Factors that make young people vulnerable to gang involvement

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Introduction

- Main topic – to explore factors that make young people vulnerable to Gang Involvement.
- There is no singular cause for Gang Involvement.
- We will examine criminological theories, evidence, social, structural and individual influences.
- We will be looking at the different factors such as family, poverty, peer influence and education and substance misuse.
- We chose these as they are all factors that contribute in making young people vulnerable.

Family instability and Gang involvement

Family breakdown and unstable homes

- Family instability is a big risk factor for youth gang involvement particularly when combined with trauma, neglect and weak parental attachment.

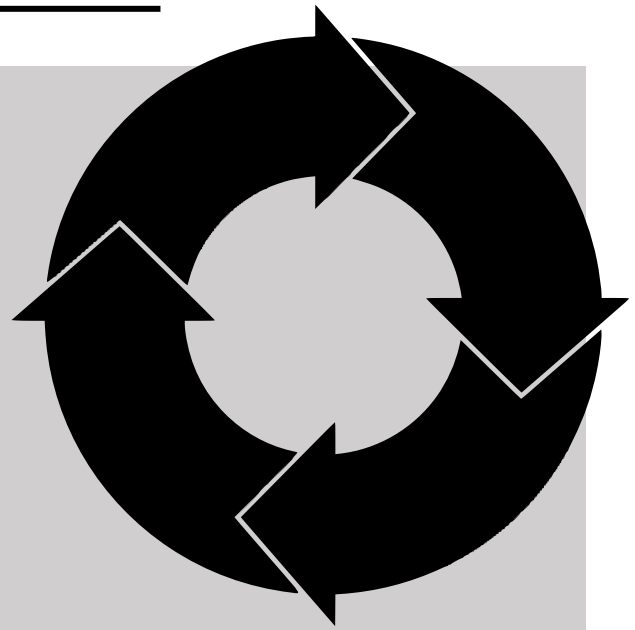
Evidence:

- Children exposed to abuse, neglect and parental substance misuse are more vulnerable to gang recruitment (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021).
- 24% of gang-associated young offenders had witnessed domestic abuse (Children's Commissioner, 2019).
- Over 90% of young offenders experienced loss or rejection (Yates, 2010)

UK Context

- 35,600 youth offences recorded in 2023-24 (Ministry of Justice, 2025)
- Violence now accounts for 34% of youth offending

Trauma, Abuse and the ‘Cycle of Violence’



- Exposure to violence in the home can normalise aggression.
- Young people may imitate violence (Bandura,1977).
- Trauma impacts emotional regulation and decision-making.

Evidence

- Victims of childhood abuse are more likely to engage in violence later in life (Widom, 1989; Holt et al., 2008).
- Young people experiencing abuse are up to 4 times more likely to join gangs (Thompson & Braaten-Antrim, 1998).
- Violence follows a ‘Cycle of Violence” pattern across generations (Dodge et al.,1990) However, it is not deterministic. Many young people show resilience.

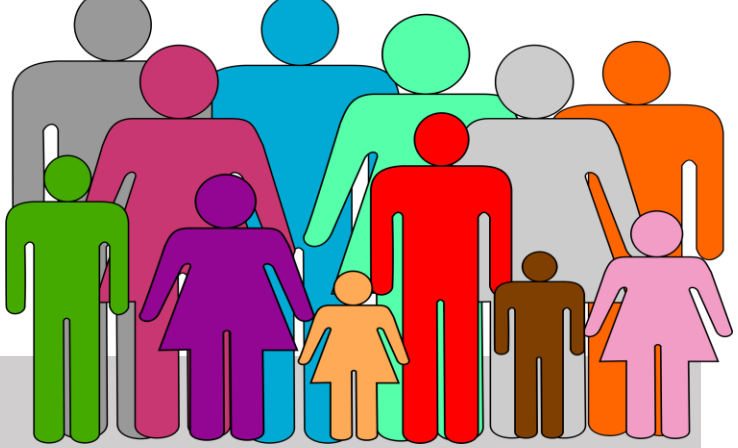
Weak Attachment and Parenting Factors

Strong family bonds are crucial to avoid young people joining gangs. Family structure alone is not decisive. Quality of relationships is more important than structure.

Evidence:

- Weak family bonds increase the likelihood of offending (Hirishi, 1969).
- Poor parental monitoring and family conflict increases gang risk (Lenzi et al.,2014).
- Poor parental supervision and inconsistent discipline are key risk factors.
- Father absence is identified as a recurring theme in gang involvement (Young et al., 2013).

Gangs as a ‘Surrogate Family”

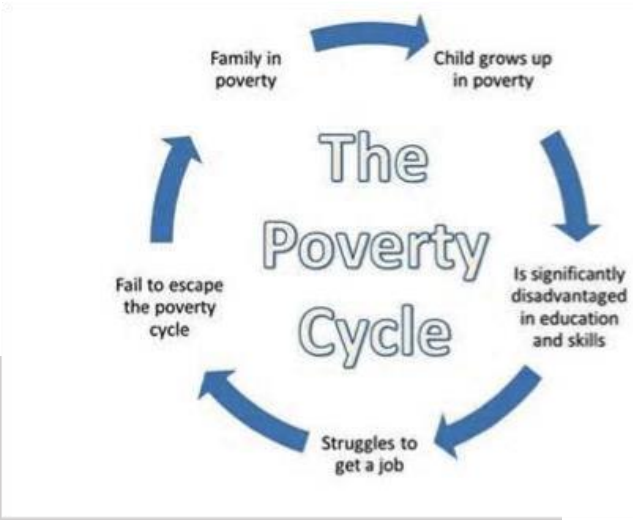


- Gangs can help provide- identity, belonging, protection and emotional support.

Evidence:

- Young people may join gangs to replace missing family structures (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).
- Gangs function as “substitute families” (Centre for Social Justice, 2009).
- Many young people report they are seeking security and loyalty that is missing at home (Children’s Commissioner, 2017).

Poverty, Family Stress and Survival



- Poverty contributes to family instability and stress.

- Some families may tolerate gang involvement due to survival pressures.

Evidence:

- Gang involvement may be viewed as necessary for survival in deprived areas. Economic hardship can indirectly encourage gang participation (Anderson, 1999).

- Structural inequalities and limited economic opportunities are therefore a factor to gang involvement.

Interactional Theory

- Family instability alone is insufficient. Gang involvement results from multiple interactions, including peers, school and community.

Evidence:

- Weak parental bonds combined with deviant peers increases gang involvement (Thornberry & Krohn, 2001; Lenzi et al., 2015).

- Family support can buffer against negative peer influence.

UK Trends and Criminal Exploitation

Key statistics

- Over 3,200 knife offences committed by children annually (Ministry of Justice, 2025).
- Around 15,500 children identified at risk of criminal exploitation (Home Office, 2025).
- 1 in 9 teenagers approached by criminal gangs for exploitation (Youth Endowment Fund, 2025).
- 47% of young people have witnessed or experienced violence (Youth Endowment Fund, 2023).

Key argument:
Family breakdown increases vulnerability, but exploitation networks actively target this vulnerability.

Linking Intervention and Policy

Effective approaches include:

- Public health model (violence as preventable).
- Multi-agency interventions (e.g Glasgow VRU).
- School based prevention programmes.
- Family support and early intervention.

Evidence:

- Public health approaches reduce violence through prevention (HMIP, 2021).
- Programmes improve attitudes and reduce gang related norms.
- Addressing family instability early can significantly reduce youth gang risk.

Gang Involvement and Poverty

Low-income areas

- Gangs are usually located in low-income areas.

<u>Reasoning:</u>

- Due to poverty (Assari et al., 2020).
- High crime rate in usually in low-income areas(The Health Foundation, 2023).
- Living in deprived areas can also affect health due to violent crime in the area(The Health Foundation, 2023).

Low-income Households

- Children from single parent households are less likely to get involved In crime than two parent households (Clemmow et al., 2025)
- Although people from single parent households may also suffer from low income due to only having one parent bringing in money(Clemmow et al., 2025)
- Families may also influence their children or sibling to involve themselves with gang culture and crime as a source of income (Kakar, 1998)
- Children may also see family or friend involoved with gangs and may feel the need to do so too. (Kakar, 1998)

Lack of education

Children who come from low-income households tend to do worse in school

Reasoning:

- Tiredness and fatigue was the main reason
- Not being able to concentrate
- Unable to complete homework

(National Education Union, 2024)

Immigration

- 67% of children in need were white in 2025.
- 33% were from all other ethnic groups combined. (Service.gov.uk, 2025)
- In 2023 it was recorded that black people were 2.2 times more likely to get arrested than white people.(Home Office, 2024)

Police involvement in low-income areas

Crime rates are higher in low-income areas due to poverty, so police involvement is more regular

To maintain crime police have set in place Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) to patrol low-income areas(Rowland Atkinson, Gesa Helms and University Of Glasgow. Department Of Urban Studies, 2007)

Police a trying to get low-income communities to work with them rather than against them to help prevent crime. (Gov.uk, 2021)

Statistics on gang crime rates in low-income areas

27,000 children (10–17-year-olds) associate and involve themselves in gangs(HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024)

313,000 children said they knew someone who was in a gang(HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024)

33,000 had siblings who were members of a gang(HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024)

34,000 children were either a gang member, knew a gang member or a victim of gang violence in the year 2017(HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2024)

Boys from low income areas and households tend to commit more crimes than girls from the same background(Gmelch and Kuppinger, 2018)

Out of all shooting in London half of them are carried out by gangs and 22% of all serious violence(GOV.UK, 2011)

Gang Involvement and Substance Misuse

Drug and Gang normalisation and operations

- Bandura's social learning theory more specifically the modeling process may be used to understand observing substance misuse at an early age may influence one to partake in drug related crimes, country lines is an example of this

- the four processes of the modelling process begin with attention, meaning observing the act, retention of the act, reproduction which is the ability to replicate the act, and finally the motivation, which is the means to carry out this act. (Nabavi and Bijandi, 2012).

- When drugs and gang behaviour are normalised the moral boundery between wrong and right begins to decrease, in terms of trafficking

- The majority of the youths involved in gangs are at the bottom of the gang hierarchy and are often manipulated into these operations while the members higher in the operation profit from the exploitation of these individuals (Maxwell, 2024) and with normalisation in the moral boundery comes victimimasation of youth gang members.

Drug Debt and trafficking

- Drug debt is a common way for a substant using or dealing youth to be exploited into a gang
- Drug trafficking is often seen as a profitable way to deal drugs, and so youths are often exploited at a young age when most vulnerable. (UKDPC,2008)
- When drugs and gang behaviour are normalised the moral boundary between wrong and right begins to decrease,
- A case study showed that Traffickers had higher levels of moral disengagement and noted to dehumanise victims (D'Urso, Petruccelli and Pace, 2018)
- With this means that people in the higher levels in the gang operations may feel normalised in their actions to cooerce and manipulate a child into their gang.

Substance use Disorders (SUD)

- Adolescense is the pinnacle of cognitive activity and growth however is also the peak of risk-taking and impulsive behaviour. (Ravindranath et al., 2024)
- Much of this impulsive behaviour tends to be substance misuse, often alcohol and cannabis consumption, when these are consumed there is a vast amount of damage to brain development.
- Substance use disorders often are assosicated with violent and aggressive behaviour, a common side effect of SUDs is the damage to the adolescent brain impair neurocognitive function. (Doran et al., 2012).
- With this youths may be more suseptible into a community that have these things in common such as drug use, alcahol use and aggressive behaviour. They may find community in gangs as these acts are well known in such groups.

Drug Connections and Exposure

- Gang connections are easily made by Youths at a young age, From perchusing substances and in many cases turning to dealing.
- (Morselli, 2009) connected how ties within neighbourhoods, communities, families and friendships may influence how one may have ties within criminal networks.
- Exposure to these networks makes the introduction into a gang easier for a young person as they may already know some of these people from the the drug community and perchusing.
- However, often these connections and friendships are a result of drug grooming and manipulation. Once these conncections are made it becomes more difficult to detach from the community.

County lines statistics

- 748 children and young people have received support from the dedicated County Lines specialist support service (Home Office, 2024)
- 5,420 safeguarding referrals year ending 2024 (Home Office, 2024)
- 1,348 people , including 252 girls and 544 boys under the age of 18 safeguarded in one week in March 2026 (National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), 2026)
- 46,000 young people are believed to be involved in county lines (Jaggers, 2024)
- 1 in 5 boys are being offered work inside a county lines operation (Jaggers, 2024)
- estimated that around 14,000 children are at risk of child criminal exploitation and drug trafficking in county line operations (Parliament.uk, 2025)

Gang Involvement and Peer Groups and Education

Vulnerable students

- A poor educational background can be difficult for student to be engaged in school, and be difficult for the individuals to gain the proper qualifications they need to find employment opportunities resulting in people turning to to crime to support themselves
- Young people tend to loose interest in education once they have joined a gang as they are receiving money however they still don’t receive there qualifications to be able to get a proper job in the future
- There is a correlation between high exclusion rates and increased vulnerability to gang recruitment
- (Novus, 2025), (Emery et al., 2025)

Peer pressure

- A child can easily be peer pressured in to joining a gang and wanting to fit in with others and to feel powerful and to gain status
- Or they want to feel protected from other gangs and avoiding being targeted
- Social media are being used by gangs for recruitment, boasting, and bullying often intensifying peer pressure
- (BBC, n.d)

Special educational needs

- Children with special educational needs and disability's are significantly more countable to criminal exploitation
- Gangs will often target children with educational needs, mental health issues or disability's as they will often look for emotional vulnerability
- A child is more apt risk of being recruited if they have been excluded from school or have special educational needs
- (Leeds city council, 2022)

Police involvement in schools

- Safer school officers where introduced to combat gang activity and youth violence with over 650 in the uk going in to schools
- They work in schools to provide a rapport with students, acting as a direct link between the community and the police to reduce crime
- They help deliver lessons on the dangers of drugs, knife crime and county lines gang activity and help raise awareness among students
- Police focus on early interventions for young people showing behavioural signs of being drown into violence and aim to prevent them from becoming involved in gangs
- (HMICFRS,2023)

Statistics on education and the criminal justice system

- Young adults who received custodial sentences had a lower levels of educational attainment, 36.9% achieving the expected level of English and maths by the end of key stage 2
- 52.5% of young adults who received custodial sentences had been persistently absent during schooling
- 72.2% of those who had a custodial sentence had received a fixed exclusion compared of those with a non custodial sentences or cautions
- (Office for national statistics, 2022)

Conclusion

- In conclusion, the factors that lead into youth gang involvement are not just black in white nor a singular issue is an array of different and complicated issues that may inevitibly lead a young person into these situation.
- Vulnerabilities often brought on by many adverse childhood experiences are often at the heart of a young person yearning for belonging elsewhere.

Conclusion

- These factors including,
- Family environments surrounded in toxicity and neglect often are a factor of youths in gangs evidentily seeking comfort elsewhere.
- Poverty another cause of concern for such things as the push for financial stability and reach for survival in a community of limited opportunities.
- Substance misuse reinforcing patterns of learnt behaviour and resulting in cycles of harm and danger to individuals and others.
- And finally peer pressure within friendships and education influencing desire for community and acceptance, in gang culture for the worse
- And a lack of education restricting the chance for change and a future.

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