

Introduction

ON 22 AUGUST 2007, an eleven-year-old boy named Rhys Jones was shot in the neck as he walked home from football training on the Croxteth Park estate in Liverpool. He died the innocent victim of a feud he neither knew nor cared about. It was a tragedy that thrust an age-old issue back into the public consciousness: gangs.

Gangs take various forms, and academics argue over definitions. Some are territorial; others are focussed on acquisitive crime. For most purposes, a gang is simply a criminal collective working towards a common goal. They are not a modern phenomenon in Britain. Newspaper articles from the mid-1800s spoke of rising rates of mob violence and the corrosive impact of youth crime in our bigger cities: Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool, London, Manchester and Edinburgh. Criminal subcultures are neither new, nor are they necessarily more violent than they have been in the past. They are a constant, immovable threat.

Today, however, Britain is enduring a gang crisis. One in ten young people, between the ages of ten and nineteen, class themselves as belonging to a gang. Gang members are responsible for just under a third of criminal offences and represent around fifteen per cent of known offenders. Although the situation in the UK is nowhere near as severe as it has become in