

Youth Justice in Canada: a resource manual

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Excerpt on Youth Gangs (pages 45 to 40).

2.3.4 Youth Gangs

Media and political attention is increasingly focused on the issue, if not always the fact, of youth gangs. Here are a few examples.

- In 1999, Toronto Police Services estimated that approximately 2,000 youth were involved in the Greater Toronto Area. (Toronto Police, undated)
- Toronto Police also claim that “record numbers of females are attracted to gangs and they are often extremely violent.” (Toronto Police, undated)
- Toronto Police say that “A ‘tribal youth subculture’ is emerging among youth in which kids gain status by devaluing others, gang attire is routine, and violence is glorified. This subculture is portrayed in youth music and videos, on television and in movies and is desensitizing kids to violence.
- Based on intelligence sources, Waterloo (Ontario) Regional Police estimated that there are three crime-based street gangs with a total of 100 confirmed members. The membership of the gangs is described on ethnic/racial lines: “roots in local Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian communities”; “many members Asian or black, but not exclusively”; and “many members Hispanic or white, but not exclusively”. (Kitchener-Waterloo Record, June 30, 2001)
- Press reports in Waterloo also say that there are numerous informal peer groups or crews that have formed in recent years. (Kitchener-Waterloo Record, June 30, 2001)
- A 1999 Ottawa Citizen headline says “Teen to serve 17 months for gang attacks.”
- Claims in the Manitoba legislature state “for example, that “the horrid threat” of street gangs, growing like a “cancer,” was responsible for an “astronomical increase in violent crime” (cited from Hansard by Mallea, 1999, page 13). Street gangs are often associated with Aboriginal youth.
- The Federation of Canadian Municipalities in 1994 observed growing concerns about youth gangs, but also a lack of Canadian research on the topic. “During the past decade, there has been growing concern about youth gangs forming in several Canadian cities. These gangs have been responsible for a spate of sensational violent crimes. This has led to public demands for stiffer penalties and greater protection of the public. However, little Canadian research is available. (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 1994, 6)

This attention creates the impression that youth gangs are rampant across the country. Many of the images associated with youth gangs are racial and racist in nature. Certainly, using terms like “tribal youth subculture” does not help.

One of the issues is that a wide range of activities are associated with youth gangs, whether or not gangs are actually involved. As the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (1994, pg. 14) report notes, “There is no consistent definition of the term ‘youth gang’ employed in Canada. Some identify youth gangs with criminal behaviour, while others do not.... Rather than trying to develop a single, all encompassing definition of youth gangs, we suggest a continuum on which distinct types of collective youth violence can be located.”

The Federation (FCM) continuum is marked by two kinds of groups at each end:

<p>Friendship Groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • loosely organized • no leadership structure • spontaneous involvement in violence • little involvement in crime for profit 	<p>Criminal Youth Gangs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • highly organized • definite leadership structure • systematic involvement in violence • crime for profit is a major activity.
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In the middle of the continuum are groups that come together primarily to engage in criminal activities for material gain. They rarely have an ongoing organization and only come together for specific criminal acts.

For example, this type of group may get together to commit a series of house break-ins. Once the crimes have been committed, the stolen property is divided and the group disbands until its next criminal episode. The lack of organization, continuity and leadership structure suggest that this should be considered a group, not a gang. (Federation of Canadian Municipalities.1994, pg.15)

Public perceptions of threat are heightened when media and authorities lump the behaviour of all such groups under the “gang” banner. For instance, the Greater Vancouver Street Gang Study defined three kinds of gangs:

- *Criminal business organizations* -- organized criminal groups with a formal structure and a high degree of sophistication.
- *Street gangs* -- semi-structured groups of youth and young adults who engage in planned and profitable criminal behaviour or organized violence against rival gangs.
- *Wannabe groups* – unstructured groups of young people who engage in spontaneous social activity and exciting, impulsive criminal activity, including collective violence against other groups of youth. (Solicitor General, 1999, 4)

Failing to distinguish among these types of groups/gangs, leads to distorted public perceptions:

While criminal business organizations are usually easily distinguishable from the other groups, often the line between street gangs and wannabe groups is not as clear. While street gangs may have a stronger negative impact on a community, through crime and violence, wannabe groups tend to be very visible. This can result in an inflated perception of a gang problem. In general, members of wannabe groups tend to be younger than those of street gangs (hence the term “youth gangs”) and often claim affiliations with street gangs, which may or may not exist. While wannabes may appear to be more of a nuisance than a serious threat to public safety, Dr. Gordon advised that these groups should be taken seriously but addressed in a strategic manner. (Solicitor General, 1999)

Many of the youth participants in the National Forum on Youth Gangs have experienced harassment and discrimination from adults while they were out with a group of friends. They felt that it was crucial to reinforce for professionals that not all groups of youth should be looked upon as street gangs.

Another reason that youth gang activity is difficult to estimate, and often overestimated, is that adults are often involved in gangs. For instance, in Winnipeg, it is estimated that only 25% of street gang members are youth. (Mallea, 1999 citing Cameron). A 1999 estimate of Winnipeg gang membership was 1,000. This would mean 250 youth were involved.

All of this led the FCM to conclude:

Evidence gathered for the FCM project suggests that there are very few highly organized criminal youth gangs in Canada. The groups of young people visible to the public on street corners or at shopping malls are usually not organized youth gangs. The public, however, may regard these young people as threatening and consider them to be dangerous or criminal. This includes instances in which groups of young people have come together just to hang out and socialize with other young people. (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 1994, pg. 17)

Public concerns are escalated further when racial overtones are added. For instance, a study of Toronto Tamil youth (Balasingham, 2000) discovered there were significant differences between reality and the perceptions of police and school personnel about Tamil youth gang and group activities. Despite clear evidence that there is no connection between Tamil youth groups/gangs in Toronto and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, many of the front line police and school personnel believed there were such connections. This perception then gets communicated to the public. Tamil youth see “gang” activity as less cohesive and less formally structured, and as far less serious and threatening than the image that gets created in the public. All of this serves to further racialize and marginalize Tamil youth.

Mark Totten of the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa-Carleton highlights the racist nature of the blurring of distinctions between groups of youth and gang activity.

Less than one per cent of youth in Canada belong to hard-core criminal youth gangs... A youth gang is a group of three or more youth whose members routinely commit serious crimes and regularly engage in severe acts of violence. The media's inaccurate usage of the term gang does real harm to all youth, in particular to visible minority youth. More often than not, the media present black youth as being representative of all gang members. Although racial origin is an important factor in gang analysis, the media do not offer any thought or analysis as to why this may be the case. For example, visible minority youth face discrimination in many areas of their lives and as a result, experience blocked opportunities in the areas of schooling and employment. In the face of this, gangs have more appeal. (Totten, 1999, 2)

Why Youth Join and Leave Gangs

For those who are focussing on the dynamics of gang membership, there is considerable agreement on why youth join gangs. The following is a summary of factors identified at the National Forum on Youth Gangs in 1999:

- Three issues are common to all adolescents: identity exploration (including deviant identity); peer group acceptance; and need for family/parental attachments.
- Joining a gang is a normal part of adolescence. For most young people, such a gang takes the form of a sports team, the school band or a group of friends who “hang out” together at the local mall. For some, the choice between affiliating themselves with a “normal” gang such as these or with a street gang may be a function of the cohesiveness of the community and the resources available (e.g., recreation, youth organizations).
- A number of reasons for joining a gang were identified in a Montreal study, including a sense of belonging, recognition, appreciation, protection, fun and financial gain. Gang members shared a number of common characteristics, including lack of close family ties, difficulty in school and a social network that included gang members.
- Fashion may also play a role. At times, “gang member” becomes a highly prized label for adolescents, and one that they actively seek out, as it provides them with power, status and peer group acceptance.
- For some, the gang provides a surrogate family where close attachments with parents do not exist.
- The media can play a role in the expansion of gang activity by bolstering the “cool factor” of gang membership and enhancing the value of the gang member label. Entertainment media can glamorize gang membership and influence copycat behaviour (e.g., almost immediately following the release of the movie

Colors, which depicts Los Angeles street gangs, behaviour from the movie, including tagging, jargon and wearing “colours” began to be mimicked on Vancouver streets). The news media may also amplify the problem by publicizing gang activity.

- Research among Aboriginal youth in Winnipeg indicated that their involvement in gangs (or not) was rooted in their sense of self, of who they are and who their people and communities are.
- Young people are drawn into gang life through a network of acquaintances with gang ties. (Solicitor General, 1999, pgs. 4-7)

The reasons for joining gangs are understandably linked to some of the factors involved in leaving gang life:

- Montreal gang affiliated youth identified a number of factors which prompted them to leave gang life, including fear for their safety and a desire for a new life. The youth found that the most difficult part of leaving the gang life is not so much leaving the gang itself as rebuilding one’s self-identity afterwards.
- The Vancouver Gang Study identified the following reasons for the dissipation of a gang: individuals may lose interest in maintaining their deviant identity (the gang member label); targeted enforcement which removes (incarcerates) key individuals; incapacitation (via death or drug abuse); and maturation.
- Youth who have been involved in gang life know that risk for gang involvement does not end when a young person leaves a gang. These youth require a strong support network and skills to help them build a mainstream life. (Solicitor General, 1999, pgs. 4-8)