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PRESS RELEASE FROM THE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Girls face brutality and exploitation in gang underworld, CSJ report says

- **Girls used as drugs and weapons carriers with lack of scrutiny from police**
- **Gangs using sexual exploitation and rape to control girls and young women**
- **CSJ says youth workers should be placed in hospitals to find gang members**

Thousands of British girls and young women are entangled in a brutal gang culture where sexual exploitation, guns and drug-running are a daily reality, a new report from the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) reveals.

The investigation, which looks at how gang life can impact girls and young women, builds on previous CSJ work which shows how some communities have been devastated by gang activity.

Researchers heard how female gang members in their teens are being pressured to have sex with young boys – some as young as 10 – to initiate males into gangs. The report also outlines a case where one schoolgirl was abducted and sexually assaulted by nine males because she criticised a gang member.

The study heard that rape is used as a weapon and girls and young women associated with rival gangs are targets. One charity told the CSJ about a practice known as a 'line up', where young females are made to perform sexual acts on groups of men in a row.

The CSJ, which carried out the research with the London-based urban youth charity XLP, says that despite a Home Office-led strategy against gang culture being launched in 2011 after the riots, too little has changed. It adds that in some schools problems have been exacerbated because headteachers have turned a blind eye to gang activity to protect their school's reputation.

"We are often unsighted about the desperate lives of girls embroiled in gangs," Edward Boyd, CSJ Deputy Policy Director and editor of the report, said. "While the media regularly shines a spotlight on the criminality of male members, the daily suffering of girls goes largely unnoticed.

"They live in a parallel world where rape is used as a weapon and carrying drugs and guns is seen as normal."

A recent report said almost 2,500 children are known to be victims of child sexual exploitation by gangs and groups – but it is widely agreed this number is a conservative estimate.

A study by Bedfordshire University asked 96 young people connected with gangs what they identified as being part of gang life.

- Half identified examples of 'sex in exchange for (perceived) status or protection';
- 34 per cent identified examples of 'multiple perpetrator rape';
- 39 per cent identified examples of 'sex in exchange for other tangible goods'.

Girls and young women are also frequently used to stash weapons and as drug mules, because they are less likely to be stopped and searched by police. For example, in London last year only six per cent of stop-and-searches were conducted on females. Between 2011/12, it was five per cent in Manchester and three per cent in Merseyside.

The CSJ heard from two leading charities who described how young women have used buggies to carry weapon and how schoolgirls as young as eight are being used to conceal drugs.

Involvement in gang culture has a detrimental impact on the educational achievement of girls and young women, the *Girls and Gangs* report, published tomorrow (Monday March 24, 2014), adds. Recent evidence has shown girls in gangs to be over three times more likely to be under-performing at school than other women entering the youth justice system.

Asked why some girls were so keen to get involved with gangs, one headteacher told the study: "We can't compete with the attraction of fast cars, sex and drugs."

The CSJ said the Government was right in 2011 to identify that authorities did not know enough about girls and young women associated with gangs. Yet three years later too little progress has been made.

Patrick Regan, CEO of XLP, said: "The biggest issue with girls in gangs is that we simply don't know the full extent of the problem. The data we have is merely the tip of the iceberg and at XLP there is no doubt that we see increasing numbers of girls dragged into this appalling world of exploitation, criminality and hopelessness."

The report calls on the Government to act with urgency to map the problem of girls and young women associated with gangs so opportunities to intervene are easier to identify.

The CSJ calls for youth workers to be embedded in major trauma units in gang-affected areas. The CSJ points to the success of King's College Hospital and St Thomas' Hospital who have been running similar schemes with great success.

The report also calls for the police to team-up with voluntary organisations and make sure that when male gang members are arrested and imprisoned, their girlfriends get support to exit gang life.

ENDS

The *Girls and Gangs* study heard from current gang members, former gang members, charities working with gangs, government agencies and other frontline services. The CSJ and XLP will tomorrow (Monday, March 24) host a major event exploring the exploitation of girls by gangs in central London. Media representatives interested in attending the conference, which will be hosted by ITV presenter Nina Hossain, should contact Becky Morris on 0207 256 6240.

For media inquiries, please contact Ross Reid from the Centre for Social Justice on 07780 707322 or Nick Wood of Media Intelligence Partners Ltd on 07889 617003.

NOTES TO EDITORS

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think tank established in 2004 to put social justice at the heart of British politics. In June, the CSJ was awarded UK Social Policy Think Tank of the Year 2013 at Prospect magazine's Think Tank Awards.

In 2007 the CSJ published its landmark report, Breakthrough Britain. This publication, which set out 190 evidence-based policy recommendations to tackle poverty in Britain, transformed the social policy and political landscape and was awarded Publication of the Year by Prospect Magazine in 2008.

Since Breakthrough Britain the CSJ has published over 40 reports which have shaped government policy and influenced opposition parties. These have included the seminal papers Dying to Belong and Dynamic Benefits.

Further to this, the CSJ manages an Alliance of over 350 of the most effective grass roots, poverty-fighting organisations. The CSJ is able to draw upon the expertise and experience of Alliance charities

for research work and media inquiries. Journalists wishing to conduct grass-roots research into social problems can be put in touch with front-line charity directors and staff.