



# Safeguarding Children Affected by Gang Activity / Serious Youth Violence

## 1. Introduction

With gangs and crime featuring frequently in the media it is important that an emphasis is retained on the safeguarding needs of children and young people involved, and an awareness of risks and challenges that they face in their daily lives. The objectives of this policy are to:

- Provide definition of a gang.
- Include a definition of serious youth violence.
- Explore risk.
- Identify signs and symptoms of a child/young person at risk from gang activity and and/or serious youth violence.
- Detail professional's roles and responsibilities and appropriate actions.

The word child/children in this document includes children and young adults. It is important that foster carers, supervising social workers and all those who come into contact with children know what actions to take to best protect a child. It is also important that we are careful in the use of the word 'gang'. Labelling an individual as a gang member and making assumptions about an individual's behaviour and choice of peers can have a very negative impact and may further lead to the individual living up to the label that has been assigned. Clearly at all times the individual's perception of his/herself and their views are essential.

This policy should be read alongside Fortitude Fostering's Safeguarding Policy, Child Sexual Exploitation Policy and Fortitude Fostering's Risk Assessment Documents.

## 2. DEFINITIONS

### 2.1 Definition of a gang

Children often group together to socialise, to learn, to play. Yet when they reach teenage years this same group can be referred to as a gang. Defining a gang is extremely difficult. Here are a couple of different definitions as outlined by Robert Gordon, Hallsworth and Young 2008 :

*“Peer group: a small, unorganised, transient group of children who ‘hang out together’ in public places such as shopping centres. Crime is not integral to their self-definition;*

*Wannabee group: includes children who band together in a loosely structured group primarily to engage in spontaneous social activity and exciting, impulsive criminal activity, including collective violence against other groups of children. Wannabees will often claim ‘gang’ territory and adopt ‘gang-style’ identifying markers of some kind;*

*Gang: a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of children who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is integral to the group's identity.*

*Organised criminal group: members are professionally involved in crime for personal gain, operating almost exclusively in the ‘grey’ or illegal marketplace*



*Children may be involved in more than one 'gang', with some cross-border movement, and may not stay in a 'gang' for significant periods of time;*

*Children rarely use the term 'gang', instead they used terms such as 'family', 'breddrin', 'crews', 'cuz' (cousins), 'my boys' or simply 'the people I grew up with'"*

Gangs change, and evolve. Sometimes they are less visible but are effective in exploitation of vulnerable people. Looked after children are vulnerable and it is important that information is shared to help prevent exploitation.

## **2.2 Definition of serious youth violence**

The definition of 'serious youth violence' currently in use by the Metropolitan Police Service is:

*'Any offence of most serious violence or weapon enabled crime, where the victim is aged 1-19' i.e. murder, manslaughter, rape, wounding with intent and causing grievous bodily harm. 'Youth violence' is defined in the same way, but also includes assault with injury offences.*

Where a child is 'affected' by gang activity or serious youth violence, the risk or potential risk of harm to the child may be as a victim, a perpetrator or both. Children involved in criminal gangs may be forced to commit robbery, assault or drug related crime to prove themselves. They may carry knives and guns.

People who carry weapons themselves are more likely to be injured, or killed, by other people carrying weapons.

## **2.3 Definition of County Lines**

County lines is the police term for urban gangs supplying drugs to suburban areas and market and coastal towns using dedicated mobile phone lines or "deal lines". It involves child criminal exploitation (CCE) as gangs use children and vulnerable people to move drugs and money. Gangs establish a base in the market location, typically by taking over the homes of local vulnerable adults by force or coercion in a practice referred to as 'cuckooing'.

Looked after and other vulnerable groups of children are being groomed and exploited by gangs and criminal networks to move cash and class A drugs between towns and cities. Children placed out of Borough (away from their support networks) are particularly vulnerable). In this way criminals avoid detection and prosecution. This can be referred to as 'County lines exploitation' The National Crime Agency has identified over 700 country line operations across the country (January 2016).

# **3. KNIVES AND OFFENSIVE WEAPONS**

## **3.1 Motivation, Definitions & the Law**

Fear and a need for self-protection is a key motivation for children to carry weapons – carrying a weapon affords a child a feeling of power. Neighbourhoods with high levels of deprivation and social exclusion generally have the highest rates of gun and knife crime. The Home Office report that gang members carry out nearly half of all shootings in the capital and 20% of all serious crime. Offensive weapons could include:

Fortitude Fostering December 2020



- Kitchen knives or craft knives or ornamental knives
- Martial arts weapons
- Screwdrivers
- Hammers
- Dog chains
- Baseball bats
- Planks of wood

The legal definition of an offensive weapon includes anything intended to be used to harm another person, like a sharpened comb.

Eighty-five percent of those that had carried a knife said the main reason was for protection, and a further nine percent said it was in case they got into a fight. Unfortunately, carrying weapons increases the risk of serious injury or death while defending oneself or fighting, and the risk multiplies in group situations (Local Perspectives on Ending Gang and Youth Violence 2016)

### **3.2 What to do if confronted by someone with an offensive weapon**

If a supervising social worker, member of staff or a foster carer has a concern that a young person carries a knife or any other weapons they should:

- Notify the Designated Manager
- Notify the local Authority Social Worker – putting the concern in writing if necessary e.g. cannot get hold of a SW
- Telephone 101 and discuss full details of concern if urgent phone 999 without delay.

## **4. LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN, GANGS AND SERIOUS YOUTH CRIME**

Children in the care system could be attracted to gangs because of the sense of belonging and acceptance and excitement that seems to be on offer through gang membership. Research with children indicated that they felt poor access to positive activities and personal experiences of victimisation were related to gang membership, this also stated that peers often exert a much greater influence than parents or carers.

The risks are significant:

- Drugs and associated crimes are a fundamental driver for established gangs
- Violence
- Running away
- Sexual abuse and exploitation – The risks of sexual exploitation of girls connected to gangs are well established
- Expressions of despair such as self-harm – cutting, eating disorders, drug addiction and overdosing, sexualised risk taking
- Significantly risks extend to friends or family members, or fostering household members of the child in question (gang members pursuing a vendetta)
- There is the risk that a victim of crime becomes the perpetrator. Help needs to be given to victims so that they may come to terms with/recover from or overcome their experiences without recourse to violence – particularly given research on dual victim and perpetrator status.



All professionals who have contact with children should be able to recognise when a child is vulnerable to, or at risk of harm from, gang involvement or activity. The potential dangers posed to siblings, family and household members should also be considered. e.g. if an individual is being targeted by a violent gang and then moves, danger to others in the household individuals peer group or risk of a crime such burglary may be increased.

#### **4.1 Identifying signs and symptoms of a child/young person at risk from gang activity and and/or serious youth violence**

Children as young as 7 years old can be gang-involved. Professionals who have contact with children should be competent to identify the signs and symptoms which, particularly when clustered together, raise concerns that a child may be either reluctantly or willingly involved with a gang. These include:

- Child withdrawn from family;
- Sudden loss of interest in school. Decline in attendance or academic achievement (although it should be noted that some gang members will maintain a good attendance record to avoid coming to notice);
- Being emotionally “switched off”, but also containing frustration / rage;
- Started to use new or unknown slang words;
- Holds unexplained money or possessions; one significant sign is the owning of two or more mobile phones;
- Stays out unusually late without reason, or breaking parental rules consistently;
- Sudden change in appearance – dressing in a particular style or ‘uniform’
- Dropped out of positive activities;
- New nickname;
- Unexplained physical injuries, and/or refusal to seek / receive medical treatment for injuries;
- Graffiti style ‘tags’ on possessions, school books, walls;
- Constantly talking about another young person who seems to have a lot of influence over them;
- Broken off with old friends and hangs around with one group of people;
- Associating with known or suspected gang members, closeness to siblings or adults in the family who are gang members;
- Started adopting certain codes of group behaviour e.g. Ways of talking and hand signs; gang names often involve post codes;
- Expressing aggressive or intimidating views towards other groups of young people, some of whom may have been friends in the past;
- Scared when entering certain areas; and
- Concerned by the presence of unknown youths in their neighbourhoods.
- Excessive and secretive use of social media, sites such as Pandora cannot be followed;

Children may become reluctant gang members as a means of self-protection. Not being a member may mean that it would be dangerous to use specific facilities such as FE College or the local park – children can become involved through lack of experience and failing to foresee consequences or on sheer impulse.



The more heavily gang-involved a child is, the less likely s/he is to talk about it. However, if a child does talk about gang involvement, professionals should always take what the child tells them seriously.

## **5. A CHILD AT RISK OF BECOMING A SERIOUS VIOLENT OFFENDER.**

Professionals who have contact with children should be competent to identify the combinations of signs and symptoms which can place children at risk of becoming serious and violent offenders. Presenting indicators could be:

Hyperactivity – the relationship between hyperactivity and later violence has been found consistently across studies, regardless of the measurement methods used;

Concentration problems – which can predict later violent behaviour as well as academic difficulties, which themselves are risk factors for violence;

Aggression - the earlier anti-social and violent behaviour presents, the more likely a child is to display chronic and serious violence in later childhood and adolescence;

Acceptance of violence, carrying weapons and substance misuse and sexual exploitation – which weakens a child's internal controls against these behaviours; Dishonesty, anti-social beliefs and attitudes, and hostility toward police – all of which have all been found to predict violence, particularly among boys

Blatant making of YouTube Videos that feature the gang

## **6. SEXUAL EXPLOITATION**

There is a range of risks of sexual exploitation e.g. gang leaders on gang members, gang members on vulnerable individuals outside of the gang, or as recent media coverage of Rotherham has highlighted gangs of men that are exploiting vulnerable young girls (at least 1,400 children were subjected to brutal sexual exploitation between 1997 and 2013) Children at risk of sexual exploitation linked to gang activity and/or serious youth violence may also present with:

- Running away;
- Overt sexualised dress / attire;
- Internal injuries, multiple sexually transmitted infections (STI's), miscarriages and/or termination;
- Chronic drug dependency (particularly crack / heroin); and/or
- Expressions of despair such as self-harm – cutting, overdosing, eating disorders, sexualised risk-taking.

## **7. RESPONDING EFFECTIVEY TO CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE AFFECTED BY GANG ACTIVITY / SERIOUS YOUTH VIOLENCE.**



- Foster carers must remain informed and aware; they should attend the foster caring training that is available to them so they may recognise the signs detailed in this Policy.
- If a foster carer has concerns about a child that they are caring about, they must share and discuss the concerns with their supervising social work and in turn Fortitude Fostering's Designated Manager the child's Local Authority social worker.
- As a preventative measure Foster carers should try to help a child:
  - Have positive self-esteem by praising efforts and achievements - By being a positive role model
  - Be proud of identity and roots
  - Promoting interests, new experiences and after school/community activities
  - Getting to know child's friends, friend's families, and networks
  - Be aware of gangs, exploitation, risks of drugs and alcohol
  - By keeping lines of communication open
- Concerns could be any of the signs or symptoms mentioned in this Paper, it could be other signs and symptoms, it could be the finding of a weapon (gun, knife, other weapon) anything that gives rise to concern. Where there is significant concern about a child's welfare and the concern is urgent, a foster carer or supervising social worker should contact 999 the safeguarding flow chart, that is part of the Child Safeguarding Policy should be followed.
- Remember also that the police are a very valuable source of advice, they have skills and knowledge that many of us do not.
- A foster carer must be careful to record all events carefully and accurately and be sure they understand any plans and actions of the local authority and their role e.g. the foster carer's role in protecting the child and sharing information.
- If a supervising social worker has concerns they must share them with Fortitude Fostering's Designated Manager (or their deputy) – Where there is concern or a specific incident the supervising social worker must visit the foster carer at the earliest opportunity. The supervising social worker must support and advise the foster carer and help the foster carer understand his or her role in the task of fostering.
- Whilst local authorities have statutory and investigative duties in respect of protection of children, Fortitude Fostering as a Partner has a duty under section 11 of the Children Act 2004 to ensure that functions are discharged with regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. What is crucial is prompt sharing of information so that an action plan with a safe guarding objective can be created/updated and any further risk assessments carried out.
- Notifications to Ofsted must be made in the usual way, this will be completed by Fortitude Fostering's Designated Manager, who will also ensure a written record is kept which includes details of those contacted, action taken and the outcome of any action or investigation'
- The Child or Young Person's Local Authority Social Worker must address concerns by assessing the level of risk and devise an action plan. At reviews, the Independent Reviewing Officer should recommend that a team manager convenes a multi-agency professionals or network meeting if there are concerns that a child may be vulnerable to gang involvement and/or serious youth violence.



- There needs to be clear lines of accountability for any looked after child who is vulnerable to, or affected by, gang activities and/or serious youth violence
- A recent audit of a London youth offending team revealed that a high proportion of gang involved children are known to the criminal justice system (Reluctant Gangsters Pitts 2007) YOS professionals should share information with all relevant agencies. YOS can be contacted by foster carers and SSW's for advice, they also organise crime prevent initiatives.
- The police, especially safer neighbourhood policing teams, should be aware of children who are affected by gang activity and/or serious youth violence, including parents as adult gang members, and should share this information internally with child abuse investigation teams and externally by referral for a common assessment and/or to LA children's social care at the earliest opportunity.
- The police should inform LA children's social care and other relevant multi-agency groups wherever possible of victims of gang-related crime and serious youth violence, given the correlation between victims and future gang members.
- The police recognise that responding appropriately to children who are involved with or affected by gangs requires a long-term, joined-up strategy involving high-level, multi-agency strategic leadership. Police, working in partnership, will also make use of effective problem solving interventions and diversion activities, alongside rigorous enforcement options where appropriate.

## 8. FURTHER INFORMATION

**Gangline:** Mostly staffed by ex-gang members provides mentoring services, legal advice, Support to those effected by gangs including parents and foster carers Telephone 01375 483239 [www.gangline.com](http://www.gangline.com)

**Word 4 Weapons** is the UK's Leading Weapons Surrender Charity: Tens of thousands of knives, guns and other weapons have been voluntarily surrendered in Knife Bins, Telephone 07452 743443 [www.words4weapons.co.uk](http://www.words4weapons.co.uk)

**Crimestoppers** is a service that allows you to pass on information about crime 100% anonymously. Telephone 0800 555111 [www.crimestoppers-org.uk](http://www.crimestoppers-org.uk)

Tackling Gangs: a practical guide for local authorities, CDRPs and other local partners (May 2008 [www.crimeeducation.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.crimeeducation.homeoffice.gov.uk) Youth Justice Board [www.yjb.gov.uk/](http://www.yjb.gov.uk/)

County Lines Violence, Exploitation and Drug Supply (National Crime Agency 2019)