AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF CRIMINOLOGY

trends & issues

in crime and criminal justice

## No. 167

# Young People and Gangs

Santina Perrone and Rob White

*Over 150 years ago, the Cabbage Tree Hat Mob, one of the prominent "youth gangs" of the time, reputedly annoyed respectable Sydneysiders. Since then, there have been periodic expressions of public concern regarding youth group formations in major Australian urban centres.*

*This paper provides an insight into perceptions of, and research into , "youth gangs" in Australia today. Among its findings are that American style criminal gangs are not prevalent in this country, although the preconditions for the emergence of such gangs are apparent. The paper shows that by and large the phenomenon of "criminal youth gangs" is largely a media myth. Furthermore, much of the publicised concern over youth gangs is linked to the ethnic background of particular groups of young people, which in turn raises major issues regarding youth opportunities and the policing of youth from selected social backgrounds. While "youth gangs" as such do not constitute a significant social problem, there is nevertheless evidence that young people on the street are engaging in activity that occasionally includes anti-social behaviour, criminal activity and group conflict. To address present and potential "gang" problems a range of social and economic measures as well as community effort, are required.*

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In recent times, there has been much public consternation regarding the perceived proliferation of youth gangs in Australia. Those fears have been fuelled, in no small part, by the surge in media reports promoting negative images of youth street activities: random violence, drug taking and distribution, and a range of other socially disruptive, illegal and/or predatory criminal activities have been disproportionately attributed to young people (*see*, for example, Healey 1996). Such "moral panics" over youth street behaviour are by no means new, as evidenced by the public concern over the push larrikins in Sydney in the 19th century (Murray 1973) and public reaction to the phenomenon of the "bodgies and widgies" in the middle of the 20th century (Stratton 1992).

Since the early 1990s, media reporting of youth collectives has, however, increasingly assumed a *racialised* character, with a range of ethnic minority groups (non-Anglo Australians who are non-Indigenous; Zelinka 1995)—including those of Somalian, Lebanese and Asian descent—being implicated in gang-related conduct *(The Age* 1993, 1995; White 1996; Pudney and Hooper 1999; Taylor 1999). The resultant waves of race-based public panic are customarily triggered by the sensationalised reporting of atypical events. This reporting tends to reinforce the "ethnic" character of the criminal activity in question, based on the "racial" background of the perpetrators—alleged gang members. For example, following the 1998 drive-by shooting of the Lakemba police station in Sydney, police alleged that a "Lebanese Youth Gang" was responsible. That ethnic finger-pointing exercise,

September 2000

ISSN 0817-8542
ISBN 0 642 24178 3

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which tended indirectly to dangerously stigmatise the entire Lebanese community, was met with considerable wrath from various multicultural organisations (Poynting 1999).

Against this backdrop of media sensationalism of collective youth criminality, police concerns and mounting public hysteria, the reality of the extent of youth involvement in gangs, and indeed, the prevalence and nature of such group formations—whether racially-based or otherwise—remains largely unknown. By contrast with the volume of research into the gang phenomenon undertaken in America and Canada (*see*, for example Maxson, Woods and Klein 1996; Adamson 1998; Gordon and Foley 1998), comparable research in the Australian context has barely moved beyond its infancy. Much of our existing knowledge is, unfortunately, the product of anecdotal information and popular media imagery, rather than scientific investigation (*see*, however, Aumair and Warren 1994; White, Perrone, Guerra and Lampugnani 1999).

One of the reasons for the paucity of research, and the inability to precisely quantify the magnitude of the problem is the absence of a single, uniformly acceptable definition of what constitutes a "gang" and a "gang-related" incident. In addition to (or perhaps because of) the conceptual inconsistencies, our understanding of, and ability to address youth gangs, is further hampered by the absence of a cross-jurisdictional mechanism for recording gang-related data.

## Gang Membership: Defining Characteristics

Given the variety of common-sense and academic definitions of the term "gang", it is easy to appreciate the ensuing confusion. As the Standing Committee on Social Issues in the NSW Legislative Assembly (1995) cautions, the expression "gang" is commonly employed in an all-embracing, erroneous fashion, to denote any group of young people on the streets.

Nevertheless, it is clear that much of the public discourse and panic surrounding youth gangs appears to be driven by negative images of "colour gangs" (identified by their distinctive Los Angeles gang-style apparel) emanating from the United States. It is therefore appropriate to explore the defining characteristics of gang membership as construed in the United States, in order to determine whether youth formations in the Australian context might similarly qualify as gangs. The following list, although not proposed as an all-encompassing definition, represents a composite of those distinguishing characteristics commonly cited by United States researchers and police departments as youth gang identifiers (Chicago Police Department 1992; Miller 1992; Goldstein, cited in Healey 1996, p. 1; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 1997):

- A self-formed, complex association of youths (aged 12-24 and predominantly male) united through mutual interest, the members of which (customarily numbering in excess of 25) maintain regular, ongoing contact;
- Formalised structure and organisation maintained through strong inter-group solidarity and loyalty;
- Identifiable leadership and rules;
- Distinctive geographic, territorial, ethnic, and/or other forms of domain identification: gangs may, for example, designate themselves specific names, such as the Los Angeles based "Crips" and "Bloods", or the New Zealand "Black Power" and "Mongrel Mob", and may be associated with specific symbols, such as distinctive articles of clothing (emblazoned perhaps with a gang logo) gang-specific tattoos, hand signals, vocabulary, or a particular graffiti "tag" or style;
- Specific and purposive role rationale and group norms, including structured, continuous engagement in criminal conduct. Though the range of street crimes that gangs allegedly participate in is quite extensive, the predominant form of illegal activity appears to have changed somewhat over the years. In addition to violent, physical combat between gangs, street gangs have significantly been implicated in entrepreneurial activities including house robbery, widespread drug usage, interstate drug-trafficking operations, and instrumental violence and intimidation, including drug turf wars that involve illicit weapons use and often end in homicide (*see* Du Phoc Long 1996; Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority 1996; Block, Christakos, Jaccob and Przybylski 1996; Howell and Decker 1998).

The above summation evokes an image of gangs as highly structured, organised and criminally motivated. A review of the existing Australian research on youth gangs, however, paints a portrait of youth collectivities that seriously challenges the United States-modelled imagery.

## Australian "Gangs" and Youth Culture

In an effort to substantiate their longstanding suspicions regarding the spurious nature of media portrayals, the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence (ABCI 1991) distributed an Australia-wide Youth Gang survey to ABCI intelligence officers in 1990. The results of that exercise confirmed the unjustifiable nature of media generalisations.

Respondents identified a number of youth gangs (n=54), some of which appeared to be established loosely along ethnic lines, others motivated by "skinhead", graffiti, heavy metal

music and occult interests. Over 90 per cent of known gang members were male and almost 50 per cent were aged between 15-18 years. The character and composition of those youth formations was, however, far removed from the depictions of their United States counterparts. Although criminal activity was observed, the offences committed by gang members were assessed as "street level" or minor, namely theft (including shoplifting), robbery, drug usage and sale (customarily "soft drugs" such as cannabis) and occasional violence.

Of significance is the finding that the vast proportion of crime committed is opportunistic in nature, rather than highly organised, and although there is knowledge of interstate graffiti group affiliations, there was no evidence of systematic gang movement between states or countries for the express purpose of perpetrating major crime. In particular, entrepreneurial activities, especially drug trafficking, was not identified as a major motivator of gang membership, and "turf" or territoriality wars were not a distinctive feature of Australian-style "gangs". The lack of extreme loyalty was in part explained by the rapidly changing structural composition of group formations, which appeared to retain only a "small hard core number remaining loyal on a full-time basis" (ABCI 1991, p. 16).

In short, those Australian youth gangs identified were dissimilar to "colour" gangs. The authors concluded that since local youths were reproducing the style of dress and demeanour of gang members represented in the movie "Colors", there was an inclination to conflate actions and motive. Subsequent research has further substantiated those conclusions. A study by Aumair and Warren (1994, p. 43) for example, noted "… a distinct absence of internal structure and criminal purpose among most groups of male peers". Similarly, the Standing Committee on Social Issues (1995) found no evidence of highly structured gang existence in Australian communities, and indeed went so far as to dispute the relevance of the term "gang" to Australian youth activity. The sorts of youth group formations discernible within the Australian context are generally loose collectivities and friendship groups whose visibility is heightened through their routine congregation around, and movement through, public space (for American parallels *see* Yablonsky 1966).

This portrayal has been further supported by the most recent Australian and overseas investigations of youth gangs that have turned more specifically to the issue of ethnicity. In their examination of the activities of 120 Melbourne-based, street-frequenting young people from Vietnamese, Turkish, Pacific Islander, Somalian, Latin American and Anglo Australian backgrounds, White et. al. (1999) discovered that the majority of young people were in some way associated with larger groups. The perception amongst the interviewees was, however, that group formation and association was a perfectly normal activity designed to facilitate a *social connection*, and of itself not indicative of gang membership.

As with the academic literature, there was considerable ambiguity surrounding the term "gang" amongst the young people interviewed. For instance, amongst the responses provided, reference was made to troublemakers (24 per cent); drug dealers (9 per cent); just a group of friends (22 per cent); and ethnic groups (18 per cent). The concept of a "criminal" gang therefore had less relevance to the analysis than concepts pertaining to group identification and social identity. Associations were formed on the basis of ethnicity, but that was not the exclusive criterion; similarities in fashion, preferred activities, musical taste, culture (language, religion) and low socioeconomic circumstances were common bonds.

Illegal activities were noted, but as in the ABCI (1991) research, these principally revolved around anti-social behaviour and low-level property crime, localised drug dealing, burglary/robbery, shoplifting and theft. These crimes were often spontaneous in nature and committed in an effort to supplement meagre incomes (for similar findings in Canadian research, *see* Gordon and Foley 1998). Aside from the possible material gains to be derived from illegal group activity, many young people reported their illegal behaviour as a thrill-seeking exercise prompted by boredom and/or peer pressure. In fact, 58 per cent of young people were of the opinion that there were insufficient recreational resources available within their communities to occupy their leisure time. Of particular note is the lack of transportation available in some areas, which propelled young people of similar ethnic background towards association by default, since they were largely restricted to a geographic area populated by individuals of similar ethnic background.

Gang-related violence and group conflict were also identified (White et. al. 1999). At the street level, reference was frequently made to "street fights" and conflicts, which were often violent, and occasionally involved weapons, customarily knives. However, rather than being prompted by territorial incursions, in many cases racism was the motivating trigger for conflict. Physical and verbal altercations were both inter and intra racial, including those from Anglo backgrounds, as well as occurring between non-ethnically based groups. Group conflict also took the form of fights instigated by school gangs, which consisted of both physical and verbal assaults, and again, were often instigated by racism.

As noted earlier, the general public often fears groups of

young people on the streets or congregating in public domains such as shopping centres or malls. Moreover, the interview respondents felt that authority figures (police officers and security guards) tended to target youth groups for increased attention purely on the basis of their identifiable presence, which was perceived as a precursor to menacing activity. The overwhelming majority (68 per cent) reported actual contact with police, occurring mostly on the street (73 per cent). Just under 50 per cent of the sample recounted that experience as being generally negative, including instances of subjection to stop, search and/or threats (55 per cent), physical abuse (34 per cent), false accusation/arrest (15 per cent), and racism (11 per cent).

This experience of "overpolicing" of ethnic young people is not unique. A New South Wales study, for example, found that ethnic minority young people were more likely than other groups of Australian young people (with the exception of Indigenous people) to be stopped by the police, to be questioned, and to be subject to varying forms of mistreatment (Youth Justice Coalition 1994). Young Vietnamese Australians in Melbourne and Sydney have complained about unfair treatment and racism in their dealings with police (Doan 1995; Lyons 1995). More recently, a study of encounters between police and young Asian background people in the Sydney suburb of Cabramatta, found that young people were subject to routine harassment, intimidation, "ethnic" targeting, racism and offensive treatment, including the routine transgression of "crucial norms of respect, shame and authority…" (Maher, Dixon, Swift and Nguyen 1997, p. 3).

Ironically, however, for many young people of ethnic minority background, group participation was viewed as a form of protection against racism and street violence, rather than a violent outlet. For others, group or gang membership conferred a form of social status, identity, security and respect. In essence the group had become a subculture of empowerment and support that compensated for their social and economic disadvantage (homelessness, unemployment or lack of income security), low educational qualifications, drug addiction, lack of family and/or support network, and domestic problems, including violence. These positive features associated with group structures were similarly cited by a Sydney study into street-frequenting, non-English speaking background young people in Sydney (Pe-Pua 1996, p. 115).

## Issues for Further Exploration

What the above review indicates is that the expression youth "gangs" is generally not applicable in the Australian context, at least not as youth gangs are known in the United States. The research conducted to date consistently reinforces the picture of youth affiliations that are non-formalised and non-hierarchical in structure and certainly not purposely delineated along geographical territorial lines, nor formed specifically for large-scale criminal purpose. The spectre of threatening, violent gangs is, by and large, a myth perpetuated by the media.

Notwithstanding the conclusion that youth gangs are not an issue of major significance for Australian society at present, a number of issues have surfaced that demand further attention. Of crucial importance is recognition of the social conditions that engender the negative perceptions of youth associations generally, and in the current climate, ethnic minority youth affiliations.

These perceptions have the capacity to impact directly upon the quality of young people's lives. For instance, public perceptions of young people in groups influences the regulation of public space. As indicated earlier, many youth groups tend to "hang out" in public forums, such as shopping centres. Given the difficulties in identifying a "gang", and the diversity of youth dress, language and behaviour associated with specific youth *subcultural forms*, (for example, gothics, punks, hiphop), it is not uncommon for commercial managers and authority figures such as the police and security guards to treat young people as "outsiders"—illegitimate users of public space—purely on the basis of appearance rather than behaviour. The effects of being made to feel unwelcome or socially excluded from public domains, and subject to constant scrutiny and negative responses from authority figures, can generate resentment. When combined with the lack of alternative recreational outlets and the consequent boredom experienced, those feelings of exclusion may actually lead to various kinds of "deviant" behaviour.

More specifically, a negative interaction between young people and the police breeds mutual mistrust and disrespect, especially where ethnic minority young people are concerned. Whilst a minority of people within a community are engaged in particularly anti-social behaviour and serious criminal activity, prejudicial stereotyping of that community often leads to differential policing of the whole population group (White 1996). This not only violates the ideals of treating all citizens and residents with the same respect and rights, but again, it may inadvertently lead to further law-breaking behaviour. For example, as victims of racist violence, ethnic minority young people may be reluctant to approach state authorities for help when these same figures have done little to entrust confidence or respect. The perceived lack of police protection can lead some young people to adopt the stance that "self-defence is no offence"

and thus to arm themselves against racist attacks (Edwards, Oakley and Carey 1987). The self-perpetuating cycle is clear: concern about the carrying of weapons not only justifies more intense police intervention, it feeds media distortions about the problem of "ethnic youth gangs", thereby encouraging wider, socially divisive race debates.

It is quite clear that racism permeates the lives of many ethnic young people both on the streets and within notionally safe surrounds, such as the schoolyard. Through ignorance of "ethnic" difference, that racism is manifested in the stereotyping of other groups of young people and the employment of violence as an immediate, practical solution. However, in order to make sense of the street conflicts involving different groups of ethnic minority youth, it is necessary to appreciate the lack of material resources available to these young people, and the problems for status and a sense of belonging created by the lack of legitimate avenues.

## Strategic Issues

Although not representing a major Australian concern at present, in the absence of constructive and proactive measures, "youth gangs" may well emerge as an issue of substantive concern. The socioeconomic preconditions conducive to breeding more serious, United States type gang formations are certainly beginning to emerge in the Australian context—poverty, high levels of youth unemployment, precarious job markets, the ghettoisation of some city sites and the tensions between different groups of young people in schools and on the streets. In the light of these trends, and on the basis of the established research, it is vital that policymakers, researchers and community advocates respond in ways that acknowledge cultural diversity and the changing nature of Australian society.

Preventive and remedial measures must be broad-based and not merely restricted to the justice system. As recommended by White et. al. (1999) a range of developmental strategies is required, including amongst others:

### *General Educational Strategies*

- It is essential that young people in general be provided with specific education in cross-cultural issues in order that the backgrounds, cultures and patterns of life pertaining to specific ethnic groups be better understood by all concerned.
- Attention must also be directed at the provision of anti-racist education, so that issues of discrimination, prejudice and unequal power relations be analysed and discussed in an enlightened, informative and empathetic manner.
- There should be developed at the local, regional and state levels a series of youth reconciliation projects, that will promote the diversity of cultures among young people, aim to reduce violence between them, and give young people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds the practical opportunities to get to know each other at a personal and group level.

### *Specific Institutional Strategies*

- Attention must be directed at providing quality educational facilities and services for young people, particularly those which are based upon a multicultural curriculum and atmosphere, where students are provided with adequate individual and group support, and where anti-racist strategies and practices are applied across the whole school population.
- Concerted action is needed on the specific issue of school bullying so that appropriate conflict resolution and anti-violence strategies be put into place in order to reduce the number of such incidents and to reassure students of their safety and security within the educational institution.
- The police and security guards, as well as shopping centre managers and retail traders, need to be encouraged to develop positive and constructive methods of public space management and social regulation, in ways which will include the concerns of young people themselves, and which will reduce instances of unfair treatment and unnecessary intervention as these pertain to young people.

### *Broad Government Strategies*

- It is essential to undertake a mapping of existing community services and contemporary settlement policies in order to better determine what does or does not exist specifically for young people in specific geographical areas, to assess the possibilities for further development of appropriate support agencies and services.
- There is a need to provide much more in the way of a social and economic infrastructure to assist recent immigrants as part of the re-settlement process, especially given the difficulties experienced by some young people because of language differences, lack of immediate employment opportunities, the effects of war-related trauma and so on.
- Strategic action is needed in the area of youth unemployment and in the creation of jobs for particularly disadvantaged groups and communities, especially since there is increasing evidence that certain neighbourhoods are likely to become ghettos if sustained intervention on these matters is not undertaken.

### *Media Strategies*

- The media need to be strongly encouraged to review programme and reporting content, with a view to

providing greater information and more balanced accounts of specific ethnic minority groups, so that the use of gratuitous images and descriptions based upon stereotypes be monitored and actively discouraged.

- The media and politicians need to have adequate information sources and/or pressure placed upon them to report events and situations accurately, and to respond to specific groups in a non-racialised manner, highlighting the necessity both for active presence of independent bodies such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, and for governments to take the lead in promoting reconciliation and anti-racist ideals.
- Governments at all levels should adopt pro-active campaigns which convey in a positive and constructive manner the realities and strengths of cultural diversity, and which show how, collectively, the fabric of Australian society is constituted through and by the contribution of many cultures, religions, nationalities, languages and value systems, rather than being based solely upon a monoculture linked to British inheritance.

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