



EMBARGOED UNTIL: 00:00 16 June 2008

Get rid of 'gangs'

A new report from the Runnymede Trustⁱ has found that attempts to label youth violence as a 'gang problem' may be stopping the police and youth services from taking effective preventative action and risks criminalising all young people – especially young black men.

The tragic and disturbing patterns of violence between young people are a legitimate cause for concern but the attribution of this tragic violence to 'gangs' obscures more than it illuminates and is stopping effective action being taken to tackle the violence. There is no agreement on the definition of a gang or any intelligence on the number of gangs in our towns and cities. Instead there is speculation, myth-making and confusion. This is not a basis on which to take the necessary action to make our streets safer – especially when they are policies that target young people from minority communities for police action.

The reportⁱⁱ, written by Dr Claire Alexander, author of 'The Asian Gang'ⁱⁱⁱ and a trustee of Runnymede, examines police intelligence gathering, media reporting, and the latest academic research. It concludes that:

- While the 'gang' label may be appropriate in a few very specific cases, given the difficulty in agreeing definition and usage, it would be better to abandon this term completely. Certainly 'the gang' should not provide a basis for welfare intervention, legal categorization or punitive sentencing.
- While the 'gang' might make sense in an American context, interventions on the streets of LA are not transferable to the streets of the UK
- There does not seem to be any boundary between young people socializing together in public spaces and 'gang' activity – causing groups of young people to be viewed as automatically suspicious. 'Gangs' are regularly identified as 'cultural' and then attached to particular ethnic groups. The effect is that entire 'communities' are criminalized on the basis of their 'cultures'.
- Intervention into youth conflict needs to be made on the basis of empirically grounded evidence, local understanding and expertise.
- Youth initiatives should avoid the labelling and criminalization of young people as 'gang members', and resist the linking of state funded youth initiatives to a 'gang prevention' agenda. Youth initiatives must respond to the real needs of young people in our communities, not just those who fit the image of 'the gangster'.

Rob Berkeley, Deputy Director of Runnymede, said:

"With a growing divide between generations and high levels of fear of crime, we do not need mythical 'gangs' added to the equation. More worryingly, talk about use of indiscriminate stop and search will worsen community relations and only serve to distract police from intelligence-led policing into harassing young men because of their supposed gang membership. We deserve better."



NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. The report is part of Runnymede's Perspectives series, the aim of which is to engage with government – and other initiatives – through exploring the use and development of concepts in policymaking, and analysing their potential contribution to a successful multi-ethnic Britain.
2. Rob Berkeley, Deputy Director of Runnymede is available for interviews and comment – or to arrange interviews with the author, Dr Alexander. To arrange an interview, please contact 020 7377 9222 during office hours. Outside of office hours, contact Rob Berkeley on 07764 935 770.
3. The report will be published online at 10am 16th June. Preview copies are available for press by contacting Runnymede on 020 7377 9222.

ⁱ The Runnymede Trust is an independent policy research organisation focusing on equality and justice through the promotion of a successful multi-ethnic society. Founded as a Charitable Education Trust, Runnymede has a long track record in policy research, working in collaboration with eminent thinks and policymakers in the public, private and voluntary sectors. Since 1968, the date of Runnymede's foundation, we have worked to establish and maintain a positive image of what it means to live affirmatively within a society that is both multi-ethnic and culturally diverse. Runnymede continues to speak with a thoughtful and independent public voice on these issues today. For further information visit www.runnymedetrust.org

ⁱⁱ '(Re)thinking Gangs' is released on Monday 16 June by the Runnymede Trust. It is available for download from www.runnymedetrust.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Dr Claire Alexander is Reader in Sociology at the London School of Economics. Her research interests are in the area of race, ethnicity, masculinity and youth identities, particularly in relation to ethnography. Her main publications include *The Art of Being Black* (OUP, 1996) and *The Asian Gang* (Berg, 2000). She is co-editor of *Beyond Difference* (Ethnic and Racial Studies, July 2002) and *Making Race Matter: Bodies, Space and Identity* (Palgrave, 2005) and Editor of *Writing Race: Ethnography and Difference* (Ethnic and Racial Studies, May 2006). Dr Alexander is a Trustee of the Runnymede Trust.