

# Time to Wake Up

Tackling gangs one year after the riots

A policy paper by the Centre for Social Justice

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THE CENTRE FOR  
**SOCIAL  
JUSTICE**

## Introduction

In 2009 the Centre for Social Justice published *Dying to Belong*, a landmark review of street gangs in the UK. We argued that gang culture is symptomatic of even deeper social problems: chaotic families; absent fathers; young people cut adrift and lacking purpose; and a revolving door criminal justice system which does nothing to change lives.

In *Dying to Belong* we argued that without concerted action to mend our broken society more violent and appalling disorder will rear its ugly head. There is nothing more dangerous than a group of people who feel they have nothing to gain and nothing to lose. This truth was loudly confirmed when last summer's riots erupted.

Gangs played a significant role in the riots and it is dangerous to pretend otherwise – in London at least one in five of those convicted was known to be part of a gang. One year on, we have talked to members of our UK-wide Alliance of small, frontline organisations and charities asking them how they feel gang culture has changed in the light of the government response. Worryingly, many have drawn us a picture of little or no progress, despite the publication of a positive political strategy. Some have even suggested that the problem is becoming worse with increased violence amongst younger gang members and growing numbers of girls joining gangs. There is also deep concern that the Government is not serious about making a long-term commitment to tackling gang culture and its roots. Many in Whitehall regard the riots as a random one-off and mistake the quashing of the disorder as control of the streets. They could not be more wrong. The alarming fact is that many streets across the country are besieged by anarchy and violence. There is no control in such neighbourhoods.

Gangs policy cannot be allowed to drift. To do so would be to give up on children and young people who have already been badly let down. It would leave communities ever more vulnerable to even larger, more active gangs in the future. The Government must rediscover the momentum and commitment it once had to tackle gangs. Without a reversal of the social breakdown and disorder that characterises too much of life in our most deprived communities, we will continue to see wasted generation after wasted generation. And countless other young people will lose their lives to this tragic and pointless violence.

**Christian Guy**

Managing Director

## About the CSJ

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) aims to put social justice at the heart of British politics. Our policy development is rooted in the wisdom of those working to tackle Britain's deepest social problems and the experience of those whose lives have been affected by poverty. Our Working Groups are non-partisan, comprising prominent academics, practitioners and policy makers who have expertise in the relevant fields.

We consult nationally and internationally, especially with charities and social enterprises, who are the champions of the welfare society. In addition to policy development, the CSJ has built an alliance of poverty-fighting organisations that reverse social breakdown and transform communities. We believe that the surest way the Government can reverse social breakdown and poverty is to enable such individuals, communities and voluntary groups to help themselves.

The CSJ was founded by Iain Duncan Smith in 2004, as the fulfilment of a promise made to Janice Dobbie, whose son had recently died from a drug overdose just after he was released from prison.

## Acknowledgements

A considerable number of people have contributed to this short report but we would like to thank particularly Karl Lokko, Gracia McGrath, Patrick Regan, Joe Russo, Junior Smart, Borough Commander John Sutherland, as well as all those who wished to remain anonymous.

## Summary

In 2009 the CSJ published *Dying to Belong*, a detailed analysis of gang culture in the UK that called on the Government to tackle gangs' root causes. Following last year's riots, the Coalition acknowledged that more should be done to combat the issue of gangs and in November last year it published *Ending Gang and Youth Violence (EGYV)* which took on board many of the CSJ's recommendations.

One year on from the riots, the CSJ talked to its Alliance of small, frontline organisations working with some of the most vulnerable people in the UK to ask whether government plans have turned into reality. They told us that:

- Whilst they initially welcomed a number of the Government's announced responses, the Coalition appears to be losing its commitment on this issue;
- The arrest of key gang members has left a power vacuum in some gangs which has led to an escalation of violence – urgent work is needed to mitigate this upsurge and to help younger gang members disown gang life;
- Preventative work to discourage young people from joining gangs has 'fallen off the radar';
- There is an urgent need to improve relations between the police and young people;
- Money has failed to filter down: there was poor communication between government and charities about the availability of funding following the riots – this is being seen as symptomatic of 'a complete disconnect between what goes on at the policy level and what goes on on the ground';
- They are concerned that the Government is taking a short term approach: 'it takes years to work with gang nominals; transformation cannot be achieved with short term funding', yet the Government has required organisations to spend all their funding by 31 March 2013;
- There has been an increase in the number of girls joining gangs.

The Government must set out a long-term commitment to defuse the problem of gangs in the UK. To do this it must build stronger families and communities, invest in thorough preventative work, and improve relations between the police and young people.

## I. Gangs and the riots

In the aftermath of last year's riots, the Prime Minister declared 'an all-out war on gangs and culture' in response to claims that such groups played a significant role in the disorder.<sup>1</sup> Over the past 12 months their part has been continually called into question. Elements of the media<sup>2</sup> have leapt upon the finding that, outside of London, fewer than one in ten<sup>3</sup> arrestees were gang members, citing this as proof that gangs were not pivotal. Statistics revealing that one in five of those arrested in London was a known gang member<sup>4</sup> have been downplayed.

These numbers are highly significant and it is wrong to dismiss them. The vast majority of those involved in the riots have not been caught – the status of these individuals remains unknown. But debate about whether or not gangs actively orchestrated the unrest misses the central issue. Interviewees reported that it was the very existence and prevalence of gang activity in the riot-affected areas that was pivotal to such neighbourhoods being at the heart of the unrest. As CSJ Alliance member Gracia McGrath of Chance UK stated:

*'... In an area where gangs are prevalent (and that encompasses all the areas where there were riots) what we see is a general erosion of acceptable behaviour, and a high tolerance of violence and criminal activity... This makes a community more tolerant or at least more afraid to challenge what has become the status quo in some areas. They are also more likely to accept the kind of reckless violence and criminality we saw last summer.'*<sup>5</sup>

David Lammy, Labour MP for Tottenham, made the same assertion: 'It remains to be seen what role individual gangs played in orchestrating the riots in England. But what is crystal clear is that the culture that gangs cultivate was the engine of unrest'.<sup>6</sup> Further support for this analysis is found in the National Centre for Social Research's report for the Cabinet Office, which cited interviewees' comments that being part of a neighbourhood where there was a prevailing culture of low-level criminality – where criminal behaviour was normalised – was a factor that facilitated involvement.<sup>7</sup>

The CSJ also challenges those who say that the proportion of gang-involved London arrestees is negligible. Official figures show that one in five of those arrested in London – 337 suspects – were known gang members. By any measure, this is a significant minority; one that represents serious social breakdown. Furthermore, the actual number is likely to be higher as in all probability a number of others have not yet been brought to justice.

1 Independent, 'PM vows war on gangs after riots', 15 August 2012 [accessed via <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/pm-vows-war-on-gangs-after-riots-2338009.html> (21/08/12)]

2 See for example, Huffington Post, *Gangs Were 'Not Pivotal' In England Riots, Police Forces Say* [accessed via [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/10/24/rioters-were-overwhelming\\_n\\_1027942.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/10/24/rioters-were-overwhelming_n_1027942.html) (21/08/12)]

3 This statistic applies to the majority of police forces outside of London; Home Office, *An Overview of Recorded Crimes and Arrests Resulting from Disorder Events in August 2011*, Home Office, 2011, p5 [available at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/research-statistics/crime-research/overview-disorder-aug2011/overview-disorder-aug2011?view=Binary> (20/08/12)]

4 19 per cent of arrestees in London and 13 per cent overall were reported to be affiliated to a gang; Home Office, *An Overview of Recorded Crimes and Arrests Resulting from Disorder Events in August 2011*, Home Office, 2011, p15

5 New Philanthropy Capital, <http://newphilanthropycapital.wordpress.com/2012/01/25/early-intervention-mentors-and-spin-doctors-learning-from-last-summers-riots/> (21/08/12)

6 Lammy D, *Out of the Ashes: Britain after the riots*, London: Guardian Books, 2011, p109

7 Morrell G et al, *The August riots in England: Understanding the involvement of young people* (prepared for the Cabinet Office), London: NatCen, 2011, p44

We cannot afford to downplay the gang problem; individuals who have links to gangs are believed to be responsible for 16 per cent of London's total drug supply, nearly a fifth of stabbings, half of all shootings and 14 per cent of all rapes.<sup>8</sup>

These trends should move us to action.

## 2. The effectiveness of the Government's response

The CSJ commends the Cross-Government strategy on gangs, *Ending Gang and Youth Violence* (EGYV), published last November in response to the riots, which was heavily influenced by the CSJ's in-depth review of street gangs in the UK, *Dying to Belong*.

The strategy put forward a range of positive initiatives, including:

**Providing support** to local areas to tackle their gang or youth violence problem, by:

- Establishing an Ending Gang and Youth Violence Team working with a virtual network of over 100 expert advisers to provide practical advice and support to local areas with a gang or serious youth violence problem;
- Providing £10 million in Home Office funding in 2012/13 to support up to 30 local areas to improve the way mainstream services identify, assess and work with the young people most at risk of serious violence, with at least half of this funding going to the non-statutory sector;
- Investing at least £1.2 million of additional resources over the next three years to improve services for young people under 18 suffering sexual violence in our major urban areas – with a new focus on the girls and young women caught up in gang related rape and abuse.

**Preventing** young people becoming involved in serious violence in the first place, with a new emphasis on early intervention and prevention, by:

- Delivering the existing commitments on early intervention, which research shows is the most cost-effective way of reducing violence in later life, doubling the capacity of Family Nurse Partnerships and recruiting 4,200 more health visitors by 2015;
- Improving the education offered to excluded pupils to reduce their risk of involvement in gang violence and other crimes;
- Supporting parents worried about their children's behaviour by working with a range of family service providers to develop new advice on gangs.

<sup>8</sup> Metropolitan Police Service, *Dozens arrested in raid – news 30 March 2011* [accessed via: <http://content.met.police.uk/News/Dozens-arrested-in-raids/1260268759072/1257246745756> (20.08.12)]

**Pathways** out of violence and the gang culture for young people wanting to make a break with the past, by:

- Continuing to promote intensive family intervention work with the most troubled families, including gang members, with a specific commitment to roll out Multi-Systemic Therapy for young people with behavioural problems and their families to 25 sites by 2014;
- Setting up a second wave of Youth Justice Liaison and Diversion schemes for young offenders at the point of arrest, which identify and target mental health and substance misuse problems. These will be targeted at areas where there is a known and significant gang or youth crime problem;
- Working, through the Ending Gang and Youth Violence Team, with hospital Accident and Emergency Departments and children's social care to promote better local application of guidance around young people who may be affected by gang activity presenting at A&E;
- Exploring the potential for placing youth workers in A&E departments to pick up and refer young people at risk of serious violence;
- Supporting areas, through the Ending Gang and Youth Violence Team, to roll out schemes to re-house former gang members wanting to exit the gang lifestyle;
- Exploring ways to improve education provision for young people in the secure estate and for those released from custody;
- Implementing new offending behaviour programmes for violent adult offenders in prison and under community supervision, including new modules on gang violence.

**Punishment and enforcement** to suppress the violence of those refusing to exit violent lifestyles, by:

- Extending police powers to take out gang injunctions to cover teenagers aged 14 to 17.

If fully implemented, these are promising first steps. But contributors to this report have told us that this strategy is not translating into the genuine transformation of communities. Furthermore, some have expressed deep concern that the Coalition is losing commitment to this extremely important issue.

## 2.1 Police focus on gangs

Over the past 12–18 months, there has been a step change in the Metropolitan Police Service's (Met) efforts to tackle gangs, signified by several major new developments:

- Establishment of the first ever centralised Met database of the most harmful gang members in London, collated by the Met's new Operation Connect unit. The intelligence is drawn

from and shared amongst the Met and key partners, including schools, local councils and health authorities;<sup>9</sup>

- Launch of the new Trident Gang Crime Command by the Met in February 2012. This has expanded the remit of Trident, established in 1998, from its previous focus on shootings;<sup>10</sup> and
- Creation of dedicated 'gangs teams' in 19 of the 32 London boroughs (in addition to those that were in existence beforehand).

February 2012 saw the early impact of these initiatives as a series of raids on gang nominals were carried out across the capital resulting in over 200 arrests.<sup>11</sup> The Met deserve much praise for this important work; enforcement plays a critical role in tackling the gang problem that blights many of our most deprived communities.

However, as *Dying to Belong* argued, the police cannot arrest their way out of the gang problem. There is a critical need for work to encourage gang members to disown gang life. We have received concerning reports from professionals that, subsequent to the raids, there has been a lack of follow-up work with the younger, junior gang members who remain. They reported that this has resulted in a vacuum in which the younger, and often more volatile, gang members have suddenly ascended into senior gang positions. The upshot of this is not only the continuation of gang violence, but its escalation as Youngers vie for status and respect using the currency of violence. This is a dangerous turn of events.

Interviewees told the CSJ of a marked increase in the violent behaviour of some gangs. Indeed it seems that an unintended consequence of the arrest of senior gang members has been to heighten tensions and violence. The removal of *Elders* by the police was cited as integral to this development; preceding *Elders* were described as having a 'code' in which certain acts – such as shooting a rival gang member when accompanied by his mother – were understood to be unacceptable and therefore not committed. There was a consensus that the current gangs neither have such a code nor cohesive leadership, which is resulting in increased chaos, violence and anarchy. One young person with whom we spoke related a recent situation where a young gang member had held a gun to the head of a rival gang member's baby. Speaking to us he remarked that 'you're seen as 'a nobody' if you haven't killed someone'. This strongly echoes a concern raised by the CSJ in *Dying to Belong*:

*'Enforcement is not enough. Indeed witnesses to the inquiry have repeatedly argued that a solely criminal justice response not only ignores the drivers behind gang culture, but also has the potential to escalate the problem. With the increasing presence of volatile Youngers vying for status and respect, the removal of Elders can leave a void which the Youngers are keen to fill, potentially through intra-gang fighting.'*<sup>12</sup>

9 Metropolitan Police Service, 'Dozens arrested in raids' [accessed via: <http://content.met.police.uk/News/Dozens-arrested-in-raids/1260268759072/1257246745756> (accessed 20/08/12)]

10 Metropolitan Police Service, *Trident* [accessed via: <http://www.met.police.uk/gangcrime/index.htm> (accessed 20/08/12)]

11 BBC News, *More than 200 held as Met Police crackdown on gangs*, 8 February 2012 [accessed via: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-16940160> (20/08/12)]

12 Centre for Social Justice, *Breakthrough Britain: Dying to Belong*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2009, p153



The Met has said that the 'police cannot tackle gang violence alone' and made clear that they are 'committed to working with our partners and the public to prevent young people from joining gangs in the first place'.<sup>13</sup> There are, however, serious doubts as to whether the Met and its partners are fulfilling this commitment.

As the CSJ has previously argued, there is an urgent need for a multi-pronged approach towards gangs. This should combine enforcement tactics with intervention and prevention programmes, while a clear message that the violence must stop should be delivered to gang members before enforcement begins.

## 2.2 Tackling the underlying causes

Fundamental to tackling gangs is preventative work in the most dysfunctional and struggling families and schools to stop the conveyor belt into gangs. This point was made repeatedly in the Government's *Ending Gang and Youth Violence* (EGYV) report and our own report, *Dying to Belong*. Yet many of our witnesses reported that early prevention work has 'fallen off the radar' in relation to gang-involvement. Furthermore, nine out of ten CSJ Alliance charity respondents reported that they had not been approached to take part in any preventative work following the riots.<sup>14</sup>

One voluntary sector professional reported that they had been excluded from applying for the EGYV monies as they had been working at too early a stage of gang involvement – at ages 8–11. The same individual commented that despite the Government having made a commitment to early intervention, it did not appear to be being implemented across Government. This is a particular problem given that children are increasingly joining gangs at younger ages.<sup>15</sup>

The absence of a strategy within primary schools to address early gang involvement was highlighted to us as a key issue. Primary school staff were said to lack training about signs of gang involvement and gang recruitment processes, and were therefore failing to address the problem. Cases were related to us where primary school pupils had been wearing gang colours, yet due to a lack of awareness of the issue, staff were not aware of the ramifications of this. There was reported to be nervousness and reluctance amongst primary schools to implement the necessary training. As one interviewee told us:

*'If schools start saying that they're training staff, then you risk parents getting nervous and pulling their children out of schools. The impetus for training has to come from local authorities – saying that head teachers need to be trained. There needs to be awareness amongst parents of grooming/signs of gang involvement.'*

Many individuals with whom we spoke felt that the Troubled Families initiative presented a real opportunity to do some of this vital early intervention work.

<sup>13</sup> Metropolitan Police Service, *Trident* [accessed via: <http://www.met.police.uk/gangcrime/index.htm> (accessed 20/08/12)]

<sup>14</sup> CSJ, SurveyMonkey

<sup>15</sup> E.g. Qa Research, *Children and Gangs*, 2011

The CSJ has repeatedly made the case that the Government must take a deep view of the root causes of gang culture and deploy strategies that help to combat:

- Family breakdown and dysfunction
- Educational failure
- Economic dependency and worklessness
- Addiction
- Serious personal debt
- Mental and emotional health problems
- A lack of positive role models
- Discrimination and stereotyping

### 2.3 Relationship between the police and young people

The attitude and behaviour of the police has been consistently cited as a trigger for the riots – both in London and outside.<sup>16</sup> It has also been found to be a factor in the gang problem: our review of street gangs, *Dying to Belong*, heard that ‘negative, discriminatory and aggressive police behaviour, if not perpetuating gang culture, actively hinders attempts to tackle it’.<sup>17</sup> In a recent CSJ survey of our voluntary sector Alliance members, 57.7 per cent said that the relationship between young people and the police had remained the same since last summer, while 13.5 per cent said that it had gotten worse.<sup>18</sup>

Given these findings, it is startling that the Government’s *Ending Gang and Youth Violence* report proposed no action to address the issue.

In recent months, a number of organisations, including the CSJ, have called for youth work training for police officers.<sup>19</sup> Localism has often been put forward as a defence – or excuse – as to why the Government has not acted on this important issue; training is viewed as a matter to be locally determined.

The CSJ strongly believes that national guidelines on the provision of police youth engagement training are long overdue. We have previously proposed the following recommendations to develop police youth engagement skills and improve relations between the police and young people in all local areas:

- At a local level youth-led police-youth engagement training should be developed in partnership with the voluntary sector;

16 Morrell G et al, *The August riots in England: Understanding the involvement of young people* (prepared for the Cabinet Office), London: NatCen, 2011, p5

17 Centre for Social Justice, *Breakthrough Britain: Dying to Belong*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2009, pp116–7

18 CSJ, SurveyMonkey

19 See for example, *NYA says youth work training for police officers should be ‘more systemic’*, 17 August 2012 [accessed via: [http://www.cypnow.co.uk/cyp/news/1074316/nya-youth-training-police-officers-systemic?utm\\_content=&utm\\_campaign=170812\\_Daily&utm\\_source=Children%20%26%20Young%20People%20Now&utm\\_medium=adestra\\_email&utm\\_term=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.cypnow.co.uk%2Fnews%2F1074316%2Fnya-youth-training-police-officers-systemic](http://www.cypnow.co.uk/cyp/news/1074316/nya-youth-training-police-officers-systemic?utm_content=&utm_campaign=170812_Daily&utm_source=Children%20%26%20Young%20People%20Now&utm_medium=adestra_email&utm_term=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.cypnow.co.uk%2Fnews%2F1074316%2Fnya-youth-training-police-officers-systemic) (21/08/12)]

- Such training should be refreshed by means of regular workshops with young people and police officers. The exact content of the workshops should be decided at a local level. The workshop should be the product of collaboration between police and one or more grassroots youth projects. We recognise that there is a cost here both in money and time but our view is that these are costs worth meeting; and
- The National Policing Improvement Agency should develop a police training programme based on the SecondWave/TSG4 initiative in which TSG4 officers attend monthly workshops with young people at the youth charity Second Wave;
- Refresher workshops should be established, facilitated by one or more local youth organisation(s), in which police and young people work together;
- Police forces should make working with local youth organisations part of general practice. This should include regular youth consultations, police participation and the provision of funding and resources for joint projects;
- Every Basic Command Unit (BCU) should have, as part of their policing strategy, partnerships with local youth projects working with at risk young people. Specifically, we suggest the establishment of youth advisory groups. These would provide an opportunity for young people to provide feedback to police, and for police to provide information (where appropriate) on initiatives and operations. BCUs may also want to consider police participation in local voluntary sector projects and provision of funding for joint initiatives.<sup>20</sup>

## 2.4 Funding – where’s the money?

The Home Office has committed £10 million of funding between 2011 and 2013 to areas identified as having significant levels of gang and youth violence. It has been stipulated that half of this must go to the non-statutory sector.<sup>21</sup> We spoke with a number of organisations, including several voluntary sector projects, who had received a share of the Ending Gang and Youth Violence (EGYV) funding. They reported that the money had been vital to continuing and extending their work to address gang activity.

However, a number of voluntary sector organisations in our Alliance with whom we consulted reported that they did not find out about the funding in time to apply. Others only became aware of the Government’s initiative and associated funding during the CSJ interview conducted for this paper. This lack of awareness is symptomatic of what one frontline professional described as the ‘complete disconnect between what goes on at the policy level to what goes on on the ground’. One witness also questioned the extent to which half of the EGYV money was being awarded to the voluntary sector, as had been stipulated.

20 Centre for Social Justice, *Rules of Engagement: changing the heart of youth justice*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2012

21 Home Office, *Ending Gang and Youth Violence: a Cross-Government Report*, 2011, p58

All the voluntary sector organisations with whom we consulted were critical of the fact that funds were released for too short a timeframe: the monies have only very recently been distributed, yet local councils have been reportedly told that the funds must be out of their accounts and spent by organisations by 31 March 2013. One organisation told us that they had managed to get around this – instead spending the money past this date – due to their strong relationship with their local council. Other organisations reported that they had decided not to apply for the funds due to their short-term nature. As one interviewee said ‘it takes years to work with gang nominals; transformation cannot be achieved with short-term funding’. Another said that ‘it does not allow the necessary time to turn around lives’.

The pitfalls of short-term funding have been highlighted again and again to the CSJ, and, as is clear, the evidence submitted to us for this piece of research is no different. Many organisations are asking what is going to happen when the money runs out. The CSJ understands that future funding will be awarded by Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) following their election in November of this year. However we question whether, at this early stage, PCCs will have the expertise or understanding of gang activity to commission services in an effective manner. In this context, one interviewee told us that:

*‘Seven strands of EGYV strategy are spot on, I wouldn’t want to change any of them. But the question is: what is going to happen beyond this? EGYV money is great as no one else is able to get their hands on it. But with cuts and beyond the end of the EGYV funding where will we be?’*

Furthermore, short-term funding is highly destabilising for the recipients of the monies and distracts them from service delivery. As one voluntary sector practitioner said:

*‘These services need funding which extends for the next couple of years – fair enough, a six-month funding stretch keeps people on their toes, but it is a huge distraction from service delivery. Services such as ours are successful because we are consistent when many others in the young people’s lives are not. Hence we need to be there over years rather than six months. This has a much better effect in the long term.’*

The Home Office itself has stated that a ‘concerted, long-term effort is now needed’ to address gang activity.<sup>22</sup> In the words of one practitioner, ‘it is now time that they put their money where their mouth is’.

- The Government should immediately review the means, amount and timing of funding for anti-gang strategies. In doing so, Whitehall must improve communication and co-ordination with frontline organisations so as to assist them in maximising the effectiveness of service delivery.

22 Home Office, *Ending Gang and Youth Violence: a Cross-Government Report*, 2011, p7

### 3. The level and nature of gang activity

We asked interviewees for this study whether the level and nature of gang activity had changed since last summer. The responses paint a somewhat 'patchy picture'. Nearly half – 47.2 per cent – of CSJ Alliance charity respondents said that gang activity had stayed the same and 17 per cent said that it had increased.<sup>23</sup> A number of interviewees reported that the level of gang activity was starting to fall in their areas. They pointed to a 'more robust' policing approach and investment as reasons for the apparent success. There was consensus that the Government's focus on gangs since last year had helped, yet they emphasised that those areas starting to see results had been investing in tackling gang activity on a long-term basis – over the past three to seven years.

A similar number of witnesses to our review reported that the level of activity had stayed the same or had increased. Unemployment was seen as a key reason for the increase; as it becomes harder for young people to get employment, a growing number of disadvantaged young people are being drawn into gangs. One voluntary sector organisation told us that:

*'Things have been getting tougher. We're in a tug of war – with our clients against what their peers are doing. Gangs have upped the 'ante' in terms of recruitment. As it becomes harder to get into employment, young people are turning to gangs as an alternative. Now the early stages of our gangs project (set up six years ago), seems like the golden age.'*

As discussed above, the arrests and detentions of *Elders* have also led to a rise in violence as younger members have sought to assert themselves within their gangs. One organisation told us that: 'Over the past three years gang members are getting younger, they're becoming more violent and girls are more involved than ever'.

The increasing involvement of girls in gangs, particularly in relation to sexual exploitation, was highlighted as a significant issue by all interviewees. Concern was expressed that the problem remains 'hidden' and severely under-addressed. We were told of a case where a 13-year-old gang-involved girl being subjected to sexual exploitation was found to be grooming her 10-year-old sister for the purpose. Another case related to us was of a Year 5 girl (i.e. aged 9/10) grooming her friends to be kissed and fondled by her 11-year-old gang-involved brother.

It is clear that no time should be lost in tackling this issue. We look forward to the findings and recommendations of the Office of the Children's Commissioner's two-year Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups (CSEGG) – due to be published later this year.<sup>24</sup>

These issues are timely reminders that, rather than subsiding, the UK's gang problem is evolving and in need of urgent attention.

<sup>23</sup> CSJ, SurveyMonkey: 28.3% said they 'Didn't know' and 7.5% said it had decreased

<sup>24</sup> Office of the Children's Commissioner, *Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups (CSEGG)* [accessed via: <http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/info/csegg1> (15.08.12)]

## Conclusion

Nearly a year on from the publication of the Government's gangs strategy, there is a danger that the enthusiasm for change developed after the riots is being allowed to go cold. But as this short report shows, there is a great need for the Government to develop a fresh sense of purpose and urgency in tackling this problem.

This means working with children and young people already involved in gangs but also addressing the drivers of gang culture, not just the symptoms. The surest way of eliminating gangs is to try and ensure that children and young people never want or feel the need to join them. To do this we need to tackle deeper issues in our society, and seek to nurture and support ever stronger families and stronger communities.

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