The Matrix Reloaded? Why we should improve the MPS 'Gang Violence Matrix', not dismantle it

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The MPS 'Gang Violence Matrix' is a database of Greater London individuals that the Met have reason to suspect belong to urban street gangs. Each person is graded according to his or her risk of either becoming a victim or committing a violent offence. The risk from, or to, 'gang members' is assessed with numerical scales, estimates combined together using weightings (for those gang members posing a threat, suspected homicide is given one the highest weightings) and the result of the calculation places each individual into one of three broad categories: 'Red', 'Amber' or 'Green'. The categorisation is used as part of the effort to mitigate the risk posed by, or to, each suspect or potential victim. Policing tactics might take the form of prevention, diversion, disruption or prosecution. For example, disrupting the criminal activities and influence of 'red-flagged' individuals might provide the opportunity for other members of an urban street gang to reduce ties with the rest of the group.

For many of our readers, utilising and maintaining a London urban street gangs' database may seem a self-evidently worthwhile undertaking and especially important given the recent upsurge in knife crime and homicides in London. However, earlier this month Amnesty International UK released a highly critical report (*Trapped in the Matrix*) arguing that the MPS Gang Violence Matrix is 'racialised', counterproductive, and not compliant with human rights law. The report also claims that the Matrix was largely the result of a political will to tackle 'gangs and gang culture' in the aftermath of the 2011 riots (in the words of the report, 'a direct response to a new political priority'). Amnesty recommends that the Matrix should be dismantled unless it can be brought into line with international human rights law and 'in particular the right to non-discrimination'.

At the outset we wish acknowledge that the report makes a number of valid and important points about the Matrix. Amnesty highlights problems in maintaining the currency of the database, particularly in terms of removing from the Matrix those individuals no longer deemed to be a risk, or at risk (although we understand the MPS is addressing this problem). The two examples they cite of young men whose lives have been apparently adversely and unfairly affected because their names

remained on the Matrix are clearly cause for regret. We believe that the Met have sought to ascertain the veracity of these reports and if substantiated then no doubt an appropriate course of action will follow.

More generally, Amnesty are right to highlight the difficulties in defining a 'gang' and especially fluid 'urban street gangs', and to criticise the definition adopted by the Met. The report quotes from police and young people who cast doubt on the validity of claiming that a particular person belongs to an urban street gang, arguing that "young people's identity affiliations with the 'gang' were porous, fluid and often 'for show'; they did not necessarily correspond with criminal activity."

Amnesty report that in October 2017, 87% of the people listed in the Matrix were from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds; 80% were aged between 12 and 24 and 99% were male. These proportions obviously do not reflect the demographics of the population of Greater London. However, the crux of Amnesty's argument that BAME people are over-identified as gang members concerns two BCUs with similar volumes of 'serious youth violence' (incidentally, a measure not currently used by MPS), one a 'BAME borough' (Hackney) and the other a 'majority white borough' (Bromley). In the case of the BAME borough, a large number of gang-flagged crimes were recorded whilst only a very small number were recorded over the same period in the majority white BCU. The report then links the issue with disproportionate use of stop and search.

Trapped in the Matrix highlights that approximately 40% of the individuals on the database have a total risk score of zero, indicating that they have no record of criminal charges or police intelligence linking them to violence in the past two years. However, the report does also explain that this is designed to show individuals affiliated to a gang but who have not been drawn into gang violence.

A further point of discussion in *Trapped in the Matrix* is about how Matrix data is shared with non-police agencies and their staff who sit on multi-agency bodies, such as Gangs Units, Youth Offending Teams and the Gangs Multi-Agency Partnership (GMAP). Amnesty makes some concerning allegations (albeit largely based on a single interview) about how data is shared and used with Police partners in the GMAP. The report also highlights problems if data from the Matrix is shared in relation to immigration, housing, education, and employment, for given the 'uncertain veracity and accuracy of the Matrix data, not to mention its racially biased nature' the sharing of the data 'could harm people's rights'.

However, despite raising some critical points that warrant the Met and the Mayor's Office of Policing and Crime (MOPAC)'s attention, the Amnesty report has a number of limitations. Most obviously, the methodology is weak. The report's authors explain that it is based on interviews 'with more than 30 professionals who use the Gangs Matrix, or are familiar with it, working in the police, voluntary sector, and local authorities in seven London boroughs'. Exactly, how many more than 30 is not specified. It

appears that only six police officers working on Gangs Units and two senior officers were consulted, but their rank or role are not specified. It also appears that representatives of the Home Office, CPS, Probation, Prison Service or Ministry of Justice were either not consulted, or perhaps declined to be interviewed. Further, the evidence base to support some claims is limited to single, often uncorroborated sources.

The report is also based on a number of implicit but unacknowledged assumptions - for instance that the concept of an urban street gang is either an artificial construct or one that is impossible to define for any practical utility; and that tracking those at the margins of such gangs would have few practical benefits. It is true that the word 'gang' is now more frequently used when the police encounter groups who associate together and commit street-level crimes than it would have been in the past. It is less often applied to more organised and less visible criminal associations such as 'gangs of armed robbers', or indeed to a conspiracy of individuals committing organised 'insider trading'. We accept that this is important, as it will affect the way that data that is collected, categorised and collated. However, the ability to identify, monitor and deal with those that pose a serious threat must take precedent over debates about taxonomy.

The report also makes a number of unsubstantiated assertions. These include claiming that the Matrix was politically initiated, with a genesis in the riots of August 2011 (when in fact it was being trialled by a number of London BCUs before that event); that the Matrix in ineffective for tackling violent crime (although the authors of the report did not define or attempt to measure 'effectiveness'); and that it is fuelling a disproportionate use of stop and search (an understandable assertion, but one which the report simply fails to evidence).

As noted earlier, the report's argument that the Matrix is inherently 'racially biased' is based on a comparison between the two London boroughs of Hackney (a 'BAME' majority population) and Bromley (a 'white' majority). Amnesty analysed publically-available data for August 2017, pointing out that although these two boroughs have similar profiles in terms of 'serious youth violence' Hackney has a much higher number of gang-flagged crimes. However, a comparison between two London boroughs for a single month in 2017 does not constitute firm evidence that the Matrix is racially biased. As a counter illustration, in the following month (September 2017) there were 149 gang-flagged crimes in Hackney but 196 gang-flagged crimes in Greenwich (a 'majority white' borough in London which during September 2017 had about the same level of serious youth violence as Hackney). This comparison does not support the 'racial disparity' which Amnesty claim. Clearly further research is needed. The report also does not take into sufficient consideration that the MPS also monitors, investigates and collates intelligence about suspects which the Met differentiates from urban street gangs (for example, Organised Crime Groups, OCGs). The MPS investigates OCGs in a different way to

urban street gangs – in simple terms different Business Groups have responsibility for OCNs (SCO7) and street gangs (SCO8) and run separate databases. It is possible that non-BAME individuals are being 'under-represented' on the Matrix as a result of being included on other databases. We simply do not know until (or if) the separate databases are combined in some way.

Most problematically, the report does not sufficiently recognise the fact that violent urban street gangs are a reality in Greater London and that they pose very real risks to each other and the (often BAME) communities they attempt to intimidate and exploit. The phrase 'human rights' is used 39 times in the report, but not once does Amnesty explicitly refer to perhaps the most fundamental basic human right of all, that of the right to life. Although Amnesty International has a remit to call on governments to 'protect everyone - whoever they are - from violence' the report fails to make any positive suggestions on how the police should manage intelligence to reduce gang-related knife and gun crime in London. One could argue that this was not one of the reasons for Amnesty conducting its research but we were struck by the fact that all of the four recommendations that the report makes to MOPAC and the MPS concern dismantling the Gang Violence Matrix, unless conditions are met (e.g. 'brought into line with international human rights law').

Whilst we earlier acknowledged the problems in defining a 'gang', including disentangling the cultural binding that wraps around the term, there is no doubt that urban street gangs exist and some commit very serious crimes. Whilst incidents of 'false positives' (those identified as gang members who pose no risk of offending, or are at no risk of victimisation) are reprehensible it seems to us that 'false negatives' (those not on a database but who should be) pose at least equal, if not greater dangers. In our view dismantling a valuable database with the potential to reduce the threats posed by urban street gangs on the basis of *Trapped in the Matrix* would be a grave error. The answer is not to dismantle the existing Matrix but build a better one.

There a number of ways in which the MPS Gang Violence Matrix could potentially be improved. For example, the scoring system currently employed assigns numerical values to various sources of information about past arrests, convictions, and intelligence related to violence or access to weapons. Individuals are also given a 'victim' score, if applicable. As noted earlier, the Matrix uses a formula to give aggregated and weighted scores which are then grouped into red, amber or green categories. The score represents an individual's likelihood of committing, or being subject to, harm. The score is adjusted on a rolling basis according to the previous 12 months data, which has the unintended effect of a 'stepwise' change in the grading system (a person might move from red to green 'overnight'). This suggests to us analysing past data concerning the correlation between grades of individuals at particular times and their subsequent criminal histories, with a view to devising a more reliable scoring system and a better temporal framework (for example, employing aoristic techniques).

It is also interesting that Amnesty did not consider at all the fundamental premise on which the Matrix is based - that past offending is a reliable predictor of future offending (and likewise for past victimisation). Again, it would be useful if research is conducted to test these premises in the context of the Matrix, not least with growing use of machine learning and the opportunities which that might afford. More fundamentally, it appears that the Amnesty report missed the opportunity to understand in a more detailed and nuanced way exactly how the MPS determine the criteria for inclusion on the Matrix.

Further, although we speak of **the** Gang Violence Matrix each BCU owns its section of the database and is responsible for its population, grading, 'housekeeping', and dissemination of data. That clearly has the inherent danger of different BCUs operating in different ways, not least in deciding which individuals should be removed from the Matrix. This is something which the Met might choose to review.

Finally, as noted earlier, the MPS holds and analyses a number of databases that include individuals that group together in some way, if only loosely and from time-to-time and who commit crime, including acts of violence. Can we improve the way that these databases are able to 'communicate' with each other? More fundamentally, does having separate databases for urban street gangs, OCGs and similar provide the best way of managing criminality?

It is beyond doubt that policing London in 2018 presents some very significant challenges, not least in terms of gang-related crime, including preventing serious injuries and deaths caused by knives and guns. It is clear to us that that Amnesty International has failed to produce sufficiently compelling evidence that the MPS Gang Violence Matrix is ineffective, discriminatory, or counter-productive. It is important, however, to acknowledge some of the difficult issues to which alludes. The challenge for the Met, amongst the many others, is to assess how best it can retain, adapt and revise the Matrix to maximise its utility in the struggle against gang-related violent crime in London whilst meeting the more well-founded concerns expressed in *Trapped in the Matrix.*