

# **Bromley Safeguarding Children Partnership**



## **Safeguarding Children Affected by Gang Activity / Serious Youth Violence Protocol**

2020

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## 1. Aims and Principles of Protocol and Practice Guidance

This protocol has been developed to ensure consistency and effectiveness in the partnership's approach to safeguarding those at risk of, or who have suffered, significant harm in relation to gangs. It should be read in conjunction with the [Vulnerable Adolescents Strategy](#) and other relevant supporting protocols on CSE and Missing

The protocol will aim to:

- Ensure the effective delivery of a partnership response in safeguarding children affected by gang activity whilst outlining the accountability of each agency involved
- Identify children at risk of involvement in anti-social behaviour, emergent criminality and gang activity and identify appropriate responses
- Enable professionals to empower children and families to make safe choices and improve the outcomes for all people identified as at risk

This protocol clarifies the safeguarding responsibilities of agencies whether they deliver universal, targeted or specialist services, to intervene in ways that will prevent and minimise risk from gang activity and to identify and act when there is high risk of significant harm as a result of gang related violence.

The actions of frontline practitioners across the Local Authority's children's services and partner agencies have the power to transform the futures of those children and avoid the damaging effects of gangs.

This protocol is intended for all organisations and teams working with children, young people and families across universal, targeted and specialist services in Bromley.

This document should be read by managers and frontline practitioners in all agencies working with children and their families.

Effective safeguarding procedures are essential to support children associated with gang members; those who have been drawn into the periphery of gangs; as well as promoting the exit from gangs of the small but significant number more heavily involved. Procedures are crucial in protecting those who are at immediate risk of harm; either as gang members and/or (potential) victims of gang-related behaviour.

Potentially, a child involved with a gang or with serious youth violence could be both a victim and a perpetrator. This requires professionals to assess and support his/her welfare and well-being needs at the same time as assessing and responding in a criminal justice capacity.

As Bromley is a London borough, follows the London Child Protection Procedures and as gang-related activity and serious youth violence often crosses borough boundaries and county lines, this protocol will begin by citing the section of the Procedures focused on Safeguarding Children Affected by Gang Activity / Serious Youth Violence.

The protocol will then focus further on the more Bromley-specific processes and pathways to better enable staff from all of the multi-agency partnership to respond consistently and effectively to children affected by gangs and serious youth violence.

## 2. London Child Protection Procedures 6<sup>th</sup> Edition (2020)

### 2.1 Introduction

There are a number of areas in which young people are put at risk by gang activity, both through participation in and as victims of gang violence which can be in relation to their peers or to a gang-involved adult in their household.

A child who is affected by gang activity or serious youth violence may have suffered, or may be likely to suffer, significant harm through physical, sexual and emotional abuse or neglect. See [Responding to Concerns of Abuse and Neglect Procedure](#).

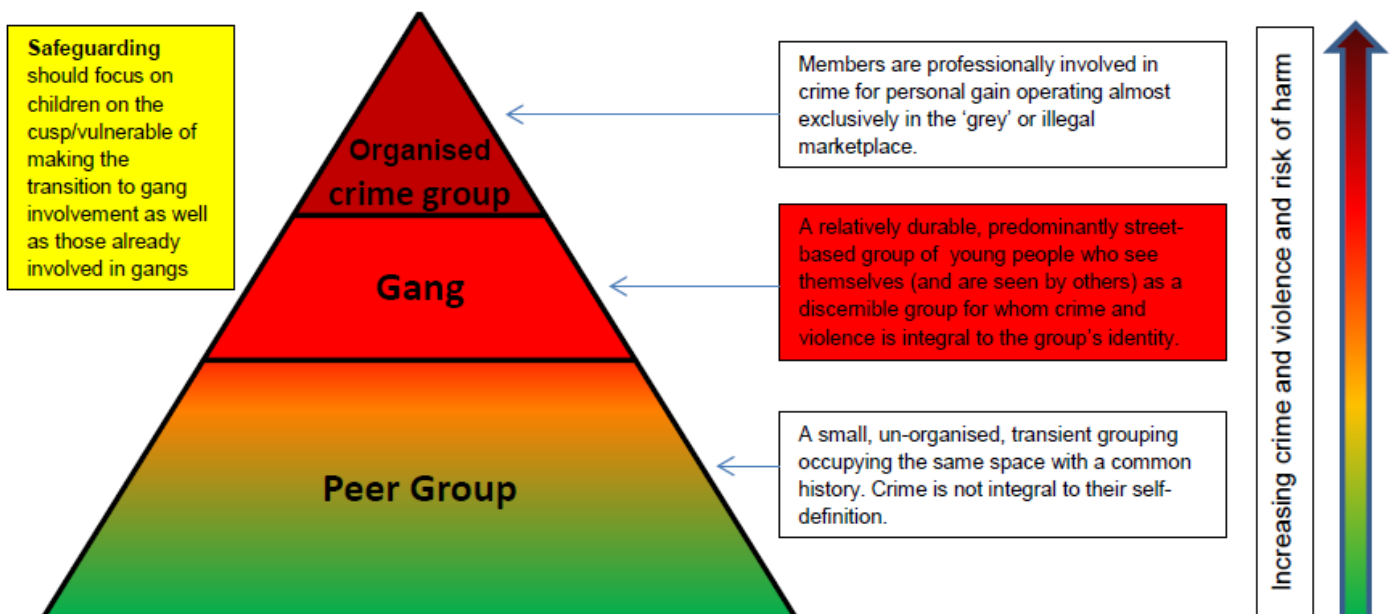
Significant harm is defined in [Responding to Concerns of Abuse and Neglect Procedure, Concept of Significant Harm](#) as a situation where a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, a degree of physical, sexual and / or emotional harm (through abuse or neglect), which is so harmful that there needs to be compulsory intervention by child protection services.

### 2.2 Definition of a Gang

Groups of children often gather together in public places to socialise, and peer association is an essential feature of most children's transition to adulthood. Groups of children can be disorderly and/or anti-social without engaging in criminal activity.

Defining a gang is difficult, however it can be broadly described as a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of children who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is integral to the group's identity.

### Pyramid of Gang Involvement



(Adapted from: Hallsworth, S and Young, T. *Getting Real About Gangs*; *Criminal Justice Matters* 2004 (55) 12-13)

Children may be involved in more than one 'gang', with some cross-border movement, and may not stay in a 'gang' for significant periods of time. Children rarely use the term 'gang', instead they use terms such as 'family', 'breddrin', 'crews', 'cuz' (cousins), 'my boys' or simply 'the people I grew up with'.

Definitions may need to be highly specific to particular areas or neighbourhoods if they are to be useful. Furthermore, professionals should not seek to apply this or any other definition of a gang too rigorously; if a child or others think s/he is involved with or affected by 'a gang', then a professional should act accordingly.

Violence is a way for gang members to gain recognition and respect by asserting their power and authority in the street, with a large proportion of street crime perpetrated against members of other gangs or the relatives of gang members.

Youth violence, serious or otherwise, may be a function of gang activity. However, it could equally represent the behaviour of a child acting individually in response to his or her particular history and circumstances.

The Metropolitan Police Service defines serious youth violence as:

*“...any offence of most serious violence or weapon enabled crime, where the victim is aged 1-19' i.e. murder, manslaughter, rape, wounding with intent and causing grievous bodily harm. 'Youth violence' is defined in the same way, but also includes assault with injury offences.”*

The factors which influence a child's propensity to initiate violence include:

- Parenting which is cold / uncaring, non-nurturing and neglectful
- Parenting which includes harsh disciplining
- Maltreatment, such as physical or sexual abuse in childhood (abuse by adults and peers within and outside of the family)
- Trauma such as domestic violence or involvement in or witnessing conflict violence (see also Safeguarding Children Abused Through Domestic Violence in London CP Procedures Practice Guidance Part B, Parents Who Have Additional Needs.)

One factor which influences a child's propensity to imitate violence is:

- Parenting which is permissive and neglectful, resulting in a lack of guidance and creating ineffectiveness and poor self-control for a child. The child is then not equipped to resist an environment or group which instigates violence

## 2.3 Community and Family Circumstances

Circumstances which can foster the emergence of gangs include:

- Areas with a high level of social and economic exclusion and mobility (which weakens the ties of kinship and friendship and the established mechanisms of informal control and social support)
- Areas made up of predominantly social housing, and especially where it is high rise / high density social housing. There is a perfect correlation in London with 'gang neighbourhoods' and being amongst the 20% most deprived government lower level super output areas (based on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2007)
- Areas with poor performing schools - in terms of leadership, positive ethos, managing behaviour and partnership working

- Lack of access to pro-social activities (e.g. youth service) and to vocational training and opportunities
- Communities who have experienced war situations prior to arrival in the UK
- Areas with a high level of gang activity / peer pressure and intimidation, particularly if the family is denying this or is in fear of the gangs
- Family members involved in gang activity and criminality

Many parents are aware of the widespread perception that the gang problem is ultimately a product of poor parenting and that the solution lies in assuming responsibility for their children. However, they feel unable either to control or to protect their children.

## Weapons

Fear and a need for self-protection is a key motivation for children to carry a weapon - it affords a child a feeling of power. Neighbourhoods with high levels of deprivation and social exclusion generally have the highest rates of gun and knife crime. Children are more likely to carry knives and other weapons than guns.

Professionals working with children who may have reason to be fearful in their neighbourhood or school / FE college should be alert to the possibility that a child may carry a weapon. See [London CP Procedures Practice Guidance](#) on: Managing work with Families where there are Obstacles and Resistance Procedure; Keeping Professionals Safe and Managing Work with Families where there are Obstacles and Resistance Procedure; and Management responsibility, and Roles and Responsibilities Procedure, Screening and Searching Pupils for Weapons in Schools.

## Girls and Sexual Exploitation

There is evidence of a high incidence of rape of girls who are involved with gangs. Some senior gang members pass their girlfriends around to lower ranking members and sometimes to the whole group at the same time. Very few rapes by gang members are reported.

Gang members often groom girls at school using drugs and alcohol, which act as disinhibitors and also create dependency, and encourage / coerce them to recruit other girls through school / social networks.

See also [Safeguarding Children from Sexual Exploitation](#); and [Safeguarding Trafficked and Sexually Exploited Children](#)

## 2.4 Organised Criminal Groups

An organised criminal group is a group of individuals normally led by adults for whom involvement in crime is for personal gain (financial or otherwise). This involves serious and organised criminality by a core of violent gang members who exploit vulnerable young people and adults. This may also involve the movement and selling of drugs and money across the country (known as 'county lines' because it extends across county boundaries).

It is a tactic used by groups or gangs to facilitate the selling of drugs in an area outside of the area in which they live, often coordinated by mobile phone and reducing their risk of detection. It almost exclusively involves violence, intimidation and the offer of money or drugs. Young people can become indebted to gang/groups and exploited in order to pay off debts. Young people may be going missing and travelling to market or seaside towns;

often by rail but sometimes car or coach. They may have unexplained increases in money or possessions. Young men and women may be at risk of sexual exploitation in these groups.

There is a distinction between organised crime groups and street gangs based on the level of criminality, organisation, planning and control; however, there are significant links between different levels of gangs. Activity can include street gangs' involvement in drug dealing on behalf of organised criminal groups and the sexual abuse of girls and boys by organised criminal groups.

[National Crime Agency Report County Lines Gang Violence, Exploitation and Drug Supply \(2016\).](#)

## 2.5 Professional Response

See also [Children Harming Others Procedure](#) and [Risk Management of Known Offenders Procedure](#).

Professionals should always take what the child tells them seriously. They should assess this together with the child's presenting behaviours in the context of whatever information they know or can gather from the child about the risk factors described in the risk assessment framework for children affected by gangs and serious youth violence.

Potentially a child involved with a gang or with serious violence could be both a victim and a perpetrator. This requires professionals to assess and support his/her welfare and well-being needs at the same time as assessing and responding in a criminal justice capacity.

Local authorities are recommended to nominate a local professional who can develop specialist knowledge in relation to gangs and serious youth violence to act as an adviser to other professionals in cases where there are concerns that a child is/could be affected by gangs and/or serious youth violence.

If a professional is concerned that a child is at risk of harm as a victim or a perpetrator of serious youth violence, gang-related or not, the professional should:

- Wherever possible, consult with their agency's designated safeguarding children professional, their manager and, if available, the local multi-agency gang intelligence forum and/or professional with specialist knowledge in relation to gangs
- Consider [Children Harming Others Procedure](#)
- If the threshold is met for significant harm, then a referral must be made to LA children's social care, in line with the [Referral and Assessment Procedure](#)

***For referral to the Bromley Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) please use the information and contact details within the following hyperlink:***

**[Referral to Bromley MASH](#)**

## Looked After Children

Looked after children are particularly vulnerable to being affected by gangs and serious youth violence as they may have low self-esteem, low resilience, attachment issues and the fact that they are often isolated from family

and friends. Looked after children have been reported to say that bullies, gangs and the risk of serious youth violence are the worst things about where they live.

## 2.6 Agency Response

Local Authority Children's Social Care professionals need to be alert to the possibility that a child referred to them or a child they are already working with may, in addition to any of the child's other presenting issues, be or become vulnerable to / involved with a gang or serious youth violence.

A high proportion of gang-involved children are known to Youth Offending Services (YOS) and a recent UK study found that almost two thirds of a sample of active gang members interviewed had been permanently excluded from school.

The police, especially safer neighbourhood policing teams, should be aware of siblings or other children living in households which are affected by gang activity and/or serious youth violence, including parents as adult gang members, and should share this information internally with child abuse investigation teams (CAITs) and externally with Local Authority Children's Social Care at the earliest opportunity.

If the police give an Osman Warning<sup>1</sup> to a child they should inform Local Authority Children's Social Care at the earliest opportunity.

Schools affected by gang issues and potential or actual serious youth violence will need to work in partnership with the police (the Safer Neighbourhoods Policing Team), YOS services and Local Authority Children's Social Care. Safer school partnerships can be an effective forum for this multi-agency working.

Community groups / third sector agencies can be well placed to know the profile and location of local gang activity and potential or actual serious youth violence through their community links.

See also: [Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation \(January 2016\)](#).

## 2.7 Violent Extremism

Particularly from their teenage years onwards children can be vulnerable to becoming involved with radical groups through direct contact with members or, increasingly, through the internet. This can put the child at risk of being drawn in to criminal activity and has the potential to cause significant harm.

### Prevention

Channel forms part of the cross-Government Prevent Strategy to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremism. Channel is the mechanism for making referrals and accessing support for children (and adults) at risk of violent extremism. Channel guidance states that if a referred individual is under the age of 18 the Channel co-ordinator must liaise with the common assessment framework (CAF) co-ordinator or Local Authority Children's Social Care service (the latter should be represented on the Prevent partnership and multi-agency Channel Panel) to agree how best to manage the case.

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<sup>1</sup> The Osman v United Kingdom case (1998) placed a positive obligation on the authorities to take preventive measures to protect an individual whose life is at risk from the criminal acts of another individual e.g. where a gang member threatens to kill another gang member



Following initial discussion a decision needs to be made on how to progress the case (e.g. as a safeguarding issue, under Channel, CAF, or another support process) and establish how this will be reviewed. This decision can be taken on a case by case basis or a decision can be made by all local partners to use one particular system for the referral of all children.

If an area does not have Channel, local areas should incorporate referrals of children within local CAF and safeguarding procedures i.e. in line with the [Referral and Assessment Procedure](#).

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**[Referral to Bromley MASH](#)**

See the Prevent Strategy at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance> and also the [Channel Guidance](#).

Local strategic partnerships, children's trusts or equivalent and crime and disorder partnerships, advised by LSCBs, should have an agreed process in place for safeguarding children vulnerable to gangs, serious youth violence and violent extremism.

Local safeguarding strategies should:

- Promote awareness of the relationship between 'good enough' parenting and aggression in children
- Promote early years' service-led parenting support
- Promote capacity-building in the community for parental self-help groups to educate and support 'good enough' parenting
- Promote targeted youth support, re-engagement and participation

## 2.8 Further Information

- [Knife, Gun and Gang Crime](#)
- [Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation](#)
- [Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults: County Lines](#)
- [Reducing Knife, Gun and Gang Crime](#)
- [Girls and Gangs, The Centre for Social Justice, 2014 \(research paper\)](#)
- [Ending Gang and Youth Violence Community Engagement 2014](#)
- [Injunctions to Prevent Gang-Related Violence and Drug Dealing \(Home Office\) May 2016](#)
- [Injunctions to Prevent Gang-Related Violence and Gang-Related Drug Dealing A Practitioners' Guide Revised Guidance May 2016](#)
- [Preventing Gang and Youth Violence: Spotting Signals of Risk and Supporting Children and Young People](#)

### 3. Bromley Processes and Pathways

#### 3.1 Safeguarding Children and Young People at Risk of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), those who go missing from home and care and those affected by Gang activity, criminality and/or Gang-related serious youth violence

- The Atlas Team has the primary responsibility for co-ordinating and increasing safety for children and young people at risk of extra familial (contextual) harm and for those children who go missing from home or care. This team comprises of a team manager, 3 return home interview officers, a data analyst and a business support officer. A CSE intervention worker from the Asphaleia service is also based in the team. The team works closely with the Youth Offending Service, Police (Gangs, Missing, CSE and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)) and Rescue and Response Project.
- The Atlas team is located within the MASH and contributes intelligence to daily MASH meetings and the MASH intelligence process thereby supporting the early identification and safeguarding of young people in need of support or protection. All children and young people who go missing from home / care, are at risk of CSE, CCE or serious youth violence are known to the team. The team manager and data analyst attend strategy meetings and collate information in relation to risk assessments and safety planning for young people. The team manager is responsible for ensuring that all young people at medium or high risk are presented and tracked through the MEGA panel.
- In Bromley all children and young people known to be at risk of CSE, CCE, County Lines activity, gang affiliation or those missing from home or care are regularly are tracked through the MEGA (Missing Exploitation and Gangs Affiliation) panel. The criteria for making a referral to the MEGA panel requires the level of risk to be medium to high as identified through the relevant risk assessment. The MEGA panel supports risk management and risk reduction through strategic and operational oversight of the young people who fall into the above categories. The shared intelligence and partnership arrangements support joined up planning and interventions for young people. The panel also allows for high risk young people to be more visible to all partner agencies who are able to offer support and ensure that interventions are robust and effective.

#### 3.2 Practice Principles and Agreed Agency Response

##### Underlying Principles

The following principles should underpin the partnership's work to prevent and minimise the harm caused by gangs and serious youth violence:

- Child's welfare is paramount consideration
- Minimum intrusion into family life - only intervening when there is real concern for the safety or well-being of a child to address problems as early as possible
- Support children to make positive and safe choices

- Support children to stay in the community wherever possible
- Ensure children see and learn from the consequences of their actions through the appropriate and effective use of enforcement
- Persevere, even when children and families resist support

## **Risks**

The particular risks that children may face because of gang involvement will vary from area to area and over time, but they may include:

- Retaliatory violence
- Territorial disputes with other gangs
- Psychological harm due to the trauma gang members experience and witness
- Physical harm suffered whilst committing a crime
- Use of violence to assert authority in the local area
- Sexual violence and sexual exploitation
- Exploitation to commit crimes such as selling drugs, stealing phones etc.

All practitioners who have contact with children should be familiar with the broad range of risk factors that indicate that a child may be in distress and awareness that, without additional support that builds resilience, their needs may escalate. Risk factors may indicate child distress due to trauma or abuse including; witnessing domestic violence in the home, or involvement in harmful activities including youth offending generally, violent extremism or gangs and serious youth violence.

Whilst there is no direct cause and effect between risk factors and becoming involved in gangs and serious youth violence, we know that if we do not support a child in distress quickly and effectively their needs are likely to escalate and early concerns may become more severe resulting in more risk to themselves and others. An awareness of these risk factors allows all organisations within Bromley to stay alert to risk factors and act quickly and effectively to support the child and family in ways that make them more resilient; which may prevent anti-social behaviour and other risk-taking activities that could lead to gang involvement and serious youth violence.

## **Signs of Gang Involvement**

- Child withdrawn from family
- Sudden loss of interest in school. Decline in attendance or academic achievement
- Started to use new or unknown slang words
- Holds unexplained money or possessions or cannot explain where large sums of money have gone (financial exploitation)
- Stays out unusually late without reason
- Sudden change in appearance - dressing in a particular style or 'uniform' similar to that of other children they hang around with, including a particular colour

- Dropped out of positive activities
- New nickname
- Unexplained physical injuries
- Graffiti-style 'tags' on possessions, school books, walls
- Constantly talking about another young person or adult who seems to have a lot of influence over them
- Broken off with old friends and hangs around with one group of people
- Increased use of social networking sites
- Started adopting certain codes of group behaviour e.g. ways of talking and hand signs
- Expressing aggressive or intimidating views towards other groups of children or young adults, some of whom may have been friends in the past
- Signs of sexual exploitation (e.g. pregnancy, abortion (perhaps forced), sexually transmitted infections and injuries)
- Signs of psychological effects of exploitation (e.g. depression and suicide attempts)
- Scared when entering certain areas
- Concerned by the presence of unknown youths in their neighbourhoods

**(DCSF & Home Office, Safeguarding Children & Young People who may be affected by Gang Activity, 2010)**

Children at risk of sexual exploitation (which may be linked to gang activity and/or serious youth violence) may present with:

- Running away (missing from home/care)
- Overt sexualised dress/attire
- New and unexplained possessions/receipt of regular 'gifts'
- Internal injuries, multiple sexually transmitted infections (STIs), miscarriages and/or terminations
- Chronic drug dependency (particularly crack/heroin)
- Expressions of despair (e.g. self-harm - cutting, overdosing, eating disorders, sexualised risk-taking)

No matter what level of intervention a child is receiving (universal, targeted or specialist/statutory), when a concern is raised that a child is at risk of or participating in gang activity, professionals need to take appropriate action to protect the child, reduce the risk to all children in the family/family network (including siblings and girlfriends), prevent or divert the child from such activity and minimise the impact of any harm.

The [Bromley Thresholds of Need](#) describes when a referral should be made to London Borough of Bromley Children's Social Care.

Within Level 3 of the Bromley Threshold of Need gang association is referred to as:

*“The young person is known to be associating with gangs which is placing them at risk of harm and poor outcomes”*

Within Level 4 of the Bromley Threshold of Need gang activity is referred to as:

*“Child/young person engaged in criminal activity, including gang activity, that is placing them at serious risk of harm”*

A referral to the Bromley Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) is required for children meeting thresholds at Level 4 and the higher end of Level 3 of the Bromley Threshold of Need. Therefore, in the event of concern of either gang association or gang activity, professionals are required to make a referral to the London Borough of Bromley MASH:

**During Office Hours:**

**Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)  
Tel: 020 8461 7309 / 7373 / 7379 / 7026**

Send the completed referral form to:

**[mash@bromley.gov.uk](mailto:mash@bromley.gov.uk)**

**Out of Hours (Emergencies Only):**

**5.00pm - 8:30am and weekends**

**Tel: 0300 303 8671**

*If at any time a professional has reasonable concern that a child or young person may be at immediate or acute risk of suffering significant harm or has already suffered significant harm, they are required to make a referral to Children’s Social Care immediately. They should not, at this stage, consider arranging a CAF assessment or organising a multi-agency response*