

the United States, it is widely accepted that gang membership has seen a substantial, and continuing, rise.

So what is my connection to gangland Britain? What makes me suited to writing a book about such a difficult area? My knowledge of this little-explored area stems from a year of immersion in the British prison system. I have worked, eaten and slept within the company of convicted gang members. I have spent time with every sector of criminal society, from low-level drug runners to national crime bosses. I have studied gangs from within their midst in one of the toughest jails in the UK.

In August 2008, I was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison for selling ecstasy whilst at university. It was a crime of immense naivety: I was attempting to supplement my student loan by dabbling in things I knew little about. The second I stepped through the prison gates, I realised that I was in for a rough time. HMP Leeds, commonly known as Armley Gaol, is one of the longest-running operational jails in the country. It is a large, stone building covered from top to bottom in barbed wire. It is icy cold during the winter and swelteringly hot during the summer. The walls of the cells are caked in racist graffiti and a thick, brown phlegm. Rapists, paedophiles, torturers and murderers are indistinguishable from the general population.

Prison inmates are fiercely territorial. The first question a new arrival is asked is 'Where are you from?' closely followed by 'What estate?' Many of the offenders have their postcodes tattooed on their arms and some have maps of their hometowns etched across the back of their necks. They segregate themselves in terms of the town or city that they were living in up until their arrest, slotting into one of a number of different 'firms' – geographically determined gangs. Acceptance into a firm is the key to survival: prison is a hostile environment and

membership of a gang can mean the difference between an easy sentence and an unbearably hard one.

I was intrigued by the territorialism of the other inmates on the wing. There were inter-county rivalries: South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire were in a state of constant competition to prove whose area was the 'hardest'. Then there were individual cities that hated each other, and there were even different parts of the same city that were at each other's throats. I began to wonder if the same area-based conflict existed outside of the prison. I started asking questions, quizzing the other prisoners on the exact nature of their rivalries and why they had started. The majority of the inmates that I encountered had been in a gang at some point in their lives. So I conducted interviews, carried out research and attempted to gain an insight into the daily workings of a modern British street gang, all within the prison system.

*Young Guns* tells, often in the words of gang members themselves, the reality of life for many of what are a new breed of young gang member: youths who, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, have dragged the problem in the UK to new depths. Almost all of those I interviewed spoke on the strictest conditions of anonymity, which is why I have changed the names of interviewees throughout. Most are still involved in 'the game', despite protestations that they have given it up. What this book is not is an attempt at a comprehensive history of the problem, nor is it an exploration of the various solutions that have been tried or mooted. Rather it is a series of personal accounts, and telling snapshots, direct from the streets.

While gang culture has been documented in places like Croxtheth and Norris Green, there are regions where it has received almost no media attention. So I have written this book