

## Parliamentary Research Branch

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### YOUTH GANGS: FINDINGS OF THE MINISTRY OF THE SOLICITOR GENERAL REPORT

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## **YOUTH GANGS: FINDINGS OF THE MINISTRY OF THE SOLICITOR GENERAL REPORT**

For several decades, youth gangs in the United States have been the object of study by academics and other analysts. Poverty, slum housing conditions, racial divisions, the out-migration of stable middle-class minority group members from the inner-city to the suburbs, isolation, association with deviant peers, and limited access to socially acceptable, legitimate opportunities are some of the factors which, criminologists and social policy analysts posit, provide fertile ground for the formation of, and recruitment to, delinquent gangs. Historically, collective youth crime has not been a social or criminal justice problem in this country. This is due, in part, to Canada's relatively generous income security system and to different immigration, demographic and development patterns in its urban centres.

As a result, no comprehensive body of empirical, social scientific criminological research on the phenomenon of youth gangs has been amassed in Canada. And, because official statistics on gang-related criminal incidents are not collected, the nature and extent of any illicit activity perpetrated by youth gangs is largely unknown.

In recent years, reports of delinquency presented in the mass media have suggested increasing levels of interpersonal violence and property crime involving groups of youths on the streets and in the schools of some Canadian cities. According to some youth crime analysts, these representations, which are often based on sensational events, exaggerate or distort the actual occurrence and level of seriousness of most youth crime and only foster public fear and anxiety. Others maintain that youth gangs and youth violence are indeed on the rise and are an ever-increasing concern of law enforcement authorities.

In March 1994, the Ministry of the Solicitor General (MSG) released the research report *Youth Gangs on Youth Gangs* by Frederick Mathews, which offers some insight into the phenomenon from the perspective of youth involved in illegal gang activity.

### **BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The experiences of youths who were, or had been previously, involved with a youth gang/group in Metropolitan Toronto or southern Ontario constituted the centre of the research. The researcher conducted interviews with 12 youths (11 males and 1 female, ranging in age from 14 to 21) who volunteered to share information about their involvement with a youth gang/group. In addition, 21 adults (7 police officers, 7 school officials, 3 social workers, 2 parents of gang/group members, and 2 adult victims) were interviewed.

The report stresses that this small sample of 12 youth participants is not random or representative of youth gang/group members or typical of any gang/group. Thus, the study findings should be treated as "exploratory and tentative, a modest beginning to understanding, and not an exhaustive analysis of the phenomenon." In light of the methodological limitations, the study findings cannot be generalized or applied beyond

the experiences of the youths who agreed to participate in the research.

It is well known that young people socialize in groups. Demonstrably, not every youth gathering is a gang and not every breach of the law committed by a group of youths is organized criminal gang activity. Throughout the MSG report the author uses the term gang/group "to avoid the criminal stereotypes and exaggerated media images usually associated with the term "gang" and to capture the idea of a continuum ranging from a 'group of friends' who hang out and occasionally get into trouble with the law to more serious organized 'criminal group' associations." The report does not make clear which of the participants belong or belonged to a group and which to a criminal gang.

## **SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **A. Composition of Youth Gang/Groups: Sex, Age and Economic Status**

Although the majority of members are male, some gangs/groups include members of both sexes and some consist of females only. The respondents reported that girls involved in gangs/groups commit acts of interpersonal violence that are equally as violent as those perpetrated by boys.

Though the age range of members of gangs/groups was not identified, it was suggested that members under the age of 12 are becoming more common. Opinions differed among both the youth and adult respondents about the involvement of such members in youth gang/group criminal activity. Some suggested that young children are being used by some criminal gangs to transport drugs, break into houses and rob commercial property and that children under 12 are imitating in school the violent behaviour of older siblings and peers.

According to the respondents, involvement in youth gangs/groups cuts across income categories with young people from middle-, upper-, and lower-income families all included. This is unlike the situation in the United States, where members of criminal youth gangs are drawn mainly from the economic underclass.

### **B. Gang/Group Activities in Schools**

Youth and adult participants reported such gang-related criminal activities in schools as violent conflicts between gang/group members, extortion, intimidation and drug dealing. In their view, the presence of gangs/groups in schools jeopardizes the safety of students and staff, undermines the integrity of the learning environment and fosters fear. The study reported the presence of youth gangs/groups in elementary and junior high levels as well as in high schools.

### **C. Weapons**

Youth and adult respondents both believed that more gang/group members now carry weapons, which are being used increasingly in gang/group conflicts. Because the school can be the setting for such conflict most gang/group members carry weapons to school. Youth respondents claimed that most young people in school carry at least a pocket knife to protect themselves.

Weapons said to be carried by gangs/groups included knives, dart guns, billiard balls in socks, explosives, guns with knives being the most common. According to youth respondents, guns are easy to purchase but are usually stolen from parents or friends or during break-ins.

#### **D. Illegal Activities**

The research found that most youth gang/group-related crime consists of property offences. The range of criminal activities identified included theft, break and enter, robbery, arson, drug dealing, extortion, mugging, and assault. Murder and other more grievous offences are uncommon and are often perpetrated by organized criminal groups/gangs.

#### **E. Youths At Risk of Becoming Gang/Group Members**

Adult and youth respondents identified some of the conditions, characteristics and experiences shared by youths drawn to gangs/groups: a history of abuse and/or neglect, poverty, dysfunctional families, isolation, exposure to the glorification of violence and pornography in the media, music and videos, school failure and low self-esteem. Not surprisingly, these factors are found in the social environment of persistent young offenders and are seen as fostering their criminality. With the exception of poverty, these factors can exist at any income level, and this may account for the involvement of middle- and upper-class youths in gangs/groups.

Respondents noted that vulnerable youths are drawn to gangs/groups for a variety of reasons: to fulfil a perceived need for protection and safety; to achieve a feeling of power, self-confidence and control; to attain material gain; to relieve boredom; to fulfil a desire for thrills; and, to achieve a feeling of belonging and being accepted.

#### **F. Views about the Young Offenders Act**

The *Young Offenders Act* (YHOA) has been subjected to considerable controversy and criticism by a growing proportion of the public and law enforcement authorities. Fuelling the debate is a widespread belief that young offending and re-offending is due to the weakness of the YOA as a deterrent to crime.

Youth respondents in the study disagreed about the efficacy of the Act in deterring criminal behaviour. According to some, the fact that young offenders are treated less harshly than adult offenders enables them to admit responsibility for their behaviour and go on to adopt a crime-free lifestyle. Others were of the view that the Act is not tough enough on violent offenders and first-time offenders.

One finding that stands out in the report is youth gang/group members' level of misinformation had about the YOA, especially those who had not been processed by the justice system. The study notes that none of the participants had "a real knowledge of the legislation or an understanding of the spirit of its intention." Some youth who had been arrested, convicted and sentenced under the Act, admitted that their experiences with the youth justice system had been more onerous than they had expected. Adult participants also agreed that many youth hold the erroneous impression that the YOA is

lenient. In their view society perpetuates the damaging myth that the YOA is ineffective through repeated declarations that the Act allows young people to get away with crime.

The report identifies some of the outcomes for youths charged and convicted of breaching the law: absence from school can result in failing grades; the stigma attached to being labelled a young offender is long-lasting; a criminal record limits a youth's options; a known offender who has ceased criminal activity may continue to be subject to suspicion by the police and other members of the community; and a youth crime record is not automatically destroyed after a fixed period. The adult participants called for public education to explain both the intent of the YOA and the consequences for youth convicted of violating the criminal law. There was also some support for a review of the penalties for crimes involving violence and weapons and for first-time offenders.

### **G. Responses to Youth Gangs/Groups**

In the view of the study participants, responding to the youth gang/group problems requires the joint efforts of a number of social institutions - social services, the police, government, school and the family. Solutions suggested included: community-based policing with a crime-prevention orientation; social services for at-risk youth and their families; a school curriculum for prevention of crime and violence; open communication between schools, parents and children; government action to provide youth employment opportunities; and public education about the overall thrust of the *Young Offender's Act*.

### **CONCLUSION**

A priority social and legal policy issue in Canada is personal and community safety and security. Public opinion polls, petitions, and reports in the electronic and print media leave little doubt that there is widespread concern about youth criminality, particularly violent offending. This has fuelled public demands for the state to strengthen its response through tougher laws and longer sentences.

While *Youth Gangs on Youth Gangs* fills some of the gaps in our knowledge, it fails to grapple with certain important questions. How many different types of gangs/groups are there? What proportion of young people are estimated to be members of gangs/groups? What is the extent of gang/group-related criminal activity? What proportion of gang/group criminal offences involve interpersonal violence and the use of a weapon? What are the fundamental differences between gangs and groups? Are gangs more likely than groups to engage in criminal activity?

The challenge for legislators confronted with mounting pressure to reform the YOA is to balance protection of the public with fostering positive growth and development of youth in conflict with law. In the current highly charged environment, it is critical that our knowledge of the nature and extent of the youth crime problem be based on systematically collected evidence rather than on opinions, anecdotes and the experiences of a small, non-representative sample. Research carried out to support the development of public policy on socially sensitive subject matters that provoke intense responses, such as youth gangs, must identify trends and develop generalizations about the phenomenon. Participants in the MSG study claimed that "youth gang/group activity has increased remarkably in the past few years." The claim remains unproved, however, because of the methodological limitations of this research.