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Historical perspectives on youth, gangs and violence

Executive summary

- Gangs are not new.
- Long-standing correlations between violence and poverty, ill-health and lack of opportunity.
- Punitive responses have repeatedly failed to eradicate gangs.
- Most effective responses have hinged on targeted investment in new facilities for young people.

Evidence base

- Legal records (trial papers; court registers)
- Newspaper reports / commentaries
- Census (offenders' family backgrounds / life histories)
- Memoirs

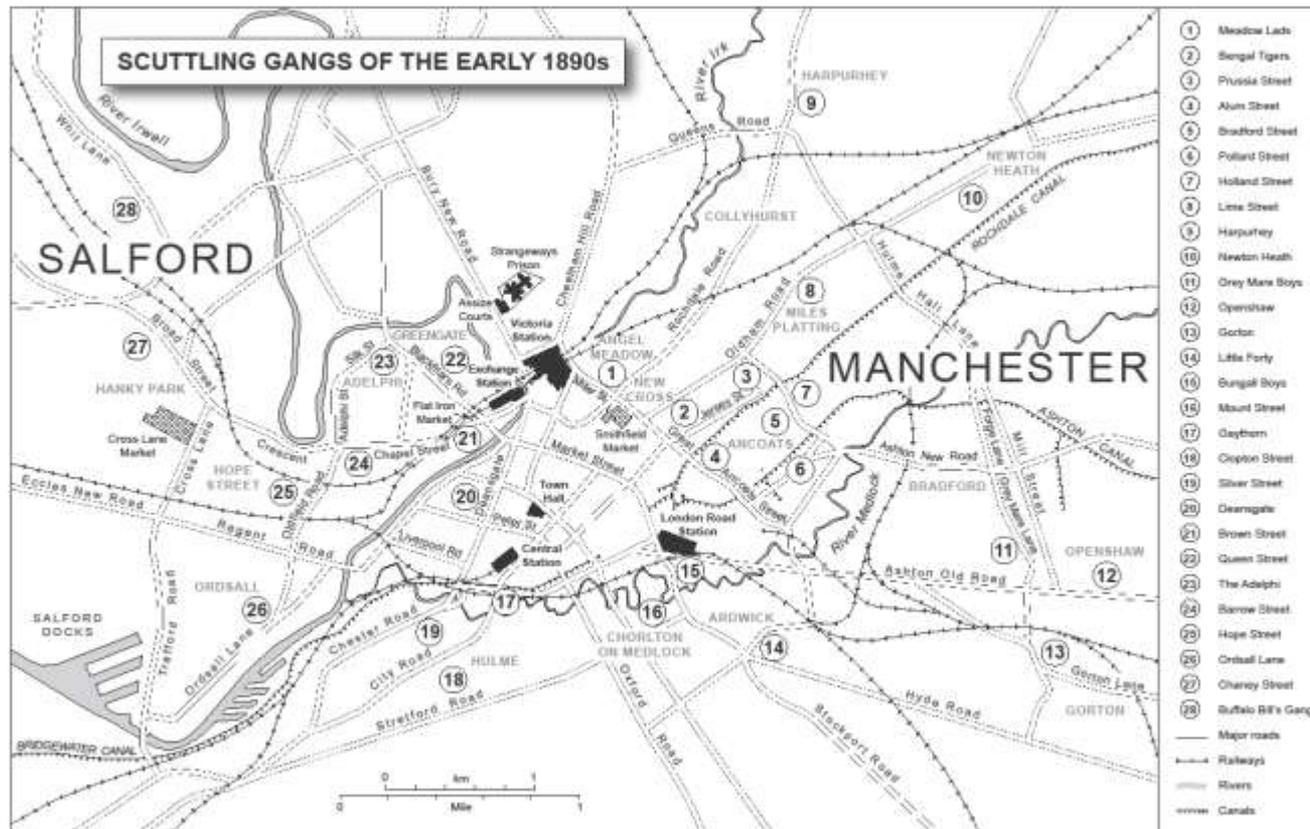
Case-studies

- Manchester and Salford, 1870 – 1900
- Glasgow, 1870 - 1939
- Additional evidence from London, Birmingham and Liverpool

Manchester and Salford, 1870-1900

- Periodization (according to police):
- Conflicts originated among school children, 1870 – 71 (sectarian); labelled 'scuttling'
- Flared for three decades (more than a short-lived 'moral panic')
- Diminished during late 1890s

Mapping Manchester's 'gangland'



Economic and social context

- Map of 'gangland' *identical* to maps of poverty, casual employment, tuberculosis
- Gangs most heavily clustered in most notorious so-called 'slums' (self-reinforcing)
- Occupational / class backgrounds (sample of 800): uniformly working-class, but very few apprentices

Patterns of violence

- After early 1870s, territorial rather than sectarian; most gang members aged in mid-late teens
- Routine use of weapons: knives, belts
- Many young people hospitalized, but very few fatalities (traced six over 30 years)

Limited impact of imprisonment

- Scuttlers jailed in large numbers (formed majority of prisoners aged 16 – early 20s)
- Exemplary sentences: 15 – 20 years
- High levels of re-offending
- Witness intimidation / reprisals

The formation of Lads' Clubs

- Targeted at principal gang territories from late 1880s
- Provision of new facilities for sport / indoor entertainment / education
- Assistance with finding employment
- Significant investment of time (volunteers) and money (charitable fund-raising; local employers)

Impact of Lads' Clubs

- Gang conflicts declined within ten years
- Most success in recruiting younger boys, rather than established members of gangs
- Diminished pool of recruits into gangs
- Increased contact between youths from different districts

Glasgow, 1918-1939

- Sectarianism much more intense than in Manchester > gang conflicts more enduring; but two key parallels:
- i) Violence heavily concentrated in districts characterized by high levels of multiple deprivation
- ii) Routine use of weapons, including razors, but still few fatalities reported

Fear of 'Americanization'

- Gang violence widely blamed on American 'gangster movies'
- Fear that Glasgow youths were seeking to emulate Al Capone (or Paul Muni)
- Yet the city's gang conflicts pre-dated the cinema

The formation of Pals' Clubs

- Fewer lads' clubs in Glasgow than in English cities
- High-profile murder case in 1930 led to series of initiatives that paralleled those in 1880s Manchester
- Pals' Clubs instigated by Church of Scotland ministers, but non-sectarian
- Targeted at principal gang districts – but difficult to raise funds (prejudiced views of slum youths as sub-human)

The impact of Pals' Clubs

- Did not eradicate gangs in Glasgow
- However, police reported greatly diminished levels of gang violence (1930 – 32)
- Especially successful in the Gorbals – where sectarianism was less intense than in the city's East End, and where 'gangsters' were encouraged to run clubs themselves

Conclusions

- Historical antecedents make us question causes of, and solutions, to current difficulties
- Popular culture: lends new styles / language, but root causes are much deeper
- Mass imprisonment has repeatedly failed to eradicate gangs
- Successful interventions have been localized, and voluntary, but have not been sustained