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Abstract

Purpose

This paper aims to provide the reader with Senior Investigating Officer (SIO) perspectives of their understanding of gang-related homicide and associated investigative challenges.

Design/methodology/approach

Phenomenological design was utilised in this study. Fifteen SIOs from the Metropolitan Police Service were interviewed using a semi-structured interview and analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings

It was found that the original typology of 'gang homicide' might be too narrow and focus should be paid to 'gang-related homicide', characterised via motive behind the offence. This type of homicide exhibited specific characteristics (e.g. violent nature, large potential scene and pool of suspects) and investigative challenges which made it different from other types of homicide (e.g. complexity; need for more resources; managing unwilling witnesses; managing media interest; specific evidence challenges, need for thorough risk assessments). The need for expertise in the deployment of officers was highlighted and related to the desire for more continuing professional development.

Practical Implications

-Gang-related homicide is especially challenging but due to its volume, SIOs in London developed a sort of 'muscle memory' – something that other police services do not have, even though the 'gang problem' is spreading outside of metropolitan areas

-Support for changes (e.g. in the utility of Community Impact Assessment) and non-standard procedures (e.g. consideration of covert operations early on) should be discussed in further training and manual development

-More attention needs to be paid to the synthesis of experience, expertise and science, SIOs being especially interested in debriefs and continuing professional development opportunities. Multi-agency training is key for homicide investigators, relating to the complex nature of gang related homicide and relevant safeguarding issues.

-Resourcing is a clear issue relating to the increase in gang-related homicide, as well as its investigation

Originality/value

This is the first research into investigative challenges of gang-related homicide in England and Wales and the findings can be utilised by all police services who may be dealing with gangs in their area. The findings can also support calls for change and development within services.

Investigative challenges relating to gang-related homicide: Senior investigating officers' perspectives

Homicide statistics in England and Wales were the highest in the year ending March 2018 since 2008 (OSN, 2018). What is more, recent years have seen a changing landscape of the nature of homicides. For example, some 40% are perpetrated by knives or sharp objects, there is an increase in young male victims (17% between 16-24 years old), and larger numbers of homicides occur in public places (almost 23% took place on the street, footpath or alleyway). This is taking place in the context of an increased number of homicides around larger cities, with over a fifth committed in London alone which some attribute to gang culture (Centre for Social Justice, 2018). Whilst homicide investigations themselves are complex by default (Brookman, 2005; ACPO, 2006), no research currently exists in England and Wales which would consider the investigative challenges gang homicides entail. This is likely due to their increased occurrence being a fairly recent phenomenon, as they used to only form about 1% of homicides (Brookman, 2005). The aim of the current study is to fill in this knowledge gap by providing the reader with an insight into practitioner perspectives of the unique challenges relating to *gang-related homicide investigation*.

Gang homicide has been portrayed as a type of homicide characterised as being a male, masculine phenomenon related to drug dealing or turf wars and the inclusion of firearms (Brookman, 2005). However, current data on homicide suggest a prevalence of knife (or similar objects) enabled homicide (Greater London Authority, 2019; Office for National Statistics, 2018). Whilst media reports attribute a large proportion of violence to gangs, there is no standardised data collection mechanism relating to how many homicides can actually be attributed to gangs (e.g. in London; Greater London Authority, 2019), likely due to the largely differing definitions of what constitutes a gang and its policy implications (see e.g. Andell, 2019; Centre for Social Justice, 2009) and the wide statutory definition used in England and Wales which characterises a gang as consisting of at least three people and having one or more characteristics which make them recognisable as a group (Section 34(5) Part IV of the Policing and Crime Act, 2009, amended by the Serious Crime Act 2015). Therefore, as gang-related homicide prevalence seems to be based on estimates and inferences (McMahon, 2013), it is unclear whether the original definition of gang homicide still stands today.

In a recent presentation by Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick (2019), it was stressed that gang-related homicide is of concern, though it is unclear what definition, if any, was used. Internal analyses of demographics noted a similar profile for victims and perpetrators: young, male, and of BAME background. Worryingly, 8% of perpetrators were 10 to 14 year olds. This is important descriptive information, but no research currently exists exploring whether the 'gang' dimension impacts on the way it is investigated or any unique challenges associated with it. Strides have been made in understanding gang violence through work by a number of scholars which has paved the way for a better understanding of causes and characteristics of gang violence, the role of status, initiation, or drug dealing, and deterrence strategies (e.g. Decker & Curry, 2002; Densley, 2013; Hopkins, Tilley & Gibson, 2013; Sierra-Arevalo, Charette & Papachristos, 2017; Vasquez, Osman & Wood, 2012). The

only studies relating to homicide investigation specifically are US-centric and outdated (Bailey & Unnithan, 1994; Howell, 1999; Maxson, Gordon & Klein, 1985) which causes concern due to UK gangs exhibiting in a unique manner (Alleyne, Wood, Mozova & James, 2016; Klein & Maxson, 2010) and different investigative processes utilised in different jurisdictions. Consequently, we can infer from previous research, that gang-related homicide can be complex, due to A) including more victims, B) including more perpetrators, C) including more witnesses, D) lack of cooperation (embedded in distrust) of involved parties. However, currently no research exists, in England and Wales, relating to how the *investigation* of such homicides manifests which is at the core of the current research. Moreover, research has also examined how the word ‘gang’ actually relates to crime and justice, highlighting inappropriate use of the word in prosecutions (e.g. Hallsworth, 2016; Pyrooz, et al., 2011; Williams & Clarke, 2016) and it is unknown whether a similar trend relates to homicide investigation.

That gang-related homicide is unique has been echoed in English case-study papers which highlight the nuances of this type of homicide and the need for its better understanding (e.g. Partridge, 2011). Further, whilst gang-related homicide investigation undoubtedly falls within the framework of major incident guidelines (ACPO, 2005) and the Murder Investigation Manual (ACPO, 2006), we do not have any information about the challenges of investigating gang-related homicide, specifically, on an operational level. The aim of this paper is to provide the reader with the first empirical exploration into the perceptions of Senior Investigating Officers (SIOs), responsible for such investigations, as to the unique challenges gang-related homicide investigation entails. Understanding this will have important implications for knowledge sharing and training, especially as concerns remain about the spread of gang-related crime outside of metropolitan areas (Spicer, 2018). Based on the above, the overall research question of this paper is: *How is gang homicide understood by SIOs and what are the key challenges associated with its investigation?*

Methodology

Design and Participants

Qualitative phenomenological design is employed in order to understand participants’ lived experiences, rather than ‘objective truths’ (Smith, 2015) relating to investigating gang-related homicide. Therefore, their subjective realities are presented in this research study and further research is necessary to understand realities of all parties involved in gang-related homicides. Fifteen respondents took part ($M_{age}=47.8$ years old; $SD_{age}=5.3$ years), 13 male and two female. All served as Senior Investigating Officers in the Metropolitan Police Service and all but two are currently employed in the force (two participants retired in late 2018). Participants’ average experience in the police is 24.5 years ($SD_{experience}=8.3$ years), and their average experience in investigating homicide is 10.69 years ($SD_{homicide}=6.1$ years). As SIOs, 13 participants were Detective Chief Inspectors and two were Detective Inspectors. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was utilised (Mack et al., 2005) as a niche category of officers were recruited and some then referred the researcher to others. Geographically, participants had responsibility for investigating homicides in all areas of their force; however, their bases were representative of all four core geographical quadrants.

Procedure

The researcher approached individuals via e-mail or LinkedIn. Upon agreeing to participate, a convenient date and location was set. Nine interviews were conducted face-to-face and six over the phone. All participants were presented with an Information Sheet in writing and/or verbally, outlining the aims of the study and explaining to participants their voluntary participation, right to withdraw, and GDPR related issues. They were also informed of anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, as well as of the interview being audio-recorded. Then, participants were asked to consent to taking part in the study. A semi-structured interview was used (Mack, et al. 2005). The questions were based on the limited literature available on gang-related homicide and available guidance (e.g. Murder Manual, Critical Incident Management). This resulted in ten wide-reaching questions (e.g. How do you know whether a homicide is gang-related?) which allowed the researcher flexibility in elaborating on areas which participants themselves perceived as most relevant. The interviews ranged from 30 to 130 minutes ($M_{\text{length}}=63.07$ minutes; $SD_{\text{length}}=29.23$ minutes). Interviews conducted over the phone were shorter than those conducted face-to-face ($M_{\text{phone}}=39.17$ vs $M_{\text{face}}=79$). In general, this difference was accounted for by the number of examples provided, rather than number of codes generated through the interviews. The study gained ethical approval from Canterbury Christ Church University. British Society of Criminology ethical guidelines were adhered to.

Analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim and input into NVivo software. Thematic analysis was utilised (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as it allows flexibility in coding which is especially useful as coding was conducted in a ‘bottom up’, inductive way so that codes generated reflect the data, rather than the questions asked. Each new argument presented was assigned a unique code. These were then thematically grouped together where appropriate which resulted in the generated themes. Data saturation was achieved after the first nine interviews were analysed; however, the remaining interviews underwent the same analysis in order to confirm codes previously found and capture most relevant quotes.

Findings and Discussion

This section is organised into themes (presented in **bold**), with underlined subthemes within. The aim of this study is not to provide an investigative procedural manual, rather, to present challenges most relevant to SIOs involved in investigating gang-related homicide. The themes are not mutually exclusive.

Defining Gang-Related Homicide

As varied as our understanding of the word ‘gang’ is in practice (Andell, 2019), defining what constitutes gang-related homicide is also not straightforward. Whilst a small number of participants noted that victim or suspect identification through the gang matrix (an intelligence database) provided a clear indication, all agreed that gang-related homicide is much wider and embedded in far reaching associations among young people. For example, #4 noted: “... *if the perpetrator or the victim is on the gang’s matrix...that’s clear. I wouldn’t say that necessarily makes it different from what we have dealt with an awful lot, which is just groups of young people with a loose affiliation to a particular area. Most of them have*

got a connection to a gang...”. Further, the general use of the word ‘gang’ and the lack of resonance of the word itself among young people was noted, reflective of previous literature (Wood & Alleyne, 2010): *“I think the word gang has been given to them by the media, the police, it’s a way of describing these groups (#7)*. Participants described a large Variety of Gang-Related Homicides, where one or more of the involved parties would have some association with a gang or more widely a geographical area, mirroring definitional difficulties relating to practice (Centre for Social Justice, 2009).

It was the identified Motive which all participants agreed made a homicide gang-related: *“Well, I suppose in simplest terms, whether or not the motive has been driven by some sort of friction or some pre-cursor, a previous incident involving gangs” (#10)*. This allows for a wider range of incidents (e.g. victim not associating with a gang or a gang member killed due to a non-gang-related reason) to be considered as gang-related. Whilst this supports the notion that gang-related homicide is a specific type of homicide, it should be judged based on motive, rather than ‘gang membership’, reflective of Papachristos’ (2009) social networks construction of gang homicide in the USA.

Gang-related homicide motivations

The strongest motivation is Retaliation, though this could vary from minor disrespects, through ‘tit-for-tat’, to retaliation related to criminality: *“You’re disrespecting me because you’re turning up at my house, I don’t like the look of you, so I’m going to kill you” (#7)*. Retaliation was further seen as embedded in Drug/Business disputes, and closely intertwined with Geography, more specifically, postcode, as #3 summarized: *“it is usually linked to a particular estates and that estate is usually gonna have underlying criminality and that is invariably drug dealing...”*. These motivations seemed further exacerbated by two things. First, Knife culture poses more serious consequences to the need to retaliate: *“the bravado and macho type thing...someone does something and they go oh sh*t and suddenly... oh my god I am covered in blood and I’ve got a knife in my hand” (#1)*. Second, a few participants also noted the facilitating impact of Social Media, in its widest sense (e.g. Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube), acting as a catalyst in disputes: *“...social media is more of causational factor of inflaming very trivial things.” (#4)*.

These motivations mirror previous literature surrounding youth violence (e.g. Centre for Social Justice, 2018; Hopkins, et al., 2013) and provide evidence to problematic knife culture and social media use by young people (Storrod & Densley, 2017) which can ultimately result in homicide. However, these motivations, identifiable early or later in the investigation, are not the primary investigative considerations, as will be discussed in the next theme.

Standard investigation and gang bias

All participants agreed that there is a need to focus on the ‘homicide’ element foremost and Standard Procedure, in order to counter any possible biases which might occur due to perceiving the ‘gang’ element first. As #2 noted, their initial response *“would be... think of the five building blocks because they are there for a very good reason”*. The five building blocks (preservation of life, preserve scene, secure evidence, identify victim, identify suspects) are in place to ensure that an investigative mind-set is adopted from the initial response to a possible critical incident (ACPO, 2006). At the same time, participants were wary of the conscious need to follow such procedure, due to the possibility of Gang Bias: *“we*

are trying to deal with it as a homicide first and foremost and trying almost ignore the gang aspects, because if you start going into that world suddenly it can just escalate and go into all sorts” (#3) which reflects positively on developments since prolific cases, such as Lawrence (House of Commons, 2009). Conversely, SIOs noted that Covert operations are invaluable in gang-related homicide investigation at an early stage, effectively “*turning investigative strategy on its head*” as it normally “*follows other lines of enquiry, like witnesses, but using covert strategy later is too late, people talk and things become more hidden*” (#13)”. Such strategy largely relies on the SIO’s experience in homicide decision-making. On the other hand, the ‘gang’ element of a homicide was also seen to enable SIOs to request more resources, though this was not experienced by all. Therefore, whilst it is important to keep an open mind with initial hypotheses, appreciating the ‘gang’ element may enable different lines of inquiry beneficial to a successful investigation.

Initial strategic considerations in gang-related homicide

The overarching element, noted by all participants frequently, is the Complexity of this type of homicide, neatly summarised by #7: “*the first thing I would say with regard to gang homicides is, they are very difficult to solve. They are probably the most challenging type of homicide that you will get*”. What is more, all participants noted that, in general, they are more complex than any other type of homicide they deal with, participants comparing it to, among others, domestic homicide, pub fights, sexually motivated homicide, or homicide as part of robbery, as #14 stated: “*[homicides] by stranger... in pubs... they usually have a clearer strategy, they’re more straight forward, more predictable...*”. This relates to them being perceived as Long-run investigations. Another early consideration relates to preventing possible Retaliation which is frequent and embedded in the motives of this type of homicide (e.g. Vasquez, et al., 2012), suggested also by #6: “*But the spin off was in this gang there was retribution with another gang down the road so there was a period of two weeks where it was just really tricky, nobody knew what was going on*”. The previously noted possibility of an early covert strategy also relates here and a more holistic approach to homicide investigation, as discussed later.

Due to the embeddedness of these homicides in the community, Local Area Knowledge was highlighted as necessary for context and helpful with inquiries relating to suspects or witnesses. Whilst Trident, as a tool to better understand the gang context of the incident, was mentioned by participants frequently and in a positive light, it was appreciated that: “*...[it is] by no means the be all and end all. It’s just another intelligence tool*” (#10), reflecting critique surrounding its limitations (e.g. Bridges, 2015). On the other hand, participants appreciated their unique position, in that access to organisations like Trident provides invaluable knowledge not accessible elsewhere. Wider Multi-agency Cooperation was perceived in a mixed manner. Some noted the intelligence that can be gained from them, if asked for (e.g. social services, housing). Others noted issues with contradictory agendas and lack of sharing agreements: “*But they will be reluctant to give it to you because it breaches trust and I get that actually, what worries me about it I suppose is the knowledge of the existence of it makes it disclosable...*” (#5). SIO views therefore supported the notion that better partnerships need to be created and calls for this have been made in literature specific to tackling gang violence (Centre for Social Justice, 2009).

One of the strongest themes across all interviews was the need for Expertise, across different roles, an area which has been indicated to be key in any police work, especially in complex contexts (Willis & Mastrofski, 2018), and characterised by exposure to different experiences (Fahsing & Ask, 2016). #4 noted: *“well qualified people who have done it before [are needed]. This is not the go around to start experimenting with new people...”*. The reasons for such consideration directly relate to core characteristics of gang-related homicide which are described in the next theme.

Characterising gang-related homicide

This analysis goes beyond usual descriptors of victims and witnesses, though it is worth noting that all participants agreed with the young, black, male prototype for both profiles. Violent Character and a seemingly disorganised scene were perceived as characteristic of gang-related homicide. #9 described it as: *“very violent... outwardly, it will be showy violent, injuries will tend to be multiple, ...there seems to be a lot where there are actually groups of people attacking others so you will get more than one injury for one person”*; this puts strain on initial scene management. These homicides also tend to have Multiple Actors and Crimes, as some original US research suggests (e.g. Maxson, et al., 1985), further highlighting the investigative challenges as the evidence and intelligence required to be preserved and gathered grows exponentially. For example, #1 recalled: *“unlike any other homicide you are looking at multiple offenders not just one or two you are looking at 6 7 8 9 10...”*, and #3 noted: *“you’ve got homicides but in the middle of that there could be multiple stabbings, shootings, drug dealing ...”*. This also relates to the possibility of Larger/Multiple Scenes. Individuals in their own area can ‘starburst’ as an exit strategy, or there are multiple scenes (e.g. burnt car, multiple victims).

The group element of these homicides, along with local information, can result in what is usually a quickly identifiable, but also a Large Potential Suspect Pool. Whilst a positive in terms of open lines of inquiry, this reflects the need for more resources to handle the large volume of possible leads: *“...we would be very lucky if it gave us the specific suspect but it gives a wider call and as I say it makes it more difficult from domestic ... in gangs related world we are looking at between 5 to 15 people ...”* (#2). This relates to the need for more resources which are of utmost importance in successful homicide investigations (O’Neill, 2018), especially as complex investigations already carry an increased risk of investigative failings (Savage & Milne, 2007). A subtheme prevalent through all interviews was the inherent Offender/Victim/Witness Link which can make the context of the offence confusing and relates to questions surrounding credibility of the individuals and the importance of continuous development and testing of hypotheses (O’Neill, 2018).

An important finding relates to Criminal Learning. Only some participants felt that there were differences between younger (more disorganised, motivated by disrespect) and older (forensically aware, motivated by their enterprise) offenders. All, however, appreciated the advancement of offender knowledge (e.g. committing crime at night, in dark clothes, wearing baklavas and gloves, ‘dodging’ CCTV, using burner phones, disposing of digital evidence, using hire cars, or leaving a digital footprint in places other than the scene of the crime): *“they very quickly get it, really quickly get it, you join and within three or four months you will know what the score is”* (#6). This is supportive of the notion that whilst street gangs are not quite organised criminals, they can commit ‘organised crime’ (Decker & Curry, 2002).

Evidence, Disclosure and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)

Gang-related homicides seem to contain vast amounts of information. Generally, intelligence which was perceived as the Most Likely Evidential related to phones, CCTV and forensics. Despite the vast amount of intelligence they contain, they were most likely to provide concrete evidence. Interestingly, even though individuals are usually well aware of CCTV around the scene, the majority of respondents recalled that footage from fast-food restaurants, such as McDonald's, was often used to identify individuals. SIOs perceived intelligence from social media Less Likely Evidential. Whilst it could help create a narrative surrounding an offence, SIOs didn't "get a lot of evidence from it" (#6), and noted their inability to consider the full extent of social media footprints: "at the end of the day there will be lots and lots of stuff on there that is just bogus and false and misleading" (#7). Contrary to the usual stereotype of homicide investigation (see Brookman, 2005 or Geberth, 2016), Least Likely Evidence actually originated with witnesses and from house-to-house, which makes it that much harder to solve and consider guidance provided by available manuals. This does not mean that usual lines of inquiry are not undertaken. This was echoed by #5: "focus on stuff that doesn't rely on people because you won't... you will have to tailor your investigation ... you are not going to get any help which from a traditional policing point of view is hard to swallow". The reasons for this are noted in a later theme.

It is perhaps not surprising that participants were very strict with the need for a thorough disclosure strategy. The need for an Experienced Disclosure Officer was noted, at times requiring a whole team, most SIOs utilising two disclosure officers as standard. Early and Ongoing disclosure management was discussed, especially as it can take a back seat during long and complex investigations, #9 said: "I would always encourage and direct my staff that are undertaking that role, to make sure they start with it on day one". Similarly, early and ongoing Communication with CPS and Defence was promoted so that all parties are given enough time to review evidence, #10 explained: "Mr Defense lawyer, you are now representing (NAME), he's given a statement and an interview, we're gonna look through his phones, this is what we propose to look through, is there anything you can add to that?". All participants recognised the importance of disclosure management, showing support for procedural justice (Brookman & Innes, 2013) and learning from prolific cases (e.g. Allen; Smith, 2018).

SIOs relationship with the CPS goes beyond disclosure. They showed a Positive Appreciation of the CPS, noting their lack of resources, as well as valuing the independence it provides to officers often emotionally engaged with their cases. Good relationships with a Point of Contact was highly valued and beneficial. However, they also spoke about Different Agendas, SIOs focusing on justice to families and CPS focusing on convictions. In this way, participants often felt that the CPS acted as judge and jury. This was especially when officers perceived they used Victim Bad Character as rationale for their decisions: "...didn't want to charge because his concerns were that because of [retracted] previous offending history no jury would convict the person who did that to..." (#1) and #11 stating: "it's almost like the victim has to be squeaky clean, it's difficult". SIOs further noted frustrations with time limits imposed on them which do not seem to be as strictly applied to the defence, as discussed by #6: "we seem to be the last people that they suddenly say 'right you must do this within...' . It seems when the defence are given time limits, they are allowed to have slippage ...". Officers also recalled the usefulness of CPS Specialists which are no longer the norm. The relationship between CPS and the police in gang-related homicide seems to largely mirror

that that in sexual assault investigations (Spohn, Tellis & O'Neal, 2014) and, again, resourcing of both seems to strain the relationship further.

Community Impact Assessment (CIA) and Media Strategy

The need for a CIA is a part of any homicide investigation. Interestingly, it seemed it had Insignificant Impact on the investigation itself, as it is the job of the local police *“to try and keep everybody calm and try to bring the tension levels down”* (#5). Whilst CIA was perceived as valuable in terms of risk management (e.g. safety of officers in particular areas) by some, it was acknowledged that it could be utilised more effectively, if it was not as Reactive and Generic; #1 recalled: *“I have sat with Gold Groups before when they done the CIA and they have said oh the community impact assessment risk is low blah blah and I said well that’s complete rubbish”*. It is important to further investigate the role of CIA in gang-related homicide investigation, as previous fieldwork suggests it could have large benefits (Innes, 2010) and relate to success outcomes (Brookman & Innes, 2013) and SIOs noted their significance as *“very beneficial when they are done right, they can really guide a lot of what you do”* (#13).

Relatedly, media strategy has been highlighted as an important facet of gang-related homicide. SIOs perceived Interference from traditional, as well as social, media, in terms of presenting details which could possibly hinder an investigation, as well as presenting inaccuracies. Such inference was also felt from politicians. SIOs Manage Media usually through a point of contact, the use of police media departments and not fighting against inaccurate representations. Participants often spoke about the need to keep the media’s interest in a way that aids the investigation and does not focus on the ‘gang’ element of the offence, #3 noted: *“it was a murder in youth club...when you actually dig into it it turns out the victim is a badish person the appeal point has to be the fact it is the youth club”*. This lines up with the researched reporting of homicide and their ‘newsworthiness’ (e.g. Gekoski, Gray & Adler, 2012). They also highlighted the need to balance transparency and the victim’s family’s knowledge as information was often shared very quickly. SIOs further found that anniversary appeals and gaining information through anonymous avenues (e.g. Crime Stoppers) was at times useful, though witness engagement remained difficult.

The Wall of Silence

The Non-Cooperation of witnesses related to distrust or hate of the police, combined with community perceptions of police failures, as characterised by #9: *“I wouldn’t even say it’s necessarily a distrust of the police I think it’s more of an ingrown hatred”*. Witnesses, as well as the general public, often fear the repercussions by gangs: *“... the things that a judge can do to them is irrelevant compared to what other people have been doing”* (#1). The subculture poses its own difficulties (e.g. loyalty, own law), where even a victim’s own parents are often non-cooperative due to these reasons. This strained relationship between police and communities (Newburn, et al., 2016) seems to heavily impact on homicide investigations.

Despite this, officers identified some ways of Overcoming Witness Resistance, though admittedly, these are not frequently successful. SIOs reflected to the ‘accidental witness’ and speaking to witnesses one-on-one, as they lose some ‘bravado’. Trust development through

continuous management of any witnesses, as well as persistence, mostly facilitated by experienced officers, was often discussed, relating to the long-run characteristic of these investigations: *“the officer has got to be able to think on their feet and have got to go into an environment and think dynamically* (#6) and *“you have to have the right people on it, keep coming back”* (#15). Interviewing a witness as soon as they are willing, regardless of whether further safeguards could be put into place (e.g. use of intermediary), was talked about as necessary though this poses questions relating to procedural justice. Third-party facilitation (e.g. family member, community leader, organisations as Divert or London Gang Exit Scheme) was perceived as useful in breaking down barriers. Whilst witness management is important in all investigations, including gang-related (e.g. Brookman, 2005, Roycroft, 2007), it seemed it could come at the expense of safeguarding witnesses beyond basic right, an issue mainly relating to resources as the risk of losing a witness due to delays is too high. Therefore, embedding safeguarding practices more strongly in training, as well as available manuals, is needed, as well as safeguarding resources being more readily available so that their impact on the investigation through delays can be minimised.

Whilst the police can offer certain Protections, these seemed limited in gang-related homicides, in part because the younger age group involved does not want to relocate (e.g. witness protection). Anonymity was seen as useful with some witnesses. However, officers were aware of the fact that it is not their gift to give, making engagement with a witness difficult as no promises could be made, often only gaining anonymous intelligence from them. Further, witnesses often fear that the gang will find out who they are regardless: *“they know exactly whose talking and who’s not and how would someone know that? If you weren’t there, so they start eliminating who it is”* (#8). Witness protection has been highlighted as a key tool in regards to organised crime (Kramer, 2016) but it is unclear how it can be applied to street gangs.

Most SIOs agreed that their investigations rarely rely on witnesses, unlike what previous research suggests (Roycroft, 2007), again relating to the need to alternative strategies, including covert operations. The current findings also seem to most relate to Innes’ (2003) ‘whodunnit’ type of cases (as opposed to self-solvers and hybrids). However, that does not mean that they do not provide intelligence or that they should not be approached at all. What it does mean, however, is that more learning, resources and expertise are needed in order to engage with the community appropriately.

Family Liaison Officer (FLO)

All SIOs noted the FLO’s unique position and challenges, including dealing with distrust, fear, seeing police as failing, being unaware of their child’s background, or even being immersed in the subculture themselves. Their Bigger Role in gang-related homicide was noted as they are entering difficult environments whilst being ‘detectives first’, as summarized by #10: *“you make sure it’s one of your experienced officers that you know is gonna get the best out of that witness, who’s not gonna take no for an answer, because that’s unbearable what you’re gonna get...”*. Being experienced and a good communicator were key. Considering that previous research into FLO failings noted a core problem being inexperience and being ‘investigators rather than support’ (Gekoski, Adler & Gray, 2013), the need for an experienced FLO in these homicides is crucial, as well as understanding how to balance support versus investigation effectively. SIOs felt that during their early engagement with the family, they should present the family with the often troubling facts,

leaving the FLO to then maintain communication but allowing them to not be the ‘bearer of bad news’: *“it is better that they hear it from us [SIO] really. They don’t have to like us, you know”* (#5). Risk Assessment of FLO deployment was noted regularly, as well as the possibility of Dual Deployment, which was preferred by many but not possible due to resourcing.

Resourcing

All participants agreed that current resourcing impacts on the increase in gang-related homicide, as well as its relating to Resourcing the Investigation, as whilst resources decreased, workloads increased. This is in part because the complexity of the homicides, rather than number, increased: *“[previously] you would probably pick up a new job once every ... four to six months... those jobs would probably be [easier homicides]... you might get a [more difficult one], gang type homicide, and very rarely, if ever, you might get a [very difficult one]... fast forward I was going on call every six weeks and I knew that pretty much every time ... I’d take a new job, and I knew that most of them will be [difficult]”*. This then further impacted Staff Resources relating to the speed of laboratory work, availability of officers and experienced officers, as well as senior positions where SIOs did not always feel supported by their superiors. Often, this was due to their own lack of experience in homicide or related fields. Further complications arise as they often involve Children which impacts on the safeguards put into place for them. Whilst accepted as part of procedures, the need for better availability of services was noted (e.g. Appropriate Adults, Intermediaries). Such issues with resourcing have been noted in much homicide and major incident research (Brookman & Innes, 2013), noting that the success of a homicide investigation is much dependent on the resources available, especially in complex investigations, and is inhibited by the current austerity measures (O’Neill, 2018).

Problem Oriented Policing

SIOs were very concerned with the Reactive nature of gang-related homicide investigations. As #12 stated: *“gang homicide sits closer to gang violence, stabbings...than any other homicide...”*. Participants were very keen in being engaged in more Proactive and Holistic policing. However, due to the current climate, they felt like they have to have tunnel vision and focus only on the homicide investigation: *“. I am very conscious of the way we deal with ...the continuity, the dealing with the causes... the effects of familieswe don’t have that kind of continuity of knowledge, it is pretty much isolated and related to a particular job...”* (#5). SIOs reflected that their disengagement from local policing matters and that having different teams investigating related crimes relevant to an investigation can complicate their investigation. However, they stated that gang-related homicide investigation should remain in homicide teams. Overall, the notion that we must do what we can so that gang-related homicide does not become ‘volume crime’ was clear. This relates to the overall desire for more knowledge exchange discussed below.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

SIOs felt that the available training and guidance is Insufficient: *“the Murder Manual is probably well overdue and in need of a revamp”* (#9). For example, they noted problems with lack of technology guidance or strategies which are too prescriptive, especially for

complex cases. For example, #14 stated “ *[The Murder Manual] is the skeleton... but it’s not enough... if you don’t have experience then it’s really not enough*”. It is important to note that SIOs appreciated guidance and structure is needed as it is important to remain focused. Participants were also keen to have some further Gang-Related CPD in a format which can be continuously updated and is based upon best available evidence. This was especially as SIOs noted that gang-related homicide almost became like Muscle Memory for them, as they now deal with them very frequently, as summarised by #1: “*it would be useful because ... you learn as you...muddle through yourself, ... as you go along and... it’s the nature of policing ... [but] a little bit of guidance would be useful... and this goes back to when I said about other agencies I didn’t even know they existed it’s stuff like that, particularly in terms of dealing with witnesses who feel intimidated and vulnerable and going back to the whole risk issue stuff*”. In general, SIOs were particularly interested in opportunities for more Debriefs and CPD, which, invariably, are not perceived as feasible in the current times of austerity. However, officers saw great value in them and some have even taken it upon themselves to create such opportunities: “*So I’ve never seen an organisational learning team on-site, so yeah any form of debrief ... the feedback into organisational learning is important. ...we’re meant to try training days, we don’t have..., all the training units were taken away from police so...*”. Whilst the Professionalising Investigation Programme (PIP) made strides in professionalising criminal investigation (O’Neill, 2018), wider CPD, including debriefs or other learning seems non-existent, as noted in other SIO research (see e.g. Stelfox, 2011).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The present research considered SIO perspectives as relating to the unique challenges of investigating gang-related homicide. Whilst a wide range of valuable information was collated, care needs to be taken when interpreting results due to focus on one police force. As this was the first study of its kind, it was exploratory and each of the analysed areas warrants its own holistic research study. This research captured SIO perspective and did not provide an objective evaluation of homicide investigation, if such a concept exists.

It was found that gang-related homicide is understood in terms of the motive behind the homicide, and embedded in conflict and retaliation between groups of young people. It was perceived as especially violent and outwardly with possible large scenes and potential pools of suspects and witnesses. This study also found support for the existence of unique investigating challenges, relating to different investigative strategies, such as witness management, media and disclosure strategies, or resourcing.

This research therefore provides numerous practical implications. Whilst the original ‘gang homicide’ type has some validity, due to its variety, the term ‘gang-related homicide’, defined via motive, is more appropriate. Participants noted the importance of not being swayed by the possibility of a homicide being gang related, positively reflecting on developments since failings identified through cases as that of Lawrence (House of Commons, 2009). The overarching finding in this research was the SIOs desire to truly follow in what Willis and Mastrofski (2018) advocate– the symbiosis of art, craft, and science, which was seen through wanting more opportunities for CPD in the area of gang-related homicide investigation, whilst significantly promoting the importance of expertise in these types of investigations which arises from experience (Fahsing & Ask, 2016). It relates to work around disclosure, witness management, FLOs and even senior management. It is therefore recommended that opportunities for CPD are better implemented in everyday SIO

work as they noted that CPD is near impossible due to their current workloads (Stelfox, 2011) and current guidance is in need of an update as it provides little more than the skeleton for an investigative strategy. Gang-related homicide investigation seems to be difficult to relate to previous research, theory and guidance. Further, multi-agency training is specifically important for SIOs investigating gang-related homicide, due to its embeddedness in communities, related safeguarding issues, and their general complexity (e.g. Centre for Social Justice, 2009).

This relates to the wider issue of resources (Brookman & Innes, 2013; O'Neill, 2018) impacting on all areas of homicide investigations, further in complex gang-related homicide investigations. This was visible through, among others: 1) lack of sufficient CIAs which could likely be used more effectively in reassuring the community and the investigation itself; 2) strained multi-agency relationships which are still awaiting a joined up approach to cooperation; 3) CPS workloads and lack of specialists; 4) or to an extent foregoing safeguarding beyond legal rights which needs better embedding into an investigation and resourcing. What is more, lack of resources were also attributed to the increase in gang-related homicides in the first place. All these areas combined are causing frustrations to SIOs.

To conclude, whilst gang-related homicide will always, and should always, be investigated as a homicide first, it does pose its unique challenges which were agreed by multiple SIOs at once. Their complexity impacts on all areas of the investigation and usually requires extra resources and expertise. It is important to listen to the SIO voices as it seems that not enough is currently done to allow for learning in times of decreased resources. As it is likely that gang-related homicide will spread outside of metropolitan areas, in no small part due to county lines, and that the 'gang' element can lead to bias unless consciously avoided, CPD (in form of debriefs, manuals, conferences, or others) needs to be better implemented across the different police services. Moving forward, it is important that the participants' experiences are heard and adjustments are made through consultation with them. The current study presents an opportunity for a research agenda investigating further all the core themes discussed and creating solutions relating to better provisions for SIOs aiding in their investigation.

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