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## Glasgow gangs chose route to peace in face of tough crackdown

Strathclyde community project helps blighted housing estates in city's east and north claim 50% cut in gang violence

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• [guardian.co.uk](#), Thursday 11 August 2011 21.37 BST



*The Barlanark area of Glasgow is one of a number of neighbourhoods where gang crime has dropped significantly in recent years. Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images*

It was, said one witness, a day of great theatre but also of great underlying menace. Scores of battle-scarred gang members, bitter rivals in their home territories, were marched by police in stab-proof vests in to a courtroom in Glasgow for a unique and highly charged confrontation.

Faced with the mothers of their victims and graphic medical slides of faces disfigured by blades, the gang members were given a blunt choice: end it now or face an unrelenting crackdown by Strathclyde police and the judiciary.

With the courtroom packed with church ministers, youth workers, criminologists and an American basketball star whose gang-member brother suffered a violent

death, the gang members – dismissed by some as feral thugs – listened. And it worked.

The Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV), cited by David Cameron in the Commons on Thursday as an example to all cities, has seen a near 50% reduction in gang-related violence in the east end of Glasgow and the blighted housing schemes on the city's eastern and northern fringes, particularly in Easterhouse, Barlanark and Shettleston.

The scheme provides mentoring tailored to individual needs, with advice on finding work, how to behave at interviews and access to education and training.

Peter Donnelly, a professor who recounted that dramatic day at Glasgow sheriff court, writing in the British Medical Journal in 2008, said his detailed study of the CIRV's work had found that violent offences by gang members on the scheme had fallen by 46% in the two years since then. Other figures suggested even greater success for the worst offenders: a 73% cut for those on the most intensive programme.

Many of these young men, brought up on estates with multi-generational unemployment and raised on violent territorial wars defending just a few blocks of housing, came from "really disrupted backgrounds", Donnelly said.

What the programme did was gave those people a second chance, he said.

"This isn't a softly, softly, approach. It's very much tough love. Access to the good stuff is contingent on them signing pledges not to carry a weapon and not to be involved in violence. And if they do go back to that they get withdrawal of all these things: I think that aspect is very important."

Detective Chief Superintendent John Carnochan, head of the Scottish violence reduction unit which set up the CIRV, said the method, adapted from a proven US system tested among the [gangs](#) of Boston and Cincinnati, was actually "incredibly straightforward".

Both Carnochan and his deputy, Karyn McCluskey, are in regular contact with English colleagues, sharing experience.

Funded with £1m from the Scottish government, the programme involves close coordination by all the services: police, prosecutors, the courts, trainers, social workers, young workers and teachers. What it does not do is break up gangs.

Tested in the north and east of the city, it is now being rolled out across Glasgow by Strathclyde police.

Working with members of 55 gangs, it attempts to give its members greater self esteem, and a diversion away from the often arranged street fights.

Carnochan said: "We're not trying to bust gangs up. We don't mind them being in gangs – we're all in gangs. We all gather together around a common purpose now and again, but these guys get together for a rather dangerous thing, which is recreational violence.

"We can't break the gangs up because they do get something from gangs, a sense of identity, a sense of sociability, so it's about the positive elements of that.

"They defend their areas against another area and stand in very dangerous situations alongside their friends. If you're in the British army in Helmand province these things would be valued, but it happens on housing schemes in the 21st century." And that, he said, "we bloody do" care about.

The programme has got two key ingredients: offering hope and much greater help finding work, and, most immediately, an alternative to the grim routine of an arranged knife fight every Friday night. On many Friday and Saturday nights, the gangs have been brought together to fight it out on the pitch, with a football.

"What really matters to these guys is a job," Donnelly said. "Part of the programme is about personal development but it's also about getting job training and experience; there's no doubt that's the incentive."

While clearly flattered by Cameron's applause for the project, Carnochan would not be drawn on whether it would work elsewhere in the UK. "I don't know the inner city challenges facing Birmingham, Manchester or London but I do know it has worked in [Scotland](#) ... it's for others to judge what's applicable. I wouldn't want to be told from 300 miles away what to do." .

What Carnochan does believe, however, is that the current system has clearly and patently failed.

"More cops, more prisons, more sentences, will make you feel better for a couple of days – and we haven't made a blind bit of difference to equality or inequality and the gangs are still there, gangs that were there when I was a young cop 35 years ago.

"This is about a cultural change and attitudinal change, which is as much required within professional service providers, police, health and social workers, as well as a cultural change within the [communities](#) that think it's okay to do this. It's everybody's issue."