**Youth Gangs in Victorian and Edwardian London**

**[The research for this paper was based on Chapter 7 from my recent book, ‘“A London Plague that must be swept away”: Hooligans and Street Fighting Gangs, c. 182 – 1912’, *London’s Criminal Underworlds, c. 1720 – c. 1930; A Social and Cultural History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015):**

In this presentation I’m going to talk about the youth street fighting gangs that became a significant concern to late Victorian and Edwardian law enforcers**.** In the short time that I have today, I will address three areas: What was the character and extent of ‘gang’ conflict? And who were the gangs, what do we know about the youths involved (age and occupation)? What patterns can we detect in relation to territory? How were such youths dealt with by the Criminal Justice System? Were there any specific strategies for policing, prosecution and punishment? I’ll conclude with some brief considerations of the historical gangs in relation to the modern youth gang problem. Is it possible to make any meaningful comparisons across time?

Territorial street fighting gangs have been identified historically in a number of urban conurbations. Most notably by Andrew Davies, who has written about the of scuttling gangs in Manchester and Salford in the later nineteenth century. Reporting escalated in London in the summer of 1898, when widespread press coverage of street violence in the metropolis brought the term hooligan into common usage. A report in *The Times* put the ‘unusual number of crimes of lawless violence in our streets’, down to the excessive heat to which the English were unused. In fact the problems with gang-related violence in London started much earlier than 1898. Indeed they had been the subject of some intense if sporadic reporting since the early 1880s.

My research has focussed on 41 gang-related cases, involving 97 individuals, who were prosecuted at the Old Bailey and other London Police Courts between 1882 and 1912. ‘Gang-related’ crimes are defined as those involving a predominance of young men (aged from mid-teens to early twenties), who were engaged in fighting a targeted group or individual, and where there was some evidence (often from police and/or witnesses) of territorial identity. It is impossible to know how far the prosecuted crimes reflected street level incidence of disorder. These cases may represent the tip of an iceberg – only the most violent confrontations ended up in the courtroom. However, these most visible prosecutions might more realistically reflect a periodic bubbling over of tensions between local youths rather than an endemic youth gang problem.

**Gang Demographics:**

These were mainly older youths and young men. Just under three quarters of the youths I researched were aged between 16 and 19. The youngest to be charged was aged 14 and the oldest 25, and the most common age was 17. It’s likely that the activities in which youths were involved, graduated in seriousness as they aged, leading to their more formal encounter with the criminal justice system. The demographic profile relating to age remains similar today, the Mayor of London’s report on gangs from 2014, found that 70% of the individuals were aged between 17 and 23, with over a quarter of the individuals aged as either 19 or 20. Only one of the individuals that I investigated was female, 15 year-old Eliza Walters, who was prosecuted in June 1897 as part of a group of youths who were tried for the manslaughter of 12-year-old Margaret Jane Smith who had been caught in the crossfire of a gang affray. However girls certainly featured on the fringes of the gangs, and gave evidence as witnesses. They were also ostensibly the reason for some of the fights.

The image comes from the *Illustrated Police News*, who linked the shooting to the activities of what it called the Clerkenwell Pistol Gang. The report noted the significant disquiet of the jury who called for, ‘more stringent measures than at present exist for the protection of the public against the prevalent reckless use of fire-arms’. Despite being described by the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1882) as ‘savages of the slums’, almost all the youths worked. Of the 97 individuals, 71 were described as having occupations. Perhaps unsurprisingly 20 of the defendants were described simply as labourers. However of the remaining 51, semi-skilled and manual workers predominated. As well as 12 costermongers, there were six porters; other trades included, ‘carman’, ‘carriers boy’, ‘general dealer’, ‘van boy’, ‘van guard’ and ‘fishmonger’.

**Where did they live and where did they fight?**

Many of the gangs came from a relatively contained triangle from Lambeth and Southwark in the South, from Islington and King’s Cross in the north, and Clerkenwell and Hackney in the North-east. However, youths also travelled significant distances in order to face rival gangs, crossing major thoroughfares or canal bridges which could be seen as a form of provocation. However, most confrontations were played out within close neighbourhoods and adjacent streets. Despite the tendency of the press to associate the fighting gangs with slums and slum-dwelling, the economic shape of the areas linked to youth gang activity were far from clear cut. Structural factors may have precipitated certain areas into close associations with criminal activity and disorder; a process amplified by press and police identification , and consequent stigmatisation, of ‘problem’ areas.

Urban poverty and disorder, WERE a feature of many of these neighbourhoods. However, they were also areas with proximity to manufacture, to markets, and to opportunities for employment. So these were not ‘savages of the slums’, but working-class youths from poor to respectable working-class communities.

**Moving on to police and prosecution strategies.**

Unlike Manchester, where there was a concerted effort by the police and magistracy to counteract the gangs, I haven’t found clear evidence for a specific policing response in the London evidence.

  We do get glimpses of the extent of the gang problem from police evidence in the Old Bailey trials. For example, in 1912, Frederick Wensley, Chief Inspector by this time, noted at a trial involving the Somers Town Boys and Clerkenwell Lads, ‘that during the last nine months there had been five cases of use of revolvers in this district. The police had the greatest difficulty in obtaining evidence, as various gangs of lads had become a terror to the neighbourhood.’ This terror increasingly involved firearms.

Nearly half of the London cases involved the use of pistols or revolvers. Knives and daggers were also commonly mentioned by witnesses. Although some youths were more generically accused of disorderly behaviour with no clear weapon identified. The number of cases involving pistols and revolvers increased from 1897. How significant this increase was is difficult to assess since the fact that they involved lethal weaponry obviously made them much more likely to be reported and tried at the higher court. The problem of youths access to revolvers and pistols became central to the parliamentary debate about firearms from the 1890s. The Pistol Bill had been first introduced in July 1893, with the focus specifically on pistol use by young people. The bill was thrown out in September in the face of interventions by Charles Hopwood, Member of Parliament for South East Lancashire who argued that it was an ineffective measure and not justified by recent statistics for firearms use. It wasn’t until 1903 that the Pistols Act came into force, with specific provisions to restrict sales to persons aged under 18.

**Moving on to charges and sentencing:**

65% of the prosecutions were for wounding, there were three charges of murder, one for manslaughter and a few for riot and assault. The majority received guilty verdicts. It is important to note that many of the trials involved multiple defendants, and it is in these trials that the occasional not guilty verdict would be found. The majority of the youths were sentenced to prison with hard labour, and five to penal servitude. Thomas Galliers received the ten-year sentence for the murder of Frederick Wilmore in 1882. Only one boy, William Bond, was sentenced to the reformatory (most were over 16 and thus too old), and from 1908, three youths were recommended to Borstal.

**So I’d like to draw some conclusions, but firstly a couple of caveats:**

A key distinction with modern youth gangs is the involvement of drugs. The Mayor’s report from 2014 found that 20% of gang-related crimes were linked to drugs and 43% were crimes of violence against the person. This contrasts with the 65% of wounding cases in the historical prosecutions. The prevalence of drugs in modern youth gangs perhaps means that the connection to organised crime activity is much more pronounced than in the historical context. Moreover, whilst there were considerable Jewish, Irish and Italian populations in the areas associated with gangs, there is no evidence that historical gangs had a particular ethnic identity. In contrast, present day gangs clearly do. However, of course, these youths are also more likely to reside in areas with high levels of unemployment.

**Conclusions:**

Firstly, territory. The places in London where youth gangs congregated historically, remain associated with youth gangs today. Somers Town, Clerkenwell, Hoxton and Lambeth have long been on the grid of London’s gang culture. The problem is that gang-related incidents are now identified in almost all boroughs of London, so I don’t think these continuities are particularly meaningful.

A 2009 report from the Centre for Social Justice found that the prevalence of gangs was highest in areas characterised by unemployment and underemployment. Whilst my Victorian and Edwardian lads were employed, the social costs of underemployment and the marginalising impact of unskilled, semi-skilled and poorly paid work, remain important.

Secondly, there are clear problems with the labelling of large groups of youths as gang-related. In the historical gangs much of our knowledge about gang names comes from control figures, such as police, social workers and journalists; or from witnesses in the courtroom. Political and press rhetoric today shows us little has changed. Interestingly, the Home Office has been very proactive in trying to avoid potential stigmatisation by replacing the term gang in their reports with the phrase, ‘delinquent youth group’. Research into both historical and modern youth gangs suggest that using problematic rhetoric has dangers, and this is something that perhaps needs to reinforced.

Thirdly and finally, a reminder that most youths desisted from gang violence in the longer term. Recent research by Godfrey, Cox, Shore and Alker shows that the majority of young people in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century moved out of criminal offending. In fact, re-offending rates in this period were much lower than they are today. The evidence points to the success of community based interventions, which Andy will go on to talk about. For those youths who were prosecuted, the evidence suggests that reformatory style institutions, with a strong ethos of reform, education and occupational training had some value. Of course most of the youths I’ve researched were too old for the reformatory, leading to the establishment of the Borstal System for youths aged between 17 and 23, which was initially informed by a liberal and progressive ethos. This group remain challenging, reflected in the current Justice Committee Young Adult Offenders Inquiry.