

FOCUS - 5 of 26 DOCUMENTS

Scotland on Sunday

December 14, 2008, Sunday
1 Edition

Richard Bath At Large: Ganging up to stop a downward spiral into crime

BYLINE: Richard Bath**SECTION:** Pg. 16**LENGTH:** 962 words

REG HALL is standing in a frozen street in Easterhouse waiting to do a TV interview. It's absolutely Baltic and the Beeb's man wants to get on with it before his mouth freezes shut. "Where d'you wanna go pal?" he asks the man with the mic. "Over there will do," comes the reply.

"Over there" is a wasteland of cracked tarmac surrounded by a clutch of shattered tenements with boarded-up windows, blackened walls and huge swathes of missing slates. The scheme's the very epitome of urban squalor: Harlem crack den chic meets Beirut on ice. But what the camera doesn't show is the new-build family homes across the road, just 50 yards away but out of shot.

"We could easily have gone up there but they didn't fancy that," says Hall. "What they wanted was abject deprivation, a backdrop which would tell its own story. But gang culture isn't about whether the place you live in is derelict or nice and new. That's not where the problem lies. The problem lies within the people who are living in those communities who have a choice to make - and who choose gangs."

Hall should know. A 38-year-old ex-offender and gang member who grew up on the tough streets of Glasgow's East End, he is now an expert on gang culture who works as a life coach for Routes Out Of Prison, a programme that helps ex-offenders withstand the lure of gangs when they finish their sentences. He spends as long as it takes - up to three hours a day, seven days a week - mentoring offenders at risk of slipping back into a life of gangs and crime. He has few illusions about the size of the undertaking.

"Would I have listened to me?" he asks. "If I'm being honest I know in my heart of hearts that I wouldn't have, not for one moment. That may sound bad but the horse I got on at an early age, very few people are ever able to get off. A lot of my pals are dead, a lot of them are still in the jail. For some reason I came through the other end of it and so I'm going to try to help other people to get to where I am. A lot of the young boys I deal with are lost. I was brought up with a social work background - care homes, foster parents, all that stuff. There was a big chip on my shoulder. I wanted to fight the world, and a lot of these boys come from misery in these housing schemes and have real anger in their bellies. That's what we're fighting against."

Hall is in demand today because war has been declared on Glasgow's gangs. But where the Wise Group, the organisation Hall works for, is intent on ensuring the products of the justice system don't head straight back to jail, the GBP 5m initiative from the **Violence** Reduction Unit is coming at the problem from the other end as a preventative measure. The VRU's Community Initiative to Reduce **Violence** (CIRV) is aimed at weaning youngsters off gang membership before peer pressure sees them step across the line into criminality.

Richard Bath At Large: Ganging up to stop a downward spiral into crime Scotland on Sunday December 14, 2008,
Sunday

Based on an American scheme dubbed the "Boston Miracle" but also used widely in Cincinnati, CIRV halved crime in both cities within two years during the Nineties. The principle is one of tough love. If gang members stay on the straight and narrow they can access education, health services, careers advice and social services; if they don't, they face Draconian sentences. Crucially, there's group responsibility. If one person commits a crime, all gang members get punished, which has sparked a surprising level of self-policing.

The reaction has been encouraging. Some 220 members from 55 Glasgow gangs were invited to attend a summit at the city's sheriff court where they heard from the parents of victims of gang **violence** and the Glasgow A&E doctors who see a new face wound every six hours, a litany of maiming that costs the NHS GBP 6.5m a year. Incredibly, 150 attended the two seminars - under-15s before lunch, over-15s in the afternoon - and 63 have taken up the offer of help.

Although gang members involved in CIRV were guaranteed anonymity, some were willing to discuss their Damascene conversion. Veteran gang member Stevie was so moved by the testimony of those who had lost friends and relatives in gang fights that the 16-year-old asked to go on anger management and conflict resolution courses. Twelve-year-old Stephen kicked the habit after hearing ex-gang members describe their downward spirals. David joined a gang at 14, was slashed across the face at 16 but at 21 has just become a father and reassessed his life with CIRV's help; now work beckons.

Given the social wreckage caused by incarceration, not to mention the financial cost of GBP 65,000 per spell in prison, the preventative efforts represented by CIRV are common sense. But, says Hall, there will always be kids in Glasgow who take the wrong option, even if not consciously.

"A lot of youngsters don't understand how gangs drag them into crime. They want respect and credibility so they say 'I run about with Gang Z and I've committed this crime or that crime' and almost before they know it they're in prison. When they come back out their credibility's up a wee bit, they've done a bit of jail, they've got a wee bit more of a swagger. All of the young ones look up to them, and a lot of these boys just start to live up to expectations, which often takes them to greater levels of crime." Yet if you can turn one or two hardened ex-offenders into model citizens, says Hall, others will follow their lead. Not that it will ever be easy.

"Gangs have an order, a hierarchy; it's a culture, a mentality, a way of life that they've been a part of since they were young and they can't just walk away from it," says Hall. "It's all bound up in their credibility and their security. It's about being on the street with their pals, their surrogate family. In the end they want to belong. We just need to change what they want to belong to."

LOAD-DATE: December 15, 2008

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper