Research Paper

2011/02

New Thinking About Women & Criminal Justice

THE GRIFFINS SOCIETY

Seeing differently:

Working with girls affected by gangs

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Contents

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the research participants who gave their time to speak to me and to those who gave me feedback and comments. Thanks also to Charlotte Weinberg and Tara Young for their guidance.

For their help, support and encouragement I would like to thank Samantha McBean, Charlotte Nussey, Elizabeth Botfield, Venetia Boon, and Sharon Shaw.

For enabling me to do this research I would like to thank Platform 51, in particular Rebecca Gill and Helen Berresford.

In particular I would like to thank Professor Frances Heidensohn for her consistently invaluable guidance, inspiration and expertise, and the Griffins Society staff and Council members for their advice throughout the year.

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"People are really quick to say 'she's in a girl gang', 'she's in a gang', and stuff like that. And then what happens is that you overlook all of the stuff that makes it just risky, all of the coercion. All of the fear, all of the threats, all of the limited choices and low self-esteem and you end up just criminalising young women." (P4)

1: Introduction

Girls and gangs

While concern has grown in recent years about the extent of gang activity in Britain, the ways in which girls and young women[1] are affected tends to be overlooked, simplified or distorted. Where attention is given to girls' involvement they tend to be depicted either as violent, out of control perpetrators or as vulnerable victims;[2] reflective of a wider tendency to cast girls who offend in a 'false dichotomy' between the extremes of 'autonomous actors' or 'passive subjects' (Batchelor, 2009a). Through experience of working in organisations delivering gender-specific services to young women, I know these representations to be simplistic and rarely reflective of the complexity or reality of girls' lives.

One pertinent example of the representation of gang-associated girls is the case of Samantha Joseph, dubbed the 'honeytrap killer' for her involvement in the murder of Shakilus Townsend in 2008. Media coverage of the trial fixated primarily on her involvement and responsibility for 'luring' Townsend to the place of his death at the hands of seven gang-associated boys. As has been noted in other media representations of women involved in murder cases (Jones & Wardle, 2008), Joseph's picture was shown more regularly and prominently than those of her male co-defendants, suggesting her ultimate responsibility. Despite some coverage which reported Joseph's boyfriend Danny McLean (for whom she had agreed to 'get Shak set' (Clements, 2009)) to have been neglectful and abusive towards her (Bird, 2009), little critical analysis was given to her role, motivation or potentially constrained choices.

Both the current and previous Governments have taken a range of actions in an attempt to reduce gang activity and serious youth violence, including the 'Tackling Knives and Serious Youth Violence Action Programme' (TKAP)[3], the introduction of gang injunctions,[4] specific

[1] Herein, I use the word 'girls' to refer to girls and young women, to reflect both the young age of some of those involved and with whom interview participants worked, and to make a distinction between girls and adult women.
[2] See in the media, for example, '*Girl gangs muscling in on street violence*' (Slack, Daily Mail, 2007) as compared to *'Girls accept gun running and rape as price of joining gangs'* (Fresco, The Times, 2009).
[3] The *Tackling Knives and Serious Youth Violence Action Programme* (TKAP) ran from June 2008 to March 2010 in 16 police areas, and whilst serious violence involving 13- to 24-year-olds declined across the country during this time, research suggests it is not possible to directly attribute these reductions to TKAP activities (Ward et al, 2011)

funding to tackle 'knife, gun and gang-related violence',[5] and a cross-sector Ending Gang Violence team.[6] These measures tended to have been developed without consideration of girls' and women's experiences, however, resulting in a context where they 'fall straight through the gaps at best, and at worst have their situations exacerbated, or their risk increased, due to a lack of consideration for their experiences' (ROTA, 2010:17).

The recently published 'Ending Gang and Youth Violence' report (HM Government, 2011b) makes a number of references to girls, and when published the Home Secretary was keen to stress that the strategy would have a 'new focus' on girls and young women 'caught up in gang-related rape and abuse' (Hansard, 2011). The strategy committed money to specialist sexual abuse services for gang-affected young women, and referenced positive outcomes specific to girls and young women, including increased self-esteem, early referral to support services, and reduced sexual assault, exploitation and forced miscarriage. Alongside other indications that policy-makers are considering girls' needs more,[7] this is a step to be welcomed, however, the degree to which this translates to a shift in public discourse or enhanced local service provision remains to be seen. In comparison to the priorities outlined by practitioners I spoke to for this research, gaps in delivering appropriate support to girls and young women remain unaddressed, including having sufficient staff support or expertise, an appropriate balance between prevention, intervention and support services, and addressing attitudes that enable a culture in which violence against girls and women is permissible.

As part of TKAP, the previous Government also produced a toolkit 'Tackling gangs: practical guide for local authorities, Crime Disorder and Reduction Partnerships (CDRPS) and other local partners' (Home Office 2008) and a guidance leaflet for parents on how to detect children's involvement in gangs.

[4] Introduced in the Policing and Crime Act 2009, gang injunctions are a civil tool that allow the police and local authorities to apply to a county court (or the High Court) for an injunction against an individual who has been involved in gang-related violence. They were introduced in January 2011 and will have been extended to those aged 14 to 17 by the end of 2011.

[5] Most recently £18 million of funding was committed in 2011, of which £4 million was for the voluntary and community sector (VCS) specifically. For more information see 'Knife, gun and gang-related violence' (Home Office), accessed at: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime/knife-gun-gang-youth-violence/

[6] A joint Home Office and Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) initiative to develop a cross-sector team to address gang violence, comprising experts from a range of professional backgrounds around the country, including the VCS.
Announced in a speech given by Teresa May, 11 August 2011. Accessed at: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/media-centre/speeches/riots-speech

[7] These include, for example, statutory gang injunction guidance which references the 'particular needs and experiences of women in the gang context, which are often very different to those of men' (Home Office, 2010a:21) and the Government Guns, Gangs and Knives Roundtable working group to develop specific proposals to address women's gang-association as part of their Violence Against Women strategy (HM Government, 2011a).

Girls work

This research was an investigation into how voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs)[8] perceive girls' gang-association[9] or involvement,[10] how they have responded to meet girls' needs through their work,[11] and the challenges they face in delivering their work. It reflects concerns feminist criminologists have uncovered over many years about the impact gender inequality and related social factors has on the lives of women who offend, and addresses recent areas of study of girls' gang affiliation and violence. In looking to the work of VCSO practitioners, it focuses on the small but vibrant network of gender-specific services currently available to meet girls' needs and considers the possible future of this work.

It can be difficult to prove the value of girls-specific youth work, especially at a time when it is frequently assumed gender equality has been achieved.[12] It is not uncommon for the argument to be made that because girls who offend are fewer in number than boys, and the risk they pose tends to be only to themselves, there is less need to invest in services for them.[13] Concentrating on 'the risk that young people *pose* rather than the risks young people *face'* (NSPCC, 2009:3) can result in frequently punitive, interventions in the lives of those deemed "risky", whilst overlooking the 'socially mediated risks and vulnerabilities they face and experience in their everyday lives' (Garside, 2009:14). I would argue these experiences differ vastly by gender and that overlooking them risks neglecting girls' needs.

There is a compelling argument, however, that providing particular services for 'discrete' groups of girls, thereby 'filling gaps in government services', is a manageable challenge with significant and measurable benefits (NPC, 2010:58). The costs of custody and the wider social costs of criminal justice involvement are, without doubt, enormous. The cost of youth crime is in excess of £23 million a week (Prince's Trust, 2010) and youth custody costs

[8] For the purpose of this report, the voluntary and community sector also includes social enterprises. In addition, one statutory sector practitioner was also interviewed.
[9] Throughout this report the terms 'affiliation', 'association' and 'involved with' are used interchangably.
[10] My original research proposal used the phrase 'gangs, youth group offending, and serious youth violence, but only the word 'gang' is used in this report, as this was the term used most frequently during interviews.
[11] Herein, work with girls and young women is referred to simply as 'girls work'.
[12] In a piece of research on women's organisations carried out by the Women's Resource Centre, for example, participants frequently stated that 'the misconception that women's equality has been achieved is widespread' was a common barrier to delivery of their work (WRC, 2011a).
[13] This argument is not a new one. Noel Timms' study (1969) of a programme working with vulnerable girls in the 1960s found it was cut, despite its success, because the only real harm the girls were doing was to themselves.

anywhere between £60,372 and £215,496 per child per year (NPC, 2010:21). The cost of sending a woman to prison is around £42,000 per prison place per year (MOJ, 2009).

Alternatively, organisations working with girls and women have been estimated to provide significant social impact and return on investment (Matrix & WRC, 2006) and support-focused alternatives to custody for adult women offenders are thought to generate £14 of social benefit for every £1 invested (nef, 2008). Similarly, investing in early intervention services and preventing just one in ten young offenders from ending up in custody could save society over £100m a year in the UK (Audit Commission, 2004; Social Finance, 2010). The impact girls work can have on the individual, her family, and community, of which she is often an integral part, can be far reaching.

Use (and abuse) of the term "gang"

The term "gang" is frequently used as unthinking shorthand for groups of young people acting anti-socially. In the wake of the August 2011 disturbances or 'riots' in England, political and media discussion turned immediately to speculation about the involvement of 'gangs', leading David Cameron to announce 'a concerted, all-out war on gangs and gang culture' (Telegraph, 2011). The Government later conceded, however, that gang involvement was 'not as high as people first thought' (Commons Select Committee, 2011) and a later independent inquiry found that the role of gangs had been 'significantly overstated by the government' (LSE, 2011).

It is important not to overemphasise the extent of gang activity in a 'media and policy context characterised by an undue emphasis on the portrayal of youth as antisocial – ethnic minority youth in particular' (Alrdidge, 2008:33; Alexander, 2008:12). This criminalises and labels young people (Becker, 1963), and overuse of the term can exacerbate the problem it seeks to describe by lending a 'spurious glamour to the minor forms of delinquency' committed by groups of young people, encouraging involvement in more serious offending (YJB, 2009:4; NSPCC, 2009:25).

I did not intend this research to generate further 'gang talk' (Hallsworth & Young, 2008) but rather to see how those close to the subject perceived it, with the aim of drawing implications for future policy and service development. As long as the media continues to use the term it is important to provide balance through academic study that 'goes beyond the journalistic accounts of gangs' (Aldridge et al, 2008a:34), and as long as gangs continue to be the subject of debate, and responses are developed to address them in policy and practice, it is essential that girls' experiences are represented.

2: Literature review

The "gang problem"

The definition of a gang is a source of much disagreement, including amongst those deemed to be gang members (MOJ, 2011b:8). The term can mean 'different things to different communities be it a street gang with a very specific identity and territory or a group of youths hanging about on the street corner' (Home Office, 2011a:122), and is approached with understandable caution by academics and public bodies (Ralphs, 2009:484). Little is known about the nature or characteristics of gangs in the UK (Maher, 2009:179) and the 'challenge of defining gangs, alongside the difficulty of collecting data…results in problems gauging whether it is actual incidents of gang violence, reporting of gang violence or fear of gang violence that is on the increase' (Feinstein, 2006). It has been noted that when researching gangs, even where a definition is provided the 'concept is too fluid and subjective for all research participants to interpret the term in the same way' (NASUWT, 2010:7).

Some researchers prefer to use terms such as 'delinquent youth groups' (Home Office, 2006) and 'troublesome street-based youth groups' (Maher, 2009) to distinguish between 'gangs' and other anti-social youth groups. One definition of a gang frequently cited in the British context is Hallsworth and Young's (2004b), which distinguishes between 'gangs', less serious 'peer groups', and more serious 'organised criminal groups', describing a gang as a 'relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people, seen by themselves and others as a discernable group; crime and violence is integral to the group's identity' (2004:12-13).[14] For their use, the Centre for Social Justice added to this definition a youth group's identification with, or claim over, territory, some form of identifying structural feature, and their conflict with other, similar, gangs (2009:2).

[14] Where 'peer group' is characterised as small, unorganised and transient, to which crime is not integral to its self-definition, and more serious 'organised criminal groups' have a professional involvement in crime for personal gain (Hallsworth & Young, 2004:12-13).

Girls, gangs, and violence

Much research on girls and gangs has originated from America (Campbell, 1984; Archer, 1998; Chesney-Lind & Hagedorn, 1999; Chesney-Lind, 2001; Miller, 2001; Schalet et al, 2003), and while less evidence exists of the role played by girls in gangs in Britain, it is similarly clear that girls do not share the same experiences as boys 'on road' (Young, 2009a). Mainstream gang research has been criticised as androcentric and 'dominated by male researchers who study the criminal behaviour of other men', or as having considered girls 'solely from the perspective of young men' casting them either as 'sexually-liberated "post-feminist" criminals or sexually-exploited victims' (Young, 2009b:235; Batchelor, 2009b).

Women most frequently play a secondary or auxiliary role in gangs which fall along gender-normative lines and are less likely to engage in violent offending, for example providing safe houses, acting as alibis, and holding drugs, money or weapons (Catch 22, 2009). They are often at risk and have much to fear, including an increased risk of sexual violence and exploitation (Young, 2009a/b). Gender inequality is described as a 'cornerstone of the urban street scene' (Aldridge et al, 2008b:20), characterised by a 'subculture of lawless masculinity' (Hallsworth & Young, 2004a: 13) where girls are frequently treated as property or objects for male use (Weller, 2010). Gang-involved girls may have turned to a gang to protect themselves from violence or mistreatment from families or male associates, though this involvement can place them at greater risk (Miller, 1998:430).

It has been suggested that girls' violent offending has increased in recent years and there is a common misconception that girls' offending has become 'more prevalent and more serious' (CfBT, 2008:5) yet 'just how accurate the media image of a 'rising tide' of new violent females is, is open to question' (Gelsthorpe, 2005:115). *M*any argue this apparent increase has more do with girls being drawn into the justice system for offences that would previously have gone unpunished than with an actual increase in offending (Worrall, 2001:6; Nacro, 2008:2), with young women still more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence (Catch22, 2009).

"What works" with girls and women

The criminal justice system remains largely defined by male standards (Fawcett, 2009) as boys still commit the majority of crime (MOJ & YJB, 2011),[15] and responses to adult women's offending tend to have overlooked the 'invisible minority' of girls and young women, resulting in girls falling in the gap between these 'two stools' (Burman & Batchelor, 2009:270). The youth justice system has historically struggled to respond to girls who have been 'viewed as uncontrollable and worse than boys simply because of impossibly high expectations of their behaviour in the first place' (Gelsthorpe & Worrall, 2009:220).

Whilst little is officially known about "what works" with girls involved with the criminal justice system, evidence suggests they respond best to interventions that are stylistically different to those preferred by boys and which recognise their different offending patterns (CfBT, 2008; YJB, 2009). Research suggests gender specific programming for girls should: be comprehensive, addressing the multiplicity of girls' experiences and the various forms of discrimination they face; create an emotionally and physically safe and nurturing environment, including the use of single-sex space; foster respectful and positive relationships and address the importance these play in girls' lives; acknowledge their high levels of trauma, victimisation and abuse; teach girls new skills building on existing strengths and develop their goals and ambitions; develop personal respect; give girls control and involve them through peer support, mentoring and delivery; be holistic, informal and flexible, including addressing physical, sexual, emotional and mental health; and provide a range of support and positive opportunities beyond official penalties (Ryan & Lindgren, 1999:56; Patton & Morgan, 2002; CfBT, 2007; Williams, 2009; YJB, 2009).

For gang-affected girls work should include these aspects, in particular addressing the extent of inequality in their lives, provide them with opportunities, and be delivered by credible individuals they can trust (ROTA, 2010). Similarly, scoping research into what works to reduce the risk faced by young women committing or being subject to serious violence, gang related and sexual violence, suggests work must: involve young people in programme design and delivery; be delivered by staff to whom young people can relate and who have excellent communication skills, including utilising the expertise of ex-gang members; should

[15] Boys committed 78 per cent of all offences committed by young people in 2009/10 (YJB & MOJ, 2011).

engage parents and carers; be relevant to young people; and be sustainable (Adamson & Burrell, 2011).

Challenges to delivering girls work

A welcome series of service and policy initiatives to address the needs of women offenders and those at risk of offending[16] (Heidensohn, 2006:4-5) mean it is 'now generally understood that 'what works' for men may not be suitable for women' (Gelsthorpe, 2011:15). The same attention has not been paid to the needs of girls' who offend, however. There is a 'continued lack of gender-specific interventions for girls who break the law' (CfBT, 2008:7), with most interventions designed to meet boys needs, and there is 'little evidence about "what works" with girls in the youth justice system' (YJB, 2009:4/5; Batchelor & Burman, 2004:2).[17]

Girls work faces a number of challenges. The limited number of programmes designed specifically for girls, the lack of formal evaluation of that which exists, and the absence of national policy and guidance has resulted in limited evidence of the effectiveness of girls work, and ad-hoc service development driven more by individual interest than by an evidence base (Batchelor & Burman, 2004; Williams, 2009:184). Problems with access to long-term and sustainable funding, which results in many programmes operating on a temporary basis, and difficulties with developing and maintaining links with statutory services further hamper successful delivery (Clarke, 2004: 29; TSRC, 2010).

Girls are often considered a 'difficult group with which to work' (Gelsthorpe & Worrall, 2009:209) and can be labelled disproportionately 'risky' or 'vulnerable' because practitioners lack knowledge of gender specific provision and have not been given the tools to provide effective interventions with girls (Matthews & Smith, 2009:9). The extent of girls' emotional needs and their challenging behaviour (often as a result of their frequent experiences of physical and sexual abuse and abuses of their trust) and the difficulties faced

[16] For example, in 2009 the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) allocated £15.6 million to support services for vulnerable women in the community, £9 million of which was given to third sector providers to help develop Women's Community Projects. In 2010 the Corston Independent Funders' Coalition (CIFC), made up of twenty-one charitable trusts, foundations and individual philanthropists, and the Ministry of Justice announced a joint £2million Women's Diversionary Fund, and in May 2011 announced another £3.2m fund to maintain the current women's community project sector.

[17] At the time of writing the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) into women and the penal system, chaired by Baroness Corston, was undertaking an inquiry into girls and the penal system and I hope that the findings of this result in a greater overall prioritisation of girls' needs in the youth justice system.

in delivering girls work in services and systems designed around the needs of boys, can lead practitioners to feel unenthusiastic, negative and inadequate (Baines & Alder, 1996: 483).

Addressing gangs

Responses to gangs vary considerably, both regionally and nationally, and in custody and the community. Despite a range of initiatives and an increased focus on gangs at central level, police, youth offending teams and young offender institutions lack coordination, guidance or agreed definitions and strategies, exacerbated by a lack of data on young people with gang affiliations (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2010: 3). At the local level, small, grass-roots attempts to tackle gang activity are hampered by a 'lack of sustainable funding, appropriate training, organised coordination, support from statutory agencies and opportunities for young people' (Aldridge, 2008b:21).

In particular, very little work exists to address girls' gang-association, with a Home Office commissioned review of anti-knife crime projects concluding 'there are not enough projects out there specifically tailored for young women' (Home Office, 2011b:15). Additionally, girls' own concerns about poor or inappropriate information and disclosure management procedures, which can at times increase their risk, creates a significant barrier to their engagement with the services that are in place (ROTA, 2012:32).

3: Methodology

Research aims & design

The aim of my research was to investigate effective ways of addressing the needs of gang-associated girls through programmes and projects. Through speaking to those with expertise in this area, predominantly in the voluntary and community sector (VCS), it was an enquiry into how professionals working with girls and young women saw and defined gang-associated girls' experiences, and what they believed to be the most effective ways of working with them.

I set out to explore the following questions:

- What kind of work is currently being delivered to gang-affected girls?
- What are the benefits of delivering this work?
- Is there value in delivering this work in gender-specific ways or single-sex spaces?
- How do programmes address gender and sexual inequality?
- What are the gaps in practice and the barriers facing the delivery of this work?
- What is needed to further support this work?

My work was underpinned by feminist research methods, foregrounding the use of subjective, qualitative accounts of personal experience (Roberts, 1981; Letherby, 2003). The research was inductive, drawing inferences from accounts and commonalities between these, and interpretivist, in that it allowed participants to articulate personal views of their work and the girls they worked with (Bryman, 2008: 366). Interviews were semi-structured, with flexible, open-ended questioning, and designed to be conversational in style to gain spontaneous responses which encouraged participants to communicate their underlying beliefs as freely as possible (Gilbert, 1993: 138).[18]

[18] Questions were based around: girls work including programme rationale, style and delivery; practitioners experiences; girls' needs; and challenges to delivering the work.

Sample

Participants were chosen through a process of purposive sampling (Bryman, 2008: 415) to gain an indicative or suggestive snapshot of work being delivered. The final sample was based on judgment and availability, with VCSOs chosen as the main focus of my research for the access to and experience I have of this sector. I also considered professionals from this sector to be interesting in themselves and a seldom heard from group, as confirmed by my literature review.

I chose to speak to practitioners and managers of girls' programmes in the main, due to their closeness to both the work and the girls themselves, but where opportunities to speak to girls were available these were taken. Additionally, I spoke to a small number of experts with experience of girls work and gangs from an academic or strategic position. Due to the limited number of programmes delivered in this area, practitioners represented a spectrum of work, from preventative to targeted interventions. I had additional telephone conversations with five others with an interest in this area who did not go on to complete a full interview.

Overall I carried out seventeen interviews with three experts and 13 practitioners who represented 11 programmes and this data formed the bulk of my analysis. I held small supplementary focus groups with three groups of girls and young women, two in the community and one in custody. Data was collected between January and April 2011.[19]

Participants were sent transcripts of their interviews and given opportunity to comment, a number were consulted on key findings, and all were sent a draft of the final report prior to publication for final comment and to confirm they were satisfied with the degree to which they were anonymised.

Limitations

I did not intend this research to be a scoping exercise or definitive mapping of all work currently delivered; therefore representation of organisations was limited, as was their geographical spread. Many community and non-formal groups fall under the radar of more widespread recognition and there are undoubtedly other kinds of girls work which I did not

[19] A full list of anonymised research subjects is included as an appendix.

capture. Having been professionally involved in this area of work, however, and from what participants told me through interview, I am confident that my sample well represents this area of work.

Neither did I intend this to be an evaluative project of the outcomes of programmes represented. Some organisations had conducted, or were in the process of conducting, their own evaluations, but beyond this little evaluation of such programmes exists. In many cases practitioners did not have access to comprehensive or longitudinal data for the girls they worked with, so the longer-term effectiveness of their intervention was not known.

Due to the sensitive nature of the subject and the reluctance organisations may have had in agreeing to girls being interviewed directly I focused my interview requests on speaking to practitioners and experts primarily. As a result, there is scope for further research with girls and young women who have accessed programmes to investigate what they perceived to be of most benefit to them as a comparison study. The small sample size of girls and young women I spoke to mean their views are referenced occasionally, but are not consistently embedded throughout.

Reflexivity

As a researcher, I acknowledge my privilege in having had access to some of the practitioners I spoke to through my professional contacts and the bias this may have created. I recognise that my professional role may have also influenced the interviews, either by encouraging more open dialogue as a result of pre-existing relationships or trust, or by inhibiting conversation as result of “professionalism” which was unable to be broken down. Working in the women's sector I also acknowledge my bias towards gender-specific work and women-only space.

4: Gangs - Terminology, characteristics, and girls' experiences

Over the next three chapters I set out the findings from my interviews and focus groups. In this first chapter I discuss the context in which participants used the word 'gang' and how they described gangs as affecting those that they worked with, with a particular focus on the specific experiences of girls. In the second chapter I go on to describe girls' low profile in youth, and youth justice, settings, and the work that practitioners had developed to respond to girls' particular needs. In the final findings chapter I explain the challenges practitioners faced in delivering this work. The report ends with conclusions and policy recommendations.

The findings reflect the accounts of practitioners and experts in the main, though areas of particular congruence between these and the views of girls and young women are referred to. Where quotations are given these are anonymous and coded, with each code representing a different participant. Quotations coded 'E' represent interview subjects who were experts in the area but who did not directly deliver services, those coded 'P' represent practitioners, and those coded 'G' are the words of girls and young women. A selection of further quotations and participant monitoring information are included as appendices one and two.

What is a 'gang'?

"Of course the whole thing with gangs is definition." (E1)

Participants expressed varying schools of thought on the word 'gang', reflecting wider moral dilemmas and divided opinion over the appropriateness of its use (Aldridge et al, 2008a:32). Views ranged between those who used the word comfortably to describe criminal youth gangs,[20] those who used the word in relation to young people's groups of friends or anti-social peer groups, and those who rejected the term 'gang' as one which criminalised young people and did not reflect the structure of their groups. Partly as a result of this lack of agreement, the programmes represented were quite different in approach, varying from specialist targeted intervention to universal work with girls facing a range of risks, of which

[20] In the instances where 'gang' was used to describe criminal gangs, practitioners generally described this is in sense as understood by Hallsworth & Young (2004), that is 'a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people, seen by themselves and other as a discernable group; crime and violence is integral to the group's identity' (2004:12-13).

gangs were one.

Many were keen to stress that most people belong to a 'gang' of some sort and at its most basic level the term was understood to mean a group of friends with a shared interest. Some urged that *"we need to be quite careful about gangs and how we use the term"* (P1), expressing frustration at its inappropriate application. Most had given their position some thought and often problematised the word's usage, including with those they worked with, cautious not to *"just fall in with the popular discourse, which actually isn't that helpful sometimes"* (P8).

"Shifts in the way we define things" (P9) were described, amongst the media, policy makers, politicians, practitioners, and the police, with 'gangs' having become common parlance, a *"sexy"* (P4) subject, and a word used frequently unrepresentatively. The increased frequency of its use meant it was more readily applied, because *"once you start to use the terminology, you apply it to circumstances which might have been described differently"* (E3). This was reflected in the language used by Government, funders and commissioners where, for example, money previously *"wasn't [for] gangs it was 'young people at risk of offending', that was the label at the time"* (P13).

Gang was not necessarily a term young people would use of their groups, and girls who authorities might deem to be gang-affiliated would rarely identify themselves as such, and *"9 times out of 10…don't classify themselves as gang members" (E1).* Instead, the label 'gang' was often said to be *"a term that we've given them as professionals"* (P3). While individual organisations might have their own understanding of the word *"it doesn't mean that all services are agreed about what they're talking about"* (E2).

Where the term gang was used comfortably in association with a criminal group, a number of characteristics and motivating factors were frequently cited. Gang culture and the motivation to join a gang were seen as part of a "crisis of identity" amongst young people.[21] In certain areas gang and criminal activity was normalised and seen as a *"way of life"* (P3), with the particulars and ethnic composition of gangs geographically and culturally specific to

[21] This was frequently described in relation to race and ethnicity. Some practitioners spoke generically, others described this as a particular feature of the young Black community, and others said that young White and Asian people experienced an identity crisis in relation to other ethnic groups of young people.

their locations. In areas where "*opportunities and life chances for people have been systematically and substantially reduced",* gang membership appeared to provide *"quite a lot of benefits"* (E3), particularly economic opportunities.

Life "on road" was associated with violence, bereavement, imprisonment, and loss of life, and the normalisation of these experiences from a young age could result in profound trauma, lack of fear, and a feeling of the inevitability of death. Whilst most young people 'grew out' of gang involvement, as with wider youth offending (Smith & McAcra, 2004), a small minority found it very difficult leave because *"once they're in it, it's very, very hard for them to get out"* (P2) with few opportunities available to exit the lifestyle.

Girls and gangs

"People are really quick to say 'she's in a girl gang', 'she's in a gang', and stuff like that. And then what happens is that you overlook all of the stuff that makes it just risky, all of the coercion. All of the fear, all of the threats, all of the limited choices and low self-esteem and you end up just criminalising young women." (P4)

Participants agreed there was a "*massive gap in knowledge about women involved in gangs in this country"* (E1). Gangs were described as male dominated in which men held power, with the majority of girls' association relationship-based, commonly as family members, friends, girlfriends, sexual partners or 'links', or as the result of living in gang-affected areas. This was contextualised as being reflective of girls' wider reasons for offending, where *"the kinds of behaviour which are bringing girls into the system are to do with their relationships, with people in their immediate environment"* (E3). The concept of the 'girl gang' was mostly dismissed.

Girls frequently 'drifted' into or became implicated in gang activity, rather than 'joining' gangs per se. In the words of one, girls involvement varied between the few *"core females in the middle who are in the nitty gritty of it"* to the majority *"on the periphery, on the outside, who won't consider themselves gang members, they just hang around with the group"* (E1). When girls were close to a gang, their roles frequently followed subservient and gender normative lines, fulfilling domestic, sexual and care-giving roles. Girls faced risks of criminal involvement associated with their homes being used as safe houses, holding drugs, money

and weapons, and acting as alibis. Partner abuse, domestic violence, sexual violence and exploitation, were frequently cited as risks gang-associated girls faced. Girls' levels of risk varied depending on the extent of their involvement and knowledge of the gang's activities, but could result in extremely high levels of threat, fear and violence.

Girls' wider experiences

"The issues that women face in gangs, girls are facing outside the gangs, they just don't have that additional risk factor of the gang." (E2)

Some of the problems and risks faced by gang- associated girls were particular, but participants stressed that many of these experiences were shared by girls much more widely. Whilst there was not a universal experience amongst girls, there were strong commonalities positioned along a scale or spectrum, many of which related to their experiences and negotiations of social norms, authority, and power, particularly male power. It was said these issues transcended race, ethnicity, class, and age, *"play[ing] out in different ways within different cultures and different backgrounds…it's different situations but very much the same emotions and psychology behind it"* (P6).[22] Research suggests that these shared experiences should not be universalised to the point of neglecting the particular intersectional experiences of race, class, and disadvantage on young Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women's experience of gender-based violence (Miller, 2008), however, and this could benefit from further research in the UK context.

Participants emphatically said that girls suffered an "*alarming*" (P10) lack of self-esteem, which they cited as one of the main underlying causes of their behaviour and an aspect of how the "identity crisis" said to affect young people impacted differently on girls: *"there's a lot of self-esteem issues, self-worth, self-value, and that's at the core of things"* (P5). Girls often saw their worth in relation to acceptance by men and sought social credibility from their association with powerful and respected men, as the girlfriend or 'baby-mother' of a gang member, for example, *"because that actually gives them a sense of value, because the boy that everyone else wants, wants them"* (P6). Social hierarchies were organised around status in relation to boys, physical attractiveness, and material possessions.

[22] The practitioner here was speaking particularly about violence and sexual abuse, but her words reflect those of others of the subject of girls' shared experiences set out here which transcended race, class, and age.

Girls' relationships were frequently described as unhealthy and characterised by a general sense of powerlessness, with violence and abuse commonplace. It was felt that a lot of girls *"don't really know what love is, because they've not been shown it, so they're searching for something and they don't know what they're searching for"* (P11) and as a result were vulnerable to manipulation, exploitation and abuse. Domestic violence was frequently cited, including inter-generational violence between gang-involved boys and their mothers. Girls' relationships with their male peers were described as; *"relationships where actually young women don't know what their rights are, they don't really understand what consent is, they feel like they have to go along with certain behaviour to be accepted and to be seen as sexy and desirable by young men, which makes them very vulnerable"* (P8).

Most participants comments reflected the concept of the 'male in the head', whereby young women define their own needs in relation to those of young men's, which can lead them to privilege and prioritise male sexual desire and tolerate or justify abusive behaviour to ensure a relationship continues (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2009:5). Other research has found high levels of violence in young people's relationships (Barter et al, 2009), with disadvantaged girls twice as likely to view this as normal (Wood et al, 2011).

Sexualisation[23] and the hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity it created (Home Office, 2010b:43) was stressed as underpinning girls and boys expectations of and relationships with one another. Girls experienced high levels of sexual *'interference'* on a daily basis, including *"verbal sexual harassment and awareness of self and sort of physical groping…that's just absolutely normal common stuff"* (P13) which was seldom seen as a violation of their rights. This reflects polling that found one in three girls experienced unwanted sexual touching at school and nearly half heard sexual name-calling towards girls on a daily basis (EVAW, 2010).[24]

Participants frequently described girls as living with the effects of past trauma from physical, sexual, and emotional abuse or neglect which could lead to internalised feelings of shame, guilt, and anger which many carried with them into adulthood and seldom disclosed. Girls

[23] This was understood in the terms set out by the American Psychological Association (2004), namely that sexualisation is occurring when: a person's value comes only from their sexual appeal; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.

[24] Twenty-nine per cent of 16-18 year-old girls had experienced unwanted sexual touching, compared to 14 per cent of boys, and 44 per cent of girls had heard sexual name-calling towards girls such as 'slut' or 'slag' on a daily basis compared to 30 per cent of boys.

were said to have a *"skill and tendency to turn their trauma on themselves…[using] many avenues of self-harm*" (P13), including self-harming and self-medicating through sex, alcohol, drugs, self-injury, and unhealthy eating.

In jarring contrast to these experiences, however, was a social expectation for girls to be independent, strong and in control, a view corroborated by young women. This expectation was typified by high-profile female celebrities, who were generally seen to be poor role models for girls, creating and exacerbating anxieties about body image, preoccupation with status in relation to men, and perpetuating an empty rhetoric of "empowerment" (Budgeon, 2003; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). As others have argued, the socialisation of girls which instils in them the sense that society places little value on their worth (other than in terms of appearance) contrasts sharply with notions of 'girls empowerment and such mixed messages can contribute to low self-esteem and an expectation – and sometimes acceptance – of victimisation' (CfBT, 2008:7).

As a result of internalising their problems, and seldom disclosing abuse or victimisation, girls frequently passed by the attention of services and were *"really clever at just getting by and…making all of the noises, but not keeping up with services"* (P4). Both practitioners and girls agreed they tended to keep their problems to themselves, with many feeling they could not share their experiences and that there was no one to talk to. This feeling was compounded for gang-associated girls who tended not to trust services and who feared disclosure could result in police involvement (ROTA, 2011).

As a result of the precariousness of their own social position, and the competition this encouraged with other girls, participants said many held extremely negative views of other women. They lacked trust, were judgmental, particularly in relation to sexuality and "honour", and were highly competitive over status relating to boys and physical attractiveness. Distaste or aggression displayed towards other women was, therefore, a method of self-preservation because *"if they aren't critical towards other young women then they risk being victimised, they risk being the ones who are criticised"* (P8), and a form of self-hate or self-sabotaging behaviour; *"[i]f I don't love myself, if I hate me, anyone who looks like me, is getting it"* (P6).

Girls' sexual orientation was conspicuous by its absence in most interviews. Some participants discussed girls, some of whom were lesbian or bisexual, who resisted a culture of sexualisation by adopting masculinised identities, internalising prevailing, frequently sexist, attitudes towards women and using aggression to assert status and power. The majority spoke solely of heterosexual girls' experiences, however. Whilst the predominant challenge of girls work is to heterosexist norms, professionals should remain cautious not to assume all girls are heterosexual so as not to alienate lesbian or bisexual girls.

Girls' violence

"So their upfront behaviour may be very bosh and aggressive…[but it's] concealing a real vulnerability underneath." (P10)

There was a lack of agreement about the supposed increase of violence amongst girls. On the whole, participants felt there had been an increase in recent years, but that the increased criminalisation of young people, media reporting of girls' violence, and intervention on the part of the criminal justice system for incidents "*which in previous generations may have rather been dealt with outside of the criminal justice system*" (E3) were integral to this.

What was clear from all interviews with both girls and practitioners was that intimidation, fear and threat played a significant role in girls' lives, often from a young age, and that *"violence is something they see every day"* (E1). This frequently curtailed their movement and lead to a daily sense of fear, reflecting other research on young people in gang-affected areas (Ralphs et al, 2009:484). This could result in a normalisation of, and desensitisation to, violence as well as girls' own aggressive behaviour and problems with communicating or presenting themselves in 'pro-social' ways. Violence was often a form of self-protection, of both their physical safety and their social status, and fights, particularly between girls, were often a reaction to having been slighted, disrespected or dishonoured, reflecting wider research suggesting girls' violence is a way of protecting themselves in a patriarchal environment (Batchelor, 2009a/b).

Girls' aggressive 'front' was often a mask, but "*if we look even deeper into their anger and their violence there's often a whole complex tapestry of experiences of neglect or abuse*"

(P8). Many girls who had been abused felt extremely aggrieved by both the abuse of power on the part of their abuser, and the failure of others to bring their abusers to justice, and could “act out” because of it. Many had extremely negative experiences of authority which could lead them to be suspicious, aggressive, and distrustful.

In the next chapter I go on to discuss how girls' experiences, as discussed above, were seldom recognised in generic youth, or youth justice, settings, and how practitioners sought to address this marginalisation by developing responses appropriate to the needs of the girls they worked with.

5: The case for gender-specific girls work

The need for girls' work

"Anywhere where young people are – where young women are – they are often totally outnumbered and not given a space to be able to talk about, or even think about the things that might affect them specifically as a young woman." (P9)

Participants universally described a youth justice system set up to respond to boys' offending in which girls' needs were seldom recognised. Girls had different routes in and out of the system to boys and were perceived to be more treated more harshly when they offended, as punishment for transgressing gender norms. Gender-specific service provision was patchy, referrals were not always made appropriately, and low numbers of appropriate girls for a service could result in difficulties running programmes.

Girls were consistently marginalised in "*male orientated [and] male dominated*" (P11) mixed youth justice provision. Both girls and practitioners described the influence of boys in youth work settings as distracting, inhibiting, and sometimes overwhelming for girls. As one young woman said of her previous experiences in youth settings *"the boys were a bit rowdy and the girls weren't getting involved"* (G10). Most generic services failed to recognise the different lived experiences of girls and boys and were not *"a true reflection of the needs of the young women"* (P10). All participants stressed the value of and need for gender specific work, and single-sex space because *" the issues are different, and the analysis is different, and what you need each group to achieve is slightly different"* (P7).[25]

On the whole participants agreed there should be a range of provision for girls, from universal services to focused interventions for girls facing gang-associated risks; *"there is a need for generic, gender specific provision for girls - there is also an evident need for gang-specific work for girls, for girls that need it"* (E2). Work with gang-associated boys was known to be a much more established field than work with gang-associated girls.[26]

[25] A practitioner speaking of their previous experiences of devising gendered youth work in services attended by both boys and girls.
[26] See, for example, the handbook produced by Leap Confronting Conflict (Feinstein & Kuumba, 2006) and the range of interventions in London Criminal Justice Partnership handbook of interventions for gangs and group offending (2010).

Practitioners frequently described their own journey of having 'come to realise' the distinctions between girls' and boys' needs, including gang-associated risks, through their professional experiences of mixed-sex youth work. They also commented that a wider lack of knowledge amongst professionals working with young people lead them to overlook difference and lack expertise of how to appropriately support the girls they work with. This indicates that knowledge of girls' and boys' different lived experiences, and how to deliver gender-sensitive work, is not embedded within youth or youth justice practice.

Principles of delivery

"I'm not sure you can run a program with girls on how not to become a gang member." (E1)

Participants stressed that it was not the right approach to attempt to develop a model programme which 'works'. This could easily turn into a tick-box exercise not framed within practitioner's terms of reference, language or priorities, far removed from the reality of the work they delivered. Instead it was the principle behind the delivery of work, how work was delivered, and who delivered it that was felt to be the key to success, over and above rigidly defined content. Participants represented a range of delivery styles and methods, but many shared similar principles to their work and common themes were described.

Practitioners felt best able to respond to girls' needs and preferences in single-sex space. This created a safe environment that enabled greater freedom to explore subjects openly and frankly, particularly personal, sexual and relationship-based issues, which practitioners were clear would not come out in a mixed sex environment, and this was partly corroborated by girls too. As one young woman simply put it *"you're not going to go up to a male youth worker or male staff and tell them about your personal problems because he's a boy and you're a girl"* (G6). Whilst single-sex space could be met with some resistance from girls at the outset, initial nervousness about being in groups with other girls was rapidly overcome, as is reflected in research elsewhere (Williams, 2009:186). Whilst the majority of girls and young women I spoke to also shared the view that gender-specific girls work was positive and had given them a space and experience they would otherwise not have had, this comparative unanimity should be treated with some caution and could arguably change were the sample of girls expanded.

Girls were said to prefer different delivery styles to boys. Girls responded well to a style that was honest or 'real', and which broke down walls of silence around taboo subjects; *"that's the sort of thing they talk about, the realness, the power of truth"* (P13). Girls were said to *"like to be able to debate stuff, and work through how they feel about things"* (P4) and responded better to *"being heard rather than being lectured"* (P6). Discussion methods allowed girls to articulate themselves, explore subjects, and *"recognize and identify what their belief systems are"* and *"collectively…find the answers and solutions to what they're looking at"* (P10). This enabled girls to *"realise other people are affected by those issues, and…create some sense of solidarity and get them to identify with each other in a positive way"* (P1), creating a sense of belonging, supportiveness, shared identity, and reducing feelings of isolation.

General concern was expressed that girls were not always aware of how they presented themselves or how they were perceived. Practitioners aimed to help girls gain a greater understanding of this and to *"recognise that there are a number of different ways that you can actually be included in youth society without necessarily having to become somebody else that you're not really comfortable with"* (P10). The use of the male perspective was cited a number of times as a method by which to reflect upon presentations of self and how boys and girls perceive one another.

This raised sensitive questions, as drawing attention to the ways in which girls are perceived, and the risks they face if not fully aware of this, can suggest they are responsible for their victimisation and negate the responsibility of others to treat girls with respect. Where work with girls did operate the use of the male perspective, it was felt that this was best delivered by, or in partnership with, organisations that had expertise in delivering gender-specific services.

Relationships were of paramount importance, both in terms of addressing girls' existing relationships, and of the *"positive relationships that they could form with other young women and workers"* (P1). This was often described as creating an alternative family or gang. Peer mentoring and education was also extremely valuable because *"If you can teach a younger girl something, a mistake that you've done, it prevents them from doing it"* (G9).

The use of therapeutic approaches to address the effects of trauma on young people were discussed by a number of practitioners and cited as an innovative aspect of practice. This was either a direct part of their model or part of their professional backgrounds which had an influence on their work. Therapeutic methods discussed included narrative therapy, counselling, and cognitive behavioural therapy, as well as more broadly creating a therapeutic environment where girls could share their experiences in a non-judgmental space and support one another with professional guidance. This is an area that would merit further consideration, particularly considering the close connection between trauma, risk-taking behaviour, and offending in girls (Smith et al, 2006).

Many of the ways in which programme-principles were described resonated with traditional youth work practice, reflecting, for example, Kerry Young's seven 'defining features' and 'key dimensions' of youth work (2006). Programmes were often described as age-appropriate, responsive and adaptable to the needs of the group, stimulating and engaging, and non-judgmental. Girl's voluntary engagement was essential, and one of the unique and positive aspects of VCSO's engagement with young people generally; *"[t]hey should come in because they want to come in, not because they're avoiding going back to court"* (E3). Girls' welfare was taken very seriously, with practitioners commonly providing ongoing support, engagement or onward referral beyond the life-span of a programme.

Practitioner skills

"Everyone's preaching the same message, but whether one person can get through or another depends on who's delivering that message." (P10)

Participants stressed that having the right staff delivering the work was as important as the work itself, with words such as energy, passion, enthusiasm, humour, empathy and maturity used of effective practitioners. Some of the most dynamic practitioners I met working with some of the most challenging girls had a powerful, engaging, and motivational energy which they clearly channelled into their work.

Female staff were vital, as they enabled more open disclosures, conversations and a greater sense of safety. Being someone who inspired respect was critical because *"young people are going to look up at you and if they don't want to be like you a bit, they're not going to listen*

to what you say" (P13). Effective female staff were those who girls could identify with, trust, and who could become positive role models. In the words of one practitioner, *"I can't teach a young man how to be a man, but I can teach a young woman how to be a woman"* (P6).

Personal experience was frequently cited as valuable on the basis of authenticity, that *"if you've lived it, you know it"* (P10). In some cases this meant practitioners who had personal experience of gangs or offending, and in others the use of a carefully structured mentoring scheme. In all these instances it was clear practitioners needed ongoing support to develop their skills, professionalism, and self-reflexivity to retain boundaries and become appropriate role models. It was thought that many more practitioners should be *"putting more work into who they are as people and their own identity, their own knowledge*" (P6) than they currently do.

Many of those interviewed had youth work backgrounds, and brought this expertise with them. Skills in delivering gender specific work were also important, given the wider context described of youth-work practitioners lacking the appropriate skills or knowledge to work with girls appropriately, and where some regarded gender-specific work with suspicion and felt threatened by female only space.

In the final chapter of findings I go on to describe the variety of challenges to delivering girls work. These relate to working relationships, identification of gang associated girls, a need for complementary work and more focus on early intervention, the position of the VCS, financial and resource limitations, proving the value of girls work, and emotional and psychological challenges.

6: Challenges to delivering work with gang-associated girls

A lack of gender-mainstreaming underlined all participants concerns, characterised by the feeling that both their work and they as individuals were marginalised, under-resourced and under-supported. These comments were made of the wider criminal justice system, the sectors they worked in, and sometimes even of their own organisations. The work they had developed was frequently in response to their own learning, done of their own volition, and seldom had more senior or strategic direction or support, which could lead to exhaustion, damage their professionalism, and diminish the quality of their work. Situations were often described where delivery had only managed to take place due to the support of one individual championing their cause in the face of a general lack of commitment to girls work.

Problematic working relationships

"Sometimes we can feel quite isolated, and it's very difficult actually standing on the outside of statutory services to try to reach in and get the multiagency support going for that young person." (P8)

Relationships with other agencies, both voluntary and statutory, were frequently discussed. These varied in nature, were at times problematic and frustrating, particularly with statutory bodies, and could significantly affect a project's success.

The strategic landscape VCSOs worked within was described as *"extremely poor"* (E2), with a lack of consistent arrangements to address girls' needs, problems with identification, and of girls frequently *"slipping through the net"* (E1) between services. Other professionals and agencies that came into contact with girls, including health, education and youth offending services, were not always aware of, or monitoring for, girls' gang association, and were not effectively sharing the information they had. Where there was shared knowledge, commitment, and agreement between agencies from the outset, processes were much more effective and straightforward, numbers of referrals were higher, and girls received comprehensive and appropriate support; *"when you are more integrated into a borough, the multi-agency working...[is] a lot easier"* (P9).

These challenges were partly due to fundamental differences between the statutory and

voluntary sectors in approach, values and understanding of their client groups. The uniqueness of VCSOs was "*their lack of red tape…their flexibility, and…their knowledge of the community and environment, which makes them a very, very different service to a statutory agent"* (P10) yet this uniqueness was seldom felt to be acknowledged by statutory services. The sector saw its independence as key to its success, both in terms of the relationships organisations could build with young people and the respect they gained from external audiences as a commissioned service. This distance between the statutory and voluntary sectors could breed animosity and reluctance on the part of statutory agencies to work with VCSOs which was limiting and frustrating.

Complementary work

"It's not an individual problem, it's not a gang member problem, it's a community problem."

(P3)

It was unanimously agreed that while there was a clear need for girls work this could be more effective if other work, complementary to its aims, ran alongside it.

The most frequently discussed was the need for a *"brother model"* (P7) of gender-sensitive work with boys, because *"otherwise we're just fighting a losing battle"* (P3). This is needed to give boys a non-judgmental space to have their questions answered, and to address their attitudes towards women, which other research has described as 'disrespectful and predatory' (Coy, 2011:38). Issues around sex and relationships, masculinity, aggression, respect, and the mainstreaming of pornography all impacted on boys' attitudes: *"When you do group work with young men and they say 'do women enjoy rape?' you kind of know that actually you need to do some work around that"* (P8). Survey data has also shown young men to have confused ideas about the meaning of consent (The Havens, 2011).[27] It was noted that whilst boys involved in gangs and offending were frequently worked with, this was rarely done in a gender-sensitive way; "*all generic services are aimed at boys - what they don't do [is] gendered work with boys and young men*" (P7).

[27] Opinion Matters surveyed a random sample of 1012 people in London aged 18 to 25 online on behalf of The Havens, sexual assault centres.
A quarter did not believe it to be rape if a woman says no to sex and the man continues anyway, and half didn't consider it to be rape if the other person changes their mind during sex

Concerns were expressed about finding *"male practitioners that are skilled, willing, able and conscious enough to do the work*" (P7). Few were used to working with boys around violence against women issues and some were actively opposed to, or hostile towards, female-only space and gender-specific work. Where participants who had experience of gender-specific work had worked in partnership with male practitioners, or in delivering boys' work in synergy with girls work, this had been successful.

Need for additional work with the wider community was also discussed. There was seen to be little existing support for those affected by gangs at risk or in crisis, particularly mothers and family members, and without addressing the problems in communities which enabled the normalisation of gangs, girls work would have only minimal impact.

Emphasis was placed on the need for better early intervention from a young age *"rather than dealing with the situation after it's occurred"* (P3), particularly in the context of gangs given the difficulties young people had in leaving once involved. Young people themselves report children joining gangs from an increasingly young age (Qa research, 2011:8). Early intervention work should increase girls' self-esteem and aspirations, raise awareness of risk, empower them to make informed decisions, address healthy relationships and consent, and signpost girls to further sources of support. Given the concerns raised about working relationships, identification and referral-pathways, however, the challenges to delivering this were clear.

Schools had a potentially key role in tackling gangs (NASUWT, 2010:8) and reaching girls at school-age when they were most likely to become involved. It was argued schools should be delivering effective sex and relationships education (SRE), raising awareness of signs of gang-activity amongst staff, appropriately dealing with disclosures, and providing girls with better targeted support. Many schools were unaware of, or unwilling to engage with, the issues surrounding young people and gangs, however, and this was frustrating and damaging to other work being carried out.

Resources and financial

"The voluntary sector is under-resourced and they're under-supported a lot of the time."

(P13)

The work practitioners delivered was extremely financially dependent, and a lack of funding and resources was constantly cited as a challenge. This restricted the development of in-house resources, including staff training and clinical supervision, resources for those they worked with, and the amount of time with which they could engage with someone, which could lead to young people feeling let down or given up on which was potentially very damaging.

Many practitioners could only deliver what they were paid or commissioned to deliver, and this prevented them from developing the work in ways they would like: *"they'll commission you in to do an initial piece of work as a desperation…then you'll start to make huge inroads and then they'll find, right, they want to cut the funding"* (P10). Many were personally affected by funding cuts, or could identify other programmes that had ended or been scaled back.[28] One described programmes as "*dropping like flies"* (E1), and for some, their most immediate concern was just *"to survive in one form or another"* (P1). Wider spending cuts to youth and public services were also damaging, reducing wider support services for young people, as well as places for onward referrals.

Participants were extremely concerned that in the current economic climate girls work would *"be the first thing to go"* as it would not be a commissioning or funding priority, and would *"become easier and easier to be ignored, unimportant and de-prioritised"* (P7). A recent Ofsted survey (2011) found that local authorities often do not even consider the VCS when commissioning services for young people. Participants feared this would increasingly be the case, with statutory agencies attempting to replicate or bring services back internally rather than funding VCSOs, as well as reducing funding to preventative services, focusing instead on enforcement. In reaction to the restrictions in scope that statutory funding dependency caused some had set up as social enterprises or were developing services to generate unrestricted income, including consultancy and training.

Proving worth

"I can't put into words what they do and what it does for them [to be on this programme]."

(P5)

[28] One estimate suggests the VCS is set to lose £2.8 billion between 2011-2016 (Kane, 2011).

Difficulties associated with proving the worth of a service were frustrating to practitioners. Limited evidence was available about women and gangs or girls work to back up the need for and value of their work. Trying to express this on paper proved challenging, and it was suggested that funders should make more effort to see projects at first hand. Smaller, grass-roots organisations found it particularly hard to gain recognition and funding in the face of competition with other organisations.

Measuring outcomes was often problematic as comprehensive data was not always available for the girls they worked with. Evaluation is heavily dependent on a referral or commissioning agency's willingness to track participants, which often did not happen. Many of the positive outcomes of working with girls could not be known *"until quite a long way down the line*" (E3), requiring longitudinal mapping which is rarely possible.

Emotional and psychological impact

"There's only so much that I can go on about it…" (P4)

A significant impact of these challenges was the strain they placed on one key individual to champion girls work, hold all the expertise, and deliver a programme on their own, often without support. This could be lonely and isolating, leading to "*burnout*" or "*apathy"* (P1), and without the motivation, knowledge and skills of one individual, girls could quickly become de-prioritised. Practitioners expressed frustration at the lack of take up of what they did, and some described not wanting to become pigeon-holed as 'the girls worker'.

Practitioners faced considerable strain from working closely with traumatised girls who often had negative experiences of authority and had been failed by previous services. Girls' personal disclosures were often very troubling and "*dealing with traumatised people every day takes its toll"* (P13), particularly if practitioners had personal experience of these issues themselves. The need for professional clinical supervision was heavily stressed to help practitioners make "*sense of things… support the girls better…[and] keep the work safe*" (P1) though this was seldom provided as it was "*not a mandatory requirement and [seen as] really expensive*" (P13), something practitioners perceive as a false economy.

7: Conclusions

Despite the degree to which the word gang is clearly disliked or deconstructed in policy and practice circles, its use is still prevalent. This appears to be largely in response to a shifting policy and funding landscape where the word has developed significant political leverage and become convenient shorthand for a range of experiences associated with urban youth culture. Whilst this may be done with the best intentions, by using the term 'gang' too easily there is a danger of applying it in damaging and inappropriate ways. Services should be cautious about using the word where they might otherwise articulate the needs of the girls they work with in a more realistic way.

Where an area has a known gang problem there is a clear need to raise awareness of the particular risks faced by girls, to advocate on their behalf, and to provide them with specific interventions that address their particular experiences. Girls at risk of gang-involvement should be treated as both a safe-guarding and a public health issue. Better cross-sector multi-agency partnership working, locally agreed strategies and standards, and awareness-raising and training for professionals is needed to ensure better identification of girls in need of support, better referral mechanisms, and effective commissioning and funding of services. This in turn would enable VCSOs to make a better case for the need and value of their services, and to develop work appropriate to girls' level of risk, including prevention, intervention, diversion, and gang-exiting services.

Beyond those facing gang-specific risks, however, are many more girls who share similar experiences but who do not have the additional risk factor of the gang. The programmes represented in my research directly addressed girls' unique experiences as young women, which derived primarily from their social position and experiences of gender inequality. At the heart of all the work were shared ambitions of supporting girls to raise self-esteem, develop a clearer sense of identity, increase aspirations and opportunities, develop a critical consciousness, an awareness of the consequences of their choices and potential vulnerabilities, and to be able to relate safely to others, particularly men. Work broke cultural silences by speaking honestly and without bravado about taboo subjects, particularly sex and relationships, enabling girls to share their experiences and learn they were not alone. Through this girls moved from an individualised to a shared sense of

experience, developed positive relationships with female peers and staff, and gained female role models as a result. Girls' offending, as well as their gang-involvement, is frequently relationship-based so work addressed girls' interpersonal relationships as a priority and aimed to transition girls from spaces that were harmful to them. The skills practitioners brought to this work were key to its success, in particular their ability to be trustworthy and authentic to young people.

Participants were clear that if supported and delivered effectively, girls work has value in its own right, can bring significant long-term cost benefits to girls and wider society, and that it should not be allowed to suffer in the current economic climate. A lack of gender-mainstreaming underlined their concerns and both the work and the staff were at times marginalised, not understood, under-resourced, and under-supported. It should not be left to singular individuals to champion girls' needs, rights, or the value of girls work. Practitioners and VCSOs should be empowered to develop their work further than they currently can to promote innovation and effectively target resources at a gap in service-provision where a real difference can be made. All regions should map the needs of girls and young women in their local area, with the participation of girls themselves and the services who work with them, to ensure they are responding appropriately and complying with their duties under the Equality Act (2010) to eliminate discrimination and victimisation and advance equality of opportunity between people.

8: Policy Recommendations

1. Caution should be taken on the part of funders, policy-makers, services, and the media when using the word 'gang'. When the term is used, everyone should be clear as to what they mean by it.

2. Girls work has value in its own right. Scaled levels of support and intervention should be delivered to address the spectrum of girls' needs and levels of risk, from universal girls work to targeted interventions which focus on gang-specific risks.

3. A greater awareness of girls' needs and experiences must be mainstreamed throughout all young people's services, particularly amongst those working in the youth justice system. To be able to work effectively with girls, practitioners need gender specific training, multi-agency information-sharing structures, and on-going professional support. This must have central direction to be consistent, comprehensive and sustainable.

4. Where there is a locally identified gang problem, there must be a multi-agency safe-guarding response involving the full range of partners to meet the requirement of the Equality Act (2010). Strategic arrangements must:

    a. Address girls' particular needs at the same level of priority as boys';

    b. Support partnership work across agencies, involving VCSOs as equal partners;

    c. Ensure there is full local service provision to address girls' needs along a spectrum, from universal to targeted services;

    d. Include a clear gang exiting strategy for high-risk girls;

    e. Include delivery of gender-sensitive boys' work to run alongside girls work;

    f. Provide wider work with gang-affected families and the wider community;

    g. Address the importance of prevention work and specifically the role schools can play.

5. Clinical supervision must be provided to professionals working with traumatised young people to keep their work safe, professional, and to ensure their continued professional development.

6. Gender-sensitive boys' work should be delivered alongside girls' work by, or in partnership with, organisations with expertise of delivering gender-specific work.

7. VCSOs should be empowered to take their work forward by being embedded within local strategic arrangements that address offending, through more sustainable funding and evaluation of their services to evidence their effectiveness and value.

8. Education providers should take a greater role in addressing gangs, including providing targeted support for girls, raising awareness of signs of gang-affiliation & training staff to respond to disclosures with an appropriate safe-guarding response, and delivering specialist sex and relationships education (SRE).

9. The potential of using mental health and therapeutic models for gang-affected young people should be further explored.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Selection of quotations

Below are quotations from interviews with participants which I felt to be reflective of a significant number of conversations and some of the most striking themes.

What are some of the features of gangs, or gang culture?

"It's very hard to be specific about it because it, the gang situation is a very new situation over here…the media plays it up a lot more than it is…the gang situation is still is very small, especially the really serious violent, like actually organized gang situation is still very small….Everything to do with the gang situation is around identity. The young men not having a clear identity and the young females not having a clear identity and that's what's really powering the gang situation" (P6).

"It's almost as if, young people of today believe that they're not something without being part of a gang – that to be a gang, to be part of a gang is it. You know, they don't seem to see after the gang, or…they're just sort of, sort of very, boxed in" (P2). *"They call it family or crew, or brothers, and they have different roles and structures, which is something that they would not, may not, necessarily have at home"* (P3).

"The whole world is about 'must be the best, must have the good job, must have this'. If you can't compete with that, then how does that make you feel as a child growing up? And if maybe for guys who are on road they might think, 'I can't live up to that suited and booted, carrying a briefcase...I'm just going to be the best at being the baddest on the road'" (P5).

How is the term 'gang' uses? Does everybody using it mean the same thing?

"Certainly policy makers and the police will have a different view of what a gang is than a young person" (P8).

"You'll find there's a big difference, even between academia and practitioners" (E1).

"[Girls] will say they've got friends who are gang members, or they've got experience because of where they live with gangs" but they do not always identify as directly gang-associated and "unless they turn around and say 'I'm a gang member', the statutory agencies around them are not going to identify them as a gang member, and then they're not going to get the services they need" (E1).

How do gangs affect the girls you work with?

"I think that gangs is a 'new' things for girls, well not new, but it's becoming more apparent to everybody but then I think everybody's jumping on 'yeah, girls in gangs'" (P5).

"So there are gangs, gangs of young men who hang around together, there's gangs who may do small crime, and then the gangs that may take it up a notch and do the more serious violent crimes. And I think because this area is still not certain, and un-measurable, it's really hard to say what the young women are going through. But you know there tends to be young women who are the family members, the young women who are the girlfriends, who are in the peer groups, and then the young women who are actually part of the gangs…But I think a lot of the young girls are more so the peer social group, they may not be affiliated, they may not be involved, but they're around it, and they're seeing what's going on" (P6).

"Whilst they're not directly an identified gang member…the net result is that they're equally involved or at risk of getting drawn into either criminal activity or placing themselves at physical risk" (P10).

What are the life experiences of the girls you work with?

"What I was finding was when we would come across young females, the issues that surrounded them were immense, and it would take, for one young female, it would probably take the same amount of time as working with about five young males. You know there was always a lot of sexual abuse, there was always a lot of sexual violence, and the drug use tended to be a lot more extreme" (P6).

"The boys' self-harm will be about putting themselves at risk, by carrying weapons and being in that kind of environment and putting themselves at risk of going to prison, so it's a self-harm literally by making themselves vulnerable to that kind of thing, and breaking their

mothers' hearts, that's as bad as it gets. Whereas girls are the ones that are drinking themselves to death, and having unprotected sex with 9 people in one night…That's a whole different kind of thing isn't it? Or cutting, or eating all over the place…This sort of succession of really dominant relationships, that kind of self-harm, it's a different sort of fit and I would still call that violence, because that's violence committed to yourself." (P13).

What kind of relationships do the girls that you work with have with their peers?

"The main things that came out of [our own research] was the levels of vulnerability and manipulation that [girls have] got in terms of relationships and really their ignorance or lack of understanding about their rights and about consent and about the issues that they face in terms of personal identity and self-worth" (P10).

"They want a boy to like them, they think that by sleeping with them this boy will like them, or by hanging around holding drugs, selling drugs for this guy they've fallen in love with, that he'll like you" (E1).

"We're not showing our young women an alternative of what it is to be a woman… So now they're thinking, to be a woman is to be highly sexualised, to dress highly sexualised, to flirt and get male attention" (P6).

A lot of people have spoken about the supposed increase in girls' violence – is this something you have seen in the girls you work with?

"There's a real issue in…the perpetrator not being brought to justice, but then as soon as they've offended they are brought to justice…including custodial sentences for often quite minor crimes - breaches, fighting" (P1).

"A real key theme for all the young women really is their anger, and then subsequent violence as a result of that anger. That violence isn't shown in maybe the way you see young men's violence shown, so for example, you know, fights with random groups or whatever, it's actually the anger and the violence is shown in young women's intimate relationships, so towards their mums often, and towards their peers, and it's very much tied up with the dynamics of that relationship - feeling betrayed or offended in some way. And then also if we

look even deeper into their anger and their violence there's often a whole complex tapestry of experiences of neglect or abuse, at different levels, depending on the young woman"' (P8).

What kind of provision exists for girls in youth and youth justice settings?

"Most of the traditional intervention programs that are designed, are delivered generically with an emphasis that tends to lean towards the male side of things because they tend to be those that would be most at risk of offending or going down that route. So we felt that it wasn't a true reflection of the needs of the young women" (P10).

"In the mixed groups, [the girls] were saying nothing, absolutely nothing, but loving it, coming regularly as clockwork, but never saying anything" (P13).

"There's not enough work on girls at the moment...There's one or two speckled around the place and it just isn't enough targeted provisions for young women that deal with the intervention and prevention…We feel that there needs to be much more out there and really it's about people sort of pulling together expertise and trying to create services and the capacity to build so that there are enough services out there to work with young women, because it's nowhere near enough at the moment" (P10).

What kind of work do you deliver with girls, and what kind of outcomes do you see?

"The style that we deliver the programs is fundamentally, rather than being a sort of lecture based program, where you're just lecturing to young people "this is a fact," is trying to empower them and facilitate them to reach their own conclusions" (P10).

"And [the girls], through their own inquiry, actually came out with the analysis, whereby, 'we're vulnerable and men know that, and they manipulate us because they can, and because we're not allowed to do these things that would make us frigid, teases. Therefore, what's going on? And actually, part of the reason I'm here, is because a lot of that was happening, and nobody helped me work it out'" (P7).

'[Y]ou do see a change from the first day to the last day, where on the first day there's a lot of insecurity around, animosity, lack of confidence, not wanting to take a risk, maybe

bullying behaviour, all the rest of it, you definitely get to a place on the last day where there's a sense of camaraderie, or respect in the room, maybe love in the room' (P1).

"I want…for us to start thinking about girls associated with gangs in regards to vulnerability and how we can take care of them better, how we can support them, how we can move them on, how they can then make better choices for themselves" (P4).

"And once you're in…I suddenly had access to these lovely little people but I know the horrible little face that they pulled when they came in and I know that the YOT officers see nothing but that horrible face, the mask that they wear, which gives nothing away, which is part of surviving on the street" (P13).

What are some of the main challenges to delivering the work?

"[G]irls and young women's work has…always been put on the back burner, and it's always been the first thing to go. That's going to happen more and more, and it's going to become easier and easier for it to be ignored…and de-prioritised. And a huge concern of mine is that race, class and gender become taboo. And that actually, they're the only things that it's worth talking about" (P7).

"And this is what really pains me…when it comes down to funding [work with gang-affected girls will be] one of the first things to go, because it hasn't been evaluated yet, because we don't know what works yet because we've only just started doing it" (E1).

"Until the Government or regional bodies say this is what we expect as a minimum to protect children from this kind of violence, then you have this postcode issue and interventions working alongside nothing actually" (E2).

"You know where before we've got youth clubs across the city, we've got other groups that have been funded from the government…and now we're not having that and those youth clubs are being closed down, young people are still coming together, they've still got needs…it may be that if that youth group is still open down the road, they've got someone to go to, or someone to talk to about their problems before it got to the stage where they felt that they had to take it into their own hands" (P3).

"If you're closing down everything that benefits young people, how are we as a society going to complain when young people start acting up?" (P6).

"And you see these amazing women with no training, none of the luxury of the knowledge and the training and the years at university and family discussions where you can talk about – none of that. They've come from shit street, via prison, to delivering in the voluntary sector for £7.50 an hour, with no one who ever asks them how it's effecting them" (P13).

"But if that trauma and abuse hasn't been dealt with properly, all those youth workers are going to do, and I've seen it happen a million times, is put their issues on other young people" (P6).

"When you're working with highly traumatised young people who've gone through so much themselves and you're…absorbing all of this emotion, this negativity that they've actually been through and experienced, you yourself need processing" (P10).

What could make current work more effective?

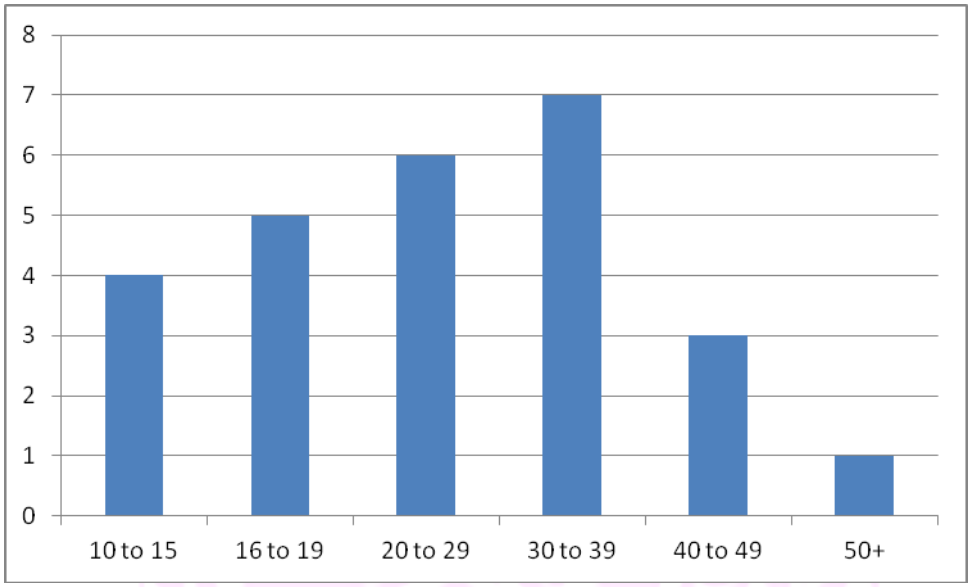
Young men "need a space as well…that's non-judgmental and that gives you time to maybe have those concerning attitudes challenged but give you the opportunity to ask the questions that you need to ask. And get some sensible and factual answers given back to you. So that's what you're basing your actions on rather than what you're seeing in the media and quite sort of pornographic-based material" (P8).

"I've always maintained that there needs to be a multi-agency organization, be that local authority, voluntary sector, however it looks, probably ideally a mixture that can take referrals and do key work with girls. You see it in bits and pieces; you see it as an add-on…an add-on to my job description. You see it as a six month contract…you see it as women's and girls' network, there's a worker there but she's only in ---- for two days...we see that, and that is not good enough...So I'd like to see that there be a service for girls that are at risk, gangs, whatever, that do key work, can support girls from beginning to end, has colleagues that has fingers in different pies, and be on top of supporting girls so that they don't end up going into the criminal justice system" (P4).

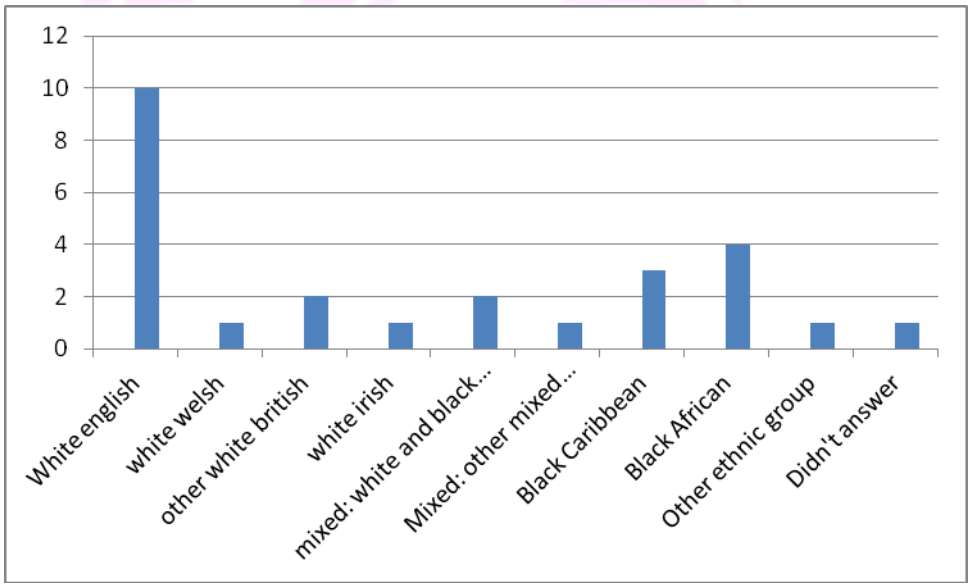
Appendix 2

Participant monitoring information

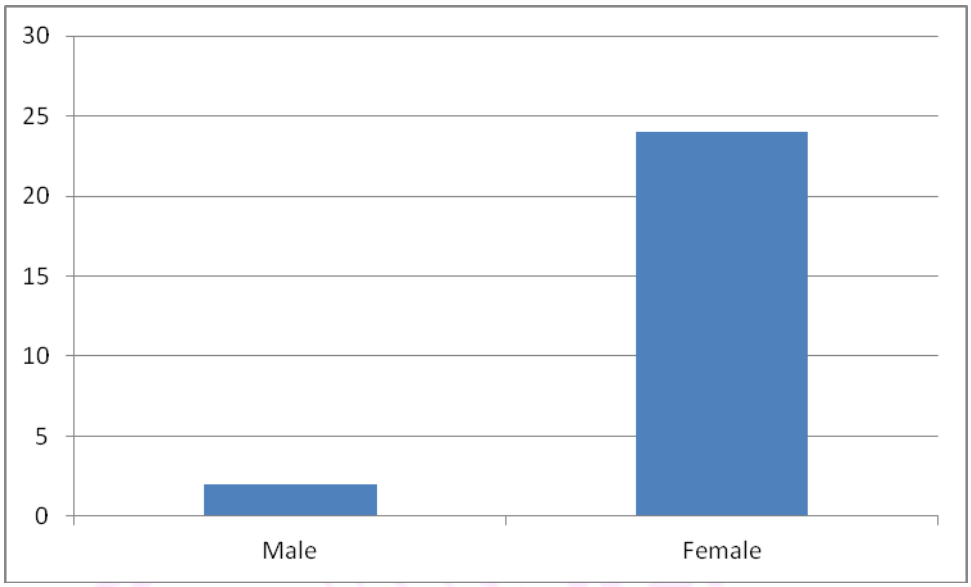
Included below is participant's monitoring data from practitioner and expert interviews, and focus groups with young women. Data from a focus group with five young women in prison is not included here for confidentiality reasons.



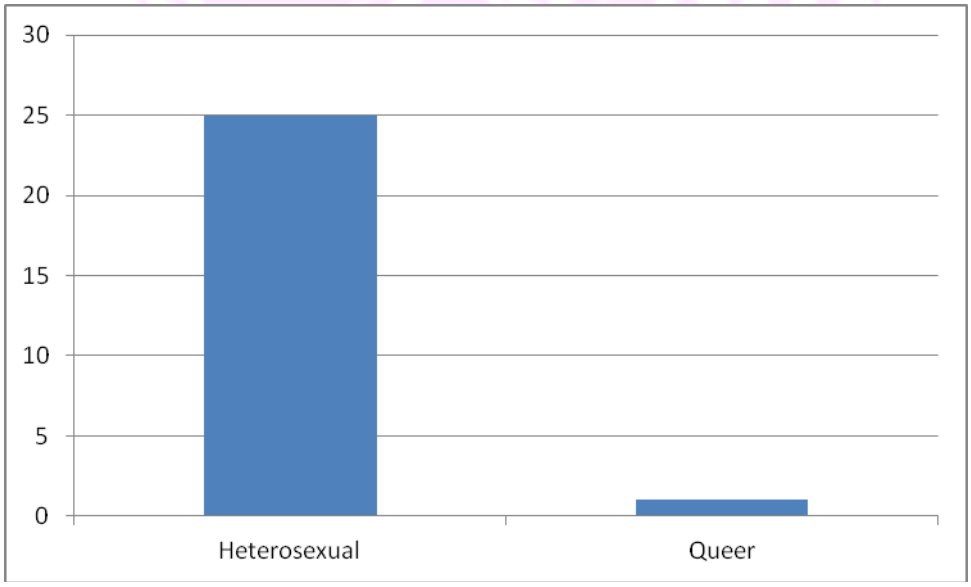
Participant age



Participant ethnicity



Participant gender



Participant sexual orientation[29]

[29] Sexual orientation category options were: lesbian; gay; bisexual; heterosexual; queer; prefer not to say

Appendix 3

List of interviews

All interview participant names have been anonymised and coded with a reference for reasons of confidentiality.

Interview number	Participant reference code	Gender	Role
1	P1	Female	Practitioner / project manager
2	P2	Female	Practitioner
3	P3	Female	Practitioner
4	G1 – G5	All female	Programme participants *Focus group with five young women in prison – quotations and monitoring information not included.*
5	P4	Female	Practitioner / project manager
6	G6 – G10	All female	Programme participants *Focus group with five young women.*
7	P5	Female	Practitioner / project manager
8	P6	Female	Practitioner / project manager
9	E1	Female	Expert
10	P7	Female	Practitioner / project manager
11	P8 P9	Female Female	Practitioner Project manager
12	E2	Female	Expert
13	P10	Male	Practitioner / project manager
14	P11 P12	Female Female	Practitioner Practitioner
15	G11 – G17	All female	Programme participants *Focus group with seven girls.*
16	P13	Female	Practitioner
17	E3	Male	Expert

ENDS