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Arrests of gang leaders have led to “chaos, violence and anarchy”, warns new report

Government and councils accused of “being asleep at the wheel”

The removal of more than 200 gang ring leaders from London’s streets has resulted in a vacuum in which younger gang members have grabbed power on a wave of violence, according to a major new study.

The Centre for Social Justice study, *Gangs – Time To Wake Up*, looks at how gang crime and fear of gangs has changed since the summer riots of 2011. Christian Guy, Managing Director of the CSJ, says:

“Gangs played a significant role in the riots and it is dangerous to pretend otherwise – in London at least one in five of those convicted was a known to be part of a gang.

“The Prime Minister declared an all-out war on gang culture after the riots, which culminated in a radical strategy heavily influenced by the CSJ’s own gangs research. But one year on political commitment is waning and the Government and local authorities have mistakenly assumed that its new strategy represents job done – it could not be more wrong.

“We have talked to members of our country-wide Alliance of small, frontline organisations and charities asking them how they feel gang culture has changed in the light of the Government response. Worryingly many have drawn us a picture of little or no progress.”

Patrick Regan OBE, an expert on gang culture and founder and Chief Executive of the charity XLP, said: “Everyone tells us the gang problem is getting better, but for organisations working at a grassroots level we look out of our window and that’s not what we see.”

The CSJ report praises the efforts of the Metropolitan Police for clamping down on gangs and gang-related crime, but criticises a lack of joined-up thinking and stresses the need to prevent young people joining gangs in the first place.

It also warns that the crackdown has backfired because it has created a power vacuum in many street gangs.

The report, which draws heavily on interviews with community leaders and former gang members, says that a lack of follow-up work since the arrests of gang leaders has meant that younger and often more volatile members have suddenly found themselves gang leaders.

According to the report, the upshot of this is not only the continuation of gang violence, "but its escalation as *youngers* vie for status and respect using the currency of violence." It is, says the report, "a dangerous turn of events".

Interviewees from gang hot-spots told the report authors of an increase in violent behaviour and heightened gang tensions, which they say are the unintended consequences of arresting the senior gang members, known as *elders*.

In 2009, the CSJ published its landmark report on gang culture, *Dying to Belong*. The authors argued then that enforcement is not enough, and that "focusing solely on criminal justice not only ignores the drivers behind gang culture but also has the potential to escalate the problem".

The Met Police has claimed that the "police cannot tackle gang violence alone" and the report stresses that enforcement plays a critical role in tackling the gang problems that blights many of the poorest communities. It is the absence of a broader government strategy that risks undermining the progress made by police.

In the wake of last summer's riots, the government established the first ever centralised Met database of the most harmful gang members and Operation Trident had its remit extended from gun crime to broader gang-related issues. Despite these efforts, removing gang 'elders' has, according to Christian Guy, "created a Lord of the Flies environment in which anything goes."

The report calls for immediate action. One submission to the report from a charity dealing with gang culture said:

"Gangs have upped the 'anti' in terms of recruitment. As it becomes harder to get into employment, young people are turning to gangs as alternative. Now the early stages of our gangs project (set up six years ago), seems like the golden age."

The report calls for tougher measures to disrupt and dilute the influence of gang culture, including the creation of a new multi-agency task force in Whitehall to ensure that as much focus is put on prevention as it is on enforcement.

According to the think-tank's research, there has been a startling increase in the number of girl gang members and a rise in sexual violence within gangs. The increasing involvement of girls in gangs, particularly in relation to sexual exploitation, was highlighted as a significant issue by all interviewees. Concern was expressed that the problem remains hidden.

The authors were told of a case where a 13-year-old gang-involved girl was subjected to sexual exploitation and was found to be grooming her 10-year-old sister for the same purpose.

Mr Guy says:

“Fundamental to tackling gangs is preventative work in the most dysfunctional and struggling families and schools to stop the conveyor belt into gangs, yet many of our witnesses reported that early prevention work has ‘fallen off the radar’.

“Furthermore, nine out of ten CSJ Alliance charity respondents reported that they had not been approached to take part in any preventative work following the riots. Such a lack of engagement with those who really understand gang culture is indicative of a government being asleep at the wheel.”

The CSJ has repeatedly made the case that the Government must take a deep view of the root causes of gang culture and deploy strategies that help to combat:

- Family breakdown and dysfunction
- A lack of positive role models
- Educational failure
- Mental and emotional health problems
- An absence of aspirations
- Unemployment and underemployment
- Discrimination and stereotyping

The report comes at a time of falling crime in England and Wales. The murder rate was down 14 per cent in 2011-12 compared to the previous year, while overall recorded crime fell by 4 per cent.

But, crucially, there are no figures on the number of gangs, or the level of gang-related crime. One problem is that a significant proportion of gang-related crime and violence is not reported and young offenders often do not identify themselves as gang members when appearing in court.

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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 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*, which has led the Coalition Government's welfare reforms.

Further to this, the CSJ manages an Alliance of over 250 of the most effective grass roots, poverty-fighting organisations.