

Consultation on the Redesign of the Crime Survey for England and Wales response



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Defining ‘gangs’

We are writing from StopWatch, a coalition of legal experts, academics, citizens and civil liberties campaigners, working towards fair and accountable policing. The [consultation on the redesign of the Crime Survey for England and Wales](#) asks respondents whether data drawn from the survey’s self-completion module ‘**Gangs and Personal Security**’ are useful – however, we have much broader concerns regarding these survey items that we wish to share.

As you will be aware, Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities – particularly young, Black men – are overpoliced in England and Wales. These groups are searched at significantly higher rates than white people. In the year to March 2021, Black people were searched at [seven times the rate](#) of white people. Nearly seven in ten Black men aged between 15 and 19 years of age were stopped and searched in the two years before October 2019 – the figure for white men in the same age group is one in six.¹ Often, the “gang” label has been attached to this kind of overpolicing. [Declared to be operating unlawfully](#) by the Information Commissioner’s Office in 2018, the Metropolitan Police Service’s [gangs violence matrix](#) offers just one example. This database is supposed to contain the personal data of those the Met perceive to be in a gang and are likely to commit violence – but an investigation revealed around a third of individuals on the matrix have never committed a crime. Those labelled on the database found themselves subjected to police and wider state intrusion into the lives – predominantly and disproportionately infringing on the rights and civil liberties of young black men. Because of this, it is essential that data sources which may be deployed in support of such policing tactics are investigated thoroughly.

The description of a “gang” offered in the Crime Survey for England and Wales is extremely broad. According to the most recent questionnaire, a “street gang” refers to:

a [group] of young people who hang around together and: have a specific area or territory; have a name, a colour or something else to identify the group; possibly have rules or a leader; who may commit crimes together.

¹ BBC Politics London. Aired 1 March 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000g1bh>

It is somewhat unexpected that a victimisation survey would gather data on groups who might not engage in criminal activity. But most worryingly, many of the ways young people socialise could meet the criteria this definition lays out, including sports teams, youth clubs, musical collectives – even just friendship groups. Indeed, under a definition this broad, we could consider every 5-a-side team in the country to be a street gang. This example may appear flippant, but it highlights an important concern – asking respondents whether they believe incidents of crime to be perpetrated by anyone who is part of such a broadly defined “street gang” invites prejudicial replies, as respondents rely on [sensationalised press reports](#) or [criminal justice system rhetoric](#) to fill the gaps this definition leaves open.

This consultation might be an ideal opportunity to reflect on the utility of these survey items altogether. Importantly, it is not only the case that the term “gang” appears repeatedly in this country’s long history of overpolicing of young black men (Amnesty International UK, 2018; Spicer, 2020; Williams, 2018; Williams & Clarke, 2016) – it is that the term ‘[legitimises]’ this intrusion (Williams, 2015, p. 18). Williams reflects on research commissioned by Local Authority Crime Reduction Partnerships, including one project seeking to examine an “‘emergent’ gang situation’ (2015, p. 26). Here, they found that reports from police respondents (that the area ‘is one gang!’ (2015, p. 26)) contradicted those from local young people, who didn’t recognise the presence of any such group in their area. Troublingly, the geographical focus was pre-determined for their team, excluding areas with higher rates of violence and serious youth violence, and instead focusing on areas with high Asian populations. Williams suggests this represented the ‘construction of a “gang” problem’ – that they had been commissioned as researchers ‘to “find” gangs... to conjure simplistic commonsense explanations’ for broader problems the area faced, like deprivation (2015, p. 27).

Work like this has led researchers like Williams and Clarke to describe “gang” as a racialised term of ‘no ontological value’ (2018, p. 12). The inclusion of survey items that reify this concept only serves to contribute to the overpolicing it is so often associated with. As you consider changes to the survey, we would be happy to meet to discuss the module and the evidence presented here in more detail.

ENDS

About StopWatch

StopWatch is a coalition of legal experts, academics, citizens and civil liberties campaigners. We aim to address excess and disproportionate stop and search, promote best practice and ensure fair, effective policing for all.

References

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