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Girls achieve high status in criminal street gangs because of their people skills, research shows

Girls and young women can achieve influence and high status in criminal street gangs because of their people skills, the British Sociological Association annual conference in Leeds heard today. [Friday 25 April 2014]

Dr Simon Harding, of Middlesex University, spoke to members of gangs in South London and found that girls' superior social skills could often give them an advantage over less streetwise male members.

The girls made use of these skills to carry out trusted tasks such as money laundering or banking, alongside more practical tasks for gangs such as smuggling weapons in their prams or hiding drug stashes, he said.

Dr Harding said his research challenged the traditional view of girls as powerless hangers-on who had to suffer rape or other abuse as the price of belonging to the gang.

He talked to members of four gangs aged 16-25 in Lambeth over four years. He found that the males in the gangs "achieve status within the gang by violence and criminal activity – the rougher, tougher and nastier they are, the higher their status.

"But the girls and young women could gain status in a different way through their social skills – they can become quite important players but not through violence or brutality. They deal in information – trading and exchanging this daily.

"In the gang world information is vital if you're going to be successful at fighting off rivals and staying ahead of the police.

"The male members of the gangs often spend a lot of time hanging around with their gang mates, smoking dope, staying out of the way.

"It's the girls who keep in touch with the wider community as well as all the gang members – they pick up gossip on the streets, stay in contact with friends and family and use Facebook and Skype to gather information.

"They know who is dealing drugs on the gang's patch and when the police are watching the estate. They can be used to arrange fights with other gangs, and they can smuggle weapons or drugs – sometimes in the prams next to their babies. They can be used as 'clean skins' – they don't have criminal records and it's easier for them to avoid suspicion.

"They often know who is wavering in loyalty to the gang – after a street fight it's the girls who pick up the discarded mobile phones and they check the messages to see who has been communicating with other gangs.

"The girls' knowledge gives them status within the gang and the male members are wary of their power to spread rumours about them or inform on them to others in the gang, and that can put some of them in a powerful position.

“One girl told me: ‘I get 300 texts a day – I live in a texting storm’ – she sifted this information and from it she knew a great deal about what was going in her gang, in other gangs and on the street.”

Another girl told him: “Now you can find out in 30 seconds what someone said about you. The gossip can come from massive number of sources. You can hear at least 10 things a day. I’m not gonna lie, my phone rings at least once a day and I get told something about someone.”

Another said: “if something happens, people will say ‘find out – phone that girl’ and she will tell them’.”

Dr Harding told the conference: “This research sheds a new light on street gangs because it has previously been assumed that girls always had a low or secondary status within a gang, but that’s not necessarily the case. The girls’ social skills give them status and they benefit from this, receiving money, gifts and respect.

“But for those women who do not have the social skills – including street knowledge and high levels of trust – their situation is much more precarious. They may end up with little choice but to sleep with gang members to get protection. Frequently they are likely to be victimised – passed around for sex or gang raped.”

Dr Harding approached the gangs through charities that work with them.

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Notes:

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