



No. 237

Understanding Youth Gangs

Rob White

“Youth gangs” range from harmless groups of young people who simply hang around together to those engaged in serious law breaking. There is very little empirical material in Australia that would tell us how many “gangs” exist, who is in them and what they do.

The recently formed Ozgang Research Network, of which Associate Professor Rob White, the author of this paper, is a key member, is concerned with systematic research into youth group formations and anti-gang strategies in Australia. It is hoped that the Network, which plans to undertake cross-national research, will also fill many of our knowledge gaps in relation to youth gangs.

This introductory paper sets the scene for understanding the complexity of gangs in Australia. It provides us with a framework of what gangs are, what sorts of behaviour they engage in, how they are structured, how they change over time, and how they form and disappear.

The Australian Institute of Criminology will, over the next few months, publish more papers by Rob White on how to deal with gangs from the perspective of the community, law enforcement, schools and parents.

Adam Graycar
Director

An important part of gang research is to explore ways that criminal gangs can be prevented from forming or growing. Gang membership can affect criminal behaviour—it can increase the risk of involvement (that is, prevalence) in serious and violent crime, and increase the frequency of serious and violent crime. The key question here is: what strategies can be employed to prevent the development of criminal or violent youth gangs and what forms of intervention are most appropriate to diminish gang-related activity?

To start, it is crucial to know what gangs are (and are not) and what they do. There is no agreed consensus on gangs—there is disagreement about the key aspects of gang-related behaviour, identification of gang members and the formation and disintegration of gangs. But gangs, however they may be described, are fairly transient, with members coming and going. So knowledge of how they form and how they disintegrate is important.

Simply put, if a group sees itself as a “gang”, and is perceived by others as a gang, *primarily because of its illegal activities*, then this constitutes the minimum baseline definition of a gang.

Do Youth Groups Equal Gangs?

It is important that distinctions be made between different sorts of groups. These may include gangs, youth subcultures, friendship networks, school cohorts, sports teams and so on. Similarly, the reasons for group formation and the typical focus of activities can

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provide insight into differences between groups—as with distinguishing between social-centred and criminal-centred activity.

Recent work from Canada (see Gordon 1995, 2000; Gordon & Foley 1998) helps distinguish different types of street-present groups. These are particularly useful given the many similarities in social structure and cultural life between Canada and Australia. A six-category typology developed by Gordon consists of:

- youth movements—social movements characterised by a distinctive mode of dress or other bodily adornments, a leisure time preference, and other distinguishing features (for example, punk rockers);
- youth groups—comprising small clusters of young people who hang out together in public places such as shopping centres (for example, sometimes referred to as “mallies”);
- wannabe groups—young people who band together in a loosely structured group primarily to engage in spontaneous social activity and exciting, impulsive criminal activity, including collective violence against other groups of youths (for example, territorial behaviour and the use of identifying markers of some kind);
- criminal groups—small clusters of friends who band together, usually for a short period of time, to commit crime primarily for financial gain (may contain young and not so young adults as well);
- street gangs—groups of young people and young adults who band together to form a semi-structured organisation, the primary purpose of which is to engage in planned and profitable criminal behaviour or organised violence against rival street gangs (for example, less visible but more permanent than other groups); and
- criminal business organisations—groups that exhibit a formal structure and a high degree of sophistication, comprised mainly of adults, and which engage in criminal activity primarily for economic reasons, and almost invariably maintain a low profile (for example, may have a name but are rarely visible).

Box 1: Gang-related Behaviour

Criminal

The main focus of the activity is directed at making money through illegal means (such as property theft or drug selling). This kind of activity may be sporadic and episodic, and may not be central to a group’s overall activity. It may involve complex relationships, techniques and skills—in essence a whole culture and highly organised division of labour within which profit-making occurs.

Conflict

The main feature is street fighting and violence associated with gaining social status and street reputation. This kind of activity is marked by an emphasis on honour, personal integrity and territoriality (defending one’s physical or community boundaries). Issues of self-esteem and identity, and constructions of masculinity and self-protection loom large in consideration of why conflicts occur and persist over time.

Retreat

The main activity is that of heavy drug use and generally a withdrawal from mainstream social interaction. Illegal activity mainly lies in the use of drugs as such, rather than in violence or other forms of antisocial activity. However, due to the drug use, property crimes and crimes of violence may result, often on an impulsive and senseless basis. The presence of drug users may create moral panic or disturb the sensibilities of other members of the public who are witness to them.

Street Culture

The main characteristic is adoption of specific gang-related cultural forms and public presentation of gang-like attributes. The emphasis is on street gang culture, incorporating certain types of music, ways of dressing, hand signals, body ornaments (including tattoos), distinctive ways of speaking, graffiti and so on. It may be “real” activity in the sense of reflecting actual group dynamics and formations. It may also simply be a kind of mimicry, based upon media stereotypes and youth cultural fads.

Whether described as “gangs” or “groups”, membership tends to revolve around similar interests (such as choice of music, sport or style of dress), similar appearance or ethnic identity (such as language, religion and culture) and the need for social belonging (such as friendship, support and protection) (White et al. 1999). Group affiliation is sometimes perceived as the greatest reason why certain young people are singled out as being part of a “gang”, and why particular conflicts occur between different groups of young people.

What is Gang-related Behaviour?

Gang-related behaviour can initially be categorised into four types of activities (in another context, some of these activities have been associated with different types of gangs; see United States Bureau of Justice Assistance 1998, pp. 11–14). The

four types of activities are criminal, conflict, retreat and street culture (see Box 1).

Many of the activities described in Box 1 actually pertain to young people in general, rather than to youth gangs specifically. Young people engage in one or more of these activities, at different times and in different locations, and to a varying extent depending upon social background and other factors. They may do so on their own or with a group, and involvement in particular activities may be for short or long periods of time. In other words, what is described in this paper as gang-related activity does not equate with gang membership.

Nor does gang membership necessarily translate into participation in these activities. For example, it has been observed that:

In some gangs, using drugs is an important means of gaining social status. In others, drug use is forbidden, especially if the gang is involved in selling them. (United States Bureau of Justice Assistance 1998, p. 21)

In addition, it may be the case that individual members of a gang may engage in specific types of illegal activity, such as selling drugs or robbery, but this may not be a function or outcome of the gang as a whole.

While youth offending cannot be equated with gang activity as such, membership of a gang can play a major part in criminal engagement. American research, for example, has shown that there are significant differences between the criminal behaviour of youth gang members and non-gang (but similarly at-risk) young people. It was found that gang membership increases the likelihood and frequency that members will commit serious and violent crimes (Huff 1998). In other words, gang membership does not explain juvenile offending in general, but it can

exacerbate juvenile offending in specific cases.

Are All Gangs the Same?

American, Canadian and European research has increasingly emphasised that gang formation is a social process involving complex forms of membership, transformation and disintegration (Spergel 1995; Gordon 2000; Bjorgo 1999). Indeed, recent American research challenges popular media images based on traditional stereotypes. This research demonstrates, for example, that in many cases gangs typically are not highly organised, and that the gangs, drugs and violence connection applies more to adult gangs than to youth gangs (Howell 2000). American researchers have developed a range of gang typologies to describe diverse youth group formations from the criminally instrumental to the purely recreational (see for example Miller 1992; Huff 1996; Klein, Maxson & Miller 1995).

Klein (2002) illustrates the diversity of street gang formations, and thus reinforces the fact that gang stereotypes do not match gang realities. He distinguishes between several different street gang structures by comparing groups on the basis of:

- whether or not they have subgroups or internal cliques;
- their size in terms of numbers of members;
- the age range of membership;
- the duration of the gang over time;
- whether or not the gang is territorial; and
- its crime versatility versus whether it specialises in particular kinds of crime.

Further to this, Maxson and Klein (1989) identify three criteria for defining a street gang that have implications for the development of suitable anti-gang strategies:

- community recognition of the group;

- the group's recognition of itself as a distinct group of adolescents or young adults; and
- the group's involvement in enough illegal activities to get a consistent negative response from law enforcement and neighbourhood residents.

Identification of Gang Members

There are major problems in trying to identify who a gang member is, and what his or her precise relationship to a particular youth group formation might be. Variables to consider include:

- symbols or symbolic behaviour that tie the person to a particular gang;
- self-admission of gang membership;
- association with known gang members;
- type of criminal behaviour;
- location or residence;
- police identification as a gang member;
- other informant identification as a gang member; and
- other institutional identification as a gang member (see Howell 2000).

Consider the following. A young person may occasionally associate with a gang, but not be a member. A young person may participate in the activities of the gang once in a while, but not be a member. A young person may desire to be a part of the gang, but not actually become a member. A young person may say they are part of the same crowd or gang, but not actually be a member of the relevant core group. A young person may have all the external trappings of a gang member (street gang culture in the form of dress, posture, talking style) but not be a member of a gang.

Social inclusion and exclusion appears to be central to the processes of gang identification. One Sydney gang study found that some of the young men who were interviewed presented themselves as a gang in order to gain a measure of "respect"

(Collins et al. 2000). Rather than espousing particular kinds of professional criminal activity, there was symbolic representation of themselves as members of a gang (that is, presenting an image of being tough and dangerous). The point of claiming gang status was to affirm social presence, to ensure mutual protection and to compensate for a generally marginalised economic and social position. Significantly, research indicates that where young people themselves claim gang membership, they tend to engage in substantially more antisocial and criminal behaviour than those who do not profess to be gang members (Esbensen et al. 2001, p. 123). Who you say you are has implications for what you do and with whom.

Group identification is intertwined with group activity. American research on the nature of gang activity, for instance, delineates a process in which group violence undergoes a series of ebbs and flows (see Decker 1996):

- gang members feel loose bonds to the gang;
- gang members collectively perceive a threat from a rival gang (which increases gang cohesion);
- a mobilising event occurs, that may or may not be violent;
- activity escalates;
- one of the gangs lashes out in violence;
- violence and activity rapidly de-escalates;
- the other gang retaliates.

The interesting thing about this process model of gang violence is that it appears to match, at least to some extent, the experience of group violence among young people in Australia—including those young people who do not identify as being a gang member as such. Furthermore, it is clear from recent studies (White et al. 1999; Collins et al. 2000) that group protection from perceived and actual threats is integral to

Box 2: Key Factors in Gang Disintegration

- Growing out of gang life through natural maturation and new priorities in life.
- Defeat of the group by external use of force.
- Loss of external enemies or threat.
- Loss of identity, status and image.
- Decay of group cohesiveness, solidarity and attraction value.
- Fragmentation of the group into smaller units which may be too weak to survive.

Source: Bjorgo 1999

both group identity and the use of violent means to protect oneself.

How Do Groups Change Over Time?

Recent European work on the movement of individuals and groups from one type of group formation to (or away from) a gang formation have relevance for Australian gang research. For example, Bjorgo (1999) points out that street gangs have usually emerged out of something else, such as a play group, a clique of friends or a loose subculture. Significantly, he describes how an immigrant youth gang (the “Warriors”) in Copenhagen emerged in response to White Power gangs. Australian research (see White et al. 1999; Collins et al. 2000) has highlighted the ways in which racism permeates the lives of ethnic minority youth and that group formation (and street fights) are directly linked to issues of protection, social status and group identity. Analysis of factors affecting entry and exit to youth gangs is important here (see Bjorgo 1999). For example, entry factors could include various “attractions to join” (for example, thrill-seeking) and “incentives to stay” (for example, friendships). Exit factors could include “push factors” (for example, negative social sanctions) and “pull factors” (for example, establishing a family).

Issues of entry and exit are complex. They are also highly specific to particular social contexts and particular types of youth group formation. American research on membership processes, for example, challenges the notion that individuals face difficulties in either entry or exit. It is pointed out that in most instances young people can refuse to join gangs without reprisal, and that gang members (especially marginal members) typically can leave the gang without serious consequences (Howell 2000, pp. 49–50). One implication of this is that if gang entry and exit is fluid, and if individuals tend not to remain gang members for long periods of time, then members can be drawn away if given attractive alternatives.

For many young people gangs provide a sense of social inclusion. Gangs can provide support and security for vulnerable groups of young people. They can provide opportunities for status, group identity and excitement. They provide a mechanism for young people to cope with oppressive environments, and represent one response or option to chronic marginalisation and social exclusion. All of these features point to the importance of peers and peer networks in the lives of young people, but leave open the

matter of the social content of youth group formation. The problem is not with youth groups as such, it is with what youth groups do.

Change and Continuity in Gang Formation

Developing anti-gang policies or anti-gang intervention strategies requires a knowledge base about specific youth groups in particular areas (for example, identification of youth group formations, processes of group transformation) and knowledge of how and why particular groups disintegrate (see Box 2).

Interpreting how gangs change over time depends on two things: the concepts deployed to explain gang formation in the first place, and the empirical history of the group in question. Gangs may enjoy a short life span, or they may persist over time as quasi-institutionalised groups. If they are short-lived then gang formation is more probably due to temporary peer group dynamics, fluctuations in local regulatory situations or employment markets—in other words, trends and fashions that ebb and flow according to immediate circumstances. If they are long-lived then it would appear that entrenched long-standing cultural and socioeconomic factors are determinate. Either way, it has been observed that gangs tend to be linked to “underclass” conditions, and that they arise wherever and whenever these become evident. Their persistence is thus best understood in the context of the wider political economy (see Moore 1988; Gordon 2000).

Although certain “gangs” may be seen as more or less a permanent fixture of some neighbourhoods (suggesting a basic continuity in gang life) the actual composition and activities of each gang formation need to be examined closely because the character of particular gang

formations will be different depending upon who the current members are. As Moore (1988) observes, new cliques or “gangs” may start up every few years, each with their own name and separate identity. They may identify with previous gangs or cliques that have gone on before them, yet they are separate from previous generations. The presence of gangs in a neighbourhood over time does not therefore equate to the same gang persisting over time. Each generation of young people constructs the kind of group formation suited to its specific time and circumstance, while drawing upon past examples to guide them in this process.

Conclusion

A few general observations about gangs can be applied across assorted geographic, demographic and ethnic settings (United States Bureau of Justice Assistance 1997, pp. 5–6).

- **Gangs are diverse**—they vary, for example, in ethnic composition, criminal activities, age of members, propensity toward violence and organisational stability.
- **Gangs change**—they evolve due to direct factors (such as prevention, intervention and suppression efforts) and in response to indirect factors (such as demographic shifts, economic conditions and influence of the media).
- **Reactions to gangs vary**—some communities deny they exist while others sensationalise them if one is identified. Some communities establish task forces to address gang issues while others conduct assessments to determine the nature and scope of gang problems.
- **Effective responses are diverse**—communities have developed various responses to gangs, including prevention,

intervention and suppression or enforcement.

Clearly there is no one single model of a “gang” as such (see Perrone & White 2000). Often commentators rely upon either stereotypes of youth gangs or narrow definitions of what constitutes a gang. Policy and practice options likewise need to be devised in relation to analysis of specific groups, incidents and situations. Practical examples and case studies from diverse jurisdictions can nevertheless provide insights into how best to respond to perceived gang problems. These will be explored in later papers in this series.

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