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REPORT

YOUTH GANGS
ON
YOUTH GANGS

No. 1993-24

Responding
to Violence
and Abuse

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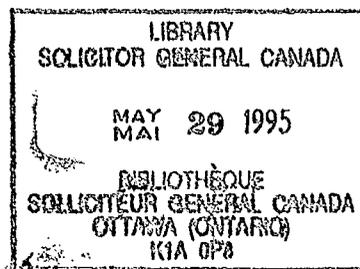
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YOUTH GANGS

ON

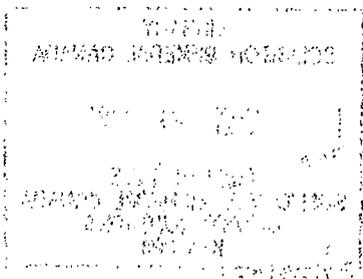
YOUTH GANGS

No. 1993-24



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F.M.

INTRODUCTION

. "Wake up and look around. Look at what everything is turning into."
(Tim, 16)

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. Marginalization, poverty, and disenfranchisement is a common experience among youth of most societies, especially young persons who are members of "out" groups such as the lower class or ethnic and religious minorities. Using non-sanctioned or illegal means to meet sustenance and other material needs is universal where grinding poverty is present. However, a majority of young people involved in gangs/groups today are not living in poverty nor are they all from marginalized groups in Canadian society.

It is hard to determine conclusively if youth crime and violence, for whatever reason, is truly a serious and growing problem. A recent Canadian study reveals that between 1986 and 1991 violent offence charges for youth 12 - 17 increased by over 106% (Canadian Social Trends, 1992). However, violent crime represents only about 15% of all youth crime. Most youth crime involves property offences.

It is important to keep in mind that these statistics on violent youth crime are based on police charge rates only, so it is hard to know how much of this is murder and rape and how much is schoolyard pushing and shoving. Without a more detailed analysis of these figures it is difficult to say whether actual incidences of violence per capita are increasing or have become more serious or whether the police are simply laying more charges in response to political pressure and public outrage that adolescents be held more accountable for their behaviour.

On the other hand the Yonge Street "riots" in Toronto on May, 4, 1992, were certainly a watershed event unique in Canadian history. Though teens were not the only participants in the beatings, looting and destruction of private and public property, they represented a significant proportion. This disturbing public spectacle by youth of all backgrounds should serve as a "red flag" and focus our attention on what young people are trying to say to the adult world they often feel so alienated and excluded from.

There is also 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 knives, though most attacks are against other girls either as individuals or in gangs/groups;
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 (Ryan, Mathews, and Banner, 1993a).

Putting the "is-it-a-real-increase-or-more-reporting" debate aside for a moment it is time for all caring members of the public and the wider youth-serving community to acknowledge that we are not dealing effectively with the youth violence problem we already have. Though communities large and small in the province of Ontario are slowly starting to wake up to the fact that they have a problem with youth violence and youth gang/group activity, especially in schools, there still is much more work to be done.

The most important first step a community can take to address this phenomenon is to avoid making uninformed and hasty decisions. Strategies based on political pressure and quick-fix reactions are likely to waste precious human and financial resources. Social problems such as youth gangs/groups and youth violence are complex and should be given careful thought and analysis. Police, School Boards, social services, and parents can all address specific issues but no single group can solve the whole problem in isolation from the wider community.

But what do we really know about youth gangs/groups and on what information should we, can we, base strategies for intervention. Very little research has ever been done on gangs/groups in Canada and there is virtually none available on the phenomenon as it exists in its current historical context. The American literature on gangs, deviance and delinquency provides some insights but it is fragmented and based largely on the "detached" observations of social scientists.

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".

One of the earliest studies of gangs by Thrasher (1929) provides a simple definition:

"an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously and then integrated through conflict." Shaw and McKay (1931) of the Chicago School sought to demonstrate and measure a protocol for treatment intervention and prevention of delinquency in Chicago neighbourhoods with high youth crime. The essence of their model is that delinquency is a normal part of slum life and that the vast majority of crimes are committed with other males in a group or gang. They maintain that gang members are trained by their peers to become offenders and that this is a predictable course of events in a slum neighbourhood.

Tannenbaum (1939) adds to Thrasher's model by including factors external to the gang/slum that facilitate group cohesion and explain the process of "escalation" in the seriousness of gang member's crimes; in effect, they "graduate" from less to more serious criminal activity. The gang becomes more cohesive as it encounters reaction from the larger community. According to Tannenbaum, 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".

Tannenbaum frames the problem of gangs as a clash between two perspectives and value bases, those of the youth and those of the broader community. Young people see their activity as interest, fun, excitement, and mischief. The community sees it as crime in need of punishment and control. Tannenbaum feels that gang involvement is preferred by members not because it is appealing in and of itself, but because the pressures and motivation towards more socially acceptable behaviour are less attractive or weak.

Whyte (1955) views gang formation as a response to poverty and a lack of opportunity. He feels the "corner gang" forms to aid and assist individual members. Mutual support, childhood connections, and living in close proximity make this type of gang cohesive and give its members a feeling of solidarity.

Lemert (1951), an early "labelling theorist", distinguishes between two types of deviance, "primary" and "secondary". Primary deviance is basically the commission of any act that is outside societal norms but has not been labelled by the person, or the actor has not been caught and labelled by an authority of the state or other outside person. Secondary deviance applies to those behaviours that are "found out", i.e., when the person self-labels the act as deviant or others exercise formal legal actions or other punishments and penalties. Secondary deviance 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 (see also Becker, 1963; and Erikson, 1964).

Cohen (1955) "strain theory", Merton (1957) "anomie theory", Cloward and Ohlin (1960) "differential association theory" and Spergel (1964) all focus on class and make the claim that gangs grow out of from frustration trying to achieve the status and material goals of wider society or arise as a reaction to mainstream urban culture. Gang members accept the material goals of their society but use non-sanctioned or illegal means to attain those goals.

Cohen talks about a "subculture of delinquency". In his view, lower class youth are exposed to middle class values and aspirations but do not have the means to achieve them. In rebelling against middle class norms, a delinquent subculture is set up in opposition. Their dislocation in society results in frustration which leads to the development of gangs and an organized and legitimized structure for dealing with their frustration.

Cloward and Ohlin's "differential opportunity" model differs from the others in the claim that class alone cannot predict delinquency. Lower class youth need an opportunity to access, or live in a neighbourhood with, an established gang or criminal subculture. They see gang formation as a "nonconformist alternative" for alienated youths. Gang members support each other and help solve shared problems or frustrations.

Merton (1957) talks about striving towards success as a national (American) goal, something to be obtained through hard work, saving money, and education. According to Merton, people who do not have access to legitimate means to achieve this goal choose non-sanctioned means, sometimes crime.

Jeffery (1959) offers a theory of "social alienation". In essence, he views the rise of crime as a result of the breakdown of social cohesion in small, interdependent communities and a product of urbanization where there is anomie, anonymity, and isolation. People become criminal when they have few or no satisfying interpersonal relationships with others.

Haskel (1961) offers a "reference group theory". The gang member, a youth, experiences himself as inferior to the adults in his family in terms of income earnings, prestige, and job skills. These feelings of inferiority along with a lack of social competence push the youth toward the street and peers who feel the same way. Peers

validate the youth's experiences and give him/her opportunities to win approval and recognition.

Reckless (1961) writes about a "containment theory" which suggests there is 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.

Strodbeck and Short (1964) write about the role of "chance" in gang related activity. They claim that perhaps some gang or group behaviour is motivated less by criminal profit and more by a need to take risks. When the risk-taking behaviour results in police and court involvement, usually an unintended consequence, it should be distinguished from other types of willful criminal gang activity.

Matza's (1964) "drift theory" attributes more agency or individual choice to delinquent youth. His theory offers a "soft determinism" and suggests that a person is neither totally free nor totally controlled by his society. Matza maintains that most delinquent youth drift in and out of crime in a directionless path but remain a part of larger society. He feels that youth learn to be delinquent from others but are not compelled towards crime or to be committed to delinquent norms.

Bandura (1977) suggests that behaviour is learned by observing others, i.e., "social learning". Perceptions of reward or punishment for the observed actor reinforce, maintain, or extinguish behaviours. Thus, delinquent youth learn to be delinquent when they observe someone benefitting from illegal behaviour.

Hirschi's (1969) "social bond theory" suggests that all humans are anti-social by nature and that everyone is capable of committing delinquent acts. He feels that delinquency is neither learned nor follows from having insufficient means to achieve material gains. Instead, Hirschi maintains that delinquent behaviour arises in the absence of values or beliefs discouraging it from arising and from poor social attachments. In essence, people will not conform to the predominant social values if they have not learned to do so through reinforcement and attachment to the values of their non-offending significant others. Without these bonds and reinforcements, youth are more likely to commit deviant or delinquent acts.

Sutherland and Cressy's (1970) "differential association theory" suggests that youth become delinquent and learn and develop their values, criminal behaviours, and beliefs from interaction with others in an intimate and small group. They feel class is not the essential issue and that the motivation to commit crimes does not come from the need to pursue status or material gain per se but rather from the fact that the person possesses more definitions of actions favorable to violation of the law than towards compliance with the law.

Quinney (1974) offers a radical theory which explains crime as the result of class struggle and the marginalization of youth. He feels that the motivation toward crime comes from perceived inequities in the distribution of a nation's wealth and the lack of power of youth. The state and those who control capital have a vested interest in maintaining the existing social and economic order through law. Gang activity is how young people attempt to escape from this economic bondage.

Tomson and Fielder (1975) believe that gangs give members an identity and provide social activity, friendships, material benefits, and a sense of belonging. They also feel that youth in gangs accept the dominant culture's material goals but use aggression to obtain these goals. 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 (Mathews, 1989; and England, 1967).

Other theorists offer positivistic or "medical models" and suggest there are predisposed "born criminals" (Ferri, 1901) with discernible body types and temperaments (Sheldon, 1949) or genetic and hormonal predispositions towards aggression in males, i.e., those with an extra "Y" chromosome.

Some studies in social psychology suggest that people in groups take their cues for behaviour from others (Darley & Latanne, 1968). For example, all members of a gang/group involved in a "swarming" would take their cue to get involved from others around them. If there is laughter and no obvious concern on the faces of others for the victim or the criminal nature of the attack, members will tend to become involved. When a gang/group commits an offence responsibility can be divided proportionally among the number of people present, significantly watering down personal accountability (Latanne & Darley, 1968).

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 (Berkowitz & LePage, 1967). Also, the presence and influence of peers, especially among younger adolescents, can arouse some young people to become involved in behaviours they would not engage in alone. Peer pressure and the diffusion of responsibility may account for the alarming number of gang/group sexual assaults that occur in high schools in Metro Toronto (Mathews & Stermac, 1989).

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. The biological, psychological, social, situational, and family influences discussed in the literature provide us with pieces of a puzzle that in various combinations can help shed light on why young people become involved in gangs/groups and deviant or criminal activity. 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 is deterministic in its theoretical orientation; literally, poverty or some other "pathology" in the individual *causes* him/her to become deviant. There is little appreciation in this view for interaction effects between individuals and their society, individuals and social institutions, or the vulnerability factors that put young people at risk of becoming involved in gangs/groups. A deterministic view focused on poverty cannot account for middle class youth involvement in gang/group activity or explain why *all* persons living in poverty do not become criminals.

Almost all the research is American and focuses on lower class youth living in poverty. However, according to police, school officials, and social workers most of the gang-related activity in cities in southern Ontario involves middle class youth - as victims and perpetrators. The majority of these gang/group members come from intact families, and have access to material comforts, career pathways, part-time jobs, and other supports. Also, writers who feel that class conflict and poverty are prime motivators driving gang/group activity would have difficulty justifying the paltry take of most swarmings - a single jacket, pair of boots, or lunch money.

However, despite the fact that most of the research is American, it is still useful in helping us understand our own situation and may even provide a glimpse into our future. Many social trends that start in the U.S. eventually move north. If we can learn from the mistakes and experiences of many American cities, we may be able to start planning prevention efforts early and avoid some of the serious youth gang problems they are now facing.

A recent Canadian study views street gangs as a subcategory of "street youth". The two axis model developed in the study locates street gangs on a continuum of gradually escalating levels of commitment to crime while on the street or in the street community (Brannigan and Caputo, 1993). The model also identifies time spent on the street as a factor influencing a young person's decision to become involved in illegal activities, a view supported by other Canadian research (Mathews, 1989).

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. There is great heterogeneity both within and between Toronto's youth gangs/groups (Mathews, 1990b). 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.

Little attention is paid to the wide developmental differences between young, middle and older teens. The social pressures and motivation to join a gang/group and participate in illegal activity will almost certainly vary according to a young person's level of maturity. For example, peer pressure typically has a greater influence on younger teens.

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.

There is growing debate about the potential role of the media in stimulating youth to commit violent acts and in "creating" the gang/group phenomenon. Commercial and cable television, films, adolescent consumer culture, rock videos, and popular music all offer a high-powered and overwhelming "neural diet" of gratuitous violence, dehumanized sex, murder, rape, and greed. Few teens possess the media literacy and critical thinking skills they need to help sort through these messages. It should come as no surprise that vulnerable young people, desensitized to the feelings of others after a lifetime of exposure to violence as entertainment on television programs and in films, act out in an aggressive and violent manner. It really is more of a surprise that a larger number of young people are *not* involved in such criminal and other illegal activities.

Above all, we need to be careful not to judge all young people based on the violent and criminal actions of a few. With all the media attention being given to teens involved in gang/group activities, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that most young people are concerned, law-abiding citizens. Unnecessary panic caused by media-created and erroneous impressions of "rampant" youth violence can make many adults "youthphobic". Youthphobia, or fear of youth, either as individuals or in groups, has led to the murder of innocent or mischievous teenagers in the United States, when panicking adults misunderstood their actions and reached for their guns before asking questions.

What is most conspicuous by its absence in the literature is the perspective of the young people themselves. If we are to move closer to a more comprehensive understanding of the youth gang/group phenomenon it is essential to solicit the views of young people involved. Their experientially based "expert" knowledge will provide us with an "everyday understanding of problems" (Furnham, 1988) and furnish us with insights that will contribute in important ways to making intervention and prevention more relevant for youth. Any comprehensive response strategies developed to address youth gangs/groups and youth violence that are not pro-youth and do not include the voices and input of youth will likely fail (Mathews, 1992).

In consideration of the above, *Youth Gangs on Youth Gangs* was undertaken to provide young people with an opportunity to add their voices to the discourse on the phenomenon. 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. 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. Also, it is important to keep in mind that the voices of children under the age of 12 and developmentally delayed youth are not included in the sample and thus their stories remain untold.

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.

Study Objectives

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 Canadian society.
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 exploratory and descriptive, 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.

Use of a control group consisting of youth not involved in youth gangs/groups was proposed in a revised design of the study but, for financial reasons, was not possible to include at this time.

Self-reports in the form of responses to interview questions are of course open to challenge with respect to veracity, exaggeration, and impression management. However, the candidness of responses and the richness and detail provided in virtually all interviews suggests youth participants were sincere in their desire to be honest and help government and youth service providers understand youth gangs/groups and find ways to support and assist other young people involved. 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.

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 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.

Study Participants

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. Because of the seriousness of some of the crimes committed, the greatest difficulty in conducting the study was finding former or present youth gang/group members who would be willing to speak candidly about their experiences. Trust is always a major issue in the lives of these young people and so it was necessary to approach youth participants through an intermediary, an adult they knew and who could explain the intention of the study and encourage them to participate. The youth were told that their participation in the research would be of assistance to other young people in similar difficulties.

The young people in the study were located through school administrators, social workers, and police officers. Youth participants either self-identified or were identified by others as belonging to a gang/group. Most had criminal convictions and six had spent

time in custody. Since the completion of the interviews, two young people have returned to custody on new charges.

The youth participants cannot be considered a random or representative sample of all youth gang/group members or typical of any particular gang/group type, a situation which limits the generalizability of the study findings. They do, however, 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. One youth was the former founder and leader of a Skinhead group.

A total of 12 youth, 11 males, one female, ranging in age from 14 to 21 were interviewed. The age breakdown was as follows: two were 14 years old, one was 15, two were 16, three were 17, one was 18, two were 19, and one was 21. Youth participants had to be current or former gang/group members while young offenders. Their length of involvement in gangs/groups ranged from one to seven years.

Youth participants were given an explanation of the study's purpose. All were guaranteed anonymity and informed about the limits of confidentiality; if they disclosed abuse of a minor or mentioned they had committed or were planning to commit a capital crime or serious injury against a named person. They were also informed of their right to refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. They were asked for permission to tape the interviews. None refused. No participants refused to answer any questions.

Interviews with the young people took place in a wide variety of settings: a shopping mall food court, police station, parents' homes, a school nurse's office, a school guidance office, a social work agency, a principal's office, and an open custody facility for young offenders. Interviews ranged in length of time from 45 to 90 minutes.

Adult Interviews. Interviews with adult key informants (seven police officers, seven school officials, and three social workers), two parents of gang/group members, and two adult victims were conducted in private homes, police stations, school offices, social work agencies, and a secure custody facility. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two and a half hours. 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. In order to broaden the study's perspective interviews were conducted with adult victims of youth gangs/groups.

Adult interviewees were given an explanation of the purpose of the study and guaranteed anonymity. Participants were informed of their right to refuse to answer any question or to stop the interview at any time. Non refused. Interviews were taped and transcribed.

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

Since our attempts to find appropriate responses or solutions will depend heavily on the definitions we use, it is important to be as inclusive as possible in formulating our definitions and concepts for analysis. However, given the complexity and fluid nature of youth gangs/groups and youth violence as it exists today in Canada, any simple definitions should be accepted with caution.

There are essentially three key terms or concepts that will be used in the study that have imprecise definitions: (1) "gang" or "gang/group", (2) "youth", and (3) "gang/group activity". 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 eight (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. However, an upper age limit of 21 years was used for purposes of the study.

The term "gang/group activity" is used to refer to behaviour considered illegal under the *Criminal Code*. A case could be made for extending the term to apply to anti-social acts, intimidation, sexual harassment, and gestures, jokes, or comments that could reasonably be expected to cause harm or arouse fear in another person. Also, because of the stereotypes attached to the term "gang", *multiple perpetrator youth crime and violence*, might be a better term for use when discussing the gang/group phenomenon and gang/group activities.

CHAPTER 1

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF GANGS/GROUPS & YOUTH VIOLENCE

*"(We're) not a gang. We're friends with a name."
(Barry, 17)*

Perspectives on Youth Violence

The young people in the study were asked to provide their views on youth violence in Canadian society. Their responses reflect a range of opinion, though all see youth violence as a problem. Some see conflict and disagreement among youth as "natural", though not when it turns into a group assault on one victim. Others see it as an escalating problem likely to end in serious injury or even death for some young persons. Violent clashes can result from the most minor incident between youth. A look, perceived slight, name-calling, or accidentally bumping into someone in a school hallway can lead to serious conflict and injury. Fear and acceptance characterize most of the responses along with a sense that youth are being left to deal with the problem of violence themselves.

*If they don't fight for themselves nobody will. They can't rely on many people.
(Mary, 17)*

*They just think it to be cool. It's just the "in" thing. Everybody wants to get into a fight because it boosts their reputation, and if you get into a gang then that will make your reputation even higher. It depends. Youth violence is natural. You're going to have some disagreements, some fights. But, when it turns into a group sort of thing, when they start beating up on one person, that's when it starts getting dangerous.
(Joe, 14)*

*I know people that are like just waiting to shoot somebody, like dead. Like if you go out and do some guy in then it's like you're badder than he is because he's all punched out and whatever.
(Tim, 16)*

Is the Problem of Youth Gangs/Groups Serious?

Young peoples' comments concerning youth gangs/groups also reflect a range of opinion, though there is strong consensus that it is a serious problem. They express concern about the physical harm involvement can bring gang/group members. There is concern about the casual attitude some young people have towards gangs/groups and that it is an avenue to popularity. Some youth worry that gang/group membership or using violence has become status enhancing. Perhaps most significant is the expressed fear that youth gang/group violence is out of control and adults cannot control or limit it.

Oh yeah (it's serious) 'cause if another group threatens us or whatever and they threaten to get more buddies down and, oh yeah, they'll bring knives and guns sure. It's all about intimidation. You know, if the other group is tougher and...kind of like stronger. It's kind of like a macho thing too. If anybody does try to touch us we'll beat the shit out of them. If they try to use weapons or whatever we'll get bigger and stronger ones.

(Gary, 16)

It's easier to get involved with the gangs than probably it used to be. In Ontario, in Toronto...it's becoming a larger problem than it used to be. It's starting to get almost as bad as L.A. It's getting really scary that way.

(David, 19)

Youth Gangs/Groups in Schools

Much concern was expressed over the impact of youth gangs/groups and youth violence in schools. The presence of youth gangs/groups makes young people feel unsafe and seriously affects the learning environment. According to the young people schools fail to acknowledge or understand the emotional impact on students of observing or being aware of other youths' victimization.

Conflicts arising between youth gang/group members and originating outside the school or after school hours can continue into the classroom and hallways. Involvement in gangs/groups often starts with peer associations at school and can begin as early as grade one. Drug dealing, extortion, and intimidation of teachers and other students were all identified as gang/group activities that occur regularly in schools.

Violence is not limited to senior level high schools. Young people report that acts of violence perpetrated by older students can also be observed in the behaviours of children as young as six or seven years of age.

Yeah, they're becoming more of a problem. Nowadays, you're getting more and more cases of somebody walking up behind you and stabbing you in the back or shooting you just for whatever reason because Johnny walked down the wrong side of the street last night, "Oh, we've got to stab him." Like, it's definitely, definitely becoming more of a problem in high schools and in elementary schools.

(David, 19)

(They're a problem in) some schools. They can stop, literally stop, kids from learning, even make them miss time from school. Some of the gang members that were in schools, they can even discourage teachers (and prevent them from) teaching to their ability. (Teachers) don't take it to the Board but they should. If (gangs) know people are afraid of them they'll keep going and doing the same thing. If people don't stand up (to them) they'll just keep going on and on.

(Joe, 14)

It's actually bad now that I think about it, but it would depend on the school. Extortion is the biggest (problem). I know myself personally more than once I walked up to someone and punched them in the nose and took something of theirs. That's just how it is I guess. Why not just go and take whatever you want to take. That seems to be the attitude. If you want it just go out and take it. It's that simple. There's always drawbacks but if you want it there doesn't seem to be too much stopping you.
(Brad, 19)

Like if you've got a gang, a couple of kids that are involved in a gang in a school, it's very bad for the school, very detrimental for the school because they could definitely bring down the school in not just violent ways or in drug ways but also bringing down...the kids. A lot of the kids will backtalk to the teachers because they think they've got more authority over the teachers, just because they either have a knife in their pocket or that they're involved in the gang.
(David, 19)

That's where it mostly starts is in schools. A lot of the problems start in schools like right now six, seven, eight, the grade six, seven, and eight kids.
(Wayne, 18)

What is a Gang?

The youth identified a continuum of gangs/groups ranging from the loosely associated "group of friends" to the more hard core crime-focused "gang". One youth saw himself as being in a group of friends who, despite having a name and involvement in conflicts with other groups, and the law, did not see themselves as being in a "gang". Another saw herself in a "family" that took care of her. Some used the descriptor "group of friends" despite the fact that they committed crimes and carried weapons and used them in conflicts. Two youth felt that others outside the group of friends would use the label "gang" to describe them when they themselves did not.

The youth identified a single criteria for distinguishing a "group of friends" hanging out from a youth "gang", namely, involvement in illegal behaviour. The illegal activity could be planned or spontaneous. The minimum number of members required to constitute a gang or group appears to be three.

I think a gang is more or less a group of people that does crimes together, causes trouble together, and more or less goes out to look for trouble, to do wrong by other people. A group is a group of friends. A gang is a group of trouble.
(Steve, 17)

A group, I think, of the same race or a few races together that hang around together all the time, do things with each other, and if anybody has trouble we're all there. That's it.
(Gary, 16)

Like for myself, when I was in a gang, there was a lot of us. I really didn't see it as a gang. I saw it as a bunch of friends. In the eyes of society I guess people see it as a gang because whenever there is a whole bunch of young people joining together and doing crime or beating up on people and taking over territories and stuff like that the society calls that a gang. But most young people don't see it as a gang. They see it as friends.

(Wayne, 18)

CHAPTER 2

GETTING INVOLVED IN YOUTH GANGS/GROUPS

"Gangs cannot exist without the fear of others."

(Joe, 14)

Unintentional Gang/Group Formation - "Drift"

The formation of some gangs/groups can be quite unintentional resembling more a kind of "drift" than a planned development. It can be a reaction to challenges from other groups of youth who perceive the group as being a gang, a consciousness that evolves from a neighbourhood "gang culture" or other peoples' labelling, or a "club" of friends that turns serious when group members get into interpersonal difficulties with others.

We were just a couple of friends who all like to play basketball and football on occasion. We've been the best of friends for three years. We all just started wearing stuff (clothing items with an American university logo) and like it wasn't even the red, white, black uniform yet. It was just I had a hat, he had a jacket and what not and we were playing basketball. The police and other people labelled us a gang and then this other gang tried to pick a fight with us and that made us want to get them back and so it just started. It escalated from there.

(Bill, 21)

Sometimes it's just the area you live in, it's like a gang neighbourhood so everybody thinks they're in a gang, so everybody starts up gangs. Because like I knew all the people and they were like all my friends. A lot of them I have known since I was seven years old...and younger. It's just who I hung around with.

(Tim, 16)

We don't really think of (ourselves) as a gang. We originated last year. We hang out together. Any problems...we're together. One of my friends said, "We need a name." At first I thought it was a joke. I really treated it as a joke. Then when things started going wrong...people started to get to know us better and said, "Let's put these people to a test." They started poking at us and started trying to start fights with us. They kind of gave us an attitude. They kind of like said, "All right these guys have a name. They're a gang. Let's see what they can do."

(Barry, 17)

Intentional Gang/Group Formation

At other times gang/group formation can be planned and quite deliberate. Some organize to commit robberies, deal in drugs, sell stolen property, or procure and sell

weapons. A few of these types of youth gangs/groups go on to become highly organized adult crime-focused gangs.

There are also groups of young people that come together *ad hoc* to settle a score or defend a schoolmate and are often perceived by others to be a "gang" even though the "membership" disperses after their task is completed. These vigilante type configurations, though intentional and purposeful, form for a specific purpose then disband.

I used to be a Skinhead and Skinheads is totally different. I mean Skinheads is military. It's like you're not allowed to smoke, drink, do drugs, even though there are Skinheads who are into that. The real hard core White Power Neo-Nazi Skinheads don't drink. They don't do drugs. They keep themselves in shape in case there is a race war that they think is coming. Whereas these other gangs...that's just new era. That's like 90's, late 80's, that's totally different. They're into drugs. They're into drug dealing. They're into stuff that Skinheads would never see as right.
(Bill, 21)

The owner of the gang (I was in) was forty-five, fifty. (He) had the full intention to develop a gang and have younger people running (it) for him so that he could make money and profit off it. That was the intention of the gang that I was involved with.
(David, 19)

Protection and Safety

Many young people get involved in gangs/groups because of a perceived need for protection. Though schools in Canada remain relatively safe places it is evident from the interviews that young people possess a remarkable sense of fear for their personal safety while at school. A remarkable number of the young people interviewed in the study are small in stature. Some articulate specifically that their physical size and fear of being hurt by older or larger boys was a contributing factor in their decision to join a gang/group. The safety and protection provided by the gang/group meets very important wellness needs for these youth. The refuge provided by the gang/group also makes leaving much more difficult.

Well for me when I was 13 I was scared. I was a small boy. I was scared 'cause I was just about to go in the high school. When I did get into high school and stuff I was picked on because I was only live five foot (tall). I was like maybe 90 pounds at the most. So in grade ten...I joined the Skinhead group. Like I read a book about it and I was fascinated because the look is intimidating. To have a shaved head and tatoos and big boots and a flight jacket is intimidating. People look at you and they don't want to go near you. Even teachers were scared of us. I got thrown out of school like two years in a row for beating up the teacher, and it wasn't the same one. It was a supply teacher and stuff like that. It was cause he got so scared that he tried to kick me out of class and I told him where to go and he tried to grab me and pull me out of class. I didn't want him to touch me because it reminded me of when the bullies were touching me and it just made me snap again and I lost it and took it out on him. And that's how I got into the

gang. It was a security blanket for me. It made me feel good. It made me feel powerful too.

(Bill, 21)

People joining gangs and stuff like that...some people don't have a sense of personal security so some people might join a gang as a result of getting beat up by a group of people. Like I have known people like that just because they were jumped by a group of people a couple of times. You know, they felt...they had an anger inside. They joined the gang to get back although it's not really getting back. It's just getting that anger and frustration out.

(Wayne, 18)

Power and Control Through Intimidation

Most violence characterized by the expression "swarming" is directed against other youth. Young people at school or in the neighbourhood make easy and available targets. The material gain from these group assaults and robberies is secondary to the thrill of controlling the victim and ego boost of making him/her fearful. The feeling of power and control over another person is equated with the high of a drug, both of which can become addictive. Since most of these young people would not rob someone if they were on their own it is difficult to see their acts of power and control as anything other than expressions of powerlessness.

I mean if you see someone quivering at your feet it makes you like. "Yeah, I have power over this person." It's a head buzz. It's better than actually really getting high. Even though the guy might be six foot six and you're only five foot ten and you've got four of your friends (so) this guy is scared of you. I mean one on one you would never do that. It's a real big high. It makes you feel like you're untouchable. If somebody sees a pair of shoes that they want and they're in a gang, (they) and three of their friends will go up and take this kid's shoes just because the one guy wanted it. Even though he might be able to afford it, that's not the point. The point is the thrill of watching this person take off his shoes in front of you to give them to you because he is scared.

(Bill, 21)

I always used to like to live on the edge. I just like living on the edge. I like to do things to get an adrenaline rush. It made me feel good that I had power over (another guy) because I was involved in the gang. I could do what I wanted and I felt free to do it.

(David, 19)

Who is More Vulnerable to the Lure of Gangs/Groups?

The youth identified young people whom they felt were more vulnerable to the lure of gangs/groups. Young people living in poverty or in communities and neighbourhoods with a "gang culture", youth who had been previously abused or

neglected, youth who were failing or experiencing other school-related problems, and youth motivated by excessive material gain were all thought to be more vulnerable.

Those people (that) want to have the clothes that the rich people or the better off people have...will turn them into going out, stealing it, joining a gang possibly. Youth who have been abused are more likely to be in a gang...I mean abused sexually, physically, even mentally. I was abused mentally. I got yelled at all the time and...after a while it's too much. It's just too much. You can't handle it. If I wasn't mentally tortured...by my parents that way, I wouldn't know how to play with other people's minds as well as I (do). That's why I am a leader of most of the gangs I'm in because I know how to intimidate other people. If you've been physically abused you know how to physically abuse other people. You've been taught how to do it. If you have been sexually assaulted for your first 12 years of living you know exactly how to sexually assault other people and intimidate them in a way that they won't go to the police.

(Bill, 21)

Kids that have problems at home or have problems in school...younger people...from 11 to 13. Cause when they deliver drugs nobody suspects them.

(Mary, 17)

The way I see it the kids that would probably be more likely (to get involved with gangs) is (one) of two types. People who just want to be part of that lifestyle because they think it's attractive or people (who) just grew up around it and as far as they're concerned that's life. Like it's all one big package.

(Brad, 19)

Youth From Wealthy Families

Boredom and the desire for extravagant sensations lead some young people into gang/group involvement. Youth from wealthy families who would have no pressing or urgent need for material gain commit crimes in gangs/groups purely for the fun and excitement of it.

There are some rich gangs. Rich kids that (join) a gang, they make their own gang. They're not doing it to survive. They're only doing it because they want the thrill. They do it because they think it's cool. They think it's fun.

(Bill, 21)

Children from wealthy families. Some of them don't have anything to do with their lives. This is exciting and it's dangerous and (they) enjoy their success if they're not getting caught.

(Mary, 17)

Differences Between Males and Females

Girls are definitely a part of the youth gang/group phenomenon and they can be just as violent as the boys. The young people interviewed in the study had a wide range of opinion concerning male/female differences in terms of gang/group involvement. Some see girls using the gang/group to meet the same power and esteem needs as the boys.

Girls are often the instigators of gang/group fights. They will egg on their own gang's/group's male members to start a fight or provoke a conflict with a rival gang/group. Many gang/group fights start over conflicts between two girls and spread to include their boyfriends and other gang/group members. Girls are also used by gang/group members to carry weapons into nightclubs and quantities of drugs to be sold in the community.

I think girls get involved in gangs because they want to be popular. Like when I was a leader of (specific gang) my girlfriend went around and actually picked fights...because she thought she was so hot and popular because she was my girlfriend. (Girls get) an attitude because their boyfriend (has) a bad attitude and you know he (is) the leader of the gang or he (is) a member of a gang. So they could be bad mouthing people too because they know that their boyfriend would whatever, pull a gun, shoot the guy, whatever. They know they are protected, that they can do whatever they want and get away with it.
(Bill, 21)

A lot of girls they don't think the way they used to. They think a lot more like guys. Girls never used to fight but now they are always fighting each other, actually fistfighting and knifing each other.
(Wayne, 18)

Gangs/Groups as "Family"

The theme of gangs/groups as a "family" emerged often in interviews with the youth participants. However, there was also recognition that this family can be "dysfunctional" and over time even more dangerous to the young person than their original or biological family.

I was in a gang before I came here. I was 11 then. I ran away from home. I started using drugs, delivering them for some money so I can get something to eat. They took care of me. After that I ended up in a reform school for two years. When I got out I went there and met my boyfriend there and when I wanted to get out it was pretty dangerous. Another friend of mine wanted to get out of the gang and they killed him. When I came to Canada I was new here. I didn't know anyone. I went outside one day for a smoke and I met a couple of guys there and we started talking and they invited me to a party. Pretty soon I was in it again and it was good because I got kicked out (of home) a lot. (Being in a gang) I (knew) I had a place to stay and some money on the side and I can get something to eat. I learned how to survive. This was a good part of it.

Because being in a gang (is) very dangerous. You have to satisfy everyone there and if you (make) one mistake or they don't like something you said or something you did...I mean you are going to get it.
(Mary, 17)

Generally I think...they don't have anybody else. They do have a family but they don't feel comfortable with that family. They don't feel safe with that family. That or they don't have much money. They want to receive quick easy money and when you're in a gang...they call it a family...you're with your friends. You're safe with your friends.
(David, 19)

Youth Don't Really Know What They're Getting Into

There was overwhelming consensus among youth interviewed that they did not really appreciate what they were getting into when they became involved with a gang/group or crossed the line into serious criminal activity. Most often described was a perception of a "drift" into gradually escalating levels of serious crime.

Some people might be on the streets and they just want somebody to be with and they (don't) really know what they're really getting involved with. A person sort of gets involved with it and gets caught up in it and doesn't understand what's going on and the wheels are just turning too fast and they wind up involved with this hard core gang. They thought it was just like, "Oh buddy, buddy, chum, chum, let's go out and party. Let's do a couple lines of coke." Then the next day, "You know so and so down the street. He's involved with this gang. Well here is a gun. I want you to kill him." A lot of kids sometimes just don't know what they're getting involved with.
(David, 19)

Ever since I was a kid we grew up together, the whole bunch of us. As we got older we (didn't have very good) role models so as we got older even when we were 12, 13 years old we were already getting into crime and getting into fights and stuff. There were always people coming in and going, joining and leaving. But there was a group of us that always stuck together. I guess I didn't really see where I was going. I just thought I would hang around with my friends. I didn't really see myself getting into that much trouble.
(Wayne, 18)

Unemployment and Money as a Motivator

Several young people mentioned the lack of a job and a need to earn money as a motivator for committing crime with their gang/group associates.

I do crime for money. If there was a job I'd take it but there (aren't any). Money. The only reason. I love money. I love buying clothes. I love going to clubs and taking girls out. Just money.
(Danny, 15)

The young people that are involved (in gangs), most of the youths that are involved in violence and crime and stuff like that see it as a way of life. It's a way of making money. If you can't find a job or something you know that is one of the ways to make money.
(Wayne, 18)

Involvement of Youth Under 12 Years of Age

The involvement of youth under the age of 12 in youth gang/group activity has recently come to the attention of police and schools. Despite differing opinions among the youth interviewed in the study about the extent of minor involvement in the illegal activities of youth gangs/groups, it appears evident that it is a serious and growing problem.

Say (a gang) wanted to break into a house. We can send a guy in there that's just say about 12 years old or even eight. You tell him, "You go through that window there. You go upstairs and open the door, simple as that. You look around for walls, the windows, you see if there is any alarms around, any wires." You'd be surprised how (well) they know alarms. They know alarms because these guys train them and he opens the door and smack, boom you're in.
(Joe, 14)

(Young kids get involved) usually as runners, they call them runners or gophers. They would be...given drugs (to take from) point A to point B.
(David, 19)

There are a lot of kids who are homeless that are 11, 12 years old. They get into the gang for the protection and shelter and all that stuff. Their role would be like spying or if you send a ten year old kid into a store he's not going to look too threatening. He goes in and looks around to see if everything is all right and then he comes out and gives you the sign and then you go in and rob it.
(Wayne, 18)

Influence of the Media, Music, Videos

The study provided an opportunity for youth involved in youth gang/group activities, much of which involved violence, to add their own voices to the debate on the influence of the media on youth violence. Their remarks leave little doubt that they feel surrounded and disturbed by the widespread prevalence of graphically violent images. The young people see this violence as instructive, providing them with ideas and supporting anti-social attitudes and beliefs.

That's the way everything is made out to be like, all the music and stuff. Like you listen to music, any kind of music and they're always talking about...shooting people and it's sort of like an expectation sort of deal.
(Tim, 16)

One (reason why youth get involved in gangs) is really important (and that is) the kind of society that we live in, the kind of media that goes on. Like when people watch movies about gangs and stuff. Although it's showing the bad side of the thing people (like) looking at it and they like that living on the edge of life, especially teenagers because they're looking for...when you are a teenager you think you can take on anything. Like when you see a movie...you see a whole bunch of people in a gang and they do all of this stuff and say five of them get caught and they go to jail but they never show you what goes on in jail. They are all tough and looking bad and they don't show you what went on. They don't show you what went on during those five years. You know, the guy goes in and two minutes later he is out and people don't see what goes on.
(Wayne, 18)

I think it will get worse with all the shows too on TV. Everybody looks up to TV. Everybody watches TV six to maybe eight hours a day so I would say with all the cop movies and all those gangs that you see on TV, mobsters and you just want to be like that. Like it's exciting to watch and everything like that but I don't know I guess little kids or kids my age take that a little too far.
(Gary, 16)

Youth Perceptions of Recent Change in Youth Gangs/Groups and Violence

There has been much debate recently about whether the youth gang/group phenomenon and youth violence is truly increasing in terms of actual numbers or if it is just being reported more. This circular argument takes no note of the fact that, according to the young people, we are not coping with the level of violence we already have.

Young people in the study feel that there has been a noticeable change in youth gang/group activity and youth violence in recent years. They identify the presence of and easy access to guns and the use of all kinds of weapons in interpersonal and gang/group conflicts as a major part of the shift.

It ain't like before, a couple of years ago. If everybody went out and got into a scrap there was a fist fight and that was it, you know, maybe some baseball bats. Now it's rarely ever a fist fight (there are more weapons now). Thirty years ago and all that there wasn't as many shootings and stabbings as there is today. More and more people are doing it and a lot of people aren't paying attention. They know what's going on but they don't want to believe what's going on.
(Tim, 16)

There's probably more murders now. There's easier access to guns. A lot of kids nowadays just don't care. They really don't. Drug dealing, large drug dealing. The drugs are too easy to get and the thing that's bad about it is that you don't really know what you're getting.
(Bill, 21)

Gangs have been around for a long time, right? They had fights and everyone would meet in a baseball field and everyone would have bats and stuff. It's not like that anymore. There is a lot more guns now. If you don't have a gun in your gang then people look down on you. Nowadays, everybody doesn't come together and go to the other people's area and start fighting. Now you sit in the car and go and do a drive-by or something.

(Wayne, 18)

CHAPTER 3

YOUTH GANG/GROUP ACTIVITIES

"If I wanted a gun today I could go get one. I could walk in through the school and find a gun. I may not get it today but I'd have it tomorrow."

(Steve, 17)

Illegal Activities

The activities of youth gangs/groups are as varied as their types and range from petty theft to robbery, assault, and, though rare, murder. The more serious illegal activities appear to be primarily the domain of more organized gangs/groups though a "group of friends" can cross the line and move from mischief to serious crimes of violence and property offences. The majority of offences appear to be property offences.

You know, like one guy (in the gang) sells hash, one guy sells weed, one guy sells crack...one guy just breaks into cars. Like usually a lot of stuff goes on.

(Tim, 16)

It depends on the people who are in it. Murders...armed robberies...muggings, shooting. Other gangs are into petty theft, you know rolling kids for shoes...hats, jackets. Some gangs are just straight into drug dealing. Thirty per cent of the gangs are probably into the heavy stuff. Those are the really hard core, you know, "We don't care if we die by a cop's bullet. We don't care if we're in jail for life. We're right into this."

(Bill, 21)

Stealing cars, breaking into houses. One guy burned down this new house. Gang fights...shoot outs...breaking into stores.

(Joe, 14)

Robberies, B&E's, car thefts...(selling) drugs. A lot of people in my area want to do drive-by's. They've got the guns. They've got the power. They've got the cars.

(Danny, 15)

Drugs for sure, even in home room I see some guys passing weed or whatever you want to buy even in home room classes. Hash, weed, yeah in home room. It's so easy to do in class. Why wait if you can get it right there and now.

(Gary, 16)

Weapons

The presence of weapons, and indeed an increase in the use of weapons, has become a more predominant feature of youth gang/group conflict in recent years according to the youth interviewed. They believe that possibly a majority of all young

people in school carry some form of weapon with them, typically a pocket knife. Knives appear to be the weapon of choice because they are easy to conceal and obtain. The reason most young people carry knives is out of a perceived need to protect themselves in case they are threatened or assaulted by other youth or gangs/groups.

Weapons used range from crude homemade knives fashioned from "exacto knife" blades to billiard balls in a sock, automatic weapons, and explosives. Guns are apparently easy to obtain and as a weapon carry the greatest status. Guns can be purchased illegally "on spec" from underground local suppliers, though most appear to come from parents' or friends' homes and burglaries. There appears to be a strong connection between the rise in the sale of drugs, particularly crack and cocaine, and the presence of high-powered guns and automatic weapons.

Find out who's dad goes out hunting. You find some kid who is not part of the gang who wishes to be part of the gang or looks up to you or you know from class, go to his house, pretend like you are going to do homework for him (then) pocket a gun. Throw a rifle out the back window or whatever from the basement. One of your friends will run by and pick it up. You can buy bullets at Canadian Tire, you can buy (them) just about anywhere.
(Bill, 21)

A lot of young people my age carry guns and they'll use them too. Nine out of ten people carry knives with them you know, and if not knives some other sort of weaponry. Guns (are) cheap and easy to get.
(Tim, 16)

Weapons right down from (an) "Uzi" to a finger nail file and (everything) in between. You've got guns, knives, swords, smoke bombs, chains, bicycle chains, lead pipes, wires, pool balls, shot put balls, whips.
(Joe, 14)

Drugs

Drugs were not a major part of the youth gang/group phenomenon when it first emerged in its present manifestation in the late 1980's. However, this appears to have changed over the past several years. The social consumption of drugs, theft and robbery to obtain money to buy drugs, and dealing drugs for profit are becoming a central feature of much gang/group activity. A lot of this drug activity appears to be centred in and around schools.

The emergence of the trade in crack cocaine, especially in Toronto, has apparently brought with it an increase in the use of guns, lethal violence, and fights over "territory".

The weed business and the hash business that's like used to be my areas main thing. Now the kids want to sell crack. A lot of kids want to do armed robberies now

'cause they know that they're just (going to get) away with it. Most of them haven't even been charged before so if they do an armed robbery they're going to be let go. Most of my friends that I do crime with do it for the rush or do it to buy drugs, money for drugs, to sell drugs.

(Danny, 15)

How Gang/Group Members See Their Illegal Activities

It is common for gang/group members to see their illegal activities only in terms of material gain. The fact that it is illegal is really not a consideration nor a sufficient deterrent. After some time of being involved in a gang/group or living in a community or neighbourhood with a "gang culture", crime just becomes part of the lifestyle, an occupation or livelihood. Under these circumstances individual members rarely have an opportunity to question their behaviour since neighbourhood gang/group norms are strong and there is a great deal of pressure to conform. A youth risks ostracism and sometimes physical harm for challenging the status quo.

Involvement in illegal activity meets a number of needs for gang/group members. Some commit crimes as a way to meet immediate survival needs for food and to prove they can take care of themselves. Others see it as a means to achieve the good life and meet status needs such as the desire to have fashionable clothes, jewellery, and obtain prestige among peers. Receiving pleasure from the "spoils" of crime, recognition from peers, and affirmation of one's criminal skills is powerfully reinforcing.

(It's) an everyday part of life. Some of my friends, you know, they're only like 16, 17, but if they don't wake up in the morning and steal something then they don't eat. Like that's how it is. (They also) like to get clothes and stuff. Everybody wants to have all sorts of jewellery and stuff.

(Tim, 16)

If they didn't get busted or anything...they see it as a victory. If they can take care of themselves they see it as a victory.

(Mary, 17)

As much as it might not be worth it for (a) particular person because they're always in and out of jail...when they're out they've got new stuff and good stuff. It's just attractive. You get the best looking girlfriends and the whole shebang. It's like your job if you know what I mean. Your play is hanging out with the boys and partying and drinking beer, and your job when you're not doing that is crime, you know, 'cause everybody wants to have money. You're job is crime.

(Brad, 19)

It's...a way of making money. I can make more money in two days than people make in two months.

(Wayne, 18)

Involvement in Illegal Gang/Group Activity is Fun

One of the most worrisome aspects of gang/group involvement, and one of the most difficult for adults and victims to understand, is the excitement that can come with involvement in criminal behaviour, the elation of "getting away with it", and the excitement over breaking social taboos. This aspect of fun presents a serious challenge to youth-serving professionals to address programmatically because it is consistent with adolescent developmental needs, specifically the need to seek adventure and novel sensations and situations, limit-test, and challenge authority.

They think of it as fun, something exciting to do. Like it's an adrenaline rush. Like it's purely adrenaline for me at least, somewhat like a natural high. It's like a drug and when I used to do things illegal it used to make me feel like powerful, full of adrenaline. It was just fun to do. It was just so much fun to do that I would get off on it basically.

(David, 19)

It's a way (to have) fun. I had fun. I had a lot of fun. It's a way of living on the edge, having the thrill of getting away with a crime.

(Wayne, 18)

It's a way of escape. It's a new experience and kids are naturally curious about many things. The problem is how to get out (once you're in).

(Mary, 17)

Fear of Getting Caught Is No Deterrent

A majority of the young people in the study considered the risk of being caught, though it was not a deterrent. A few never really considered that being caught was even a possibility. Either way the consequences of being apprehended didn't actually sink in until it was too late. For those young people who felt they had nothing to lose, getting into trouble with the law was an expected but irrelevant consideration.

I didn't even think about (getting into trouble with the law). That aspect wasn't even in my brain at all. It never crossed my mind until it happened.

(Bill, 21)

(It's) just living on the edge. Basically...the less you have in (life)...the less you think about (consequences)...the more (committed) you will be (to) the gang because you really don't care if you go to jail or not. You're not cautious about this.

(Joe, 14)

It was just fun and making money. I never really saw myself crossing the line. It was just the way life was for me. It went on for a long time. I don't know why I was never really caught by the cops until I was about 16 years old.

(Wayne, 18)

Inter-Racial Gang/Group Conflict

The opinion of young people varied on this question, but there was a majority view that inter-racial conflict is becoming a significant part of the youth gang/group phenomenon. This is something that appears to have changed remarkably over the past few years.

However, rooted in young peoples' responses was an awareness that race may not be the central issue in many gang/group conflicts. Inter-racial gang/group conflict often starts with a perceived slight, stare, bump in the hall, or a petty misunderstanding between two individuals. When those individuals gather their friends together to settle the score the clash has the appearance of an inter-racial gang conflict.

Nonetheless, there are indeed race-based conflicts that can be most easily observed in the clashes between minority youth and White Supremacist Skinheads. There is also inter-race conflict between, for example, Black and Asian youth.

Sometimes it's racial sometimes it's not....maybe 30%...I don't think it's that high. Like generally it's for other reasons.
(David, 19)

(Racial tensions are) not really (a part of most gang conflicts)...I'm speaking from experience. The gangs that I know of they...they're Black, Black on Black and when they fight each other it's mostly for like territory. They want their own territory.
(Joe, 14)

Racism is quite a huge thing and it's building even more in all the schools. It was pretty bad around here for a while. I think it's starting to cool down a bit.
(Barry, 17)

Gangs/Groups that Other Gangs/Groups are Afraid Of

These gangs are characterized by their size in terms of numbers, the physical size of members, their access to and use of powerful weapons like automatic guns and explosives, a total disregard for the law, their use of violence, and the fact that they are involved in dealing large quantities of hard drugs such as cocaine, crack, and heroin.

These guys are into, you know, 12 kilos of coke type of thing. They're shipping hardware, military guns and stuff like that.
(Bill, 21)

Basically having weapons, the accessibility to the guns and knives and all that.
(David, 19)

It would come down to...two basic things, numbers and weapons.
(Brad, 19)

Opinions About the Young Offenders Act

Some young people feel the Y.O.A. is beneficial for them, helping them to acknowledge their criminal behaviour and giving them an opportunity to turn their lives around. The majority view is that the Y.O.A. is too lenient on first-time offenders and on those who commit violent offences involving the use of weapons.

It is apparent from the interviews that the young people have some erroneous impressions about the Young Offenders Act. Some are aware of the legal process for young offenders because of their experiences with the legal system. However, none possess a real knowledge of the legislation or an understanding of the spirit of its intention. Some feel the Y.O.A. will not benefit young people committed to a lifestyle of crime because they will exploit certain provisions. A few argue for making all young people more aware of the Y.O.A. so they might avoid the consequences of getting into trouble with the law.

Like some people I wouldn't care if I killed them 'cause like I get charged as a young offender and I will be in and out like that (snaps fingers). I'll do like maybe four years. Jail is a joke. A lot of people have that attitude, you know, well I'm young (so) if I rob a bank I'll get like 50 grand, I'll do maybe two years. And people think well that's all right because I couldn't make 50 grand in two years. Like the Young Offenders Act is like nothing. Everybody knows it's a joke. Like being a young offender the only thing that would really suck if you did a robbery and got caught is if you didn't stash the cash.

(Tim, 16)

No one understands what jail is about unless you've been there. When I got out of jail everyone said, "Oh wow, hey, how are you doing?" They thought it was cool that I went to jail so they thought they would be cool and try and hang around me. If they understood what the Young Offenders Act was about maybe they would understand some of the charges. There's a lot of things I don't understand about the legal system. A 14-year old kid would know even less than I would and that's not enough to know.

(Barry, 17)

I don't think (most kids) actually know the (Y.O.A.) itself but I think they have an impression. Most kids know that if they're going to get caught for a crime that generally they're not going to be punished (and) if they do get punished it's not going to be that harsh. It's not going to be that harsh because...they're under the age of eighteen. In the gangs generally the age range would be between 18 and under all the way down to, I think our youngest was ten, nine...sometimes maybe a little bit younger.

(David, 19)

When you look at the Young Offenders Act in a way it's really good because it gives you a second chance. In another way there are the kind of young people who have their mind set ...about how they are going to (live) their life. They know they are going to be in the gang forever. They know they are going to do crime until they die and the

Young Offenders Act is not really helping those people. Just three or five years for killing somebody, you're just going to think well I will do my time and then get out and do it again because it doesn't seem like a long time for murder. It was really good for me because I didn't need that much of a punishment to change my mind about how my life was going, but a lot of people need (more serious) punishment.
(Wayne, 18)

How Serious Youth Gang/Group Activity Can Get

Few adults or other young people understand just how dangerous involvement in youth gangs/groups can be. Young people start off generally naive about the potential risks involved in gang/group activity and typically lack the cognitive skills and sophistication to recognize the peer, situational, or other factors that can influence their behaviour. Since many gangs/groups "drift" into escalating levels of crime or violence, the gradual increments are not serious enough to recognize until it is too late.

I came about an inch and a half from death (shows slash mark across head and face). This was a blind swing by this guy and it could have been my throat. He tried to have me killed at a dance a little while later.
(Brad, 19)

I know why I got shot. I got shot because of a knife fight that happened in the park earlier. We were walking through the park at the wrong time. Ever since I got shot you know like...I never had no problems with nobody really before. I would go anywhere I wanted and pretty well do anything I want and like before everything was just a fair fight. Then I realized it's come down to life or death sometimes.
(Tim, 16)

Leaving A Gang/Group

For some young people the process of leaving a gang/group can be as simple as not showing up anymore. For others it can be an ordeal and involve attempts on their lives and threats to their families. Either way it is typically viewed as a difficult process. Even when the young person does not receive threats or actual beatings, the process of leaving usually means abandoning a circle of friends and acquaintances who have supplied social and emotional support, friendship, and good times often in difficult personal periods of the youth's life.

Many have been friends with their gang/group associates for a long time and find it difficult to break the emotional connection. The gang/group also provides structure and order for some youth whose lives are chaotic and out of control. Exiting the gang/group would leave these youth extremely vulnerable and ungrounded.

I was constantly worried that somebody...might get to me...or another gang might come after us. I knew what it was like when I was in it so when I tried to get out of it I was afraid of that. I was scared to death when I got out. (When I left the gang) I had

people driving by the house firing shotguns in the air, obscene phone calls in the middle of the night. (I was threatened with, "If you say anything to anybody we're going to kill you and we're going to kill your family."
(David, 19)

(A young person gets out of a gang) only if he is dead or very, very lucky...or if he goes to a different country. I'm not that afraid now...as I was six months after I left the gang or during when I was in the gang. People I know (outside the gang) are somewhat more normal. It's emotionally very hard to get out and be released from the crowd that you were in because if you feel low or you don't have anywhere to stay or if you are broke...I mean I start wondering whether to go back. Sometimes you need some kind of protection and you don't have anywhere to go.
(Mary, 17)

It's really hard (to leave). Because when you're in a gang those are the people you see all the time. You spend all your time with those people and once you have been with a group of people for so long it's really hard to leave. You have to become a totally different person to leave that group. You have to totally change your mind about your way of life. It's really hard.
(Wayne, 18)

The Personal Consequences of Youth Gang/Group Involvement

Most young people interviewed in the study expressed regret and sometimes great sadness about how their personal lives had changed as a result of their involvement in gangs/groups and criminal behaviour.

I stick out now. People look at me and they know who I am. Police still think I'm part of (a gang). (I'm) looked upon differently. Say I was standing there and there was a robbery and some other kids who pulled the robbery (but) who never had a criminal record before (were) standing there too, the police would come up and question me first. (The police) know that I've been in trouble and they know the people I used to hang around with. It's not worth it.
(Bill, 21)

It's very hard to trust people after (you've been in a gang). I mean you trusted so much you just don't know who to trust anymore and it can be very scary at times because you feel alone. You don't have anyone to trust but (yourself) so you get drunk or something.
(Mary, 17)

I've learned a lot about myself and people around me and self-respect for myself and others and to treat other people like a human being and not as a piece of meat...you could go just beat up. I never thought about other people as having feelings. I just thought of another person as a thing or an object...we could go up (to) and beat the crap out of...not even thinking about it and not thinking about that person hurting or suffering

from it. I've just learned about life in general and realized what it's all about and it's not about gangs and money and power and violence. It's about life and living it and enjoying it and not being worried about things all the time.
(David, 19)

I just reached a point where I just said, "You know, this is my life...crime and fights and all that." Once it got brought to the extreme (of nearly being killed) that's the final thing, when you get into having to kill people or have them kill you. You know it doesn't go any further than that. I just took a look at it and said, "Is it worth (it)? Do I want to sacrifice the next 25 years of my life over this meathead. The guy is scum and somebody else will probably kill him in the next couple of years anyway, so do I want to sacrifice my life...over this guy?" If someone screws it to you you have to screw them back. But it just got to the point where I just said, "No. I'm sick of it. I can't do it no more. I'm sick of it man."
(Brad, 19)

CHAPTER 4

HOW TO RESPOND: SOME SUGGESTIONS FROM YOUTH GANG/GROUP MEMBERS

"The perfect time to get out is the first time you get scared or charged. It's the best way."
(Bill, 21)

Young people were asked to share their thoughts and feelings about how we as a society should respond to the phenomenon of youth gangs/groups. Their responses are characterized by a strong need to feel valued, respected, and connected to schools, families, and communities. Permeating the responses is a desire for real relationships with trusted adults and peers.

Suppressing Gangs/Groups and Prohibiting Gang/Group Formation

Young peoples' responses to questions about prohibiting or suppressing youth gangs/groups or youth violence reflect both pessimism and optimism. Virtually all youth feel we need to try because the situation is becoming quite serious in their opinion. However, most doubt it is possible to prevent youth gangs/groups from forming or eliminate them. One youth feels that we should not do anything as young people will eventually just grow out of it.

It's not something that can be stopped. It's going to take a long time. It can't be stopped right now.
(Wayne, 18)

I think that groups or gangs are like at one time or another they're just going to split up and go their own way and they're going to go on with their lives. It's like a pit stop in life. I don't think it should be stopped. I think it's a very positive thing but there are also groups where it's not very positive, where they're pushing people into hard core drugs and crack and heroin.
(Steve, 17)

(Gangs) should be stopped in any possible way. The situation is bad. Too many kids are getting killed. Too many are killing themselves just so they'd be out.
(Mary, 17)

Police

Young people in youth gangs/groups, especially those involved in criminal activity, inevitably come into contact with the police. For most this contact brings an abrupt end to their intense and exciting lifestyles, and to much of their freedom. Not surprisingly, many of the youth report that their experiences with law enforcement officers and the legal system were less than positive.

However, many youth acknowledge that getting caught was a relief and brought them to a place where they could begin getting their lives back together. Some are able to speak with empathy about the difficulty and dangerousness of being a law enforcement officer. These youth see how both their lives are intertwined in a social arena characterized by uncertainty, fear, and volatility.

When asked how police could best respond to the phenomenon of youth gangs/groups, most respond by placing great emphasis on the human relationship between the police officer and young persons. Mutual respect is highlighted by most as the fundamental core to any relationship between police and youth gang/group members. Mutual respect would appear to be at the heart of creating a communication bridge and a margin of safety to nurture dialogue.

I know some cops from around the neighbourhood, you know, they're doing their job and everything but they're like cool with the people. With the cops like I can see where they're coming (from). After I got shot I can see a lot of things now (like) how come the police are so rough with all these people...because like they have...guns and you know if somebody moves the wrong way, you know, then (the police are) scared themselves because they don't know this guy. They don't know what he's going to do.
(Tim, 16)

(Police should) start communicating with young people in a way that the cops are showing respect toward young people, then they are going to get more respect from young people. That is a really good way to do it. Getting involved with communities, actually working with the people not just cruising around in the cars.
(Wayne, 18)

Some cops are cool. You know, like some cops...they sit there, you can sit in the car with them, talk you know, just joke around with them...nothing to do with crime, nothing at all, just joking, like it (was your) uncle. Some cops are like that you know.
(Danny, 15)

Schools

Schools in Canada are a major focal point for young peoples' social life and a forum for youth gang/group conflict and youth violence. Given the large number of youth present in most schools conflicts appear inevitable.

The young people feel that schools should play both a reactive and proactive role in responding to youth gangs/groups. Some feel that schools can play an important role in preventing gang/formation or gang/group conflict, especially between youth from different cultural groups, by providing cultural sensitivity training and opportunities for different groups to interact more. Several youth also identify a need for schools to focus on the protection and safety of the non-offending majority of students.

One young person encourages educators not to be judgmental and to try and see the desperate situation of youth gang/group members from the young person's point of view. Some feel schools should provide students with information about the legal and other consequences of gang/group involvement,

They have to do what they can do to protect the (non-offending) other kids in school.
(Barry, 17)

If you are a guidance counsellor make sure you help the kid and look at the situation from his point of view not from yours. Many guidance counsellors (tell) you, "You have to get out (of the gang), you have to get out". You don't know how to get out. You know that it's bad for you but you don't have a choice.
(Mary, 17)

Education is an important thing. You have to get to young people before they start getting into gangs. Telling kids and educating them about what goes on and what the consequences (are) and tell them where gang bangers end up. It has to be done before they get to that age where they start joining gangs. Schools could have a lot of programs of getting the students together to get to know each other because there are a lot of different (racial) groups in schools. If they could get these different kids together to know each other because usually they don't. If these people in the school get to know each other...it's going to cut down on the amount of violence and stuff. That could ease down the troubles between them.
(Wayne, 18)

Social Services

Few young people have any knowledge of or previous experience with social services but do provide a few suggestions. The prevention of gang/group involvement by resourcing homeless youth, and coordinating services for high needs youth are mentioned. Again, the importance of relationship, trust, and mutual respect is highlighted.

There are a lot of kids who are homeless and stuff like that and they get into gangs. If they have places for them to go to when they don't have a place to sleep instead of that kid going and joining a gang he or she can be helped by those agencies. That would really cut down on the number of people joining gangs which would cut down on gangs.
(Wayne, 18)

If they need help in rehabilitation, well set that up for them. If they need to just talk to somebody, talk to them as a person. If they need education set them up with a school. Help a person rather than saying, "Well this is the textbook, this is what we have to do, this is what you have to do, this is what I have to do." Rather than (acting like) a professional (or on) a business level, have a more person to person (relationship).
(David, 19)

They can make sure those kids trust them and in some cases not to be so formal with them. Those kids don't have anyone but the gang and the social workers. (Social workers) should make sure that those kids trust them very much so they can open up and...accept some help from them and...prove that there's somebody who is looking over them and wanting to help them and understand what they are going through.
(Mary, 17)

Government

It was to questions about the potential role for government that young people gave their most strongly worded responses. Many feel that government is out of touch with youth and totally unaware of the seriousness of youth gang/group phenomenon. Their frustration over high youth unemployment and an uncertain future is strongly evident.

Several young people want government to take a stronger stand on violent offenders and weapons offences, make more resources available for law enforcement, and stop the flow of weapons into the country and ultimately the hands of young people. Some youth feel there is a need to resource families more so they can provide better care for their children. Others feel that the government should play a central role in educating the public, parents, teachers, and youth-serving professionals about the presence and dangers of youth gangs/groups.

If I stop selling drugs are you going to give me the two hundred bucks a day I could be making? The government (needs to make) more job opportunities. Like there's no jobs out there, like unless you want to work at McDonalds and nobody really wants to work at McDonalds. Like a lot of people say like open more community centres and that but I don't know if too many people will go to the community centres anyway. (Maybe) if the penalties were more stiffer. Say you get into a scrap and as soon as you throw that punch you get an automatic certain amount of time. If you get convicted on it then that would stop a lot of fights. Say you got a year for fighting. Then a lot of people are going to say, "This guy ain't worth a year." I think that for like weapons and stuff there should be more serious (penalties). If you get caught with a gun, you know, I think it should be an automatic two years, like if the gun had no bullets. If the gun has...bullets you add on more time.
(Tim, 16)

Governments aren't aware as much as they think they are. They think they know everything that's going on...with gangs. There's a lot of people out there that governments don't know anything about. If there wasn't so much disrespect for gang members and they would treat them as normal people and look past their appearance, then I think (things) would be a lot better. There would be a lower crime rate.
(Barry, 17)

We need more people aware of (gangs). A lot of parents would not know what the signs are, what to look for. A lot of teachers don't know what to look for. We need education. Not only in schools but in general everywhere. Education in all aspects, in

court systems, with social services, in therapy situations, school situations, police. Everything, basically in every aspect that's dealing with children or kids or even parents that have children. Educate them.

(David, 19)

Assist...families that don't have very much money because kids are more likely to look for some other financial assistance. Limit the weapon supply in the country. Bring more cops to ensure that the kids are not in danger at least not while they are in school.

(Mary, 17)

Parents

Parents were identified as perhaps the single most important factor in preventing or suppressing youth gangs/groups. An overwhelming number of responses point to the need for more and better communication, relationship, trust, respect between parents and youth, and real involvement on the part of parents in their children's lives.

The best way I can say it is like my dad does with us. He's our dad and everything but sometimes he'll sit us down and be more like a friend. Like he'll say, "Listen, I know this is going on and I know this is going on." (Parents need) to be like cool with their kids and try and understand what's going on and why they're doing certain things. A lot of people like their parents believe every single word that (they) say. Like it's good to believe what your kids say but you've got to know if they're shitting you or not. The kid comes home with 20 VCR's in boxes and he says he bought them. You've got to know there's something wrong here with your son or your daughter. Parents just have got to smarten up and realize what's going on.

(Tim, 16)

That's the key, that's what it all comes down to. Everything comes down to respect. They don't get the respect they want (from parents) so they will go out and rip something off to say, "Look, look at the attention I'm getting now. Am I going to get respect now?" That's what it all boils down to. (Kids) want attention and they want respect.

(Barry, 17)

Parents should be understanding, sympathetic. Like, talk to your kids. Sit down (and) say, "Look, I understand what you're going through. I hear about these things. What can I do to help? What do you need me to do? I'm here for you. I love you a lot. I care for you. Just being very supportive of children. Punishment generally doesn't help. Punishment usually ends up in rebellion...either the kid against the parent or the kid against society. If people helped the kids then the kids would generally be more willing to help themselves.

(David, 19)

What Does the Future Look Like

Young people speak with genuine fear and concern about the future of our society if we do not take steps to address youth gangs/groups and youth violence. Most feel that the phenomenon in Canadian towns and cities will end up resembling the situation in Los Angeles.

A lot of people are carrying guns now and more people are going to start carrying guns. The younger people that grow up they're going to be the worst because...they see all these older people carrying guns so they're going to want to be "badder"...so they're going to start carrying guns...except it won't be hand guns.

(Tim, 16)

If they don't stop it soon the gangs are going to grow and people are going to be killed because everyone thinks it's cool to carry a gun. Everyone thinks it makes them bigger than they actually are. People are going to get really hurt.

(Barry, 17)

I totally don't think the city is going to get any better. That is my honest opinion. It is only going to get worse because the younger kids are worse than the older kids and they're only going to get older. They're just going to get older and more severe.

(Brad, 19)

The Last Word

If I was going to say something about youth gangs right now to people who were thinking about getting into a gang I'd say, "Learn, learn what it's about from people who have been in it. Don't get involved in gangs because it leads to more problems than it's worth. You have a choice. Don't start it because it's a long, long process especially with the legal system. If you get screwed with the legal system it's a long process." I had to go through seven months of...to get my court cases remanded, missing a lot of time off school. My marks dropped. It was just amazing. You wouldn't believe how much my marks dropped with missing classes. The only thing that I've got to say is just mellow out and hang around with your friends. Don't get so caught up over popularity. It'll come. People who get caught up over popularity are usually people that aren't popular. People who are just acting themselves, (who) mellow out, (who) talk to people they're usually the ones that are more popular. That's all I've got to say.

(Barry, 17)

CHAPTER 5

YOUTH GANGS/GROUPS: COMPARING THE VIEWS OF POLICE, SCHOOL OFFICIALS, SOCIAL WORKERS, PARENTS, VICTIMS, AND YOUTH

"I think people often minimize. The schools weren't taking it seriously. I think the police force wasn't taking it seriously. I think they thought it was a bunch of loosely knit kids playing these little games."

(Parent #1)

In comparing the views of youth gang/group members and the adults in the study there are surprisingly few areas of significant contrast or remarkable disagreement. Despite youth impressions that the adults around them are unconcerned, the comments of youth-serving professionals are insightful and sensitive and reveal an honest caring and concern for their well-being. The adult professional participants were often self-critical and spoke candidly about the concerns they have about their role in both addressing and encouraging youth violence and youth gangs/groups.

PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH VIOLENCE

Consensus: Youth Violence is a Problem

Adults and young people alike feel that youth violence is a problem in Canada. The adults' responses ranged along a continuum from simply being "a problem" to being a "very serious" problem. Their impression is that young people today appear to be more willing and able to resort to violence to solve their problems and deal with frustration and anger than youth of previous generations.

Comments reflect that youth violence has been increasing in recent years, both in terms of incidents and reporting, and involves young persons from elementary to high school age. Concern is expressed that youth violence is still not taken seriously and, despite recent media attention, remains under-reported and unrecognized in terms of its prevalence. Youth violence is also identified as a health problem, a reflection of unmet needs and other deficits.

It is a very rapidly increasing problem. Youth violence has escalated over the last five to six years in my experience. The assaults themselves are more and more violent. We are seeing more and more weapons used. It's not unusual for kids to bring knives to school and say they need it for protection now which was very unusual five or six years ago.

(Police Officer #7)

We have a very, very violent youth society. They don't even recognize their violence. Their parents don't even recognize their violence. (I've never) worked with a group of young people who have...been so preoccupied with violence.
(Vice Principal #2)

I'd have to view (youth violence) as a very significant societal problem. From kindergarten on up in terms of playground behaviours, verbal harassment, verbal threats...and very often unrecognized.
(School Official)

I view it as a statement of resourcelessness. I view it as a statement of the changes in society which a lot of people in positions to deal with it have not recognized it (or) dealt with it. This is the young peoples' way of saying, "We have some problems."
(Social Worker #2)

If you had asked me (if youth gangs were a problem) five years ago I would have looked at you and thought you were nuts. I honestly, when this thing started, didn't believe it. Then slowly piece by piece (I) could see...it coming together.
(Victim #2)

Consensus: Youth Gangs/Groups are a Serious Problem

Within the context of the broader problem of youth violence, youth gangs/groups were thought to be a serious problem. Again, comments reflect a concern that the issue is not being recognized or taken seriously. Adult participants observe that the individual bully of yesterday has been replaced by the assaultive or threatening group.

They are serious. I don't see individual acts of violence anymore among youth. I can't remember the last one on one fight I ever investigated. They just don't seem to happen anymore. Clearly it's a trend to a collective nature. (Youth gangs/groups) are acting out more and more each year, certainly for the last few years where those statistics are available, but I believe it's actually been longer than that.
(Police Officer #1)

I think the problem is extremely serious. Kids in grade school are now banding together asking a kid who wants to be their friend to go do something to the teacher or take something from the mall or beat up a kid. Once that is done that person becomes part of that little clique and (this is) the beginning of full blown gang involvement and gang ideals. I think we're farther gone than people care to imagine.
(Social Worker #2)

Consensus: Gangs/Groups are a Problem In Schools

The problem of gangs/groups in school raised some of the strongest feelings among all participants. The involvement of young children is thought to be a indicator of the seriousness of the problem. Gang/group-related activities involving children often

resemble those of the older teens in high schools. The prevalence of violence in schools is felt to be a reflection of the violence prevalent outside in the community and the rest of society.

Gangs are certainly a problem in schools. It's not just a question of one or two bullies in a school anymore. That's long since past. What ends up happening is these groups of kids have a very negative effect on the school environment because they are intimidating. They threaten the peaceful atmosphere in a school...and there are many students (and) staff members...who are frightened of these people.
(Police Officer #2)

During the month of October I had to suspend 20 kids. Sixteen of those suspensions were for gang-related activities.
(Vice Principal #2)

I believe that gangs are a problem in schools. I think that what happens in a neighbourhood simply carries into the schools. There are gangs that actually control what kids wear, who kids hang around with and how kids interact together. This is all controlled within the school setting. The most powerful interaction among gangs and regular kids in the schools is the extortion and intimidation. To simply show the power that the gang has is enough to have people respond to their requests.
(Social Worker #2)

Consensus: Victims are Reluctant to Report

Youth victims of violence and gang/group-related activities are reluctant to report to parents, police, or school authorities for fear of retaliation or that nothing will be seen to be done about their complaints. Victims also fear the stigma of being a victim which identifies a person as being unpopular and without friends.

(Victims) don't report these things because they are fearful of retaliation. I think to some extent too they accept this sort of thing in 1993 as inevitable. It's one of the hazards of going to school. It's the way it is. They're afraid to report it. Nobody else seems to give a shit about it. Nobody is stopping it so what's the big deal. Why should I tell anybody. No good will come of it.
(Police Officer #2)

Consensus: Kids Mistrust and Have Lost Faith in Adults and Systems

Overshadowing all participants' comments is a feeling that youth today do not trust and have lost faith in adults and adult-run institutions that are supposed to be their supports. Young people look to adults to protect them and provide safe and secure environments whether at home or in school. When we fail to provide it young people become fearful and uncertain and eventually learn not to rely on adults.

Some adult participants feel that youth today have very few positive adult role models in their lives who inspire hope, courage, and respect. Their disillusionment with the hypocrisy they see in the adult world leaves them vulnerable to the influence of any individual or group that gives them a sense of belonging and groundedness.

I think part of the problem has been the breakdown of trust in adults generally. A breakdown in terms of our politicians...our ministers aren't to be trusted, our priests are making headlines all the time. A general mistrust of not only the institutions but the adults that make up institutions. It's pretty hard for them to find a role model these days other than the ones they find in...videos and in the media.
(School Official)

I believe there's a lack of faith or trust in adult systems. Adult systems are letting them down. They're not there for them. They're not working. They're obsolete. I know my own is. They're obsolete and the kids are not buying into it and that's painfully obvious. (We need to) try and get (kids) to have faith or trust in some of the adult systems particularly our own, and get them to report things and to show them that the system can work.
(Police Officer #1)

Kids, I feel, quite often don't trust the adult systems out there and as a result they feel they have to become reliant on their friends to protect themselves. As a result they're forming gangs.
(Police Officer #4)

There is a gross misunderstanding of a gang and the workings of gangs and how it impacts on the individual and their families in society. Until those questions are able to be asked and answered by parents and teachers and police and social workers and all of the people in the helping field I think that young people will continue to be victimized by gangs. They are not in a position to be able to accept a lot of our offerings on what steps they should take to leave the gang because as far as they're concerned we don't have to live it on a day to day basis. Our words do not get through (to them).
(Social Worker #2)

Consensus: Schools are Reluctant to Admit There's a Problem

Adults, especially school officials, spoke candidly about the problem they perceive with schools not confronting the seriousness of youth violence and gang/groups. The reluctance is thought to be based on an aversion to draw negative attention to schools thereby creating an impression in the minds of parents, students, and the public that they were unsafe. Some suggest that personal career ambitions of school officials are also part of the problem. A lack of resolve on the part of officials to acknowledge and deal with gangs/groups in schools alienates and angers non-offending students who must live with the fear of gang/group intimidation.

Many school administrators are motivated by self-interest. If the cops are seen to be at their school too often they get a reputation for being a bad school. It reflects unfavorably on them. It looks like they can't handle the problems. This denial of the problem is a serious mistake because the kids know there is a problem. It's very discouraging to kids because they see (the denial) as bullshit.
(Police Officer #2)

I had a parent in here last year...didn't know how to deal with the school administration. The school administration wouldn't believe that the kindergarten level...at recess...there's gangs of five year-olds. They didn't realize that there was a gang operating. (If the victim didn't hand over his/her recess treat) the tough kid had four or five kids all lined up behind him to beat the hell out of (the victim). The parent couldn't get the school principal or the vice-principal to admit this was a gang activity under...the policy of the county Board of education. (For) a lot of high school administrators it's political. He wants (a) promotion so he's going to make sure there are no damn problems in his school. Education is full of these guys. The only reason they want this chair is that it's a step to the next chair. If you get somebody like that sitting in a chair...they never admit to any problem. We have a few of those.
(Vice Principal #2)

I can understand the school not wanting anyone to know that they're having problems. The school is very cautious about their public image. I had a...discussion with some good friends of ours and they're both teachers in another area. They said that this is not a problem in their area and that I was exaggerating. We tried to go through it all with them and up to the point where we actually shared with them what had happened to us they really truly didn't believe it. I think there still is a great disbelief that this is happening. When my husband came into the office bleeding from the face I demanded that the principal be brought to the vice-principal's office immediately. They told me he was too busy. I said, "You get him!" We explained to him the situation and they went to get a bag of ice for my husband. The principal basically indicated that he disbelieved (we were attacked). He said, "Oh really. Well that kind of thing doesn't happen at my school." Well...the vice-principal basically gave him a little sense of reality. They were not going to call the police. They refused to initially and I demanded that they do so.
(Victim #1)

There were certain activities going on in the schools...that...teachers, school administration people, Boards of Education did not want to acknowledge. If they acknowledged that it was there they would have to do something about the problem and they had to admit that maybe they weren't doing the best job that they could.
(Parent #1)

Consensus: Involvement in Criminal Activity Defines a "Gang"

Participants identify a continuum of youth associations ranging from a simple group of friends to more organized criminal groups. There is virtually unanimous agreement that what separates groups of youth from those considered to be "gangs" is

involvement in criminal or illegal activity. Historic stereotypes of what constitutes a gang may prohibit many people from recognizing the form and seriousness of the youth gang phenomenon as it exists in the 1990's.

Eight kids walking down the street is not a gang as far as I'm concerned, OK, until they cross the line and do something criminal. That I consider to be a gang. Gangs that we're dealing with are mostly spontaneous in nature. (They) come together for one event and they disband after. Kids will form a gang in a school and the gang might only last two or three weeks then it will disband and (the youth will) go out and make new friends and form new gangs.

(Police Officer #6)

Basically, the difference between a group of friends or a club (and a gang) is when that group of friends or club crosses over to do something criminal and in my mind intimidation is...criminal. Any group that intimidates by their power, by their size, by who they are, by their status I would consider to be a gang.

(Vice Principal #1)

The word gang brings up a stereotype image in your head and you're looking for specific things. When you don't see those specific like gang-related things that a "gang" conjures up in your mind...you just laugh and say, "They're just a bunch of kids." Well those bunches of kids are the 90's way of being a gang.

(Victim #2)

GETTING INVOLVED IN YOUTH GANG/GROUPS

Consensus: Youth Join Gangs/Groups To Achieve Power, Self-Confidence

There is strong agreement that involvement in gangs/groups gives youth self-confidence and a feeling of power they would not likely achieve on their own.

I believe there's an appetite for power through violence by the kids. The group's feeling of invincibility is...the power to be reckoned with.

(Police Officer #1)

There's a lot of thrill in being a powerful unit. The whole group perceive themselves as the toughest or the meanest.

(Vice Principal #1)

Consensus: Being in a Gang/Group Provides Protection and Safety

Gang/group involvement provides youth with a sense of safety and security. Young people know they will have backing if they are targeted by other gangs/groups or individuals. Gang/group involvement also confers self-esteem and personal efficacy as measured by the number of friends and associates one has.

Most of the victims that we saw at first were real naive kids, the loners that weren't really in a group. They were kind of the outcasts and they didn't have any friends. What we found is that the gang would go after them for a while and then what would happen, the kids would finally join a gang for protection.
(Police Officer #6)

I can see it growing as an attraction as the violence escalates in the schools you are going to have to be part of a group to survive.
(Police Officer #7)

Consensus: The Value of Gang/Group Names Varies

Adults and youth agree that the importance of names varies from group to group, youth to youth. There appears to be a developmental pattern involved. When a gang/group first forms, a name helps them establish their presence in a territory or gain a reputation. The longer a gang/group stays together the less important a name becomes since it draws unwanted police attention.

New members are more likely to be concerned with a name than long term members. For those just joining the name helps them establish an identity and quickly brings them the recognition, power, and status they are hoping to achieve through affiliation with the gang/group.

If they consider themselves to be important I think they will (have a name). The individuals that may end up in an altercation or an assault very briefly in the park or spontaneous assault may not have a name. Maybe it's just a group of friends that crossed that line. They could as well. If they want an identifier they will (name themselves).
(Vice Principal #1)

To new members (gang names are) very important because that's how they begin to show they have a force behind them. To seasoned members it's not very important because a name is not used, their reputation speaks for itself.
(Social Worker #2)

Consensus: Some Youth are More Vulnerable to the Lure of Gangs/Groups

Participants agree that smaller, younger, abused, and isolated youth may be more drawn to gangs/groups for the protection they afford than other youth. Of course these are not the only youth who join gangs/groups or become involved in illegal or violent activity. Young people experiencing difficulties in school, impressionable children and teens, and youth who have a high need for acceptance also become involved in gang/group activity.

A person (who) is a low achiever inside the school. They're not doing well. They're constantly being corrected and getting into trouble. They are poor performers.

Once they walk out that door (and) they're with their gang they're somebody on the street. They have the respect out of fear. They're somebody on the street. They feel superior.

(Police Officer #7)

The ones who are weaker (are more vulnerable) because they are looking for the power that the gang may very well represent.

(Vice Principal #1)

The young man or woman who is victimized from grade school onward might...go to an extreme. So as not to be victimized any longer they would join the perpetrators, just simply associating with them, therefore they're protected. Kids who are isolates might be attracted to it. Kids who are impressionable. That seems to be the largest number of kids who become gang members.

(Social Worker #2)

Consensus: Youth from Wealthy Families also Get Involved

Participant views challenge the stereotype that gang/group members come from families living in poverty or in economically depressed neighbourhoods.

I think the stereotypes have gone. Some of the people involved in gangs have been from I would say upper socio-economic brackets.

(Vice Principal #2)

Consensus: Females in Gangs/Groups Abuse Power and are Violent

The involvement of girls, either as members of mixed gender or all girl gangs/groups is mentioned by most study participants. A recurring theme, especially among adult participants, is that the girls, though fewer in number, are as violent as, and sometimes more violent than, the boys. Girls also get involved in gangs/groups to meet power and status needs.

We're finding, actually finding that the girls are getting more violent than the guys right now. I think girls are more mature now. Most of the girls that we're dealing with are bigger...than the guys. They get together in their little groups and (beat) up boys and (beat) up other girls. Most of it is over stupid stuff. They all get in a little clique and they...drag (the victim) into the washroom and beat the shit out of (her). (With our) first all female gang...we charged four of those girls with assault. A girl will take on a guy. A girl will take on a teacher. If you ever get attacked by a group of girls it's the worst thing. I think it's mainly because the guys don't want to fight back. They're really, really vicious.

(Police Officer #6)

Girl gangs usually are acting, if you notice, against other...it's almost gender specific against other girls. It really threw me at first how violent they could be. How

they could carry weapons and knives in their pockets. How they could be just as vicious and vindictive and uncaring and brutal as any guy could be or any guy gang.
(Vice Principal #2)

The girls, to me, are one of the most mystifying parts because the girls are violent. You just don't imagine the girls as being as violent as the guys and yet they are. It's hard to understand that a girl carries a knife and yet these girls do carry knives. These girls do get in fistfights. They do gang up on other people and cause real serious injuries.
(Victim #2)

Consensus: Gangs/Groups are Like a "Family"

Adult participants use the term "family" less than the youth when talking about the cohesiveness of the gang/group. Adolescents' lives are typically more dominated by emotions and needs for peer affiliation than adults and may have influenced their choice of words. However, both groups identify gangs/groups as providing youth with a sense of communion, support, and closeness, qualities one normally expects to be provided by families.

(The gang) becomes sort of a peer family for the young people in a sense of belonging. I think they need that. It's a replacement for a family that they may not be interested in being involved in which is typical of teenagers.
(Victim #1)

They also refer to themselves as a family. I think that that's more striking in a lot of ways, that the kids really are developing sort of little families, groups of kids with a sense of belonging where they perceive the members of the group having the time and energy to care about them., possibly more than they perceive their parents or their relatives.
(Vice Principal #3)

Consensus: Youth Don't Really Know what they're Getting Into

Study participants agree that many youth who get involved in gangs/groups are naive and don't always recognize the seriousness of their illegal activities, the consequences to themselves, and the impact on victims.

I think they're naive. Most of them don't understand that it is a crime until it's too late.
(Police Officer #6)

I believe that they know that there are consequences but I don't think they're aware of the severity of the consequences.
(Social Worker #1)

I don't believe they understand the repercussions of what they're doing at all. They look at it as minor events in their lives. I honestly don't think that most of them can see what it must be like from the other side, to be the victim.

(Victim #2)

Consensus: Earning Money is a Motivator

Beyond meeting power, status, affiliation and other needs, involvement in illegal gang/group activity is viewed simply as a way to make money.

They may see it as a means of raising money...and to support...a drug habit or an alcohol habit, buying weapons or whatever. The objective is in terms of a need for money.

(School Official)

Consensus: Youth Under 12 are Involved in Gang/Group Activity

Though there was some variation in participants responses there appears to be little question that children under 12 years of age are involved in gangs/groups. Their participation appears to be a growing part of the youth gang/group phenomenon. Participants feel that young people under 12 years of age are perpetuating a violent youth subculture by emulating the behaviour they observe in their older brothers, sisters, and neighbourhood teens. There is some concern that the younger children are capable of acts of violence equal to or more serious than those committed by teens.

Right now the kids in grade five and six are mimicking what the older kids are doing. Maybe the violence isn't as high because they're...not big enough yet...but they are becoming involved. They're (also) being used by the older groups. It is spreading in my view. I think that's another thing that has to be addressed.

(Police Officer #3)

When we first started our work (here) I can remember...feeling that this was a secondary school problem only or a senior elementary (or) secondary problem. When we took it to principals committees, our concerns and our policies and things...the K to six guys (were) saying, "Hang on, you know we're finding the same behaviour...going right down to kindergarten level."

(Vice Principal #2)

Last month...a lady was driving down the road and wanted to go through a pedestrian crossover. There was a group of elementary school aged children, so we're talking probably kids nine to twelve, all wearing Chicago Bulls jackets. They proceeded to block the pedestrian crossover on a very busy street here and they blocked it for five minutes. One at a time very slowly and patiently they would cross in front of the cars making very obscene gestures and giving people the finger and scream at them. Now looked at from those peoples' point of view was that a gang-organized related activity? Well most people would say no. But on the other hand...they all went to one school, they

all wore the same outfit, and they planned what they were going to do and they obstructed traffic. I guess you could say it's gang-related.
(Victim #2)

Consensus: Influence of the Media, Music, Videos

Adults and youth strongly agree that the media influences young people and provides models for gang/group behaviour. Violence as entertainment in the form of music, films, and television as well as graphic portrayals of violence in news coverage are thought to desensitize youth to the impact of their violent behaviour on victims.

There (are)...certain types of music out right now, heavy metal music advocates violence, some of the rap music. Film media, even to the point where the news reports are extremely violent on television. They show blood and gore and whatnot all the time now. Television programming itself (has experienced) a heavy, heavy increase in violence shown. (Kids) are seeing it all the time. They're not sensitive (to the fact that) they're actually hurting people that badly. I mean this is something they see on T.V. I think that has an impact.
(Police Officer #7)

In the newsletter (of) the public school up the way...the principal (was trying to inform) parents that some of (the) children (were) acting out male/female behaviour on the school grounds. It's not playing doctor anymore. It's acting out copulation. These are five and six and seven year olds. (Imagine) having to mention this in a parents' newsletter (in) a fairly good K to six school. Simulated intercourse and the teachers are having to deal with it. How is the kid learning this. He is watching the videos that mommy and daddy are watching.
(Vice Principal #2)

YOUTH GANG/GROUP ACTIVITIES

Consensus: Gangs/Groups are Involved in a Wide Range of Illegal Activities

The youth and adults report gangs/groups are involved in a wide range of illegal activities. Among those identified by adult participants are theft of guns, break and entering, extortion, arson, intimidation, and prostitution.

We've had the kids run the gamut here. We've had them involved in setting up break and enters, theft of hand guns, extortion, robberies, firebombing.
(Police Officer #6)

Shoplifting...vandalism...uttering...intimidation...breaking...and...entering...armed robbery...prostitution. They're the pimps so they would attract a stream of young girls into that world.
(Social Worker #2)

Consensus: Weapons are Common

Weapons typically are a part of being in a gang/group and are commonly found in schools. They range from simple "exacto knives" to automatic weapons and explosives. Their use is believed to be on the increase. Weapons, especially guns, convey status and power to the carrier. Though they can be purchased illegally from various sources, most guns appear to come from the homes of family, friends, and neighbours. Adults agree with youth that knives are the most common weapon used.

They're a major, major, major, major, problem. I've never seen so many weapons out there now all of a sudden. The spectrum of weapons is from knives right up to and including sawed-off shotguns. The bigger the gun the more power you carry. That's the way they measure how big you are.
(Police Officer #5)

The weapon of choice is the knife and the pellet pistol. The kids will use anything. We've had gang fights where kids were using golf clubs, bars, machetes, bayonets, dart guns. We've also had nine millimetre (guns), 357 magnums, replica Uzi machine guns, all kinds. Most of the weapons they're getting, especially the guns... (are) coming from their relatives... they're stealing the things from home. (Parents) don't have them properly locked up. (Weapons give status). When they go into school and... especially if they have a shoulder holster or a gun in their belt and they flash it to a couple of kids it gives them a lot of power. They see guns as power. If you have a gun... you have a lot of prestige in the gang.
(Police Officer #6)

We've had a whole range of weapons. I couldn't even begin to describe them. Knives... switchblades... butterfly knives... brass knuckles. We had kids making the weapons in shop.
(Vice Principal #2)

Consensus: Drugs Have Become a Part of the Problem

There is strong consensus that drugs are becoming a larger part of the youth gang/group scene. The major concern is that drug dealing will lead more increasingly to turf wars and a further rise in the use of weapons, especially guns.

We're dealing with a drug today (crack cocaine) that's very marketable, that is very accessible to young people, that provides pleasure in a matter of seconds. I think if you are a young person who is unemployed who feels that there is no future, that the only way to survive is to get rich quick... you seek out and have access to crack, hey, you're set. So you fall into a mentality and culture that goes along with the sales and use of that drug.
(Social Worker #3)

A lot of it comes from the drugs. There's a big market for it. When the drugs come into play the weapons come into play.
(Parent #2)

Consensus: Involvement in Illegal Activities is "No Big Deal" to Youth

Participants feel that most young people involved in illegal gang/group activity see their behaviour as inconsequential, justifiable, and status enhancing. When apprehended, many youth seem surprised their violent and criminal activities even attracted the attention of the police.

If you charge a kid for beating someone up and being part of a group that beats someone up for an article of clothing outside of a school and you charge them with robbery the first thing they...say to you is, "How is that robbery?" They think (of robbery) as a bank holdup or mugging.
(Police Officer #1)

I think they see particularly violent crime as status gaining amongst their peers. Swarming type robberies, multiple suspect assault and robberies are usually trophy crimes. The thefts and drug trade is just a money-making venture...or a way to party for the night. They can go in and steal a number of items get some money and then party with the money later on. They know it's wrong but they've gotten into a different mind set where you gain status by doing it.
(Police Officer #7)

The major sense that they give you is that they aren't doing anything wrong. In a lot of cases the victim didn't complain. I've had cases where...I'll call it harassment and intimidation (took place) and the response would be, "Well he never said anything about it so I thought it was OK." And yet when you talk to the victim, the victim is usually very upset.
(Vice Principal #1)

Consensus: Involvement in Gangs/Groups and Illegal Activity is Fun

The adults also see youth involvement in illegal activity as fun and excitement, a way to live on the edge. Some worry that violence has become a real life form of entertainment for youth.

The sense of adventure. I mean this is something new to them, it's exploratory. Teens...always try to experiment with things, you know, like your first drink...drugs...your first sexual encounter. There's that sense of adventure of just trying it out.
(Social Worker #1)

The kids who committed the offence (against us) went and told my children that they really enjoyed creating the harm that they did. That it was fun. So I think there is an element of excitement and fun in that type of thing. Violence has become a form of entertainment.

(Victim #1)

Consensus: Fear of Getting Caught is no Deterrent

There is agreement that some young people, even when they are aware of the potential consequences of their illegal behaviour, will proceed because the benefits, in terms of material gain and enhanced status among peers, are worth the risk. Other youth understand the consequences but simply don't care.

Even though you could sit down with a new gang member and tell them exactly what the consequences are, it does not effect them in the way that it would someone who was not in a gang. They're driven by the fact that they want to be friends with those people. They want to be a part of that fun that they see and so they become blinded to the real consequences. There is a very high level of ignorance on their part. There is a small number, for example, the kids who have been in the criminal justice system, who know exactly what the consequences are and what it means...and they (could) care less about that. They just go ahead with what their friends want to do.

(Social Worker #2)

Consensus: Gangs/Groups Typically Victimize Younger, Smaller Youth

Though not the only victims, youth gang/groups will typically target smaller, younger, and vulnerable young persons who are loners or who do not appear to have many friends.

It is almost exclusively another kid who is viewed as having either a small or non-existent friend base. The kid who wears a calculator on his belt.

(Police Officer #1)

Kids are cruel to each other. When a guy is known to be vulnerable, when a victim is labelled as a victim then the number of victimizers increases because this is someone you can go up to and take a poke at and he will do nothing about it. (Then) there is some escalation of it.

(Police Officer #2)

I think that it is human instinct that the weaker the individual is, whether it be physically or emotionally, intellectually, those individuals will very much be picked on. It is the bully aspect of it. Some kids are walking victims. I don't know how they get their thrill out of that but that seems to be the way it goes.

(Vice Principal #1)

Consensus: Inter-Racial Conflict is Becoming a More Serious Problem

Conflicts among racially or culturally homogeneous groups, not previously a significant or remarkable part of the gang/group phenomenon, appear to be increasing. Adult participants share young peoples' concern that small, otherwise insignificant incidents at school between individuals from different cultural backgrounds are becoming flashpoints for larger gang/group conflicts, and that these conflicts are becoming more violent.

Right now...it is the emerging problem. It is the most important, most serious problem looming on the horizon.
(Police Officer #2)

When (the) music you listen to differentiates you from the next person, your colour, your creed, your background, your language, where you live, all those factors can create a division between you and the next person. It is only natural that the racial, ethnic background will be a factor. What is socially acceptable in one culture may not be in another and so we are dealing with all those differences that only those within the same culture would appreciate. Here at (my) school it is a very, very small percentage. Now that is because we have a very, very small percentage of (different) cultural backgrounds.
(Vice Principal #1)

The youth gang/group phenomenon is changing. In the beginning it was just any youth that was interested in having a little fun would just go out with whoever, be they Black, White, Chinese, whatever. Five years later we're seeing a change where kids are organizing according to their racial group. If someone does something to one member of that group the gang will come to their defense...so more and more of the conflicts are racially based.
(Social Worker #2)

Consensus: Gangs that Other Gangs/Groups are Afraid Of

Among youth gangs/groups, those possessing more members, weapons such as guns, and a reputation for using extreme violence to settle scores are the most feared.

If the group is larger they're scared of them. If they're smaller they're not. It's as simple as that.
(Police Officer #1)

(Those that have) a preponderance for violence, a preponderance for weapons, carrying weapons...size.
(School Official)

Consensus: The Y.O.A. Needs to be Modified and Better Promoted

Adults share young peoples' opinion that certain aspects of the Young Offenders Act are exploited by youth who consciously choose a criminal lifestyle. Participants agree that sanctions for first time offenders, violent offenders, and weapons offences need to be reviewed and possibly strengthened. There is also agreement that the Young Offenders Act does indeed hold youth accountable, but that the impression of leniency needs to be addressed by more public education.

We do kids a huge disservice if we perpetuate the myth that the Young Offenders Act is ineffective. The kids who come into contact with the law and go into the criminal justice system I think are surprised that the Young Offenders Act does have some impact on them. Their expectation is that nothing can happen to (them). Then they discover that something can happen to you.

(Police Officer #2)

If you talk to some of these offenders...they will be the first ones to tell you, "Had I gotten six months the first time I went in...I (wouldn't) have done this again. But the first three times I went (to court) I got probation and walked out of there laughing. Yeah, I kept doing it."

(Police Officer #7)

I think they understand it well enough where they could work, you know, with the loop holes. Those that created the Act may not necessarily see those as loopholes. But certainly from the kids point of view it works for them and they know exactly where and for how long...the Act protects them. Almost every gang has had someone who has been through the system...the expert on consequences, on recognizing the loopholes and so on. So the gangs quickly become informed as to how to use the Act in their favour. Their actions suggest that there are some problems with it serving as a deterrent.

(Social Worker #2)

It has to be changed that (if) somebody goes in for a violent crime that it has to be dealt with much more severely than some kid who goes out and steals something. People who go around with guns and knives (are) really serious. If you don't stop a person when they're young why should they stop when they get older. This kid that shot my son, if (he) gets six months for what he did I'll be surprised after watching first hand how it was dealt with in court. Why (should) any juvenile be afraid to go and shoot somebody? There's no deterrent, none. People only listen when there's...when you have to pay a price for something.

(Parent #2)

Consensus: Leaving a Gang/Group can be Easy or Difficult

There is strong agreement that leaving a gang/group can be as easy as just walking away or life threatening, depending on the gang/group and its activities. The more organized criminal gangs are thought to be the most difficult to exit. However,

leaving can be difficult emotionally at any time given all the needs the gang/group meets for the young person. Exiting often mean severing ties with life-long friends and strong neighbourhood peer associations.

It depends on the gang. (With one organized gang here) when you joined...you filled out an application form. They get all the names of your relatives. The main reason for that was they made the threat to you that once you're in the gang if you leave we're going to go after your relatives and that was done a couple of times. The loosely formed gangs, the spontaneous gangs, they just disband...and the kids go their own ways.
(Police Officer #6)

I think you have to be stronger to get out of a gang than you do to get into it. Peer pressure is an enormous pressure. Peer influence is an enormous influence. Once you are in the gang I think you have the knowledge of how powerful you can be at any particular moment. So if you aren't in it you lose that power.
(Vice Principal #1)

It is absolutely terrifying to live through. You don't go to sleep at night without checking every window and every door. You get phone calls ten times a day, people hanging up. People trying to break down your front door. We had gun shots go off in the backyard, threats, verbal threats that you're going to get killed. "We'll kill your kid. We will find him." There (are) severe consequences of trying to get out of the gang.
(Parent #1)

Consensus: The Problem has Increased in Recent Years

There is strong consensus that youth violence and youth gang/group activity has increased remarkably in the past few years, and it is not limited to large urban centres. Adult participants report noticing similarities between communities in Canada and those of large urban centres in the United States, in terms of patterns of growth and expansion of activities. Crimes against persons has been the most remarkable part of the increase.

It's not kicking in lockers anymore. It's not acting out in a group to commit vandalism. There's the odd one, but (it's) generally a crime against a person, against another young person.
(Police Officer #1)

In Ontario, and I've seen it the last three years since I've been involved with it, that a lot of different agencies thought it was just a Toronto problem. (But) it just spread like wildfire. We're getting calls from Ottawa, St. Catherines, Chatham, Windsor...Sudbury. What it seems to be is that nobody really knows what to do about the problem.
(Police Officer #6)

We are no different than the States was say about ten years ago. We're rapidly catching up to the U.S. cities as far as the gangs (are concerned). We now have gangs

coming up from the Buffalo area. They are heavily involved in the crack trade, procuring prostitution. We also have the Neo-Nazi Skinhead groups. They are becoming far more organized than they ever were. We are seeing a great deal more of...school gangs. Extortion is becoming a problem in the schools, group extortions.
(Police Officer #7)

Consensus: Youth Gang/Group Activity Can Get Very Serious

Issues of naivety and carelessness on the part of the youth aside, participants express great concern about just how serious youth gang/group activity can get for both young people and their victims.

I know a mother in (a city in southern Ontario) she and her daughter were in the (local) mall and she went to go the washroom. (When) she came out...she turned around and there her daughter was being taken out of the mall by a bunch of fellows. She was unconscious because they had put something on a cloth on her face as they were trying to abduct her. (In my case) I could have been blinded. My husband could have been seriously harmed. It could have been very, very serious. Luckily it wasn't and it wasn't without want of their trying either. And there were girls involved too who were just as vicious.
(Victim #1)

My son and I went into (the local mall) and started to walk a very short distance. I suddenly realized that we were surrounded. We were surrounded by about a dozen youths ranging in age probably from about 14 to 17 years old, all wearing a certain kind of baseball cap. It was a strange feeling...very unnerving because...I've got my son here and I've got my wife out there in the car. We continued out into the parking lot just sort of walking as this group, and they're not saying anything. It was more of an intimidation thing. It's very hard to describe. They blocked the car. They never made a demand. They just intimidated you through their presence and it was odd. It was a very odd occurrence.
(Victim #2)

I think it's extremely serious. The ultimate end of being in a gang is jail or death. Those are your choices and I don't think it should be minimized for a moment because those are your choices.
(Parent #1)

RESPONDING TO YOUTH GANGS/GROUPS

Consensus: The Need for an Enhanced Role for Police

Police officers are critical of their present approach to dealing with the phenomenon and provide suggestions for enhancing their role that are similar to those of the youth. The strongest theme to emerge in this area is the need for improved communication and mutual respect between law enforcement officers and youth. Police are viewed as an important and integral part of a community wide response. An enhanced

role for police should include a community-based policing focus, providing education about the law and legal consequences to parents and youth, and support, and law enforcement and education resources to school staff.

I think our biggest problem (is) we're a paramilitary organization. We only react to crime. We've done it a little bit different here. We've gone out and we've talked to the kids. We've put clothes on and gone into the malls and sat down, had a pop with the kids, and shot the shit with the kids, got down to their level and found out really what the problem was in '89. What we were dealing with...really (blew) our minds. Kids were scared. Kids were afraid to go to school but they (wouldn't) talk to anybody. They wouldn't talk to their parents about it. They wouldn't talk to the teachers about it. They were just living in their own little world but they were afraid. We got down...at their level and started to attack the problem and told the kids, "We are on your side, like we think you should be able to go to school without being bothered and we will help you." Once they believed...that we could help them...you can't shit them. You can't say one thing to them to their face and then turn around and say something different to somebody else. If you fool around with kids you lose them right away. We have won the respect of the kids. The gang members know that if we get on to them we don't let go and we prosecute.

(Police Officer #6)

I have two thoughts on that. One is...enforcement. The second...is prevention, and prevention is the knowledge that the police are there to help as opposed to always enforcement. The education of the kids on what is going on, the education of the rest of the school staff as to what is going on.

(Vice Principal #1)

I think they should take education and enforcement together. As well, they can't work in isolation. They must work in partnership because a kid listening to a police officer saying the same thing, you know, about an issue, will not hear it as comfortably as that same kid hearing it from...a youth worker.

(Social Worker #2)

Consensus: Schools Must Acknowledge and Confront the Problem

There appears to be little question in the minds of participants that schools are a major point for intervention in the youth gang/group phenomenon. Participants are overwhelmingly in agreement that little progress can be made until school officials acknowledge the problem and form working partnerships with police. Evidently, school/police partnerships have proven to be successful in reducing violence and youth gang/group activity in the few communities where they have been tried. School officials must also keep parents and the community informed about their problems and concerns and look outside to develop partnerships with other youth-serving social service agencies.

The education system was the same as the police. They were going their own little way. "We're just here to educate kids and that's all. We don't want to listen to any of

their problems. Kids don't have any problems." And kids had big problems. (One) principal...had blinders on. He thought he had a great school. He didn't really know what was going on out in the hallways or the lunch room or after school. He didn't know the intimidation that was going on and...or he did know and didn't want to tell anybody. I think that was one of the problems.
(Police Officer #6)

I believe the school has to work hand in hand with the police dealing with the total package in confronting youth violence. The schools that sit back and ignore or do not acknowledge (it) could very well have some difficulty. (We need) the openness of the schools to talk about youth violence...to be aware of the youth violence that is taking place, the gangs. Schools need to deal with...prevention. There's curriculum, there are services and agencies that you can bring into the schools to deal with those type of things. You know anger management, stress management courses, sexuality courses, self-esteem components within courses, policing the building. Those all lead to better communication. Parents also have to be involved in that.
(Vice Principal #1)

Schools first of all need to acknowledge they have a problem. They need to start...looking outside the system and engaging some of the resources that are readily available to assist them. Traditionally they've just looked in-house and have not been able to effect any kind of change because they haven't had this problem before. They don't have the resources to deal with it. I think schools need to merge with the outside services to more effectively understand and work with the problem.
(Social Worker #2)

I think the schools have to be the information link between parents and community groups such as police and agencies. Let's face it. Young people don't generally tell their parents an awful lot about what's going on in schools. So the parents may very well not be aware of what's going on. Teenagers...certainly are not going to go home and say, "By the way, mom, we have a gang at school that carries weapons." They're not going to do that because...those people for one thing may be their friends and they don't want to get them into trouble.
(Victim #1)

Consensus: Social Services Can Play an Important Support Role

Social service agencies are seen as having the kind of expertise that could be of significant benefit to schools, police, and parents. Concern was expressed that there needs to be more social service resources directed toward vulnerable youth at risk of becoming involved in gangs/groups.

(Social Services) should be in the schools. The more we can bring services to the schools the more effective those services are going to be. Like very simple health services, counselling services, addiction...health. They should be based in the schools as

opposed to across town. Instead of sending the kids to the services, bring the services to the kids.

(School Official)

The best role for social services is to educate. We see the kids in a very candid situation. We see them in the neighbourhoods, actually out there committing those acts. We may see them in our office after they've been victimized or after they've been caught. We understand the individual. We need to take that understanding to...the police...educators, the local community association, parents need to be informed, the media needs to be...better informed. We must continue to work with...the young people to send out messages that prevent them buying into that lifestyle.

(Social Worker #2)

A lot of these kids who chronically get involved in inappropriate activities usually have some sort of family dysfunction and that's where social services fit in. Unfortunately services for youth...tend to be lacking. Young people, especially the 15 to 17 age group, seem to fall through the cracks.

(Victim #1)

Consensus: Government Must Act

Participants express strong opinions about the need for government to begin taking the phenomenon of youth violence and gangs/groups seriously and provide financial and human resources to address the problem. Specific suggestions are made to amend the various Acts of Legislation that govern the activities of professionals directly involved with the phenomenon. Concern is expressed that there are too many impediments in the current Acts to enable youth service professionals to respond effectively. Many advocate for wider community consultation and involvement of young people in making the necessary changes to the legislation.

Most of the people who are shaping and molding a lot of the policies...are either adults or legal minds, which is part of my complaint. It has to start including a lot of other people including the kids themselves.

(Police Officer #1)

The Young Offenders (Act), Freedom of Information (Act), Criminal Code, Education Act, those four pretty well have to work hand in hand for us to deal with individuals because (as professionals) we are all coming from different backgrounds (and are governed by) different Acts. I don't know where the blames lies. (They) haven't been written in conjunction with each other.

(Vice Principal #1)

The gangs continue to flourish because people continue to question whether it is a media created thing or are they really here. Well, they're here. We have kids living in social conditions that in no way...should be churning out the gang activities...and the gang ideals that...we're seeing. Yet it's here and we have to work with that. We should

skip over blaming one source and look at what to do. We are caught in a cycle of denial that only perpetuates the problem. Government (must) acknowledge we have a problem and...provide assistance and...resources...to work (on this) problem.
(Social Worker #2)

Consensus: Parents Have the Most Important Role to Play

More than any other group parents are identified as the single most important players in preventing gang/group formation. Participants advocate for more parental involvement in the lives of their children, more open communication between parents and offspring, and more direct involvement with schools. Parents need to be supplied with information, supports, and other resources to help them deal with their children who are already involved in gangs/groups and to prevent their siblings from joining. Adult participants especially want to see a more collaborative and mutually supportive relationship between school personnel and parents.

I think the main thing is communication. I think parents aren't talking to their kids right now. Most gang members that we get in here, the parents are shocked. They are good little kids (at home) but when they get out with their group of friends they turn into a totally different personality and I think it shocks a lot of parents. There's no place really for kids to get help especially if they're not getting it from their parents, if there's no communication there, they're really out in left field. I think we've put a lot of responsibility on kids now at a younger age, especially with...both parents working.
(Police Officer #6)

Parents need to be more involved in the schools. Parents need to advocate more and be more demanding of what is expected (from) schools. I think there would be a lot more parents involved in activities in the school if they were aware that these things were going on. Historically, there has always been a dichotomy between parents and schools and I don't think that has changed as much as it needs to. There seems to be a real division and a lack of cooperation between parents and schools.
(Victim #1)

(The problem is) how to get information to the parents that require (it) 'cause their kids are in gangs. A lot of them to me are just treading water and hoping that this thing will pass not knowing where to go or what to do. The school offers information night on gangs (but) the parents that are going to show up are the parents you don't need to worry about. (My advice to parents is) as soon as you see the signs (of gang involvement) go get help from the police department. Educate yourself about what kind of gang (your child) might be in. What (are) the type of things that might be going on.
(Parent #1)

Consensus: The Need for Community Partnerships

Participants agree there is no one group or community agency can solve the problem of youth gangs/groups on their own. It will require a concerted effort on the part of many players, including young people, to find solutions.

I think the biggest thing is communication. You have to form a partnership between the different groups and unless you do that you're not going to get anywhere with this phenomenon of gangs.

(Police Officer #6)

Any educator who thinks they can handle this by themselves today is living in a dreamworld. It's not just the police that they need to be involved with too. It's probation, interaction with crown attorneys and courts. It has to be a combination of all our resources, working together to make this work.

(School Official)

We have a fragmented approach to dealing with...social problems. We have a multitude of experts who are responsible for different areas of a problem...(but) all the different players are not talking, are not working collaboratively.

(Social Worker #2)

Consensus: Unless we Intervene the Problem Will Continue to Escalate

Adult and youth participants share the opinion that if we as a society do not take the problems of youth gang/groups and youth violence seriously we will find ourselves in trouble. All participants point to the gang/group problem in the United States as an indicator of where we are headed. Some feel we are irrevocably on that path in some communities.

I think we're going to have a problem like Chicago and L.A., especially in Toronto. I think we've lost control in Toronto...and the reason...is...you have the police doing one thing and the educators doing another thing and you have social workers doing another. But nobody's doing anything together.

(Police Officer #6)

What's down the road are public murders. There will absolutely be no remorse. I think we will see a very firm marriage between drugs and youth gangs. I think because of the merger of drugs and youth gangs there will be greater and more intense turf wars which will lead to racial clashes which will lead to an extremely violent and depressed society. The beginning of the disintegration of our future.

(Social Worker #2)

Summary of Youth And Adult Participants' Views

Why Young People Get Involved In Gangs/Groups - Youth Perspectives

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
- 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
- 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, social services
- Racism and cultural conflict
- Drift

Peers

- Peer pressure
- Peer modelling
- Influence of older teens
- Neighbourhood gang/group culture

Financial

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

Why Young People Get Involved In Gangs/Groups - Adult Perspectives

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
- 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
- Racism and cultural conflict

Peers

- Peer pressure
- Peer modelling
- Influence of older teens
- Neighbourhood gang/group culture

Financial

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

Responding to Youth Gangs/Groups - Youth Perspectives

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
- 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
- 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
- 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

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
- 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
- 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
- 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

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

Defining the "Problem"

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. We must be cautious of the labels and definitions we use when working with young people involved in gangs/groups. Adults' judgment, hurtful words, and official labels can quickly become internalized as part of a youth's self-concept. Young people are often very successful at "living down" to our expectations of them.

When examining this phenomenon, it will be important to ensure that our discourse does not become critical and blaming toward youth without looking in the mirror first. Defining gangs/groups as a problem *in* the individual youth puts the focus on identifying *causes* of deviance and delinquency, and on finding solutions for correctional, law enforcement, school safety purposes. Defining the problem as societal and systemic places the focus on issues concerning social relations, social power, employment opportunities, social learning, and institutional and professional practices that encourage and support violence *toward* and *by* youth. A more thorough analysis of these micro- and macro-social perspectives is warranted, though beyond the scope of the present study.

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. According to study participants youth gangs/groups and youth violence are a problem in southern Ontario and growing in terms of incidence and in the level of violence. Official statistics support the view that there has been an increase in youth violence in recent years, though they limit our understanding of the true picture because they are based on police charging patterns only. However, 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. Though their property offences may target businesses, adults, and teens alike, gang/group violence appears to be targeted primarily toward other youth or other gang/group members. The majority of victims of youth gangs/groups are other youth who tend to be smaller,

weaker, younger, isolated, friendless, awkward, or "walking victims". Girls tend to be the targets for a majority of the incidents of sexual violence, boys for physical violence, though either sex can be victims of each. Minority youth are also targeted, especially if they possess any of the characteristics above.

Teen victims are extremely reluctant to report their victimization to parents, teachers, school officials or the police. Their reluctance is based on a number of different factors: 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 affect reporting. Because of our apparent social tolerance of aggressive male sexual behaviour, i.e., "boys will be boys", young girls often do not recognize unsolicited and unwanted sexual behaviours toward them as sexual assault or sexual harassment. One police officer in the study shared a story about young women in a high school who had their nipples twisted by young men "teasing" them. The young women did not report this or feel that it was unusual until one of the girls showed her parents her bruised breast.

When a girl is part of a gang/group and her "boyfriend" forces her to have sex with other members she will either accept what happens as a norm of the group or feel too intimidated or even terrified to report her associates to the police. Girls will also be shamed into silence because of the stigma associated with having had sexual relations, albeit forced on her against her will, with a number of boys. Words such as "slut" and "tramp" can be powerful silencers.

Male victims are doubly victimized by gender role scripts that silence and shame boys and young men for not being "man enough" to stick up for themselves or for showing fear or other feelings associated with being victimized. Boys or teen males assaulted by individual girls or girl gangs/groups would most certainly refrain from reporting. Quite simply, we do not permit males to be victims in our society, which likely contributes significantly to the under-reporting of most forms of male victimization (Mathews, 1993a).

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. It is hard to draw conclusions about the apparently sudden upturn in female participation in these activities. Young girls, who after all, possess most of the same developmental needs as their male peers, may be buying into patriarchal models of power relations once they see how effective they are for boys in meeting these needs.

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. Teens and older children who are being intimidated by gangs/groups will simply stay away from school. Youth involved in gangs/groups find the fun and allure of illegal activities more enjoyable than school and will let their education suffer for the short-term thrill of involvement.

Young people spend a significant part of their day at or around schools so it is easy to see how they become a focal point for gang/group organizing, planning, and activities. Intruders and gang/group members from outside the school who trespass to "show force" with their friends inside create special problems for maintaining school safety.

Schools also provide a readily available supply of victims. Vulnerable and friendless youth cannot hide in this very public setting. Unsupervised halls, empty classrooms, and washrooms provide ample opportunities for gangs/groups to intimidate and practise extortion. Female targets for group sexual assaults known as "sexing", follow predictable routines based on class timetables, so it is easy to predict when a girl will be anywhere in the school at any given time.

However, the "problem" is not simply one of maintaining a safe environment. The frank and candid 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 who fear being labelled "racist" or "alarmist" will not report to police or senior level administrators the activities of minority youth gangs/groups or inter-racial gang/group conflict, even when it is quite serious. In other cases, teachers and administrators 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 model provides eight categories for differentiating among subsets of the two main gang/group configurations above.

The eight categories in the typology do not constitute, nor were they intended to be, a definitive typology. There is some overlap in the categories because of the wide diversity of individuals who comprise the membership of these groups and the similarity of many of their activities. The descriptors used highlight some of the specific characteristics that distinguish each group/gang in terms of membership or activities, but they should be considered only as a conceptual framework to assist further refinement and analysis.

1. Fashion or Social

This appears to represent the single largest proportion of the youth gang/group phenomenon. They are a relatively loose configuration usually centred around a school, community centre, sometimes a neighbourhood, mall, or strip plaza and consist of "middle class" youths. The activities are largely social in nature, i.e., "hanging out", though their mischievous behaviour or adolescent pranks can sometimes get out of hand. Gatherings of these youths are often perceived as threatening by business persons, adults, and other youths who encounter them.

However, members of this type of gang/group do participate occasionally in group assaults or thefts, i.e., "swarmings". These group assaults can be both impulsive, based more on situational factors, or deliberately planned. This swarming activity can occur at school, in shopping malls, in subway stations, and sometimes on the street. The motivation for some of this group's more violent activities can arise from "macho posturing" and the need to impress girlfriends and male peers by bullying or harassing others.

Their perception of having power comes from the number of members in the group/gang. When apprehended for involvement in assaults or other crimes committed with their gang/group, police report that individual members will often display timidity, remorse, and fear.

Group members sometimes, though not always, wear common articles or styles of clothing ("Roots" sweat shirts, baseball caps, football jackets,

bandannas, etc.) or have some type of "look" that signifies membership. Some have names but most do not. Leadership of the group is fluid and appears to be based on popularity. Members can be local youth or live anywhere in the city. Some youth belong to two or more gangs/groups simultaneously.

2. Ethnocultural

This is only a slightly more stable configuration centred around a community, public place, or school. New Canadians or other visible minority youths whose customs, beliefs, or values differ markedly from mainstream Canadian culture and who often feel cutoff or isolated sometimes form themselves into groups. These young people have one foot in both cultures and live often a very fractured and disorganized life. Young persons in this position will use a group of peers to gain a sense of identity and belonging and to share their problems and concerns.

Denied full and equal access to education and employment opportunities because of language barriers, assimilation problems, age, or other forms of discrimination and prejudice, many young people from these groups simply give up hope and turn to one another for support and a livelihood. Sometimes these groups organize along willfully criminal lines possibly as a "community development" and "employment creation" scheme (selling drugs, theft rings, extortion, etc.).

Leadership in these groups appears to come from those members who are best at whatever they do in terms of illegal activity, from popularity, or from those who are most aggressive or violent. Socializing is typically confined to members within the group. This type of gang/group appears to be increasing in Ontario, especially in urban areas with diverse and rapidly changing population demographics.

3. Political, Pseudo-Political

The best example of this type of gang is the 'Skinheads'. There are various types of Skinhead groups - "Sharps", "Trojans", "Alternatives" - though the "Neo-Nazi" and "White Supremacist" individuals get most attention in the media. Originally, the Skinhead movement was a British-based, pro-working class, and basically non-violent youth movement. In Canada, the regalia of the British Skins has been appropriated but evidently not a great deal of the political or class analysis. With some young people, being a Skinhead, or dressing in the regalia of Skins, is more an act of rebellion against convention than it is a statement of particular political beliefs.

The Skinhead movement in Toronto is small and marginal relative to other types of youth gangs/groups. Though a few street fights, swarmings, and racially motivated assaults involving Skinheads have been reported in the press, the media appears to make them a larger part of the youth gang/group phenomenon than

they really are. However, they are becoming more organized and aligned with adult groups, particularly the neo-Nazi and White Supremacist Skins, and their activities are spreading throughout southern Ontario. These groups are also growing in British Columbia, Quebec, and Alberta.

4. Violent (Sociopathic)

This group represents perhaps the smallest proportion of the youth gang/group phenomenon. Though their numbers are small, their activities present a threat to community safety because of the sociopathic dimensions that can be observed in the violent behaviour of some of these youths, i.e., limited feelings of guilt or remorse for destructive acts against others, limited feelings of compassion or empathy for others, and acting-out behaviour characterized by high egocentrism. The term "wilding" has been used to describe the activities of this gang/group.

Membership consists of largely marginalized youth, some former or current psychiatric outpatients, and street "hangers-on". Group membership is unstable and leadership unstructured and shared. Their activities are almost always spontaneous and impulsive. Some of the activities of this type of group include common assault, sexual assault, vandalism, and theft.

5. Crime-Focused/Delinquent

This gang/group can be both organized and relatively stable or loosely defined and "project specific". These youths organize themselves to carry out group thefts, to sell drugs or stolen property, or to commit physical assaults such as gay-bashing. This type of gang/group is still a relatively small part of the phenomenon but evokes the most fear in adults and other youth and the most concern for law enforcement officials. What distinguishes them from other groups is the fact that the members are willfully criminal in their activities.

One variation of this type of group is the one that gets involved in "sexing" or group sexual assault. Typically, the victim is an adolescent female who is fondled over or under her clothes, often at school or on school property during regular hours. This group can consist of three or more boys who may otherwise have no other formal or informal association apart from being in a peer group of friends.

6. Street Youth

Street youth are not really a gang/group *per se* but an extremely fluid and unstable collection of marginalized youth, kids fleeing abusive home environments, and "weekend street kids" who are drawn to the romantic myth of life "on the street". These loosely associated groups can sometimes be involved in assaults, thefts, drug-trafficking, and vandalism. There appears to be no

leadership or identifiable group structure. It should be noted that not all street youth participate in these gangs/groups.

7. Volatile Group

This is more a situationally defined phenomenon of group/gang activity than anything organized or defined by members. In fact, there is no real membership *per se*, and such groups can consist of large numbers of strangers. Hooliganism or spontaneous acts of violence, thefts, and assaults that occur after rock concerts or sporting events are the typical behaviours perpetrated by this type of gang/group. They are a relatively small part of the phenomenon though their actions receive a great deal of media attention.

8. Vigilante

The vigilante gang/group is usually made up of familiar friends, relatives, or acquaintances all or most of whom could be simultaneously in any of the above types of gangs/groups. What distinguishes this type of gang/group from the others is not the membership *per se* but the motivation for their actions. The vigilante gang/group is usually formed to get revenge for acts of violence, thefts, or other perceived slights committed against their friends, brothers, sisters, or associates.

Young people say they get involved in this type of gang/group activity because they feel school officials protect offenders instead of holding them accountable. Young people involved in vigilante groups say they don't see school officials or police doing anything to protect them so they decide to "settle their own scores".

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.

Forming secret clubs with exclusive membership is a feature of childhood and adolescence. These clubs or groups work as an micro-community where members can associate and play in agreement. They provide a sense of security and safety in a rapidly changing society and offer refuge for youth experiencing a difficult transition to adulthood.

Through their peer associations in gangs/groups young people can experiment with roles, rules, and their new found freedom. They can obtain a sense of power, status, order, safety, and communion with others free from the scrutiny of the adult world, that is, until members come up against societal limits imposed by the rule of law. The powerful draw and influence of peers in early and middle adolescence gives these groups enormous power and influence over young people. Gangs/groups can take on a life of their own with rules of conduct and association that adults or outsiders would never understand.

Some communities are beginning to evolve a "gang culture" similar to that seen in inner city areas of large U.S. cities. It appears that some young people have adopted patterns for intra- and inter-racial gang/group conflict observed in the American media and are copying this behaviour in their own communities. At some point, and unfortunately it may already be too late, it will matter little that the roots of this violence were mimicry as inter-racial tensions build and the need to "settle scores" and "save face" erases all civility between these groups of young people.

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.

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.

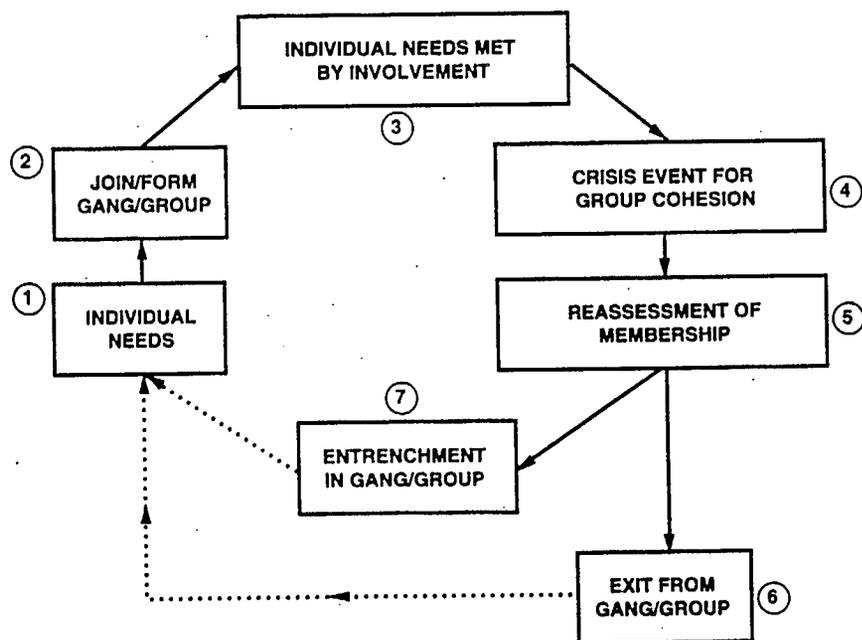


Figure 1: Gang/Group Involvement Cycle

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 a sudden transformation and elation. They achieve almost 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. Every crisis successfully weathered tends to strengthen the bonds between members and build group cohesion. Conversely, failing to pass successfully through the crisis will lead to the dissolution of the gang/group. Youth committed to a lifestyle of crime will pass through this stage quickly or with little effort.

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. As youth mature they tend to be less influenced by peers and more capable of independent thought and actions. It is often at this point that youth raised in families who support pro-social, anti-criminal values, attitudes, and beliefs will return to their early training. 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.

Implications of the "Gang/Group Involvement Model" For Prevention/Intervention

The *gang/group involvement cycle* model illustrates some of the different *decision points* and *stages of commitment* a young person passes through in the process of becoming involved in a gang/group. It also provides some insight into potential courses of action that might be taken to address issues of prevention and intervention.

Preventing youth from becoming involved in gangs/groups in the first place makes most sense. However, it is difficult to know exactly where to start focusing prevention efforts. Avoiding labelling non-criminally involved youth groups as "gangs" and individual youth as "gang members" is important. De-glamorizing gangs/groups and warning young people about the dangers and personal consequences associated with involvement will be necessary to address. De-mythologizing the gang/group as "family" and gang/group activity as being purely fun and not harmful to self, family, school, community, and others will also need to be considered.

Schools will need to address a number of issues: "flagging" isolated, vulnerable, and at risk youth; security and vigilance with respect to the physical plant of the school, including the elimination of intruders; students' feelings of fear for their safety; the development of sexual harassment and zero tolerance policies; and the protection and support of victims who disclose. Meeting the protection needs of students and holding offenders accountable would almost certainly reduce the need for gang/group involvement and the formation of *vigilante* type gangs/groups.

Parents, schools, community service organizations, youth-serving agencies, business, and government will need to work cooperatively to find or create opportunities for young people to experience success and self-esteem, particularly in association with positive anti-criminal peers and in pro-social ways. This could include things such as after school and evening sports and recreation programs, employment, mentoring, skills development and job training, and community-focused pride or work projects.

Young people in the study claim that the best time to get out of a gang/group is the first time you get caught doing something illegal. For some youth strong first interventions are necessary to deter them. For others simply being caught or confronted once is sufficient. Better differential assessment for the correct application of sanctions and "alternative measures" appears to be key at this point.

As youth become more entrenched in gangs/groups new challenges emerge for those trying to assist them. Young people trying to leave need to find pro-social ways to meet the needs and address the risk factors that motivated them to become involved in the first place. Meeting income, employment, and sustenance needs and treating addictions is fundamental for some youth as is enlisting family members or other adults as support persons or mentors in the community.

Also, once youth are entrenched in gangs/groups it takes a different kind of outreach to connect with these young people. Police need to consider linking with community-based streetworkers connected to community-based local social service

programs. These streetworkers could provide a mediation or bridge-building role between youth and police while officers work to establish their own rapport and connection with gang/group members.

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).

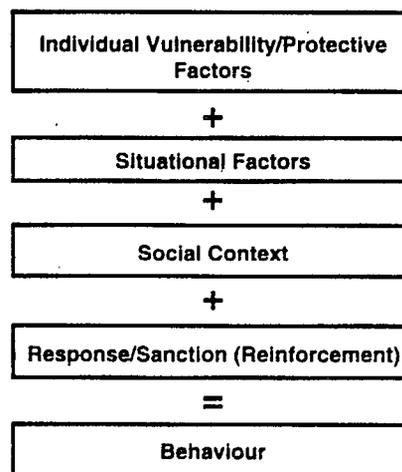


Figure 2: Interactional Model of Youth Gang/Group Crime and Violence

The model is not additive or linear but simply delineates those factors which appear to influence the behaviour of youth in gangs/groups.

Individual Vulnerability/Protective Factors

Individual vulnerability and protective factors 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
- Good health and proper nutrition

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
- 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.

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.

Many of us don't realize that violence permeates our society so extensively that it has become almost invisible. Young people witness violence in the intimate relationships of parents and other adults, in sports, in news coverage, in war, in politics, and in various forms of media entertainment. Critics who argue that most youth can separate fantasy from reality when watching violence in entertainment overlook vulnerable, marginalized, and impressionable youth for whom such "entertainment" is instructive.

The socialization of males is worth highlighting for a moment. Raised to take charge, have power "over" others and to ignore physical pain and deny their emotions, boys may be able to swarm, assault, and sexually assault others with no awareness of the

impact on victims. This may be one important reason why a majority of youth gang/group members are male and a majority of incidents of youth violence involve males. Unfortunately, it is also true that, with the exception of sexual violence, males appear to be the victims in most types of violent crime.

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.

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.

Implications of "The Interaction Model" for Prevention/Intervention

While the *involvement cycle* model outlines a process for becoming and staying involved in a gang/group the *interactional model* provides an account of the factors that appear to have impact on whether or not members' decide to become involved in crime and violence. This multi-level analysis locates violent youth gang/group behaviour in a social context and places the individual youth, with all his/her strengths and weaknesses, vulnerability and risk factors, in a tension between social norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs, and the social institutions that are mandated to support and serve young people.

Two categories of the model overlap to some degree with two of those in the gang/group *involvement cycle* model. *Individual needs* is roughly equivalent to *vulnerability/protective factors*. *Crisis event* possesses some features of *response/sanction*. Prevention measures designed to address a youth's *vulnerability factors* may have the effect of lowering motivation to commit crime, whether it be for personal or material gain. Enhancing *protective factors* may have the effect of "inoculating" young people against the effects of *situational factors* and empower them to resist committing illegal or anti-social behaviour or discourage others from doing the same. Lowering the rewards and increasing the cost of involvement in illegal behaviour through the application of appropriate legal or other sanctions, especially when a youth is first apprehended, may have important specific deterrence value. General deterrence may be achieved through the development and application of appropriate sexual harassment and zero tolerance policies and procedures providing they are clear, communicated to young people, and consistently enforced. It involves controlling young people's access to guns owned by family members and increasing the severity of consequences for weapons use and possession.

Addressing the *social context* means demanding accountability from systems, professionals, young people, and government. It involves our reassessing teaching and learning as it pertains to critical thinking skills, life skills, media literacy, cultural differences, and gender role socialization. It also involves holding the media accountable for portrayals of gratuitous violence, the omission of positive images or the transmission of harmful images that stereotype, demean or denigrate persons, and for sensationalizing and oversimplifying complex social phenomenon. In fact, we are unlikely to make any significant process against rising levels of violence in Canada until we become "re-sensitized" to its impact on victims.

Situational factors are often unpredictable and thus difficult to control. However, things such as better lighting, improved building security, and consideration for the safety of persons in the design of public spaces are tangible and relatively straightforward to address. Impulsiveness and peer pressure and the presence of weapons are more difficult. "Inoculation" against the situational factors, in the form of life-skills training, is perhaps the best if not the only defense we have. The best method of teaching young people to be prepared to deal with ambiguous or highly arousing or stimulating situations, is through role-playing. Knowledge acquired through lectures or reading materials may not generalize to the community because the youth's emotions do not get engaged or the examples are unfamiliar. A better way to prepare young people for what they will need to know to resist situational factors is to observe or participate with peers in role-playing scenarios that are realistic and likely to be encountered in their own community.

Media Origins of the Phenomenon

Debate over the effects of media images of gratuitous violence on young peoples' behaviour has yielded little consensus. There is no question that these images are present in all forms of youth subculture from music videos to computer games, films, television programs, comic books, cartoons, and advertisements. Violence as a form of

entertainment titillates, arouses, and sells consumer products; it is that simple. Visual media appeals to adolescents and serves as a passive educator providing them with models of behaviour in a rapidly evolving universal youth subculture. For young people searching for an identity and a place in the world media images are a major source of information.

Claims that the youth gang/group phenomenon is, or was, media created are not without some merit. News coverage of the American gang scene in places such as Los Angeles and New York has provided Canadian youth with the scripts, regalia, and models for gangs and gang behaviour. In essence, much of what we are seeing here in Canada has been imported and appropriated from the United States. There is ample evidence of mimicry. Also, the media, through selective coverage of youth gang/group and other forms of violence, has created an impression in many peoples' minds that Canada is as violent as the U.S., an impression which is not supported by the statistics on violence in Canada.

However, as the debate continues, two larger and perhaps more important points have been missed. First, the media reports only the more sensational aspects of the phenomenon such as Neo-Nazi group incidents, "swarmings", "riots", and the occasional shooting, but provides few accounts of the widespread, though subtler, kinds of intimidation, characteristic of gangs/groups in schools. In fact, a comparison of police charge records and clippings from Toronto newspapers reveals that only a small number of all occurrences of gang/group activities is ever brought to public attention (Banner, Ryan, and Mathews, 1993; Banner and Mathews, 1993).

Second, the youth gang/group phenomenon, in its present manifestation in this country, has now become an entrenched part of youth subculture that is being passed down to younger teens and children. Even banning all depictions of violence in the media immediately would not change this situation. Debate over media origins of the youth gang/group phenomenon is purely academic now.

Power and Control

One major reason why young people become involved in youth gang/group activity or stay involved is for the feeling of power and control it gives members. On their own these young people often feel vulnerable. It is worth noting that many, though not all, of the youth interviewed in the study were small or slight in build. However, large physical size did not appear to attenuate the need or desire for power and control and protection.

This aspect of power and control over others is a key dimension to understanding youth gang/group involvement. Power and control over others gives a sense of power and control over one's own life, over one's own insecurities, over the uncertainties of life commonly experienced by young people struggling with the transition from childhood to

adulthood. It is evident that these young people have acquired a model and understanding of power that is predominant in our culture, namely "power over" as opposed to "shared power".

Needs for power and a sense of personal efficacy can be achieved very quickly in a gang/group. This speed is a powerful reinforcer and something which makes involvement somewhat addictive. This addictive quality makes exiting or giving up certain behaviours difficult.

Responding to Youth Gangs/Groups

Planning a comprehensive intervention strategy will be an enormous challenge because the youth gang/group phenomenon in Canada is a moving target. Gang/group activities, membership, names, and locations and kinds of activities are constantly shifting. Our present lack of information and understanding about youth gangs/groups is unfortunate, especially when some immediate action is necessary. The use of weapons, sexual and common assaults, gay-bashing, robbery, vandalism, and other criminal aspects of the phenomenon certainly call for immediate attention.

Enhancing the Role of Police

In addition to parents and schools, police are one of the key partners in the struggle to respond to youth gangs/groups. Study participants see a reactive (law enforcement) and pro-active (education) role for police.

There is no question of a need for law enforcement. Comments from both adults and youth about just how serious the problem can get is ample evidence of that. However, most of the suggestions made about the role of police had to do with the manner in which law enforcement is practised, specifically the behaviour and attitude of individual officers.

Young people are looking for three things from police: involvement, open communication, and respect. Youth want police officers to get to know them and the communities they serve, to be someone who is tuned in to the needs and the joys and the hurts and the pains of the people they protect and serve. They want to see police "live and interactive" with community members, themselves included. They want to know that the local police officer is "their cop", someone they can trust and depend on. But most of all young people want respect from police and officers who will be straight with them. Young people admit that police officers can have a strong impact on them when they are shown respect and genuine concern.

Obtaining the kind of knowledge and skills necessary to work effectively with adolescents takes time. Unfortunately, youth work is not a high priority in most police forces or among police officers. Many officers feel Youth Bureaus are where you spend a brief period of your time before moving on to "real" law enforcement. What police need to understand is that the time they spend providing a professional police service to

youth today will have a significant impact on the criminal lifestyle choices of many young people tomorrow.

In terms of a pro-active role participants see the police as a valuable information resource for parents, youth, school administrators, and teachers. Police are important sources of information for a community but they need to demystify the law enforcement process and help people understand what a citizen can expect from a police officer, and why. Educating teachers and youth about the existence of and dangers associated with youth gangs/groups, and helping parents identify the early warning signs of their son's or daughter's involvement is crucial. Without this information a community has only rumour and fear to guide its actions.

Police can play a significant support role in maintaining school safety if it is managed properly. A pilot project of such a partnership is currently underway in Toronto and involves D.A. Morrison Junior High School and the #5 District Street Crime Unit of the Metropolitan Toronto Police Force (Ryan, Mathews, and Banner, 1993b). The key features of the program are:

1. Teachers, students, staff, and parents are invited to attend a meeting or assembly where they are informed about the purpose and nature of the program and invited to ask questions;
2. The police officer is not *in* the school but *on call* to school administrators;
3. The same police officer responds to calls from the school. This helps the officer to get to know the students, community, administrators, and non-teaching staff and vice versa;
4. The officer acts as both a law enforcement and information resource to students, administration, and staff;
5. The police officer maintains an intimate connection with students through involvement in non-law enforcement activities such as teaching, showing up at dances or sporting events, or dropping by the school at lunch hour just to talk.

Schools

The presence of large numbers of young people, the large size of many school buildings and grounds, the constant interactions of the student body in halls and classrooms, and the presence of intruders all add to the problem of maintaining safe schools. School administrators need to be vigilant with respect to the physical plant factors that may contribute to gang/group violence or other activities. Defining or strengthening student disciplinary procedures to reflect a zero tolerance attitude towards violence and ensuring consistent enforcement are important first steps. Policies addressing violence must balance the rights of offenders and victims and ensure both have access to supports and resources.

Students should be encouraged in every appropriate and possible way to take ownership and responsibility for the safety and security of their schools. Organizing a "school watch" program or school safety committee, and allowing anonymous disclosure of potential or actual crime and delinquency activities on or off school property may assist law enforcement officers to apprehend persons threatening school safety or to confront potentially dangerous situations before they escalate. Of course inviting students to take ownership of their schools means sharing power and decision-making responsibilities which may be difficult for some Boards or administrators.

Across the curriculum themes that confront and address conflict, sexism, racism, heterosexism, and provide critical thinking skills and visual or media literacy will be of enormous benefit to the process of preventing some of the behaviour seen in gangs/groups. Schools should consider offering peer counselling, anger management, and conflict resolution skills, and "gang-proofing" to students.

Peer learning and influence models suggest that positive peer groups have the potential to provide an optimal environment in which gang/group members can learn pro-social values and behaviours. Young people whose impulsive or situationally influenced choices are toward antisocial or criminal actions could be encouraged and supported to change their behaviours through exposure to positive peer interactions.

Some School Boards are using police officers to educate their students about the hazards and illegalities of carrying and using weapons. This kind of activity helps build a bridge between police and the schools and is an example of the kind of linkages to external community resources that schools need to develop further.

School Board officials and administrators should consult regularly with all personnel, teaching and non-teaching, to keep informed about individual trouble-makers and gang/group activities in their schools. School Boards and administrators need to be very supportive of all personnel and assist them in all ways possible when they are forced to confront violent or threatening students in their classrooms, respond to attacks on their person or property, or choose to pursue legal actions against a student or intruder who assaults or threatens them.

Social Services

Social service agencies can also play a supportive role in providing support and assistance to young people in schools. Linking up with the guidance and counselling department in high schools professionals in community-based social service agencies could help students deal with the personal and family problems and pressures that leave them vulnerable to exploitation and at risk of either joining a gang/group or being victimized by one.

A number of vulnerable young people involved in gangs/groups are in need of attention from social services. However, it is extremely unlikely that any more than a few would ever find their way to agencies. Community outreach is the most practical and

realistic method for reaching young people involved in gangs/groups. In most communities the police are the only ones who see young people on their own turf and they simply are not trained or prepared to deal with all the complex issues affecting the lives of these youth. Social services, churches, or other community groups have to go into the malls, onto the streets, and into the schools if they want to be of real assistance.

Government

The Young Offenders Act was mentioned repeatedly in the study, some participants in support of it, others critical. Some youth felt that the Y.O.A. benefitted them and were grateful for the second chance it gave them to get their lives back together. Others exploited its provisions and used those opportunities to further their criminal careers. What were benefits to some were loopholes to others. This points to a problem in our ability to differentially assess offenders perhaps more than it does to problems in the Act.

However, there was strong consensus concerning the need to amend the Y.O.A. to allow for harsher sanctions against violent or repeat offenders and weapons offences. Sadly, it was apparent from speaking with the youth that no changes to the Y.O.A. would affect the behaviour of chronic young offenders who feel they have nothing left to lose.

Critics of the Y.O.A. fail to realize that it works for most young offenders. A little over half of all youth who are charged each year under the Y.O.A. are first offenders. That means many, if not most, are not returning to court a second time.

Many young people have an impression that the Y.O.A. is lenient, that youth can get away with anything, and that nothing really happens to them. It is this impression that the government needs to address, and soon. The tragic part of this assumption is that much does indeed happen to them. Charged offenders miss time away from school which can result in failure or lower grades. The stigma attached to being arrested and charged lives with the young person for a long time. Criminal records close many doors just as the young person is trying to start out in his/her life. Being known to police and other community members as a former gang member makes them suspect even if they are staying out of trouble with the law. Contrary to popular opinion young offenders' records are not automatically wiped clean.

But the costs go even farther. The loss of former neighbourhood friends who chose a different and non-criminal path can leave the youth isolated back in their communities. Criminal skills acquired in the gang/group are of little use in the conventional employment world. Gang/group members acquire few opportunities to achieve success and establish themselves or obtain positive self-esteem outside the gang/group context. This can leave them feeling very vulnerable, alone, and afraid, which often lures them back into criminal gang/group activity.

When discussing the Young Offenders Act or strengthening certain sanctions it is important to heed the cautions of "labelling" theorists who suggest that we may need to be careful when we attempt to define or describe the actions of youth gang/group members. Not all young people involved in gangs/groups or illegal activities are "bad" or criminal. Many adults forget that some of their own teen behaviour may have skirted the line between crime and prank. Labelling theorists would certainly advocate for a judicious use of the criminal justice system and for more and better use in Ontario of "alternative measures" under the Young Offenders Act.

The adult professionals in the study report much dissatisfaction with the way certain Acts of Legislation impede their ability to respond effectively to the youth gang/group phenomenon and youth violence. Mentioned specifically were the Freedom of Information and Privacy legislation, the Education Act, the Child and Family Services Act, and the Young Offenders Act (for a more detailed discussion of these concerns see Mathews, Banner, and Ryan, 1992).

Legislative issues aside, there are other dimensions of the youth gang/group phenomenon that will require a more macro-social level of government intervention. For example, ethnic-based gangs/groups, especially those composed of youth who are recent immigrants, are sending us a message that their communities are in distress and ill equipped to help members adjust to their new lives in Canada. Governments will need to address this issue and do everything possible to increase these peoples' access to education, jobs, housing, social services, and other supports.

The influence of poverty and high youth unemployment are also factors which need to be addressed as does strengthening the social bonds between youth and their families. This means involving families in individual interventions and in the development of a comprehensive intervention strategy. It also means that government needs to be conscientious in resourcing families, however defined, to provide the best possible level of care to children and youth.

Freedom without Limits has a Dark Side

Listening to the words of the youth who wanted to be caught it was hard not to hear a cry for boundaries and limits. As strange as it may sound to adults or non-involved youth, breaking the social taboos against harming others and crossing the boundary between pro-social and anti-social behaviour leaves many of these young people ungrounded and often afraid. The social taboo against harming others gives us limits and norms through which we guide our social relations. Through them we obtain a sense of safety and predictability. Once young people cross the line and break the taboo, the forbidden becomes known to them. If they don't get caught there is a temporary thrill and euphoria that comes with the behaviour. If they continue to cross with impunity there is a tendency to up the stakes and risk testing stronger taboos and limits.

The problem is that as they keep crossing the thresholds the whole idea of a boundary can disappear. At this point gang/group members may start to feel that there

may be no limits. They may murder, they may die violently. Such awareness can put these youth in a strange land with no maps to guide them. At this point they typically face an existential crisis of meaning and will review their lives and decide to alter their path. Tragically, some decide to go on.

Addressing the Social and Systemic

Responding to youth gangs/groups and youth violence should not be a process of simply focusing on the youth themselves but must include thoughtful reflection on the institutions and the professionals who serve them. There is much in our institutions and professional practices that support and encourage youth violence.

Violent acts do not simply or necessarily reflect pathology in an individual or in groups of individuals. They are also social in nature and have a social meaning. One need only look at the differences between the youth who lashes out violently against a perpetrator after giving up on school officials to respond to his/her victimization, the minority youth who gathers with friends from a similar background to defend themselves against the assaults of racist groups, or the youth struggling for survival on inhospitable streets who joins a gang/group for protection and material gain to understand this simple point.

At the broadest conceptual level, the development of a comprehensive response strategy will need to proceed along short and long-term timelines and address the individual and social/systemic factors that have some bearing on the phenomenon. Most important of all, any comprehensive strategy that does not include input and cooperation from schools, police, business, community groups, ratepayers, churches, government, and young people and their families, will likely fail.

Our attempts to understand and address youth gangs/groups and youth violence must be self-reflexive. We as a society, as youth serving professionals, as parents, as adults, must stand in the circle with young people and search out the place we ourselves occupy in the perpetuation of pro-violence, racist, sexist, anti-gay, or "youthphobic" attitudes, values, and beliefs.

CHAPTER 7

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 or 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 services 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.

CHAPTER 8

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The phenomenon of youth gangs/groups and youth violence described by study participants is complex and multi-faceted and their recommendations cover a wide range of policy, legal, and service issues pertaining to both law enforcement and prevention. Many of the concerns identified in the research raise secondary issues and pose enormous challenges to government, schools, police, and parents. In the struggle to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon and plan appropriate and comprehensive responses the following areas will require further development and focused investigation.

1. Recommendations provided by study participants should be analyzed for the contribution they can make to policy and program development in the areas of youth violence and youth gang/group prevention and suppression.
2. Comprehensive community-based programs that link schools in partnership with the wider youth-serving community need to be developed, supported and *evaluated* for their impact on youth violence and perceptions of safety.
3. In-service programs that provide in-service training to police and school personnel need to be developed, supported, and *evaluated* for their effectiveness in providing professionals with skills to help them prevent or intervene in violent situations.
4. Current prevention, diversion, or corrections programs in Canada and the United States that have been successful in responding to youth gangs/groups should be reviewed and assessed for their usefulness in other communities across the country.
5. School Boards across Canada should be encouraged to survey their students and solicit their views concerning school safety, youth gangs/groups, youth violence, and the impact of violence on the learning environment.
6. Communities across the country should be supported and encouraged to hold public consultations in order to determine and document their experiences and concerns pertaining to youth crime and violence.
7. School Boards should be encouraged to develop and *evaluate* policy and prevention programs aimed specifically at youth gangs/groups and youth violence.
8. Schools and Police Forces in cities and communities across the country should make every effort to document the incidence of multiple perpetrator youth crime and violence, and keep current and detailed demographic information on victims and perpetrators.

9. Police Forces should keep detailed information on the types and extent of use of weapons in multiple perpetrator youth crime and violence.
10. The federal government must consult a wide range of front-line youth serving professionals and undertake a comprehensive analysis of the Acts of Legislation that pertain to youth crime and violence and evaluate their effectiveness in terms of prevention and intervention.
11. Provinces, in cooperation with community-level partners, should develop and *evaluate* diversion or "alternative measures" programs that focus specifically on youth involved in multiple perpetrator youth crime and violence.
12. The literature on recidivism in young offender populations should be reviewed and assessed and promising intervention approaches incorporated in these programs specifically designed for youth involved in multiple perpetrator youth crime and violence.
13. Communities should be encouraged to develop and *evaluate* outreach programs to youth involved in gangs/groups.
14. Research needs to be undertaken that will examine the specific needs and risks that leave a young person vulnerable to the lure of gangs/groups or to be victimized.
15. Research needs to be undertaken that will examine the rise of female involvement in multiple perpetrator youth crime and violence and document the risks and needs specific to young women.
16. Research needs to be undertaken that will help us understand young peoples' wellness and why youth *do not* become involved in youth gangs/groups or violence.
17. Research into the involvement of children under the age of 12 and developmentally delayed youth also needs to be undertaken.

APPENDIX 'A'

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APPENDIX "B"

THE GUELPH COMMUNITY'S RESPONSE TO YOUTH GANGS/GROUPS AND YOUTH VIOLENCE

The City of Guelph, Ontario, began to identify a problem with youth gangs in the summer of 1989. They realized that their schools were becoming a major recruiting area for gangs. They also discovered that young people involved in gang/group activity were using weapons including guns and that there was a high degree of fear among the student population.

The Guelph community recognized early that a community partnership was necessary to better understand what was going on and determine how they could address the problem. They formed an *ad hoc* group to examine the problem further. The *ad hoc* group included representatives from police, education, probation, Crown Attorney's Office, corrections, community agencies, parents, and victims. The group drew up a number of recommendations and then approached the School Boards with their plan. School Boards were initially shocked by the information presented by the group. When the schools realized the seriousness of the problem they became partners in what evolved into the Wellington County Task Force on Youth Violence.

The Task Force was formed to "develop and maintain cooperative strategies and share resources to reduce the incidence of youth violence and youth gang activities." The Task Force's over-riding philosophy is "to pursue not only a community-based framework of crisis intervention to decrease youth violence, but to provide youth with opportunities to develop more responsible and pro-social behaviour, to increase their coping strategies, and to design programs on a preventative model, focusing on building the self-esteem of the young person."

The Task Force encountered no major barriers to the development of their model. Their only remarkable struggle was against the widespread ignorance about the seriousness of the problem on the part of School Boards and the general public. The Task Force's first step was to educate their members. They initiated programs such as "Principal Awareness", "Adopt-a-Cop", "Adopt-a-School", and a "job shadowing" program where police and school officials exchanged jobs for a week. They also initiated an "anti-gang" curriculum module for grade eight students and a comprehensive Violence in Schools Policy.

The Task Force outlined eight objectives for their partnership between School Boards and law enforcement agencies.

Objective 1: To continue to provide an information base for member agencies and communities.

- Objective 2: To clearly define the issues and coordinate and clarify the roles of the participating agencies.
- Objective 3: To continue to provide resources for agencies to co-ordinate and develop in-service programs
- Objective 4: To further develop community awareness of the problem, the existence of the committee, and strategies for community action.
- Objective 5: To act as an advocate to petition significant individuals and groups to reduce the incidence of youth violence in Wellington County.
- Objective 6: To further develop and co-ordinate prevention programs.
- Objective 7: To assist in the development of programs and events to enhance parental/guardian awareness.
- Objective 8: To encourage support systems for victims of youth violence.

The Guelph community feels they have had success in reducing the amount of youth violence and gang/group activity in schools. The partners of the Guelph model attribute their success to the time they took to develop trust and mutual support among members and the fact that they established a mission statement, clear roles for members, a variety of public awareness, educational, and prevention programs, and a comprehensive school violence policy. They also identify the following principles as foundational to their success.

1. They proceeded slowly.
2. They involved a diverse range of partners with a stake in the issues.
3. They kept the group to a manageable and functional size.
4. They selected their membership on the basis of shared purpose and objectives.
5. They maintained an open communication link with other agency and community partners who, though not at the table, could provide input or receive information.

Though careful to point out that youth violence and youth gangs/groups have not been entirely eliminated they feel they have made significant progress. By building effective community partnerships and empowering students, parents, victims, professionals, and educators with supports, services, and relevant information, the Guelph community has demonstrated a high level of commitment to the well-being of students and the safety of their schools.

APPENDIX "C"

INTERVIEW GUIDES

Youth Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to help us with this study. The purpose of the research is to help tell the story of young people involved in youth gangs. Schools, social services, and others need to know what you think so they can assist young people. Your responses will be kept totally confidential. Your name will never appear in any report written about this study. I would like your permission to tape record the interview to ensure I don't miss any of the important things you say.

1. How do you think most young people view youth violence in our society?
2. Is the problem of gangs serious in your opinion?
3. What is a gang?
4. Are gangs a problem in schools? In what way?
5. Why do you think young people join gangs?
6. Do guys and girls get involved in gangs for the same reasons?
7. Are there any young people who are more likely to get involved in gangs than others?
8. Why do you think you decided to get involved with a gang?
Prompts: - what did you think you would get out of it?
- what did you get out of it?
- did you think you might get into trouble with the law?
9. How long have you been/were you involved with a gang(s)?
10. What is the average size of a gang? Do young people join more than one gang? Why? Why not?
11. How important is a gang's name?
12. What kinds of illegal or other activities do gangs do?
13. How do gang members see their illegal activity?

14. Are there gangs that other gangs are afraid of?
15. Do young people under the age of 12 ever get involved in gangs? What role do these younger kids play?
16. Are weapons used by gang members? Why types? Why? When?
17. How does a young person get out of a gang?
18. Compare yourself before and after being involved in a gang.
19. If you were not in a gang what do you think you would be doing?
20. What have your experiences been like with police, social services, schools, courts, since you got into trouble?
21. What role do you think police can play in response to youth violence/gangs.
22. What role do you think schools can play?
23. What role do you think social services can play?
24. What role do you think government can play?
25. What do you think young people need to keep them from getting involved in gang activity?
26. If you were given the job of helping young people involved in gangs what would you do?
27. If you knew another kid was going to get into a gang what would you tell them?
28. What do you think will happen if we do not help young people involved in gangs?
29. How well do you think young people involved in gangs understand the Young Offenders Act.
30. Do you think there are any racial overtones in most gang fights?
31. Is there anything else you would like to add to your comments before we finish the interview?

Adult/Front-line Personnel Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to help us with this study. The purpose of the research is to help tell the story of young people involved in youth gang/group activity. We would like to learn your perspective on this phenomenon in order to provide information to government and other agencies/organizations interested in developing a comprehensive service response. Your responses will be kept totally confidential. Your name will never appear in any written report about this study. I would like your permission to tape record the interview.

1. How do you view youth violence in our society?
2. Is the problem of youth gangs serious in your opinion?
3. What is a gang?
4. Are gangs a problem in schools? In what way?
5. Why do you think young people join gangs?
6. Do guys and girls get involved in gangs for the same reasons?
7. Are there any young people who are more likely to get involved in gangs than others?
8. What is the average size of a gang/group? Do young people join more than one gang?
9. How important is a gang's name?
10. What kinds of things do gangs do?
11. What kinds of illegal activity do gangs commit?
12. How do you think gang members see their illegal activity?
13. Are there gangs that other gangs are afraid of?
14. Are there persons that youth gangs are more likely to pick on?
15. Do young people under the age of 12 ever get involved in gangs? What role do these younger kids play?
16. Are weapons are used by gang members? When? Why? What types?
17. Under what circumstances do gang members use weapons?

18. How does a young person get out of a gang?
19. Describe your approach to dealing with gangs or youth in gangs?
20. What problems hinder our ability to help suppress gang formation or assist young people involved in gang activity?
21. What role do you think police can play in response to youth violence/gangs.
22. What role do you think schools can play?
23. What role do you think social services can play?
24. What role do you think government can play?
25. What role do you think parents can play?
26. What do you think young people need to keep them from getting involved in gang activity?
27. If you were given the job of helping young people involved in gangs what would you do?
28. What do you think will happen if we do not help young people involved in gangs?
29. Do you think there are any racial overtones in most gang fights?
30. How well do you think young people involved in gangs understand the Young Offenders Act.
31. Are you aware of any coordinated community response strategies that have been developed in response to youth gangs?
32. Is there anything else you would like to add to your comments before we finish the interview?

Victims of Youth Gang/Group Violence Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to help us with this study. The purpose of the research is to help tell the story of young people involved in youth gangs. We are also interested in learning about the experiences of those who have been victimized by youth gangs/groups. Schools, social services, and others need to know what you think so they can assist young people. Your responses will be kept totally confidential. Your name will never appear in any report written about this study. I would like your permission to tape record the interview to ensure I don't miss any of the important things you say.

1. How do you think most young people view youth violence in our society?
2. Is the problem of gangs serious in your opinion?
3. What is a gang?
4. Are gangs a problem in schools? In what way?
5. Why do you think young people join gangs?
6. Do guys and girls get involved in gangs for the same reasons?
7. Are there any young people who are more likely to get involved in gangs than others?
8. Why do you think gangs pick on or hurt others?
9. Is there any person(s) a gang is more likely to pick on?
10. What is the average size of a gang? Do young people join more than one gang? Why? Why not?
11. How important is a gang's name?
12. What kinds of illegal or other activities do gangs do?
13. How do gang members see their illegal activity?
14. Are there gangs that other gangs are afraid of?
15. Do young people under the age of 12 ever get involved in gangs? What role do these younger kids play?
16. Are weapons used by gang members? Why types? Why? When?

17. Compare yourself before and after being picked on/hurt by a gang.
18. What have your experiences been like with police, social services, schools, courts, since you got picked on/hurt?
19. What role do you think police can play in response to youth violence/gangs.
20. What role do you think schools can play?
21. What role do you think social services can play?
22. What role do you think government can play?
23. What do you think young people need to keep them from getting involved in gang activity?
24. If you were given the job of helping young people involved in gangs what would you do?
25. If you knew another kid was going to get into a gang what would you tell them?
26. What do you think will happen if we do not help young people involved in gangs?
27. What can we do to best support or assist young people who are picked on or hurt by youth gangs?
28. How well do you think young people involved in gangs understand the Young Offenders Act.
29. Do you think there are any racial overtones in most gang fights?
30. Is there anything else you would like to add to your comments before we finish the interview?

