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Solicitor General Canada
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REPORT

YOUTH GANGS

ON

YOUTH GANGS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

No. 1993-24-1

Responding
to Violence
and Abuse

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Police Policy and Research Division



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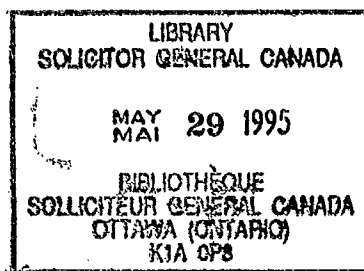
YOUTH GANGS

ON

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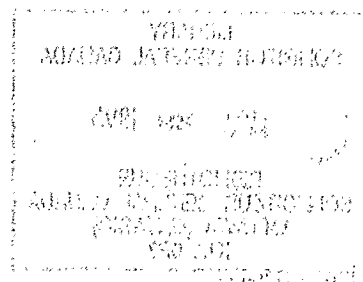
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Study Advisory Committee

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YOUTH GANGS ON YOUTH GANGS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Youth Gangs on Youth Gangs was undertaken to provide young people with an opportunity to add their voices to the discourse on the phenomenon of youth gangs/groups and youth violence. The study focuses on a range of youth gangs/groups whose common characteristic is involvement in illegal activities. The intention of this report is to stimulate and broaden discussion of the issues that will likely have an impact on problem definition and the development of a comprehensive response strategy. It is intended to be primarily descriptive and is written for a wide readership. Categories and subheadings used to report the data are based on themes which emerged from participants' responses to questions on the interview guides. There were no remarkable disagreements in point of view between adult and youth participants in the study. Because of the small sample size, findings in the study should be considered exploratory and tentative, a modest beginning to understanding, and not an exhaustive analysis of the phenomenon.

Youth gangs/groups are not a historically new phenomenon in Metropolitan Toronto, nor are they unique to North America. In England, Japan, and Hong Kong the phenomenon of gangs is centuries old. Gangs have been reported in many countries of Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, and in Australia, in communist countries and capitalist democracies. It is likely that there are some similarities between youth gangs/groups of today and those of decades and centuries past. However, there is evidence to suggest that, at a minimum, there has been an increase over the past few years in the *level* of violence used by youth, particularly gangs/groups and especially in or around schools. For example:

1. Youth involved in violent acts and gang/group activity are getting younger in age. It is not uncommon now to find students in grades 1 or 2 committing serious acts of violence.
2. Girls are becoming more directly involved in gang/group assaults and are using weapons such as guns and knives;
3. The presence of guns and gun replicas in schools, and the widespread presence of other weapons;
4. School Boards are reporting an increase in verbal and physical assaults on teachers and vandalism of teachers' cars and other property;
5. The individual schoolyard bully has been largely replaced by a group of youth who commit assaults and thefts, i.e., swarmings;

6. Students are reporting that they often do not feel safe at school or while walking to school;
7. Extortion and drug dealing is becoming a routine part of the school day in some communities;
8. Intruders have become a serious problem for many schools.

These points, some anecdotal and some supported by School Board studies and other research, suggest that something, beyond media influence alone, has happened in the past several years to increase the level of violence. Perhaps most unsettling is the fact that an overwhelming number of students feel safe in school only part of the time or not at all.

Method of Enquiry

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to define the phenomenon of youth gangs/groups in its current manifestation in Metropolitan Toronto and southern Ontario and provide information for use in the development of appropriate policy and program responses and, ultimately, structural and systemic changes in the delivery of service to victims, gang/group members, and "at risk" and non-offending youth. The study objectives were to:

1. Elicit the thoughts and feelings of young people involved in youth gang/group activity and add their voices and perceptions to both the literature and the current public and media discourse on the phenomenon as it exists today in southern Ontario;
2. Compare and contrast the perceptions of youth gang/group members with those of the adult professionals, school officials, police, and social workers who are closely associated with them on a daily basis;
3. Use information obtained in the study to develop conceptual models that will assist government, police, school officials, and youth service providers in better understanding youth gang/group involvement and gang/group crime and violence.

Research Design

The research was not intended as an "objective" analysis of youth involved in gangs/groups but as a documentation of these young people in interaction with their society, each other, and the institutions that serve them. The study was intended to be a record of the perceptions and experiences of youth "experts" who, as social actors, live their lives more immediately immersed in the phenomenon. A qualitative approach to the research based on personal narratives and responses to a semi-structured interview was chosen in order to allow for more richness in the data.

Study Advisory Committee

A study advisory committee was formed to aid and support the process of the research. The committee consisted of representatives from the federal Department of Public Security (formerly the Solicitor General), the federal Department of Justice, the Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General, the Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General, plus a school principal, social worker, social service agency administrator, and two police officers. Committee members provided feedback on the research and questionnaire design, provided contacts with youth involved in gangs/groups, and reviewed early drafts of the report.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide. Interview guides were piloted and reviewed after the first three interviews. No changes were felt to be necessary. Each participant was given an opportunity to provide any additional thoughts, feelings, or information not covered in the interview guide. Questions used in the interviews were designed to elicit participants perceptions of the youth gang/group phenomenon and ideas concerning how we as a society can respond. All interviews with participants were audiotaped and transcribed.

Youth Interviews

A total of 12 youth, 11 males, 1 female, ranging in age from 14 to 21 were interviewed. The age breakdown was as follows: 2 were 14 years old, 1 was 15, 2 were 16, 3 were seventeen, 1 was 18, 2 were 19, and 1 was 21. Youth participants had to be current or former gang/group members while young offenders. All youth were connected with a social worker or police officer or school administrator who could verify any information provided in the interviews, and, because of their contact with the law, their offences were a matter of record. Their length of involvement in gangs/groups ranged from 1 to 7 years. The young people in the study were located through school administrators, social workers, and police officers. They represent the membership of a significant cross-section of the most common configurations of youth gangs/groups and come from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Adult Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 7 police officers, 7 school officials, and 3 social workers, 2 parents of gang/group members, and 2 adult victims. All police officers were of Detective rank and all involved in dealing with gangs/groups and street crime. School administrators were drawn from Boards of Education in Metropolitan Toronto and other cities and communities in southern Ontario. All adult key informants were selected on the basis of their first hand knowledge of and experience with youth involved in gang/groups.

Data Analysis

Transcripts from participant interviews were analyzed for patterns and trends that could aid in the development of a conceptual model of gang/group involvement and youth gang/group crime and violence and in the testing of an exploratory typology of youth gangs/groups. *Ethnograph*, a computer software program for analyzing text-based data, was used in the early stages of the analysis.

Key Terms Used in the Study

The term "gang/group" is used in the study 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. Some gangs/groups consist of members ranging in age from 8 to 21 years or older hence the term "youth" cannot be limited to a strictly legal definition of "young offender". Use of the term "youth" in the study also takes into account individual developmental considerations since some young persons 18 to 21 years of age will identify with younger peers or seek supports and services from community-based youth-serving agencies. An upper age limit of 21 years was used for purposes of the study. The term "gang/group activity" is used primarily to refer to behaviour considered illegal under the *Criminal Code*.

An Overview of Related Literature

Two challenges surface immediately when one attempts to organize a framework to explain this phenomenon: (1) finding a theory to explain why young people join gangs and (2) finding a definition of "gang/group" and "gang/group activity".

An overview of the related research, virtually all American, gives us only a partial understanding. Gangs were thought to be a normal part of slum life where gang members are trained by their peers to become offenders. Some add to this factors external to the gang/slum that facilitate group cohesion and explain a process of "escalation" from less to more serious criminal activity. The gang becomes more cohesive as it encounters reaction from the larger community. The more disapproval and opposition the group receives from adults, police, or community representatives, the more the group evolves toward the development of a consciousness of being a "gang".

Some writers view gang formation as a response to poverty and a lack of opportunity. The gang provides members with support and a feeling of solidarity. Labelling theorists claim that being caught attaches a "label" to a person and in his interaction with society acquires a stigma and criminal or negative self-image that leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy of continuing deviance.

Many authors focus on "class" and make the claim that gangs grow out of the frustration lower class youth experience trying to achieve the status and material goals

of wider middle class society. Gang members accept the material goals of their society but use non-sanctioned or illegal means to attain those goals. Others see gang formation as an "nonconformist alternative" for alienated youths.

Social alienation, the breakdown of social cohesion, urbanization, anomie, alienation of youth, anonymity, and isolation are also thought to be factors leading to the development of gangs. Some writers talk about a "tension" between forces moving a person toward or away from crime. "Pull factors" are outside the individual (delinquent peer group) and draw the youth away from social norms of law abiding. "Push factors" are within the individual (organicity, hostility, aggression) and push him/her towards crime. External containment (non-offending family, friends) and internal containments (internalization of law-abiding norms) keep the youth out of trouble. When one or both of the containment forces are weak the chances of offending increase.

Some talk about the role of "chance" and that joining a gang or group is motivated less by criminal profit and more by a need to take risks. "Drift theory" attributes more agency or individual choice to delinquent youth. This theory offers a "soft determinism" and suggests that a person is neither totally free nor totally controlled by his society. A "social learning" perspective maintains that delinquent youth learn to be delinquent when they observe someone benefitting from illegal behaviour.

Some feel that delinquency is neither learned nor follows from having insufficient means to achieve material gains, but arises in the absence of values or beliefs discouraging it from arising and from poor social attachments. Others feel it stems from the fact that the person possesses more definitions of actions favorable to violation of the law than towards compliance with the law. A radical view explains crime as the result of class struggle and the marginalization of youth. Some writers talk about the "addictive" nature of deviant subcultures and lifestyles, and the influence of media created youth consumer culture on youth crime and delinquency.

Studies in social psychology suggest that people in groups take their cues for behaviour from others. One study suggests that the anticipated ends of group activities may not be as strong a motivator as stimulus properties of the targets and cues to aggression in the environment such as the presence of a weapon. One Canadian study views gangs as a subcategory of street youth and identifies time spent on the street as a factor influencing a young person's decision to become involved in illegal activities.

The delinquency, deviance, gang, and social psychology literature reviewed above provides a variety of perspectives on gangs/groups. Though not exhaustive, this sampling of the literature helps point out the complexities in trying to define this phenomenon. However, there is no single theory or definition that can account for the pluralistic or heterogeneous gang/group phenomenon in contemporary Canadian society. Much of the literature focuses on organized gangs with a definable membership and norms, or on those groups that are fiercely territorial, strongly ethnic, class, or neighbourhood based. These patterns of association and identification are not as evident in the youth gangs/groups in Toronto and other communities in southern Ontario.

Most research on youth gangs/groups focuses on explanations of why young people get involved (vulnerability factors). A strong case could be made for shifting the research emphasis to why young people *do not* get involved (protective factors). Gang-proofing and other prevention strategies could benefit from the input of young people on both sides of the issue. What is most conspicuous by its absence in the literature is the perspective of the young people themselves.

WHY YOUNG PEOPLE GET INVOLVED IN GANGS/GROUPS - YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

Following is a summary of youth participants' perspectives regarding why young people get involved in gangs/groups.

Individual Needs

Personal safety, status and recognition, power and control, affirmation of personal efficacy, friendship and affiliation, escape judgment of parents and family, associate with other youth who understand their culture, fun, thrill of living on the edge, and boredom.

Familial

Escape abusive home environment, modelling of pro-criminal or anti-social siblings, racism of parents, lack of discipline and boundaries by parents, parents unable to control behaviour of youth, parental neglect or indifference, too many rules at home, single parent, family poverty, and family wealth creates boredom in youth.

Social/Systemic

No jobs for youth, lack of social programs and other resources for youth, Young Offenders Act is lenient, consequences for illegal behaviour are minor and not a deterrent, influence of media images, influence of music videos and lyrics, mistrust of adults and adult-run institutions, police, schools are powerless to stop gangs/groups, negative experiences with police, court, schools, and social services, racism and cultural conflict, and drift.

Peers

Peer pressure, peer modelling, influence of older teens, and neighbourhood gang/group culture.

Financial

Money for drugs, money for food and shelter, money for cars, clothing, and personal luxury items, and money to impress peers/girlfriends.

WHY YOUNG PEOPLE GET INVOLVED IN GANGS/GROUPS - ADULT PERSPECTIVES

Following is a summary of adult participants' perspectives regarding why youth get involved in gangs/groups.

Individual Needs

Personal safety, status and recognition, power and control, affirmation of personal efficacy, friendship and affiliation, associate with other youth who understand their culture, fun, thrill of living on the edge, and boredom.

Familial

Escape abusive home environment, modelling of pro-criminal or anti-social parents and siblings, racism of parents, lack of discipline and boundaries by parents, parents unable to control behaviour of youth, parental neglect or indifference, single parent, family poverty.

Social/Systemic

High youth unemployment, lack of social programs and other resources for youth, Young Offenders Act is lenient, consequences for illegal behaviour are minor and not a deterrent, influence of media images, influence of music videos and lyrics, mistrust of adults and adult-run institutions, and racism and cultural conflict.

Peers

Peer pressure, peer modelling, influence of older teens, and neighbourhood gang/group culture.

Financial

Money for drugs, money for food and shelter, and money for cars, clothing, and personal luxury items.

RESPONDING TO YOUTH GANGS/GROUPS - YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

Following is a summary of youth participants' perspectives concerning how to respond to youth gangs/groups.

Police

Acknowledge the seriousness of the problem of youth gangs/groups and youth violence, show respect to youth gang/group members, build trust with youth, honest, open communication with youth, involvement with youth in community, involvement

with schools, explain their role and law enforcement process when confronting youth, firm but fair interventions with young offenders, recognize that not all youth are bad, provide education to youth about the Young Offenders Act, arrest all gang/group members at the same time, support and protect gang/group members who are exiting or assisting police, provide support and information to parents whose children are involved in a gang/group, educate all community members about youth gangs/groups.

Schools

Acknowledge the seriousness of the problem of youth gangs/groups and violence in schools, respond to victim complaints and hold offenders accountable, do whatever it takes to keep schools safe, protect the non-offending student majority, use suspension and expulsion to get rid of violent students and gang/group members, build trust with students, provide drug and alcohol abuse information to students, provide education to students about consequences of gang/group involvement, start education about gangs/groups, violence, drugs as early as possible, recognize that racism is becoming a serious problem in some schools, provide information about other cultures, provide opportunities for students from different cultures to get to know each other, keep intruders out of the school, train teachers to better recognize vulnerable students and youth in crisis, provide mental health resources to students, link up with social service agencies who can provide support and assistance to youth in crisis, be interested and involved in the lives of students, and make gymnasium and sports programs available to students and the community after hours.

Social Services

Non-judgmental approach to youth in trouble, build trust with youth, create more peer support groups, work with schools to provide supports and resources to youth, provide resources for homeless youth to keep them off the streets and out of gangs/groups, link youth with private community service groups.

Government

Acknowledge the seriousness of the problem of youth gangs/groups and youth violence, become more aware of the youth gang/group problem, harsher sentences under the Y.O.A. for repeat and violent offenders, harsher sentences under the Y.O.A. for weapons offences, create more employment opportunities for youth, use of house arrest under the Y.O.A., clear, consistently applied consequences for young offenders, establish more recreational and sports activities for youth in their communities, provide financial support to youth leaving custody while they are searching for work, fund programs for ex-gang/group members to talk to other youth at school, try and help youth before they get caught up in the criminal justice system, make youth on welfare work in their communities, create public awareness advertising campaign about youth gangs/groups, reduce the amount of violence in television and films, and direct more resources to parents, families, and social services to help them provide better care to at risk youth.

Parents

Teach youth and model discipline and respect for others, teach youth to think for themselves, love and acceptance of their children, enthusiastic involvement in the lives of their children, talk honestly and openly to children and youth, hold their children accountable for their behaviour, give youth curfews, provide safety for children so they know they can come and talk to parents, don't be overly protective of children, let them make some mistakes, keep current on information pertaining to youth, and monitor and discuss with children the films, videos, and television programs they watch and the music they listen to.

RESPONDING TO YOUTH GANGS/GROUPS - ADULT PERSPECTIVES

Following is a summary of adult participants' perspectives concerning how to respond to youth gangs/groups.

Police

Acknowledge the seriousness of the problem of violence and youth gangs/groups, recognize that incidents of violence or gang/group activity are under-reported, involvement with schools in both pro-active and reactive ways, police should be available to schools on an "on call" basis, not in the schools full-time, the same police officer should respond to calls from the school administrator, involvement with students in non-law enforcement activities at school, be an information resource to staff and students, provide education to youth about the Young Offenders Act, provide parents with information about the early warning signs of gang/group involvement, provide support and information to parents whose youth are involved in a gang/group, educate all community members about youth gangs/groups, be partners in a coordinated community-based response to youth gangs/groups.

Schools

Acknowledge the seriousness of the problem of violence and youth gangs/groups in schools, recognize that incidents of violence or gang/group activity are under-reported, recognize that racism is becoming a serious problem in some schools, work cooperatively with police and other community partners to maintain safe schools, provide space in the school for a police officer to work, develop zero tolerance policies for violence and youth gang/group activities, support and protect victims when they disclose, respond to victim complaints and hold offenders accountable, balance the rights of victims and offenders when formulating anti-violence policies, use suspension and expulsion to get rid of violent students and gang/group members, provide drug and alcohol abuse information to students, provide education to students about consequences of gang/group involvement, start education about gangs/groups, violence, drugs as early as possible, keep intruders out of the school, increase visibility of principal in school, greater vigilance with respect to the physical plant of the school, hallway and lunchroom supervision, train teachers to better recognize youth in crisis, provide mental health resources to students, link up with social service agencies who can provide support and assistance to youth in crisis, make

gymnasium and sports programs available to students and the community after hours, and involve non-teaching staff, students, and parents in the planning and development of any school-based anti-violence or anti-gang/group strategies.

Social Services

Work with schools and police to provide supports and resources to youth, provide training and information about youth to police officers and school personnel, and assist and support parents whose offspring are involved in gangs/groups.

Government

Acknowledge the seriousness of the problem of violence and youth gangs/groups in schools, become more aware of the youth gang/group problem, harsher sentences under the Y.O.A. for repeat and violent offenders, harsher sentences under the Y.O.A. for weapons offences, create more employment opportunities for youth, clear, consistently applied consequences for young offenders, establish more recreational and sports activities for youth in their communities, try and help youth before they get caught up in the criminal justice system, create public awareness advertising campaign about youth gangs/groups, reduce the amount of violence in television and films, and direct more resources to parents, families, and social services to help them provide better care to at risk youth.

Parents

Teach youth and model discipline and respect for others, love and acceptance of their children, enthusiastic involvement in the lives of their children, provide opportunities for children to experience success and acquire positive self-esteem, talk honestly and openly to children and youth, hold their children accountable for their behaviour, provide safety for children so they know they can come and talk to parents, keep current on information pertaining to youth, monitor and discuss with children the films, videos, and television programs they watch and the music they listen to, be more involved in the schools their children attend, work more collaboratively with teachers and police.

Defining the "Problem"

There is great heterogeneity both within and between Toronto's youth gangs/groups. Some are ethnic-based, while others have mixed racial membership. The majority of members are male, though most gangs/groups are mixed gender. There are a number of all male gangs, and a few that have female members only.

Gangs/groups in Toronto have, for the most part, a fluid membership. Gang/group names have become relatively meaningless and change from week to week, month to month. Young people can be in several gangs/groups at the same time, all in different parts of the city. Gang/group members can range in age from minors to adults.

In fact, it is advantageous to have young offenders and minors in a gang/group organized for criminal purposes. Minors are frequently used to carry out illegal activities because if caught they are rarely, if ever, prosecuted.

It is evident from the interviews that the phenomenon of youth gangs/groups cannot be reduced down to a simple "problem" statement. There are a number of associated concerns, both at the level of the individual youth and in the systems that serve young people, that together make this a complex social phenomenon.

It is evident from discussions with study participants that our failure now to name what appears to be an emerging and serious problem will lead to minimization and denial, which in turn will slow our response and leave victims of youth gangs/groups and youth violence vulnerable and unprotected. Objective assessments of the "seriousness" of offences cannot capture the impact on victims or the climate of fear that can build in a school environment from persistent incidents of what might appear to an outside observer to be "less serious" forms of intimidation.

Basing our understanding solely on official charge rates it is easy to overlook what participants identify as an important fact in the phenomenon, namely, that youth gang/group activities and youth violence is significantly under-reported. Teen victims are extremely reluctant to report their victimization because of fear of retaliation; fear of getting friends or neighbourhood peers into trouble with the law; fear of not being believed or that nothing will be done by adult authorities which would leave the youth exposed to further violence and to ostracism; fear of being perceived as a "rat" or tattletale; fear of appearing friendless, vulnerable, and socially rejected; and fear that parents will be upset with them for "losing" articles of clothing or other possessions. There are also some gender dimensions that effect reporting.

A rise in the involvement of girls in the phenomenon of youth gangs/groups and youth violence is a special concern of adult participants in the study. Police and school officials report finding female perpetrated crime and violence becoming more frequent, that their violence can be as vicious and extreme as the males, and that their victims tend primarily to be other girls.

Youth gangs/groups are a particular problem for schools. Though violence in schools is not yet out of control, the presence of gangs/groups "poisons" the learning environment for other students and compromises teachers' and school officials' efforts to maintain a safe environment. Schools also provide a readily available supply of victims.

The comments of school officials reveal that there are institutional and administrative practices in the school that appear to be contributing in a significant way to the growth of the phenomenon. Institutional practices in the form of performance and promotion criteria force some school administrators to deny or minimize the incidence of youth gang/group activity in their schools or the level of students' fear. Career focused educators who see their positions simply as a stepping stone to the next level of authority will be reluctant to draw attention to serious problems in their schools. Some

school officials mistake a low incidence of reporting to mean an absence of problems, when in fact fear and intimidation by gangs/groups and students' mistrust that educators will respond to their disclosures keeps young people silent.

Students continue to fall through the cracks of our educational system. Many students' learning disabilities go unrecognized. Large class sizes, early streaming, and an increased narrowing of curriculum send many youth down an aimless and empty educational path. Unprepared for the needs of young people from so many different cultures, schools are struggling under a heavy burden. Given that so many of these new demands were unanticipated, change has been slow. Consequently, many of these students are vulnerable to school failure, marginalization, and victimization within the school setting.

Given the rapid social change that has become a part of life in Canada it would appear necessary for the professional preparation of educators to go beyond learning to teach the three R's. Basic skills that will enable teachers to identify abused, neglected, vulnerable, and failing to thrive students need to be a part of their training. Teachers and administrators need to focus on their "at risk" students and plan interventions that will make them less vulnerable to the lure of gangs/groups or to being victimized.

Schools who wish to be on the cutting edge of education should be planning now for the introduction of a student wellness focus within guidance and counselling, linked to resources, supports, and other youth-serving organizations and agencies in the community. School officials who embrace this concept of an "open community school" with resources provided to students on site will be in an optimal position to support and assist their vulnerable students.

Defining "Gangs/Groups"

Arriving at a simple definition of a "gang/group" proved challenging. Study participants identified a continuum of gangs/groups ranging from the loosely associated group of peers or friends to the more hard core and organized crime-focused gang. A single criteria for distinguishing a youth peer group from the youth "gang" was identified, namely, involvement in illegal behaviour. "Illegal behaviour" included anything from sexual harassment, intimidation, and uttering threats to drug dealing, robbery, and murder.

Two main types of gang/group configurations emerged from the interviews. First, there was the "group of friends". This configuration breaks down further into roughly three subsets: school peers, long-term associations of childhood friends, and neighbourhood friends and associates. The "group of friends" can be mixed race or gender, or single race and gender. Some give themselves names, others do not. Their activities range from hanging out together to simple mischief, some petty thefts and impulsive vandalism, to the occasional assault on other youth or youth groups, and even more serious crime. When a "group of friends" crosses the line between mischief and illegal behaviour they are viewed as becoming a "gang", both in their own perceptions

and in the eyes of adult authorities and peers. The "crossing" can sometimes be well-planned and intentional, but also spontaneous.

The second configuration is the "hard core gang". This configuration breaks down into three subsets: political/pseudo-political/paramilitary (such as Skinhead groups), mixed race organized and crime-focused/delinquent, and culturally homogeneous and organized crime-focused/delinquent. The hard core gang uses weapons extensively and could be equipped with everything from knives and explosives to powerful automatic weapons.

Combining all the perspectives of study participants yielded the following definition:

A youth gang/group is a group of three or more youths whose membership, though often fluid, consists of at least a stable core of members who are recognized by themselves or others as a gang/group, and who band together for social, cultural, or other reasons and impulsively or intentionally plan and commit anti-social, delinquent, or illegal acts.

An Exploratory Typology of Youth Gangs/Groups

The findings of the study appear to support an exploratory model of youth gangs/groups developed in a previous study conducted in Metropolitan Toronto (Mathews, 1990). The eight categories in the typology do not constitute, nor were they intended to be, a definitive typology and should be considered only as a conceptual framework to assist further refinement and analysis.

1. Fashion or Social
2. Ethnocultural
3. Political, Pseudo-Political
4. Violent (Sociopathic)
5. Crime-Focused/Delinquent
6. Street Youth
7. Volatile Group
8. Vigilante

The Gang/Group Involvement Cycle

A key to understanding much of the motivation to become involved in youth gangs/groups can be found in the developmental needs of adolescents. These include the need for: affiliation with like-minded peers, self-esteem and personal efficacy, the formation of an identity independent from parents and family, limit-testing, challenging authority, the search for novelty, stimulation, and pleasure, the expression of assertiveness and aggression, and the development of a sexual and gender identity. Many of these needs are met through involvement in youth gang/group activity, and are met quickly and easily. Vulnerable youth living in poverty, in dysfunctional families, or who

have histories of abuse or neglect may have needs in any or all of these areas that are more keenly felt, and hence a stronger motivation to meet them. Other characteristics normally associated with adolescence such as egocentricity, impulsiveness, and omnipotence, i.e., "I won't get caught", etc., may also play a role.

There is no typical gang/group or individual who becomes involved. However, the process of joining, staying in, and leaving appears to follow a pattern that can be articulated in the following model.

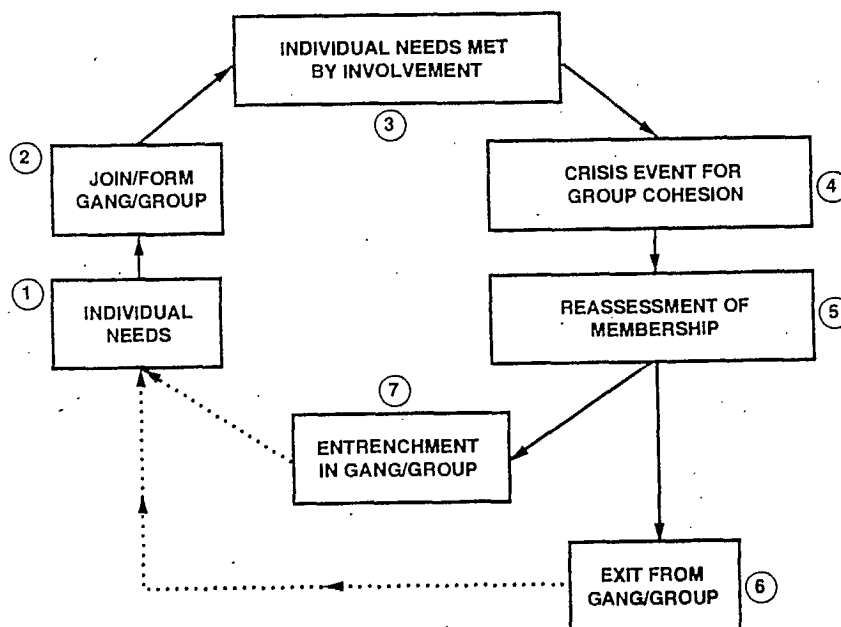


Figure 1: Gang/Group Involvement Cycle

The *gang/group involvement cycle* model delineates 7 stages which describe a young person's path concerning gang/group membership and is based on the comments of study participants. The stages are not mutually exclusive and may apply in varying degrees to different forms of gangs/groups or individual members. The model should be considered descriptive and exploratory.

1. Awareness Of Individual Needs

The first step in forming or becoming involved in a gang/group is usually precipitated by a perception of need. One major need is in the area of self-protection. A remarkable degree of fear permeates the social and learning environment of many elementary, middle level, and high schools. Young people in these schools often perceive themselves to be at risk of harm if they do not join a gang/group, thus a need for protection is a major motivator. The need to establish a sense of personal efficacy, as measured by popularity or acceptance or membership in a gang/group will also supply a youth with motivation. Other needs described earlier will also influence a young person's decision to join or form a gang/group.

2. Joining/Forming A Gang/Group

Forming or joining is not always marked by any particular event. As mentioned previously, many, gangs/groups simply drift into an association they or others eventually label a "gang". Some gangs/groups are formally organized and have rules of conduct and expectations for behaviour clearly spelled out, including an initiation.

3. Rapid Transformation Of Self Through Meeting Of Individual Needs

Once in, or when the gang/group begins to achieve a group identity, young people begin to notice changes occurring within themselves. As their needs are met they experience instant power and status within the group or in the school or community. Affirmation of personal efficacy needs are met through acceptance by other members. There is a "honeymoon" period when other associates are friends and the gang/group is one big happy "family". Attempts by friends, families, school personnel, police, or other adult authorities to discourage gang/group involvement or to sever the bonds and friendships between peers at this stage, however well intended, will almost certainly meet with strong resistance.

4. Crisis Event For Group Cohesion

A crisis event, typically a brush with the law after involvement in anti-social or illegal behaviour, being challenged or attacked by another gang/group, or death or injury of a member will precipitate a crisis that will challenge group cohesion. As long as the payoff for being involved remains high or outweighs the risks members will remain committed.

5. Individual Reassessment of Membership

Regardless of how fellow gang/group members respond to the crisis, some youth may experience cognitive dissonance, especially if they find themselves participating in activities that challenge previously held anti-criminal and

pro-social values. When the dissonance cannot be resolved by a renewed commitment to the gang/group or peer pressure the youth may decide to leave or exit.

6. Exit

There are several means by which a young person can exit. Some mature or "grow up and grow out" of the gang/group or learn to meet their needs in other or more positive ways. Some youth leave because they see diminishing returns for their involvement in illegal activity and the risk of serious physical harm, punishment and incarceration is no longer outweighed by the perceived benefits. Some leave when their families move away from the neighbourhood. Others leave after they are arrested and imprisoned or when the gang/group simply decides to break up.

After exiting the gang/group, members are still vulnerable to their lure. If a youth does not acquire employment skills, make new friends in a non-delinquent, non-criminal peer group, or address the other need/risk factors that motivated him/her to get involved in the first place, he/she may return in a moment of crisis. This is marked by the longer broken line in Figure 1.

7. Entrenchment

Once the crisis event has passed and the gang/group has passed the test of its cohesion, many members start to become entrenched. When a youth has been involved over a period of time, it becomes difficult to give up the protection and security that goes along with membership. It is difficult to forfeit the material gains, power, status, and esteem needs that are met through being in the gang/group. Since leaving often means abandoning lifelong friends and familiar neighbourhood peers, few youth do so without much pain and some backsliding. And then there are those gangs/groups that threaten to kill or seriously injure exiting members, making leaving too difficult if not impossible. Concerns about being harmed by one's own members, fears of being at risk for violence from other gangs/groups if he/she leaves, and the reinforcement of having needs met lock the youth into a cycle of fear, need, and crisis that will characterize his/her life until exit is possible.

An Interactional Model Of Youth Gang/Group Crime And Violence

Understanding youth gang/group crime and violence will require us to look beyond simplistic models and explanations that focus exclusively on the individual or youth-serving organizations and institutions or the social context of youth violence. Relying on one perspective to the exclusion of the other will result in only partial understanding and seriously compromise our efforts to develop comprehensive and relevant policy and program responses.

The following is an exploratory, multi-level *interactional model* of youth gang/group crime and violence based on the responses of study participants and previous work of the author (Mathews, 1993). The model is not additive or linear but simply delineates those factors which appear to influence the behaviour of youth in gangs/groups.

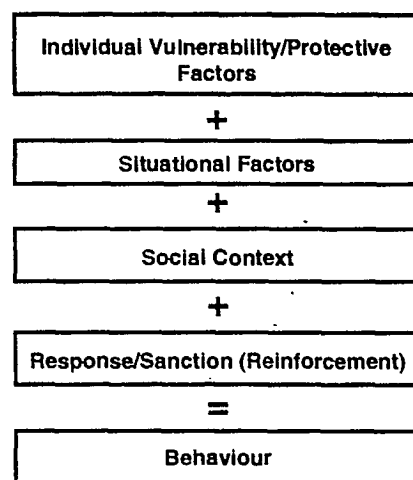


Figure 2: Interactional Model of Youth Gang/Group Crime and Violence

1. Individual vulnerability and protective factors

These are, in essence, strengths and weaknesses in a young person's background that have some bearing on their decision to become involved in a youth gang/group or illegal gang/group activity. Every individual possesses varying combinations of the two.

Vulnerability factors. Vulnerability factors are those elements in the young person's family and developmental history that would either predispose the youth to involvement in youth gangs/groups or in aggressive, violent, or anti-social behaviour. Examples of these factors can include: previous history of physical or sexual abuse or neglect, criminal, or dysfunctional family, substance abusing parents, difficulties in adjusting to new life in Canada, being unemployed, child poverty, undiagnosed learning problems or difficulties at school, presence of current or chronic life stressors.

Protective factors. Protective factors are those elements in the young person's family and developmental history that have the potential to attenuate the effects of any vulnerability factors and reduce the youth's chances of becoming involved in youth gangs/groups or in aggressive, violent, or anti-social behaviours. Examples of these factors can include: pro-social family values, attitudes, and beliefs, presence of supportive family or access to supportive extended family members, opportunities to build positive self-esteem, firm, fair boundaries and affection from family or extended family members, positive ego strength and internal locus of control, school success, and good health and proper nutrition,

2. Situational factors

Situational factors, or the "psychology of situations", comprise those elements in the immediate environment that can influence the behaviour of the individuals in youth gangs/groups by providing behavioural cues. Examples of these situational factors or behavioural cues are: the presence of others (in large or small numbers), the presence of a gun or other weapon, anonymity, darkness or other things that mask or hide identity, and opportunities to flee.

The interaction effects between individual vulnerability/protective factors and situational variables can perhaps be understood by using the model of a pan scale. Literally, young people bring their mixture of vulnerability/protective factors to every situation they encounter in their lives. In circumstances where there are many behavioural cues to act aggressively with little chance of getting caught the balance of the two along with any current life stressors are likely to guide the person's choice of actions.

3. Social Context

The concept of *social context* of youth violence and criminal behaviour, as used in the model, both includes and extends beyond a "social learning" model of behaviour acquisition. According to "social learning theory" (Bandura, 1977), young people learn how and when to behave aggressively by passively observing models (in this case youth observing other youth or adults receiving gain from the use of aggression, violence or coercion).

Learning in a *social context* extends beyond behaviour to include the acquisition of values, attitudes, and beliefs, many of which can be learned by observing violent images in entertainment or news media. Depictions of gratuitous violence, especially when shown through more passive communication mediums such as film and television, become subtle "background" supporting and promoting attitudes and beliefs about victims and the true impact of crime and violence on victims. The greatest example of this can be found in pornography that portrays women who initially resist aggressive sexual advances only to submit and enjoy it. This image supports the myth that women really mean "yes" when

they say "no" and that use of a little force will elicit their enthusiastic compliance. By *social context* we also need to consider the influence of gender role socialization, child poverty, and unemployment on the violent and aggressive behaviour of youth.

In essence, when we talk about violence *and* youth in a social context we need to approach the discussion from two perspectives - violence done *to* youth and *by* youth. Though it may be difficult for many adults to admit, we are a society that is violent towards children and youth. One only need examine the statistics concerning the widespread prevalence of child abuse and adolescent prostitution to understand this point.

Young people are keen observers of adult behaviour, especially that which brings swift rewards, and unfortunately many are choosing to use violence as a means to solve their problems.

4. Response/Sanction (Reinforcement)

Response/sanction can perhaps best be understood in terms of reinforcement. When the rewards are high and the consequences minor young people will continue to engage in such behaviours. Young people who participate in less serious criminal or anti-social activities and experience mild or no consequences may be tempted to test the boundary further and escalate the level of seriousness of those activities. Peers provide each other with non-judgmental support and reinforcement for involvement in crime. Status enhancement among peers is a strong reinforcer.

Response/sanction also applies to the actions of victims. When youth report their victimization to adult authorities and see no remedial action taken to support their disclosure, protect them, or hold the offender accountable they will eventually stop reporting. Some will settle the scores themselves. Others will lose interest in and avoid school and become mistrustful of adults and adult run institutions.

5. Behaviour

Behaviour refers simply to the illegal, aggressive, violent, or anti-social actions perpetrated by youth in the gang/group.

A typical trajectory for a gang/group member through the model might proceed as follows. Youth members bring a mix of *vulnerability/protective factors* to *situations* that may provide "behavioural cues" to act in a violent, aggressive, or anti-social manner. Youth with high levels of protective factors and low vulnerability factors might choose to resist peer pressure, ignore environmental cues, and simply refuse to participate. Others with low levels of protective factors and high vulnerability factors responding to behavioural cues and feeling supported by a *social context* or

"background" that diminishes victim impact or validates the behaviour may proceed. If they are not apprehended or punished for their actions the thrill of breaking the social taboo against harming others and the absence of punishment *reinforces* the *behaviour* increasing the likelihood it will be repeated or escalated.

Summary of Participants' Recommendations

The following list of recommendations for police forces, schools, and government, is based on the comments of youth and adult study participants, the specific wording is that of the author. It is important to keep in mind the small sample size in the study and to gauge the appropriateness of the suggested recommendations in the context of the reader's own community and local resources.

Police

1. Recognize the seriousness of the youth gang/group phenomenon and youth violence.
2. Police Forces should continue to build on and enhance current community-based policing initiatives to bring law enforcement officers into more regular and intimate contact with the communities they serve.
3. Police Forces should create a career track youth officer specialization and provide these officers with the skills and knowledge they need to provide a professional police service to youth populations.
4. Given the rapidly changing social conditions in our country, Police Forces should establish working partnerships with universities, colleges, professional schools, and the wider youth-serving community to keep youth officers' knowledge and skills related to youth work up to date.
5. Smaller Police Forces who lack the resources to develop a career track youth officer stream should work with the police colleges and universities, colleges, professional schools, and the wider youth-serving community to ensure all their officers have the knowledge and skills necessary to work effectively with youth.
6. Police Forces should recognize that a professional police service to youth serves a primary and secondary crime prevention purpose.
7. Police Forces should forge working partnerships with schools and other youth-serving professionals and organizations in order to build an integrated community-based response to youth gangs/groups and youth violence.
8. Police Forces should make themselves available to students, parents, and educators and provide them with information about youth gangs/groups and youth violence.

9. Police Forces should form partnerships with schools based on the approach used by the Street Crime Unit of the Metropolitan Toronto Police Force or the Guelph Police Force.
10. Police Forces should ensure that all law enforcement officers possess the sensitivity, knowledge, and skills necessary to work with youth from different cultural backgrounds and continue to support hiring practices that bring more minority officers into police services.
11. Police officers should recognize the need to foster communication links and close community contacts with young people involved in gangs/groups and to ensure that their law enforcement and bridge building efforts are accomplished in a manner that is respectful and open.
12. Police officers should recognize that youth have a need to feel safe and protected under the law and are willing to work with police to keep communities and schools safe.
13. Police Forces should begin or continue to carefully document the incidents of youth gang/group activities in order to obtain an accurate picture of the phenomenon and how it is evolving.

Schools

14. Recognize the seriousness of the youth gang/group phenomenon and youth violence and that it is a problem in schools.
15. School administrators should recognize that they cannot handle the problem of youth gangs/groups or youth violence alone.
16. Schools should develop and enforce sexual harassment and zero tolerance to violence policies that clearly spell out expectations for behaviour and consequences.
17. Schools should support the disclosures of victims of violence and ensure their safety and protection.
18. Schools should recognize the need to balance the rights of offending youth with those of victims and the non-offending student majority in policies and procedures dealing with violence and gang/group activities.
19. Schools should recognize the need to provide counselling and other support services to both victims and perpetrators of violence.
20. Schools should recognize that victims and the non-offending student majority need to see that they will be protected and that offenders are being held accountable.

21. Schools should ensure that counselling and other supports are available to teachers and non-teaching staff who are victims of student of youth gang/group violence.
22. Schools should understand that if victims and non-offending students do not see offenders being held accountable, they will find their own solutions to settle the score and escalate the level of violence in schools.
23. Schools should provide teachers with the training necessary to recognize victims of child abuse and neglect and to support and assist them through their healing process.
24. Schools should provide teachers with skills in conflict resolution and aggression management.
25. Schools should involve students and parents in the planning and development of strategies to respond to youth violence and gangs/groups.
26. Schools should work cooperatively with police to forge a working partnership to help keep schools safe.
27. Schools should forge working partnerships with community-based agencies to bring services and other supports and resources to students on school premises.
28. Schools should recognize the growing problem of racial tension in gang/group conflicts.
29. Schools should provide opportunities for students from different cultural backgrounds to interact and learn from each other and appreciate and understand cultural differences.
30. Schools should support and encourage the development of in-school peer mediation programs such as "Peacemakers" or other programs that address students life skills deficits in areas such as anger management, conflict resolution, impulse control, listening, and cooperation.
31. Schools should support and encourage the development of media literacy courses to give students the critical and analytic skills they need to reflect on the violent, sexist, heterosexist, ethnocentric, and other images that they observe through the media.
32. Schools should recognize that it is a student's right to expect respect and direct honest dialogue with teachers and school administrators.
33. Recognize that it is a student's right to expect schools to be a learning environment free from all forms of physical, sexual, emotional, and mental abuse and violence.

34. Schools should ensure that teachers are provided with information concerning the cultural makeup of the student body and special issues or concerns that are likely to arise in a multicultural education setting.
35. Schools should ensure that students are held accountable for any racist, sexist, anti-gay comments they make or jokes they tell.
36. Teaching and non-teaching staff should be held accountable for any racist, sexist, anti-gay, or pro-violence attitudes or beliefs they convey through jokes, sarcasm, use of threats or corporal punishment.

Government

37. Government should recognize the seriousness of the youth gang/group phenomenon and youth violence.
38. Using a community consultation model government should work with all those involved in dealing with the problem of youth gangs/groups and youth violence to review obstacles in the Young Offenders Act, Education Act, Freedom of Information and Privacy legislation, and any other Acts of Legislation that impede the development of a coordinated community-based response.
39. Government should develop and implement a public education program through the media to challenge the perceptions of young people and adults that the Young Offenders Act is too lenient and ineffective.
40. Government should provide the counselling, assessment, treatment and other supports and service communities need to better implement the "alternative measures" provisions of the Young Offenders Act.
41. Government should support and fund public and private efforts to research and document the evolution of the youth gang/group phenomenon.
42. Government should support Police Force initiatives to develop career track youth officer streams and professional police services to youth.
43. Government should recognize that living in poverty makes some young people vulnerable to the lure of gangs/groups and the need to address high youth unemployment.
44. Government should be conscientious and ensure that families are resourced to a sufficient enough level to provide optimal care for their offspring.
45. Government should seriously consider action to address the widespread portrayal of excessive and gratuitous violence in media images.

46. Government should seriously consider action to address the portrayal of media images that denigrate and stereotype men, women, children, teens, and members of cultural minorities.
47. Government should recognize the growing problem of inter-racial conflict among youth gangs/groups.
48. Government should continue to support programs that foster cross-cultural understanding.
49. Government should continue to support the development of curriculum and educational materials that reflect the cultural diversity of the country.
50. Government should establish a special commission to examine the growing problem of youth violence, youth gangs/groups, and violence in schools.
51. Government should support the establishment of local community crime prevention councils and assist them by every means possible to forge community-wide and coordinated strategies to deal with youth gangs/groups and youth violence.

