Gangs, Subculture and Identity

Troubles of Youth

27 November, 2008

Lecture Outline

- A duality of approaches
- A Changing Picture
- Interventions and Strategies

Subcultural Theories
2 Distinct Theoretical Approaches

Criminally Oriented

- Coherent

- Organised / Relatively Stable

- Critical Impact

- A Serious Problem (prevalence and severity of offending)

Leisure / Free-time Oriented

- Loose Affiliations

- One of a number of sources of influence on members

- Often depicted in exaggerated problematic terms

William Whyte: Street Corner Society

- Easier for a "slum" resident to achieve monetary success in a racket, than by conventional means

- Role models

- Gang activities highly organised

Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin

- Focussed on the range that adaptations to strain could take, incorporating differential association
- Criminal Gangs
- Conflict Gangs
- Retreatist Gangs

Sutherland's Differential Association Theory

- Delinquent practices are 'culturally transmitted' from one individual to another
- Cultural conflict: if "definitions" favourable to law violation outweigh those unfavourable, crime will occur
- Applied largely to white-collar crime, but has subsequently been applied to other crime

Albert Cohen:
"Delinquent Boys:The culture of the gang"

- Subculture evolved in response to strain, and a rejection of 'middle-class values' esp. educational ideologies

- Gangs were a particular form of subcultural adaptation, characterised by:-
  - non-utilitarianism
  - malice
  - negativism
  - hedonism
  - versatility
  - group loyalty

Critique of "Coherence Model"

1. Exaggeration
2. Conceptual Circularity
3. Doesn't fit with the typical British picture

- The application of a questionable concept has resulted in deviancy amplification

The British Experience

- John Muncie (2004) "America owns the gang, while Britain has traditionally been the home of subcultures"
- (Serious) gang activity much less common
- US causal explanations don't fit
- British "gangs" qualitatively different

David Matza: Drift and Neutralization

- Sees subcultural theories are over-predictive
- Drift: a 'limbo between convention and crime' preceding delinquency
- Techniques of neutralization demonstrate continued commitment to mainstream cultural values
- Delinquency represents the exaggeration of "subterranean", but not deviant values:
  - the pursuit of excitement
  - the disdain for routine work
  - toughness and masculinity

David Downes: a British Perspective

- In Britain, social class is central to understanding subcultural adaptation
- Working class youth had a "realistically low" level of aspiration / fatalism
- Delinquency as a 'fact' of life, but not a 'way' of life
- Gang membership not an important factor in the learning of delinquency

Downes and Subculture in Britain

- Key cause of delinquency: boredom and the importance of leisure
- little opportunity for excitement (akin to strain)
- leisure became the location for excitement and expression of
  - toughness, daring, panache
- Links between leisure and delinquency
  - proceeds of crime funding leisure
  - delinquency is itself exciting
  - delinquency is a by-product of certain forms of excitement
  - Echoed more recently by Trevor Bennett

Street Style and Identity

- Key consideration of British subcultural theories
- Meaning
- Style
- Semiological Appropriation
- Symbolic Rebellion
- At times, demonisation and criminalisation

Demonisation of Cultural Rebellion

- Stan Cohen 'Mods and Rockers' etc.
  - Simplification
  - Folk Devils
  - Amplification
  - Reaction
- Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994
- Hoodies

Conceptual Consideration: Are we talking about the same things?

Hallsworth & Young's Three Point Typology of Urban Collectivities

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

1. **Peer Group: A small, unorganised, transient grouping occupying the same space with a common history. Crime is not integral to their self definition**

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

3. **Organised Criminal Group: Members are professionally involved in crime for personal gain operating almost exclusively in the 'grey' or illegal marketplace.**

- **Peter Stelfox "**unable to find a '*generally agreed definition of a gang which was applicable to the UK situation'.* "
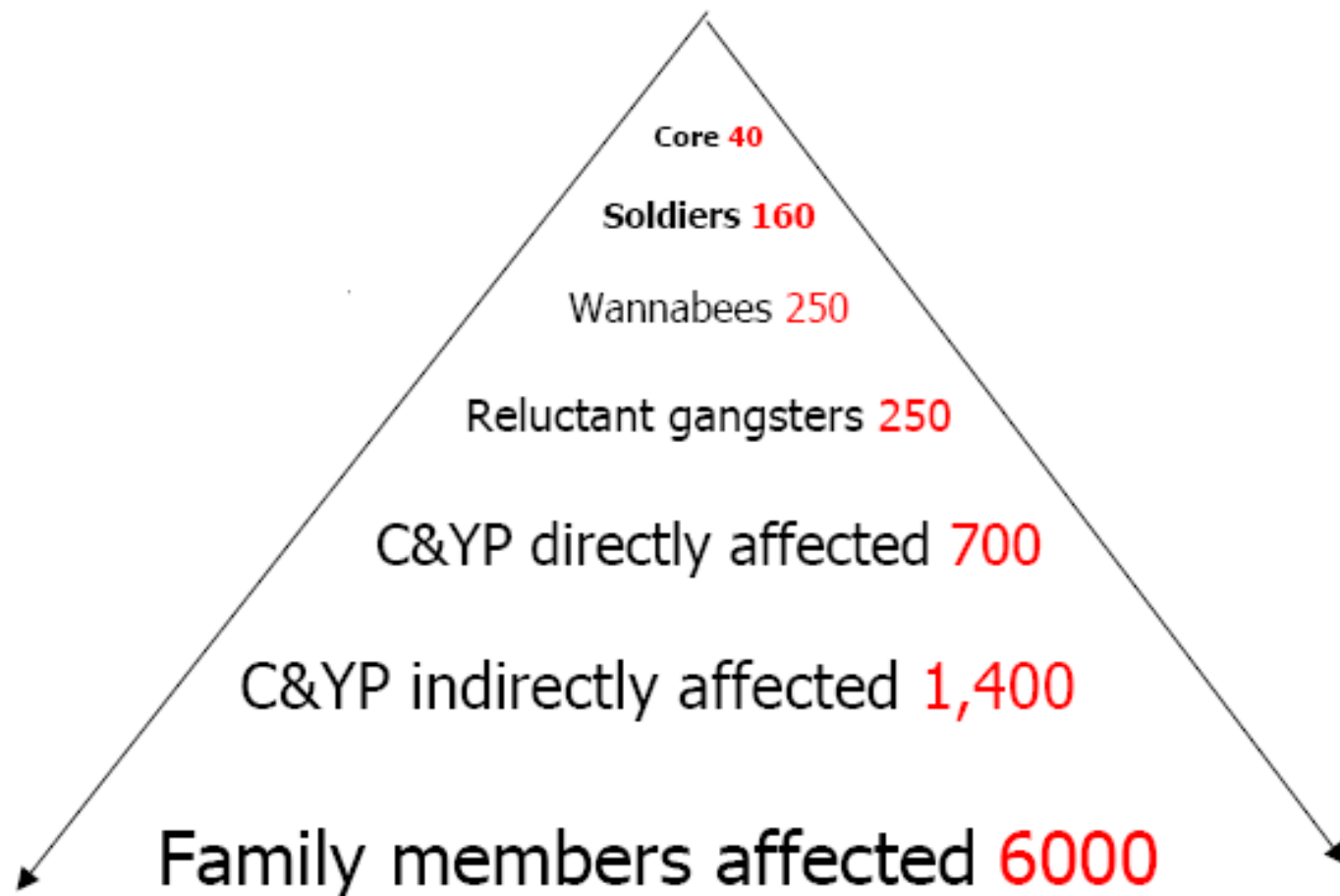
Evidence of Change?

- Absence of agreed conceptual definitions make trends difficult to identify

- Some evidence that in pockets of Urban Britain, "US Style" gangs beginning to emerge

- London, Birmingham and Manchester

Why the emergence?
(John Pitts – Waltham Forest)

- Concentration of deprivation

- Concentration of Victimisation

- Housing Market polarisation

- Polarisation of the Black and Minority Ethnic Communities

  – Wacquant (2004) – 'collapse of the ghetto' -> "hyper-ghettoisation"

  – Poverty, decline in informal control, and high levels of intra-class and intra-racial crime and violence

- The Drugs Trade – heroin, crack and cocaine

How Many People are Adversely Affected by Gangs in Waltham Forest?

Core 40

Soldiers 160

Wannabees 250

Reluctant gangsters 250

C&YP directly affected 700

C&YP indirectly affected 1,400

Family members affected 6000

Gang Strategies
(some examples)

The US Department of Justice Comprehensive Gang Strategy

- Community mobilization; social intervention with socially excluded young people; provision of opportunities; suppression of violence; multi-agency collaboration

Operation Ceasefire (The "Boston" Model)

- 1. Co-ordinated leverage on gangs - multi-agency crackdowns in response to certain specified behaviours i.e. possession or use of knives and firearms, harassment and serious assaults.

- 2. Enhancing community relations: stimulate community 'collective efficacy' in informal social control and the reduction of incivilities

- 3. Engagement with gang members to elicit information, to transmit consistent messages about targeted crackdowns and provide diversionary services

Conclusion

- **Gangs and Groupings**
  - Sliding scales
  - Not ever gang member is a criminal
  - Not every serious criminal is a gang member
  - Some seriously criminal gang members might be seriously criminal, if they were not in a gang

- **This does not deny the existence of some serious organised criminality**
  - Localised
  - Temporary
  - Possibly growing (in the UK)

- **Effective interventions do exist**