



“Dangerous Subcultures” **- exploring revenge, gangland and gun crime**¹

Ideas for leading a Conversation

For general guidance in running these sessions see
‘Planning a Conversation’ also available at www.agoraspace.org

Background

Every society has groups of people that operate ‘outside the system’. Not being able to appeal to the law or to any of the more refined structures of civilised society, so they develop a violent and unstable subculture that can ultimately threaten the whole society. This conversation explores the characteristics of these dangerous subcultures and strategies for limiting their subversive affects.

Starter questions for small group discussion

- 1. How would it feel to be part of a gang involved in the drug trade? Imagine yourself as a low ranking gang member. What pressures would there be on you?**
- 2. Think of as many groups as you can that operate outside of the law? Why do people join them?**
- 3. What strategies can you think of to help alienated people and groups become part of the society again?**

¹ These materials are produced by Project Agora, a company limited by guarantee, which is dedicated to creating new spaces in society for the highest possible quality of public conversation, the building of realistic trust and the seeking of vision. Contact Agora at www.agoraspace.org or email enquiries@agoraspace.org

One way through the conversation

Begin the evening with Question One: How would it feel to be part of a gang involved in the drug trade? Imagine yourself as a low ranking gang member. What pressures would there be on you?

Brainstorm the characteristics of a drug gang. List them on a flip chart. They will include things like fear, intimidation, strict loyalty, physical threat, adventure, lure of easy money.

Explore these altogether to try to understand why they occur as they do.

For example:

Loyalty

Why is loyalty such a strong issue among gangs and criminals in general? (See Mafia gangs in resources). Working together in any co-operative venture is difficult, but those outside of the system it is doubly difficult. They cannot appeal to the law to settle disputes and they are threatened by the law in the sense of the prospect of punishment. All they have got to bind them together is this strong moral sense about loyalty and the fear of ostracism and/or physical coercion if they let the others down.

Respect and reputation

The maintenance of 'order' among the members of a gang becomes especially important as a means of maintaining co-operative discipline. This tends toward a simple, very evident, power hierarchy. Being outside of the system there are none of the more refined ways for this to be recognised and affirmed. There can be no public recognition in the conferring of authority, no degrees offered (!), no jobs applied for or contracts given. So power is fragile and acutely dependent on maintaining respect and reputation. Status signs are often very important and to be 'dissed' (that is disrespected) is to provoke immediate violent retribution. (see Mark Burnett story as he 'dissed' a Yardie bouncer by mistake)

Territory and the arms race

A gang has to organise itself and protect its operation from the intrusion of others. Again none of the rules of the wider society apply so turf wars are common. As infringements of one upon another result in violence and tit for tat revenge behaviour. (see Hell's Angels in Canada) The need to present oneself as 'harder' and more successful than others, leads to an arms race so that if one group carries arms, their competitors must also.

Young males

Some gangs on estates comprise groups of wholly young people making mischief. Why do they do this? Perhaps they are places of belonging and adventure for young people who might otherwise feel quite alienated from society. These lads often have emotional and behavioural problems, difficult home situations and few good adult male role models. (see Hormones and social control)

Go to Question Two: Think of as many groups as you can that operate outside of the law? Why do people join them?

Many groups will already have been mentioned, but this is an opportunity to think more widely. List them on a flip chart. There are a host of criminal groups, including those who smuggle arms, drugs and people. There are those involved in sex trading in some form or another. And there are those who have simply lost confidence in the society.

For example the paramilitary groups in Belfast probably arose because the people in certain areas no longer felt protected by the law of the land. Caught up in a spiral of tit for tat killing across the sectarian divide they grew a militia, established a territory and dispensed their own rough and ready internal justice in the form of punishment beatings. From this they developed other 'trades' like drugs and gun running with their associated turf wars and internecine violence.

Having made this list – point out that all of these groups share the characteristics of gangs already alluded to. And the principle reason for the violence, revenge attacks etc is that they cannot take advantage of all the more subtle and substantial structures of the society that solidify groups, acknowledge authority, bind people into contract and protect all that by law. In other words they are outside the systems of trust which the rest of us benefit from and which bring so much peace to the ordinary citizen.

This would be a good moment to refer to the historical resources which show a gradual lessening of violence as legal codes and policing systems are developed and embraced by societies across the world. See particularly

- the violence endemic in pre-state societies
- cities of refuge in the Bible
- an eye for an eye as the earliest and crudest deterrent
- the development of centralised legal authority in the Middle Ages as an antidote to revenge killing

Together these suggest that the characteristics of gang violence arise from human nature and have been minimised in human societies by the development of legal and other structures of governance. Yet they are still manifest among those who are 'outside the system'.

Discussion of why people join the gangs and subcultures of a society should include the idea of adventure, easy money and the like, but there are also other factors. If someone gets to a place where they lose faith in the society, perhaps they feel bad about themselves and have little hope for the future then they are all the more prone to finding themselves in such a gang. That at least gives them some allies and a place of belonging.

We should notice that societies not only develop, but they can also degenerate. This happened in Northern Ireland with the rise of 'no go' areas and the paramilitaries. It has also happened in Albania and many other places to different degrees. This suggests that any society where large numbers of people are dropping out of the system, or losing confidence in it, is in danger

Go on to Question Three: What strategies can you think of to help alienated people and groups become part of the society again?

Different groups may take this in different directions. Positively encourage a diversity of opinion here.

If society is viewed as a trust then one central question becomes how to **help potentially alienated people feel**

- **accepted by the society**
- **that it can be trusted to deal with them fairly**
- **that they really do have something to gain by being part of it.**

Or it may be to approach **the communities** where gang members live, and which implicitly support the gangs, with the aim of deliberately building trust between these people and the authorities. (see Operation Trident)

Complementary to this would be strategies that make the subculture unattractive. This is where effective **policing and the criminal justice** system might rightly come in. Criminal behaviour should not be rewarding.

Another avenue to explore might be to **change the law**. Some would argue that our present drug laws present an enormous opportunity to criminal gangs and that wise legalisation of drugs might cut this out at a stroke.

Others would say that many find themselves on the edges of society through no fault of their own, but **poverty** leads to prostitution or **political struggle** leads to seeking asylum and they find themselves in the hands of the racketeers. If this is the case then deliberate efforts at understanding and inclusion may be appropriate.

You may find that different people in the group embrace one or other of these options as if it alone is the answer. This may reflect different personality types and different gut level politics. It may be most helpful to list these various options and to notice that they are **not mutually exclusive** and a healthy society might be pursuing them all to various degrees.

Finally the group might reflect on how we generally build trust in society, on the feelings of revenge that can erupt in all of us, how taking people to law is not always the proper solution to being wronged and on the proper place for mercy and forgiveness.

Resources

There are many issues raised by this conversation. Here are some more ideas and information that are intended to resource the conversation and offer alternative entry points.

Loyalty within gangs

Loyalty among criminal groups is upheld with frightening ferocity. The Mafia have a saying that if a deal goes down there must either be a 'body in court or a body on the floor'. That is, either someone has been caught by the police or someone has betrayed them, in which case they must die.

(Mr Nice- an autobiography by Howard Marks. Vintage 1998)

Gang culture and revenge killing

The word 'Yardies' comes from the backyards of Kingston, Jamaica though many non-Jamaicans now style themselves as Yardies. They are recognised by their style. Top of the range BMWs, gold jewellery, designer clothes and Mach 10 submachine guns are typical status signs. Over 70 murders in England's main cities during 2002 were thought to be Yardie-related. These murders can be for seemingly trivial reasons. In 1992 Mark Burnett was entering a London nightclub when he accidentally trod on the toe of the bouncer at the door. This guy, a Yardie, shot him dead. There were an estimated 2000 people at the nightclub that night. When the police arrived and tried to piece together what happened 350 of these claimed to be in the toilets at the time of the shooting and hundreds gave false names. Of 270 people arrested none could recall seeing anything out of the ordinary.

Territory and the arms race

In Canada the Hell's Angels have become very serious drug racketeers. One turf war in Montreal between the Hell's Angels and another local gang led to a vicious spiral of tit for tat violence and 160 murders. In the end there was a public outcry and it seemed to come to an end when the two gang leaders shook hands on TV. Everyone thought that they were agreeing to stop trading in drugs, but behind the scenes they had actually agreed some territorial boundaries so that the trade could continue to flourish. That is what they were shaking hands about. (BBC2 Jan 4th 2004 This World)

In one week in October 2003 there were 109 gun crimes of various sorts in the UK. Most gun crime involves gangsters shooting each other, known by police as 'bad on bad', but all too often other members of the public are killed too. Our media focussed In 2004 on the tragic killing of 7 year old Toni Ann Byfield (Toni Ann's father was a low ranking Yardie) and Marion Bates in her jewellery shop in Nottingham.

A Guardian report noted 'There appears to be a cycle of fear. Drug dealers arm themselves as a matter of necessity – the prevalence of guns means that others feel the need to arm themselves.

Signs of status and gang membership

Feuds in Manchester have led to 26 killings in the last five years as rival gangs of young men compete for territory to trade in drugs. Police are aware that much of the gang member's identity rests in their style of dress and way of operating. Some recent Anti-Social Behaviour Orders have actually stated that certain people cannot wear bandanas or ride their trademark bicycles.

When a group of motorbike riders in Windsor decided to form their own branch of the Hell's Angels, they copied the design of authentic Hells Angel jackets and logo, but did not formally apply to register their Chapter. Some months later their leader was shot. They are now in full membership.

Hormones and social control

Elephants have extraordinarily intricate social structures. It seems that older male elephants have a particular role in keeping young males in check when they first enter musth, a period of intense male excitement associated with a rise in testosterone levels. This became particularly evident after a culling programme in Kruger National Park, which left a large number of young males without parents. Many of these animals were moved to establish new elephant colonies elsewhere, but they had no older elephants to learn from. When they entered musth these young males ran amok, creating sheer havoc in the game parks, even killing rare white rhinos, apparently just for the fun of it. The park managers quickly made plans to bring some forty year old bulls in and made a note for the future to relocate animals in family groups.

Human males experience the highest levels of testosterone between the ages of 15 and 30. This is also the period when they are prone to form gangs and are most likely to be killed by another male. Testosterone levels can be shown to rise among football fans after their team has won and fall among fans of the losing team. Testosterone levels are generally higher among violent criminals than non-violent ones.

(Source: *Heroes, Rogues and Lovers – Testosterone and behaviour* –James McBride Dabbs with Mary Godwin Dabbs McGraw Hill 2000)

For more material on gangs see *Gangland Britain – inside Britain's most dangerous gangs* by Tony Thompson Hodder 1995

The historical development of legal systems as a means to deter revenge violence

In pre-state societies i.e. those without a legal system, between 10 and 60% of men die at the hands of other men. Over the last millennium the chances of a man dying of homicide have fallen 10 to 100 fold. (for a great resource for this whole subject see *The Blank Slate* by Steven Pinker Penguin 2002 especially Chapter 17 on violence)

Daly and Wilson (*Homicide* publ. by Hawthorne N.Y. 1988) quote many historical studies of the Middle Ages which suggest that people submitted to centralised authority at that time principally 'to relieve themselves of the burden of having to retaliate against those who would harm them and their kin'.

Some would say that our global political scene is now in the equivalent of a 'pre-state' culture. That is that we are actually in the process of developing functional systems of international policing and law to deal with disputes. In this context George Bush's declaration that he will not seek any 'permission slip' in order to defend the interests of his country (State of the Union address Jan 2004) sounds very much like the householder out to take revenge before the development of law.

Disintegration of legal systems and subcultures

Some types of society are particularly prone to violence: Nisbett and Cohen in *Culture of Honor* show that violent cultures arise in societies that are beyond the reach of the law and in which precious assets are easily stolen eg pastoralists like Masai, Scottish highlanders, Wild West, drug gangs.

In the recent very turbulent history of Albania many people lost confidence in the national legal system. Instead they reverted to an ancient code called the Kanoon. This dictated that if someone was killed then it was acceptable to take revenge by killing any member of the killer's family for up to two years from the crime. This result was that a single murder left every member of the large and extended family of the suspect in great fear of reprisal. Many children were never allowed to leave home or go to school for fear of attack. (<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2000/05/07/stories/05071348.htm>)

Operation Trident – focussed on gun crime in the black community in London. It has been remarkably successful and increased clear up rates for murder in London to 80% from 25% five years ago. One of their strategies is to build relationships with the community leaders and churches in the affected areas. The reason for this is to build people's trust in the police so that when things go wrong they will turn to them and not settle matters internally. The stated aim is 'to reassure black communities that they can successfully challenge the gunmen by coming forward with information.' (The Week)

Faith perspectives

Taking revenge

Motivations toward revenge are complex and powerful. We have an innate sense of justice that is offended by the one who has hurt us. We cannot stand by and risk humiliation and the loss of standing in the society. Evidence that this was a problem in early Israel is found in Numbers 35 v11,12 which reads

'Then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there. The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation for judgement.'

This shows that even if someone had killed someone accidentally (the manslayer), their life was at risk from the one who would take revenge (the 'avenger'). So they needed cities where people could flee to and be safe until they could be brought to a more formal court of justice ('the congregation for judgement').

Revenge has been dealt with in many societies through the development of a legal system through which victims could seek justice.

One of the most basic law codes is found in the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 21 – 24) and it includes a set of simple rules for justice in days when there was little in terms of social institutions and no formal policing system. It includes the famous phrase an **eye for an eye** and a tooth for a tooth'. An 'eye for an eye' is a primitive law code whose principal aim is to deter. The Cold War is the prime recent example of the success of this strategy. If you know you are to be hit back equally then there is no incentive to attack in the first place. But once the violence starts the problem is how to stop it.

Every society struggles with its lack of vision and the imperfection of its systems and the biblical community was no exception. Because much of the Bible is realistic history it does not flinch from recording several examples of revenge violence. Most akin to gangland behaviour is perhaps the struggle between Joab and Abner after Abner had killed Joab's brother. (see 2 Samuel 2ff). This took place in a time of civil war after the death of Saul, when the country was divided into two factions, the House of David, whose army was led by Joab and the House of Saul whose army was led by Abner. The story reads almost like gang warfare and is equally bloody.

Study the story of the feud between Abner and Joab. Pick out characteristics of gangland behaviour.

On the importance of law

Biblical faith is particularly supportive of the development of legal systems. From the earliest times there would be judges in the land who would hear cases that were brought to them. God was always understood as one who appointed such judges and inspired their decisions. (Exodus 18 v 13ff). God was always seen as the ultimate judge. This made for a code that deliberately sought justice for all.

Yet legal systems are never experienced as perfect. Invite people to tell of a time when they had dealings with the law. Did they feel that justice was done?

On working to include people

Much of Jesus' ministry can be understood as working to enhance our sympathy towards those on the margins of their society. We read in the gospels a continuous thread of stories about tax collectors, women of disrepute, lepers, Samaritans... all of whom Jesus somehow made more real to others, confronting prejudice and working for mutual understanding and compassion. This set in train a process of imagination that encouraged future societies to search out the outcast people of their day and seek to understand and include them. Justice must apply to all. Victims of violence whoever they are need to be heard. Each case must be tried on its merits. The society must have no 'no go' areas, no subcultures where the law does not apply and no people that are taken less seriously than others. Such compassion may be the platform for a realistic trust to be built in a society.

Who will bear the pain?

The building of trust in a society is a long process. People are what they are and there will be misunderstandings, conflict and occasional violence. Also there will be a great deal in interpersonal relationships that is not the concern of a legal system. We cannot take every offence to law, every slight, every betrayal. Yet if tit for tat behaviour of any sort begins, how can it stop? Someone somewhere will have to bear the pain.

Some people may feel that there is actually too much turning to the law today. We live in a 'compensation culture' where every injury becomes a potential lawsuit. This may cause us to ask questions about the place of forgiveness, mercy and simply bearing the pain.

Invite people to consider a conflict that they have been party to. Did they go to law? Could it have been handled in a better way?

Jesus responded to the inherited law codes of his day with some extraordinary words. 'You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, 'Do not resist one who is evil. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also...'' (Matthew 5v38.39) Some see this action as a strange blend of defiance and submission, refusing the return of violence with violence, absorbing the attack and yet not diminishing its significance.

This narrow road between taking offence seriously and making a response that would not provoke further injury is demonstrated most powerfully and personally by Jesus in the crucifixion narrative. There he is ritually humiliated, spat upon, mocked and denigrated in the time-honoured fashion of those who diminish someone's humanity as a prelude to violence. Yet in it all he stands there, for the most part quite silently, absorbing their worst, not returning either their insults or their violence. This attitude he maintains to the end. A centurion standing by says, 'Surely this man was the Son of God.' And then God acts to render his judgement on the situation and raise Jesus to new life. In the end we are invited to entrust judgement not to the authorities of this world, but to God.