

# ‘Trap Life’: The psychosocial underpinnings of street crime in inner-city London

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This article explores urban men’s involvement in the drug economy, examining the conditions in which they become ‘trapped’ in difficult lifeworlds and identities. Through an ethnographic exploration of what disadvantaged urban men term ‘trap life’, this article demonstrates how different ‘trapper’ identities, enacted to manage economic, social and psychological vulnerability, allows an understanding of the varied motivations to take part in criminality and violence. Whilst the terms ‘dangerous’, ‘pathological’ and ‘criminal’ are deployed to account for street lifestyles, such stereotypical imagery with roots in history, media, political discourse and policing practices, downplays the humanity of men living on the margins of society and neglects their version of reality. Far from being exclusively violent perpetrators, urban men are especially vulnerable as they are trapped in a never-ending existential crisis, which prevents successful transitions into mainstream life. I demonstrate that the issue of violence and the 21st century drug business must be placed in broader psychosocial contexts to provide a better understanding and perhaps one-day inform therapeutic and other practice interventions specifically tailored for those seeking to exit ‘trap life’.

**Key Words:** urban sociology, psychosocial criminology, illegal drug markets, street culture, violence

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘trap life’ is yet to impact on discussions about serious violence in the United Kingdom, apart from some brief references in the academic literature on young people’s involvement in illicit drug markets (see [Irwin-Rogers 2019](#); [Storrod and Densley 2017](#)). News media, politicians, police and even criminologists have failed to recognize the significance of ‘the trap’. The concept derives from street vernacular and is apparent in US and UK rap and grime music scenes (see [Ilan 2020](#); [White 2019](#)) as well as UK streetwear brands such as ‘Trapstar’. In musical terms, urban artists ‘rap’ about life in the ‘trap’ (i.e. the drug economy) and the struggles of growing up in the ‘hood’, poor, with limited opportunities. Wider than the idea of ‘the gang’ it contextualizes criminal motivation within material struggle and emotional pain. Trap life is yet, however, to be sociologically defined. I do so here, using biographical accounts of men ‘on road’ (i.e. part of a UK specific street culture, see [Bakkali 2019](#); [Gunter 2008](#); [Hallsworth and Silverstone 2009](#); [Hallsworth and Young 2011](#)). Trap life goes hand in hand with drug dealing, serious knife crime and gun culture, but it also denotes feelings of imprisonment within a dangerous set of circumstances and mind-states that prevent individuals from ‘moving on’ and

transitioning into an included position socio-economically. The notion of trap life recognizes that for marginalized, urban men an 'outer world' of socioeconomic deprivation meshes with an 'inner world' of psychological trauma.

Despite a strong evidence base linking the simultaneous influence of macro (i.e. social, economic and political) and micro processes on 'messily complex' human behaviour, criminologists tend to turn away from analysing how socio-economically marginalized BAME men make sense of the world they inhabit and turn instead, towards developing frameworks for the identification of purely criminogenic characteristics of their lived experiences. This criminogenic viewpoint is even more evident when one considers the current discourse concerning 'County Line' drug dealing, (Coomber and Moyle 2017; Densley *et al.* 2018; HM Government 2018; National Crime Agency 2019; Mclean *et al.* 2019; Windle and Briggs 2015), which has gained sensationalistic public attention. It would seem that politicians, the police and particular academic discourses do more to tie urban black men to organized, gang-related drug trafficking and exploitation (Andell and Pitts 2018; National Crime Agency 2017; Robinson *et al.* 2018; Spicer *et al.* 2019; Windle *et al.* 2020), than they do to understand why some marginalized urban men choose to sell drugs or commit robbery. Some of this research has been rather narrow, asserting the primacy of 'gangs' as the definitive structures/organizing principles in drug distribution. One difficulty with 'gang talk' (Hallsworth and Young 2008) is its lack of theoretical rigour and poor ability to account for the role of personal history, family of origin, and culture, often trivializing the diverse and complex social worlds the research desperately seeks to describe. Unfortunately, so many lives end up objectified through this literature. Critically, current understandings of the drug business in London (Andell and Pitts 2018; Coomber and Moyle 2017; Storrod and Densley 2017) and the violence that takes place within it, offers a thin narrative – one that perpetuates a culture of fear enabling the labelling of black youth as a dangerous 'criminal other' (Keith 1993; Williams and Clarke 2018). These outdated gang narratives are detrimental for criminology limiting knowledge about urban criminality/violence – and obscuring the varied agentic subjectivities of those existing at the socio-economic margins.

Gadd and Jefferson (2007: 1) argue that there is a need to replace the vilified/stigmatized subjects of 'criminological theorising with recognisably "real" (internally complex, socially situated subjects)'. There is an urgent need to reframe demonizing discourses that cast marginalized BAME men as the contemporary 'folk devil' (Cohen 1972) without properly exploring the role of trauma, the predicaments of limited opportunity, oppressive surrounding and damaged identities. Thus, in common with a small body of perspectives that merge sociological and psychological approaches to understanding serious violence and criminality (Ellis 2016; Gadd and Jefferson 2007; Jones 2008; Treadwell and Garland 2011; Winlow and Hall 2009), I show how socio-economic structures interact with psychological features to shape specific pathways into different kinds of criminal identity (or 'trapper typology'). In this article, I argue for the greater use of psychosocial perspectives to understand urban criminality and street violence with a view to centring existential terror and wounding in the ways that these phenomena are understood. While psychosocial criminology already provides a cohesive framework for understanding serious violence in a number of spheres (e.g. domestic violence, date rape, hate crime, serial murder etc), there remains much more to contribute in psychosocial terms to the study of urban criminality and street culture, especially in the context of the illicit drug economy.

Following and developing psychosocial criminology and addressing this gap in knowledge, I introduce new psychosocial understandings of urban male's 'trappedness' on road, theorizing the dynamic interplay between their inner and outer worlds – or what has been referred to as the 'psycho' and 'social' (Gadd and Jefferson 2007) in the making of distinct 'trapper' identities. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with men 'on road', this article pays specific attention to a trapper typology, to establish the different levels of psychosocial 'trappedness', and the

three different ‘trapper’ identities that emerge in reaction to socioeconomic disadvantage and intrapsychic pain. The trapper typology supplies important nuances into understandings of the different kinds of strategies/dispositions available to socially excluded men in the drug economy. The concept of ‘trap life’ speaks to the dialectical relation between the physical and existential struggle of living with socioeconomic exclusion and psychological vulnerability, and how urban men grapple with issues of life and death. Developing this novel-to-academia concept, I focus on the importance of constructing viable trapper identities in disenfranchised milieus and the impact these have on self-identity, engagement in violence and diminishing economic opportunities within the socio-economic mainstream. Specifically, I demonstrate how trap life emerges as a key strategy utilized by urban men to escape the structures of marginalization, but paradoxically, engulfs them in a social system which sets them up for lives of severe self-destruction and failure.

### REFRAMING URBAN CRIMINALITY/VIOLENCE: THE PSYCHOSOCIAL U-TURN

UK research on urban criminality/violence has seen some movement towards broadening the discourse away from traditional gang explanations. Not only has there been an emerging strand of interpretive ethnographic studies that explore from a ground-up perspective, the lived experience of marginalized young people involved in ‘on road’ and/or street contexts (Fraser 2013; Gunter 2008; Ilan 2015) but, more recently, there has also been an attempt to steer us towards a closer investigation of the structural violence in society that encourages and fosters social suffering within inner-city council estates. Bakkali (2019) for instance, employs the concept ‘munpain’ to theorize how marginalized BAME men understand and cope with structural disadvantage brought on by neo-liberal societies, offering a timely analysis of the psychosocial suffering that permeates their everyday experiences. Understanding trap life and its impact on the lives of marginalized urban men requires psychosocial theorizing, integrating fully, the ‘emotional, psychological, social and, cultural influences’ (Jones 2008: xi) on human behaviour.

The ‘psychosocial subject’ (Gadd and Jefferson 2007:41) has long been a point of analysis for a limited number of criminologists, who are renowned for their complex case studies of masculinities and interpersonal violence in a range of contextual settings. Motivated ontologically/theoretically, by the desire to challenge common-sense understandings of violent crime, psychosocial criminologists argue for more analysis of individual biography, ‘psychic life and the social world – and their interrelationship’ (Gadd and Jefferson 2007: 2). In contrast to traditional criminological thought, scholars in the field, have adopted a holistic stance, aiming to humanize the criminal subject by way of capturing the common place psychosocial reactions to crisis and trauma that affect us all. For example, Gadd and Jefferson (2007:2) have taken the view, that most human subjects have the potential to cause harm or suffering ‘given certain psychosocial exigencies’, but because traditional criminological explanations fail to acknowledge the common ground we all share, they are unable to move beyond the archetypical ‘moral panic’ and ‘folk devil’ thesis and towards more intricate accounts of the human subject, how they make sense of the world and their place within it.

Ellis (2016: 15) illustrates that male violent/criminal masculinities are a product of the ongoing interaction between biographic experience, namely traumatic and brutal life events and the damaging socio-economic conditions of neo-liberal capitalism, which he suggests ‘can shape individual perception, emotional experience and social engagement with others, and reverberate powerfully across an individual’s life course.’ Underpinning Ellis’s work with violent men is a simple, but strong idea: violence amongst working-class men isn’t purely about the physical act itself, but rather points to the complexities of human experience, and especially, the pervasive

and harmful impact of trauma that can shake us up to our very core. As a paradigm, psychosocial theory offers a solid foundation for analysing the relationship between interpersonal violence and trauma, offering a powerful argument for a more nuanced approach to the study of violence – one that captures the fullness of the individual, their personal autobiography as well as the conscious and unconscious processes that shape choices and behaviour (Gadd and Jefferson 2007). Though trauma is undoubtedly a strong correlate to crime/violence, this recognition has not led to a wealth of psychosocial studies on the topic of trauma among street/road affiliated urban men in multi-ethnic cities.

The tendencies in the psychosocial studies cited here have been towards a specific demographic, namely, the white working-class male in Northern English towns, little is known about the external and the internal worlds of those multi-ethnic men living in major urban centres, trapped in a volatile, violent drug economy. Just as popular and traditional perspectives (i.e. gang talk) neglect the psychosocial factors underpinning crime in urban criminality, failing to unpack the subtleties and nuances of life in the inner city, psychosocial theory also falls short in terms of engagement with 'on road' experience. Threading together the subjective lives of those caught up in trap life with the objective conditions of 'inner-city' poverty/socioeconomic exclusion that pattern their existence, I provide a detailed account of how they become physically, socially, morally, and psychologically embedded in what they describe as the 'drug trap'. Bringing understandings of drug dealing and street violence into the 21st century, I present an argument for more inclusion of psychosocial theory in the realm of urban criminality to better understand the links between existential wounding/trauma, socioeconomic exclusion, and participation in high-risk behaviour, including drug dealing, robbery, and street violence. It will be argued that trap life arises out of a psychosocial crisis that occurs during transitions from childhood to adulthood. In order to grasp the origins of this crisis, one must dig beneath the criminality, to investigate the traumatic past/experiences and the cultural values that encompass it from the disempowered world of marginalized urban men who seek the trap (i.e. the drug economy) as a source of material success and psychosocial survival.

### ENTERING 'TRAP LIFE'

This article is drawn from a larger ethnographic study undertaken in a disadvantaged London housing estate I refer to as Northville, the pseudonym I have given the neighbourhood to protect the men I grew up with. Like several other ethnographic studies, this research involved directly observing and immersing myself in the lives of the participants in order to as Malinowski (2014: xiv) argues, 'grasp the natives point of view, his relation to life to realize his vision of the world'. I did not have to go very far to realize the social world of the participants because as an insider researcher situated in the research setting, my home, my identity, and my life experiences all connected me closely to the field site. Similarly, to Hobbs (1988) who used his biography and positionality to facilitate his research, I too used my cultural and social capital to necessitate access to a hidden population aiming to provide the 'thick description' (Geertz 1973: 6), that mainstream criminology tend to miss, the 'elaborative venture', which proves essential for a rich insight into the 'social meanings and the ordinary activities' of participants in their natural everyday lives (Brewer 2000: 11). Thus, in the tradition of insider ethnography, I continue this trend, providing new perspectives on cultural experience and the value of the 'autoethnographer' (Wakeman 2014) in the production of knowledge. Because of my privileged position as 'childhood friend' I was readily accepted into the mandem's<sup>1</sup> subculture, and

1 Mandem is a slang expression used by men 'on road'. In a street context, it is often employed to describe their friends and associates. The term is referred to throughout the article, as it represents a hegemonic and centralized force in road culture.

thus used this shared biography to gather observational data from a variety of hotspot locations that the participants routinely occupied, including, the ‘flats’, the ‘block’ and the ‘shebeen’<sup>2</sup>. In addition to the observational data, I carried out twenty-nine semi-structured interviews and eight focus groups with both young and adult men heavily invested in what I described earlier as ‘trap life’.

To sum up a complex picture, the 29 ‘mandem’ that took part in this study were aged between 16 and 40 and were mixed in terms of ethnicity. 17 of them had been expelled from formal education, 2 had attended pupil referral units, and 25 of the sample were unemployed. Many experienced familial stresses and trauma, including spending time in care; and the majority had served time in prison. Overall, all had long histories of being either the victim or perpetrator of violent crime. Conducting research with a cohort of marginalized men immersed in criminality and violence and/or what Lee (1993: 4) defines as ‘research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who have been involved in it’, meant that ethical dilemmas played a definitive role in the research and had to be managed carefully. I did struggle to get ethics approval, because like many academic institutions across the country, the university I obtained my PhD from was increasingly risk-averse and was especially concerned with the emic nature of my research and my insider position, and, because of privacy issues, had a preference that researchers do not live in the community where they are conducting a study. I spent approximately eight months (producing three draft ethics applications) reassuring the Research Ethics Committee that I would be ‘safe’ amongst the people I had grown up with. The ethics process was thus made complicated not only by my insiderness and the ethical tensions associated with insider research, but by a certain degree of stereotyping and misrepresentation.

It was difficult to balance my dual role as community member and researcher. I was forced to acknowledge the human consequences of the research, making ‘difficult decisions about personal and professional responsibility’ (Ferrell 1998: 20). In an attempt to protect my participants, and not jeopardize the trusted relationships built over time and my own safety, I was able to employ some formalized ethical protocols to assist in the protection of the participants. I engaged in an ongoing dialogue so as to be completely satisfied that they fully understood the research, risks and benefits as well as check with the mandem regarding the content of data published. I have also anonymised the research site and I have not disclosed the real names of the research participants; rather, the mandem have chosen pseudonyms. Finally, my data was analysed using thematic analysis; a technique designed to identify, and report patterns (themes) within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). The key themes from this analysis as well as quotations drawn from the narratives of men ‘on road’ are discussed in detail below.

### TRAPPER TYPOLOGY: DIFFERENT DEGREES OF ‘TRAPPEDNESS’ AND VULNERABILITY ‘ON ROAD’

Here I present a new typology of street collectives, which offers a more empathetic, dynamic alternative to existing ‘gang’ discourse (e.g. Harding *et al.* 2019). This trapper typology is based on the ways in which men on road develop adaptive strategies around ‘trapping’ (drug dealing) to different extents depending on circumstances, opportunities, needs and the psychosocial trauma involved. These trauma informed trajectories, which a participant Aaron summarizes below can be grouped into three types and are key to understanding varied motivations to take part in criminality and violence:

2 Unlicensed night-time leisure space.



There are different mandem and different levels of desperation. Man have different morals. We ain't all the same, we trapping [drug dealing] for different reasons. Some man are sleeping on next's man's floor. Someone like that is gonna trap hard, he will rob women or do some other fuckery; he's greedy. Then you have man that have heard their mother on the phone crying because next man has kidnapped her because of some fuckery that he did – robbing next man. He is on road angry, willing to kill, do whatever. Some man are humble, just wanna make money and keep a low profile, some humble man even have a job – you have some man that work and still trap.

The quotation sums up the three different trapper types 'on road', the *Glutton*, *Predatory* and *Humble trapper*. These definitions were co-produced in dialogue with the participants in this study. Like Gunter's (2008) and Ilan's (2015) road culture/street culture continuum/spectrum, the typology speaks to the different subjectivities, material needs and levels of emotional stability 'on road' – e.g. as Aron notes above, there are some trappers who are homeless and poor, others who are seen as greedy and unchivalrous, others motivated by anger, others who treat the trap like a regular job and indeed others who work in and out of the alternative legitimate economy. Trapping activities on road run the gamut from low to high illegal activity, non-violent to violent, low risk income generating strategies to very high risk. There were also different gradations of 'trappedness', dependent upon how severe and deep-rooted the effects of existential wounding have been for them and how disconnected/shut off they are from mainstream society, including, school, the legitimate economy and other institutions. As highlighted earlier in this article, trap life is experienced as a psychosocial crisis, which usually occurs during adolescence, a stage between childhood and adulthood. For men 'on road', this stage has been impacted by a sense of liminality, of the kind depicted by Turner (1967), where rather than transitioning into the legitimate labour market (to enable independent living), they get stuck/trapped quite literally in the drug economy, a high-risk environment, which prevents normative transitions into mainstream socio-economic life. This liminal position combined with economic and social (i.e. street) pressures, familial stresses and trauma all contribute uniquely and in interesting ways to shape the trapper's identity and how they react to difficult and stressful life situations. Over time, the trapper identities become solidified and wield a powerful influence on behaviour and self-narrative. By the time, the trappers reach adulthood, they have undergone a series of crises, all of which disturb their growth into healthy adults by keeping them trauma bonded to the trap and/or disconnected from what they describe as having 'decent' lives (this was a life they associated with legal living, social respectability, and financial legitimacy). In what follows, I identify the core features of each trapper ideal-type, offering in-depth analysis of the psychosocial dynamics underpinning their offending.

### The Glutton trapper

If you speak to the other mandem about me, they will tell you that man like me are always looking for the next money-making scheme- it's all about the money. I'm unpredictable and sneaky, I will run up in man's yard and rob when man's children are there. Mandem are surprised that I ain't dead yet.

Men like Julian have been characterized by the mandem as glutton trappers due to their hunger for money and 'street capital' (Ilan 2015; Harding 2014; Sandberg 2008). For all trapper types (excluding the predatory trapper), drug dealing tends to be the most consistent source of income. However, the glutton trapper undertakes what Klein (1984) described as 'cafeteria style' offending, engaging in not only drug dealing, but low-level street crimes, and high-risk, often

violent delinquent behaviour. This model of trapper risks being dismissed as senselessly and sensationally criminal and violent, but careful analysis uncovers strong internal motivations, emotions and (unconscious) wounds that drive their pursuit of illicit drug markets. Throughout interviews with glutton trappers, it became increasingly clear that their commitment to trap life is predicated on prolonged past trauma amalgamated through severe childhood poverty, and neglect and exposure to violence inside the home (many had spent time in care and/or were estranged from their primary carers – their mothers). Julian and Dee provide insight into some of the traumatic experiences in their early years:

Man has always been a sufferer, man's mum is a crack head, she's been on crack since man was a yout. I don't deal with her, she made man go into care. I had nothing no proper family growing up, no P, no support, it fucked man up, but made man grow up fast. I didn't wanna hit the trap hard, but I didn't have a choice. It was either I make some real P or suffer.

Dem man will tell you that I've sold my soul to the roads for money and rep, but they weren't dragged up like me. I hate talking bout these tings with you, but you know man grew up hard, I told you before that my pups [dad] use to mash up [physically abuse] me, I will never forget going school with a bloody nose, one time the man even broke my arm.

Urban criminality/violence has often been discussed and/or theorized in criminological research with little discussion of the effects of childhood trauma, yet in the above extracts, discourses of growing up in an impoverished family, experiencing abuse and neglect are intertwined into the glutton trappers accounts of their early socialization. It has been well documented in the psychological literature that the development of identity starts with early experiences, and especially a person's interaction with primary caregivers (i.e. mother and father) (see [Erikson 1963](#)) which for glutton trappers is often disturbed and/or a traumatic experience. Some of the glutton trappers most telling childhood memories was of an abusive father who would routinely take his anger out on them, inadequate and even negligent parenting, which they cited caused overwhelming pain, sadness, and anger inside them, disturbing their sense of self. [Ellis \(2016: 128\)](#), identified something similar in his study with violent men, concluding that destructive trauma has a 'disorientating impact', in the sense that it can be incorporated into ones' identity, transforming ones' values, beliefs and assumptions about the world and one's place within it. Trauma played a comparable role in this study in that these brutalizing early childhood events were consistently cited by glutton trappers as one of the connecting factors for their socialization process into high risk and often violent criminal activity. This was explained by [Quinton](#) when he contemplated his early life and his adult offending:

Man had it rough, man lived hand to mouth, proper sufferation. My pups use to fuck my mum up, put her in hospital, I couldn't take him on when man was a yout – he use to knock man out cold. Man took all this stress out on the road, keeping up all kinda fuckery – robbing civilians, violating man, torturing man, I've done it all.

As I interviewed many of the glutton trappers it became evident that their offending and/or vocation was heavily informed by harrowing feelings of contempt at the poverty and abuse they experienced in their formative years and these memories of impoverishment and powerlessness weighed heavily upon these men who were prone to take their 'stress out on the roads' by way of acting out their core wounds, e.g. of feeling unwanted, weak and helpless. [Gadd and Jefferson \(2007\)](#) rightly argue that the powers of the unconscious dimensions of criminal behaviour cannot and should not be underestimated. The data suggested that unconscious influences were

working upon the glutton trappers' daily lives in profound ways – e.g. although Quinton is not consciously aware of it, he is arguably attempting to eradicate painful feelings of victimhood and devoting himself to gaining the dominance and power he believed he lacked in childhood (see also: [Winlow and Hall 2009](#)). This deep-rooted (unconscious) desire to minimize the possibility for future scarcity and subdue the pain of previous victimization is what drives the glutton trapper to make up their own rules and ambitions in the trap. Unlike his fellow trappers who reported to hold to street codes and tend to consider the kinds of crimes they engage in and weigh up the cost and benefits, glutton trappers often reported caring very little about these rules and boundaries. This led to their participation in a range of behaviour (i.e. the robbery of civilians and close friends through home invasions) ordinarily frowned upon by fellow trappers. Typically, glutton trappers are aged between 16 and 30 and tend to be positioned at the bottom end of the hierarchy of economics and prestige on road. Glutton trappers are regarded as the 'wastemen'<sup>3</sup> of the roads, failing to adhere to 'street codes' (see also [Anderson 1999](#)) and thus lacking the masculine street capital associated with higher-status 'predatory' trappers (see similarly [Sandberg 2008](#)):

Dem man think I'm a wasteman, they don't like man or give man respect cos I'll do anything to make P. It's dangerous out here for me, always having to watch my back, prove that man can back my ting, not get bad up, man can't relax, man always paranoid, thinking man's time is up, but man ain't afraid to die, you know how many of the mandem have put it on me, but man is use to the violence, it's nothing new to man.

As Adam illustrates above, being assigned the status of 'wasteman' exposes him to the risk of serious violence that he feels he must proactively counter through being indiscriminately violent himself. Dominated, even devastated by the loss of approval and love of his primary carers and now his peers, glutton trappers are on a quest to feel valued, seen and affirmed, which results in a dangerous cocktail of 'repetitive compulsion' ([Freud 1920](#)) – a re-enactment of early traumas and a gruelling anxiety-ridden search to rescue stigmatized identity, redeem oneself, prove one's credibility on road and win the love/respect of his peers this time around. The glutton trapper disclosed the highest levels of experienced past-trauma and the psychic brutalization that comes from reliving the victimhood is usually what makes him so volatile and thus a danger to himself and others. While the data clearly suggested that this identity is set in the sufferings/troubles of early childhood experiences, the process of becoming a glutton trapper is a complex one, influenced and/or moulded also by a wider sociocultural environment, which equates self-worth with one's ability to demonstrate publicly and/or within the peer group that you can defend yourself and meet the expectations of road masculinity. Their low status and volatility meant, they were unable to broaden their horizons and access potential criminal opportunities afforded to other trapper types. Prospects and routes to economic independence were thus bleak both inside and outside trap life, resulting in glutton trappers seeking out alternative avenues for dignity and status ([Bourgeois 2003](#)).

Glutton trappers were known for 'repping the endz' (representing the neighbourhood in territorial conflict), aiming to carve out a 'badman' reputation to compensate for their 'wasteman' status, to approximate something resembling hegemonic masculinity ([Connell 2005](#)) through 'acting bad' (ie violently, unpredictably and irrationally). These tough masculine identities and their relationship to offending have been operationalized by psychosocial scholars ([Ellis 2016](#); [Gadd and Jefferson 2007](#); [Jones 2012](#)) within the realm of white working-class masculinity but

3 The 'mandem' use the term 'wasteman' to refer to an individual that is useless, poor and/or unsuccessful 'on road'.



less attention has been paid to the significance of the cultivation of a tough ‘badman’ persona in urban milieus in affording some remedy from existential suffering. TV, film and music, together with gangster mythologies, celebrated badmen and local ‘heroes’ all provided a template of badman attitude and behaviour through which the trappers could understand and style themselves (see [Ilan 2015](#)). The glutton trapper’s deep experiences of trauma and particular alienation from conventional socio-economic life, render this arena of ‘badness’ as one of the few places in which they felt that they could prove their worth, and uplift a fragile ego. ‘Acting bad’, which included violating others was thus a defensive response to their inner powerlessness, a direct reaction to insecurities stemming from childhood, their low status amongst fellow trappers as well as outside the trap, but also the tacit knowledge that they might never move out of the trap and into mainstream society. Adam, who has been trapped on road for many years, commented:

Man ain’t getting out of this trap. I’m in too deep, can’t get out. I didn’t finish school, I ain’t worked a day in my life, not the proper way anyway. I can’t move around like that not with the fuckery I’ve kept up with going to next mans endz and violating them. Even if I wanted to work, I can’t, I can’t leave the ends to work, it ain’t safe. I didn’t wanna live like this but I didn’t have a choice, man came into this world with nothing.

Whilst trap life was thus described as a lifestyle which neutralizes the negative emotions that are attached to socio-economic marginalization, it diminished opportunities for engagement with mainstream socio-economic life, ‘trapping’ them. Trap life is a paradox; it appears to offer opportunities (and thus ‘choice’) to earn large amounts of money despite an impoverished background, but it also reduces agency by submerging marginalized men in a volatile world where victimization, violence and, competition for distinction is normal. The everyday, gruelling ritual of avoiding attacks from people they have violated breeds unbearable stress, but also, steals opportunities to travel within a wider geography and social and economic situations. For the Glutton trapper, they are quite literally trapped in their space and socio-economic situation. Their identity thus never evolves or develops, leaving glutton trappers observing the world through a distorted lens based on their own complexes and debilitating history. Glutton trappers do not outgrow their childhood wounds and remain enslaved by their fears, ironically almost as terrified, wounded children, when their appearance might cause such fear to others. Their emotional turmoil and volatile behaviour leave them unequipped for a socio-economic life that demands the performance of niceties. In response to their inner and outer terror/chaos, they adapt to and become desensitized to trap life – rather than overwhelmed by it. Imprisonment or early death is nearly inevitable outcomes for this particular trapper type.

### The Predatory trapper

I’m not into low-level drug dealing, I’ll leave that for the youts. I’ve been there and done that can’t make no money selling drugs on the block. I don’t see the sense in selling crack, that’s just like a normal 9-5, doesn’t make you real money, still gonna suffer. You know how much man I know who trap, but don’t have anything to show for it. Standing on the block, trapping to crackheads, robbing people on the street, some low-level shit, and they ain’t even getting paid.

From Smithy’s perspective, selling drugs or engaging in street robbery was a low-level crime, which he regarded as beneath him. His attitude was typical of men in the trap who engaged in the robbery of other drug dealers. Predatory trappers are usually men between the ages of 26

and 35 and unlike glutton trappers, who are indiscriminate in their targeting, the predatory trapper restricts his predation to other trappers as Edwin describes here:

Man is an opportunist and pragmatist, planning carefully my next move. Man plots who man is gonna rob – I run up on man with my boys, that's where the big change is at – rob the drug dealers. If you're gonna take the risk being on road, might as well take it as far as you can. I have standards though, I ain't robbing women or anything like that.

What Edwin is describing is a parasitic relationship in which preying (i.e. kidnapping and robbing) fellow trappers is key to his survival in the illicit drug economy. In contrast to the glutton trapper who are preoccupied with robbing civilians and 'getting stripes' through 'warring' other men on road, the predatory trappers are considered the 'elites' within the wider road culture milieu, ambitiously chasing momentary success and prestige. Although generating a large income through targeting those who have already accumulated drug wealth might seem like motivation in itself, there is a deeper story. The predatory trappers who participated in the research tended to exhibit unaddressed toxic shame acquired in and/or left over from childhood. Predatory trappers were significantly more likely than other trappers to recall incidents from their childhoods that provoked feelings of shame (e.g. having to beg for food, being embarrassed by a parents criminal lifestyle, being teased about their appearance and thus being assigned the label of 'tramp'), which became imprinted in their memories, strongly influencing their lives as adults, and especially their commitment to trap life:

My mumzy took me on a robbing spree with her when I was a yout, she use to rob high end clothes stores and sell the clothes in the hood. One time she lost me, man ended up with this rich white family, they found me, strolling in the shopping centre, gave man some icecream. I'll never forget that day, I wanted to be adopted by the rich white family cos man felt shame bout how I was living. I knew from a small yout that I wouldn't be a poor man and I would do whatever it takes to get my P's up.

Man use to take me for a fool when I was a yout, laugh at man, cos man's trainers were talking, mans clothes was dutty. From young I was dreaming about owning my own car, Rollie, buying nice clothes and going on holiday to nice places; that's all I use to do is fantasise about these tings cos man was living like a sufferer; man had nothing. I live the life I dreamed about, outside people don't even think man is 'on road' with how man is moving- man looks fresh to death every day all day.

In many of the interviews with predatory trappers, they placed immense importance on their poor economic circumstances and the early (negative) messages they had received from the family of origin. It became clear that they had internalized the poverty they had witnessed in the family and had grown into independent prolific robbers in order to restore a sense of dignity along with a sense of control over their material lives. These findings echo research undertaken by Gilligan (2003) which points to the direct links between shame and criminal and/or anti-social behaviour, a conclusion subsequently supported by Winlow (2014) and many other psychosocial scholars in the field. These scholars have shown that criminality is often driven by emotions and expressivity as well as instrumentality. In the case of the predatory trappers their motivations for robbing fellow trappers seemed expressive of their emotional fragility and their childhood shame colliding with their current anxieties. These men despised their childhood and desperately desired to occupy a different kind of adulthood, modelled on an idea of possessing visible success that would be admired by those around them. As such the enactment of the

predatory trapper identity could be understood as a kind of reinvention, a set of stigma reduction strategies, in which they go to extreme lengths to hide their 'true self' by replacing it with a 'false self' (Winnicott 1960) based on superficial values and the possession of specific status symbols. For predatory trappers, it was essential to manage the impression that they were not suffering and/or a poor man – but instead, living a lavish lifestyle and one way this was achieved was by establishing a local reputation for being a 'money man':

Man is Tony Montana out here (lol), just playing. Seriously though, I was the first man in the hood to be driving expensive cars, wearing Rolexes, buying up the bar in the club. I'm respected differently now, because man is living the good life. Mans lifestyle is rated cos I have what other mandem dream about. The hood is always watching what man has –you can't be seen as no wasteman, you won't get respect like that. We live in a money driven world you have to keep up, keep flossing.

Predatory trappers like Mikey are prone to self-aggrandizement and/or narcissistic tendencies and this often plays out by their need to demonstrate the material luxuries of being 'on road' (i.e. flaunting particular goods with a high social status, such as expensive cars, clothes and diamond jewellery) in order to gain 'hood fame' and popularity to enhance ego and defend against the fragility of their 'real self' and circumstances, e.g., their lack of value/power in wider structure/society. Being known in the 'hood' as predatory trappers (which equates to being known locally as a money man) affords disadvantaged men, who are shut off from the acquisition of traditional forms of capital, with masculine (road) capital (or street capital – see Sandberg 2008). The psychological drives noted are shaped on the other hand by the particularities of the culture that animates life on road. The Tony Montana reference above is especially important, because the notion of street CEO threads through popular culture, whereby many excluded populations – particularly predatory trapper types buy into exported visions of street life that glamorize elements of gangster life. Richly attired street elites thus look to reflect their high criminal standing in their appearance in much the same way as popular drug kingpin characters.

The predatory trapper's self-worth is often wrapped up in not only adopting a tough masculine persona (important for glutton trappers), but manhood is also determined by these men's earning power (and ability to make P) and projecting the right consumer identity, which becomes a commanding force in governing the predatory trappers' criminality and/or an important incentive for continued robbery of fellow trappers in the illicit drug economy. Importantly, the construction of the predatory trapper type, and especially their addiction to the material trappings of success was not created solely in the vacuum of family trauma, but this self was also influenced by the lack of legitimate mainstream opportunities and the allure of achieving the 'good life' that could be obtained through 'trapping'. Overstimulated and manipulated by cultures of superficiality and consumerism, but alienated from conventional sources of success, predatory trapper who have inherited a shame-based self are especially vulnerable to the cultural images of masculinity that they see perpetuated in their 'hoods', but also in wider society (via mass media). They thus go to extreme lengths to display an idealized (false) self to meet the expectations around them and this desperately constricted version of masculinity asserts intensified pressure on them to strive hard to remain the 'top dogs' of the sector, which reinforces their offending and criminality. Although the predatory trapper can be clearly positioned as deviant, if not criminal, a much more complex analysis is required to understand their lived experience. As many of the predatory trappers' narratives suggest, robbery against other trappers has taught them how to survive in unequal structures, how to accumulate a steady (and lucrative) income and how to cultivate honour and respect. All of these are components of very 'normal' (non-deviant) hegemonic values and practices in Western 21st century society. What was

evident within the narratives of predatory trappers was that their choice of vocation mitigates the impact of living in a 'bulimic' society (Young 1999) – that raises aspirations, but fails to provide real opportunity for all to achieve and for ambitions to be realized. While it can certainly be plausible to argue that modern culture produces this narcissistic identity (see Hall *et al.* 2008) it is men who grow up at the margins who might be especially vulnerable to these self-masking drives. Much like glutton trappers who struggle and falter in the face of their memories of childhood poverty and abuse, the predatory trapper beneath the façade of the powerful neo-liberal subject, is a struggling and fragile human being who depends on constant external validation and admiration from people around them. Sadly, their experiences of childhood poverty seem to create for them a pre-justificatory narrative that facilitates the violence they deploy in order to acquire material goods and maintain their reputations. Although predatory trappers are not as distant from mainstream socio-economic life as other trapper types, enjoying the fleeting luxuries of consumer capitalism their lust for the 'queens head',<sup>4</sup> carried with it heavy penalties: the constant risk of revenge attacks. The brutalizing effects of their lifestyle, and particularly, the stresses and strains associated with adhering to masculine (road) ideals left many predatory trappers entrapped in a social field with no real hope of moving out of their existential crisis. It was common for predatory trapper types to remain psychologically trapped by the powerful allures of making 'quick and easy' money in the illicit drug economy.

### The Humble trapper

It's fucked out there, people have too much to prove in the hood. Man are robbing man and then stunting in the hood – it's crazy. Mandem are growing up poor so when you do make P, you wanna show it off. That comes with a price though. Yeah, you are respected, but mandem are putting a price on their head because of how they are making the P. I am just a man that wants to live an easy life. So I keep low, humble, I don't draw attention to myself, I don't wanna put my heart and soul into it like next man.

The humble trapper type is the most common found on road and includes a broad range of ages. What distinguishes the humble trappers like Kenzo from the other trapper types is his approach to work. Unlike the predatory trapper who works as part of a team, he tends to avoid working with others in the trap – he is more of a lone ranger, an independent trader (Hobbs and Pearson 2001) whose financial objective is to one day, exit the trap. While there appears to be pressure amongst other trappers to build and retain reputation, this doesn't apply to humble trappers, who are not particularly interested in building social identity in the local milieu. In contrast to the predatory trappers who have established profitable careers in the trap, humble trappers have obtained menial jobs (peddling a range of drugs, including cannabis, ecstasy, heroin and cocaine to name a few) and have thus been allocated what they describe as 'hard work' in the overall division of labour. Whereas violence is a core value in terms of the predatory and glutton trapper's methods of income generation, the humble trapper attempts to position himself outside the violent end of the drug economy and they purposely avoid conspicuous material consumption. However, their attributes affirm their vulnerability in a drug industry where they are considered easy prey for violent robberies. Humble trappers are often the pawns and/or victims of predatory trappers and report a particular vulnerability to gun and knife violence. Yet, despite the personal effects of violent victimization, namely anxiety and for some, depression, humble

4 Money – Sterling denominations.

trappers readily seized opportunities in the trap to alter their financial situation and neutralize economic disadvantage:

I grew up watching my mother struggle, I was tired of seeing her live hand to mouth because the benefits wasn't enough. More time man had to share food with man little brother, some cheap Iceland food that isn't even good for man, I couldn't live like that, seeing my mum worrying about every bill, scrimping and saving. I was tired of being dragged up, so man hit the trap, so man could eat.

As Georgie notes, money, or specifically the lack of it, was one of the central motivational factors for his participation in the illegal drug economy. Not surprisingly, the humble trapper's narratives were filled with evidence of the damaging effects of childhood poverty, namely, chronic stress, depression, and substance abuse. However, it was clear from the interviews with humble trappers that their childhood experiences tended not to be as severe as the glutton and predatory trapper types, in the sense that they did not report parental violence, severe neglect or abandonment. Many humble trappers did note however, that as children they observed their mothers struggling to get by on state benefits and that they were forced to support themselves both financially and emotionally at a young age. But instead of retreating into their fateful biography, humble trappers are known for seeking out opportunities in the trap, drawing on their cultural capital to acquire the necessities, in much the same way as [Beazley's \(2003\)](#) street kids used their social environment for their survival. While it is common for Humble trappers to attempt to fulfil their unmet financial and emotional needs in the trap, they consequently encountered adverse events (i.e. violence against them), which are traumatizing and corrosive. Humble trappers tend to carefully avoid violence, but when forced (e.g. by degrading and humiliating treatment at the hands of predatory trappers) they are not beyond administering 'street justice' ([Jacobs and Wright 2006](#)). As opposed to deep wells of early trauma, the humble trapper deals more regularly with the fresh trauma of having to maintain their sense of masculinity and overcome feelings of street humiliation. The humble trappers' contemporary retaliations, the consequences of them and their feelings towards them are their principle 'trapping' forces:

Man is always getting rob by dem boy cos I make good money. I'm always watching my back, cos man don't know when dem man is gonna run up on man. You know how many times man has been kidnapped, tied up, gun butted, you name it mans been through it all. I have to protect myself and more time, I don't wanna be violent, but I can't have dem man take me for a fool. The traps fucked it made man vicious.

Humble trappers often reported a lived experience of fear, stress, paranoia and hypervigilance (i.e. 'having to constantly watch their back'). Because pain and stress featured as a key part of their lives on road, it was common for many of the humble trappers to articulate drug dealing as futile. Despite the perceived benefits of it, the initial draws of 'trap life' seemed to diminish as they became more involved and experienced the realities of violent victimization. There seemed to be a clear correspondence between the depth and volume of experienced trauma and the level of embeddedness in and commitment to 'trap life'. Several humble trappers had big dreams of escaping the trap and becoming economically successful adults. Indeed, for the fortunate minority (those who manage to avoid violence or victimization), moving away from the trap and entering low-paid and unskilled legitimate job market was common within this category of *mandem*. It was typical for some humble trappers to have one foot in the legal economy and supplement what they described as 'cunts work' (i.e. minimum wage drudgery) with their drug dealing. In this way, this trapper type is not as tangled economically in the trap to



the same degree as the glutton and predatory trapper types. Although their choices are limited and/or they experience status frustration, many 'drift' (Matza 1964) between illegitimate and legitimate modes of making an income. Sitting between these two worlds has its own agonies where the humble trapper desires a legal legitimate life, but frequently find themselves drawn towards aspects of the trapper lifestyle whether it is consumerism and leisure or the need to protect themselves or settle old scores. This often prevents them from exiting the trap and they remain somewhat socially and psychologically captured in the web of localized hyper-masculine practices and beliefs, where violence is perceived as a customary method to achieve and sustain status.

## CONCLUSION

The ethnographic material presented here highlights the case for a deeper inspection of traumatic childhood events alongside socioeconomic and cultural dynamics, all of which shape the psychology of urban drug dealers as they respond to existential suffering. Too often criminological accounts of drug dealers, gangs and county lines depict (usually black) marginalized men as uncomplicated predatory criminals, whereas psychosocial studies have tended not to pay attention to the specific cultural context of the 'streets' (or in the UK 'roads') that animate so much of street crime in major urban centres. Those street cultural studies that paint participants with complexity often shy away from more psychological elements such as trauma, focusing instead on sociological factors. The findings in this paper repeatedly point to how deeply urban men's lives are shaped by this psychosocial trauma and how they have grown imprisoned to the trap and the identities that emerged in response to difficult and painful realities.

In its broadest sense, trap life emerges as the cultural response to marginalization, but the findings revealed that the nature of trauma influences the extent to which marginalized urban men use this resource. As the study shows some trappers were heavily invested in the drug economy and were thus physically, socially, and psychologically embedded in the 'trap' – whilst others were less so, but a common thread runs through all their narratives: dealing with the fallout from damaged psyches. Men who are positioned at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, where the stresses, strains and problem of poverty are most acute, are more likely to be affected by a traumatizing past – with only a violent and traumatizing present in which to deal with that past. The place of origin of trap life is thus embedded in material suffering, which collides with the power of early wounding and further trauma which keeps the *mandem* captive in the drug economy, the narrowest of cells. Understanding trap life psychosocially begins with interpreting the lives of men immersed in the trap in a more thoughtful way, discerning the material and existential realities, including structural disadvantage, their debilitating history and constricted worldview that contaminates their lives. The typology presented in this study provides essential evidence on how and why certain urban inner-city men find themselves living in a trapped life and offers a clear rationale for a trauma informed approach, one that tackles the mental distress, upheaval and insecurity caused by unaddressed complex trauma histories. Individual therapy thus offers some hope of unblocking trap life, but recovery efforts must also promote structural intervention because the childhood trauma and socioeconomic variables are so intertwined. In addition to the wounding in childhood that erodes the mandem's ability to live safe and satisfying lives, the accumulation of systematic risk factors linked to, e.g. socioeconomic status, poverty, poor education, long-term unemployment, also negatively impact their lifecycle development. Such structural barriers also have a detrimental impact on mental health as well as their ability to fully integrate into mainstream life. This project of change that I propose here, surely also requires more psychosocial insights into the difficulties faced by young and adult men trapped in volatile street worlds, to better make sense of and piece together both the

psychological and social risk factors that lead to the development of criminal social identities. This can ultimately lead to an essential revival of both mainstream criminology and psycho-social studies aiming to understand the causes of crime/violence in the contemporary world. Appreciation of the complexity and power of trap life allows for a more sophisticated understanding of urban men's engagement in violence and criminality that accounts for social structures and individual psyche. In this way the insights provided in this paper could ultimately have implications for how interventions are made into lives beset by crime and violence.

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