

# ‘It’s all about the here and now ...’ (young man, 20)

Why are young people drawn into gangs?

- a snapshot from across Bristol, May 2010

This report covers:

- Background to the research and approach taken 2
- Definition of a youth street gang 2
- Why young people are joining up 3
- Recruitment tactics, activity and geographical spread 5
- What might deter young people from getting involved 6
- Recommendations for action 6

*Appendix 1: Sample of criminal youth activity,  
mapped onto Bristol’s 2007 Indices of Deprivation* 7

*Appendix 2: Fridays@Mill plan* 8

*Who we spoke to; References & Resources* 9

## Background to the work

This report was commissioned by Bristol City Council Community Cohesion team in order to gain understanding of the spread and causes of youth street gangs in Bristol. As it has recently been agreed by agencies across the city to avoid the word 'gang' in order to avoid glamorising the idea, we mainly use the term 'criminal group activity' in this report – see definitions below.

The work was carried out by Community Resolve, who work with youth and community conflict across the city, and who set up the 'Bristol Gang Awareness Project' eight years ago in response to violent clashes between young people from Easton and St Pauls. Over a period of five months (January to May 2010) we spoke to 228 people:

- **In-depth interviews** - 30 interviews with 22 men and 8 women, 18 aged 25 or under, 17 aged 25+, including self-identified group members, young offenders, young people, youth professionals, police, community development workers, youth housing organisations and others
- **Focus groups** - 38 people in 6 groups, 26 aged 25 or under, 12 aged 25+
- **Information collected on free 'Young people and Group Conflict' training** for adults - 120 adults over 25
- **Street-based observation and enquiry** - 40 questionnaires completed by young people aged 12-20

## Context

There has been youth criminal group activity in Bristol for many years, focussed mainly in the poorer areas of the city. Since the building of the M32, younger members of the previously united Easton and St Pauls communities have developed postcode rivalries (now seen elsewhere in Bristol), while areas such as Knowle and Southmead have significant histories of family feuds, which have become entangled with community identity issues. According to those with local experience stretching back a decade or more, the entry age range for criminal youth activity is dropping, attitudes of young people are more aggressive and entrenched, the violence is more serious – eg firebombing, guns - and there appears to be a move away from previously accepted 'rules of engagement' at the same time as a universal fall in respect for 'elders'. These shifts have occurred over the last 3-4 years, and are alarming other young people, as well as residents, workers and statutory bodies.

As the map of activity shows (Appendix 1), there is a clear overlap between areas of deprivation and where criminal youth groups are operating – with College Green a noticeable exception. Please note: this is a sample snapshot only, as all these groups/activities are fluid and constantly changing.

*One 11-yr old told his support workers about being with his 'gang' (five friends aged 11-13) when they went through their pockets to see how much they had between them to buy a dog – he was the only one with less than £100 on him.*  
(EC3, Dec 09)

## Definitions

For the purposes of this report, we are distinguishing between adult organised crime (*Serious Organised Crime Agency Annual Plan 2010-11*) and youth criminal activity. The following definition for youth street 'gangs', out of a wide range of definitions currently in use across the country and beyond, is close to our experience:

*"Street gangs are defined as groups based on a strong shared identity, moderate levels of organisation, versatile offending patterns, amplification of criminal behaviour over time and a variety of internal structures."*

(adapted from Maguire, M., Morgan, R., and Reiner, R., eds. (2007) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press)

A definition that captures their changing and fluid nature comes from one of the US's leading social scientists working on gangs, Dr Joan Moore: "*Gangs are unsupervised peer groups who are socialised by*

*the streets rather than by conventional institutions. They define themselves as a gang or "clique" or some such term, and have the capacity to reproduce themselves, usually within a specific neighbourhood."*

For this report, criminal group activity refers to dealing, robbery, vandalism, anti-social behaviour, intimidation and extortion. We have also heard unconfirmed reports of prostitution, kidnap, blackmail and trafficking. The report primarily refers to groups of young people from white, dual heritage, Black British, Asian, Somali and African-Caribbean backgrounds. Because of a lack of data, it does not include the activities of young people from newer communities.

While the majority of young people involved in street criminality are young men, there are always associated young women, as girlfriends, runners, lures for other group members. We have had a number of reports of more active gang involvement by young women across all areas of the city, witnessed on 'raids' with large numbers of young men on someone else's turf, or on videos on U Tube promoting an area or escalating tensions between rival groups.

Please note: all quotes below have been gathered by Community Resolve workers on the streets, in research interviews and in workshops. They are people's perceptions, as opposed to evidenced statements.

## Why are young Bristolians joining criminal groups?

### 'Gangs' as identity

Most youngsters get caught up in criminal group behaviour between the ages of 13-15 – a crucial age for breaking away from home influences and forming a sense of self. In some ways, friendship groups at this time form a rite of passage:

*'13 or 14, that's the age to do ... something of your own'*

*'Crime was fun to me'*

*'when they're with friends it's kicking off like, it's not just with foreigners but with other people... it's coming from boredom and drugs'*

For some, family links to criminality and adult gangs are a major contributing factor. Others identify with what they see as soon as they step outside their front doors – dealing, illegality, poverty. The importance given to 'respect' (reputation, being feared locally) means that young people become reluctant to move outside their areas: fear-based respect doesn't work when you're somewhere no-one knows you. In addition, local loyalties are locking young people into previously established ways of behaving:

*'It's hard for [young people]... if they do get a job then none of their friends have got jobs and they're isolated... so what they know is what they stay with, so people deliberately hold themselves back...'*

*'It used to be that the youngsters would know who to look for, they'd know who to target and who not to mess with – now they just look for who's not from the endz and they'll jump you, it's just different'*

*'They keep telling me 'I think I'm better than them' - not true, I jus' don't wanna get locked up. They just want me back, it would be easier to go back sometimes'*

### Why are they getting involved?

- ❖ Fun/excitement
- ❖ Financial motives/poverty
- ❖ To find love and stability
- ❖ Acceptance
- ❖ Lack of self esteem
- ❖ Peer pressure
- ❖ Poor guidance/support from adults
- ❖ Protection from other gangs/crew
- ❖ To attract girls / men
- ❖ To sell drugs
- ❖ To find status/gain respect/ build a reputation
- ❖ Family member involved in gangs/ tradition
- ❖ Media/music influences
- ❖ Lack of education/ training/ employment
- ❖ Dangers associated with not joining/ leaving a gang

This is as true in Hartcliffe, Knowle and Southmead as it is in Barton Hill, Easton or St Pauls, and means there are a lot of young people in the city with very limited experience of other ways of being:

*'Before last year I never spoke to anybody that I didn't know since young'.*

*'When I was 17-19, Stapleton Rd was the world to me ... you could get anything, crackheads selling clothes'*

*'Never left here, never left the country'*

*'Town [Cabot Circus] is not for us, doesn't cater for us in any way, shape or form'*

### Groups as safety ...

The perception for many young people in the city is that adults aren't in control – they're not going to protect them, on the street, in school or at some clubs:

*'there are no rules, there's bullying, smoking weed'*

*'if you come from an area where gangs are rough, you got nothing but being involved or not be involved and then you have to fight against it, so its kinda be down or lay down mentality.'*

*"A gang hangs out near the shops; I have been threatened with a knife and had to defend myself. I shouldn't have to put up with that outside my front door."*

*"I feel there is a race element in the attitude of the police. I have been stopped and searched four times in one day."*

*"Young people are more worried about the police than gangs"*

Many young people don't feel safe at home either, sometimes because of family / gang connections, or simply because of troubled home relationships. Asked in one local park if there was anywhere they didn't feel safe, one young person replied: *'At home when my mum is angry'*. The idea of street groups as family – young people talk about their *'bredren'*, *'fam'*, etc – is especially noticeable where parents are under pressure at home.

### Something to do ...

One young person in Hartcliffe described how it works:

*'We went to school/grew up together, got into stuff [anti-social behaviour] for fun. As we got older, poor education results, few choices, we hung around together all day. We kept busy with petty theft, robbery – then in the youth justice system. Once on that path it's very hard to get off. In the area, everyone knows each other – if you try to make a change, you're seen as putting yourself above others, pulling away from local people.'*

And another in St Pauls:

*'There is kind of a lot of reasons in one basket really, a lot of them going through a lot of frustration ... it's when we left school that's when we kinda got frustrated, how we are gonna make money, job, careers, what our options and most of us didn't have the grades we thought we would have had, because we messed about in school a lot. So, whereas someone will get a good job because they got the grades, we didn't have that option. We will go into roads as a gang in order to make more money and be successful at any means necessary.'*

Story from Connexions worker:  
*'Older brother had gone inside owing a dealer money. Dealer pushed the debt onto his younger brother, who was coerced into gang to 'repay' what his brother owed.'*

### Case study: young woman, 21

On probation, two convictions, 2 ASBOs - the last ASBO breached by hitting a local man protesting about their noise over the head with a bottle. She's been in what she calls 'the gang' for the last 10 years, into drinking and drugs (eg ketamine). Her daily routine includes hanging round shops intimidating people, petty vandalism and thieving, occasional violence when challenged or threatened. When she tried to leave the group (*March 2010*), she received 50+ phone calls a day from gang members, some friendly ('what's going on?'), some threatening. She has been beaten up twice by gang members since then, once at her cousin's in Stockwood, the other in town by two boys and three girls who followed her from Knowle.

### A way of earning ...

Criminal group activity is a natural progression for some, given their poor engagement with school pre 16: the options are backtracking, buckling down and getting the qualifications to build a sustainable life (very difficult with low self esteem, no established relationships of trust, etc etc); or making a quick buck through dealing, petty theft/robbery & crime - a route which drives some young people into the arms and territories of local criminals:

*'selling drugs, make money, work for the older boys, just to hang around, being accepted'*

*'Every person is individual. Fear will get them in there and the brokenness will get them in there and seeing their auntie or uncle with a degree and haven't got a job! They will say "why do I have to do that?" because now my uncle working in Royal Mail or Tesco...'*  
Somalian youth worker

*"selling drugs or involved in stuff that's criminal, a lot of Somali kids are getting into it, because of money and that whole thing... bit of money and belong to this group of people and feel a bit safer."*  
Community Development worker

*"Asian kids will do what they can to get quick money but they've always got something else on the side [education / job], it's all about the paper"* Asian youth worker

A lack of positive local role models ('lots of dads and no fathers' as one person put it), very few appropriate training opportunities for these late developers and limited work opportunities means that those who are ready to step away from criminal activity are unable to do so. For example, many young people manage their dealing businesses with a high degree of competency - ordering product, arranging prompt distribution - but as yet, are not offered the knowledge they need to translate these skills into legal business development.

### What makes young people vulnerable to recruitment?

- Psychologically vulnerable – not confident in self, family, community, already marginalised by early teens
- Low self esteem and aspiration
- Lack of life-changing experiences/limited horizons
- Material culture – attraction of glamour/power/status attributed to gangs – envy older guys for clothes, girls, cars (especially girls)

*'It's 3 or 4 people recruiting the little ones by letting them play their video games, they don't know what they're doing but I do. I've already told them, when it all kicks off – he ain't helpin' you.'* Young male 23

*"Gangs recruiting through violence, so carrying out robberies and then saying to the young people, I'm only going to keep targeting you unless you come and join us. There's one lad that actually disclosed that to me and he had been bullied by them constantly at the school gates, coming to and from school."* Police officer

*"I would probably say the media has got a link into that, films portrayal I think that's got a huge link, you know. 50 Cent ['Get Rich or Die Trying'] and that, it comes in here about the attraction..."* YOT worker

*"They recruit by manipulation, making you watch something, you're now part of it because you saw it, you're as guilty as I am so now you're part of my group."*

### Recent Bristol conviction ...

'The Porsche-driving ringleader behind one of Britain's biggest drug gangs was jailed for a minimum of eight years yesterday. Craig Rodel, 46, a gangster who splashed out millions on Rolex watches, diamonds and collector cars, ran a £1 million-a-week drugs and gun-running operation from an industrial-scale cocaine-cutting factory in Bristol. He led a cartel of 23 gang members, including James Waithe, a former primary school teacher and judo Olympian, who shipped in Class A drugs to satisfy Britons' increasing demand for "recreational" stimulants. The court heard "top conspirator" Rodel earned a profit of £2,000 on every kilo of cocaine he sold.

*Telegraph, March 2010*

### How are they being recruited?

- ❖ Coercion and fear
- ❖ Gifts and attention
- ❖ Promise of money
- ❖ Blackmail/protection
- ❖ Family links
- ❖ Community pressures
- ❖ Territory pressures
- ❖ Trickery

### What would prevent them getting involved/help them get out?

- Good community support networks
- Improved levels of aspiration
- Intergenerational activity
- Opportunities to earn/get into employment early, to learn trades/skills
- Improved housing support for 18-25s
- Local economy development

*“Listen to young people more... Produce more realistic options for young people...”*

*“...unless you have got something and you can't offer them the same level of money but something that's going to interest them.”*

*“you've got to give them an alternative, something better for them to leave.”*

One young person recently released on tag in central Bristol asked the magistrate if he could go back inside and complete his three month sentence - 'it's too hard when the evenings are light' he said ... 'most of my friends are back inside'.

*“Because gangs thrive in disorganized communities,  
any local intervention must rally the community to organize and work together.”*

Addressing Community Gang Problems, US Bureau of Justice Assistance (1999)

## Recommendations

### Support for 'late developers' – employment, training, aspiration

- pilot initiative at the Mill to bring young people to education/employment (Appendix 2)
- challenging labelling – recent research that shows how young people in challenging areas are treated as 'victims' up to 15, then suddenly switches to 'perpetrators'

### Engagement of local community members of all ages

- engage local populations in rebuilding connections with their young people
- keep local communities informed on work with disengaged young people

### Improve adult confidence around young people to make young people feel safer

- Provide free and ongoing training and resources for local parents, residents, those working with youth
- Engage the media in positive news stories about young people in the city

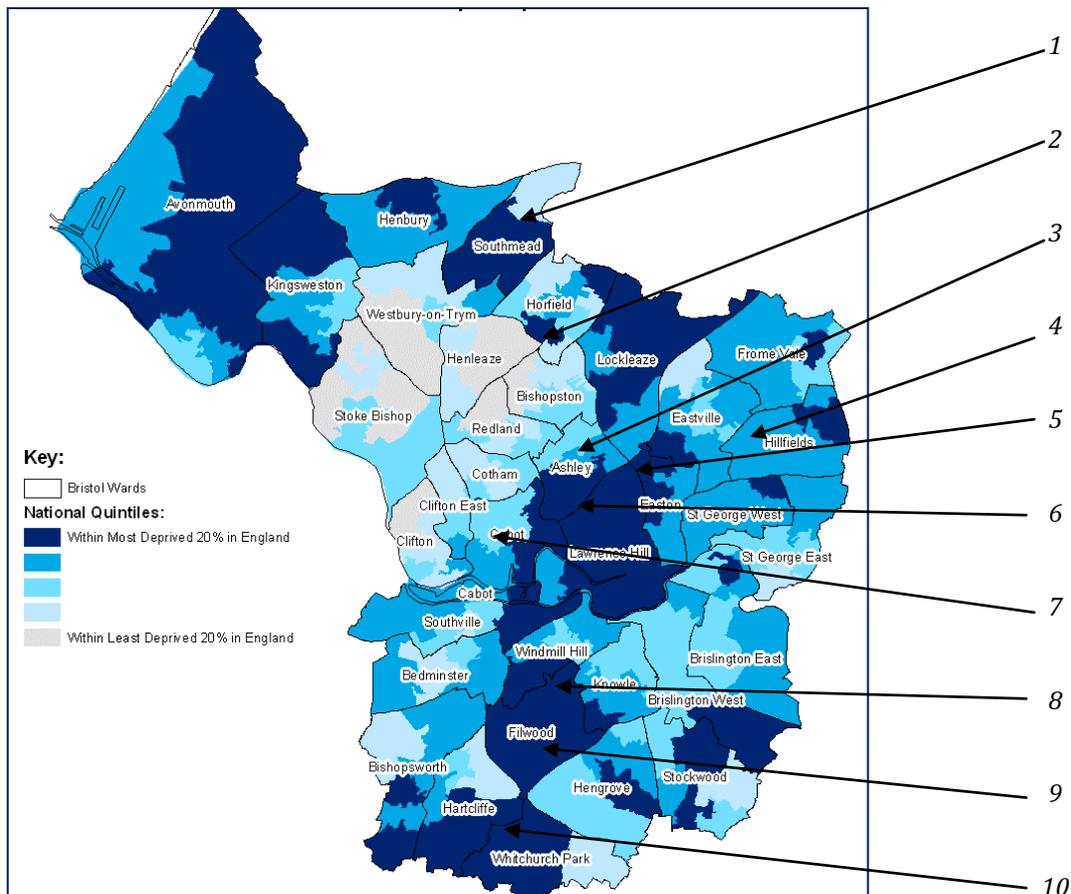
### Avoid hype and escalation

- Keeping communities informed
- Clear media strategy across agencies

### Support for agencies linked in to relevant community networks

- Long-term joint planning across agencies/council/police following analysis
- investing for the future – this work takes time and costs money but will save huge amounts of public money in the long run – as well as making communities feel safer and more optimistic
- clear and appropriate information sharing networks/procedures need to be developed, recognising the need to sustain the fragile trust between young people on the edge of offending and support workers.

**Appendix 1: Reported youth criminal group activity, mapped onto Bristol's 2007 Indices of Deprivation (May 2010)**



**Criminal groups/dealing activity reported by youth and community workers**

- |                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Southmead                         | 6. BS5 Lower Easton                     |
| 2. BS5/10 Manor Farm, Upper Horfield | 7. BS1 - College Green, Central Library |
| 3. BS2 – Lower Ashley Rd             | 8. BS4 – Newquay Rd                     |
| 4. BS16 – Thicket Avenue             | 9. BS13 – Fulford Rd                    |
| 5. BS5 Easton                        | 10. Whitchurch Park / Hartcliffe        |

**Larger known Bristol youth criminal groups – information from interviews with individuals involved**

Main ops/recruitment	Upper Horfield, Manor Farm	Hillfields, St George, Fishponds	Easton	Lower Easton	St Pauls
Related postcodes	Bs10 / Bs7	Bs16	Easton postcodes – BS5	BS5	Bs2 / Bs7 / Bs5
Number involved	50+ young men	Around 30 young men	Around 30	20+	Around 40 young men
Average age members	15-20	13 to 25s	13-19	24+	13 to 17
Ethnic breakdown	White, Black, Dual heritage	White, Black, Dual heritage,	Black, Dual heritage, White, Somalians, Asians	Black / dual heritage	White, Black, Dual heritage
Linked schools	Orchard	Bristol Metropolitan, Downend	City Academy, Fairfield, Brunel	City Academy, Fairfield, Brunel	Fairfield, Academy, Cabot Primary, Brunel Academy

## **Appendix 2 – Fridays@Mill – fresh opportunities for the ‘late developers’**

Fridays@Mill is aimed squarely at the 50-strong cohort of young dealers aged 16-25 who base themselves on Stapleton Road in Easton – the scene of a shooting in March 2010 and a fatal stabbing of a 20yr old in July 2010. The core group of young men are drawn primarily from Bristol’s Black British and Somali communities, with some of dual heritage. This project will engage local adult populations – including residents and businesses - in supporting these young people into local legitimate employment, developing their skills and drawing them back into the community.

Between June and October 2010 Community Resolve’s street-based team (funded under the Youth Crime Action Plan) spoke with over 400 young people and just under 400 residents, businesses, local agencies and voluntary groups to gather their experiences of the road, and their ideas for how to move forward. Community Resolve then joined with Bristol City Council Young People’s Services, Sports Development, Pak Butchers and Somali youth groups to develop the Fridays@Mill project.

The project will support NEET young men aged 16-25 into mainstream education, employment and activity. Many of these ‘late developers’ left school with no qualifications and or aspiration. The Mill Youth Centre is open for them every Friday from 12am-5pm (the plan being to extend those hours as demand grows) to provide training, self development and discussion. Experienced youth and conflict workers drawn from local communities will staff the day, enabling young people to build relationships of trust with responsible adults as they develop the skills they need for work.

Fridays@Mill started in mid November and is expected to grow slowly, building on the interests of the young people themselves. Initial programmes/support include driving theory, business development skills, sports coaching qualifications and opportunities to learn catering skills. From January 2011 onwards, as the young people engage with the project, they will be encouraged to programme in further ideas to help their future, such as an ‘Introduction to Youth Work’ course; introductions to skills/trades sessions run by local tradesmen; leadership skills; business training – bookkeeping, budgeting; money know-how – investments, mortgages, managing debt; legal and housing advice; and a local informal employment agency with local businesses taking on trainees.

**How this work will make a difference** The poor reputation of the area will be considerably helped by this initiative, as local people step up and take responsibility for making the programme work. It will address many comments like these and countless others our outreach teams have heard from local people up and down Stapleton Road over the last few months:

*“Nothing going on but drugs, too many young people with nothing to do, we need training, jobs and youth clubs.”* Somali male, 20yrs, Stapleton Road

*“These young people have the entrepreneurial spirit but the only really good money is in negative stuff like prostitution and drug dealing.”* Asian business owner, Stapleton Road.

*“I feel like I need something to offer the young people, and to be able to take the ideas that they have and make them happen, but as it is there is no hope of that, and they just want revenge for what has happened.”* White Youth Worker, Woodborough Street

*“They do not see the fear, loathing, and hurt inside the person involved in that ‘gang life’. The people who have made it out, who could be the most important role models and mentors, unfortunately don’t want to revisit their past – probably it is too painful, but they should be encouraged to come forward and get involved, share their experience.”* Black British Male, 22yrs

## Who we spoke to

- Young people from Hartcliffe, Knowle, Hillfields, St George, Easton, St Pauls, Lawrence Hill and other areas
- Youth workers across the city
- Local beat officers/school beat managers across the city
- Local residents/adults across the city
- YOT
- Teachers/inclusion managers/school support staff
- Young Offenders Institution – staff and young people
- Pupil referral units
- Young mothers' units
- Community workers
- Residents and local businesses
- Local agencies, voluntary organisations, grassroots projects

## References and resources

Serious Organised Crime Agency Annual Plan 2010-11

'*Gun crime*' - A review of evidence and policy Peter Squires with Roger Grimshaw and Enver Solomon, Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, 2008

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*Safeguarding children and young people who may be affected by gang activity*, Guidance notes, DCSF, Mar 2010

*Gangs: You and Your Child: Advice to parents on gangs* - Helping your child make the right choice, DCSF guidance

*Tackling and Preventing Gang Problems in London Colleges: A Review of Good Practice*, Association of Colleges London Region (2009)

*Gangs at the Grassroots: Community solutions to street violence*, Anthony Brand, New Local Government Network (NLGN) 2008

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