CHILDREN

INSIGHTS FROM CRIMINOLOGY ON

AND EXTREME

CHILD TRAJECTORIES INTO AND OUT OF

VIOLENCE

NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

'STATE OF RESEARCH' BRIEF
JACQUELINE SCOTT

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UNU 'State of Research' Workshop

The United Nations University (UNU), in concert with UNICEF, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), and the governments of Luxembourg and Switzerland, is leading a research initiative examining child trajectories into and out of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in contemporary conflicts, including those listed as terrorist and characterized as "violent extremist."[1] This project will produce programmatic guidance for preventing the recruitment and use of children by, and effectively disengaging children from, NSAGs that employ extreme violence. As part of an initial desk review process, UNU convened a series of "state of research" workshops to draw upon perspectives, expertise, and experience that traditionally have not been included in United Nations policy and programmatic discussions in this area. To summarize the workshops, build on the empirical findings discussed, and promote cross-learning, UNU has published a three-part "State of Research" series, which, in addition to this brief, includes *Insights from Social Science on Child Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups* and *Viewing Non-State Armed Groups from a Brand Marketing Lens: A Case Study of Islamic State*.

This brief is based on a 9 December 2016 workshop that UNU hosted with criminologists, sociologists, and practitioners to discuss how research on, and experiences with, delinquency, crime prevention and desistance, and gang prevention and disengagement might be applied to research on, and programming for, children associated with contemporary NSAGs. This "State of Research" Brief provides a summary of the workshop discussions combined with a limited literature review drawing from the studies and research cited during the workshop. The brief does not attempt to provide a comprehensive review of *all* the relevant work in this area. Rather, it outlines a few of the robust findings and points of consensus across the academic literature and practitioner experiences on criminality, violence, and street gang-related programmes, focusing on research that serves as a helpful analogue or findings that have implications for understanding child trajectories into and out of NSAGs.

Before proceeding, it is important to provide three caveats. First and foremost, the research findings highlighted in this brief are derived particularly from studies on street gangs, and while these groups do share some similarities with NSAGs in formal "armed conflict" contexts, they also differ in important ways. Much of the research on street gangs suggests that they are localized, typically lack any underlying political or religious motivations, do not have cohesive structures or role specializations, and use violence in a spontaneous manner, often as a response to signs of disrespect.[2] Conversely, NSAGs can range from local to international in scope and reach, and often engage in strategic use of violence to achieve political goals.

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1   There is no binding definition of "violent extremist" in international law. The term is used by different actors to describe a wide array of groups and activity. What is "extreme" depends on context, with the result that the term "violent extremist" may have different connotations in different contexts.

2   Scott H. Decker and David Pyrooz, "'I'm Down for a Jihad': How 100 Years of Gang Research Can Inform the Study of Terrorism, Radicalization and Extremism", *Perspectives of Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2015); Cheryl Maxson, "Gang Homicide: A Review and Extension of the Literature," in M. D. Smith & M. A. Zahn, eds., *Homicide: A Sourcebook of Social Research*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999); Eduardo A. Vasquez, Brian Lickel, and Karen Hennigan, "Gangs, Displaced, and Group-Based Aggression", *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, Vol. 15 (2010); and Deborah Lamm Weisel, "The Evolution of Street Gangs: An Examination of Form and Variation", in *Responding to Gangs: Evaluation and Research* (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, 2002).

In addition, the two differ in their relationship to the state. While gangs often promote scepticism or even cynicism about the state-backed legal system, they are not necessarily committed to competition with the state for formal political authority as most NSAGs are, to one degree or another. In some cases, there are also differences in membership. For example, urban poverty and neighbourhood disadvantage are correlated with gang membership in the United States,[3] but that does not necessarily appear to be the case across NSAGs, especially for certain subsets (e.g., terrorist groups).[4] Most dramatically, data from the United States suggests that gang membership tends to be significantly younger than that of many NSAGs – although there is a great deal of variation among the latter and well-known outliers with extremely young ranks (e.g., Lord's Resistance Army [LRA]).[5] Despite the age differentials across some groups, both street gangs and NSAGs use children – though this may violate domestic and/or international law – and the latter operate in opposition to a strong international norm against the use of children. While these differences and the lack of overlaps in membership[6] may limit some cross-learning, street gangs and NSAGs also share several important traits, such as the use of symbolic and instrumental violence to achieve particular goals,[7] and underlying group processes[8] and dynamics.[9]

A second important caveat is that much of the gang and crime reduction literature is based on studies conducted in the United States or other western countries. Without further research, the answer to whether the findings are applicable across other geographic contexts remains unclear. Lastly, much of the research discussed here has involved not only children (under 18 years old), but also youth.

A third caveat is that the research studies on NSAGs cited in this brief differ in their sampling and focus, hence the occasional references to studies on terrorist groups or extremists, as compared with NSAGs more broadly. While the findings from studies on subsets of NSAGs may not be representative of all other NSAGs, taken together, they allow us to build out the evidence base, which, by its varied nature, highlights some of the dimensions that may influence differences across groups (e.g., ideology, tactics, access to resources).

3   G. David Curry, Scott H. Decker, and David C. Pyrooz, *Confronting Gangs: Crime and Community*, third edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

4   There have been studies on Hezbollah and Hamas on this subject. For example, see Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malechova, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2003).

5   Although this study uses a broader definition of extremists, instead of members of listed terrorist groups, Pyrooz et al. find that, in the United States, gang members were on average 15 years younger than extremists, although there are questions about possible bias in some of the data. The study uses the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset of "Islamist, Far Left and Far Right individuals who have radicalized to violent and non-violent extremism in the United States" and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) data on a cohort of American youth born between 1980 and 1984. Differentials in age likely impact other differences across membership (e.g., educational attainment). David Pyrooz, Gary LaFree, Scott Decker, and Patrick James, "Cut from the Same Cloth? A Comparative Study of Gang Membership and Domestic Extremists in the United States", forthcoming.

6   Pyrooz et al. found that only about 6% of the 1,473 US domestic extremists in the PIRUS database had a history of gang involvement. Ibid., p. 21.

7   Decker and Pyrooz, "I'm Down for a Jihad".

8   Group processes are the dynamics that socialize individuals into groups and influence individuals' behaviour.

9   Alpaslan Özerdem and Sukanya Podder, "Disarming Youth Combatants: Mitigating Youth Radicalization and Violent Extremism", *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2011).

1 Risk Factors for Involvement with Gangs and Criminal Groups

In trying to understand the factors that influence child association with NSAGs, a field in which scientifically rigorous quantitative and longitudinal analysis is limited, it may be helpful to consider the decades of research on child and youth involvement with other types of violent groups – namely criminal organizations and street gangs – to consider what insight they might shed on contemporary NSAGs. Some studies have identified a number of consistent risk factors tied to youth gang membership, including negative life events, poor parental supervision, and delinquent peers.[10] Familial criminality has also been identified as a risk factor, particularly relating to the impacts of multigenerational gang affiliation[11] or current family gang membership.[12] While no particular cocktail of risk factors can fully explain gang affiliation, research demonstrates that individuals accumulate risks for gang affiliation.[13]

> While no particular cocktail of risk factors can fully explain gang affiliation, research demonstrates that individuals accumulate risks for gang affiliation.

This phenomenon, called cumulative risk,[14] suggests that while the impact of any one risk factor is likely minimal, the impact of several risk factors taken together can drive individuals towards criminal group membership. The individual risk factors that predict gang membership and violent offending are similar, but research finds that gang-affiliated individuals usually have more risk factors than non-affiliated criminal offenders.[15] This line of research also suggests the existence of a risk factor tipping point. For example, one study of gang membership showed that youth who possessed any six of the 18 identified risk factors were nearly 10 times more likely to join a gang than youth who did not have any of the

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[10] For a systematic review of risk factors, see Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[11] Martin Sanchez-Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); James Diego Vigil, *Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988); and Joan Moore, *Going Down to the Barrio*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

[12] Scott Decker and G. David Curry, "Addressing Key Features of Gang Membership: Measuring the Involvement of Young Members", *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 28, No. 6 (2000); and Jason Kissner and David Pyrooz, "Self-Control, Differential Association, and Gang Membership: A Theoretical and Empirical Extension of the Literature", *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (2009).

[13] Terence Thornberry, Marvin Krohn, Alan Lizotte, Carolyn Smith, and Kimberly Tobin, *Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and David Eitle, Steven Gunkel, and Karen Van Gundy, "Cumulative Exposure to Stressful Life Events and Male Gang Membership", *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2004). Research finds it takes a greater accumulation of risk factors for youths to become involved in gang violence than for youth to be involved in violent offending on its own. Finn-Aage Esbensen, Dana Peterson, Terrance J. Taylor, and Adrienne Freng, "Similarities and Differences in Risk Factors for Violent Offending and Gang Membership," *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2009), p. 327.

[14]   This finding in the criminological literature is mirrored in developmental psychology research, where there is strong evidence that children exposed to multiple risk factors have a significantly higher likelihood for developing psychological problems, exhibiting problem behaviour, and manifesting poor cognitive development. Rutter's famous study of children from the Isle of Wight found that those with one or two of the following risk factors – parental discord, low socioeconomic standing, household overcrowding, paternal criminality, maternal psychiatric disorder, and child involvement with foster care – were no different in their likelihood of adverse outcomes. However, once a child accumulated two risk factors the likelihood increased fourfold, and when a child had four or more risks the likelihood jumped exponentially. Michael Rutter, "Protective Factors in Children's Responses to Stress and Disadvantage," in M. W. Kent and J. E. Rolf, eds., *Primary Prevention in Psychopathology, Volume 8: Social Competence in Children* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1979). Another study found that four-year-olds exposed to five or more risk factors have a nearly threefold probability of psychological distress as compared to children with one or no risk factors. A. J. Sameroff, R. Seifer, R. Baracos, M. Zax, and S. Greenspan, "Intelligence Quotient Scores of 4-Year-Old Children: Social-Environmental Risk Factors", *Pediatrics*, Vol. 79, Issue 3 (1987).

[15] Esbensen et al. conclude that certain risk factors predict only violence and not gang membership, and other risk factors predict both, but there are no risk factors that predict only gang membership and not violence. Gang-involved youth have higher rates of the same risk factors as non-involved youth. The programming implication of this finding is that gang-involved youth likely require more intensive and earlier interventions that focus on group influences. Esbensen et al., "Similarities and Differences in Risk Factors".

risk factors.[16] When youth accumulated just one more risk factor (seven), their potential to become gang affiliated increased further, making them 20 times more likely to join a gang than another young person with no risk factors.[17] Risk accumulation has also been identified as a potentially useful approach for predicting risk of involvement in "political extremism"[18] and violent groups.[19]

2 Gang/Criminal Group Processes

Despite key differences in organization, ideology, and use of violence,[20] the intragroup processes that underlie criminal groups/street gangs and NSAGs are broadly similar,[21] suggesting that empirical findings from one field may help to inform research in the other.[22] The research on gang and criminal group cohesion, recruitment, violence, and mobilization,[23] phenomena that are driven by underlying group processes that include socialization, establishing a group identity, and creating an oppositional "us vs. them" mentality,[24] may be particularly relevant for understanding child trajectories into and out of NSAGs.

While the individual risk factors associated with becoming involved in a gang are often similar to those for general violent offending,[25] gang association can have a significant impact on an individual's level and severity of offending. Strong empirical evidence indicates that criminal group involvement can facilitate or enhance individual offending over and above other individual-level factors.[26] Once in the gang,[27] the socialization and structure the group provides has an amplifying effect, encouraging more criminal offending, particularly violence.[28]

Gangs influence youth internalization of certain modes of behaviour while helping young people develop a sense of importance and self-esteem. For example, one way to attain status within a gang, and to project the necessary identity and reputation, is through violence.[29] There is also some evidence that the pressure to aggress on behalf of the gang is influenced by the degree to which the individual identifies as a member of that gang.[30]

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16   Ibid., p. 321.

17   Ibid.

18   Daphna Canetti, Brian J. Hall, Carmit Rapaport, and Carly Wayne, "Exposure to Political Violence and Political Extremism", *European Psychologist*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2013).

19   Özerdem and Podder, "Disarming Youth Combatants".

20   Whereas NSAGs are often more organized and strategic – or at least tactical – in their use of violence as they seek to promote their particular ideology, street gangs typically do not have cohesive structures or role specializations. Weisel, "The Evolution of Street Gangs". Street gang violence is typically spontaneous and not always strategic. Maxson, "Gang Homicide". Gang violence is often committed as a response to signs of disrespect and lacks any underlying political or religious motivations. Vasquez et al., "Gangs, Displaced, and Group-Based Aggression"; and Decker and Pyrooz, "I'm Down for a Jihad".

21   Decker and Pyrooz, "I'm Down for a Jihad"; Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Dennis Rodgers and Robert Muggah, "Gangs as Non-State Armed Groups: The Central American Case", *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2009).

22   It should be noted that when NSAG membership is much older than that of a street gang – as is likely the case for a smaller clandestine terrorist group –group processes may differ significantly due to age dynamics, thus reducing the utility of the comparison.

23   Decker and Pyrooz, "I'm Down for a Jihad".

24   Özerdem and Podder, "Disarming Youth Combatants", p. 70; and Malcolm Klein, *The American Street Gang: Its Nature, Prevalence and Control* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

25   Esbensen et al., "Similarities and Differences in Risk Factors for Violent Offending and Gang Membership," p. 327.

26   David Pyrooz, Jillian Turanovic, Scott Decker, and Jun Wu, "Taking Stock of the Relationship between Gang Membership and Offending: A Meta-Analysis", *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2016); Terence P. Thornberry, Marvin D. Krohn, A. J. Lizotte, and Deborah Chard-Wierschem, "The Role of Juvenile Gangs in Facilitating Delinquent Behavior", *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (1993); Uberto Gatti, Richard E. Tremblay, Frank Vitaro, and Pierre McDuff, "Youth Gangs, Delinquency and Drug Use: A Test of the Selection, Facilitation and Enhancement Hypotheses", *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 46, No. 11 (2005); and Chris Melde and Finn Esbensen, "Gang Membership as a Turning Point in the Life Course", *Criminology*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2011).

27   Research suggests that individuals who become gang members exhibit more delinquency than non-affiliated peers prior to joining. Rachel A. Gordon, Benjamin B. Lahey, Eriko Kawai, and David P. Farrington, "Antisocial Behavior and Youth Gang Membership: Selection and Socialization," *Criminology*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2004).

28   Thornberry et al., "The Role of Juvenile Gangs."

29   Vigil, *Barrio Gangs*; and Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

30   Vasquez et al., "Gangs, Displaced and Group-Based Aggression".

While individual-level risk factors are themselves predictive of criminal involvement in violent groups, the group processes in and of themselves amplify an individual's scope and degree of criminal offending.

While individual-level risk factors are themselves predictive of criminal involvement in violent groups, the group processes in and of themselves amplify an individual's scope and degree of criminal offending. NSAG group processes appear to have a similar dynamic to the extent that they normalize violence and reward those who engage in it.[31]

As technology becomes increasingly integral to interpersonal relationships in the developed world, it is important to consider how these criminal group processes might take place virtually.[32] Recent research on street gangs has examined how social media is used as a forum to claim gang affiliations and foster collective street gang identities.[33] Modelling how gang-affiliated youth communicate and inter-gang conflicts escalate online has proved to be a new tool for predicting flares of violence and is being examined for potential applications to NSAGs.

3 Desistance from Crime and Disengagement from Gangs

Given the similarities across contexts in group processes and the obstacles to leaving violent groups, the research on how individuals exit criminal groups and street gangs and cease criminal offending may offer insights for understanding how children (and adults) leave NSAGs.

Studies[34] indicate that criminal desistance – the process of ceasing criminal activity – and gang disengagement – the process of disembedding from the group and de-identifying as a member – are usually gradual processes. While some gang members are able to depart abruptly by cutting ties or leaving town, many others drift away from the group.[35] The "life course"[36] research on criminal desistance and gang disengagement highlights the transitional nature of gang membership, with high rates of turnover[37] and an average length

31 Bernd and Blattman find that Joseph Kony used spiritual practices and indoctrination rites in an explicit attempt to create new social bonds between group members and instill a sense of belonging. Even children who were abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) eventually came to feel an allegiance with the group or its leader, a devotion that grew dramatically the longer they were in the group. Bernd Beber and Christopher Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion", *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Winter 2013), pp. 87-88. Littman's study on the LRA found that those who committed violence as part of the indoctrination process increased identification with the group. Children's particularly strong adhesion to group identity may be key to understanding how they might come to commit violence in the group's name. Rebecca Littman, "Perpetrating Violence Increases Identification with Violent Groups: Survey Evidence from Former Combatants", 2017 working paper.

32 Scott Decker and Janet Lauritsen, "Leaving the Gang", in Ronald Huff, ed., *Gangs in America*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002).

33 Desmond Patton, Robert Eschmann, and Dirk Butler, "Internet Banging: New Trends in Social Media, Gang Violence, Masculinity and Hip-Hop", *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 29, No. 5 (2013).

34 For more on the definitional aspects of disengagement vs. desistance, see David C. Pyrooz and Scott H. Decker, "Motives and Methods for Leaving the Gang: Understanding the Process of Gang Desistance", *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (2011); and Gary Sweeten, David Pyrooz, and Alex Piquero, "Disengaging from Gangs and Desistance from Crime," *Justice Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2013).

35 Decker and Lauritsen, "Leaving the Gang".

36 David C. Pyrooz, Scott H. Decker, and Vincent J. Webb, "Ties that Bind: Desistance from Gangs", *Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (2014).

37 David C. Pyrooz and Gary Sweeten, "Gang Membership between Ages 5 and 17 Years in the United States", *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (2015).

The process of leaving a group can be erratic – full of fits and starts – and is not always permanent.

of stay of less than two years.[38] Research suggests that members often mature out of gangs or leave due to an accumulation of factors that push and pull them away from the group, including cognitive shifts, disillusionment with gang ideologies, and the pressure of external stigma.[39] Other researchers have argued that critical turning points in a gang member's life can facilitate an exit from the group, including family commitments, interactions with law enforcement, periods of gang disruption,[40] and violent incidents.[41] Another stream of research suggests that criminal group disengagement is also often a cumulative process. The ultimate decision to leave a group often comes after an accumulation of several different events or motives that run counter to group membership (e.g., exposure to gang-related violence and increased victimization).[42] Furthermore, the process of gang disengagement is highly dependent on the strength of the individuals' gang ties[43] and their embeddedness within the group.[44] The process of leaving a group can be erratic – full of fits and starts - and is not always permanent. Criminal group membership can be intermittent over several months or years. Two studies show that the majority of all gang members quit and then later rejoin a gang.[45]

Yet there seems to be little recognition in international policy discussions around contemporary NSAGs that, similarly, disengagement from these groups might be gradual, rather than an abrupt and total abandonment of the group. There is, however, growing evidence of just this phenomenon from a number of conflicts that suggests children who leave NSAGs are often re-recruited[46] or join another armed group or force,[47] highlighting the potential value of using a "process approach" to manage exits from NSAGs. [48] As with gang exit, children who leave NSAGs often return to communities plagued by many of the conditions that motivated or facilitated their engagement with the group in the first place, raising questions about how to effectively reintegrate children into civilian life in such environments.

38   Marvin D. Krohn, Jeffrey T. Ward, Terence P. Thornberry, Alan J. Lizotte, and Rebekah Chu, "The Cascading Effects of Adolescent Gang Involvement Across the Life Course," *Criminology*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (2011), p. 1017; and Karl G. Hill, Christina Lui, and J. David Hawkins, "Early Precursors of Gang Membership: A Study of Seattle Youth," *OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin, Youth Gang Series* (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2001). National data reveal similar findings relating to high turnover and short average lengths of stay, particularly among youth. However, recent research suggests that a small but non-trivial number of individuals join gangs as adults as well (17% of the total sample in one study). David Pyrooz, "'From Your First Cigarette to Your Last Dyin' Day': The Patterning of Gang Membership in the Life-Course". *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2014).

39   Ibid; Vigil, *Barrio Gangs*; and Pyrooz and Decker, "Motives and Methods for Leaving the Gang".

40   Decker and Lauritsen, "Leaving the Gang".

41   Ibid; Vigil, *Barrio Gangs*.

42   Vigil, *Barrio Gangs*; Scott Decker and David Pyrooz, "Leaving the Gang: Logging Off and Moving On", Council on Foreign Relations (2011), p. 13; and Decker and Lauritsen, "Leaving the Gang", p. 58.

43   Pyrooz et al., "Ties that Bind".

44   David Pyrooz, Gary Sweeten, and Alex Piquero, "Continuity and Change in Gang Membership and Gang Embeddedness," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (2013); Scott Decker, David Pyrooz, and Richard Moule, "Disengagement from Gangs as Role Transitions", *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2014), p. 7; and Sweeten et al., "Disengaging from Gangs", p. 491.

45   Pyrooz et al. find 57% of gang members return at some point, whereas Thornberry et al. concludes the intermittency rate is 57-66%. Pyrooz et al., "Continuity and Change in Gang Membership and Gang Embeddedness"; and Thornberry et al., *Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective*.

46   For example, see discussion of the LTTE and Vanni LTTE in Human Rights Watch, "Sri Lanka: Tamil Tigers Forcibly Recruit Child Soldiers," 11 November 2004.

47   For example, see Wessells' discussion of child demobilization in Liberia and Uganda. Michael Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

48   The reality that desistance from a criminal group/street gang is a fitful process increases the importance of longitudinal studies in this area and long-term impact evaluation for related interventions.

4 Prevention, Intervention, Suppression, and Comprehensive Programmes

Several decades' worth of crime desistance and gang prevention and disengagement research and experience[49] yields lessons that may be useful when designing programmes to prevent child association with NSAGs or to facilitate child reintegration after association.

PREVENTION PROGRAMMES Primary gang prevention programmes typically focus on altering risky behaviours and increasing resilience prior to criminal group involvement. One of the best examples of this type of programme in relation to street gangs is the upstream Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) programme, a school-based initiative in the United States that involves thirteen 40-minute lessons delivered by police officers that focus on life-skills development, cognitive behavioural training, and conflict resolution.[50] A recent evaluation of GREAT found that an individual's odds of joining a gang dropped by 39% after participation.[51] The GREAT programme, however, raises some of the same efficiency questions as upstream programming aimed at preventing child association with NSAGs. Most of the youth who participate in GREAT programmes would never have joined a gang in the first place.[52] A more downstream targeted prevention programme, Los Angeles' Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) secondary prevention programme,[53] focuses on youth at risk for gang involvement. The comprehensive approach consists of eight phases of support – including coaching and teaching problem-solving skills – provided in multigenerational family settings.[54] Retest scores of those involved in the GRYD programming show improvement in risk factors after participation.[55]

CRIME/GANG SUPPRESSION AND INTERVENTION There are a range of interventions that are aimed at individuals (and organizations, in some cases) after they have already become involved in criminal activity. Suppression approaches entail a range of criminal justice actions (e.g., enhanced intelligence, zero tolerance policing, aggressive prosecution) aimed at deterring future gang activity and discouraging new membership. Gang suppression through targeted policing strategies has long been the dominant model for many jurisdictions in the United States, despite perceptions that anti-gang suppression efforts are often carried out without rigorous evaluation research[56] and have the potential to increase group cohesion.[57]

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[49] Despite a century of work on crime and delinquency to pull from, certain areas of research do not enjoy the same wealth of scholarship, particularly gang desistance, which until recently was a relatively understudied aspect of street gang literature. Klein and Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*.

[50] There are two different GREAT curricula, one for elementary school students, the other for middle school students. The curricula are delivered to everyone in a grade on a school-by-school basis, depending on the availability of an officer trained in GREAT. Ibid; James Howell and Elizabeth Griffiths, *Gangs in America's Communities* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016).

[51] Although effect sizes were small to modest, the impact of such a small programme dosage (thirteen 40-minute lessons) is noteworthy. Other programme effects include a shift in attitudinal measures relating to criminal behaviour as well as improved police-youth interactions among participants. Finn-Aage Esbensen, D. Wayne Osgood, Dana Peterson, Terrance J. Taylor, and Dena C. Carson, "Short and Long-Term Outcome Results from a Multisite Evaluation of the GREAT Program", *Criminology & Public Policy*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2013).

[52] Klein and Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*, p. 238; and Jennifer Wong, Jason Gravel, Martin Bouchard, Carlo Morselli, and Karine Descormiers, "Effectiveness of Street Gang Control Strategies: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Evaluation Studies" (Ottawa: Research and National Coordination Organized Crime Division, Law Enforcement and Policy Branch Public Safety Canada, 2012), p. 22.

[53] Meagan Cahill, Jesse Jannetta, Emily Tiry, Samantha Lowry, Miriam Becker-Cohen, Ellen Paddock, and Maria Serakos, "Evaluation of the Los Angeles Gang Reduction and Youth Development Program" (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2015).

[54] Ibid., pp. 13-14.

[55] Ibid., pp. 32-33.

[56] Winifred L. Reed and Scott H. Decker, *Responding to Gangs: Evaluation and Research* (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2002), p. 3.

[57] Malcolm Klein, *The American Street Gang*.

Focused deterrence programmes, by comparison, combine suppression efforts with incentives for desistance and alternatives to gang membership in order to reduce criminal group violence.[58] For example, Boston's Operation Ceasefire framework – a "pulling levers" gang intervention strategy[59] that mobilized law enforcement, community, and service actors – operates by identifying individuals who are known to be involved in gang violence and offering incentives (e.g., job training, substance abuse treatment, tattoo removal) combined with threatening sanctions for gang-related violence (e.g., heightened penalties) in an effort to curb violence. Operation Ceasefire was found to reduce the number of monthly youth homicides in Boston by 63%,[60] and this framework has since been adopted in a number of other urban areas across the US and abroad. Other models seek to interrupt cycles of violence using specialized street interventionists or "violence interrupters" as a means of targeting gang members at times they are most susceptible for disengagement.[61] For example, Oakland's Caught in the Crossfire programme sends interventionists to hospitals after violent gang-related incidents to offer support, mediation, and ongoing case management to gang-affiliated victims. An evaluation found that participants in the programme were 70% less likely than those in a control group to be arrested in the six-month period after the intervention.[62]

> By adopting a holistic and personalized approach, it is possible to tailor interventions to respond to different levels and stages of group involvement.

COMPREHENSIVE AND PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACHES Current thinking among gang researchers supports the use of comprehensive and highly personalized interventions that include aspects of gang prevention and suppression programming.[63] By adopting a holistic and personalized approach, it is possible to tailor interventions to respond to different levels and stages of group involvement.[64] An intervention that embodies this type of approach is Chicago's Cure Violence project, based on a public health model, which aims to treat gun violence in the same way that doctors treat infectious diseases.[65] In addition to "violence interrupters" who are deployed to mediate conflicts between gangs, Cure Violence uses long-term outreach from caseworkers to individually address several facets of gang involvement, including preventative awareness, membership prevention, and gang activity prevention.[66] The programme was found to significantly decrease gun violence and was associated with a reduction in homicides.[67] While there are clear advantages to highly

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58 Ibid., p. 13; Wong et al., "Effectiveness of Street Gang Control Strategies," 28-29.

59 Ibid., p. 29; Anthony Braga and David Weisburd, "The Effects of Focused Deterrence Strategies on Crime: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Empirical Evidence," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (2012).

60 Braga et al., "The Effects of Focused Deterrence," p. 207.

61 Research has suggested that gang-related victimization is a common reason given for leaving a gang. Decker and Lauritsen, "Leaving the Gang."

62 "Strategic Planning Tool Program Matrix," National Gang Center, available from https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/SPT/Program-Matrix; and Marla Becker, Jeffery S. Hall, Caesar M. Ursic, Sonia Jain, and Deane Calhoun, "Caught in the Crossfire: The Effects of a Peer-Based Intervention Program for Violently Injured Youth," *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (2004), p. 180.

63 Despite the positive impact shown by some of the interventions cited in this section, in general there is a lack of services in this area, and many of the programmes that do exist do not fit the needs of the beneficiaries.

64 Howell and Griffiths, *Gangs in America's Communities*.

65 Ibid., p. 33.

66 Ibid., p. 22; Wesley G. Skogan, Susan M. Hartnett, Natalie Bump, and Jill Dubois, *Evaluation of CeaseFire-Chicago* (Evanston, IL: Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, 2008).

67 This study found a decrease in homicides in six of the seven Cure Violence sites. Skogan et al., *Evaluation of CeaseFire-Chicago*.

tailored, holistic interventions, it is unclear if weak or failing states or NGOs/IOs running programming for children associated with NSAGs will have the resources and capacity necessary to adopt these types of approaches in conflict contexts.

COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY (CBT) CBT programmes[68] are commonly used for high-risk offenders in corrections contexts or are embedded in gang prevention and intervention programmes. For example, Aggressiveness Replacement Training (ART), which administers social skills training, anger management, and moral education to juvenile offenders, has been found to have some success in reducing recidivism rates among gang-involved youths,[69] while other CBT programmes have led to significantly lower rates of recidivism for treated gang members.[70] Overall, CBT programmes have been found to be most effective when they are multidisciplinary and focus on those at greatest risk.[71]

5 Potential Implications for Programming

A number of the empirical findings and points of consensus highlighted by the workshop have potential policy and programmatic implications for NSAG association prevention programmes, as well as release and reintegration efforts. The suggestions below are not comprehensive, but they highlight some useful lessons learned from gang and crime prevention and desistance programming, and as such they do not necessarily address all of the motivating and facilitating factors for NSAG association (e.g., systemic factors) or every reintegration need.

RISK ASSESSMENTS FOR TARGETING AT-RISK YOUTH Many prevention programmes attempt to reduce gang violence by targeting high-risk populations – as opposed to more upstream, broad-based programming (e.g., GREAT) – but their effectiveness hinges on the efficacy of their assessment tools to identify at-risk youth.[72] For example, the Gang Risk of Entry Factors (GREF) assessment tool, based on empirically substantiated risk factors (e.g., cumulative exposure to stressful life events, impulsivity and risk taking, oppositional and aggressive behaviour, family gang influence),[73] has been found to accurately identify a subset of youth who are more likely to join a street gang.[74]

68 It should be noted that Multisystemic Therapy (MST), another type of intervention, which incorporates some aspects of CBT, has been found to be less effective with gang-affiliated youths. MST's reduced efficacy is likely due in part to the heightened overall risk profile of gang-involved youth when compared with their counterparts. Furthermore, because MST's success is significantly based on its ability to reduce youth contact with delinquent peers, it would therefore have the extra task of prying a gang-affiliated youth from an embedded criminogenic group in which ties are particularly difficult to sever. Decker et al., "Disengagement from Gangs as Role Transitions". For more on the efficacy of MST programmes with gang-affiliated youth, see Paul Boxer, "Negative Peer Involvement in Multisystemic Therapy for the Treatment of Youth Problem Behavior: Exploring Outcome and Process Variables in 'Real-World' Practice", *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, Vol. 40, No. 6 (2011); and Paul Boxer, Joanna Kubik, Michael Ostermann, and Bonita Veysey, "Gang Involvement Moderates the Effectiveness of Evidence-Based Intervention for Justice-Involved Youth", *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 52 (2015).
69 Arnold P. Goldstein and Barry Glick, "Aggression Replacement Training: Curriculum and Evaluation", *Simulation & Gaming*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1994); Howell and Griffiths, *Gangs in America's Communities*; and Michael F. Caldwell, Michael Vitacco, and Gregory J. Van Rybroek, "Are Violent Delinquents Worth Treating? A Cost-Benefit Analysis", *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2006).
70 For an example of a CBT programme offered at the Regional Psychiatric Center in Saskatchewan, Canada, see Chantal Di Placido, Terri L. Simon, Treena D. Witte, Deqiang Gu, and Stephen C. P. Wong, "Treatment of Gang Members Can Reduce Recidivism and Institutional Misconduct", *Law and Human Behavior*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2006).
71 "Strategic Planning Tool Program Matrix."
72 Karen M. Hennigan, Cheryl L. Maxson, David C. Sloane, Kathy A. Kolnick, and Flor Vindel, "Identifying High-Risk Youth for Secondary Gang Prevention", *Journal of Crime and Justice*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2014), p. 106; and Chris Melde, Stephen M. Gavazzi, Edmund McGarrell, and Timothy Bynum, "On the Efficacy of Targeted Gang Interventions: Can We Identify Those Most at Risk?" *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2011).
73 Hennigan et al., "Identifying High-Risk Youth".
74 Ibid., p. 116. The GREF also provides a baseline that can be used to examine the impact of an intervention. Cahill et al., "Evaluation of the Los Angeles Gang Reduction", pp. 32-33.

One-size-fits-all models that fail to tailor interventions based on a child's exposure to in-group processes – as well as how and why she/ he came to be associated with the group and subsequently left – are unlikely to be effective.

While the GREF model could be applied to other contexts, the knowledge base necessary for effective identification of those children at high risk of NSAG affiliation is still largely lacking. As such, and given the potential to stigmatize children who are not at risk, a GREF-like tool is inappropriate at this point for focusing prevention programmes. That said, given the empirical findings across disciplines that children accumulate risk for a whole host of problematic behaviours,[75] an assessment tool based on a risk accumulation model may be an approach worth exploring for children at risk of NSAG association. Such an approach may help avoid the potential stigmatization of participants and reduce the need to rely on a particular cocktail of risk factors for NSAG association, for which there is little evidence.

IMPACT OF GROUP PROCESSES ON OFFENDING A related observation is that gang affiliation was correlated with higher rates of, and more violent, offending. Research suggests intra-group processes or peer influence can contribute to violent behaviour.[76] This is likely similar to what happens inside a NSAG, raising questions about if and how reintegration programming accounts for these dynamics. One-size-fits-all models that fail to tailor interventions based on a child's exposure to in-group processes – as well as how and why she/he came to be associated with the group and subsequently left – are unlikely to be effective. Moreover, while many recognize the importance of peer influence on child association with NSAGs, few have worked to harness the same peer networks and dynamics to try to prevent NSAG association or facilitate children's exit from NSAGs. The extent to which peer influence can be harnessed to promote non-violent behaviours that could reinforce prevention programming or reintegration goals deserves more attention.

UNINTENDED EFFECTS OF INTERVENTIONS While employing peers and former gang members as street interventionists has been shown to have success in some contexts, there are concerns that their use could have the unintended effect of increasing group cohesiveness or glorifying gang membership.[77] Indeed, there appears to be a fine line between reducing criminal group membership and unwittingly strengthening group cohesion.[78] Some have raised concerns related to suppression interventions that focus on gang membership or gang-related crime in particular – as opposed to gun violence more broadly – that these programmes can inadvertently reinforce gang identity.[79] Research suggests that targeted policing aimed at the gang can reiterate the oppositional culture of a gang and the feeling among members that the suppressive measures against the group present an existential threat to them as individuals, as well as their ideals and identity. That threat only reinforces the "us vs. them" mentality of the gang[80] and increases

75   UNU *Insights from Social Science on Child Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups: 'State of Research' Brief* (2017).
76   Vasquez et al., "Gangs, Displaced, and Group-Based Aggression"; and Gordon et al., "Antisocial Behavior".
77   Malcolm Klein, "Comprehensive Gang and Violence Reduction Programs", *Criminology & Public Policy*, Vol. 10, Issue 4 (2011).
78   Klein and Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*.
79   Wong et al., "Effectiveness of Street Gang Control Strategies", p. 28.
80   Klein and Maxson, *Street Gang Patterns and Policies*.

It is important to recognize from a programming perspective that the cessation of offending and separation from a NSAG (both physically and in terms of identity) are unlikely to be cold-turkey events.

gang members' reliance on each other for self-defence, thus strengthening the bonds between them.[81] This is an important takeaway when considering how to target programmes for children thought to be associated – or at risk of association – with a NSAG.

DISENGAGEMENT AND DESISTANCE ARE PROCESSES One of the most interesting takeaways from the workshop is the potential to apply the disengagement/desistance process models – as compared to a single event perspective – to our understanding of child release and reintegration after association with a NSAG. While there may be little political appetite for accepting desistance from political violence or disengagement from a NSAG – especially one characterized as extremist or listed as a terrorist group – as a process, it is important to recognize from a programming perspective that the cessation of offending and separation from a NSAG (both physically and in terms of identity) are unlikely to be cold-turkey events. As with gang-affiliated children who are unable to relocate to other neighbourhoods to escape the gang's influence, children who leave/are released from a NSAG but return to the same context that fostered their association in the first place are unlikely to be able to make a clean break with the group. Another important observation from criminology – that most people will age out of gang association and criminal offending without intervention – raises questions about some of our assumptions about child trajectories out of NSAGs. Do interventions, especially coercive or involuntary ones, reinforce identity and cohesion for a group most members are likely to eventually leave on their own?

COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY (CBT) It may be interesting to draw from studies on CBT programming for criminal offenders and gang members when thinking about prevention and reintegration programming for children associated – or at risk of association – with NSAGs. Adolescents are more likely to engage in impulsive and risk-taking behaviours. Interventions aimed at getting young people to slow down their decision-making processes and learn skills to manage emotions in decision-making may have universal applications, whether in preventing tit-for-tat inter-gang violence or helping youth consider alternatives to joining a NSAG.

AFFILIATED FAMILIES In many contemporary contexts, children become associated with a NSAG because a member of their family (or a friend) is associated with the group or encouraged/compelled them to join. As noted in this brief, there are many similarities in this

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[81] Wong et al., "Effectiveness of Street Gang Control Strategies", p. 28.

regard with youth gang membership.[82] As such, there are potential lessons to be learned for the child protection community from the gang prevention and disengagement programming experience with youth who have gang-affiliated family members. Indeed, some family-based interventions for at-risk youth have shown successes in risk factor reduction even when there is a gang-affiliated family member in the home. For example, evidence from programs in Los Angeles and Honduras suggests that family-based interventions for high-risk youth – including youth with multiple gang-affiliated family members – can drastically decrease an individual's overall risk for gang association.[83]

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[82]   It was long assumed that a child of a gang member would be encouraged or pressured to join their family member's gang. Some anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that the patterns observed among gang-affiliated parents in the 1980s and 1990s may not hold today. Recent engagement with gang-affiliated parents suggests many actively try to discourage their children from joining a gang even though they remain affiliated; parents express a desire for their children to have a better life than they did. Paul Carrillo, email interview with UNU, 1 August 2017. Despite this observed shift, researchers and practitioners continue to view family gang influence as a risk factor for youth gang involvement.

[83]   In Los Angeles and Honduras, there are secondary prevention programs to identity high-risk youth (using the YSET risk assessment tool, also known as GREF in some places, detailed on page 9) before they engage in violence, and provide them with family-based counselling with the purpose of diverting participation in violence. These programs employ multigenerational and structural family systems models and target a number of risk factors, including family gang influence (i.e., having two or more gang-involved family members or reporting familial pressure to join a gang). Practitioners report an average drop of 52% across nine risk factors measured in Honduras, including a 43% drop in the variable measuring family gang influence. This decline is similar to the average 48% drop in overall risk that was reported in the Los Angeles YSET-based program. These results suggest that pairing accurate risk assessment tools with intensive family programming can have a favourable impact on at-risk youth and their families across multiple contexts. Karen Hennigan and Guillermo Cespedes, "Violence Reduction: Dynamics of Family-Based Secondary Violence Prevention Programs," working paper, 1 August 2017, p. 10.

About UNU's Workshop Brief Series and Acknowledgements

This research brief is part of a three-part series that UNU has published in the lead-up to the release of an edited volume examining why and how children become associated with, are used by, and exit NSAGs in contemporary conflicts, including those groups listed as terrorist or characterized as "violent extremist". The analysis and research presented in this brief feeds into the larger desk review published as part of the volume – forthcoming in late 2017. The volume includes three conflict case studies – Syria+, Mali, and Nigeria – that explicate the factors that influence child trajectories into and out of NSAGs. The volume features a chapter exploring the thorny legal questions that arise in contemporary conflicts, particularly around the legal limits of the humanitarian response and how legal obligations to uphold the rights of children stand up when viewed as being in tension with national security legislation.

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