

Abianda's reflections on the term "gangs"

Abianda describes its services as supporting "girls and young women affected by gangs and county line activity".

We recognise the term "gangs" is problematic for a number of reasons. It is also a widely recognised shorthand for activity encompassing youth violence, criminal and sexual exploitation, which attracts attention, collaboration and funding.

Young women we work with often tell us that the label does not reflect their experiences. For some young women it is a barrier to engagement – and for others, it can open up space to explore the exploitation they have experienced.

We also recognise that being considered "gang-affected" means young women can access our services, and our tireless advocacy in support of them. Yet the label may then stick in the minds of other professionals working with the young woman, at odds with her own perspective on her experiences.

We consider here the term "gangs" as typically applied to street gangs, and we do not consider in depth the links between this and organised crime groups.

1. Our concerns with the term

Young people's use of the term is often at odds with professionals' use of the term

- A "gang" can be a very positive thing to a young person, and shouldn't necessarily warrant intervention from us. There is a huge difference between young people hanging out on the street with their peers, and being part of an organised criminal gang - yet the label is used as a broad term for both situations.
- The term gang is used in the arts and music culture as part of expression.
- Young people talk more about 'the lifestyle' - it's an environment you find yourself in.

"Young people's language is so different to professionals. They don't self-describe as "gang". We literally call young people "trappers" because they're trapped. We call it "surviving". The language young people we use say we are living this life but we didn't choose to be there. The meaning is within the words but the professionals fail to see that."
Abianda Consultants, March 2021

Young women feel targeted when this term is used to label them

- Young women we work with tell us that hearing that term makes them feel like they are "expected to hurt someone and/or carry guns/knives/other weapons." They may be alienated by the professionals' perceived assumptions about their behaviour. They may also find the term triggering.
- The label often results in a punitive response from professionals.

The term is used to define young people, not their experiences

- Too often young people are labelled as involved with gangs, without consideration of the structural inequalities, exploitation, oppression, grooming and coercion that have contributed to the traumatic experiences they are now enduring.
- We believe professionals should intervene when young people are experiencing exploitation, oppression, and coercion, whether in the context of "gangs" and county lines or other contexts.

"Gangs" can be used loosely to encompass a variety of traumatic experiences young people experience

- Young people being exploited to run county lines aren't always part of a gang
- Young people who are stabbed aren't always part of a gang
- Young people who are dealing drugs locally aren't always part of a gang

However, there are young women who are affected by each of these things, as well as being affected by "gangs" to use the CJB definition (see below).

The term comes from a space of criminalising young people

- Our modern understanding of street-gangs is based in academia heavily influenced by the racialised use of the term in America. Arguably therefore the term is laced with structural oppression.
- Researchers applying this term to UK and European contexts are predominantly criminologists or professionals working in criminal justice, rather than youth workers or those undertaking participatory practice.

We also acknowledge that some young people choose to identify as affiliated with a gang, and use the term to define their experiences.

2. The definition we recognise

Where the term gangs must be used, we advocate for sector wide agreement to ensure consistency across various agencies' policies and practice.

We acknowledge the following definition, recognised and adapted by the Children's Commissioner:

"A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who
(1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group,
(2) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence,
(3) identify with or lay claim over territory,
(4) have some form of identifying structural feature, and
(5) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs."

<https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/DyingtoBelongFullReport.pdf>

3. Our stance

We listen to how young women and girls describe their experiences

- Young women tell us the language professionals use to label them, and their experiences, are often a barrier to engagement.
- Young women feel the language used about them is often based on unconscious bias about race, class, gender, sexuality, religion & ability - this can lead to blind spots and things can be missed.
- We believe young women are the experts on their own lives, and that the people affected by an issue are best place to find the solutions. We must upend the power dynamic that exists in service delivery. Services must work for young women so, as professionals, we must be willing to change and adapt. That includes respecting how they describe their experiences.

Our work addresses vulnerabilities

- We support young women affected by serious youth violence, and criminal, sexual and financial exploitation.
- We work to address the inequalities, risks and harm faced by young women.
- We will consistently highlight to professionals the systemic inequalities and oppression that has left young women vulnerable to exploitation.

Language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination & liberation.

Angela Carter

We are committed to challenging oppressive language

We encourage professionals to:

- Use the term "gangs" cautiously, being mindful of its history, classist and racist connotations.
- Come to their own organisational agreed definition of the term "gangs".
- Consider bias and assumptions when a young person is labelled as involved with gangs.
- Ask young people for their input and their understanding of their experiences.
- Recognise all young people's vulnerabilities, and what life experiences have led to them being labelled in this way.
- Consider contextual harm, extra familial harm, and peer-on-peer abuse to describe young people's experiences of harm from a safeguarding perspective, rather than a criminal justice one.

We are committed to making clear our reservations about the term "gangs" across our publicity materials, in future funding bids, in our training and training handouts, and at public speaking engagements.

The Abianda team, March 2021

With thanks to Abianda Consultants and Interns, and Nicky Hill @nickyjanehill.

Suggested further reading:

- *Gangs Revisited: What's a Gang and What's Race Got to Do with It?*, Runnymede Trust
[https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/GangsRevisited\(online\)-2011.pdf](https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/GangsRevisited(online)-2011.pdf)
- *Reluctant Gangsters Revisited: The Evolution of Gangs from Postcodes to Profits*, Andrew J Whittaker and James Densley
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331717459_Reluctant_Gangsters_Revisited_The_Evolution_of_Gangs_from_Postcodes_to_Profits
- *Keeping kids safe: Improving safeguarding responses to gang violence and criminal exploitation*, Children's Commissioner
<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CCO-Gangs.pdf>