain expensive and difficult to come by, not least because police are cracking down on gun suppliers.⁵⁰

According to unpublished statistics, 75% of all firearms recovered by the MPS in 2006-07 were not even capable of firing. During the fieldwork, I saw a Bruni Olympic .38 starter pistol doctored to fire low-velocity ball bearings down a smoothbore barrel and an Airsoft assault rifle, with a magazine capable of firing upwards of 50-rounds, converted to shoot one single shotgun cartridge. I also heard about gang members negotiating the limited extent and shelf-life of firearm ammunition by manufacturing their own “homemade” bullets. Despite the novelty of such items, stories about realistic and conversion imitation firearms backfiring or misfiring abound. Police apprised me of one gang member who actually blew off three of his own fingers during a point blank shooting of a rival. This only reaffirms the technological divide that exists between gang members and their suppliers.

In sum, as gangs evolve from recreational groups into institutions that facilitate production and exchange, they must acquire a number of resources. Although gangs do not control illegal markets, not least because they emerged after more sophisticated illegal enterprises had already shaped the landscape, they do aspire to regulate the production and distribution of certain commodities and services. By Varese’s (2010: 14) reckoning, therefore, gang life emulates organised crime and governance comes to represent the highest stage of evolution for gangs. The mechanism, it seems, is the

⁵⁰ *BBC News*, 11 January 2010.

ready presence of organised crime groups in London and the availability of organised crime possibilities. Existing knowledge of “successful” organised crime groups also contributes. I develop this point further in **Chapter 4**.

3.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Gangs may start off as recreational groups, but this chapter demonstrates how they quickly evolve into something all together more complex in response to external threats and economic incentives. The gang for its members thus comes to represent an alternative society bound by the narrow context-specific experiences of its inhabitants. The gang is not an alternative *to* society, as Thrasher (1927a) once argued, but rather a functional reflection *of* society, which gang members only ever symbolically reject. This alternative social and economic infrastructure incorporates both *public* and *private* sectors. The public sector deals with the delivery of goods and services for the gang and its members (e.g., defence, justice, and recreation). The private sector, or “black market”, which is regulated but not always explicitly controlled by the collective gang, provides the means for gang members to generate financial and reputational capital (e.g., drugs). It is clear that gang members have high aspirations to succeed and share with their non-gang counterparts the material expectations encouraged within advanced capitalism. As a consequence of material deprivation and poor life chances, however, they often experience a wide discrepancy between ends and means. To evoke Merton, gangs thus become adaptive mechanisms (or solutions) for satisfying what Maslow (1943: 386) famously identified as “basic needs”, both public and private, which, for a particular subset of society, cannot be

met through conventional avenues.

For gangs to be effective suppliers of illegal goods and services, it seems reasonable to expect the presence of a “rudimentary structure, a system for issuing orders”, rules that govern member interaction, “someone who benefits” from gang structure, and “some continuity over time” (Varese, 2011: 15). To expect, in other words, that gang organisation reflects gang business. With this in mind, I turn now to address the second central question of my thesis: how are gangs organised?

CHAPTER 4

GANG ORGANISATION

The trouble with organizing a thing is that pretty soon folks get to paying more attention to the organization than to what they're organized for.

(Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*)

One man with a gun can control 100 without one.

(Vladimir Lenin)

Unless otherwise stated, this chapter looks at the organisation of gangs principally in the enterprise and governance stages, which were outlined in **Chapter 3**. I focus on gang organisation in these two stages in part because the majority of the gangs in my sample had themselves reached these stages by the time of my fieldwork, but also because these are the stages in which gang members make the conscious decision to organise in order to achieve group goals. Indeed, crime can be spontaneous and opportunistic, but to effectively and efficiently provide illegal goods and services, gangs need to adapt. In this chapter, I address gang organisation on three levels (internal, external, and symbolic), with a view to better understanding the interaction between gang business and organisation, the context and constraints of recruitment (which is the topic of **Chapter 5**), and the ways in which gangs advertise their brand and presence in a given “market”.

4.1 INTERNAL GANG ORGANISATION

4.1.i Gang size and interaction

As discussed in **Chapter 3**, gangs invariably start life as small recreational groups of friends. The number of functioning members in the group can be reasonably flexible between five and ten, with a few hangers on. As group size grows, however, there are greater opportunities for potential interactions, but also more formality and less intimacy (Simmel, 1950). As each new person comes into the gang, connections among members multiply. In a gang of five, for example, there are 10 possible interactions. Gang members are able to remain in the same room and hold a single conversation. In a gang of ten, by contrast, there are 45 different relationships—too many open channels to follow. Space becomes tight and inclusive conversation becomes impossible. Members thus break up into subgroups. I observed this pattern of behaviour first hand at countless gang assemblies and parties, although it is of course not unique to gangs: families undergo similar processes at large reunions, as do students at college bops. Suffice it to say, the size of the gang affects its ability to cooperate in a task. As gangs grow, gang members inevitably retreat into smaller and safer subgroups. These subgroups are not discordant factions (group loyalty still exists), but rather they are instrumental outlets for gang enterprise.

All 52 gang members reported the existence of subgroups within his or her gangs. Gang activities, they explained, were much more likely to originate from within these subsets than from the entire gang acting as a unit. Gang subgroups (“crews”, “batches” or “cliques” in gang parlance) were typically defined or determined by age with and without affiliations to each other in an overarching gang structure. They were based on friendships formed within or outside of the gang, as Daredevil mapped out:

There's a lot of little crews, but they all go, go back to one big, big crew ... The younger ones they have, 'cus they hang about themselves they have their own little crews, that's their own little crew. This is our little crew and then there's the elders' little crew. ... But when we go to like parties, we all come together. Or when we hang out or we go youth club we all come together right, and everyone knows each other like that. But usually when we just hang out on the street, it used to be like the youngers by themselves, maybe with a couple of us or us with a couple of youngers and a couple of elders, but usually it's just every little group by themselves. ... People were just rolling in twos or fours and only coming together in parties.

Larger gangs may even formally incorporate separate auxiliary gangs or “sets” for their younger members.¹ Gangs typically denote these younger sets with a prefix, such as “younger” or “tiny”. In Southwark, for example, the “Young Peckham Boys”, “Younger Peckham Boys”, and “Peckham Kids”, are all age-defined sets belonging to the older “Peckham Boys” gang (Stevens et al., 2009).² The organisation of gangs into smaller cliques explains in part public overestimates regarding the number of named gangs in London (see **Chapter 2**). To wit, smaller and more localised “gangs” actually fall under the umbrella of one larger gang (Stevens et al., 2009). Nevertheless, these auxiliary gangs often create pools of potential recruits for the real gangs.

As discussed in **Chapter 3**, much of the income-generating criminal activity of gangs also occurs in the context of subgroups. Xavier explained:

When we say the word ‘gang’, we just get it twisted. We think gangs are a group of young people committing crime all together all the time. Yeah, obviously they’re committing crime, but individually everybody’s doing their own little thing. Some are into street crime, robbing phones, and some

¹ This is not a new phenomenon, even in Britain. In his study of gang characteristics in western Scotland, for instance, O’Hagan (1976: 309) describes how “gang boys often progress from membership of a junior gang to membership of an older and more senior form of the same ‘team’”. These “associated junior groups”, he added, were made up of four distinct parts: (1) the “gang”, with members aged 16 years and upwards; (2) “young gang”, aged 14–16 years (3) “tiny gang”, aged 12–14 years; and (4) “toddler gang”, aged 7–12 years.

² These names have since been replaced with more ominous-sounding acronyms such as “DFA” (Don’t Fuck Around), “PYG” (Pecknarm Young Gunners) and “SN1” (Spare No One).

are into high drugs dealing and some go into car theft and somewhere, so it's like, everybody's their own individual. Everybody do their own little interest.

Although individuals need the gang writ large to maintain anonymity in committing crimes and to access criminal commodities and resources, true to classic group size theory (see Hamburger et al., 1975) smaller groups accomplish more in less time than larger ones do. They also attract far less negative attention from law enforcement and rival groups.

As gangs grow in size and stature they also tend to develop more formal structures to ensure longevity. No longer can gang members *assume* that other gang members are “insiders” in sympathy with what they say or do. Now they must take the larger audience of gang members into consideration and implement quality management techniques designed to break down individual identity and mould recruits into full group members (see **Chapter 5**). Overall gang organisation thus relies less on personal attachments and more on established rules and regulations, some of which are described in **Section 4.1.v**. In turn, gangs display less personal orientation and more goal orientation, as the following interviewees suggest:

We've got a common goal which is like you try and grow the reputation and you try and make money ... economics is a very, very important part of it.
(Iceman)

It's organised crime. We had an aim, an aim being money, yeah, an aim being to generate capital for the big man.³
(Electro)

During the recreation and crime stages, gangs operate without specific aims and are characterised by loose structures and fluid memberships. As they expand in size and

³ Here, Electro is referring more to “crime that is organized” than “organized crime” proper (see Schelling, 1971: 73-4).

evolve in substance, however, the first generation and original gang members become *de facto* elders (and a few among them, the inner circle). This is due to tenure more than anything, with roles and responsibilities allocated according to talents and interests (see **Section 4.1.ii**). During the enterprise stage, moreover, leaders emerge and more specialised roles become apparent. Decision-making becomes more calculated than spontaneous (as was the case when crime was the ends not the means). Individuals also start to incur costs for their leaving gangs. These characteristics, in turn, help make gangs more efficient and enduring.

With size, gangs become more stable and capable of withstanding the loss of one or more members, which is crucial given the risks inherent to gang life (e.g., injury or incarceration). Much as corporations expand and contract during periods of “boom” and “bust”, gang rosters may swell in times of crisis, such as impending gang violence or to protect turf or drug markets when they are threatened (Klein, 1995). Gangs cannot continue to grow *ad infinitum*, however, because in the underworld common organisational problems of asymmetric information, imperfect monitoring, and opportunistic behaviour are exacerbated (Gambetta, 2009b). Overseeing gang business is a challenge at the best of times. In Magneto’s words, “you don’t write much down ‘cus it’s all evidence if you get caught”.⁴ More gang members mean more problems because there are more gang members to monitor.

Gangs mitigate their agency problems in part by screening potential members during recruitment (see **Chapter 5**), but also by staying local and keeping agency chains reasonably short. Indeed, although the number of members varied, the gangs I

⁴ Indeed, for this reason I was unable to obtain anything close to equivalent the extraordinary financial records Levitt and Venkatesh (2000) use in their economic analysis of a drug-selling gang.

encountered were never very large. Average gang size was around 40 members with a set space resigned to areas in and around one social housing estate. Bigger gangs (e.g., Excalibur and Sinisters) comprised no more than 140 members across multiple sets and enjoyed territorial claims of less than one square mile.⁵ Suffice it to say, “big” gangs would barely even qualify as “mid-sized” businesses in legitimate markets.⁶ Gangs further address agency problems by arranging their members in a vertical ranking. Contrary to Klein and Maxson’s (1994: 45) suggestion that each of a gang’s “cliques, triads, and dyads” are “responsive to its own peers rather than to powerful (and older) leaders”, I found that subgroups within gangs were still hierarchically composed. Gang members were supervised by persons above them in the gang, but also mentored and monitored others below them. We turn now to look at this hierarchical structure in detail.

4.1.ii Hierarchy and roles

The 12 street gangs I encountered were hierarchical entities. The concept of stratification as used here refers to the gradation in status among gang members (i.e., the position or standing accorded a given gang member by his fellow gang members dependent on certain properties, such as longevity of gang involvement, violence capital, and financial strength). Each of the gangs with which I engaged consisted of key individuals surrounded by ordinary members. As such, they appeared more

⁵ In July 2008, police rounded up onto a red double-decker bus approximately 80 Sinisters members on route to “*cause mayhem*” at the Lambeth Country Show, a large outdoor festival. This episode was repeatedly described to me as the largest “*deliberate show of strength*” by any one gang in recent memory (KI XLI).

⁶ According to the Small Business Act for Europe, a mid-sized business within the European Union has between 50 and 250 employees.

organised at the core, or “inner circle”, than at the periphery. Ordinary members, known as gang “youngers”, were organised under the supervision of gang “elders”. The most senior gang elders comprised the gang’s “inner circle”. Finally, surrounding the gangs were their associates and affiliates, some of whom will graduate to become gang members, as Daredevil outlined:

There’s about 30 people that are in it properly and then there was other people that are associated with it ‘cus they live around or they know people or they’re family. But there’s like the people that made it, like the older lot [the inner circle], then there’s our lot (the elders) and then there’s the younger ones. But they came afterwards because [the inner circle] added all the people that were associated with it as youngers, so it worked like that.

In some more articulated and established gangs, moreover, “youngers” had their own “youngers”, known as “tinies”. The general consensus among senior gang members, however, was that the tinies enjoyed a tenuous at best relationship with their actual gangs. Daredevil continued:

They’re like peoples’ cousins, little cousins, little brothers. They’re just young like people that are still in school, like first, year seven and like that age. They’re just running around screaming blah, blah, blah, we rep blah, blah, blah, I’m younger, whatever, I’m this guy’s cousin, I’m this guy’s little brother. They just run around doing everything to get people scared. When, when people know you’re in a certain gang which is big, then they get scared and they start to respect you more. ... these young ones are running around screaming everyone’s name to be feared in school. They’re associated with the gang but not initiated. They’re not real gang members. ... You’ll walk down the street and you’ll see people screaming [gang name] that you’ve never seen before. Never seen. And you ask them ‘who are you?’ ‘I’m thingy’s cousin, I’m thingy’s friend’. And the people they’re saying aren’t even involved.

For this reason, and because my assessment of gang youngers would essentially and equally apply to gang tinies (in as much that all gang members are licensed to initiate recruitment and thus youngers look like elders from the point of view of tinies), I do not pay too much attention to them in this thesis.

4.1.ii.a Leadership and the inner circle

The gangs I observed were generally organised around a small tight-knit group of approximately seven gang members that sat atop the internal hierarchy of their gangs and shared roughly equal authority over all other members. This “inner circle” comprises first-generation and founding gang members now aged in their mid to late twenties and above, old enough to have built solid criminal credentials at a time before gangs were on the national policing agenda and local authorities understood the full extent of their activities. Many inner circle gang members have served custodial sentences in the past or are in the process of serving them in the present. From this we can infer more just than a relationship between gangs and crime; while in prison, such gang members developed the contacts and skills necessary to expand their criminal operations and ensure that others now view their authority as legitimate (see **Section 4.2**).

Inner circle gang members have in most cases grown up together in and around gang turf or otherwise know each other as relatives and old school friends. The inner circles of at least seven of the gangs I accessed during my fieldwork, for instance, were comprised in part of cousins and siblings. In a world where trust is fragile, these established connections proved instrumental to the daily operations of the group:⁷

Looking back now, there’s only a few people I’d say, ‘Yeah, boom’, they have my back. They were like brothers to me. They were like, they were like blood and still are. ... Like, some of them are my cousins and I know that they would ride or die for me, do you know what I mean, like? Others are like people that I’ve grown up with since I’ve come here, like. One of my

⁷ I develop this point further in **Chapter 5**.

friends, I've only been in this country since, what, 1990, we met each other in '91. So, I met some of these guys, like, the year after I come here. We've been brothers from then, do you know what I mean? ... I think it's probably the longevity of the relationship that made that close-knit crew. ... Even though I'm almost like, I'm like the head; there are a lot of people that don't know my real name or where I live. So it's like, it's like a tiered system. You've got people that just hang around with you when you're out and about, you've got, you know, other people who are a bit closer but they still don't know you; you know, you'd, like, meet them in certain places and you congregate and you have different bits and pieces (business deals) with them. And you've got other people who are your close, close, close friends, your inner circle who might even come to your house and see your mum ... you trust them to a very, very deep extent. You know if anything goes wrong, you can count on them.

(Juggernaut)

I had people all at the top with me but I grew up with them and I've known them for the longest, do you see what I'm trying to say? I've known one since I was in year four of primary school and one was at my christening and lived on the same road as me since I was a baby. My aunt used to look after them so these people I know I can trust. ... They're not just at secondary school or since, since I moved into my hostel or something like that because those sorts of people you can't trust, especially when you're in a gang because you don't know who they're talking to. You don't know who they know ... and who they're close with more than you, you see what I'm trying to say? You don't just give out trust and you only trust the ones that you know, that you can bring them to your mum's house and eat with them at someone's table. Do you see what I'm trying to say?

(Octopus)

Tacit status hierarchies that have remained largely unchanged since the group first came together generally dictate the internal dynamics of the inner circle. The group invariably possesses one dominant personality who is, for all intents and purposes, the *primus inter pares*, as the following exchange highlights:

Densley: So, who's in charge of the gang?

Daredevil: The boss. The top dog, like some guy...

Densley: Is it really just one guy at the top? I mean there's a lot of elders and stuff...

Daredevil: Yeah, there's elders and then in the elders there's one guy.

Densley: And he's at the top?

Daredevil: Who came up with the name, who came up with the contacts, whatever and he's at the top.

Densley: Who does he answer to? Anyone?

Daredevil: His mum.

[Laughter]

Daredevil: No. He don't answer to no one. Seriously.

The person described is the gang's unofficial or hidden "leader", but to reduce the appearance of dictatorship within the gang and appease its members he is neither endowed with such a title nor assigned with written formal duties. The "first among equals" is not elected but rather asserts himself by developing and managing the gang's criminal enterprise through his reputation for violence. In other words, people follow this person because of who he is and what he has done. Sinister offered the following scenario:

[O]nce you commit murder and you get away with it, you straight away, your mentality is I'm a leader because I've done murder, other kids ain't got the heart to do that and I've got, second of all I got away with it. I'm back on the street, I can do it again. So then that's when people are scared of you. So then you become a leader because every time you're walking down the street people are looking down, 'cus they're scared to look in your face. So that's when you become a leader. You rule through fear.

Violence assertion is the key to *obtaining* leadership during the recreation and crime stages, and to *maintaining* leadership during the enterprise and governance stages, but a penchant for violence alone is of course not enough. The leadership must also display a certain degree of entrepreneurial acumen because without a "strategy for growth", the gang would stagnate and its members would defect. At the end of the day, the gang needs to keep its underlings scared, but satisfied; a point to which I shall return in **Section 4.1.iii**.

The "first among equals" is the gang's instrumental leader, a role that developed out of his being the "ringleader" back in the early recreation and crime stages of the gang. During my fieldwork, the person described was typically credited with coining the name of the gang and some of its key symbols. He focuses on getting things done, from illegal transactions to organised raids on rival turf, typically through the

adoption of an authoritarian or autocratic style that demands obedience. Hulk gave the following explanation: “If someone doesn’t want to do something, it’s like ‘you think you’ve got a fucking choice?’ You think this is a democracy, bruv?” Gangs also often have an “expressive” leader within their inner circles, broadly analogous to the *consigliere* (counsellor) of mafia families, who concentrates on the well being of gang members and on internal dispute resolution. In my experience, this person is more popular with gang members at large; however, since leadership makes others more conscious of a person, inner circle gang members generally have a huge target on their backs (see **Section 4.1.v**). The irony of course is that without the contributions of the inner circle gang members, gangs would cease dealing with the principal suppliers of criminal commodities and thus probably collapse (see **Chapter 3**).

Responsibility is distributed across the inner circle, which means that gangs are able to sustain operations even when key individuals are removed. Given that leaders within gangs assert themselves, however, there is no agreed form of succession planning, in which those higher up in the gang designate a successor to take over operations upon their imprisonment, retirement, or death. Instead, inner circle gang members typically assume certain roles and responsibilities based on a claim to some expertise. During the fieldwork, I encountered senior gang members that specialised in aspects of the drug business or in planning cash-in-transit robberies. Others focused solely on the modification and supply of firearms. The most common specific role in the gang, however, was “enforcer” or equivalent. Eleven of the 12 gangs I studied identified such a person residing within their ranks. Enforcers lack the savvy to be the strategic architects of collective action; they do not coordinate gang business, but rather preside over it as a deterrent to opportunists and would-be defectors. They

typically start their careers with violent acts, thus proving themselves proficient in violence, but now rely on the reputation with which such acts provide them. This reputation literally precedes the enforcers and is inflated through gang mythology, as evinced by Falcon's description:

You just hear stories about them. You see them and they look mean, like they just look like they don't care, like, or they're always wearing something that you know that they've got [a weapon] on them like black leather gloves. ... They're big in the gang. They are like the hardest person in the gang. They're like on the levels of the top elders, the insiders.⁸

Enforcers are indeed often implicated in unsolved gang homicides or known for impressive displays of survival against all odds. To help maintain such a reputation during the enterprise and governance stages (where violence is much more calculated), enforcers (in fact, all inner circle gang members) will on occasion deliberately "front out" or display uncustomary levels of aggression toward police in public. This usually results in a symbolic public order arrest, which sends a signal to the rest of the gang that the inner circle is "still down for the street" (KI XLI).⁹

4.1.ii.b Elders

Inner circle gang members are typically the most senior gang members, based upon age and longevity of gang involvement but also acquired violence and financial capital. Below them lie the gang "elders", a mix of first- and second-generation gang

⁸ Falcon, and others, argued during my fieldwork that gunmen used to be easily identifiable because they wore a single leather glove on their hand to protect against forensic evidence and to signal to others that they are "strapped" (carrying a weapon). Such a cheap signal, however, was easily mimicked and now countless young people within and without gangs wear one glove to deter would be assailants and give the appearance of being "tooled up" or "fully loaded".

⁹ Likewise, when senior gang members perceive threats to their status within gangs, they often either resort to uncustomary levels of aggression or encourage it in others. I was apprised of one gang member, for instance, who upon his release from prison stabbed his own younger in order to regain the role, which he had earlier asked said younger to occupy in his absence.

members, aged 17 to 24 on average who are responsible for running the gang's business. Although gangs gain their reputations from the inner circle gang members, such individuals tend to distance themselves from the gang name and symbolism once it is established in order to conceal the level of gang organisation from outsiders, as Wolverine explained:¹⁰

The people that make the most money in these gangs like from drugs and that, they're not seen. They're somewhere else. They're playing God somewhere. You will not see them. They're affiliated with the gang, they're running the gang, but they don't really partake in any gang activities. ... Those that are good at what they do don't even come into contact with the police. A thing that you should watch is *The Wire*. I don't know if you've seen that. ... There are a lot of Stringer Bells in this world, really there are. They start with a platform that's illegal and they build on that with something that's legal. They be modest with their spending. Might start a car business or might own a couple of cars, then from that he starts doing number plates. So whenever someone comes to ask them to account for their money, they be like, they have the documents there already. So, you're the smart person, you're the plan behind the business. You're the one calling the shots. You don't want to get your hands dirty so you're going to get somebody else who's stupid enough. That's proper gangster.

Elijah Kerr, the self-proclaimed leader of the PDC gang, for example, qualified in business studies while in prison and publicly renounced his criminal lifestyle, renaming his inner circle "Poverty Driven Children".¹¹ In Kerr's own words, PDC is no longer a gang but a "street movement", which encapsulates an underground record label ("PDC Entertainments"), a clothing line ("Public Demand Cartel"), a barbershop ("Pristine Designer Cuts"), a youth engagement project ("Code 7"), and investments in the local night time economy.¹² One can only speculate how a group that is "poverty driven" can so afford to pay for their business premises and to produce and promote their work; suffice it to say that "taxing" drug dealers on the Angell Town

¹⁰ Wolverine also makes reference to *The Wire*, which exemplifies the way in which gangs use popular culture to convey information. See Section 4.3.i.

¹¹ *The Guardian*, 25 February 2007.

¹² *UKHH*, 21 August 2006.

estate where they operate and the revenue generated from record sales and live performances (in this age of digital media), cannot cover it alone.¹³ A lower tier of “PDC wild men”, therefore, remain involved in small arms dealing, drug distribution, and related serious violence, trading under the original PDC brand and its affiliates (KI XVI).

Elders are responsible, therefore, for continuing (and in some cases, improving) the legacy of the inner circle gang members, which often entails adopting a very public persona. As one interviewee explained:

There are celebrities who try not to get papped (photographed by the paparazzi) and celebrities who do. You know, celebrities like Jordan who is famous just for being famous. The same is true of gang members. The serious guys, those with the real talent, stay hidden. Those with something to prove hang around the schools gates trying to get their faces known. On the street it's all about being known. Image and perception are everything and some of these elders literally have celebrity status. A few days ago I saw two of them hanging outside the [local] school gates. You could see from the reaction of the kids walking home that they knew who they were. No shit, they were acting as if they had spotted David Beckham or something. They were all excited. After a while these two guys walked over to one of the teachers, hugged him, you know like half-hug half-handshake as they do, and talked. They knew the teacher as a volunteer youth worker. But how does that look to those impressionable young people? I tell you, it looks like the teachers answer to the gang.

(KI XXXVII)

Electro, a retired gang elder, described his time as a “local celebrity” as follows:

You'd get looked after and you can for a short time at least be the man, yeah? That's what kept me entrenched in that lifestyle. I loved it. Loved it. I was getting, people were boosting me up, I got cash in my pocket, and no one could touch me. I'm living in the middle of [a gang estate]. I forgot to lock my car. Do you know, I checked the car, it hadn't been touched, yeah? It hadn't been touched at all. My car had, like, a stereo bass and everyone knew this. But the car was untouched. That's the respect I had. It was a long time before I was picked up by the police and I went a long, long time

¹³ The music exists in a largely informal economy. Most artists make their debuts on independently produced DVDs and mix-tapes sold out of barbershops and “autonomous” record stores around London. *The New Yorker*, 21 March 2005.

without being even stopped ... I was almost invincible at that point. Your name was chattering in the backgrounds, but people wouldn't dare come to your face and say anything. People know who you work for and you've got your own rep, your own people working for you.

Elders handle day-to-day decision-making within the gang and generally determine the response to any “beef” (“ongoing dispute”, Hales et al., 2006: 82) that arises. Daredevil explained that the majority of them operate as retail level drugs “entrepreneurs”, but the more physical or violently predisposed elders serve as “muscle” or contract “gunmen” for the inner circle—“the people that you would call when you want someone gone, to shoot somebody”—which again speaks to some degree of coordination within the gang and some of the prerequisite skills of a gang member.

Gang elders are also the gatekeepers to gangs. As discussed in **Chapter 5**, much of the recruitment into gangs comes through this group. The elders, in turn, are responsible for scrutinising the most recent recruits: second- and third-generation gang members, known as “youngers”.

4.1.ii.c Youngers

As the name suggests, youngers are usually a few years younger (aged 12 to 16 on average) than the elders to whom they are bound. As discussed in **Chapter 3**, individual elders each have their own youngers. Vulcan explained that this gang “apprenticeship” system is most clearly reflected by the way in which elders bestow upon their youngers a “street name” or “tag”, which is often a derivate of their own street name or tag, and highlights some trait about them and/or further broadcasts

their reputation (see **Section 4.3.ii**). This creates some degree of accountability within gangs because the reputation of a given gang member is intricately tied to his or her name. Developing and inheriting a “good name” in gangland is paramount:¹⁴

You might have an older brother who’s a nice guy at college, doing his A-Levels, working part-time at Sainsbury’s. But if you’re in a gang, you don’t want to be ‘younger’ him. You don’t want his endorsement. You want to be a badman’s younger. The younger of someone with a reputation.

(Gambit)

As detailed in **Chapter 5**, elders “vouch” for their younger by naming them, which means that deception or defection on behalf of any given younger exposes the poor judgment of the elder to the rest of the gang. The naming process also enables gang elders to maintain a non-physical street presence and ensure that their name “lives on” should anything unforeseen ever happen to them.

As discussed in **Chapter 3** and in Pitts (2007: 25), younger typically work at street level, committing robberies, collecting debts, delivering messages, enforcing contracts, and giving early warning of police raids. Youngers also often mind and conceal weapons for their elders because they are less likely to be caught and prosecuted. Youngers are essentially left to make reputations for themselves, but also to assume the risks that the achievement of such notoriety involves. Says Xavier: “If they get in trouble, if they get arrested, that’s them, nothing to do with us. Worse thing is if they get arrested with the drugs or gun or whatever, they owe, they owe us if you know what I’m saying”. Suffice it to say, younger still operate in more of the recreation or crime sphere despite the fact that the overall purpose of the gang may

¹⁴ Support for these claims can be found in the literature. In his autobiography, Los Angeles Crip Sanyika Sakur (1993: 379), street name “Monster”, writes: “The purpose of all gang members is to develop a reputation. You must build the reputation of your name, you must build your name in association with your gang—so when your name is spoken your gang is also spoken of in the same breadth, for it is synonymous”.

have shifted toward enterprise or governance. Elders direct the criminal activity of the youngers in furtherance of the enterprise.

Some might say that gang youngers are primarily concerned with creating attention for themselves and diverting police attention away from the true business purpose of their gangs. Indeed, one key informant described the petty crime of the youngers as a “smokescreen” for the organised, for profit criminal activities of the gang elders. In his view, a relatively small number of young adults were “taking advantage” of the “chaotic lives” and social formations of children living in deprived neighbourhoods (KI VI).

4.1.iii Incentives and organisational mobility

The key informant quoted above raises a very important point. In **Chapter 3**, I described the gang business structure as akin to “multi-level marketing”, a system of business that puts more emphasis upon the recruitment of distributors than on the selling of products. As Electro explained:

The reality of the situation is the gang is a triangle. The triangle is the business, just like any other thing. Got people at the top, people at the middle, people on the lower level although now the bottom level could be really, really wide because you’re recruiting numbers all the time.

Electro describes the gang as a triangle. I would go as far as to call it a pyramid. Multi-level marketing is intrinsically flawed, yet it appeals because it sells the dream of material wealth and independence and appears to be outside the mainstream of business as usual. Avon’s website, for example, champions the ideal of a “flexible”

business whereby you “make your own hours” but enjoy “unlimited earning potential”.¹⁵ This sounds very much like the sales pitch I heard street gangs use when recruiting for the illicit economy. What both groups fail to advertise is that the system benefits the few over the many. For every gang younger who makes a decent living or even a decent supplementary income from drug dealing, there are countless others who do little more than break even. If the basic idea is for sellers to recruit more sales persons then rather than expanding the client base they are increasing internal competition. Only those who control the gang supply the drugs at the top profit by having more customers (youngers) trying to out-sell each other. For those at the bottom, the gang becomes an exercise in survival of the fittest.

Internal processes betray the true relations of forces between elders and youngers and the real state of affairs regarding the purpose of the gang. Indeed, my fieldwork revealed that youngers were often very grateful for the opportunities provided by their elders:

If you're, if you're shooting for your elder, if you're selling for your elder, you're getting a cut but your elder's getting a bigger cut from you because basically your elder's giving you the food (drugs), yeah, and your elder's putting you on this thing because without him you wouldn't be doing it or without her you wouldn't be doing it. So you've got a duty and it's not, it's not like to say ... you're pissed off about it, you don't want them to have more, you want that person to have more than you, do you see what I'm trying to say? Because, I don't know, I think a younger thinks that they're doing the elder a favour or that the elder's doing them a favour. So they have to provide for the elder, I think how it is. My elder, he actually put me on it and gave me a chance, he said, 'Oh, yeah, just have that and then build on it yourself and give me some back'. And from then he just gave me food, I bought food off of him the next time and then started up my own thing and started to shot my own thing and like just keep doing it. I was buying it from him, yeah buying it from him for cheap. He was helping me, he was properly helping me ... trying to make a profit off me.

(Sunfire)

¹⁵ http://www.youravon.com/REPSuite/static/BAR/earnings_avon.html

The quote above demonstrates how youngers derive some emotional fulfilment from the relationship with their elders even if they do not always earn big money, which harks back to the motivations for gang membership listed in **Chapter 3**. Elders, on the other hand, spoke quite openly about the exploitative nature of elder-younger relationships, with youngers seen merely as a tool for gang business:

What's happened is, they're making the sentencing harsher for carrying a gun. So rather than me take the risk, I'm the middleman ... I've got a 'young gun'. That's the term for the kids around here. I'll get them to hold onto that gun for me. ... We call them send-outs. So I've just committed a crime with a gun and I'm going to ask you to clean it. Yeah? Now, if you're lucky the gun won't go off in your face and you'll leave your fingerprints on the gun instead of me because you don't know how to clean the gun. Do you? You're an 11-year-old kid. ... If he gets stopped by the police, that's five years for him. I don't care. Bye, bye. I'll just get another young gun. When I got taken out of the loop, the system makes this assumption that because I'm out of the loop, it's just all going to stop. The guys just find somebody else. And they probably find him very quickly. They probably set me up in the first place.
(Electro)

Elders normally use these people to do their dirty work. Do you see what I'm trying to say? Like, hold this in your house or give them something to do outside the streets. They just use the young people because young people are less, younger people used to be less intimidated by the police, the police wouldn't really stop a younger person. So an elder will say, you know, 'you go and take care of this for me'. They do it, and that'll bring up [the younger's] rating. And they want to do it because obviously they want to be like these people more than anybody else. ... So whatever way ... like I said, you do our dirty work basically.
(Xavier)

As can be observed, youngers' "false consciousness" is a result of control that they either do not know they are under because of the non-pecuniary benefits associated with gang membership or which they disregard with a view to their own possibility of upward mobility within the gang. Youngers are still in that "reasons to join a gang" phase, whereas elders occupy a "reasons to stay in a gang" phase, which is far more self-serving. To elaborate, elders provide a visible model of consumer etiquette and "success" for youngers to aspire to (Pitts, 2007: 29). In their dreams of entering at the

ground floor and expecting to climb to the penthouse over time, youngers have been fooled by history. During the recreation and crime stages, participation in the gang was a rite of passage, meaning that as gang members got older they dropped out and the younger generation stepped up to take their place. As gangs became enterprises, however, they provided such powerful economic incentives that gang elders were loath to retire. Instead, they acquired the resources and put measures in place to ensure the gravy train would never end. Gang structure serves a purpose: the rich get richer.

Are gang youngers really so naïve? Not necessarily, but it is worth reiterating that one of the most unique features of gangs is their youthfulness and the reasons for joining gangs (as discussed in **Chapter 3**) extend beyond pecuniary rewards. This is a world constructed and reconstructed by adolescents, many of whom have less than five good GCSEs. To make their lives more bearable and for fear of reprisals, moreover, youngers continue to paint a rosy picture of the situation, telling anyone who asks that they are successful, keeping up appearances on the street through conspicuous consumption. The primary motivation for gang youngers remains the prospect of rising up through the internal hierarchy, to a position where social status is higher and earnings are far more than what would be attainable in legitimate markets, as in the “tournament” model of Lazear and Rosen (1981):

It’s the same as a company. You might start at the bottom, but you work your way up to the top. Once you get to the top, you know, you’ve made it. Your role changes, that might mean going out there and making different connections and what not, which might be with other gangs and, you know, all the rest of the bits and pieces like that. Your role on the street itself decreases. You can go and spend time on the beach, you can go and spend time in New York because, you know, you got that cash now and you’ve got someone else next to you that can cover you until you come back.

(Kingpin)

Everyday I tell a hungry young person, 'I'll give you a piece of this pie if you do this for me'. I don't give them half of my pie. I give them a little bit, a little piece. But they keep doing it. They keep coming back. Why? 'Cus one day they think this will be their pie.

(Wolverine)

As the quotations above suggest, gang elders use the possibility of internal promotion and material wealth, no matter how slim, as an incentive system to further address agency issues and retain gang members. Despite low promotion rates, youngers typically remain positive about their chances to advance within gangs in part because they look around and see other youngers making no greater headway than they are. Much like Stouffer et al. (1949) found with soldiers in elite units, gang youngers form a subjective sense of well being by looking inward and comparing themselves to other gang youngers. Youngers climb the hierarchy in competition with their peers rather than their elders. Youngers thus feel less deprived than they probably should because neither their colleagues nor themselves are being promoted.

Not all gang youngers compete in the promotion tournament, in some cases by choice and in some cases due to reasons beyond their control. Some of them languish in a somewhat "deactivated" position within their gangs, as the following exchange highlights:

Sunfire: You had the rankings. Like, you had top people, the top people in the gang. Then there was the middle and then you had the low. The low, they're your friends, yeah, you got to respect them but you know if it comes down to it these people can't really defend themselves. They won't really go with someone out of their depth. They're there but they're not doing that much. So it's useful to have them people around but then for like fighting or something it won't be useful but you still have them around because they're, they're useful. They're your entourage.

Densley: So can those people at the bottom rise up in those rankings? It seems strange to have them around if they're really not doing much.

Sunfire: They can, but if you're at the bottom it's for a reason. Some people just stay there because they're nice there. That's their position. Do you see what I'm trying to say? That's where they're meant to be and they really don't want to go any further. The people at the bottom normally come out of the gang first, do you see what I'm trying to say? Because they know this ain't for them, they just done it to do it because of their friends or because they're scared and need protection. It's a social thing. The people at the top, they have to do it or they want to do it. At the time, they might have thought they had to do it because there was nothing else for them to do. For them it's a money thing. But people at the bottom, they know really and truly they don't want this lifestyle. They know in their hearts that they're not really cut out for it, you see what I'm saying?

Densley: What about those people in the middle? Because they must be in a sort of weird situation. In limbo.

Sunfire: The people in the middle stick by the people at the top. They want to be at the top. Do you see what I'm trying to say? That's how it is. People in the middle, they don't want to come out the game, they want to stick by these people at the top. They want to be like you. And that's how it is.

Bullseye used a professional football analogy to explain this process, noting that there are far more avid "supporters" of his team than players on the payroll. Only a minority of talent within a "youth team or reserve squad", he added, demonstrated the aptitude and dedication required to ascend the ranks and break into the "starting eleven". And only the starting eleven is privy to sensitive information.

In sum, only those gang members with proficiency in violence, commitment, strong sales skills, and product knowledge can position themselves to gain access to more valuable client lists and ascend in a structure that by definition is not a meritocracy:

We do look out for people that are good at it ... if someone's working for me and they're working extra hard and they're getting everything done by the time that I tell them to yeah, and every time they come into me they get it done, I'm going to have to promote them. So that's how it is in the street. If someone's making me money consistently and they come correct every single time, I'll have to make them join my forces, say 'yo, I've got your back, I'm looking after you'. So I can, I can keep encouraging them to keep making that same amount, not, not slipping so they can just keep it going. ... Because you know one day they might come with £10 short, they might come with £20 short, which is really minor until you get to the 100s and

200s. Ten, 20, if you're coming with that obviously you're making mistakes so I'm not really going to bring you high up because if you come higher you're going to make more mistakes.

(Xavier)

Merit-based promotions are unlikely unless outside circumstances create an open position (e.g., someone dies, retires (see **Chapter 6**), or goes to gaol).

4.1.iii Girls and gangs

Some gang associates are independent drug-dealers or serious organised criminals, as discussed in **Chapter 3**. Others, like Sandman, Tempo, and Vulture, are prospective gang members; they are the focus of **Chapter 5**. Here I address another category of gang associates: women. To wit, the vast majority of girls who claim gang “membership” are in fact merely associates of male gangs: they are not recognised by other (male) gang members as being gang members. Exceptions to this rule are of course members of girl gangs, such as the Queens, or gang cliques segregated by gender, such as in Juggernaut's gang:

It was split into different sub-sections, like we had the lady [gang], all the girls who backed for you because you've got to set them. ... Most of the men don't want to go and hit her so just front one of the girls and the girls go and deal with it. Then you have, like, the junior [gang].

Much as Aldridge et al. (2007) found in Research City, all female gang cliques are typically small, highly cohesive and structured entities, often organised around schools, and, in some cases, with a criminal focus on carefully planned non-violent acquisitive crime such as shoplifting. This is not to suggest that girls do not play an important role in gangs *per se*. On the contrary, as Aldridge et al. (2007: 6) argue,

“[r]egardless of whether they are seen as gang members or not, young women are associated with gang members and this association has important implications for their lives”.

As with gang members themselves, the first question is why women are even motivated to associate with gangs. My fieldwork suggests that although most women become involved in gangs through their relationships with male gang members (as friends, girlfriends, sisters, mothers, *et cetera*), they are in fact attracted to gangs in general for much the same reasons as men: money, status, and protection. They are drawn to gang members in particular because they are said to personify all three:

I never went out with a boy in school. I didn't like boys through school. Lots of girls are like that. They don't like schoolboys. They're immature. They ain't got nothing and don't do nothing. ... A gang boy is different. They got their respect, got swagger (style). They're driving. They got their selling line or they're selling drugs so they're making lots of money and spending lots of money. And people don't fuck with a gang boy. If they do, then the gang's got your back.

(Malice)

It is likely that my interviewees were attracted to gang boys in part because gang boys were the only boys they knew or had access to in their parochial communities. Dazzler, a girl gang member, suggested that while some girls are “threatened” into acting on behalf of a gang and others are “bribed” with money or gifts, many more do it willingly and without any coercion whatsoever because they love having a “bad boy” or “thug” for a boyfriend and will “do anything for him”. Girls associate with gangs and gang members, she added, not only out of economic necessity and opportunity, but also because illegitimate activities appear more “exciting” to them than the legitimate alternatives available in their depressed communities. By simple association, moreover, some girls can encourage, perhaps even endorse, the deviant

and criminal behaviour of the boys, by using sex and sexuality to exploit and manipulate them into doing (and getting) what they want (see also, Firmin, 2009).

The second question is how do girls fit into a gang's organisation? My fieldwork suggests three main ways: (1) by trying to be one of the guys; (2) to further crimes, although without necessarily knowing about it; and (3) as sexual objects that provide a release for the guys. In my experience, all girls associated with gangs display a willingness to engage in recreational alcohol and drug use, but only some girls employ violence in the defence of the gang and its territory. Much as Miller (1991: 180) discovered among gangs in Los Angeles, the more physically capable women, often labelled "tomboys" by the guys, appear to want to be "one of the guys" and are willing to equal or best the level of violence perpetrated by males in the competition to be considered the only true female member in a male gang. Fighting is an integral part of their sense of identity because violence is seen as the only means to achieve the real "respect" of the boys. Such girls look down upon others that "pimp" themselves out to the gang for the same ends:

A girl is different from a boy ... if you're going to attack anyone, don't attack a girl because if, when I was young, I was more dangerous than a boy because I'll say that because anything that comes next to me, I'm picking up and I'm doing some damage with it, anything, do you see what I'm trying to say? A boy, he'll just use his fists when he was young. ... There's more reputation as well because you're known, you're respected by boys and that's a lot. When you're respected by a boy and not in a sexual manner or that, boys enhance your reputation. It's not "yeah, we went out with each other, yeah, she sucked my dick, I respect her so much". No, boys respect you because you done the street, because you fucked some girl up for talking shit about you. When a boy is talking highly of you, yeah, and they say, "Do you know what she's done?", you get more rating from people. More respect. That's how it is.

(Sunfire)

Girls such as Sunfire, who was the one true female “member” of the Marauders gang, often consider the perennial violence to which they are exposed outside of gangs (i.e., domestic violence, predatory violence), as much worse than the violence to which they are exposed within gangs. Gang association thus becomes a valid source of protection for them:

Yeah, because the boys, the boy gang, now, you hang around with them, you drink or whatever with them, you socialise with them, but they’re there for protection as well. So if you get boxed in your face by a boy, you’re not going to be fighting them, are you? You’re going to call a boy who you trust and is connected to you, do you see what I’m trying to say? So you’re going to call them. Or, if they’re in a problem with a girl and they want to do something to this girl, they’ll call us. And we’re there straight away. Because that’s our boy ... I’ve got boys for back up and I back my boys, do you see what I’m trying to say?

(Sunfire)

Whereas gang boys share at least “the façade of brotherhood”, however, girls in gangs are often in blatant competition with each other for any “sense of camaraderie or peer support” (Firmin, 2009: 60). Socialised into a culture that conflates power with masculinity (see Messerschmidt, 1995), moreover, male dominance over females in gangs is often seen as natural and legitimate.

There is a gendered division of criminal labour within gangs. Following Messerschmidt (1997: 71), I would go as far as to suggest that gang boys determine the “range of possibilities” for gang girls. Either gang girls display a remarkable cognitive dissonance or they are truly oblivious to the fact that gang boys are using them. As Juggernaut explained:

Some of the girls are just like, they’re none the wiser and involved in some of the stuff. They just think they’re someone’s girlfriend or something like that. ... Some of the girls round here, they carry guns because it’s their friend. ... Then you might have someone who is your friend or is supposed to be your boyfriend or whatever it is and he’s putting something in your

house and you don't even know. Do you know what I mean? Your house, it might be your mum's house, you don't even know. It's only when he phones you or you go and meet him in prison on his visit and he goes, 'Okay, you've got three Ks of white (cocaine) up in your attic. This person's going to come and pick it up'.

Gangs use women in a variety of roles. In some cases women are employed because they are far less likely to attract police attention; law enforcement does not anticipate girls showing up to known addresses to deliver drugs, for example. Mirage, a female associate of the Thunderbolts, explained that some women provide logistical support for male criminal activities, such as by helping to "wash up" cocaine in the kitchen to form crack or agreeing to wash the boys' dirty laundry soiled with blood. Others, she added, provide "alibis", work between gangs to antagonise or "seduce" rivals, make arrangements for confrontations, and act as "lookouts and spies". Samantha Joseph, for instance, set the now infamous "honey trap", which led to the 2008 murder of 16-year-old Shakilus Townsend.¹⁶

According to Jubilee, a girl gang member, some girls dress up as boys to decoy and set up rival gang members. Others dress provocatively to "bait" rivals on neutral turf or to distract store clerks while the boys shoplift. Polaris, a female associate of the Brotherhood, added that girls also conceal drugs, weapons, and other contraband in "magic support underwear", pencil cases, purses, perambulators, and pushchairs: "I carried my boyfriend's gun, yeah, and I holded it in my house before". One police officer confirmed, "Whenever there's a nightclub shooting, that gun has been slipped in by a girl who knew she wouldn't get searched because she batted her eyelashes at the bouncer" (KI XXXIX).

¹⁶ *The Guardian*, 4 September 2009.

Finally, some female gang associates perform an entirely sexual role. Mystique, a female associate of the Brotherhood gang, explained that these casual sexual partners are known colloquially as “links” akin to “friends with benefits”. Unlike a “princess” (best female friend) or “wifey” (serious girlfriend, literally “wife material”), a “link” is not entitled to the “privileges” of daily intimate conversations, romantic dates, or family visits, but rather is “on call or on speed dial” as and when a given gang member desires a sexual release. Polaris, an associate of the same gang, confirmed: “Obviously the link girl is different [to other gang girls], for sex really. You just go in a relationship with the boys”. Magma, a girl gang member, added that “links” are often considerably younger than the gang members to whom they are linked and expected to sleep with each and every gang member.¹⁷ Shadowcat, a former female associate of Excalibur, shockingly disclosed that she was once forced to perform oral sex on a “line-up” of gang boys and was literally “passed around” while the boys “run a battery” and “took turns” on her. I heard similar stories throughout my fieldwork, particularly from key informants working in the field of sexual violence (see **Section 4.1.vi**).¹⁸ Shadowcat added that gang girls were typically even more “taken advantage of” than gang youngers.

¹⁷ Key informants worryingly disclosed that “any girl year seven [at school, twelve years old] and up is fair game”, but once the gang gets bored of them sexually, “links” are often labelled as “jezzies” (whores) and abandoned (KI XIX). As a result, these girls often subject themselves to a “Molotov cocktail” of contraceptive pills, skunkweed, alcopops, and, in some instances, crack cocaine simply to cope (KI XIX).

¹⁸ The gender dynamics in gangs are mostly a product of the biological changes that take place in the course of puberty and the tensions teenagers face between sexual and social maturity. As adolescents and young adults, gang members talk about sex and sexual conquests to the point of obsession. The Internet has led to an explosion of accessible sexual content and my fieldwork suggests that many gang members use pornography, which is laced with sexual violence, to learn about sex and relationships and thus pick up potentially dangerous behaviours and attitudes. The issue of consent, for example, appears to be a grey area for many gang members. Some boys with whom I spoke were convinced that if a girl attends a party or innocently visits their house to “hang out” and listen to music or watch a film, for instance, then she has “consented” to whatever sexual activity follows with whoever happens to be in the room at that time, which can be a group of boys laying in wait. And if a girl has already had sex with two or more gang members, Sage, a girl gang member, observed, then she has essentially agreed to have sex with the entire group. Setting girls up to perform sexual acts, sometimes coercing them to do so in the process, was generally agreed to be something that, in Messerschmidt’s (1995:

4.1.v Rules

Each of the 12 gangs I studied had oral traditions and expected norms of conduct, both of which were enforced by older disciplinarians within the gang. To elaborate, although none of the gangs had a set of formal written rules, each had a fairly consistent set of informal unwritten (and in some cases, unspoken) rules, such as: deference to your elders, availability on demand, respect for the symbols of the gang, no getting high on your own supply (although this really only applied to Class A drugs, such as crack and heroin), no unnecessary violence, no “snitching” (informing) or “snaking” (cheating) on other gang members,¹⁹ and no undue preying on community members (indeed, as discussed in **Chapter 3**, gangs need local community support in order to survive, not least because gang crime and violence are so internecine).²⁰ In this section I focus on the rules pertaining to the use of violence and use of drugs because these are central concerns in the gangs literature (see Fagan,

172) words, “boys do”. Rape, on the other hand, was something entirely different, a tool knowingly used by gang members to “dominate”, “humiliate” and “punish” girls who were associated or affiliated with gangs (KI LXI).

¹⁹ Gang members’ aversion to “snitching” is perhaps best understood in the context of the controversial “Stop Snitchin’” campaign used by some in the United States to discourage police informants. The campaign first gained national attention in late 2004 when an eponymous DVD including footage of a number of men claiming to be drug dealers threatening violence toward anyone who reported what he or she knew about their crimes to the authorities (especially those who inform on others to get a lighter sentence for their own crimes) began to circulate around Baltimore, Maryland. The “Stop Snitchin’” slogan later became mainstream in the hip-hop community as many rappers expressed support for this mantra. Entire songs were devoted to warning others about the violent repercussions of snitching and testifying (Kubrin, 2005). Once word spread, corresponding accessories became popular in urban youth fashion, particularly t-shirts of a stop sign emblazoned with the words “Stop Snitchin’”. Some of my interviewees indeed owned this shirt, doctored with fake bullet holes, implying that snitches should (or will) be shot for their actions.

²⁰ Much as Sánchez-Jankowski (1991: 185) and Venkatesh (2008) found with gangs in the United States, I learned that some gangs in London offer sentimental support and services to their communities, from help carrying groceries and moving furniture to temporary shelter and financial assistance. Inner circle gang members, moreover, often demonstrated a deep appreciation for and understanding of the history and politics of their local communities, which, in turn, enabled them to court favour with important local figures.

1989; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Hagedorn et al., 1998; Howell & Decker, 1999; Zhang et al., 1999; Bennett & Holloway, 2004; Gatti et al., 2005; Decker et al., 2008; Bjerregaard, 2010).

As discussed previously, gangs, like all organisations, suffer from inherent agency problems. This idea was popularised by Levitt and Venkatesh (2000: 781), who observed that gang violence often “arises because a particular foot soldier interested in moving up the hierarchy may have a strong incentive to build a reputation for toughness and thus may engage in violence even if such actions run counter to the best interests of the gang”. Gangs responded, they argued, through incentives. While “a willingness to engage in limited violence increases the likelihood of promotion to the rank of officer, those who engage in wanton violence do not advance”. My own fieldwork offers evidence in support of these claims.

First, “gang-related” violence (as distinct from “gang-member” violence, see **Chapter 5**) is typically sanctioned from above and allocated to violently disposed gang members. Juggernaut described such individuals, or “hyped cats”, as follows:

The hyped cats ... they're always very hyperactive, they always, you know, they always want to be at the forefront, yeah. Which means that you don't need to be at the forefront because that person's always going to get hyped. They're always going to flare up and sometimes you want that person that's going to flare up and you just go to them, 'I'm going to put something here for you, go and use it'. Because as far as they see it they need to prove themselves to me, do you know what I mean, like? So if they need to prove themselves to me, I can put anything on them. ... A lot of these hyped cats think that because they become so hyped that they can become the face, yeah? And if you can become the face everyone knows you and you're the most powerful, yeah? But it doesn't always work like that. That's not always the way the system works. The hyped cats are there for a reason. They're there to get hyped, they're there to get taken down. If the police want to take you down, 'cus you want to get hyped, you go ahead. You know what I mean? There's always someone else who will take over.

As Juggernaut explains, the agency problem for gangs lies with the fact that so-called “hyped cats” are prone to “go out and do crazy shit”, because they desire advancement within gangs. The fact that violent people are often “a bit slower in the head ... basically unwired”, Juggernaut added, proves to be a “double-edged sword” for gangs:

You’re an asset because I can use you. So you can be used for whatever I want you to be used for, because you’re trying to prove yourself to me, yeah? But you’re also a liability because you can go out and do something wrong and not finish the job and then who are they coming back to? They’re coming back to the whole crew. You are affiliated with this crew, so if you go and do something against another crew because you had to prove yourself, you become a liability because you become, you know, people put X’s on our heads because of what you’ve just gone out and done. We’ve all got a bit of that in us, but most of us got control with it. See, I get to a certain point where I see red and if I see red there’s no going back but there’s some of these kids who, it’s almost like they don’t see that red but they create it. You know, it’s like a waving a flag to a bull. And if you’re one of these people who just creates the feeling yourself you’re almost, you’re an asset but also a liability.

(Juggernaut)

The presence of such individuals in gangs explains in part the trend in recent teenage homicides in London that are attributed to “single, often minor, acts of disrespect”—ostensibly innocuous offences such as brandishing a “dirty look”, hailing the wrong person in the street, and even a row over an unpaid £15 debt (CSJ, 2009: 61). Indeed, I would suspect that these murders are unsanctioned and that gang elders probably reprimand the perpetrators (see **Section 4.1.vi**). Gang norms that support the administration of violence and diffusion of criminal responsibility merely conceal this reality from outsiders.

Second, I found that although gang members may want others to think of them as “untouchable” or “psychopathic”, there are limits and sanctions for going beyond

them. Scorpion told me about a former colleague, for example, who kicked his victim so many times in the face that he stained his new white shoes with blood. At the bequest of the watching gang, he finally stopped kicking, only to look down at the now claret leather, and scream at his target: “Fuck! Look what *you’ve* done. *You’ve* ruined my new shoes”. He then proceeded to “punish” his victim further, kicking him until he his head “exploded” over the concrete. This person could not be controlled so he became surplus to requirements. Not only did this person not advance within his gang but also he was apparently “taken out” from within because, in the eyes of the gang’s inner circle, he had proven himself a liability. In short, an equilibrium must be achieved that balances enough violence to enhance individual and gang reputations but not so much that it is bad for business and attracts too much police attention.

The remainder of the discussion about violence and costly behaviours within gangs is reserved for **Chapter 5**. The point I wish to stress here is that gang rules dictate limits to costly behaviours. Whereas violence for violence’s sake would pass muster during the crime stage, it fails during the enterprise stage becomes direction comes from above. Perhaps the guy wearing the white shoes in our story did not recognise the evolutionary stage of the gang he was in. During the enterprise or governance stages, violence is a means not an end—violence must be used appropriately in line with gang goals and not individual goals. Likewise, over 40 years ago, Short and Strodbeck (1965) found that gangs typically shunned individual gang members who exhibited severe pathology (e.g., heroin addiction or simply “crazy acting”), because such individuals were unreliable and attracted miscellaneous conflict with police and rival gangs. My own interviewees made similar observations:

He was sniffing crack and that. Sniffing cocaine and that. I don't want that around me. If you deal, you don't use. That's the rule. I even hate weed. Can't stand it, trust me. My brother, that's how he died, do you know what I mean? What skunkweed does is it induces psychosis, yeah? And once it induces that psychosis, there's no way back. ... One morning he came out of work, went onto London Bridge, stripped off and jumped in the Thames and that was it. You know what I mean? That was the end of his life. So these things, like, once you hit that deep psychosis, you can't really do anything for me.

(Juggernaut)

Some people are just mentally lost. They just want to do sick things. They'll tell you, 'I don't care about money, I don't care about my life. I'm only here to take souls like the rest. I'm gonna keep on doing it until I die. I'm only here to take souls.' How can you work with that?

(Cyclops)

Bottom line: drug sales are accepted, indeed encouraged; drug use beyond recreational levels is prohibited, not least because the pharmacological effects of drugs on the user can induce wanton violent behaviour (for a discussion, see Goldstein, 1985). My fieldwork thus lends supports to Fagan's (1990) argument that drug intoxication runs contrary to the instrumental orientation of entrepreneurial gangs. Gang members must act rationally. Irrational behaviour implies that one cannot be controlled through conventional means. And if one cannot be controlled then they are useless to the gang.

4.1.vi Punishments

Gang rules are enforced through a variety of mechanisms, including blackmail (see **Chapter 5**), public shaming, and the threat of expulsion from the gang, as Daredevil explained:

Daredevil: The elders can stop people from being involved. Like they can say you're de-recruited, 'I don't want to see your face'. If anyone seen this guy, something will happen. So they can do that.

Densley: How do you get de-recruited?

Daredevil: You just do stuff that's unnecessary, like really unnecessary. If you stab someone in your crew for no reason then you're going to get de-recruited. You're, you're going to get beat up by everyone. If you do something or if you snitch on someone, you're going to get de-recruited. If you get de-recruited that is a completely total loss of respect, you have no one who likes you ... [you] just fade away.

Gang members expect rule violations to be punished and punishments to be consistently applied. For punishment to act as a deterrent, moreover, members must have complete knowledge of their application. Consensus among gang members was that the best evidence was a battered and bruised body.

Elders use the threat of violence to regulate the behaviour of the youngsters and will violently punish those who do not comply with their directions. Case in point:

One of my friends was selling [drugs] for someone else like ... he's quite a clumsy dude, and I don't know where he had it but I think he got stopped and he didn't have the stuff on him. He got stopped by the police but he didn't have the stuff on him. See, he'd lost it somewhere along the journey. Now he's gone back to his elder and told him, 'you know what? I got stopped by the feds but I didn't have the things on me so its okay'. Well, it wasn't okay. All of a sudden now you've got to work off that money. You've got to work that off because that's, you just lost that money. Doesn't matter if you saved yourself from the feds. They had an argument, and the older guy just slashed him across his face. He probably thought to himself, 'you know what, you're going to pay for this,' or whatever. So, yeah, the dude just pulled out his knife and slashed up his face. And he had to pay it off. That was his punishment. It humbled him for a while.

(Juggernaut)

While the above speaks in part to the way in which gang elders use economic sanctions to punish their subordinates, my interviewees generally agreed that violence was the primary control mechanism used within their gangs to address individual transgressions. When a younger failed to comply with Havoc, for example, Havoc

“slapped him around a bit” and “stabbed him in the buttocks” so that “every time he sat down he remembered what he done”. Other interviewees described similar instances whereby gang elders used guns and knives to deliberately injure but not kill (such as by aiming at their victims’ lower limbs), as punishment for errant behaviour within their gangs.

Rogue and Storm, two female associates of Generation X, both expressed concern at the way in which gangs also disturbingly use *sexual* violence to punish girls. Although they were not victims themselves, Rogue and Storm knew “enough” other girls who were. Sexual Offences Investigation Trained (SOIT) police officers told me about one 14-year-old girl from the same neighbourhood, for example, who was viciously raped and assaulted as punishment for having misplaced the gun and drugs of a gang elder during a house party.²¹ At first the elder demanded the girl do a line-up for him and 3 of his boys because they all had lost out on drugs money. The victim initially agreed to do the line-up but later backed out. This only compounded the punishment. A few weeks later, the girl was raped orally, vaginally, and anally by all

²¹ Passed in 2008 during my fieldwork, United Nations Resolution 1820 recognises rape as a weapon of war. Rape is certainly a weapon that police cannot stop and search gang members for. Rape is also less likely to be reported than other offences because there are often social ties between victims and suspects and victims live in fear of reprisals from the gang. According to unpublished MPS figures, “multi-perpetrator rape” in London increased from 71 incidents in 2003–04 to 93 in 2008–09, the number of black victims nearly doubled over this period, and the average age of victims fell. There is a lack of clarity with these figures, however, because the perpetrators are not necessarily “gang” associated and the motive can still be “gang-related” even in rapes where one perpetrator is involved. Often multi-perpetrator rape is not violent and girls are not even held down, but rather the act is coercive due to the numbers involved and threats implied. Either way, girls do not have a choice. There were a number of high profile incidents of gang rape in the field sites during the fieldwork period. In Lambeth, three teenage boys raped a 16-year-old girl with the mental age of eight and then doused her body with caustic soda, disfiguring her for life. In Hackney, three young men, one only nine years old, gang-raped a 13-year-old girl and similarly poured bleach over her skin. In Croydon, five boys aged 11 and 12 raped a ten-year-old girl on her way home from school. And in Greenwich a group of young men raped of a 15-year-old schoolgirl and committed the incident to a video entitled “Lethbridge X-rated Part One”. The list goes on. These incidents are part of a worrying trend that deserves far greater examination than I can provide here. The interested reader is directed to Firmin (2009) for further analysis and interpretation.

four gang members, while two others, including an old school friend, watched and kept guard.

4.1.vii Defection

During my fieldwork, I was introduced to an emerging “decline of deference” (Briggs et al., 2007: 73) amongst a new generation of gang youngers. As Cyclops observed: “Nowadays the younger lot or the hype lot don’t like to listen to no one. They’re their own boss if you get what I’m saying. Their respect level has dropped a lot from the elders to like everyone else, it’s dropped a lot”. Some subjects attributed this shift to the increased availability of firearms:

Four, five, six years ago, you couldn’t get a gun. It was more about knives. There was only a minority of people that had access to guns and that was the elders of the gangs or the hardcore drug dealers. But now, it’s just flooded. From the age of 10 or 11 upwards, kids have gotten access to a gun. Eleven. Look, just last week a young person has been arrested for possession of a gun at the age of eleven.

(Electro)

Everyone’s got a weapon now basically. No-one fights with fists, everyone fights with weapons. It’s either a gun or a knife. So people aren’t scared of no one no more. Even the weakest person ... can get a gun like that. So if you trouble him or he remembers you from school, he can go get his gun, he’s going to shoot you. No one’s scared of no one, everyone’s got a gun.

(Kingpin)

The problem with this explanation, as explained in **Chapter 3**, is that youngers are still dependent upon their elders for access to criminal commodities, especially firearms:

That’s how the younger ones are getting their protection. That’s how the younger ones are getting their guns, getting ... their money and how they make money selling weed or selling cocaine or selling heroin such like that.

Their elder, yeah, that's how they do it. Because they couldn't get it otherwise. Anytime a little younger stabbed someone or does something to someone the elder probably is there and influencing. And if he didn't want it to happen, it wouldn't happen.

(Sunfire)

The younger get their guns from the elders. Elders can always get a gun like that. They are still better connected even if the younger are causing more noise.

(Flash)

A more viable explanation, it seems, is that gang younger are growing tired of patiently waiting for their elders to retire or acknowledge them:

I don't know, the elder might have not shown [the younger] love and respect and show them ratings like what they should be getting. It's all up to how the young person is feeling. If he feels to stay by the elder, then he will stay. But if he can't get to do what he wants to do with you because you're top in your gang, if he feels to leave then he will just make up his own name and move on. ... If he feels that he's made enough name for himself and now he can leave, he can do his own independent stuff. Look, you're my older and I'm your younger. You was once bad, now you're not no more. I'm doing bad things and people are realising. They notice that I'm bad, I'm worse than the worst. I used to get more reputation on the street through your name. Now it's my name that's out there. People see me and they're looking to the floor. Shook (scared). I don't need you no more, you gets me? So I just leave you. All of the people out on the streets are scared of me so I could have my own little crew made up that can come for you. I've got certain connections inside it, 'cus now, I'm the next top guy, you're not. I rebel against you, literally stab you in your back.

(Xavier)

It is uncommon for *bona fide* gang members to defect, but Xavier explains a likely scenario. This is certainly an emerging trend that future research should make a point of investigating. Situations such as this, moreover, help explain the emergence of new gangs or the fragmentation of existing gangs into smaller, more cohesive units. Suffice it to say, rebellious gang members rarely sign “non-compete” agreements (see **Chapter 6**).

Case in point: in the early 2000s, when numerous PDC key players, including Elijah Kerr, were imprisoned on counts of serious violence, outside the prison gang youngers, bored by the lack of action from their imprisoned leaders, “took a leaf out of the McDonalds playbook”, branched out and formed “franchises”, of which one was nicknamed the “Muslim Boys” by police and press alike (KI XLI). As one police officer recalled: “We were frequently arresting young boys who claimed to be Muslims to garner preferential treatment in the cells. We called them the ‘Muslim Boys’ because they were quite literally Muslim boys, which obviously stuck because they started calling themselves by the same name” (KI VIII). Some Muslim Boys had indeed converted to Islam and, in the post-9/11 and 7/7 era, began posing as Islamists to gain street credibility and trade on false perceptions about links to al Qaeda.

Following largely unsubstantiated rumours that the Muslim Boys were forcibly converting young men to fundamentalist Islam at gunpoint with help from corrupt Imams, Lee Jaspar, then the Mayor of London’s senior advisor on policing, described the gang as a criminalised front for terrorist extremists and “as tough to crack as the IRA”.²² Local police similarly over-emphasised the threat of the gang in order to tap into a burgeoning counterterrorism budget and bring state resources to eliminate them. This only enhanced the reputation of the gang, for while the Muslim Boys were certainly responsible for a number of violent crimes, neither they nor PDC, which was incorrectly reported to have over 2500 “members”,²³ presented the size or scale of threat that was suggested. Prominent Muslim Boys are now themselves in prison and the gang has once again undergone its own splintering processes from which new

²² *The Observer*, 22 April 2005.

²³ *The Guardian*, 29 January 2009.

gangs are beginning to emerge. This brings me to my next topic, the external organisation of London's gangs.

4.2 EXTERNAL GANG ORGANISATION

Gangs cannot be viewed in isolation. Many of my interviewees indeed stressed how gangs themselves were almost defined by the presence of other gangs. As Cyclops so aptly put: "How can you be a gang without a rival gang"? This rhetorical question speaks to Thrasher's (1927a: 46) classic notion that gangs are "integrated through conflict". Much like Gambetta (1993: 108) describes in reference to mafia firms, my fieldwork also suggests the presence of "natural" alliances and groupings among gangs. Small gangs, for instance, cluster around larger gangs. One reason for such alliances is that large gangs are generally older and more established and therefore enjoy better ties with the wholesaler suppliers of criminal commodities. Smaller gangs, in turn, are somewhat dependent upon larger gangs when procuring drugs and firearms. Another reason is that borough allegiances often transcend local gang affiliations. Rival gangs in the "blue borough" of Lewisham, for instance, are known to call a truce and amalgamate during periods of inter-borough rivalry with the "black borough" gangs of Southwark or the "green borough" gangs of Bromley.²⁴ As Colossus explained: "It's a gang with your area. When another gang like invades that area or someone from a different area invades that area, all the gangs come together as one. No matter if they like each other, all the gangs come together to defend that

²⁴ Lewisham's gangs are collectively known as "blue borough" after the colour of their local authority logo, street signs and wheelie bins.

area". Once a dispute subsides, however, local rivalries typically resume, amounting to what the media has dubbed an escalating "postcode war" among gangs.²⁵

Sometimes gang members will travel far outside traditional territorial boundaries to socialise and meet. The objective is either to seek out neutral territory where the risk of encounters with other gangs is low, or to visit venues where confrontations are more likely, and thereby initiate symbolic and actual shows of strength. Nightclubs and parties (including so-called private "pay parties") are a key focus of leisure in the lives of gang members and represent one of few times they leave the community and interact with other people like themselves (Hallsworth & Silverstone, 2009). These venues are certainly associated with "constructing and defending a public identity and displaying conspicuous material wealth" (Hallsworth & Silverstone, 2009: 369), which explains in part why they were regarded by many interviewees as sites of violence.

Visits out of borough are also used to cement networks developed through contact in school or prison that contribute to gang cooperation. Alliances formed in school between disparate gangs or gang members are quite common because school catchments regularly cross territorial boundaries. Many children indeed travel out of borough to go to school because their local authority simply cannot accommodate them, as Scorpion explained:

You go to school, you've got tonnes of different people from tonnes of different areas. It's not just because you go to school in Lewisham that means that everyone there is from Lewisham. You get people from Peckham, you get people from Croydon and, you know, if they're involved in something where they are, do you know what I mean? You get to know what

²⁵ *Evening Standard*, 2 January 2008.

they're involved in, they get to know what you're involved in and there becomes those ties because if I want something done down there or if I'm going down there and someone tries to stop me and go, 'Right, who do you know around here?' ... For me it's like when you go to those different areas, it's about who you meet.

Juggernaut similarly described the way in which he had used time spent in prison to forge important strategic alliances with members of opposing gangs, often along the lines of business interests:

At Feltham [HMYOI] you almost, like, knew everyone and everyone would know who you was, you knew who they were or knew something about their crew and it was easy like that. ... So when it comes to setting up, like, different links with different people from different boroughs and all the rest of it, I'd turn 'round and go, 'Well, yeah, I know north London and I know the Archway lot and know the Holloway lot. But, you know, when you're doing crime and you're doing, say for instance, you're doing fraud, you want as many different links as possible because, you know, there's many different opportunities to get this thing up and running. So you want to have as many different people from many different areas knowing what it is you're doing but still keeping it. ... All the talk about postcode rivalries in the media is hype. A lot of that stuff is bullshit. ... For the young ones maybe, but for us, this is business. The odd thing about a Peckham boy and a New Cross boy is that Peckham and New Cross are not supposed to get on together, yeah? But they sit next to each other all day in a cell, then drive home in the same car when they are out. Doesn't add up, does it?

Gang-related disputes and rivalries can be carried over into custody, but the logical need for prisoners to band together with people from the same home area, or with similar cultural reference points, particularity when held some distance from their homes, means that disputes can be put aside. Bonds between members of allied gangs may be further solidified by the decision of prison authorities to suppress violence by separating prisoners according to their gang affiliations:

It was a joke. ... I went to gaol only to link up with man that went in a week or a month before me. When I went to Feltham [HMYOI] and saw [gang member], the first thing he said and did was laugh, spud me, and say 'they got you too'? ... The gangs continued in gaol and within that, all the little cliques came together. People from your own circle that you didn't really know or get along with on the outside, they would stick with you in gaol.

They would introduce their man so it went on. The gang got bigger, got stronger.

(Lizard)

The prison in effect has become a space for the expanded business and territorial organisation of London's gangs. The so-called "Northern Line", for example, are a connection of gang members from opposing north London gangs—primarily in Haringey, Enfield and Islington—who initially came together around the in-prison drugs trade but continue to work together after release, not unlike American "supergangs" (Krajick, 1990).

An example of gang cooperation that does not necessarily require systematic coordination is the exchange of goods and services. Rival gangs can use the same weapons, for instance, which they lease or rent from a common source (usually a senior member of a bigger gang) for between £50 and £250 a day.²⁶ When multiple gang members in close proximity claim access to a firearm they are indeed often referring to the same-shared gun. In other words, people you would not expect to be allies can use one single gun on a given estate, which may be linked to multiple offences. Gangs may also share personnel based on familial connections. After the local authority relocated the families of two Acolytes members onto Avengers turf, for example, the individuals described began to affiliate with both gangs and forge a coalition between the two groups. The alliance nearly fell apart, however, when a subgroup of Avengers gang members unwittingly attacked and robbed a member of the Acolytes on neutral turf. Tensions were resolved only through a sit down between the inner circle of both groups and the return of all stolen property.

²⁶ *Evening Standard*, 16 February 2007.

4.3 SYMBOLIC GANG ORGANISATION

In **Chapter 5** I analyse communication that employs costly actions, but first it is important to say a few words about the linguistic and symbolic communications of gangs and their members, including some “exotic devices ... which convey information understood by convention rather than by intrinsic link with the message” (Gambetta, 2009a: xiv). Gangs indeed use coloured clothing, gestures and hand signals, even a variety of allusions and metaphors, to cheaply and accurately advertise, communicate, and identify fellow gang members (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). During our first meeting, Daredevil schooled me on gang colours:

Densley: So if your gang has colours, how do you show your colours?

Daredevil: Bandannas and clothes. It really is like America. It's blue, red, green, black, yellow, purple, white, girls in pink or whatever.

Densley: And those colours, the ones you just mentioned there, in what sort of geographical space are we talking about? Is that just in one area of south London or is that across...

Daredevil: All of them colours, all of them colours are all in south London. All of them colours just in southwest London, not southeast, just southwest.

Densley: So I roll up into your neighbourhood, which let's say is purple, your neighbourhood, I don't know if it is, but let's say it is, okay, and I'm wearing green. What, what could happen?

Daredevil: Well purple and green are basically the same crew, just like different...

Densley: Oh okay, bad example.

Daredevil: Yeah, it's like a crew in a crew. But say you was wearing purple and you went to a red neighbourhood, problem. Red went to a green neighbourhood, problem. If you're wearing yellow and you went into any other neighbourhood, big problem.

Ways in which gang members “rep their endz” (represent their area) include both the wearing of coloured bandanas around the lower face, neck, or wrist, and the creation of graffiti. Gangs use graffiti deliberately to mark territory and advertise their presence, pay respect to fallen gang members, and cover rival gangs’ graffiti as a show of disrespect or defiance (for examples, see **Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3**, respectively). Within a given borough there may even be several gang “sets” that identify with a particular colour or graffiti tag. By looking at gang culture popularised in the media and adapting styles to local conditions, for instance, gangs in London have taken on affiliations with the infamous Bloods and Crips gangs of Los Angeles, that wear red and blue, respectively, which are more imagined than real.

4.3.i Reference points

Much as Sullivan (2005: 182) discovered with comparable cases New York, the conflict between Bloods and Crips in London “appears primarily to be a re-labeling of local rivalries that already existed”. One key informant indeed quipped: “Nobody from Los Angeles appeared as a recruiting agent” (KI XI). Nevertheless, Gambetta (1993: 143) explains how “[n]ames acquire the power to convey reputation irrespective of other considerations. They become brand names”. The value of the Bloods and Crips brands as dangerous and ubiquitous entities, it seems, are particularly attractive to London gangs. As Toad suggests, the brands can even directly reduce the production of real violence: “In terms of like wearing colours, like repping your gang’s colours, it’s all that, should I, for example, be from another gang, as soon as I see you I’m like ‘oh, you’re from Crips gang so I’m not going to touch you because Crips gang are hard””.

Figure 4.1. A threat from postcode E8 to rivals in N16 to “bak [sic] out”.



Source: Author.

Figure 4.2. Stockwell’s ABM gang mourn the loss of Seyi Ogunyemi (“Sheyz”), killed during an organised gang fight in Larkhall Park in 2009.



Source: Author.

Figure 4.3. “Rizla”, a gang member from E5, disrespects EN3, only to be superseded by E8.



Source: <http://www.gangsinlondon.co.uk/>

Gang members are heavily influenced by stereotypes of gangs well established in fiction and examples of “successful” criminal organisations well known in fact, not least the Italian mafia. Much as Sánchez-Jankowski (1991: 70) found with gangs in New York, gangs in London not only try to organise themselves to imitate what they think the mafia looks like, but also copy certain mafia leadership categories. Most gangs in London use the terms “younger” and “soldier” interchangeably. Within the Avengers gang, moreover, the leader’s closest friend and confidant has, based on the mafia model, established himself as *consigliere* (counsellor) to the extent that he represents his inner circle colleagues in important meetings with other gangs. Elijah Kerr, leader of PDC, even ironically describes himself as “the boss of bosses” in a nod to the *capo di tutti capi* of La Cosa Nostra. When asked who they aspired to be or from whom they drew inspiration, a number of my subjects cited famous mob bosses, such as Al Capone, John Gotti, and Lucky Luciano. Others cited the “original gangsters” Stanley Tookie Williams, an early Los Angeles Crip and best-selling author, and Frank Lucas, king of the 1970s Harlem drug trade, popularised in the movie *American Gangster* (2002, Dir: Ridley Scott).

As Venkatesh and Levitt (2000: 447) observe, much of gang members’ “knowledge of the Mafia derives from highly-polished narratives such as *The Godfather* as opposed to an understanding of the role of organized criminal enterprises in communities and specific sectors of capital”. By copying the same (fictional) template, it seems, gang structures start to converge and look alike. Indeed, the lack of variation between the organisational structures of the gangs in this study reflects both the attempts of gang members to achieve operational efficiency and the competition among gangs to see who can look most like the “gangs” portrayed by the media. Only

with time did gang elders realise that the hierarchical model provided them with more control of the youngsters and was generally more efficient for drug sales than a flat structure. Most importantly, the hierarchical structure generally ensured that nobody younger than them in age and experience called the shots.

Popular culture likewise serves to enhance the reputation of real gangs. As Gambetta (2009b: Chapter 10) astutely observes, real Mafiosi borrow mannerisms and lines from movies (and popular culture in general) in order to better intimidate their victims. I submit that gang members indulge in similar practices: they invoke fiction to make people believe they are real. Gang web pages are indeed often overwhelmed with the expressions and symbols of the stereotypical “gangster” lifestyle: pictures of Vito Corleone, Tony Montana, Tony Soprano, Li'l Zé, and the cast of *Goodfellas* (1990, Dir. Martin Scorsese); emblems ripped from designer clothing and premium liquor brands; and images of marijuana leaves, stacks of dollar bills, automatic weapons, and scantily-clad women. A video removed from MySpace in 2008, moreover, showed a boy with a bloodied mouth being slapped and forced to strip by the Croydon-based “DSN” (Don't Say Nothing) gang, in a filmed torture scene reminiscent of one featuring the Joker in the movie *The Dark Knight* (2008, Dir. Christopher Nolan). A televised act of bravado such as this is certainly costly signal of “fearlessness” and “contempt for the law” because it renders the assailants more “vulnerable to prosecution” (Pitts, 2007: 47).²⁷ The act further ensures that DSN's reputation for violence reaches an audience larger than could ever be achieved through word-of-mouth alone. Indeed, I am only aware of it because the mainstream media picked up on the MySpace video.

²⁷ In **Chapter 5**, I delve further into gang members' use of costly signals.

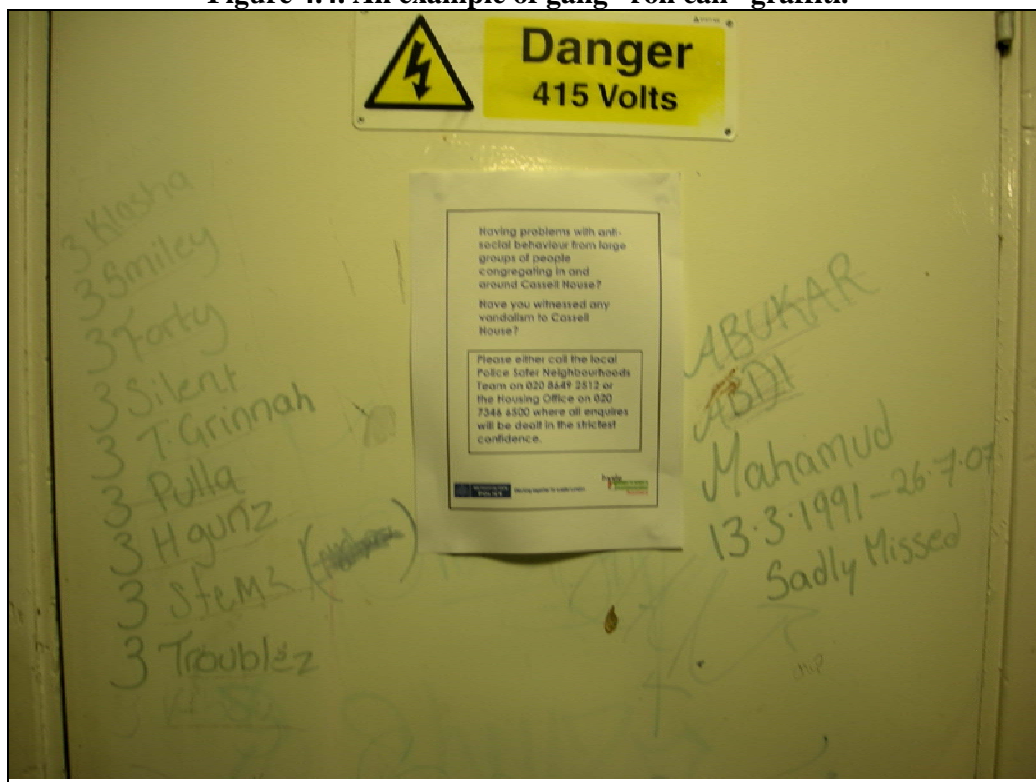
Examples of popular culture influences on London's gangs abound. Gang members refer to the Old Kent Road in Peckham, for instance, as "Brooklyn" in homage to New York City's retail heroin and crack cocaine distribution centre from the 1980s to early 1990s. The Streatham based "PIF" (Paid In Full) gang takes its name from the title of a 2002 film about crack dealers in New York. The neighbouring "ABM" (All 'Bout Money) gang similarly draws their name from that of the fictional Philadelphia gang portrayed in the straight-to-DVD movie, *State Property* (2002, Dir. Abdul Abbott), which stars rival U.S. rap stars Beanie Sigel and Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter. The list goes on. Some gang members' street names are even derivatives of or variations on the names of the infamous Hollywood gangsters they model themselves upon; characters from films such as *The Godfather* (1972, Dir. Francis Ford Coppola), *Scarface* (1983, Dir. Brian De Palma), and *Cidade de Deus* (2002, Dir. Fernando Meirelles). During the fieldwork, I indeed met a "Scarface" and he was neither Al Pacino nor Paul Muni.

4.3.ii Street names

Gambetta (2009a: Chapter 9) describes in detail the prominent role of "nicknames" in criminal groups. In this tradition, I would like to take a moment to address the use of street names in gangs, using one unnamed gang from the sample as a case study. In this gang, 74% of the 54 members I am aware of were endowed with a specific street name. The inner circle gang members and elders all had street names and spoke of themselves and to each other using them. These names were common knowledge to

the wider community and were in many cases published in the gang's own media. **Figure 4.4** below indeed depicts some of the gang's "roll call" graffiti, which lists the street names of certain prominent gang members. By contrast, only 43% of the youngers had a street name and of those with a street name, 46% were derivatives of the street name of someone older in the gang. There was a "Klasher" and "Younger Klasher", for example, and "Mo" and "Little Mo". Only one member of the gang had a street name that was a diminutive of or at all resembled an ordinary first name. The street names of many of the older gang members were chosen by their bearers and thus generally highlighted favourable or menacing qualities about them; notably "Teflon" (a reference to an ability to withstand attack with no apparent effect), "40-Cal" (a reference to his previous use of .40 calibre handguns), "Luger" (so named for his penchant for a type of German automatic pistol), and "Pumps" (a reference to an interest in pump-action shotguns). The street names of the younger members were more often attributed by the elders and thus carried slightly more negative connotations. For instance, "Lippy" was so named because he was endowed with rather large lips, "Gonzo" similarly had a big nose, and "Belly" carried a few inches of extra girth around the waist.

Figure 4.4. An example of gang “roll call” graffiti.



Source: Author.

Despite some gang members describing their street names to me as useful codenames, street names were so often used that really only the given names of the gang members confused the police, especially when siblings shared near identical names. The only true codenames used by gangs are in reference to criminal commodities. Firearms are endowed with female names, such as “Loretta” the Beretta handgun and “Tabitha” the Intratec TEC-9 submachine pistol, for instance, so that when gang members speak of “taking out” or “looking after” a particular weapon it sounds to outsiders as though they are either embarking on a romantic date or caring for a sick relative (KI LX). This again speaks to the level of gang organisation.

4.3.iii Advertising

Gangs seek ways to strengthen their brand in the market both to deter rivals and to attract the right prospective recruits who believe their personal brand matches that of the collective gang. Gangs advertise their presence and their identity through graffiti communication, Internet videos, media attention, rap lyrics, and the general spreading of myths. Elijah Kerr, for example, has featured on television shows dedicated to exploring the lives of Britain's "deadliest men" and is often described in the press as the most "notorious" gang member in London.²⁸ These claims provide Kerr and his gang with an exaggerated kudos or status, which during the transition from Younger 28s to PDC also saved on the reproduction costs of having to announce leadership succession. Phoenix put it best: "The news helps gang members. It's marketing. If your name's in the paper, if you're on *Crimewatch*, your ratings go up". Nevertheless, the most powerful "gangs marketing tool", Phoenix added, is not television, but rather "grime music", a genre of urban music that evolved primarily out of British garage, Caribbean dancehall, and American hip-hop. Grime music is thus the focus of this section.

Preeminent gang scholar John Hagedorn (2008: xxviii) argues, "[t]o understand the culture of gangs, first of all, means understanding their music". Grime originated in some of the most deprived inner city boroughs of east London, particularly Tower Hamlets, Newham, Waltham Forest and Hackney and is often hailed for "giving voice to the voiceless" young people growing up in multicultural Britain.²⁹ Grime artists indeed often mix autobiographical details about crime and violence with emotional

²⁸ <http://www.bravo.co.uk/shows/danny-dyer-deadliest-men/>

²⁹ *The Guardian*, 14 February 2009.

honesty. Grime's emergence is intrinsically connected to local pirate radio (which incidentally is used by gang members to send coded messages out over the airwaves), with many performers honing their skills out of improvised bedroom studios and achieving "underground" success before approaching the mainstream. Grime is carried by words recited rapidly and rhythmically over a pre-recorded—typically electronic—instrumental backing: it "sounds as if it had been made for a boxing gym, one where the fighters have a lot of punching to do but not much room to move".³⁰

A number of critically and commercially successful grime artists, such as Nathan "Giggs" Thompson, leader of "SN1" (Spare No 1), a branch of the Peckham Boys, continue to upload songs and videos, announce shows, promote albums and interact with fans via MySpace pages linked to gangs. Their music videos are typically made up of raw footage recorded on video camera or mobile phone and crudely produced on personal computer. The content is rarely anything more than gang members taunting rival gangs and evoking lines and scenes from popular culture. Some artists are even accompanied on songs with "adlibs" from active gang members. Following the PDC "street movement" model, moreover, SN1 have developed their own clothing brand ("SN1 wear"), which includes T-shirts, jackets and caps quoting lines from Giggs' greatest hits. The gang has also developed their own commercial website and opened a shop in Peckham Market, both of which sell clothing, mixtapes, and albums of British grime artists.

Many local lyricists affiliate with gangs because gangs control access to community resources, record labels, recording studios, and performance venues. Gangs also have

³⁰ *The New Yorker*, 21 March 2005.

the capital to invest in studio time, video production, and local record promotion.

Angel added:

That's how it goes because you get the ones that do music, they'll say, 'ah you know what, I haven't even got the money for studio time so I'm going to join these guys and I'm going to do this'. Before they know it they're one of them hangin' on road hustlin' all day.

One of my key informants indeed policed a highly publicised case in which a gang bought their own music on iTunes and Amazon websites using stolen cards in order to profit from the royalties.³¹ During the fieldwork I encountered a number of gang members in the process of reinventing themselves as “grime” music producers, deejays, and emcees in an attempt to cash-in on their street experiences. Angel observed: “It all boils down to business, it all boils down to money. The people actually making the tracks, making the music, they see it as a way out of the ‘hood by actually representing the ‘hood”. Far from living like characters in an MTV hip-hop video, however, most musical gang members appear to be operating at close to break even.

Emcees who “spit” rhymes are valuable assets for gangs even if they do not bring in much money: by unloading an eloquent tirade of abuse upon their rivals, rappers provide an important source of entertainment for gang members and help raise the gang's profile. Grime artists understandably draw on their gang experiences in their records, much like American gangster rappers. Eric “Eazy-E” Wright, who performed with pioneering hip-hop group NWA, once boasted on the videotape *Beef I* (2003, Dir: Peter Spirer):

³¹ *The Times*, 11 June 2009.

Some rappers try to rap about shit out here but they can't do it because they don't live it. They was not around it, but we can because we have been around it, and doing it all of our lives, killin', robbery, murders, thieving, gambling, dope dealing ... everything you hear on our records is true.

Some artists, "studio gangsters" in gang parlance, indeed embellish their messages; others adhere to the old adage "write what you know". As Phoenix noted, "if you're rapping about it and you're not actually putting yourself in that situation ... then you're a fake already... You have to have lived it to be able to put yourself in". Conflict between rival gangs can therefore be integrated through music because the lyrics typically refer to real life confrontations. Lyrical battling is a prominent part of hip-hop and grime culture, but it can escalate. Sixteen-year-old Iyke Nmezu, for instance, was killed in February 2008 in a row over rap lyrics posted on the Internet. London's gangs use music to deliberately disrespect one and other, to aim threatening and antagonistic slants, and to attack personal credibility. While gang elders may tolerate these signs of disrespect and respond with a record, youngers looking to make a name for themselves are likely to respond with violence (Stevens et al., 2009).

4.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The data in this chapter suggest gangs develop systems for issuing orders and rules that govern member interaction in order to maintain their social and economic infrastructure. Gang organisation, it seems, is primarily a product of gang business, but also an outcome of external constraints and new media influences. The internal organisation of gangs involves approximately three levels of power and decision-making authority: (1) a higher level, or "inner circle", consisting of individuals who make autonomous decisions and use violence or the threat of violence to regulate the

behaviour of individuals who occupy the lower levels; (2) a middle level of decision-makers, or “elders”, that translate the words of the inner circle into action and help conceal the true extent of gang organisation from the public; and (3) a lower level consisting of “youngers” who are directed by their elders and thus accountable, punishable, or capable of being rewarded by them. The reputation necessary to occupy elder status is typically gained within the gang, by demonstrating loyalty and determination. This, in turn, has important implications for who and how gangs recruit, the focus of my next chapter.

The hierarchical organisation of individual gangs, for example, speaks to the way in which gangs generally entrust the recruitment of new members to their elders, not unlike the way in which corporations mitigate mistaken selection problems by delegating recruitment to specialists, well-informed internal recruiters, or senior employees (Greenwald, 1986). Gang recruitment, moreover, is governed by, even reflective of, internal organisation and tactics, and external relationships with “competitors” in a given economic, ideological, or spatial “market”. Such is why it is so important for gangs to advertise their quality and presence (i.e., organise symbolically), but also be methodical in their recruitment practices; ensuring, for instance, that friends of friends do not join “automatically”. This brings me to my third central question: how do gangs recruit?

CHAPTER 5

GANG RECRUITMENT

As a general rule, the most successful man in life is the man who has the best information.

(Benjamin Disraeli)

Talk is cheap. Words are plentiful. Deeds are precious.

(H. Ross Perot)

There is an old adage in business: a company is only as good as the people it keeps. Organisations in legitimate markets generally appreciate that their success, indeed survival, depends upon the quality of their people. In October 2008, for example, the share value of Apple Inc., the ubiquitous consumer electronics company, fell more than 10% in response to a report that CEO Steve Jobs had suffered a major heart attack. Admittedly, Jobs is uniquely associated with the Apple brand and much of the company's innovation is directly attributed to him, nevertheless, the implication is that recruiting competent employees is a vital task. It is also a difficult task because, as discussed in **Chapter 1**, all candidates hold private or "hidden" information, which may result in mistaken selection. Street gangs, like legitimate corporations, also need good people, that is, people with the necessary skills and attributes for the "job" of gang member. The question is how they go about getting them? How do gangs screen and select among prospective recruits? How do prospective recruits distinguish themselves and thus prove that they are the right candidates for the job of gang member? These questions are the focus of this chapter.

5.1 TRUST-WARRANTING PROPERTIES

Trust is essentially the expectation that someone will do something (Bacharach & Gambetta, 2001). In the gang context, that “something” may be to beat someone up, collect a debt, give early warning of police raid, deliver a message, or hide a murder weapon. Based on the conditions outlined by Bacharach and Gambetta (2001: 150), we might say that a gang member A “trusts” gang member B to do something (X), if gang member A acts on the expectation that gang member B will do it, when both know that two conditions exist: (1) if gang member B fails to do X then gang member A would have done better to act otherwise; and (2) gang member A acting in the way he does gives gang member B a selfish reason not to do X. In other words, misplaced trust involves regret while trusting increases exposure to opportunism. If gang member B does X in those conditions he is considered “trustworthy”. If gang member B lacks the ability or motivation to fulfil X then he is considered “untrustworthy”. Gang member A thus should only make himself vulnerable if he has reason to believe that gang member B is trustworthy.

To reiterate, in using the word “trust”, I mean it is characteristic or predictable for someone to act in a specified way. Trust is essential in situations characterised by risk and uncertainty, not least the recruitment of new gang members. Here the need for trust stems from the recruiter’s lack of detailed knowledge about the recruit’s abilities and motivation. The question is, how can existing gang member C be confident that prospective gang member D is trustworthy and will not exploit the gang’s vulnerabilities? The answer lies in the presence of certain “trust-warranting properties” or factors that transform gang member D’s raw payoffs, thus influencing

gang member D in such a way that he or she favours fulfilment (Bacharach & Gambetta, 2001: 153). The following are examples of trust-warranting properties (as derived from the testimonies of my interviewees in previous chapters) that in the gang context increase the likelihood of a prospective gang member being able to fulfil the requirements of gang membership.

5.1.i Violence potential

As Sánchez-Jankowski (1991: 49) observes, gang members need to know whether or not a potential member can fight because if they are ever “caught in a situation where they are required to fight, they want to feel confident that everyone can carry his or her own responsibility. ... If someone cannot fight well and is overcome quickly, everyone’s back will be exposed and everyone become vulnerable”. For this reason, gang members are keen to recruit individuals with established reputations as good fighters. Recruiting good fighters also has the added benefit of enhancing the gang’s collective reputation for violence, which reduces the production of real violence.

Violence may be defined as the use of force to achieve some desired end. Sánchez-Jankowski (2003: 208) observes that “gang-related” violence can be defined in relation to “gang-member” violence; the former involves individuals committing violence as “agents of the organization”, whereas the latter involves individuals in gangs committing violence as “independent agents”. As discussed in **Chapter 4**, “gang-related” violence, such as a drive-by shooting, is authorised and premeditated from above. Accidents do happen; when guns and knives are around, pushing and

shoving can escalate into stabbing and shooting. Some are truly tragic. In March 2011, for example, a five-year-old girl was shot in Stockwell after being caught in the firing line of a gang who were targeting two youths sheltering in a grocery store.¹ Nevertheless, gang members are required to be proficient in violence, but also restrained enough to really only use it as “agents of the organization” (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003: 208).

5.1.ii Criminality / delinquency

As discussed in **Chapter 3**, the criminal or delinquent component separates gangs from conventional peer groups. Aside from “hanging out” together, gang members engage in illegal activities together, which are integral to the *raison d’être* of the group.² Gang members also mobilise delinquent behaviour as a currency to acquire various forms of social capital (Anderson, 1999). Given this criminal component, it seems only reasonable that gangs should expect their members to actively participate in delinquent activities or indeed seek out those individuals that have special talents to perpetrate crimes. In other words, gangs are looking for criminal potential that they can use in the future for the good of the gang. The best sign of criminal potential is past criminal behaviour. It is imperfect but a vast psychological literature demonstrates that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour (Ouellette & Wood, 1998). The criminality of novice criminals, moreover, may be inefficient or inexpedient, which in “gangland” (Pitts, 2008: 101) increases the likelihood of

¹ *BBC News*, 30 March 2011.

² A quick look of some of the names of London’s gangs helps illustrate this point: “OC” (Organised Crime); “GAS” (Guns & Shanks); “ABM” (All ‘Bout Money); “SUK” (Stick-‘em Up Kids); Terrorzone; Murderzone; Shine My Nine (as in nine millimetre handgun).

casualties, collateral damage, prolonged police attention, and reduced profit margins. In the gang context, solid criminal or delinquent credentials thus constitute trust-warranting properties.

5.1.iii Group loyalty

Gang membership is an engagement or obligation that restricts freedom of action, not least because gangs expect something in return for the costly goods and services they provide for their members. First, they want their members to live and defend the climate and culture gangs seek to perpetuate. Second, they want to see application and dedication on behalf of their members. As Juggernaut explained, “real” gang members are not fly-by-night opportunists interested solely in short-term private concerns, but rather “ride or die” individuals “100 percent committed” to the gang and its goals. He added:

If you're reaping the profits and whatever else it is that we're doing, whatever it is that we're, you know, we know all the bouncers on the club doors and you're getting in there for free or whatever, then you got to contribute. You think you're on the fringe so you're forgiven? It does work like that. Once you're in, you're not going to be on the fringes, you get involved. ... You need all stand-up-guys, d'you know what I mean? That will always have your back, no matter what. Because even some of those hard cats, when things go down, some of them are ready to flee very, very quickly. ... One thing you say in the game is you can't be half hearted. You can't be half hearted ... because someone whose half hearted is the same person that's going to feed you to the Feds. D'you know what I mean? Or is going to feed your information to someone else.

Suffice it to say, whether a recruit is an “investor” in, or merely a “consumer” of, the gang is private information, and the gang would benefit from knowing such information in advance of making a recruitment decision (Weinstein, 2007: 101).

5.2 THE PROBLEMS OF TRUST

As discussed in **Chapter 1**, trust-warranting properties are seldom directly observable. Criminal potential, violence potential, and group loyalty are certainly not.³ For this reason, gang member C (the truster) must look for signs of the relevant trust-warranting properties and, in turn, prospective gang member D (the trustee) must take appropriate steps to reveal or “signal” them. This solves the problem of primary trust but not the problem of secondary trust. The problem of secondary trust is that sometimes it is not certain that the signs themselves are to be trusted (Bacharach & Gambetta, 2001). In other words, the signs themselves may be unreliable. Gang member D may simply be pretending to be trustworthy (i.e., mimicking the trust-warranting signs) in order to reap the benefits of gang membership and later exploit the trust of gang member C. Mimicry such as this can occur when the cost of emitting a signal for being trustworthy is smaller than the benefit one can expect from appearing to be trustworthy (Bacharach & Gambetta, 2001). As such, before deciding to trust gang member D, which in this case means recruiting him or her into the gang, gang member C must screen gang member D by looking not just for any signs or signals of trust- (or indeed distrust-) warranting properties, but “reliable” signs or signals of trust- (or distrust-) warranting properties. Reliable signs or signals, as outlined in **Chapter 1**, are those that are hard or “too costly” for gang member D to fake. Gang member D must either volunteer these signals to gang member C or gang member C must probe gang member D to elicit such signals. This process is the main

³ Indeed, the first two are properties that in mainstream society would be unlikely predictors of trustworthiness.

focus of this chapter (for a more detailed discussion of signalling theory and the difference between signs and signals please refer back to **Chapter 1**).

What makes this process even more compelling is the fact that gang members and prospective members alike already operate in a low trust environment. Children living on gang estates grow up against a soundtrack of barking dogs, domestic disputes, gunshots, and police sirens. They play in dilapidated hallways, poorly illuminated stairwells, and weary elevators peppered with broken glass, crude graffiti, and the stench of urine: “The perfect set for a post-apocalyptic movie”, one key informant mused (KI XLI). From an early age, kids quite literally fight for their survival. At home, they compete with their siblings for scarce resources such as food, clothing, space, and parental attention. At school, they do battle with collapsing buildings and torn textbooks, at times irrelevant and insulting curriculum, and the soft bigotry of frightened, inexperienced, and insensitive teachers. And, “on road”, they negotiate an environment in which the young are viewed as prey by various predators:

Drug-dealers trying to sell, crack fiends looking to steal or score, and gang members out to make a name for themselves. Fuck Afghanistan, we need troops out here. Every time man be leaving his yard (house) he walks into the Gladiators’ arena. Sometimes it’s kill or be killed.

(Exodus)

You ever walk down Brixton Road [in Lambeth]? Get off the tube, walk up the stairs and before you’re even out the station door you get asked if you want some Skunk. You can smell it. Then, outside Superdrug and the old Woolworths, it’s crack. Keep walking and outside KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) it’s cannabis again. Outside Ritzy cinema, then, you can pretty much get anything. Now I know this. You know this. Don’t you think every kid around here knows this? They have to run the gauntlet every day just to get to where they’re going.

(KI LXXVI)

Sánchez-Jankowski (1991) argues that by virtue of growing up and residing in this environment, it is instilled in children and young people that they cannot have

confidence in others, who will always put themselves first, and that any assistance from anyone has immanent costs. My findings concur: youths learn through experience not to become too attached to others, for this only ever results in anguish.

Xavier articulated this notion as follows:

It's the mentality that you grow up with because everybody else around you have let you down so many times i.e., family, parents, local authorities or people that just come around and promise you things and just don't do it. It just brings down your trust and it's like you just don't trust no one. You just don't trust no one. Because one thing that you grow up with is yeah, it's good to trust, trust people, dah, dah, dah, dah, but once you start trusting people they start letting you down then you're thinking why am I trusting you? ... When I was growing up I didn't like myself, so why am I going to like you? Who are you for me to like? If I don't like myself, why do I like you?

My gang member interviewees were justifiably suspicious of others. They thus adopted a philosophy of self-reliance and learned to calculate trust.

To further complicate matters, gang members appreciate more than most people that one cannot inherently trust what people say or do to persuade you that they can be trusted. As Vulcan observed, "It's too dangerous out there [to take things at face value]. Anyone can be a snake. Anyone can be the guy in the grass spying". First, gang members operate under constraints of illegality and secrecy, which provide both opportunities and obligations to renege on their promises. Discipline within gangs is not defined within enforceable rules and regulations and disputes cannot be settled by access to a third party as established by the rule of law. Second, gang members, by virtue of being gang members, are also likely to have the "motivations" and "dispositions" to defect, for they are more prone to selfish or costly behaviour (Gambetta, 2009b: 30). Some gang member interviewees had certainly been duped in the past. Some spent time in prison or hospital as a result:

Most of the people at the top hardly trust, don't even trust people in their own crew because it's all about money. Nowadays people in the same crew are robbing each other. People shoot each other from the same crew, all about money.

(Antman)

If there is truly no honour among thieves, how do gang members solve the problem of trust? In **Chapter 4**, I described one way: *ex-post* violent sanctions. As Gambetta (2009b: 35) explains, however, the use of violent sanctions has serious “drawbacks”. First, violence attracts press and police attention and increases the possibility of arrest. Second, physical force is costly to reproduce in terms of time and resources and risks countless unintended consequences, particularly when dispensed at a level such that it affects already violent people. Third, and related, violence transfers all the costs of solving the problem of trust to the gang because the impetus is on the gang to prove that its threat of violence is credible, not the other way around. Fourth, internal gang violence contradicts a given gang's claims to protect its members, which in turn may reduce support for the gang and deter future applicants. In other words, violence may result not in passive cooperative but in active rebellion. For all these reasons, gangs seek alternatives to violence. In this chapter, I focus on how gangs solve the problem of trust *ex-ante* through recruitment.

To summarise, from the standpoint of the gang, the problem of trust begins with whether a prospective gang member is a real prospective gang member or instead has some nefarious intentions (i.e., to spy on the gang or keep their enemies close) and is thus mimicking a prospective gang member. The problem lies with the fact that certain skills, attributes, and attitudes conducive to supporting gang business are largely unobservable. In the sections that follow, I describe how gangs and prospective recruits work to make the “unseen” seen through the nature and extent of

observable proxies. I outline how reliable information is gathered, coordinated, transmitted, and evaluated. Please observe, recruitment into a gang is in most cases not a single event, but rather a gradual process that takes weeks or even months. Each of the steps on this process is treated separately below.

5.3 NARROWING THE POOL

Neighbourhoods are essential recruiting pools for gangs because they are close-knit environments, which enable long term monitoring of individuals. A community under the jurisdiction of a gang indeed serves as a selective environment for gangs to partially overcome their informational handicap and “gather information” (Weinstein, 2007: 104) about the past behaviour and practice of prospective members. As Gambetta (1993: 37) notes in reference to mafia recruiting pools, in “[t]he area where we are born or have lived longest ... we know every resident and every street corner ... new faces stand out ... are questioned, and their business, role, accent, and common acquaintances are determined”.

Within a gang’s territory, the information gathering process typically begins with the simple question: “Where are you from?” For gang members, the question “Where are you from?” is a locally recognised interrogation device, a means of gathering important information about unfamiliar people who are separated by boundaries often invisible to oblivious adults. As Garot (2007: 50) argues, the question is “one of the central practices for demonstrating a gang identity and forcing the respondent to make an identity claim in terms of gangs”. Thunderbird gave an explicit example: “It’s like,

people come up to me and go to me ‘where you from, blood?’ And I say where I live and they come back, ‘oh you’re this gang’ or ‘you’re that gang’ just ‘cus of my endz’’. Online communities further enable gangs to monitor the places people come from and the company they keep, as Phoenix observed:

A lot goes on MySpace. ... If your reputation is high, somebody from another gang will know you. ... You can’t just be any random person and come and put yourself on MySpace. You have to have had some sort of impact on street level already ... it’s difficult to fake that because if you say like, I’m from this estate, someone who lives in that estate is going to check ... your friends must spread the word ... there ain’t a single gang member on MySpace that won’t say ‘shout out’ or ‘big up’ this one, whatever and it’s like bringing up all the names ... drawing attention not only to themselves but their friends as well.

Given that London’s gangs are highly territorial, living in neighbourhoods or attending schools with active gang members often produces the expectation that “every area has a gang or is affiliated with a gang. You can be not in a gang and still be affiliated because you’re seen around that area” (Aquaman). As a consequence, residence becomes a sign “synonymous with affiliation” (Pitts, 2007: 49). Interviewees such as Marvel and Plasticman indeed eventually joined a gang because they got tired of being accused of a being a member by one gang or another.

Territory helps define the parameters of gang membership. In so-called “defended neighborhoods” (Suttles, 1972: 21), that is, local areas defined by mutual opposition to another area, insiders by definition are somewhat trustworthy while outsiders are either superfluous or threatening. Outsiders are therefore limited in their efforts to devise credible signs of trustworthiness. If someone from Peckham desires gang membership in Brixton, for instance, they are unlikely to be successful because Peckham and Brixton are fierce rivals. Xavier elucidated: “A young person in Brixton ... on these streets, he will grow up to hate Peckham ... [he will appreciate] the

Peckhamese cannot be trusted”. Even within a given gang’s territory, a preference hierarchy for recruitment may exist. Octopus observed: “[My gang] was based out of New Cross but I was actually from Bellingham [approximately 3 miles away]. I went to school with them, but I had some of the [gang members] from New Cross telling me I had to extra prove myself because I wasn’t official. I wasn’t from where it all began”.

Residence may also serve as a proximity measure of one’s experience with, indeed potential for, violence. Cyclops asserted: “You say you from Brixton or Hackney, I’ll take notice. You’ve lived this thing. You say you from Westminster, I’ll think you’re an idiot. What do you know about this gang thing?”. Youths living in communities where violence is prevalent have increased likelihood of observing a violent act or becoming a victim of violence. As Gambetta (1993: 35) argues, the ability to accept bloodshed “is not a subcultural characteristic but a specific skill which, like more pacific skills, can be transmitted from one generation to the next”. Being exposed to violence indeed statistically increases the likelihood that one will go on to commit a violent act (Thornberry et al., 1998). A number of my gang member interviewees grew up either in neighbourhoods or in households where physical abuse and punitive punishments were prevalent and argued that such an upbringing had primed them for a life of violence in gangs:

I had violence in my background. ... I saw my mum get smashed in every day when I was little so I was used to violence in my house, domestic violence, and that so fighting and doing stuff on the street wasn’t anything new. ... By the time I was nine I was used to it, so when I was going to school doing it to other people it was just like a pattern, you see what I’m saying? ... If you’re used to it, it’s not traumatising. You get on, you get patched up and you go out there and you get another day.

(Sunfire)

In much the same fashion, prior experience in war-afflicted areas, such as on the African continent, may be correlated with violence propensity. Interviewees (both gang members and non-gang members) observed, for instance, how refugees appeared on the whole to be better acclimated to violence and less fearful of death than native-born gang members, which was considered advantageous for them within what Fagan and Wilkinson (1998: 138) describe as the gang “war zone”.

To elaborate, some of my interviewees had spent their formative years in nations inured in violence and devastated by widespread disease and famine, endemic corruption, and tremendous inequality in income distribution, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, and Somalia. Their family, community, and social structures were in many cases ravaged by armed conflict and displacement. No less than three gang member interviewees lived through civil wars that killed tens of thousands of people and spawned a new lexicon of words and images that shocked the world, including “blood diamonds”, drugged-up “child-soldiers”, and warlords and militiamen forcing their victims to choose between long- or short-sleeve arm amputations. They have first hand experience of such brutal behaviours as abduction, mutilation, rape, torture, and murder.

Having been born in countries in which life expectancy was low and life was itself “cheap”, African-born youths are known in gang circles for their shallow affect and establishment of what Scorpion described simply as “an entirely different kind of violence”.⁴ Scorpion succinctly captured the voice of many of my interviewees in

⁴ Part of the reason was that local authorities housed rival Somali clans together on the same social housing estates. As one interviewee recalled: “It was like putting Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants together at the height of ‘the Troubles’ and expecting them to all get along because they’re Irish” (KI LXXXV).

explaining that violence among African youths was seen as “first and not as last resort” and as a tool through which real respect was obtained. Hulk agreed: “It used to be about fists ‘round here, then all of a sudden it was machetes, axes, swords, guns. People getting bodied (killed). ... There’s little remorse [for their provocations]. Them African boys don’t fuck about”.

Ethnic features themselves further define the margins of a gang’s recruitment pool. Although there are no black “ghettoes”, in the sense of large areas of the city, composed three-quarters to a hundred percent of black people, social housing estates in London are racially and ethnically segregated (Peach, 1996). White people stand out, so much as that during my fieldwork one white gang member was arrested for possession of a handgun simply because police recognised him as “the only white guy” in a group photograph of a gang posted on the Internet (KI XLI). Harpoon told me during the fieldwork: “Being white you would need to prove myself more than if you was black and trying to get into the gang”. Part of the reason, he argued, was that white people, as visible representatives of the state and old colonial powers, had become a symbol of black people’s exclusion from mainstream cultural and institutional life. White people were by default more attached to the mainstream and thus could not be trusted.

Ethnicity and family ties overlap and increase information about an individual, thus reducing uncertainty. Like Venkatesh (1997: 95) observes, gang affiliation is arguably the “principal public identity” for many gang members, yet much of the social interaction in gang-affected communities occurs in situations where “gang membership is not marked and where gang members are known by other roles”, as

sons, nephews, cousins, and neighbours. This is especially true in black communities that practice, in Scorpion's words, an "open house culture" in which "everybody knows everybody else's business". For gang members, embedding agency relationships in an ongoing structure of personal relationships solves in part the problem of mistaken selection in recruitment. In simple terms, friends have track records and reputations while friendships afford a rich array of sanctions for the errant gang member (Shapiro, 2005). Take the words of Harpoon: "Me and the people I grew up with, we've got trust because we grew up together. We can associate together. They, people didn't come from different places to come in. We grew up together so we have that kind of growth trust already there".

Although not always their primary motivation (see **Chapter 3**), many young people enter gangs as a result of family and kinship ties. Much as Moore et al. (1978) discovered in the barrios of Los Angeles, some youths are literally born in ("grandfathered in" or "blessed in") to gangs as a result of the neighbourhood in which they live or their families' earlier, and sometimes ongoing, affiliation with gangs and involvement in criminal activity. In some chronically poor neighbourhoods, gang membership has become a family tradition: gang members actively encourage their relations to belong to the same gangs to which they themselves belonged when they were younger, much as university-educated parents encourage their children to attend their alma maters:

For some people it's just like, it's like for the family ties as well. If you're family, you're part and parcel of it. You've already proved yourself because you're part of that bloodline. Do you know what I mean? Like, if you came through me, you're automatically known, 'Oh well, that's [Juggernaut's] cousin', do you know what I mean? Or, 'That's his cousin', or that you're someone's cousin, you're someone's brother. And that in itself makes a

difference. That in itself puts you steps ahead of someone who might have been around three or four years longer than the next guy.

(Juggernaut)

Family ties once again help define the margins of the recruitment pool.

In sum, recruitment from narrow neighbourhood, ethnic, or family stock reduces uncertainty for gangs and increases trust (see **Table 5.1**). Signs of ethnicity, locality, and personal identity are of course present anyway meaning that true possessors need do nothing more to display them. As Gambetta and Hamill (2005: 205) write, these “automatic cues” are such that an honest signaller “need hardly be aware of the cue’s effect to benefit from it”. In other words, those who are from the “right” neighbourhood, ethnic, or family type do not have to do anything to signal other than show themselves as they already are. Only the gang need be aware that the cues of the prospective members constitute trust-warranting properties. Prospective gang members become aware if their cues are negative, such as if they are white, hail from a rival neighbourhood, or come from the “wrong” family. Says Xavier:

I done something and someone came up to me and go ‘what you doing, do you know my brother is?’ I said ‘who the fuck is your brother, brother? I’ll kill your brother, bruv.’ That’s how it is. I ain’t heard of you. And if I ain’t heard of you, then I ain’t heard of him. I don’t care. That’s how it is.

The strength of these automatic cues is that they are near impossible to mimic. As a white man born in Leicester, for example, I cannot suddenly become a black man born in Peckham to fulfil the entry requirements of a gang. If mistakes are made by gangs in assessing trustworthiness, therefore, they are not made at the level of the trustworthiness of the signs, but because such properties poorly discriminate between trustworthy and untrustworthy prospective gang members. For example, although African heritage may indicate a level of comfort and experience with violence it may

also indicate possible use of indiscriminate violence, which, as discussed in **Chapter 4**, is actually bad for gang business. Suffice it to say, this is only the beginning of the recruitment process.

Table 5.1. Trust-warranting properties during “pooling” stage

Trust inducing	Distrust inducing	Uninformative
Black	White	Other ethnic group
Co-ethnic	-	Non co-ethnic
Same neighbourhood	Rival neighbourhood	Other neighbourhood
Family / friendship ties	No family / friendship ties	-

Source: Author’s compilation.

5.4. SIGNALS

The signs described above help narrow the field of candidates for gang membership. This was the “first cut” in the recruitment process, whereby gang members weed out all applicants except the most qualified or likely (that is, with the basic characteristics) to be trustworthy. For the “second cut” to begin, gang members and potential recruits must first find themselves a situation in which the exchange of signals is possible. Much recruitment into gangs occurs in settings where people already know each other and can “check each other out in the natural course of their daily interactions” (Gambetta, 2009b: 9). Before becoming gang members, nearly all my interviewees had lived or travelled within gang turf. They grew up around gangs and gangs grew up around them. As Daredevil observed, “if you go out into some of these neighbourhoods you’re almost destined to be introduced to a gang or a gang member, if you allow yourself”.

The key point here is “if you allow yourself”. Freedom from strict occupational ties of course makes for the kind of structural availability that affords youths the discretionary and unscheduled time to participate in gang activities. But in order to join a gang, youths must first signal to gang members that they are interested in joining, which means spending time on the streets where gang members hang out.

Juggernaut expounded:

It's just like the way people act shows you who wants to be in a gang and who doesn't. You see them and can pick them out, very, very easy ... you know the people that disengage from education, you can see them, when they're out on the street when they shouldn't be out on the street ... we'll ask them questions, you know, 'What are you up to?' 'Nothing'. Sometimes you see what they're up to. And if what they're up to is something that you can tap into, then you do.

By spending more and more time in the company of a gang and its members, prospective recruits enable themselves to be monitored and thus create opportunities to signal their loyalty. Daredevil elucidated: “All your time has to go into ... the gang, that is your life. Got nothing else to do but be out on the street with your other crewmembers ... it's basically your life”. Indeed, time not spent with the gang must be reasonably accounted for and gang members will ask subtle probing questions to check people's movements and make inferences about their acquaintances and behaviour, such as: “Were you in the shop yesterday, I thought I saw you? Who was that you were with, I've not seen them around here?”

Proximity to the gang and its members with time also reveals to the community at large the application status of a prospective gang member. Scorpion explained that whereas gang associates “come and go” and generally “stand off to the side” or walk as adjunct of a gang, for example, *bona fide* gang members share an exclusive “close proximity” with other gang members while “on road”—that is, they walk, stand, and

sit together.⁵ I certainly observed this dynamic during my fieldwork; indeed it helped me at times to distinguish between gang associates and gang members. The presence of gang members on the street, moreover, enables them to quite literally scan their surroundings for promising signs of membership potential. Lizard insisted: “One thing you must realise about black people is that we notice other black people on road. We size them up, try to figure out what they’re about. Are they real? We really *see* them”. The question is, what do they see?

5.4.i Violence potential

According to Sandman, individuals that negotiate the streets by “taking no shit from nobody” send all the right signals. Marvel agreed, “[y]ou’ve gotta look tough, scary, not like one of them Chris Brown (a clean-cut U.S. singer) niggers, all sweet and shit”.⁶ On the streets, the image one projects is paramount and a person’s public bearing must send the message that he or she is capable of violence when necessary. Anderson (1990: 176), a key writer on impression management in the inner city, once described how law-abiding black males purposely “put on a swagger” or adopted a menacing stance to intimidate others and keep social predators at bay. Anderson saw that the right looks and moves ensured safe passage. Likewise, many of the unaffiliated young people I interviewed were so attuned to the harassment they faced on the streets—the threats, groping, suggestive gestures, and lewd comments—they had developed a repertoire of physical and verbal gymnastics to help defuse them. Gang members did the same. Goblin, for example, explained how he developed a

⁵ There are parallels here with prison gangs which parade together to signal membership in an exclusive group.

⁶ Ironically this statement was made not long before Chris Brown was convicted of domestic violence.

“kind of bop” (i.e., a confident and typically arrogant or aggressive gait or manner about his walk) accompanied by a “screw face” (“described at best as a blank expression”, at worst as a “hostile” scowl or look of distaste (Gunter, 2008: 353)). He used these tools deliberately, he said, to signal to others that he was “not to be fucked with” and thus best “left the fuck alone”.

Of course, youths not only signal aggressiveness to avoid gang members, but also to attract gang members. During the game of gang recruitment, however, a masculine walk or evil stare are cheap signals that are easily mimicked—they do not even come close to discriminating between *bona fide* models and dishonest mimics. Only costly signals overcome the burden of proof. That gang members attend to these signals is not all that surprising. Rivera (2010) observes how elite nightclub doormen make hundreds of similar status decisions every night, admitting only the rich and famous based on signs as subtle as the type of wristwatch someone is wearing. In clubland, mistaken selection can tarnish the image of the club or discourage big spending among patrons. In gangland, the stakes are much higher.

People who fight frequently typically develop a certain posture or accrue visible scars and repeated fractures (Gambetta, 2009b). Says Toad:

You can see it in their face ... [the] shape of their face. See, if you were like a boxer yeah, you could see that you could break someone's face. ... People that are beefing a lot, they have hard-body faces, unbreakable faces. ... In their eyes, you can see if they feel confident, if they feel untouchable.

Signs such as these are honest because they are permanent and hard-to-fake. As Gambit mused, “them marks, they stay with you for life. ... I've been stabbed ... the ones that I've got along my legs and that, around the back of my legs and that, they're

there for life. Not going nowhere”. During my fieldwork, I saw evidence of violent histories in the form of cicatrices, but interviewees usually had to lift their shirts to display them. This is fine during an interview scenario but impractical in daily life. The question is thus how can one display these signs in a manner such that they become signals of fighting prowess, which, in turn, can convince gang members otherwise well versed in fighting?

The answer is that prospective gang members cultivate activities that show their physical fitness. Some youths “attack the weak” or participate in “audience-oriented staged and controlled fair fights”, which can be quickly dispersed by teachers and passers-by (Collins, 2009: 11).⁷ Gambit also talked about the way in which violent reputations are often enhanced through deliberate occupation of other “physical worlds”, such as boxing clubs and weight rooms, where nakedness and public displays of strength are encouraged. He added, however, that physical size and muscle tone are not direct correlates of individual fighting ability.⁸ Indeed, people spend hours in the gym simply to compensate for inadequate fighting prowess or the lack of “the killer instinct”. Gambit joked, “This ain’t Las Vegas. Out here, some of them tiny guys, like, they might not be much with their fists but they might be good with a knife or might be good with a gun”.

Signalling displays fail when there is little time to enact them or prospective gang members simply do not have, in Gambetta’s (2009b: 82) words, the accumulated “violence capital” to display (that is, the physical signs of having been violent). Given that gangs primarily attract adolescents, this latter point is especially poignant;

⁷ I recall plenty of instances of this from my time teaching in the New York City public schools.

⁸ Body size is not even a decent proxy for age because many gang members look much older than they actually are and obesity is prevalent in gang-affected communities.

prospective gang members are typically too young to have extensive fighting records. Likewise recent immigrants or school transfers lack *local* fighting records. When displays fail for prospective gang members, therefore, there is nothing left to do but fight, as Xavier recalls:

I went to secondary school there and the boys there obviously me coming from Africa they wanted to show off, they wanted to see if they can do certain things or because I don't talk their language and I speak a certain way they might try and make joke of me so I took the offensive and I started doing things like fighting people. With the fighting came the reputation. 'Cus once no one couldn't take me then it's like I really become scared of you and they want to be your friend. So that's how it started. I could fight any man. Basically I would fight anyone.

The quotation above reminds me of Mike Tyson who as a child was repeatedly caught fighting those who ridiculed his high-pitched voice and lisp. Tyson of course grew up to become undisputed heavyweight boxing champion, winning an unprecedented 12 of his first 19 professional bouts by first round knockout. School bullies had falsely attributed Tyson's speech impediment as a sign he was weak or effeminate; by fighting them, Tyson proved just how wrong they were and sent a reliable signal to other bullies not to make the same mistake.

To reiterate, honest signals of fighting ability reduce the number of actual battles, which are destructive to all participants. Adolescents typically do not have accumulated violence capital to display, however, which explains in part why they fight so often.⁹ Fighting was indeed almost a daily occurrence for some of my interviewees. Some had fought so often as youths that it was impossible to for them to even quantify. Sage offered the following example: "I felt like it was everyday. I just

⁹ Alternative explanations are that the young also not have other forms of capital to display and that there are fewer legal and physical consequences to their fighting: when grown men fight, for instance, they can more easily kill each other.

wanted to be with my friends but I can't because I would see a girl on the bus and she'll come up behind us, she might have a bat in her hand, metal baseball bat, and I mean I have to fight her". Individual reputations for violence of course carry over into the gang, which, as discussed in **Chapter 3**, helpfully augment collective reputations for violence. Given that resources within gangs are distributed in part according to the violence potential of individual gang members, moreover, violent reputations not only assist entry into gangs, but also predict success while in them.

As discussed in **Chapter 4** and in **Section 5.1** above, however, violence potential alone is not enough for gangs. Gangs also require evidence of *disciplined* violence potential. Daredevil, for example, was one gang member recruited specifically for his fighting abilities. He recalled: "I got into a fight with another boy who was well known, had a lot of rep ... he got pretty messed up. People heard what I done and [the gang elders] were like, 'yeah you're big, you're big, I want you to be involved'". The bigger the player you take out, it seems, the larger the pay off. This makes intuitive sense, yet an even greater part of Daredevil's appeal was his altruistic use of violence: "I was helping people that I didn't know so they thought all right he's got heart. ... The leader told me 'yeah I heard what you did today' and, like, 'man I want you to be involved. You're not just out for yourself. I want you to be part of our little gang'". Indeed, Daredevil had demonstrated he was capable of administering violence on behalf of others, or as an "agent of the organization" (Sánchez-Jankowski, 2003: 208).

5.4.ii Criminal/delinquent potential

As previously discussed, recruitment into gangs tends to take place in potentially fruitful settings, such as the immediate neighbourhood. Prisons, HMYOI, YOT, PRU, even special classes, tracks, or programmes at regular schools, likewise serve as “selective environments” (Gambetta, 2009b: 9) for gang members to locate and monitor those who like them have disengaged with education, employment, and training, in favour of criminal or deviant behaviour. Speaking about gang recruitment in schools, one key informant observed:

It’s not only what you do but what you don’t do. Like, if you have to sit out of school assembly due to religious reasons or miss out on rewards because of your behaviour, you will regularly encounter others like you who are in the margins. It’s like *The Breakfast Club*. This is where cliques grow up together.

(KI XXXI)

The pre-commitment screening venues listed above are inherently segregated by strong markers, which shoulder the burden of proof for gang inductees.¹⁰ In simple terms, unless someone is extremely unlucky, only *bona fide* criminal or delinquent individuals spend real time on suspension, on remand, on lockdown, on probation, or, as discussed in **Chapter 4**, on *Crimewatch*. Press coverage (connected to a high-profile police investigation), prison records, and trips to your caseworker or probation officer meet the hard-to-fake condition. By displaying their constraints and disclosing their misdeeds, moreover, prospective gang members reassure gangs of their loyalty.

Youths are also recruited into gangs while in prison. One police officer I interviewed told me, “If you want to get into a gang, get into Feltham [HMYOI]” (KI XXII). Among gang members, prison is typically portrayed as either a “holiday camp” or “university”, within which conventional sensibilities are abandoned, new skills and

¹⁰ Press coverage of the 2008 murder of 16-year-old Shakilus Townsend indeed stressed how two of the youths responsible had “tried hard” in the past to build a criminal record, because they considered a long rap sheet to be the pre-requisite of a true gang member. *The Times*, 9 July 2009.

resources are acquired, “gangsterism” is acculturated, and criminal networks are augmented (Gambetta, 2009b: 276n18). Indeed, it was within prison that some of my interviewees acquired the human and social capital necessary to be truly competitive in the open gang member market.¹¹ Ministry of Justice figures suggest that those released from custody have the highest recidivism rates of all young offenders who have been processed by the criminal justice system (Home Affairs Committee, 2009). I suspect that part of the reason is that unaffiliated youths affiliate with gangs in prison and thus gain access to greater criminal means. The vast literature on prison gangs lends support to this claim (for a discussion, see Fleisher et al., 2001).

Not only is a prison record a sign of distinction, but also the close quarters of prison enable long term monitoring of individuals. From within prisons, gangs can gather *indirect* information about prospective gang members, such as the crimes that they were arrested/convicted for or the length and type of sentence. Gangs can also gather *direct* information about potential recruits, as Juggernaut explains:

You know, like, if we wanted entertainment, we’d make other prisoners bloody fight their cellmate. You know, ‘you’ve got to beat up your cellmate now because I’m bored [and] if you don’t beat up your cell mate, I’ve got

¹¹ Of course not all gang members that go to prison come out worse than when they went in. For the following interviewees it was time spent in prison that exposed the futility of gang membership:

Whoever told you that, ‘yeah, prison’s alright’, they’re telling you shit. No one wants to go to prison. ... I can’t even stand the cell, yeah, I get claustrophobic; I can’t breathe.

(Ironman)

When you go to prison, you go to prison alone. I know, I’ve been there. You’ve got to remember that in prison you get moved from one prison to another prison. You could get moved overnight. You could get moved to Scotland where it’s like, ‘Who are you?’ You’re gang is nothing to them up there. You’re gang can’t protect you. ... Enough of these guys will come out and they won’t tell these kids about it, about the realities. They like ‘oh it was a holiday. I just lifted weights, got muscley, and played Playstation all day. I ran that place, rah rah rah’. They don’t hear the realty. The story’s not told because it’s catastrophic for our rep, you understand. I mean, what man wants to admit they were scared to go to sleep, or stuck on lockdown 23 hours a day, or raped, or made someone’s bitch. Trust, you don’t say nothin’.

(Gambit)

someone that's in the cell next to me that will beat you up when you come out for exercise'. You know, so, we had some good fights. People trying to kill their cellmates and all sorts. ... This is how you separate the real gangsters. Did they do what I told them to do? Did they do it good, like? One of the guys, like, literally I could tell him, 'take this chair and go smack it over his head' and he would've done that. He would've gone out and done anything for me, do you know what I mean? So, just being in prison is not enough, it's what you do in prison.

Once again the implication here is that crime or violence alone is not enough—disciplined crime or violence and doing what you are told is what counts when it comes to securing gang membership. Juggernaut continued:

One dude I was in there with, one of the white boys, he used to look like a tramp or whatever, I see him recently, I was doing clothes shopping, 'Oh, bruv, I know you're making money, man, come on, man, bring me in, bring me in, bring me in'. I told him straight, 'you ain't one of my colleagues, you ain't one of the people that I roll with'. You've just got to tell them the truth sometimes. ... He was a dickhead inside, he'd be a liability outside.

In this case, prison *per se* was not enough because in prison the prospective gang member had exposed some individual character flaws that eventually sunk his application.

Prison is an honest signal because few mimics would be willing to abandon what they hold dear and languish indefinitely in the harsh confines of a prison cell, simply to get one over a gang. In much the same way that people without any accumulated violence capital resort to real fighting to prove their toughness, however, people without extensive criminal credentials must display their criminal potential through more conventional means, such as by participating in costly criminal acts with a very public audience:

I know it sounds hard, but going into people's houses and, you know, going in and gunbucking (hitting someone with a gun) people's mums and all sorts, do you know what I mean? Like, you're in there for the cash, like, you do

whatever it takes. So when you go to someone's house you gunbuck their mum, you gunbuck their baby sister, you gunbuck, you know, you're putting hot water on their wounds and all sorts of stuff like that. You know, someone's going to want revenge, they haven't seen your face but they know it's this person and they've got, it's this person they're looking for they're, 'Oh, that's his cousin, yeah? Ok. I want to do this to his cousin'.

(Gambit)

It's basically not what you say but what you do. Like if you back your chat, say you say 'I'm going to shoot this person for doing what he done to me two years ago', you pull out a gun and then you, you bring the older lot down and you shoot him. ... They standing like a witness ... that shows them you're serious, yeah and they'll give you respect. It's about gaining respect. That's how you get respect. People that were looking, 'see what he done?'

(Angel)

Crime conveys information: it is an honest signal because it is costly. Public displays of criminality move things up a level, which explains in part the emerging phenomenon of young people photographing or filming "brazen and extravagant" acts of crime and violence and posting them online.¹² The number of images in public news articles and features likewise indicates a readiness amongst some young people to appear in the media brandishing weaponry (for examples, see CSJ, 2009). In the digital age of perfect remembering, technology facilitates the exchange of compromising or "hostage-information" (Gambetta, 2009b: 71).¹³

5.5. VOUCHING AND REFERRALS

¹² *Metro*, 20 February 2007.

¹³ It may also limit the scope for exaggeration regarding criminal exploits. One of my interviewees recalled how she once used 2-chlorobenzalmalonitrile (C.S.) incapacitant spray on a rival. Although her injuries were minor, the victim was admitted to hospital. On the street, rumours soon spread that the girl had stumbled into the road and was hit by a car. Others claimed that there was permanent scarring around her eyes and that she needed eye surgery. Others claimed that she was now blind in one eye.

As discussed in **Chapter 4**, much of recruitment into gangs comes through the gang elders, in part because they are primary receivers of signals. In addition, any gang member can *initiate* the recruitment process (indeed this is one of the privileges of being a gang member), but only a gang elder or above can *complete* it. Once a potential gang member signals properties to a gang elder and a gang elder screens them, the next step is for a gang elder to select that individual as someone they are willing to vouch for. Vouching within gangs can take subtle forms, but, as Quicksilver perhaps best articulated, more often it is represented by the way in which gang elders “hand down” their known aliases to their “protégées” with the prefix “little” or “younger” attached. Caesar’s “younger”, for example, would be named “Little Caesar”. Octopus gave the following example:

Say for instance like, my boy there, ‘Ruffy’, he’s the oldest, like, he’s like one of the oldest ones. But his brother has taken his name of Younger Ruffy. So it rolls down, do you know what I mean? Like, and then you’ve got Tiny Ruffy so, as they, as they grow up in stages, you all get known by who the eldest one is and what the eldest one does and where the eldest one’s been. It sort of filters down. As far as they’re concerned you have to be like your elder, you have to be like your older brother, you know. So that’s where the trust level comes from.

The “endorsement” of a gang elder as encapsulated in a street name is a powerful cost-discriminating signal to the rest of the gang. The cost lies in the inability to mimic such an endorsement, as Pixie explained:

If I was ‘X’, [then] you’re ‘Little X’, you’re my younger and you do things for me. You’re going to rob something, you’re coming back to me and you’re giving me half of it even if I wasn’t there. Or if you’re in a problem, I’ll come down with my people and help you because that’s how it is. *It’s like a younger sister or brother relationship. You can’t just, like, be someone’s younger and them not know you* (my emphasis).

Gangs use referrals from individual elders as a screening mechanism before admittance into the gang. Gang elders are literally responsible for mentoring their

youngers, attesting to their characters, and introducing them into the wider group. By inviting prospective members to come “hang out” with the gang, gang elders place their own reputation on the line because gang members are judged by whom they associate with. Elders “vouch” for the legitimacy of their younger, which then initiates the next stage of the recruitment process. The personal endorsement is an informal incentive for existing gang members to be rigorous in the recruitment process. If responsibility for a poor recruit were defused across a larger number of people, the consequences would be less dire for any given individual, thus lowering the risk (and in turn the bar) for bringing on new people. Forcing someone to stake his or her reputation on a new recruit ensures the bar remains high, at least for that individual.

5.6 SCREENING

Once a prospective member has secured a “tag” or “street name”, they often begin to act, dress, walk, and talk like an actual gang member. Some recruits even brag about their gangs or prematurely claim membership. Daredevil listed the signs as follows: “Slowly he’ll start screaming out whatever crew you’re repping, he’ll get a tag, he’ll start wearing the colours you’re wearing, he’ll wear the same coat, he’ll start talking the way you’re talking”.¹⁴ Such behaviour was merely reflective of imitation not initiation, he argued, because the individual was not yet authorised to exploit the shared reputation asset of the gang by the gang members who “own” it. Indeed, until now the prospective member has made no formal commitment to gangs besides some

¹⁴ Some boasting is accepted so long as it enhances the reputation of the gang and names of individual gang members are not brought into it.

time spent with gang members, which means that self-preservation likely supersedes the gang for them even if they believe in loyalty and unity within it.

Reputations and referrals pertain only to evidence of criminality or trustworthiness “acquired indirectly through a third party” (Gambetta, 2009b: 15). In this section, I review the processes by which gangs directly evaluate the commitment and competency of potential recruits. These processes are tantamount to the practice of intense and lengthy interviews, written examinations (i.e., psychometric personality tests to assess the correct cultural fit and case studies to test problem-solving skills), and medical assessments in the legitimate business world. Legitimate corporations address agency problems through careful and competitive selection procedures, training and credentialing, and the establishment of ethics codes which curb individual self-interest and opportunism (Shapiro, 2005). Gangs are no different:

If they need to prove themselves to me, I can put anything on them. ... Talk is cheap bruv, so if you wants to roll with us, if you want in on this thing, you better prove yourself. You gotta do something for us, you gets me? It's hard to really put into words, you know. ... You prove yourself ... by actions, it's more or less by actions.

(Riptide)

I think people shy away from the fact that you have to have walked it before you get into a gang. Or you have to do something bad before you get into a gang. It's no one off thing. It takes time and effort. It's about who's got the heart for it? Who's got the balls for it? And there might be different tests you put different people through, you know?

(Ironman)

Gangs indeed test potential recruits to determine the similarity of their values and abilities to those of other gang members and to see if their personal identities can be merged into that of the group. By subjecting themselves to this series of tests, potential recruits, in turn, signal their fitness for gang membership.

For many of my gang member interviewees, exposure to gang members was a routine childhood experience, which led to curiosity and resulted in observation, approximation, and fascination. As a child, Daredevil recalled aspiring to local gang members who “hung out on the block” and “flossed” (flaunted) their success in the underground economy through conspicuous consumption of designer clothing, expensive jewellery, luxury cars, and automatic weapons.¹⁵ Daredevil’s contact with adult men was relatively limited (his father left when he was a child) meaning the most readily available source of male approval became the older gang members in the community, who in turn lay the foundation for the intergenerational transmission of the gang lifestyle. Daredevil was even given “pocket money” by gang elders, which further enamoured them to him:

People looked a lot older and a lot bigger when you’re younger. ... He looks like, I don't know, he was a black guy, Jamaican, but say he looks like, you know, like a stepdad or an uncle that your mum might know and you hang about with. But he’s always surrounded by younger people. ... He’ll take you to go and eat. He’ll put money in your pocket.

As he got older, Daredevil was even invited to informally “hang out” with the gang: “I started hanging out, like getting calls to go youth club, parties, stuff like that, randomly going out, just hanging on the block really, that’s just about it, like just started hanging out”. At the parties he met some of the other older gang members, danced with their female associates, smoked his first cigarette rolled with cannabis, and drank his first beverage laced with Bacardi. Before long he had seen too much, shared too much, and knew too much about the gang. Joining the gang, he said, seemed “inevitable”.

¹⁵ Gang members’ ability to buy expensive consumer items as gifts made them attractive to members of the opposite sex, which further enhanced their image.

In reality, joining was not necessarily inevitable. Whether or not he realised it, Daredevil was actually being assessed the entire time he associated with the gang. As Juggernaut explains below, prospective gang members are constantly scrutinised by gang elders, even during the most benign group activities:

It might be something as simple as, you know, we bring a whole lot of girls, we're sort of having a barbecue. You know, all the guys in the gang are there and you can imagine you're all looking, like, you're looking your best with all the latest accessories whether it be the nice big diamond chain that you probably spent five or six grand on, or a nice watch that you might have spent two or three grand on. ... You see what they're like in that environment and that's how you work people out. ... After a few drinks, can I leave the room and trust this boy with my girl? Can I trust this boy with the money on the table? When it comes to girls and money, that's when you see people's true colours.

During such encounters, moreover, gang members ask questions of prospective members, which provoke gossip or invite exaggeration, in order to see if certain secretive qualities are revealed or not. Gang members likewise pretend not to know about things which in reality they know full well about in order to measure the validity of any stories told by prospective members. In Scorpion's words, "real gang members will openly disrespect [those who] ... listen in on everything or ... come with every gossip and spread it everywhere. They can't be trusted".

The screening process does not end here. The steps outlined above merely help gangs evaluate the general character of prospective recruits. Gang members will also set up a number of situations to test the toughness of prospective recruits. Notably, they will pick a fight with a prospective member or attempt to rob them on the street and observe the response. Xavier instructed:

If you on your ones (own) and someone comes up to you, 'What you got for me bruv?', you look at them in the eye, talk to them straight in the eye, stand your ground. ... don't take nothing from no one. 'You can't rob me

fam because I won't let no-one rob me'. If you don't react, they'll think you moist (weak).

During the courtship period, moreover, gang members will invariably talk with prospective members about “backing them” in a tough situation or a fight. This proffered loyalty to the prospective recruit demands reciprocation because they will be required to back up the gang when the situation calls for it:

You've got to show that you're down to beat people up. ... If someone says 'oh I don't like that boy', you'll be one of the first people to say 'can we rush him?'

(Mysterio)

If something goes down and you're there, you have to back it. If you're in this crew you have to back it. If you don't back it, you now become the next victim. They say, “Where was you?” ... You just get turned on and everyone just pounding you. If people don't see you there when shit really does go to the fan, they're going to think you're fake and, 'What you doing? You talk a lot but you don't show your actions'. ... If you're a fake you're finished. Your career is finished.

(Iceman)

When something goes down and you're there, you have to act. You have to go the full road with us. And that's where you find some of these kids, you know, they see someone they've got beef with and, you know, there might be 20 guys and everyone's got to get a stamp in to show that they're a part of it. Do you understand that? Do you understand why some people will get involved? Some of these kids getting killed because ... you've got 20 guys trying to see who can give you the heaviest thump on your head. They're, saying, 'you know, we are a part of this, we're in it with you'.¹⁶

(Juggernaut)

As can be observed, some interviewees actively displayed their willingness to join in with violence in order gain approval for inclusion in gangs. Perhaps the most interesting discovery from the above quotations, however, is that violence *proficiency*

¹⁶ This explains in part the dynamics of the 2008 murder of 16-year-old Shakilus Townsend. First, Samantha Joseph, 15, set the “honey trap” by preparing the gang via mobile phone and luring the smitten Shakilus down a quiet cul-de-sac in Thornton Heath. Next, Andre Thompson, 18, beat Shakilus with a baseball bat, while three associates of the “Shine My Nine” gang kicked and stabbed him and two others acted as lookouts. Finally, Danny McLean, 18, took his turn to stab Shakilus, twisting the knife to leave a gaping and fatal hole in his stomach. *The Guardian*, 4 September 2009.

at times appears almost irrelevant. What matters most is that prospective gang members simply “participate”.

5.6.i Group loyalty

By dutifully and punctually “showing up” to the “madness” (as an attack or gang fight is known), Sabretooth asserted, prospective gang members at the very least subject themselves to “monitoring”. He explained: “You’ve always got to be there. ... If you call man down for a beef, even if he don’t make it in time, just the fact man show is important. You know where he be at all times”. Defection *en route* is simply not an option, even if it would prevent certain injury. Says Daredevil:

Even if it means you’re going to get stabbed for saying you’re in a crew and you say you’re not in a crew to save yourself people think right, you haven’t got heart. ... Cool, you saved yourself from getting shanked (stabbed), but people are like ‘no, he’s a moist, why’s he saying that for, he’s not really repping, he shook, he shook (scared)’. I’m like, ‘Why? At least he didn’t get stabbed’ and people are like ‘no, he should, he should’. So he’s just, he’s lost a lot of respect for lying.

Mutual offending behaviour thus becomes a way of confirming a sense of self as loyal or belonging to the gang. As Gambetta (2009b: 61) observes, “[i]llicit acts carried out jointly create a bond among participants, not just generically because sharing significant experiences does that, but also because each will have incriminating information on everyone else”. Wasp gave the following explanation:

You’re going to have to be doing certain things that we do. You’re going to have to be in my shoes, you’re going to have to be doing what I’m doing. ‘Cus from when I see you do what I’m doing, there’s no way you can be a snitch because then I know that you’ve done it. See if you go and talk then you’ve done it as well.

In other words, collective criminality requires that prospective gang members and actual gang members trust one another not to inform in the sense that “I’ve got shit on you, you’ve got shit on me” (see Hamill, 2011: 115). Criminality gives gang members an additional reason to keep their activities secret, moreover, which, in turn, reinforces a strong sense of loyalty and cohesion within the gang. Gang elders are known to take this one step further, however, and keep used weapons as “forensic evidence to blackmail [people] with” should someone defect (KI V).

To further test for loyalty (and wean out possible police informants), gang members will stage or set up low-level criminal tasks involving prospective members, such as domestic burglaries and street robberies, and then observe whether or not the police proceed to make arrests of the specific individuals involved. These events test both the loyalty and criminal/delinquent potential of new recruits. According to Sánchez-Jankowski (1991: 50), American gangs use similar strategies for the same ends. Gang members also keenly observe how prospective members interact with police officers in public. For prospective members, a simple “no comment” response during a police interview may serve as a costly signal of loyalty to the gang because it increases the likelihood of a longer prison sentence. As Pyro best articulated: “When people get arrested, then you see who your friends are. Whoever blabs in like, in the interview room, you never trust again. Me, myself, I don’t like snitches. Snitching is suicide”.

Finally, once known to gang members but before being considered full gang members, potential recruits will be given small jobs to complete, which become incrementally more costly for the individual. As well as being a means by which the gang can observe and evaluate a potential recruit, this period reflects the transition

from conventional life to gang life. Gangs are careful not to ask too much too soon of new recruits who are as yet unproven to them. Overzealous recruits who too soon ask to be “put on something” can likewise rouse the suspicions of the gang. Instead, prospective members are tasked with running general errands for the gang, which can be as innocuous as collecting a food order from the takeaway or as costly as handling someone’s backpack filled with drugs. Over time the prospective gang member might assume the role of what Lantern described to me as “golf caddy” and be asked to carry, clean, or conceal weapons for the gang. Gang elders will later contact them at random asking for a particular weapon to be delivered, which further tests the resolve of the individual (not only must they deliver the weapon, it must be the correct one).

Examples of such behaviour abound outside of my own fieldwork. Pritchard (2008) writes that at 13-years-old, Elijah Kerr buried a revolver in his balcony garden for three months on route to becoming the youngest ever member of the Brixton “28s”, a precursor gang to the PDC. During the investigation into the 2010 Hackney murder of Agnes Sina-Inakoju, 16, moreover, police seized a cachet of weapons that the indicted members of the “London Fields Boys” had hidden under the bed of a nine-year-old boy. The haul included two sub-machineguns, a semi-automatic self-loading pistol, a single-barrel shotgun, and a converted BBM Olympic revolver.¹⁷ Suffice it to say, in this consistent pattern of escalation the necessary relationship between trust and risk is revealed. Handling weapons is a costly act, not least because the items are often previously “used” and therefore implicated in unsolved crimes.

Table 5.2 below summarises some of the trust-warranting properties that comprise

¹⁷ *Daily Mail*, 12 April 2011.

the screening stage of the recruitment process.

Table 5.2. Trust-warranting properties during “screening” stage

Trust inducing	Distrust inducing	Uninformative
Humble claims	Exaggerated claims	Honest claims
Restrained around money/women	Impulsive around money/women	-
Willingness to participate	Reluctant to participate/ defection	-
“No comment” to police	Comment to police	-
Patience	Overzealousness	-
Complicit/compliant	Recalcitrant	Biddable

Source: Author’s compilation.

5.7 ONGOING SIGNALLING

I discovered during the fieldwork that the recruitment process often bleeds into the day-to-day operations of the gang. In Xavier’s words, “how you get in is how you stay in. It never stops”. Indeed, for some gang members the signalling games never end. This section thus looks at the signals post-recruitment that pertain to retention and advancement within gangs. Dasgupta (1998: 62) argues that “[r]eputation is a capital asset. One can build it up by pursuing certain courses of action, or destroy it by pursuing certain others”. Gang members build their reputations (earn “stripes” or “ratings” in gang parlance) by participating in behaviours particularly esteemed by gangs, such as sexual conquest, alcohol consumption, and acts of crime and violence.¹⁸ According to Arrow, the “more stuff you do the more ratings you get”.

¹⁸ The stripes terminology, like many in gang parlance, has military overtones; in the armed forces ranks and stripes are awarded not only on basis of time served, but on merit and promotion. Stripes and ratings are not usually visually displayed (such as on the sleeve of a jacket) or systematically quantified by gang members, although gangs in some instances do go on to rank their members on the bases of their “achievements”. They may similarly identify them with certain types of criminal activity—an “all rounder” maintains a diverse repertoire for instance, while others “specialise” in a particular field, be it firearms or stealing cars.

And more costly “stuff”, as determined by greater legal or local ramifications, is endowed with greater respect:¹⁹

He'll start doing stuff where he gets his rep, like he'll go and stab someone or go shoot at someone or go rob a big dealer from another area or do whatever. He'll just start getting ranked up like, he'll earn respect by doing that.

(Angel)

You have to build up your stripes because if you don't build up your stripes, who are you? You'd be sorry to say, what have you done? So you have to build up your stripes like because no one will respect you. You see what I'm trying to say? If no one knows you for nothing bad no one's going to respect you. Who are you? But they know you if you disrespected a person or beaten up this person or robbed this. You see what I'm trying to say? ... If you go out there now and kill someone and stab them quickly, people that are young and who are there are going to know that you've killed this person. If you didn't get caught, even if you did get caught, your ratings are going to go up. Now you're a murderer. Now people are thinking twice to talk to you in a certain way because they might think they're going to get the same thing, do you see what I'm trying to say? 'If you touch me I'll murder you, straight. I've done it before, I'll do it again'.

(Sinister)

Homicide is of course a double-edged sword for gang members. While it is a costly signal of violence proficiency, a dead body leaves corroborating forensic evidence and invites the full weight of police investigatory resources. Instead, it is often more powerful for gang members to let their victims live because the victim then becomes tangible evidence of what someone is capable of. Toad elaborated as follows: “If you shank someone then you pretty much shoot to the top ... some people might think you're crazy. ... Most people don't stab them to kill them, it just sends a message ... 'you know what will happen next, I let you off with a lick'”. The fact that gang members will use knives to deliberately “make a mark”, thus suggests that some fatal stabbings are merely a “scratching” gone wrong.

¹⁹ A similar phenomenon exists in the United States, whereby members of the Los Angeles Crips are unable to claim senior or “OG” (Original Gangster) status until they have committed an unquestionably violent offence, such as an attempted murder or homicide (Klein, 1995).

A knife is an intensely personal weapon and means of dispatch. A gun, by contrast, is a ranged weapon, which can be used to project violence even when unused.²⁰ The symbolism of firearms often exceeds their frequency of use. The physical distance gained by using a ranged weapon like a gun indeed implies a certain amount of mental distancing—"I shot him. The bullets and the fall killed him", quips the professional assassin from Michael Mann's (2005) *Collateral*. Using a knife is a high culpability crime and thus a much more efficient and costly signal. As Sinister explained: "Knives don't jam or run out of bullets. You actually feel the knife go in. You're there. You have to look into man's eyes. Feel him as he falls to the floor. Blood pouring everywhere. People screaming. It's real. No doubt about it". I suspect only those who are truly committed to gang life will be willing to incur the time, energetic, and opportunity costs of this performance. And once a gang member has stabbed or shot someone, there really is no turning back.

5.7.i Burning bridges

Another way gang members signal their absolute loyalty to gangs is by "burning bridges" back to mainstream civilian life (Gambetta, 2009b: 37). When youths first join gangs they typically still maintain ties with the mainstream. Although they spend most of their available time with other gang members, for instance, they still visit old friends, attend school, or have a job.²¹ Gangs invite this situation to change. Through public and deliberate renunciation of old friends and all other prospects outside of the

²⁰ Showing the "bulge" is often enough to gain the respect of rivals, while in robberies, brandishing the weapon will usually suffice as civilians do not wait for proof that it works.

²¹ Some particularly savvy gang members actually exploit ties with the mainstream, such as by training as a "youth worker", enrolling in college but not attending, or working part time in the formal economy, to garner community support and evade police attention.

gang, gang members prove beyond all reasonable doubt that the gang is all they have and to abandon it now would leave them with nothing. This explains in part why gang members are reported to attack or rob their friends, quit their jobs, or fail to attend or even enrol in the school examinations necessary to secure further education, employment, or training. It is not simply the case that drug dealing is so lucrative that a second “job” is unnecessary, but rather a second job provides gang members with an out, which the gang may not like.

Gang tattoos likewise serve as examples of “costly inductions”, whereby deliberate acts operate as signals of intent and reduce one’s chances of ever being able to defect (Weinstein, 2007: 105). Gang tattoos are not necessarily large or ostentatious, but they are often conspicuously placed in difficult to conceal areas, such as on the hands or face. Elijah Kerr, for instance, has the letters “PDC” etched prominently on the side of his neck. In one of his rap songs he even boasts, “I love PDC so much I scarred it on my skin”. Elijah’s brother Chris similarly wears the words “Prey Days Change” on his chest. Many of the members of the Wandsworth-based “Stick’em Up Kids” have “SUK” tattooed on their necks or arms. The “postcode” tattoo on Havoc’s forearm was likewise designed “so people know where I’m from and who I’m repping [representing]”. As many consider gang tattoos a mark of criminality,²² such public proclamations of affiliation make it difficult to live outside the world of the gang and work in the client-facing formal labour market (Hall, 1997). Speaking of another gang member, Pyro astutely observed: “He can’t really get a job now, ‘cus he’s got his

²² For most of recorded history tattoos have been associated with unlawful behaviour and the underworld. The early Romans for instance, tattooed slaves and criminals as a means of identification. Even Japanese *Irezumi*, now widely considered the most artful tattoo form in the world, was originally introduced to disguise branded prison marks. Goldberg (2001) notes that today, “[t]he gang ethos of ‘blood in, blood out’—the idea that the prospective member must kill someone as the price of admission to the gang and cannot leave except by dying himself—is embodied in the tattoo as a sign of permanent belonging to the gang”.

gang name tattooed across his fingers”.

Although tattoos have some production cost, the predation and punishment costs of tattoos are what keep them honest: gang tattoos attract both the attention of police and rival gang members (Goldberg, 2001). As a permanent signal of group identity, tattoos also hinder the ability of the bearer to create or join new gangs, which is important given the mobility of individuals across gangs and consequent shifting of alliances (see **Chapter 4**). Smaller gangs at risk of their members defecting to larger and more powerful gangs, as such, would do well to indelibly mark their members and minimise their ability to abscond. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence from Lambeth that if prospective gang members fail to execute certain tasks for a gang, such individuals are “keyed” (scarred on the face or hand using a key) by senior gang members as punishment and therefore publically “marked” out as traitors.

5.8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In his treatise on violence, Randall Collins (2008: 20) writes that contrary to popular belief “violence is difficult to carry out, not easy”, from which we can infer that for violence to be a viable option for prospective gang members the potential rewards earned by engaging in it must be valuable; which, in gang-affected communities, they nearly always are. So-called “senseless” violence is indeed not senseless at all, but rather the cost paid by aspiring gang members in order to obtain from gangs the full range of desirable goods and services they have to offer (e.g., money, social prestige, protection). Gang members, in turn, shoulder the costs of being caught by police and

being punished, the cost of alienation from law-abiding citizens, and the psychological costs of engaging in personal violence. As Nightcrawler explained: “There’s always someone out there who’s willing to go the next step just to prove himself. There’s always that young person that’s just willing to do what it takes to show that, ‘do you know what, I’m the real deal, I can roll with you’”. To wit, this chapter provides empirical support for the proposition that only those willing to incur the costs of entry into a gang will succeed in doing so.

Given the challenges facing all young people living in gang-affected communities, the extent to which gang membership is ever “voluntary” is of course questionable. Gangs certainly do exploit naïve and vulnerable young people:

One gang will make someone a victim, then the rival gang will draw them in for protection. ... They know the police have been ineffective so they wait for the optimal time. It’s like, ‘here, take my card, give me a call when you’ve had enough’. They’re like lawyers who chase ambulances.

(KI V)

You see, when that child reaches 11 they start going into secondary school, if they haven’t got a sense of identity, someone else will give it to them. If they haven’t got a sense of belonging, someone else will give it to them. If they haven’t got a sense of being loved, someone else will give it to them. You know who those people are. You know, you find them, or they will find you. And they become part of what we are. Some are extrovert and some aren’t, you know. The ones that aren’t they’re, they are very, very, very, very, very, very useful to someone. No one suspects them.

(Juggernaut)

Quicksilver indeed only ever felt obliged to join a gang after his mother was repeatedly victimised, his older brother was axed in the face, and a rival gang set his house alight. At 13-years-old, Sandman was barely even over the age of criminal responsibility when he began associating with gangs. Some of those who “burn bridges”, moreover, quite literally do so at gunpoint—they have little or no other

option. At times, then, entry to gangs is far more insidious and less intentional than signalling theory implies, in as much that people might get “in too deep” before they even think of themselves as gang members. While gangs are selective organisations that deliberately narrow the recruitment pool, the caveat is that they select from an already narrow pool of young and often very vulnerable individuals, which gangs can both more easily entice and entrap. The less an individual has in the first place, the less bridges they must burn in the end.

During my fieldwork I encountered a small number of individuals with a unique profile: all had desired gang membership at some stage and had associated with gang members, but for some reason or another it was the gangs themselves that had outright prevented them from joining.²³ One interviewee, for instance, informed me that because he had “hesitated” to hurt someone during a street robbery, his “so-called friends” in the gang branded him a “pussyhole” (soft) and eventually shut him out (YP IX). Someone else observed, “[the gang] started to let me in on some things, but I wasn’t as committed as them, so they cut me out” (YP XIII). Another young person said that try as he may he was simply “not gangster enough” to qualify for gang membership (YP VI). These individuals shared similar sociological profiles and motivations to otherwise successful candidates, but ultimately failed in their attempts to become gang members. The reason is that they had failed to send the all right signals. To reiterate from **Chapter 1**, a willingness to join a gang does not guarantee admittance into one; people do not only choose gangs, but gangs also choose people.

In sum, gangs choose people based upon their trustworthiness. This chapter has

²³ I found no evidence of gang members being rejected by one gang but managing to join another.

demonstrated how gangs can infer trustworthiness from contextual properties (e.g., previous encounters), but also directly through interpersonal cues and by observing behaviour in the situation (see **Table 5.3**). After all we have learned about gangs, it should come as no surprise that they will do whatever it takes to sustain and further their enterprise and organisation.

Table 5.3. Summary of signs and signals in gang recruitment

Desirable Property	Sign/Signal	Level of discrimination
Violence potential	Vouching / referral	Sorting
	Ethnicity / residential history	Semi-sorting
	Scars, posture, demeanour, expression	Pooling
	Scars	Semi-sorting
	Fighting	Sorting
	Stabbing or shooting	Sorting
Criminality / delinquency	Vouching / referral	Sorting
	Prison	Sorting
	Mutual-offending	Semi-sorting
	Public displays of criminality	Semi-sorting
	Low-level criminal acts	Semi-sorting
Group loyalty	Vouching / referral	Sorting
	Time spent with gang	Semi-sorting
	Exchange of hostage information	Semi-sorting
	Non-compliance with police	Semi-sorting
	Drop out of school, quit job, reject family or friends	Semi-sorting
	Prominent gang tattoo	Sorting

Source: Author's compilation.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.

—Sir Winston Churchill

You cannot conceive the many without the one.

—Plato

This thesis began with three central questions: What is the business of gangs? How are gangs organised? And how do gangs recruit? In **Chapter 1**, I outlined how, despite being three of the most important questions one could ask about gangs, answers to them were elusive in the extant literature. This was especially true in Britain, where gangs are more of an emerging, rather than established, problem. As discussed in **Chapter 2**, I adopted a qualitative approach to answering these questions, which was appropriate given the nature of the research topics, the traditions of gang research, and the challenges inherent in accessing a hidden and potentially reticent population of gang members. Still, the data collection methods of interview and observation inevitably raise questions of the reliability and validity of my findings. I employed the technique of triangulation to address such concerns, incorporating interview transcript data, observation based field notes, and evidence from literature and media sources, to strike a balance between the descriptive and analytical. I fully accept the subtle but important truth that my thesis is a snapshot rather than a portrait of processes and peoples shrouded in mystique. Nevertheless, I am confident that my thesis provides an accurate reflection of reality.

This chapter summarises my exploration of the three central questions and concludes with a discussion of gang desistance and my recommendations for future research and policy in respect of my findings. The challenge for future scholars is to continue to study gangs in context and determine whether or not these findings stand the test of time.

6.1 GANG BUSINESS

I began **Chapter 3** with a discussion of gang members' motivations for joining gangs. My fieldwork revealed that youths primarily joined gangs for money, status, protection, or a combination thereof. With regard to money, gangs were seen as offering a more lucrative venture than individualised acquisitive crime. Gangs boast access to suppliers of drugs. Gangs boast the monetary resources to front drugs. Gangs boast territory in which to sell drugs. Gangs boast numbers that help camouflage the sellers of drugs. Gangs boast reputations that reassure the buyers of drugs. Gangs boast resources (e.g., intelligence, secrecy, violence, technology), which facilitate the actual transaction of drugs. And drugs, my interviewees believed, were a means to big, quick, and easy money.

Concerning status, collective gang reputations are accumulated assets far greater than the sum of their parts. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, to learn that youths seek to benefit from them. For a number of my interviewees, gang membership was seen as a chance to really become "somebody", not least because conventional avenues to becoming somebody (i.e., through education, employment, and training) were

perceived as both unattractive and unavailable. In our consumer society, status is largely associated with money and money can be achieved through drug dealing. Legitimate markets are too highly regulated and the entry costs too high for most gang members. Legitimate markets also require skills that gang members either do not have or are unwilling to acquire. The skills they do have, such as violence, are more handsomely rewarded on the street.

Finally, with regard to protection, youths who join gangs typically already reside in gang-affected communities, which are threatened by rival gangs and populated with presumably dangerous individuals (e.g., drug addicts, drug dealers, ex-convicts, juvenile delinquents, and procurers). If youths are at risk of being victimised whether they are gang members or not, then oftentimes they view gang membership as the lesser of two evils. Gang-affected communities, moreover, are often the most historically isolated from conventional legal suppliers of protection (e.g., police, schools). Gang membership further appeals, therefore, because gang size, reputation, and recourse to violence, promote individual security and provide alternative routes to redress.

These three reasons for joining gangs are commensurate with the reasons for joining gangs documented in the existing literature (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Knox, 1994; Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1995; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Pitts, 2008). I took these reasons, however, as grounds to begin to conceive of gangs as providers of illegal goods and services. In the tradition of Sobel and Osoba (2009), I proposed that in environments where government protection of rights appears limited at best and youths feel either alienated from or dissatisfied with conventional suppliers of

essential goods and services (e.g., intact families, employers, safe schools and neighbourhoods, police), said goods and services (e.g., money, status, protection) simply become more valuable and private providers such as gangs are able to charge inflated prices for them. I say “inflated” because of the costs associated with gang membership. While a considerable number of young people join gangs for protection, for example, the perceived threat of violence is nearly always far greater than the reality. The irony is that once someone starts associating with gangs, gang business dictates that they are at a much higher risk of victimisation than ever before. Juggernaut perhaps said it best: “You get involved in this team then you could potentially be someone’s organ donor. Death is a very, very high possibility”.

I developed the notion of gangs as service providers throughout **Chapter 3**, wherein I described the natural progression of gangs from recreational neighbourhood groups to delinquent collectives to full-scale criminal enterprises to systems of governance. To reiterate, recreation, crime, enterprise, and governance, present as actualisation stages and each stage builds upon the previous, that is, each stage transcends and includes its predecessor. Some might say that crime embraces recreation, enterprise envelopes crime, and governance incorporates enterprise. The notion of gang evolution and structural change over time is very much fitting with Ayling’s (2011) recent conceptual work. Of course not all gangs fully evolve, indeed gangs that fail to acquire the necessary resources may regress or become extinct. The point being that gangs exist on a spectrum from the simple to the complex, thus I suspect the search for one “catch all” statement on gangs is a fruitless endeavour.¹

¹ There are similarities here with Hallsworth and Young’s (2006: 3–4) typology of “delinquent collectives”, in as much that Hallsworth and Young take into account a spectrum of gang organisation from “peer groups” to “gangs” to “organised crime groups”. Where my work deviates from theirs, however, is in the fact that I see gangs as an evolving part of a broader species of organised crime

Gangs develop in stages but they have to start somewhere, which is almost always in the bonds of friendship and rebelliousness that typify adolescence. This is a tale as old as time. Documenting the development of the “People and Folks Nations”, alliances under which certain gangs in the American Midwest are aligned, for instance, Hagedorn (1988: 60) observes:

Ten of the gangs we interviewed reported they began as corner groups, identical in all respects to the classic descriptions of gangs in 1920s Chicago. Groups of teenage friends gathered on corners on their blocks and hung out. Having nothing to do and not in school, they got high, got into trouble, and fought with other corner groups.

Likewise, Vigil’s (2003: 226) Los Angeles-based study concludes: “Gangs are now made up, as they were in earlier days, primarily of groups of male adolescents and youths who have grown up together as children, usually as cohorts in a low-income neighbourhood of a city”. Sociologists classify groups toward which we feel loyalty as “in-groups” and groups toward which we feel antagonism as “out-groups” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Consistent with this, identification with gangs can generate not only a sense of belonging, but also a sense of loyalty and feelings of superiority. Rivalries often ensue because the gang is an extension of the individual and the individual is an extension of the gang. The gang is the lens through which its members view life.

When gang members age, however, I observe that hanging out on street corners and fighting in defence of district honour begins to lose its appeal. In years past this would result in gang decline or at least member turnover, but in years present the rapid

group, whereas Hallsworth and Young see gangs as conceptually distinct from organised crime groups. I can see two reasons for this difference. First, Hallsworth and Young’s typology is based upon a literature review as opposed to empirical fieldwork. Second, Hallsworth and Young subscribe to the view of organised crime groups as merely groups of individuals for whom involvement in crime is for personal gain, whereas I subscribe to Varese’s (2010: 14) view that an organised crime group “attempts to regulate and control the production and distribution of a given commodity or service unlawfully”.

growth in the lucrative illicit drugs market and changes to the structure and nature of traditional organised crime provide both incentives and opportunities for gang expansion and institutionalisation. As gangs evolve and gang members become increasingly prosperous to the outside eye, moreover, youths without gangs start to desire the goods and services gangs can offer, thus forming a pool of potential recruits. As discussed, my data suggest that youths join gangs because they believe gangs will provide money, status, and protection. To address these wants and thus ensure that their enterprise is sustainable, gangs acquire a unique set of resources, which become the cornerstones of an alternative, or extra-legal, social and economic infrastructure. Whereas crime and violence is *expressive* during the recreation or crime stages, for instance, crime and violence is *instrumental* during the enterprise and governance stages. Gang use of territory similarly shifts from shared to claimed to controlled as gangs move through the stages.

6.2 GANG ORGANISATION

Although gang organisation is narrowly conceptualised in the literature, it is clear that the most influential gang ethnographies theorise gangs in the context of their relationship with other social groups, institutions, and actors in the local and larger community (Thrasher, 1927a; Whyte, 1955; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Venkatesh, 1997). In this tradition, in **Chapter 4** I presented the case for gang organisation to be reconfigured in internal, external, and symbolic terms. Beginning with the internal, I argued that gangs exhibited a degree of organisational rationality, which is a view also held by Skolnick et al. (1988), Padilla (1991), and Sánchez-Jankowski (1991),

among others. In other words, gangs require organising in order to be effective, especially to be effective in making money and providing goods and services.

A mistake often made in the literature, it seems, is to compare *between* gangs as opposed to *within* gangs (for example, see Klein & Maxson, 2006). My view is that “organisation” and “disorganisation”, respectively, are not mutually exclusive gang “types”, but rather complimentary chapters in the evolutionary story of gangs. During the recreation and crime stages, gangs are amorphous and leaderless organisations. In their evolved state, however, gangs have strong identities and highly competitive, hierarchical structures that provide some level of exclusivity. Gang members are ranked one above the other according to status and authority, which are themselves by-products of experience and tenure. As described in **Chapter 4**, “inner circle” gang members function as implementing senior officers. Elders are managers and supervisors. Youngers are workers. Below them all are uninitiated associates, some of whom are women that are used in either a criminal or sexual capacity. Taken together, these four tiers are what make a gang a gang.

Gangs regularly go to great lengths to appear small and disorganised to one audience (law enforcement and junior gang members), while at the same time they deliberately exaggerate their size and strength to another (rivals and their local constituency). The resulting contradiction prevents outsiders from knowing too much about the true nature and extent of their operation. There is strong incentive for subterfuge or misrepresentation of what gangs really are and what they stand for. This explains why gang members so often emphasise that they are really only a part of a “group of close friends” despite the existence of rules that govern member interaction and

punishments for violating the rules. To further complicate matters, much of the activity within gangs is coordinated within subgroups, which are themselves often mistaken for separate gangs. I sincerely hope to have resolved some of this confusion by explaining the multiple motivations at play and the centrality of gang business in gang organisation.

In **Chapter 4** I also demonstrated that despite their local orientation, gangs are not remote islands. Their external organisation means gangs cooperate and compete with each other regularly and routinely. Small gangs are known to gravitate toward big gangs. Established gangs may even spawn emerging gangs. District ceasefires can be enacted to support broader borough interests. Rival gangs may affiliate with traditional organised crime groups and shop from the same suppliers. This, together with the gang's internal organisation, reflects in part the trajectory of gang growth from birth, but also the complex nature of illicit enterprise.

As discussed, gangs cannot always outwardly proclaim organisation. To organise in a world restricted by secrecy, therefore, gangs and gang members also rationally seek association with elements of popular culture that help promote their image and borrow symbols which best convey reputation and achieve intimidation. Much as Varese (2006: 108) describes in reference to Yakuza in Japan, “[w]hen an institution capable of certifying identities in an unambiguous manner does not exist, imitating art is the surest route to convincing a sceptical audience”. The use of popular culture references within the symbolic organisation of gangs is indeed one way in which gangs overcome their secrecy constraints, verify to outsiders that they are a gang, and advertise their qualities to prospective members. There are no public or educational

resources to teach “how to set up a gang” the way there are classes to set up a small business. Just as conventional notions of gang-group structure influenced scholars’ expectations of gang organisation in the past (see **Chapter 1**), therefore, gangs themselves are using structural templates derived from popular media sources to help shape their organisation in the present. Gangs assume the attributes of other gangs and organised crime groups and adopt structured methods to emulate or rival them, not least by borrowing their conventional signals.

6.3 GANG RECRUITMENT

Chapter 5 was driven by two central research questions: what are the features of those who volunteer to join a gang and how do gangs select among those volunteers? Based upon careful examination of the literature, I came to the conclusion that scholars had a better understanding of the profiles and motivations of recruits than of the actual processes of recruitment. Indeed, extant scholarship on gangs had failed to take into account the fact that recruitment is essentially an exchange between two actors (recruiters and recruits); an exchange based upon mechanisms that are governed by the constraints of secrecy and violence within which gang members live. In **Chapter 5** I explored such mechanisms through the theoretical lens provided by signalling theory, with emphasis on the strategies used by gangs and prospective members alike to address and solve pertinent problems of asymmetrical information. I demonstrated how groups such as gangs, which draw their recruits from a specific territory or neighbourhood, rely upon their territorial control and close proximity in order to identify prospective members. I then presented the ways in which gangs use

the recruitment process to screen for signs and signals of criminality/delinquency, violence potential, and group loyalty, which in the gang context constitute trust-warranting proprieties.

At times gang members struggled to articulate exactly what it was that roused their suspicious about suboptimal recruits or indeed resulted in recruitment decisions, but I would agree with Gambetta and Hamill (2005: 217) that any talk of “gut feelings” or equivalent simply denoted an instinctive appreciation of and reliance on non-verbal cues in general and costly signals in particular. In the famous words of Box and Draper (1987: 424), “[a]ll models are wrong, but some models are useful”. Signalling theory is useful. I believe it offers the most compelling narrative for understanding recruitment into gangs. I am not alone. This case study adds to the evidence from other contexts that groups constrained by asymmetric information rely upon reliable signals to efficiently and effectively recruit (e.g., rebel groups in Africa (Weinstein, 2005, 2007), terrorists in Saudi Arabia (Hegghammer, 2010), paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland (Hamill & Pizzini-Gambetta, 2010), the Sicilian Cosa Nostra (Gambetta, 2009b)).

The understanding gained from this research thus provides an input in the applications of signalling theory beyond its conventional uses in biology, economics, and political science. Consistent with this literature, moreover, my research has demonstrated how actions that in usual circumstances are harmful (costly) to those that carry them out, such as fighting, going to prison, or participating in criminal acts, may in fact assist prospective gang members in gaining entrée into gangs. Gangs charge such high entry

costs in order to overcome their informational handicap, combat the free rider problem, and intensify group cohesiveness.

Gangs may well recruit different people at different times depending on their needs, but I am confident the need for trustworthy people (read: violent, criminal, loyal) remains constant. There is simply too much at stake for gangs to neglect these features once they embark on full-scale enterprise. Gangs could use outright coercion in recruitment, indeed they certainly have the capacity to do so, but they rarely do because: (a) they have a willing pool of recruits attracted by the prospect of money, status, and protection; and (b) individuals coerced into membership might not possess the necessary trust-warranting properties of criminality/delinquency, disciplined violence potential, and group loyalty. Suffice it to say, a “reluctant gangster”, as Pitts (2008) calls such a person, is probably not a real gangster.

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

My research findings provide the following four key insights for future research. First, the organisation of gangs reflects the business of gangs. Gangs are not groups of persons that form randomly for the immediate commission of a single offence. At the same time, gangs do not control the means of criminal production. As such, they fall somewhere in-between “crime that is organised” and “organised crime” (Schelling 1971, 73-4). Does this bring us any closer to a precise and parsimonious definition of all gangs? Perhaps not, although it is clear that the typical dichotomous characterisation of gangs as either organised or not is a moot point. Like all social

groups, gangs experience variable levels of organisation, contingent upon internal and external constraints and their stage of evolution. To paraphrase the writer G. K. Chesterton, it would be almost as true to say that organisation is always disorganisation. The implication for future research is to look beyond the organisation of the gang and instead to look toward what it is gangs are organised for. Scholars must adopt the perspective of the gang member and inquire whether or not optimal gang organisation, if such a thing even exists, has yet been achieved. If it has been achieved, a key question emerges: how can gang practitioners and policymakers best intervene without further reinforcing said organisational structure?

Second, to better understand gang activity we first need to appreciate the role of the gang in that activity. The evidence presented herein reaffirms that the desire to be involved in crime and violence does not motivate gang membership, but rather gang membership motivates involvement in crime and violence. Displays of crime and violence are utilitarian; moreover, they are costly signals and costly signals deter opportunists and free riders. One question for future research, therefore, is: do gangs face greater free-rider problems as they grow in size? If the answer is yes, a second question materialises: must prospective members exhibit even costlier signals and/or does the screening become more rigorous under increased selective pressures?

Third, and related, my research lends support to the “enhancement” model of understanding the gangs-delinquency nexus (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen et al., 1993; Thornberry et al., 1993, 1998; Battin, et al., 1998; Zhang et al., 1999; Lacourse et al., 2003; Gordon et al., 2004; Gatti et al., 2005). The enhancement model is essentially a combination of the “selection” and “social facilitation” models

described in **Chapter 1**. While there is no doubt that gangs are selective organisations, criminality/delinquency is only one of many criteria for which gangs screen. My fieldwork suggests that youths who join gangs may already display a higher level of criminality/delinquency than their non-gang peers, but the complex processes of joining a gang exacerbate this criminality/delinquency. Additional research is needed to further untangle this complex relationship.

Finally, processes of gang evolution and gang recruitment both unfold over time. A limitation of my data, however, is that it is cross-sectional and based in part upon retrospective accounts. To test whether or not gangs truly progress through the stages of recreation, crime, enterprise, and governance, we need longitudinal data on gangs from inception. Likewise, to test the presence of screening processes in recruitment, we would need to watch a series of recruits gain entrée into gangs from first contact (which may be in early childhood) all the way through to initiation. To do this requires patience, time, and perhaps even predictive skills. Nevertheless, this is another important avenue for future research.

6.5 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Since 2005, over 100 young people aged 13 to 19 have died in violent circumstances on the streets of London, many of them in “gang-related” incidents. As a consequence, the British government faces unprecedented public pressure to neutralise or ameliorate its gang problem (Hallsworth & Young, 2008). My research suggests that some of the steps currently being taken are misguided (I have written at

length on this issue, please see Densley 2011). First, the Home Secretary introduced into the Policing and Crime Act 2009 a new civil injunction specifically targeting “gangs”. This Act enables the courts to impose a variety of indefinite restrictions or requirements on “gang members”, ranging from not entering areas compromised by gangs to not associating with named members of a gang, and from not using the Internet to encourage or facilitate gang activity to not wearing particular items of clothing, such as balaclavas or gang colours. The present research suggests, however, that these so-called “Gangbos”² risk becoming yet another badge of honour for gang members, that is, a costly signal of their commitment to life in the gang.

Second, the government’s approach to gangs also includes the presumption that anybody aged 16 and over who is found carrying a knife should expect to be prosecuted on the first offence and anyone found using a knife should expect to receive a custodial sentence.³ The average length of prison sentences for possession of a knife or offensive weapon increased from 140 days between January and March 2008 to 209 days between October and December 2009.⁴ My research suggests this may be another mistake. If young people are carrying weapons and joining gangs to protect themselves in areas they perceive to be unsafe, then policies to disarm gang members fail to address what exactly causes such fear and anxiety in the first place. While the threat of conviction and imprisonment does deter crime, moreover, my research suggests that being imprisoned can actually assist gang members. As Octopus recalled: “People think that prison opens your eyes up? Bullshit. In prison

² A variation on the term “ASBO” (Anti-Social Behaviour Order), which is a civil order made against a person who has been shown, on the balance of evidence, to have engaged in anti-social behaviour. ASBOs were first introduced by the British Government in the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act and can be used to severely restrict a person’s liberties.

³ *The Guardian*, 22 July 2009.

⁴ <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/knife-crime-sentencing-q4-2009.pdf>.

you are constantly around goons, every kind of criminal. Everything that went on outside the jail went on inside and more". This is not a new proposition. The vast literature on prison gangs indicates that they contribute to higher rates of prison violence (Camp & Camp, 1985), challenge rehabilitative programming by supporting criminogenic values (Curry & Decker, 1998), and contribute to failure in community reintegration through the institutionalisation and intergenerational transmission of gang membership (Fleisher et al., 2001). Much of what today constitutes the trappings of gang style, from low-slung trousers and untied shoelaces, to tattoos and an elaborate system of verbal and hand communication, moreover, was forged inside the American correctional system (Hallsworth & Young, 2006: 32-33). In short, prison may in some cases do more harm than good.

Third, far from reducing crime, drugs prohibition has fostered gangsterism on an unprecedented scale. So long as there is a market for illegal drugs there will be a supplier. The data provided in **Chapter 3** suggests the time is nigh for a sensible debate about the decriminalisation, medicalisation, and prescription of drugs through licensed outlets. The illegality of drugs increases crime, in part because some users either turn to crime to pay for their habits or are stimulated by certain drugs to turn to crime, but also because gangs use force to manage their markets. Gangs flourish in the drugs market because contracts are not legally enforceable; when one cannot sue to obtain drugs or money owed, violence is needed. Since there is safety in numbers, gangs are needed. The irony of course is that gangs are not the most economically efficient organisations—they have long, complex, opaque, and at times unreliable supply chains that feature price mark-ups and product dilution at every step. Gangs also routinely lose inventory and members to both law enforcement and rival gangs

(not least because the present drugs policy is focused on supply as opposed to demand and police enforcement is directed at street-level drug sales). The government could instead tax and regulate the drugs trade and use the funds raised (and saved on law enforcement of drug-related crime) to educate the public and to treat addiction properly. No longer would drug dealing be a viable alternative to work in legitimate markets.

I believe that the above merits a brief discussion of the external conditions that must exist in order for the types of gangs I observe to form and flourish. Gangs gain traction from a multitude of societal factors. For example, the vast majority of young people involved in gangs are of school age and countless studies confirm that a lack of education goes hand in hand with gang membership (for a review, see Thornberry et al., 2003). For a number of my interviewees, secondary school was where issues of racism and differential treatment emerged and taken together; these perceptions tended to undermine their motivation to participate in mainstream society and steer them towards gangs. A lengthier education in principle ought to reduce gang membership both by keeping at-risk youths in touch with the “right sort” of peers and social attitudes and raising their future earning power from legitimate work, making a criminal career less attractive. Education alone, however, is not enough. Youths need credible prospects of employment. Pitts (2008) writes that widespread deindustrialisation and drastic cuts in public spending during the 1970s and 1980s diminished labour opportunities for young people and created unprecedented levels of unemployment, which, in turn, sowed the seeds for gangs. In this new age of high youth unemployment, amidst cuts to public service expenditure and the collapse of

traditional youth labour markets, is it any wonder that some people are taking to the streets to sell drugs?⁵

Gangs are supported in part by the fact that so many youths in their neighbourhoods are already gang members, which creates a culture hospitable to gang members. Gangs leave a legacy of crime and violence in communities that is difficult to live down. Indeed, because crime has proved profitable for some perpetrators in the past, and the selective use of violence is a tool by which that profit is protected, crime and violence become the only way some youths know to earn a living in the present. The presence of material wealth among gang elders are indeed credible evidence of prosperity, so much so that youths continue to be motivated by these prospects. The perceived earnings from gang business are of course far greater than the reality. As discussed in **Chapter 4**, new recruits face restricted opportunities for advancement and accomplishment because the business model is intrinsically flawed and older and more established gang members must maintain control of their hierarchical criminal empires. This is a message that needs to be sent to youths living in gang-affected communities: gangs are operating a pyramid scheme, pure and simple. A frank discussion about the true economic realities of gangs will resonate more with at-risk youths than a “moral” debate in which adults pass judgement on gangs as either “good” or “bad”, or indeed horror stories about gang violence, not least because youths at risk of joining gangs already live in violent circumstances, and money makes their world go round. The best people to deliver this message are those that really understand gangs and are adept at engaging with young people: other young

⁵ Britain’s youth unemployment is the highest in Europe. The jobless rate for those aged 16 to 24 who are actively seeking work is now nearly one in five, with 974,000 out of work in the December 2010 to February 2011 period. *The Guardian*, 16 March 2011.

people (including ex-gang members) and front-line police officers. Knowledge is power—power to make considered informed decisions.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from this research is that gangs need to be understood in context. Indeed, if my own conclusions about the nature of youth gangs appear out of step with those of other researchers (e.g., Aldridge et al., 2007), it may be that there is so much variation amongst youth gangs in Britain that regional differences can be profound.⁶ Perhaps it is notable that ethnographic research conducted in large cities with chronic gang problems, such as Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, and now London, consistently support the notion of gangs as instrumental-rational groups (Mieczkowski, 1986; Skolnick et al., 1988; Taylor, 1990; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Padilla, 1991; Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000). As Venkatesh (1997: 87, original emphasis) argues, “[w]here lived experience *has* been documented, significant revision of extant theoretical and conceptual apparatuses ensues”.

This thesis contributes to an emerging national literature on the subject of street gangs in Britain (Alexander, 2000, 2008; Mares, 2001; Bullock & Tilley, 2002, 2008; Bennett & Holloway, 2004; Hales et al., 2006; Aldridge et al., 2007; Pitts, 2007a, 2008; Young et al., 2007; Hallsworth & Young, 2008; Kintrea et al., 2008; Hallsworth & Silverstone, 2009; Stevens et al., 2009, Goldson, 2010). There can be no question as to the importance of this new breed of gang research in terms of the generation of practical and policy-relevant knowledge for London and beyond. Without it, the adoption of examples of practice from the United States, which have

⁶ My findings correspond closely with Pitts’ (2008), for example, who studied similar areas in London.

only ever been applied and tested within this unique policy and social context, would be the only option. Lest we forget that policy analysts are rightly and uniformly critical of America's success in coping with gangs (Knox, 1994; Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1995; Bjerregaard, 2003). The history and problem profile of Los Angeles, moreover, are very different from London, not least with regard access to firearms.

6.6 GANG DESISTANCE

No research project on gangs is complete without a discussion of gang desistance. During my fieldwork, eleven interviewees described themselves to me as either "ex" or "former" gang members or associates. I appreciate this is neither a statistically representative nor significant sample. Nevertheless, these interviewees were asked to name their primary and secondary motivations for exiting gangs, which are presented in **Table 6.1** below.

Table 6.1. Self-reported reasons for gang desistance (N=11)

Reason	Primary Motivation		Secondary Motivation	
	N	%	N	%
General maturation ("aging out")	4	36	2	18
New opportunities (education, employment, training)	2	18	3	27
Rehabilitation through prison or other intervention	2	18	1	9
Pressure from family / family responsibilities	1	9	2	18
Injury or experience of violence	2	18	-	-
Religion / "found God"	-	-	2	18
Gang as an organisation began to decline	-	-	1	9
Total	11	100	11	100

Source: Author's compilation.

The table above brings us full circle from **Table 3.1** in **Chapter 3**. As can be observed, among my interviewees gang desistance was associated with the interplay of a number of factors, including: general maturation (“aging out”) and a recognition of the impact of gang membership upon themselves, their victims, and their personal relationships; valued and purposeful education, employment, or training; pressure from a partner; parenthood and family responsibilities; movement to other organisations; and a pattern of declining involvement as the gang itself divides or diminishes.

On the subject of “maturational reform” (Matza, 1964: 22), Xavier memorably explained how gang members are really no different from the average adolescent that thinks of himself or herself as “invincible” until something forces him or her to grow up:

When you're younger it's all about what you've got now and how fast you can get it. But then when you're older, remember you're more wiser when you're older, you're more mature so you're more, like, worried about what's going to happen to you, your family or what's going to happen to the people that you love. You're thinking like a big person, like you're thinking like an adult, do you see what I'm trying to say? You've got more to lose. When you're young you don't think of that. Your attitude is you don't care because nothing's really bad happened to you, yeah? But as soon as you're in too deep, you think to yourself you can't get out of it, that's when you feel, 'Oh, why did I do that'. You can't, like, make a bullet bounce back off you. You can't make a stab wound not go in you.

For some interviewees, gang desistance was indeed precipitated by a specific traumatic event that laid bare the effect that gang membership was having on their

lives. Some spent prolonged periods in prison. Others lost loved ones to gang violence. Juggernaut mused:

Trust me, it's not an easy life. It's not an easy life for me, you know, when you get up in the morning and you don't know, and sometimes you don't know what the next move is. Sometimes your friend has died, like, and you want to just spew up, you know what I mean? Like, you've been bawling the whole night; you've been crying the whole night and people don't see that. People don't understand that ... sometimes you've got to make decisions you didn't want to make, and you end up getting yourself involved in something and that's not what you wanted to do but it happens. Life looks very different you've been shot at or stabbed several times and your insides are on the outside and the doctors are looking at you, like 'shit, how he not dead'.

Some subjects indeed suffered from what one key informant described as the “boomerang effect” of gang violence: what goes around comes around (KI XIV). Once gang members experience first hand that their gangs cannot be there to protect them at all times, they begin to question the utility of gang membership. The implication being that a “critical incident”, ranging from injury through gang violence or the death of a close ally, to arrest, imprisonment, or involvement with criminal justice agencies, can just as easily discourage gang membership as encourage it (Ferguson et al., 2008: 133).⁷ I was apprised of one gang member, for instance, who was beaten so badly by members of a rival gang that he was left paralysed on his left side and blind in one eye. He, like the gang member in **Chapter 4** who had his gun backfire on him, was no longer physically or emotionally disposed to gang membership.

So these are the main reasons for desistence. The next question is: what are the processes? The general consensus among my interviewees was that once a gang member it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to cease being one. The difficulty

⁷ The criminal justice system can also provide realistic exit strategies for offenders via education, employment, and training.

lays not in the reaction of the gangs (as is conventional wisdom), but rather the nature and extent of the costly signals that secured gang membership in the first place, because they make desistance prohibitively expensive. Unschooled, untrained for jobs, and with flagrant tattoos and prison records that made them virtually unemployable, the ex-gang members with whom I consulted were often left wondering what to do with the rest of their lives. Calypso, for example, said that without even any GCSEs, which she perceived as the baseline requirement for an alternative career, her only option was to go back to making money through “shooting and stealing”. Other subjects found themselves only suitably qualified to work within London’s effervescent gang intervention industry—the only industry that credited their gang experiences. Through the spectacle of gang intervention, some “ex” gang members even achieved the notoriety and status they once sought to gain or possessed through gang membership (Densley, 2011).

For those who want to leave gangs, the payoff is high and the costs are relatively low. Popular claims that gang members must “kill their parents” to leave gangs are totally unfounded. Gangs are happy enough to let people retire under certain conditions because, as argued throughout this thesis, a reluctant member is no use to the gang. In fact, an unwilling or disgruntled “active” gang member, with full access to the secrets of the gang, is far more dangerous than a “retired” gang member who speaks of the gang in retrospect and with respect. As discussed in **Chapter 4**, gang loyalty is strong, but the gang is bigger than any one member. It is rarely the case that a gang member below elder rank “knows too much” about the organisation and occupation of their gangs. The vast majority of gang members are indeed totally dispensable and

other youths are queuing up to replace them. Gangs need assurances that ex-members will not will not divulge their secrets or provide evidence against them to the police.

Comparisons exist with the way in which corporations in legitimate markets often require employees to sign legally-binding “non-disclosure” agreements (otherwise known as confidentiality agreements) that protect confidential information acquired during the employee’s tenure at the corporation, or “non-compete” agreements, which prohibit work in a related or rival business for a certain period of time, within a certain geographical area. Of course, as discussed below, the enforcement mechanisms differ with gangs, because in gangland a signature making a promise is not enforceable. In much the same way that disgraced politicians, out-of-favour *aide-de-camps*, and fired Chief Executive Officers announce that they want to “spend more time with family”, gangs and their departing members also need to “agree” upon a valid reason for their parting ways, which can be sold to the wider community to save face. The last thing a gang wants is the perception that members disown them because they are dissatisfied (or indeed that they recruit incompetent individuals). Religious conversion or its functional equivalent is a much easier pill for all to swallow.

A minority of gang members get credit for having served time in prison for their gangs. The majority, however, evidence their continued loyalty by residing in gang territory and spending time with gang members *after* desistance. In the latter scenario, gang members agree not to *leave* their gangs, but rather *retire* from them. Retirement simply entails leaving behind the criminal aspect of gang involvement and developing a lifestyle less likely to bring oneself into conflict with police, which explains in part why on television many “veteran” Bloods and Crips are safe to parade around the

streets of Los Angeles in their gang colours. Desistance from crime (including criminal enterprise) is of course not tantamount to departure from gangs. After desistance, connections with gangs remain. Day-to-day involvement diminishes, but support for the gang and its members stays almost constant, not least because retirees are concerned about outright rejection from their peers and friends (we must recall, the first stage of gang formation is recreation). As one key informant explained, it is almost impossible for some to leave, because the gang is quite literally all they have:

These kids don't work. They don't go to school. They don't go away on holiday or leave their local estate for that matter. Everyone knows everyone else's business. It's an incestuous lifestyle. Without the excitement and gossip they would have nothing to talk about. They need the gang. They need the rivalry and drama for any sense of identity.

(KI XVII)

By hanging *around* the gang as opposed to hanging out *with* the gang, retirees also enable themselves to be monitored by their gangs, which signals above all that they have nothing to hide because they are making themselves available for ongoing screening.

While they may be inactive most of the time, "retired" gang members can be coaxed or forced out of their "retirement" if the situation merits it, as Juggernaut explained:

You're never out of this game ... an old enemy sees you out on the street, you don't have time to tell them you're 'reformed' now ... I can say, 'I'm not part of this game no more', although in saying that, I can still make a phone call and get people to, you know, do things.

Indeed, some retirees continue to live in gang space and associate with gang members out of necessity because they once maintained a reputation such that, despite their desistance from crime, family and friends remain vulnerable to reprisals from old rivals:

They'll just come straight to you. You know, you've got enough kids on mopeds, you know, stabbings, shootings, whatever. Those things happen very quick. [It can] be very methodical, 'I'm going to teach you a lesson and I'm going to do it systematically', basically and 'I will hit but I won't ever miss. I'm going to teach you a lesson, and that is I'm going to get your wife, get your child'.

(Electro)

Not only do former gang members remain vulnerable to reprisals from old rivals, but they also remain at the mercy of their former gang colleagues. Gangs keep an eye on the movements of retired members. Gang members on probation, Toad argued, were particularly vulnerable: "If you're on probation you're obliged to be there. If you're obliged to be there then I know every single time that you're getting there. So I had people all the time, yeah, 'I'll see this one at probation. I'll see this one at the YOT', and I set them up. Bam". Gangs also often know where the families of their old members live and where their children or siblings go to school. This information is often held over retirees to ensure compliance.

Much like gang recruitment, desistance is a gradual process, which incorporates "both subjective and behavioural changes, and recognition from others" (Aldridge et al., 2007: 16). Gang members that were most successful in staying out of trouble after desistance were those that maintained a constant vision of a crime-free life, regarding their past behaviour as being something which they had done once but which was now no longer a part of their lives. Daredevil, now a qualified youth worker, explained that he had to be "two minded":

You got to have other things going on. The majority of these young people, the reason why they all said they also have love for me is because I was two minded. I had two things going on in my head, which was doing the drugs thing, making money from drugs, but also keeping my education and trying to help other young people. Other young people out there are just daft minded, they just want to do the drugs and get money out of drugs and just

leave which is impossible. My mind was not only on the drugs but on university long term. I left [the gang] because I found something what I was really good at and I wanted to pursue for the future. For people to stop they have to be dedicated to one thing outside the gang. That's it, dedicated.

The renegotiation of personal relationships for retired gang members is a laborious and lengthy exercise, not least because of the suspicion and labelling of those both within and without gangs. The issue is further complicated because gang members and their associates are typically concentrated in relatively small geographical spaces.

Daredevil added:

My enemies think, me, a couple of them like the younger ones think I'm still involved but most of the people know I'm not involved. I've said it everywhere, I'm not involved with them, I've stopped hanging out, people haven't seen me. ... but if you've got like enemies everywhere it's hard. Yeah, places, stuff you've done, places you can't go because you was in that certain gang. ... If I get seen I'm either going to get robbed, stabbed or whatever. I've grown out of that bit [the gang] but there's certain areas now, like where my friend got killed, I can't go to that, I can't really go 'cus, it'll be a problem.

As Curry and Decker (1998: 7) explain, “[w]hen an individual has made the decision and taken the steps to leave a gang, but is still in a police database and treated by the police as a gang member, rival members may continue to perceive that individual as an active member and attack him as if he were still a gang member”.

Juggernaut argued that one way gang members communicate desistance to the wider world is via media appearances:

Depending on how much people know about you, that's what it really boils down to. Because of how much people know or, or know you're involved with certain things. Some of the guys, when I've done that some of the TV interviews and that, I've had like phone calls and stuff like that with people going, 'no, you're a liar, you're this and that'. You've just got to have other people to verify that, you know, you're not in the game no more. And I say, 'That's good that you're able to show your face on TV and say, “you know,

I'm not involved with these two", you know what I mean?' It's like a public way of saying this is not my game no more.

Another way of communicating desistance is by swapping one gang for another: organised religion.

Apart from the church, there are really no alternative forms of collective youth organisation to the gang. Not only does faith provide protection, identity, group belonging, and, in the cases of evangelical churches, a sense of solid militancy, but religious conversion is also the most easily accepted route for gang members to receive "honourable discharge" from their gangs (KI XXX). To use Richard Dawkins' apt expression, any rational inquiry is expected to "tip-toe respectfully away" once religion enters the equation.⁸ It is dangerous to question from within, and rude to question from without. As such, religion becomes a powerful and persuasive "get out of gang free" card. It is not entirely free because the individual's lifestyle must demonstrate that the delinquency and violence that underpin the gang are at odds with their new path in life. People must actively attend their place of worship, demonstrate to others knowledge of the basic scriptures and tenets of the religion, even dress differently in public. Nonetheless, just as the average person would not hit a man wearing glasses, gang members will generally not hit a colleague who claims to have found God.⁹

In sum, once someone joins a gang it is not the case that they can never get out. My fieldwork experience indeed suggests that gang members decide to leave gangs all the

⁸ http://25by4.channel4.com/chapter_11/article_6

⁹ Religious organisations are aware of this and in some cases actively seek to recruit and reform gang members. During the fieldwork, police even expressed concern that radical Mosques were giving vulnerable youths an escape route from gangs in exchange for a commitment to Jihad, but I found no concrete evidence of such practices.

time. Getting out and staying out, however, requires resolve, not least because gang members must continue to signal some of the trust-warranting properties that guaranteed them entry into gangs in the first place. Former gang members must stay loyal to their gangs and live in constant fear of reprisals. The somewhat predictable conclusion is thus that while it is good that gang members choose to desist from gangs, it is much better to have never joined in the first place.

6.6 THE FINAL WORD

Can London's gang problem be solved? During the fieldwork I heard countless ideas, but one stayed with me throughout. This thesis has demonstrated how, in the absence of other viable opportunities, certain young people will do whatever it takes to enter gangs and gangs, in turn, will do whatever it takes to ensure the longevity of their organisation. Indeed, to fill the vacuum left by conventional social institutions, gangs can evolve to become systems of governance. Gang members are complex characters, but unfortunately their street skills do not automatically or necessarily translate into marketable skills in legitimate fields of work. Poor levels of formal education, for instance, make it difficult for many gang members to navigate and negotiate increasingly complex official and legal requirements, such as licensing and regulation. What if we levelled the playing field? Could the energies of the gangs be channelled into something more productive than criminal enterprise? What if gang became providers of *legal* goods and services?

In the late-1960s, the Conservative Vice Lords (CVL) famously gained entrée to the political establishment and re-directed their energies from violence and criminality to stabilising the community of Lawndale, Chicago. The CVL established and operated prominent social and cultural centres, and launched campaigns to beautify the neighbourhood under the slogans “grass, not glass” and “making the West Side the best side” (Conservative Vice Lords Inc., 1969). Gang members were paid to transform the gang into a force for good. Although changes in government administration and agenda brought this promising social experiment to an untimely end, it is never too late to replicate.

Admittedly, the context is now different. The CVL were very much steeped in the African-American Civil Rights Movement at time before blacks became actively involved in the street retail sector of the drugs market. Still, the government could hire people to do all kinds of work, from clearing communities to building and renovating local housing. Gang members could escort youths to school in the morning or operate supervised afterschool activities in the evening. This would move people from welfare to work and in the process create much-needed hope, which, in turn, would solve the “burning bridges” predicament discussed in **Chapter 5**. More affordable childcare, moreover, would help single mothers and fathers balance the responsibilities of employment and parenting.

At time of writing, a similar experiment is underway—the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (ALKQN), an internationally organised or franchised “supergang” originating from Chicago has been formally accepted as a “cultural association” in the Spanish community of Catalonia, including its provincial capital, Barcelona. Such an

initiative is unique even among Spanish municipal administrations. Although the Spanish incarnation is significantly less violent than their American counterpart, Madrid indeed still recognises the ALKQN as an organised crime group.¹⁰

Whether or not Barcelona's faith in a path to social integration will yield greater long-term success than Madrid's adoption of a zero tolerance approach remains to be seen. In New York City during the mid-1990s, the ALKQN recruited members on much the same anti-drug, anti-crime, anti-violence, pro-health, and pro-education platform that can be observed in Barcelona today (Brotherton & Barrios, 2003). As the styles and sensibilities of the gang came to dominate youth discourse, however, the message soon became diluted. The drug business, moreover, still underwrote much of the economic activity of the gang. After two decades of violence perpetrated by callous corporate drug-dealers and a state waging a war of attrition at street level, however, the revival of the ALKQN among the Big Apple's disenfranchised Latino community "represented an indigenous attempt to impose order and structure on what had become an unmanageable situation" (Curtis, 2003: 51). And as John Goldthorpe (1980: 158–60) argues, the "achievement of a genuinely open society ... is ... only likely to be brought about through collective action on the part of those in inferior positions".

Could certain London gangs be a catalyst for positive social change? This is certainly a question for the future. In the meantime, I shall end where this thesis *originally* began. In the years leading up to this research I taught middle school in New York City, first in Hunts Point in the South Bronx, part of the poorest congressional district

¹⁰ *The Guardian*, 5 October 2006.

in the United States, then in Manhattan's Lower East Side, an area that continues to be home to significant numbers of recent immigrants and bilingual and bicultural families. My experience was marked by one recurring event: on 31 October each year, my students made me promise not to under any circumstances drive home at the end of the school day. I could catch the bus, ride the subway, walk the length of Manhattan, or any combination thereof, but I had to swear to steer clear of an automobile. The reason, they told me, was that on the eve of All Saints' Day, Brooklyn-based street gangs embarked upon their annual recruitment drive. The nature of their initiation rite, my students continued, placed innocent drivers at serious risk of violent victimisation. As my students had it, the ritual required prospective gang members to drive on busy roads at night either with their headlights deliberately off or on high beam, depending on the storyteller. If approaching motorists blinked their headlights to warn oncoming traffic, they would be followed home by gang members, attacked, and, in most versions, killed. Alas, I was safer taking the subway than the expressway.

That my students cared so much for my safety was flattering. The irony was that at the time I neither held a driver's licence nor owned a set of car keys. The story was also not entirely true. I know now that the "lights out" story is an urban myth, which originated in California in the early 1980s and spread throughout the United States during the 1990s with the help of fax machines and the Internet.¹¹ Although most government authorities denied the story was anything more than a rumour, the folk tale attracted nationwide media attention and police departments received numerous inquiries from concerned citizens (for a discussion, see Best & Hutchinson, 1996).

¹¹ Myths are not necessarily false (fallacies), but rather refer to beliefs based on little actual information that are strongly held and convenient to believe (Howell, 2007).

The story is of interest to us here because it demonstrates the pervasiveness of gang mythology, particularly in reference to recruitment and initiation. I first heard it from a group of otherwise savvy teenagers who remained convinced of its authenticity nearly a decade after it was refuted. During the fieldwork for the present study, I heard the story again on no less than three separate occasions, only this time it was adults telling the tale and in reference to street gang recruitment strategies in London, England. On the streets, when legend becomes fact, gangs print the legend.

With so much myth and misinformation out there about gangs, this thesis set out to make sense of them in straightforward, rational terms. It is my sincere hope that I provided some original insight into the field of gang scholarship by exploring not only *why* one joins a gang and what a gang looks like, but also *how* gangs select new members and execute strategies for survival.

APPENDIX A

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Acronym	Expansion or explanation
ACPO	The Association of Chief Police Officers of England, Wales, Northern Ireland
BJA	Bureau of Justice Assistance
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
CDRP	Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CO	Central Operations
CO 19	Specialist Firearms Command
CO 20	Territorial Support Group
CPS	Crown Prosecution Service
CRB	Criminal Records Bureau
GREAT	Gangs Resistance Education and Training
HMYOI	Her Majesty's Young Offender Institutions, which are prisons specifically intended for juvenile offenders aged 15 to 18 serving a Detention and Training Order or sentenced under Section 91 of the Powers of the Criminal Courts (Sentencing) Act 2000, which pertains to the conviction of a young person for an offence for which an adult could receive at least 14 years in custody
KI	Key informant
MOJ	Ministry of Justice
MPA	Metropolitan Police Authority, the body that ensures London's police are accountable for the services they provide to the public
MPS	Metropolitan Police Service
OJP	Office of Justice Programs
NHS	National Health Service
PNC	Police National Computer
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
SOCA	Serious Organised Crime Agency
SCD	Specialist Crime Directorate
SDC 1	Homicide and Serious Crime Command
SDC 2	Rape and Serious Sexual Offences Command
SDC 3	Specialist Crime Prevention and Partnership
SDC 7	Serious and Organised Crime Group ("Flying Squad")
SDC 8	Trident and Trafalgar Operational Command
SO	Specialist Operations
SO 6	Diplomatic Protection Group
SO 15	Counter Terrorism Command
SOIT	Sexual Offences Investigation Trained
YOS	Youth Offending Services
YOT	Youth Offending Team
YJB	Youth Justice Board
YP	Young person
USA	United States of America
UK	United Kingdom

APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Gang culture has produced a distinctive language and so, in the interests of reference and clarity, I have compiled the following glossary of words and terms used by young people during my fieldwork.

Term	Meaning
Balled/to ball	To engage in threatening eye contact (origin: "eyeball")
Ballin'	Conspicuous consumption
Bang	Punch
Bare	A large or sufficient amount or quantity
Bate	Obvious
Battle	Rap competitions that are sometimes drawn out over time
Beat	Sex
Beat and bounce	Sex with no strings attached
Beef	Argument/Fight/Confrontation/Conflict/Vendetta
Bell/Belled	A telephone call
Ben	A £10 bag of drugs
Blap Blap	The sound of a gun discharging
Blaze	To smoke cannabis
Block	A council estate (origin: tower "block" and the U.S. "block" meaning the area bounded by four streets)
Blud	A close companion who can be family or friend
Blowing	Running/depart quickly
Bly	Chance
Bore	To stab someone (origin: transitive verb to "hollow out")
Booky	Suspicious
Brainer	Oral sex
Breed a girl	Wanting to impregnate a girl
Brethren	A close companion who can be family or friend
Bruv	A close companion who can be family or friend (origin: "brother")
Burst/to get burst	Shot/to get shot
Burner	A firearm
Bust a nut	To ejaculate
Butters	Ugly (origin: "butt ugly")
Calm-stige	Content (a portmanteau word from "calm" and "prestige")
Certified	Serious girlfriend
Chug	Good looking
Country	Places outside of London where youngers are sent to deal drugs
Crow	Cannabis/weed
Crack	Hard crystalline form of cocaine broken into small pieces and smoked
Dash	To throw something away
Deal	To sell illegal drugs
Diss	To disrespect someone or something

DeeJay/DJ	A disc jockey, someone who uses samples of recorded music to make new music
Drapse/Drapsed	To be roughed up or held up
Dutty	Dirty
Elder	Older or more senior gang member
Emcee/MC	Master of Ceremonies
Ends/Endz	A neighbourhood, esp. one's own neighbourhood / gang territory
Fam	A close companion who can be family or friend (origin: "family")
Feds	The police (origin: U.S. abbreviation of "federal agent")
Flip/Flipping	Turning the proceeds of a "hustle" or robbery into profit (origin: to "flip" a property, that is, buy and sell quickly and profitably using a fraudulent evaluation of its worth)
Floss	Flaunt
Food	Illegal drugs
Front	An appearance or form of behaviour assumed by a person to conceal their genuine feelings
Frontline	The area in gang territory where the "action" happens
G	Gangster/ gang member
Gallis	Womaniser
Gassed	Talking nonsense / excited (origin: to fill a tank with gasoline)
Gem	Fool
Ghost	To be frequently absent
Green	Cannabis/money
Greezy	Bad
Grime	A style of urban music that evolved primarily out of U.K. garage, Caribbean dancehall, and American hip-hop.
Grips/to Grips up	To be roughed up or held up
Gwap	Money
Hip-hop	A style of popular music of U.S. black and Hispanic origin, featuring rap with an electronic backing
Hood	Gang territory (origin: "neighbourhood")
Hustle	Obtain by illicit action/swindle/cheat
Hype	To promote or publicise without real foundation
Jacked/to Jack	To get robbed / to illegally seize something (origin: "hijack")
Jezzie	A promiscuous girl (origin: "Jezebel")
Junge	A promiscuous girl
Klep	Steal (origin "kleptomania")
Kodee	A close companion who can be family or friend
Liccie	Small
Lick	Attack/attack someone
Madness	A chaotic event involving a number of young people
Mans	Oneself or another individual
Man Dem	Group of men/gang
Merked/to Merk	To kill or injure / to be killed or injured
Moist	No ratings / weak / effeminate
Moved/to move	Violence or the visible threat of violence
Nang	Good
Neek	A portmanteau word from "nerd" and "geek"
O.G.	Original Gangster, old gang member
Ones	By oneself

On it	Willing to participate
P's/Paper	Money
Peel	To rob someone
Peng	Good looking girl
Pop	To shoot someone
Posting the strip	Hanging out in front of an estate
Props	Peer respect
Pure	Complete/total
Put in work	Contributing to gang business
Rap	A type of popular music of U.S. black origin in which words are recited rapidly and rhythmically over a pre-recorded, typically electronic instrumental backing
Ratings	Level of peer respect
Rambo	Large knife
Rep	To represent an area or gang/ or reputation
Respect	Esteem for or a sense of the worth or excellence of a person
Rock/to rock	Attack/attack someone
Rolling (with)	Hanging out
Rush/to rush	To approach and threaten or use violence in /or to rob
Screw/Screwing	Look at someone more than twice/a "dirty look"
Shank/shanked /to shank	A knife/to get stabbed/to stab someone
Shot/Shotting	To sell things illegally on the street, mainly drugs
Slipping	To go through an area that you are not from; especially on your own and/or through an area that rival where you live and/or without any form of protection
Snake/snaking/ snakey	A traitor/act of treachery
Snitch	A traitor/informer
Spit	Perform rap music
Stack	To form a large quantity; build up money
Strap/Strapped	Gun/to carry a gun
Stick up	An armed robbery in which a gun is used to threaten people
Stripes	Level of peer respect
Sum	Large amount of money
Tekkers	Technique
Tiny	Young gang member
Touch skin	Unprotected sex
Wavey	High or drunk
Weed	Cannabis
Wet/Wetted up	Stab/to be stabbed
Wha'gwan	"What's going on?"/"What's happening?"
Wifey	Serious girlfriend, literally "wife" material
Younger	Younger or subordinate gang member
Yout	Youth or young person

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

A. FILE INFORMATION

Date: _____ Time Start: _____ Time End: _____	
Location: _____	Number of Randomization Form: _____

B. PREAMBLE

Interviewer has introduced the purpose of the study and an overview of the topics under consideration	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Interviewer has presented their name and status (doctoral student) and provided information of how achieve future contact	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Interviewer has provided the opportunity for the respondent to ask questions about the study, receive satisfactory answers to such questions, and obtain any additional details requested	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Interviewer has ensured that the participant understands that s/he may withdraw from the study without penalty at any time by advising me of this decision and may similarly decline to answer any particular question.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Interviewer has ensured that the participant understands that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Interviewer has guaranteed the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondent and explained that all data will be encrypted and non-identifiable	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Interviewer has obtained the informed consent of the participant to proceed with the interview	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Interviewer has ensured the respondent understands how to raise a concern or make a complaint?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Q	This section asks general questions about the interviewee—it does not ask questions about involvement in any particular organisation or at any point in time.	
1	[Enter the Respondent's Sex]	
2	What year were you born?	
3	Where were you born?	
4	Where were your parents born?	
5	In which London borough / neighbourhood do you reside?	
6	How long have you lived in this location?	
7	Think of the place you live most of the time, which of the following people live with you?	<p><i>["Brothers and sisters" includes those not of the same mother and father]</i></p> <p>1. <input type="checkbox"/> Mother 5. <input type="checkbox"/> Grandparents 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Father 6. <input type="checkbox"/> Aunts and uncles 3. <input type="checkbox"/> Brothers 7. <input type="checkbox"/> Partner or spouse 4. <input type="checkbox"/> Sisters 8. <input type="checkbox"/> Other Children 9. <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ [Specify]</p>
8	How many brothers and sisters do you have?	
9	How many children do you have?	
10	What is your marital status?	<p>1. <input type="checkbox"/> Single, never married 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Divorced / separated 3. <input type="checkbox"/> Widowed 4. <input type="checkbox"/> Married, co-habiting</p>
11	What is your religion? [Do NOT Prompt]	
12	What is your highest level of education?	<p>1. <input type="checkbox"/> No school 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Some primary school 3. <input type="checkbox"/> Completed primary school 4. <input type="checkbox"/> Some secondary school 5. <input type="checkbox"/> Completed secondary school 6. <input type="checkbox"/> Some college / further education</p>

Sample Interview Schedule

		7. <input type="checkbox"/> Completed college / further education 8. <input type="checkbox"/> Some university 9. <input type="checkbox"/> Completed university 10. <input type="checkbox"/> Institute or vocational training
13	What is your opinion of / experience with school / education?	
14	What social class do you consider yourself to be? [Do NOT Prompt]	1. <input type="checkbox"/> None 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Working class 3. <input type="checkbox"/> Middle class 4. <input type="checkbox"/> Upper class 5. <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ [Specify]
15	Do you have a job for which you were paid in the last 12 months? If so, please describe.	
16	What is your father's occupation?	
17	What is your mother's occupation?	

SECTION 1: ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

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2. RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Q	For the following questions, I want you to think about your experience in _____ organization. Please answer the following questions only with reference to your experience in that group.	
18	How did you first come to meet people in this group?	1. <input type="checkbox"/> My friend/relative joined the group 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Someone approached me/ my family and asked me to join 3. <input type="checkbox"/> I heard about the group and so I went looking for them 4. <input type="checkbox"/> I was a founding member / it evolved out of standard bonds of friendship 5. <input type="checkbox"/> I joined in prison 6. <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ [Specify]
19	If answer is (3) then, how did you find them?	
20	How did you persuade them to let you join?	
21	Why did you become involved in the group?	
22	Was there any choice in which group you affiliated with? Why did you choose this one?	
23	Have you ever been a member of another group / rejected from a group?	
24	What was the time lag between first contact and official recruitment / initiation?	
25	How can you tell who is in and who is out of the group?	
26	What are the main goals of the group? What activities do you participate in?	
27	Why do you think you were approached?	
28	How were you persuaded to join the group?	
29	Had you left school by the time you joined the group? If so, why was	

Sample Interview Schedule

	that?	
30	Who did you know in the group before you became involved?	1. <input type="checkbox"/> Family member 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Friend 3. <input type="checkbox"/> Someone at school 4. <input type="checkbox"/> Someone from the community 5. <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ [Specify]
31	What did the group tell you that you would gain from participating? What were the incentives?	
32	Can you describe the process of becoming a member?	
33	Were you nervous or anxious about joining up and if so, what in particular were you anxious about?	
34	What did you have to do to show to the group that you were loyal or trustworthy?	
35	When did you know that you were officially initiated? What were the signs?	
36	What role did you play most when you FIRST became involved in the organisation?	
37	Please explain the ranking system of your group. What does each rank mean / do etc.?	
38	What rank / position were you given when you FIRST became involved in the group?	
39	What rank / position did you last hold?	
40	When you started with the group, did you feel that you were safer inside than you would have been outside it? Why?	
41	Are your family aware of your membership in this group? Are they supportive of your being a member?	

42	Did you know anyone who wanted to join up but was unable to?	
43	If yes, why were they unable to join?	

SECTION 2: ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Sample Interview Schedule

3. ORGANIZATION

Q	I am now going to ask you some questions about the group that you are/ were with at a particular time. If you were a member of more than one group then please think of the one that was most important to you	
44	How many people are / were there in your group?	1. <input type="checkbox"/> 2 5. <input type="checkbox"/> 51–99 2. <input type="checkbox"/> 3–10 6. <input type="checkbox"/> >100 3. <input type="checkbox"/> 11–20 7. <input type="checkbox"/> ____ [Specify] 4. <input type="checkbox"/> 21–50 8. <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
45	About how many of these people were women?	1. <input type="checkbox"/> 2 5. <input type="checkbox"/> 51–99 2. <input type="checkbox"/> 3–10 6. <input type="checkbox"/> >100 3. <input type="checkbox"/> 11–20 7. <input type="checkbox"/> ____ [Specify] 4. <input type="checkbox"/> 21–50 8. <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
46	Which of the following best describes the ages of people in your group?	1. <input type="checkbox"/> <12 4. <input type="checkbox"/> 25–28 2. <input type="checkbox"/> 13–16 5. <input type="checkbox"/> >29 3. <input type="checkbox"/> 17–20 6. <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know 4. <input type="checkbox"/> 21–24
47	How old is the youngest person in the group?	
48	How old is the oldest person in the group?	
49	How many of your close friends belong to the group?	1. <input type="checkbox"/> All of them 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Most of them 3. <input type="checkbox"/> About half of them 4. <input type="checkbox"/> Less than half of them 5. <input type="checkbox"/> Not many of them 6. <input type="checkbox"/> None of them 7. <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ [Specify] 8. <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
50	Does your group have an area or place which it calls its own? If so, where?	
51	Does your group let other groups into this area or place?	
52	Does your group defend this area or place from other groups? If so, how?	
53	Were all of the members of your group from this area? If not, where do they come from?	
54	Does your group have a name?	

	for itself? If so, what is the group's name?			
55	How long has the group existed?	1. <input type="checkbox"/> <6 months	5. <input type="checkbox"/> 5–7 years	
		2. <input type="checkbox"/> 6 months – 1 yr	6. <input type="checkbox"/> >8 years	
		3. <input type="checkbox"/> 1–2 years	7. <input type="checkbox"/> ____ [Specify]	
		4. <input type="checkbox"/> 3–4 years	8. <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know	
56	Within this group are there distinct subgroups / cliques that especially spend time together based on their age, gender, neighbourhood etc.? If so, please explain.			
57	Which of the following characteristics describes your group	1. Recognised leaders: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
		2. Symbols: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
		3. Hierarchy: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
		4. Regular meetings: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
		5. Specific rules or codes: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
		6. Initiation rites: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
		7. Special clothing: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
Q	Now I would like you to think of a person in your group who was promoted or moved up quickly. When they were promoted, how important were the following things?			
58	Friend/relative of a senior member	1. <input type="checkbox"/> Very important	2. <input type="checkbox"/> Important	3. <input type="checkbox"/> Not important
59	Trustworthy / loyal	1. <input type="checkbox"/> Very important	2. <input type="checkbox"/> Important	3. <input type="checkbox"/> Not important
60	Tough / good fighter	1. <input type="checkbox"/> Very important	2. <input type="checkbox"/> Important	3. <input type="checkbox"/> Not important
61	Intelligent or educated	1. <input type="checkbox"/> Very important	2. <input type="checkbox"/> Important	3. <input type="checkbox"/> Not important
62	Popular in the group	1. <input type="checkbox"/> Very important	2. <input type="checkbox"/> Important	3. <input type="checkbox"/> Not important
63	Other: _____	1. <input type="checkbox"/> Very important	2. <input type="checkbox"/> Important	3. <input type="checkbox"/> Not important
64	Is promotion desirable? What can be obtained by climbing the ranks?			
65	How important is reputation in achieving promotion?			
66	If you had the opportunity could you have left the group? What were the costs of leaving?			

Sample Interview Schedule

67	Have you ever recruited anyone to your group?	
68	What kind of person would be a potentially good recruit?	
69	How would you tell him/her your intentions to propose his/her name?	
70	How would you persuade him/her to trust you?	
71	What kind of person would you consider would be unsuitable to be a member?	
72	Has your offer to join up ever been turned down and if yes do you know why.	
73	Why do you think you were recruited? What did you offer the group?	

SECTION 3: ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

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4. BUSINESS

75	How does the group make money?	
76	How important is drug-dealing to the group?	
77	Did you become involved in drug supply/dealing? If so, how?	
78	What types and quantities of drugs did you deal?	
79	Where did the supply come from?	
80	Who did you work with and what were their roles?	
81	Did you have a regular income from your deals?	
82	What were the major risks? How did you negotiate them?	
83	Were there any competitors you had to deal with? If so, how did you deal with them?	

5. OPEN QUESTIONS

84	Do you feel the group achieved all of its aims?	
85	Do you have any other comments you would like to make or views that you would like to share before we end this interview?	

*Sample Interview Schedule***END OF INTERVIEW****6. POST-INTERVIEW SECTION TO BE COMPLETED BY INTERVIEWER**

Did you feel that this interviewee was distracted during the interview? 1 Concentrated 2 Somewhat distracted 3 Very distracted

Did you feel that the interviewee was willing to share information or was he more reluctant to share? 1 Willing to Share 2 Neither 3 Reluctant to share

Did you feel comfortable interviewing this person? 1 Comfortable 2 Neither 3 Not Comfortable

Did Interview End Before Completion? Yes

Why:

Does the interviewee want a copy of their transcript? Yes No

APPENDIX D

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