

GANGS

**JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY OF ALBERTA
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The characterization of gangs tend to be a reflection of the sources reporting about them. Media, law enforcement, academic and research, government and community perspectives all analyze and report on Canada's gang situation. There is speculation that the media sensationalizes the gang problem, raising unfounded issues and concerns to the public. Law enforcement has identified various gangs throughout Alberta and Canada, and is working to disassemble gangs and incarcerate gang members. The role of federal and provincial governments has been to provide funding, primarily to law enforcement, in order to reduce gang activity in the country. Academic sources continue to research gangs and their members, to better understand the individual and social influences that effect an individual's choice to join and remain in a gang. Communities are continuing to access research to develop programs and prevent people from joining gangs, help gang members change their lives and provide general support to potential gang members or people who want to leave gang life.

Responses from media, law enforcement, government, community and individuals tend to be reactive. A more realistic picture of gangs appears when certain factors contributing to gang involvement are understood. The perception that gangs consist solely of youth and ethnic minorities is not true. Particular legislative decisions have effected the perceived increase in gangs. Anti-gang legislation passed this year increased the severity of penalties of individuals involved in gangs. "Less tolerance" policies are more commonly enforced by governments, law enforcement and community agencies. These factors contribute to a trend toward more severe charges against and longer sentences imposed on gang members, even though statistics show that youth crime has continually decreased since 1992. The contradiction between perceptions and facts must be resolved.

Improved responses to gang related crime are necessary. Suggested responses include improved communication and coordination among law enforcement and community groups. This may help control gang activity, improve access to information so that law enforcement and community groups can obtain a more accurate picture of how the gang phenomenon is evolving. It is important to take high risk youth seriously, especially at earlier ages, because this might help to prevent future or further gang involvement. It is also important to understand that the process of leaving a gang is a very difficult choice to make and much support is required by these individuals. Better programming for individuals trying to leave gangs is required. Further research into what could effectively keep individuals from returning to gangs would be of great benefit. Overall, a more accurate understanding of the gang situation in Canada, including the risk factors that lead individuals to gangs, may reduce discrimination against youth and ethnic minorities.

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of gangs has been of increasing concern provincially and nationally in the last few years. In order to understand the “gang phenomenon,” it is essential to look at what attracts people to gangs, the actions and events associated with being a gang member, types of gangs currently in existence and how government, law enforcement, community services and individuals are reacting and intervening to prevent gang activity. Research into gangs, from a Canadian perspective, has not been abundant. However, many theoretical and practical issues have been identified. The goals of prevention and intervention highlight the need for increased research and program development directed at high risk individuals.

THE VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES

Characterizations and descriptions of gangs tend to be a reflection of the sources reporting them. Media, law enforcement, academic and research, government and community perspectives interpret the gang phenomenon according to their role in society. The accuracy and legitimacy of these interpretations are relative to the organization reporting. It is difficult to distinguish what exactly the gang situation is, and what the proper response would be, when confronted with a variety of perspectives generated by these different groups.

Media

Media appears to be the most universal source of information. The media reports to a wide audience and has a significant impact on public perception. Recently, the Edmonton public has experienced heightened levels of fear, concern and moral panic due to media accounts of gang related youth violence. There is speculation that the media has sensationalized the gang problem, raising unfounded issues and concerns. The repercussions of this sensationalism have produced unease and fear in the public, less tolerance for youth crime and youth in general, increased reporting of any gang violence and vocal public demands for action.

Researchers Fasilio and Leckie (1993) determined that the media have produced an amplification of the nation’s street gang problem. They found that the media characterized gang activity as a widespread modern phenomenon and a significant threat to society (p. 22). According to Fasilio and Leckie, the media magnifies the severity and proximity of gang related criminal activity, offers little analysis on the causation of gangs and relies solely on citations from law enforcement as primary sources (Fasilio & Leckie, 1993, p. 3). They found law enforcement is the most cited reference in every Canadian region, while academics were rarely cited in any media coverage. Fasilio and Leckie’s findings may explain the lack of information regarding the causes of gangs in media stories (Fasilio & Leckie, 1993, p. 20). Fasilio and Leckie found that the media also emphasized the level of ethnic involvement of gangs. As a result, the researchers concluded that there is an overwhelming misperception that gang related crimes are committed solely by ethnic minorities (Gordon, 2000, p.

41). Newspaper titles published in recent years, such as “Gangs battle to death in vicious Year of Violence” and “Asian gang tentacles taking vicious grip,” are examples of articles that have produced reactions of fear and anxiety in the Canadian public (Fasilio & Leckie, 1993, p. 22). Research into media sensationalism also determined that there is a lack of effort to identify sources, leaving an aura of mystery that perpetuates the threatening nature of gangs (Fasilio & Leckie, 1993, p. 24).

Provincial research, conducted by Alberta Justice and the Criminal Intelligence Service of Alberta, reveals the negative effect of media on the Alberta public’s perception of gangs. Eighty one percent of respondents in this survey believed that there had been a significant increase in the amount of gang activity and violence in recent years (Criminal Intelligence Service of Alberta [CISA], 2000, p. 21). Research conducted at a national level supported these findings. It was found that the Canadian public’s perception of young people involved in gang related crime and violence had also substantially increased in the past few years (National Crime Prevention Centre [NCPC], 1999, p. 4). Of all respondents in Canada, Edmonton residents were most likely to perceive an increase in gang related crime (CISA, 2000, p. 24). These results are expected because there has been increased media coverage relating to gang violence in Edmonton.

Misperceptions regarding gangs do exist, and have been generated, to a large extent, from media accounts. While there is no doubt that gang activity does exist in Alberta and throughout Canada, it is the nature and extent of gang activity that remains obscure. Moving to an examination of reports by law enforcement and intelligence services, the nature and extent of gang activity from an experiential, “hands on” perspective is discussed.

Law Enforcement

In recent years, law enforcement and criminal intelligence services in Alberta have begun recording and monitoring gang activity. Members of law enforcement and criminal intelligence services have collaborated and compiled gang related information that identifies the various “types” of gangs currently active in Alberta. Law enforcement sources have reported that Asian, Aboriginal and the Hell’s Angels (an outlaw motorcycle gang) are the largest and most criminally active gangs. Traditional gangs, hate groups and Eastern European organized crime are also present in Alberta, although the degree of criminal activity associated with these gangs is not considered as threatening. Following are the classifications of gangs, and the nature and extent of their criminal activity according to law enforcement and intelligence sources.

Asian Gangs

Asian gangs are characterized as sophisticated and large, with some gangs having more than a hundred members (CISA, 2000, p. 7). Police reports have indicated that the number of individuals joining these gangs has continued to increase. Asian gangs are involved in criminal activities such as drug trafficking, illegal gambling, prostitution, counterfeiting, fraud and money laundering (Criminal Intelligence Service Canada [CISC], 2000, p. 6). In Alberta, conflicts with other gangs

involved in similar business activities have resulted in infrequent but high profile shootings between gang members (CISC, 2000, p. 5).

Aboriginal Gangs

Aboriginal gang activity has been recorded in Alberta. There are currently nine Aboriginal gangs identified in the city of Edmonton. Four of the larger and more organized gangs are the Alberta Warriors, Native Syndicate, Redd Alert and Indian Posse, with chapters in both Edmonton and Calgary. Gang activity does not appear to be limited to these urban centres, but also exists on reserves throughout Alberta (CISA, 2000, p. 8). Police monitoring of these gangs has revealed a close relationship between Aboriginal gangs and the Hell's Angels. The Criminal Intelligence Service of Alberta (2000) has recorded "business" transactions between the two gangs. It appears they are working together and sharing profits from criminal activities such as theft, drug trafficking, robberies, assaults, intimidation and extortion (p. 9).

Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs

Law enforcement considers the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang a national priority. Across Canada, the Hell's Angels has remained a powerful and well structured criminal organization for many years. In Alberta, the Hell's Angels are the only motorcycle gang in existence, with chapters in Calgary, Edmonton and Red Deer (CISA, 2000, p. 9). Police affirm that Hell's Angels members are involved with the trafficking of cocaine, firearms and explosives, growth and distribution of marijuana, money laundering, intimidation and threats, collection of protection money from both legitimate and illegitimate businesses, fraud and prostitution (CISA, 2000, p. 9). Law enforcement predicts that the Hell's Angels will expand in all areas of illegitimate business as new chapters of the gang appear throughout Western Canada.

Police have put a concerted effort into eliminating the Hell's Angels from Alberta. Alberta law enforcement has joined forces with other law enforcement services across the country in an attempt to gain perspective and optimize strategies for gang reduction. Undercover operations have been initiated for the purpose of eliminating the drug and prostitution trade run by Hell's Angels members. Police believe these operations have worked to their advantage, because they have incarcerated key members of the gang and witnessed increased infighting and tension among Hell's Angels gang members (CISC, 2000, p. 10). Hell's Angels members have been officially charged with such offenses as extortion, assault and drug related charges in recent years.

Traditional Gangs

According to intelligence services, traditional organized crime has been active in Alberta since the early 1980s. Members of traditional gangs originate from a Mafia family based in the Montreal area. In Alberta, their region of activity seems to be primarily Calgary (CISA, 2000, p. 8). Traditional gang members have been involved with money laundering, large scale frauds, drug trafficking and

corruption within business communities.

Racist and Hate Groups

Law enforcement does not consider racist and other hate groups to pose as serious a threat as Asian, Aboriginal and outlaw motorcycle gangs. Although they do not have the size, strength and level of organization of other gangs in Alberta, they do make their presence known. These groups are known by names as “We the People,” “Canadian De-Tax” and “Patriots on Guard.” The main type of criminal activity of these groups is related to the chaos they create in courtrooms throughout the province, particularly when one of their members is in court (CISA, 2000, p. 10). They are typically charged with contempt of court, obstruction of justice and assault (CISA, 2000, p. 10).

Eastern European Organized Crime

Eastern European Organized Crime groups in Canada have remained primarily in Ontario regions. Law enforcement reports that they are emerging into Western Canada as a result of new working relationships with Asian, Aboriginal, outlaw motorcycle and traditional gangs. Drug trafficking, distribution of counterfeit money and an increased use of legitimate business to conceal and launder criminal proceeds have increased. Police monitoring of this gang activity has not reported any direct links except to indicate that some crimes are *indicative* of organized Eastern European offenses (CISA, 2000, p. 10).

The interpretation of Alberta’s gang situation, from the perspective of law enforcement and intelligence services, is established by the information gathered from monitoring and recording gang activity. Law enforcement agents indicate that gangs are continuing to expand in size and sophistication, leaving law enforcement unequipped and inadequately funded to cope with this growing problem. The role of law enforcement personnel is to “control” gangs, most often by charging and incarcerating gang members. Law enforcement services work closely with federal and provincial governments. They share a common goal of formally controlling gang activity through suppression (formally charging and incarcerating). Governments are the primary financial resources for law enforcement. Governments across Canada appear to strongly support law enforcement efforts. This is seen by their recent responses, including increased funding and legislative amendments intended to increase law enforcement powers.

Government

The federal government has responded to media, law enforcement and public pressure regarding gangs by toughening policies and amending the Criminal Code to include broader descriptions of and harsher penalties for gang activity. Anti-gang legislation, passed in April 2001, introduced three new offences with uncompromising new sentences that target various degrees of involvement with gangs. The new provisions attempt to improve the protection of people involved in the justice system by broadening the current definition of a criminal organization in the Criminal Code, expanding the

powers of law enforcement to seize the proceeds of crime and establishing a process to protect law enforcement officers from criminal liability (Government of Canada Department of Justice [GCDJ], 2001, p. 1).

It appears that the government is responding to increased pressure and demands from law enforcement services and the public to reduce gang related crime. This is seen by strict enforcement of “zero tolerance” policies and increased funding to law enforcement. It is the expectation of the federal government that these new measures will provoke stronger partnerships among law enforcement services across the country and internationally (GCDJ, 2001, p. 1).

Research and Academic

Responses from media, law enforcement and government sources tend to be reactive to the pressure and demands of concerned citizens across the country. As required by their positions in society, media, law enforcement and governments are taking the expected measures against gangs. Researchers and academics studying gang behaviour consider the social factors that motivate individual decisions to join, remain in or leave a gang. This approach is more proactive, as it attempts to better understand the genuine experiences of gang members, and allows for a more realistic, accurate depiction of gangs.

Criminological research into gangs has generally focussed on the group dynamics of a gang and how these dynamics influence individual choices and decisions. What constitutes a gang, why an individual would join a gang and what kind of support system a gang provides are questions that are relevant to present and future directions of research.

Individual Theory

Researchers studying Canadian gang activity have consistently identified certain interconnected causes and sets of predictors that assist them in determining who will join a gang. Conversely, there appears to be no exact set of risk factors that can definitively predict who will join a gang. A blend of societal, community, family, school and peer influences, combined with the personality of the individual, all help to determine the choices individuals make (Victims of Violence Canadian Centre for Missing Children [VVCCMC], 2000, p. 8).

Economic and ethnic marginality is regarded as a strong predictor of gang involvement, particularly if individuals are from similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Issues of ethnicity tend to surface, and are compounded, as ethnic minority families are isolated from the larger, surrounding community. People may become involved in gangs for a sense of belonging and to preserve shared language (Gordon, 2000, p. 50). Membership in gangs often meets the economic and social needs of members and their families.

Material gain is a motivational and rewarding element that draws individuals to gangs. Members of

larger and more sophisticated gangs are likely to have migrated to Canada with few marketable skills and lack resources and employment opportunities. They may find it difficult to obtain rewarding legitimate employment because they are blocked by language barriers. Research into complex, sophisticated gangs revealed that the most significant reason for staying in a gang was financial. A member could potentially earn \$2,500 to \$30,000 per month engaging in illegal activity. Legitimate employment would not allow a member to maintain this financial status (Gordon, 2000, p. 51).

Supportive peer groups are attractive to many potential gang members. Potential members may seek to escape abusive family circumstances, unpleasant family lives or weak family bonds (Gordon, 2000, p. 39). Gang membership can bring incredible reinforcement. Being part of a group makes members feel empowered and provides them with a sense of belonging, security and family (VVCCMC, 2000, p. 7). The process of affiliation with a gang is often a gradual one. Young people are typically drawn into gang life through a network of acquaintances with gang ties (NCPC, 1999, p. 7). According to research into Aboriginal youth gang members in Winnipeg, many members of Aboriginal gangs describe their involvement as fundamental to their sense of self, who they are, and who their people and communities are (NCPC, 1999, p. 7).

Availability of choices is key to understanding why a person would join a gang. If a person has no access or is not encouraged to join a mainstream group, a gang may be chosen instead (Gordon, 2000, p. 43). Quite often, a youth's choice to join a street gang results from boredom and lack of opportunities available in the community to relieve that boredom (Gordon, 2000, p. 52).

Violence also leads people to gangs. Violence is often part of the initiation and is ever present in most of the lives of gang members. Gang violence is enhanced because it often attracts individuals who enjoy violence, and results in powerful bonds among like minded members (VVCCMC, 2000, p. 7).

One progressive area of research is the study of children's peer relationships. The purpose of this research is to provide insight into youth aggression and violence. It aims to better understand why aggressive tendencies and feelings of isolation and alienation are generated. Researchers are hopeful that future high risk behaviour will be prevented as early patterns leading to delinquent behaviour are identified.

Researchers Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl and Van Acker (2000) and Doob and Sprcott (2000), in two different studies, investigated elementary school boys, who were considered "unpopular," highly aggressive or extremely withdrawn according to peers and school teachers. Researchers hoped to identify personality traits that lead to later adjustment difficulties (Doob & Sprcott, 2000, p. 123). This research determined that boys who were peer rejected and exhibited aggressive and antisocial tendencies formed relationships with other boys with similar personality characteristics (Rodkin et al., 2000, p. 22). Doob and Sprcott (2000) found that youth who displayed aggression and violence to their peers reported feeling miserable, left out, rejected by parents and peers and were frequently bullied by other children (p. 131). Both of these findings support the theory that rejection by peers

at a young age, low self esteem, antisocial personality and unhappiness arouse aggressive and violent behaviour, conditions that create a higher risk for future gang membership.

The results of the above two studies advance the theory that supportive peer groups are attractive to high risk youth, especially if the individual is marginalized and rejected from other peers. It also supports the “availability of choices” theory, which is that youth migrate to peer groups available to them if they don’t have the opportunity to select peer groups of their choice.

Individual theory helps to predict what risk factors cause individuals to join a gang. Although there is no absolute method for determining who will join a gang, identification of risk factors may prevent high risk youth from potentially joining a gang in the future. Theory based on the individual does not provide insight into the effect a gang has on an individual, or how group behaviour differs from individual behaviour. Collective theory examines group risk factors and their influence on the individual.

Collective Theory

Collective theory attempts to interpret how affiliation with a gang alters individual behaviour. Research has shown that group behaviour has certain detrimental effects on individual behaviour. Primarily, membership in a gang increases the chances of delinquent behaviour such as violence, crime and drug use. Personal actions and responsibility are minimized and replaced with shared responsibility. The chance of being caught or punished for criminal or violent actions is lessened, leaving a greater risk that the behaviour will be repeated or escalated. Different aspects of gang behaviour, and the effect of a “group” on individual conduct, are considered.

Gang members feel supported by a social context or background. It reduces victim impact and promotes violent behaviour. When a gang member comes into conflict, he or she will call upon the gang for support. Lucy Pierce, a youth worker in Edmonton, states:

Most individuals would never take such action on their own. It’s a group dynamic. It grows until it explodes. (VVCCMC, 2000, p. 8)

The “crowd dynamic” allows reason, control and judgement to give way to strong, uncontrolled emotion (Frease, 1987, p. 250). When gang members are not caught or punished for their actions, the behaviour is reinforced, increasing the likelihood that it will be repeated or escalated.

Research suggests that being a member of a gang will lead to the eventual loss of self identity. Individuals in a gang environment are able to act in ways that are out of the ordinary. They no longer need to take personal responsibility for their actions: if someone is responsible, it is the group. This theory proposes that, as gang members become more attached to their gang, the individual sense of the person fades. This process is called de-individuation and it is defined as a process where a person is prevented (by group factors) from recognizing himself as a separate individual. It is because

of this process of de-individuation that gang members become less able to comprehend gang related violence and its impact. The individual becomes guided by the group's immediate cues and emotions rather than by long term personal beliefs. De-individuation is believed to result in emotional contagion, described as an automatic spread of behaviour from one person to another or to a whole group (VVCCMC, 2000, p. 8).

Welte, Zhang and Wieczorek (1999) recently investigated the effect of gangs on individual delinquent behaviours. Topics focussed on drug use, crime and violence. Delinquent behaviours of individuals *before* they joined a gang were compared to delinquent behaviours *after* they became a gang member (p. 106). Building upon previous research and their own findings, these researchers concluded that prior criminal activity had a strong positive effect on an individual's choice to join a gang. It also resulted in subsequent high rates of delinquency. Individuals who previously used drugs increased their drug use as they joined a gang. Those who did not use drugs before joining a gang began using once they became affiliated with a gang (Welte et al., 1999, p. 106). It was concluded that joining a gang increased personal levels of delinquency and drug use.

Perhaps the most comprehensive research on the collective effects of gang behaviour was done by Thornberry and Burch in 1997. They interviewed 4,000 participants (starting in grade seven and eight) in three American cities for a period of 10 years. The purpose of the study was to determine how much of the delinquency in America is attributed to gang members (p. 2). Gang members represented one third of the sample, although they were found to be accountable for the majority of delinquent acts. Overall, they were responsible for 86% of serious delinquent acts, 69% of violent delinquent acts and 70% of drug sales (Thornberry & Burch, 1997, p. 4). The researchers considered the level of association between delinquency and gang members to be alarming (Thornberry & Burch, 1997, p. 4). This reinforces Welte, Zhang and Wieczorek's (1999) theory that being part of a gang increases the levels of delinquency of individual members. The results of this study have set the stage for future inquiries of the need for research, development, implementation and testing of programs to intervene and prevent individuals from joining gangs.

AVAILABLE RESPONSES

There are numerous responses to the "gang problem" in Canada. Each response appears to be specific to the agency or organization reacting. Governments are responding two ways. First, they are funnelling money into law enforcement services across the country. Second, they are continuing to enforce harsher penalties against individuals involved in gangs. Community and social groups continue to be limited financially, but are proceeding with programs to prevent and assist high risk individuals. Responses from governments, law enforcement, communities and individuals appear to be dependent on the others' issues and concerns. Individuals and community groups continue to express their concerns and fears about gangs, and these concerns and fears appear to motivate the decisions made at law enforcement and government levels.

Individual

It is important for individuals to develop an accurate understanding of the nature and extent of gang activity in a community. The current assumptions that street gangs are composed solely of youth unfairly labels and discriminates against young people. Distorted perceptions regarding gangs may arise from differing views of what constitutes youth violence or the biases inherent in sources of information as discussed previously (Federation of Canadian Municipalities [FCM], 1994, p. 7). The awareness that individuals may be basing their views on a distorted understanding of gangs could assist in reducing discrimination against youth.

Individuals look to community agencies and law enforcement for information about gangs. Community groups have suggested strategies that individuals can use to reduce their fear of gangs. People may acquire information on the nature and extent of youth violence in order to become more informed. They may obtain incidence reports available to the community from local police services. Organizations and neighbourhood groups are often aware of patterns of youth violence. Community agencies may have information from public health and outreach programs, and the school system should also know about the nature, extent, location and perpetrators of violence (FCM, 1994, p. 8).

If individuals are very concerned about increased rates of youth violence, they can take the initiative to reduce violence. Independent measures might include alarm systems and opportunity reduction strategies such as block parent programs (FCM, 1994, p. 1). Individuals may also become more involved with the gang issue by encouraging or getting involved with agencies and existing community groups already addressing youth concerns (FCM, 1994, p. 9).

Community

Preventing individuals from joining gangs and providing support to those trying to leave gangs are common goals of community organizations. Programs set up in schools can provide students with skills that will assist in deterring them from joining gangs and increase their ability to deal with the fear and intimidation gang members might create. Community groups are beginning to implement preventive awareness training about gangs (NCPC, 1999, p. 9), with the hope that such initiatives will generate a more negative attitude toward joining a gang among youth at risk. The perception of gangs as “uncool” may be the best means of prevention (Gordon, 2000, p. 57).

It is essential that youth at risk of gang involvement be targeted with initiatives that are meaningful to them. Professionals who work with community groups should reach out to young people rather than expect youth to seek out services. Community programs must provide high risk youth with assistance, such as safe houses and anonymous health care, to limit the harm caused by their current lifestyle. Community initiatives should encourage legitimate behaviours through education, job training, family support and counselling services (VVCCMC, 2000, p. 10). To understand the involvement of an individual in a gang, the community agency should keep track of delinquent behaviour, drug use, community and family dynamics, parental attitudes and school performance

(Thornberry & Burch, 1997, p. 2).

Recently, communities across the country have witnessed the growth of racial tensions between gangs. As a result, current responses have centred around racial issues and, in particular, educating the public about different cultures. Schools, police organizations, community agencies and other initiatives play key roles in reducing racism in communities. Programs have been implemented to teach others about the importance of identifying and eliminating racism and hate. These programs are expected to increase tolerance and sensitivity for others (FCM, 1994, p. 3).

In Edmonton, several committees and agencies are committed to reducing racial tensions between gangs and individuals involved in gangs. The Edmonton Safer Cities Committee is involved with a number of crime prevention and community safety initiatives. The Edmonton Chinese Community Services Centre is a nonprofit organization that specifically works with Edmonton's Asian community. Recently, the centre launched "A Safe and Healthy Community for Us: An Asian Canadian Youth Team Project," a program aimed at preventing crime and victimization, including gang recruitment and activity, among Asian youth (VVCCMC, 2000, p. 10).

Current responses by individuals and community organizations are considered informal methods of controlling the gang situation. The goal of individuals and community groups is to promote awareness of the reality of gangs, minimize discrimination against youth and ethnic groups and develop programs meaningful to individuals involved in gangs. Research is continually being accessed by program developers to find more effective and meaningful alternatives for individuals in gangs. How individual and community groups respond to gangs differs conceptually from the responses of law enforcement services. As will be seen shortly, law enforcement reactions to gangs are much more formally administered.

Criminal Justice System

Joint forces and information sharing are the most recent approaches that law enforcement have taken to gangs. It is believed by criminal justice personnel that having a greater volume of information available to law enforcement officials will allow for better strategic assessments and interventions (CISA, 2000, p. 5). Intervention strategies include monitoring gangs and their members, formulating gang profiles, regulating the involvement of criminal activity and observing reactions of gang members to law enforcement. Law enforcement is hopeful that this system will predict future emerging trends and patterns of gang behaviour so that further crime and violence may be prevented.

In Alberta, databases of gang related criminal activity are shared among the Criminal Intelligence Service of Alberta (CISA), Edmonton police service and the RCMP. The information systems mutually available to these services include the National Crime Database, Automated Criminal Intelligence Information System, Canadian Police Information Centre, Police Information Retrieval System, RCMP Office Support System, Corporate Registry System, Vital Statistics and the Internet

(CISA, 2000, p. 4). It is believed by the Edmonton police service, RCMP and CISA that this cultivation of agency relationships at local, provincial and federal levels has been fundamental in reducing gang related crime.

A national joint forces session, hosted by the Solicitor General and the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, was held in response to gang related concerns from the policing community and general public. The “out of control” national gang problem and the need to address the feeling of law enforcement services across the country that they had no effective means to cope were the bases for the forum (NCPC, 1999, p. 1). Discussions were centred around the need for expanded programs to provide marginalized youth with opportunities to engage in prosocial activities and the lack of an effective response to youth involvement in gangs. The need for young people to be actively involved in all aspects of the implementation of policy and program development was identified (NCPC, 1999, p. 2). The goal of the forum was to better understand the social issues behind gang activity and better integrate social programs into the community so that law enforcement and community agents can act effectively to reduce gang activity.

Ironically, federal and provincial funding has not been substantially directed to community agencies that could deal with the social aspects associated with individuals involved in gangs. Governments have directed funding primarily to law enforcement, with the intent of getting gang members off of the street and incarcerating them. Federally, \$200 million will be added over the next five years to implement legislation and fund related prosecution and law enforcement costs. This is in addition to the \$584 million that the RCMP received in its 2000 budget to address organized crime (GCDJ, 2001, p. 2). The Department of the Solicitor General will receive \$883 million between 2000 and 2003 that will be predominately directed to the RCMP to fight gang related crime (Nathanson Centre for Organized Crime in Canada [NCOCC], 2000, p. 11).

The Alberta government is also contributing extensive amounts of funding to law enforcement efforts. A \$2.1 million courtroom was built in the basement of the Edmonton courthouse solely to handle gang related proceedings (Farrell, 2001, p. A3). Alberta Justice provided \$8 million between 1998 and 2001 to promote an Organized and Serious Crime Strategy to target gang activity. In September 2001, a new team composed of the Director of Organized Crime Strategy and an Organized Crime Coordinator will collaborate to support provincial efforts against organized crime. The goal of this team is to develop organized crime policy and forge relationships with organized crime investigators and prosecutors in other provinces and at the federal level (Alberta Justice, 2000a, p. 2).

A SHIFT IN FOCUS

Governments, law enforcement, community groups and individuals take different approaches to Canada's gang situation. Community groups and services are continuing to implement and readjust programs to better work with individuals affiliated with gangs. Governments and law enforcement continue to resist gang activity with increasingly harsh penalties, longer sentences and increased volumes of arrests. The differences among government, law enforcement, community groups and individual reactions is that their approaches are based on their societal position. Such a variety of responses fosters confusion and misperceptions about gangs. An accurate description of the nature and extent of the "gang movement" in Canada is fundamental to understanding how to address gang related issues.

Nature and Extent

The current gang phenomenon in Canada appears to have triggered a set of reactive responses among individuals and communities, law enforcement and government. Media reports largely influence public perception, promoting fear and concern among individuals. In return, these fears and concerns from the public leads to demands for law enforcement services to get gang members off the streets. Law enforcement looks to governments for additional funding to reduce the "out of control" gang phenomenon. One is left with the understanding that crime is rising and that gangs are responsible.

The perception that gangs consist of ethnic minorities may also contribute to society's fear of gangs. This generalized belief is not necessarily true and, again, results largely from media portrayals. Research into gangs in Vancouver found that the largest percentage of gang members were of European ancestry and born in Canada (40%) with Asians (34%) being the next largest group (Gordon, 2000, p. 48). This potentially unjustified fear of certain minority groups acts as a catalyst in facilitating further alienation and resulting gang growth. Marginalized ethnic groups faced with rejection and alienation are more likely to band together for reasons of social support and acceptance. It is important that society be aware of the reasons why individuals are attracted to gangs and not encourage further isolation and alienation of ethnic groups.

Amendments to the Young Offenders Act have contributed to the perceived increase in youth violence and other gang related offenses. Legislative decisions resulted in youth being charged and incarcerated for longer periods presently than they were under the Juvenile Delinquent's Act. Particularly, the anti-gang legislation passed in April 2001 increased the severity of penalties for individuals involved in gangs. As will be discussed further, there has been a continual decrease in youth charged with violence in the past years. This reveals a discrepancy that suggest that governments and law enforcement may be reacting more to a frightened public than to an out of control gang problem.

Law enforcement and governments are not the only ones responding to gang related crime with harsher penalties. Youth service agencies are also supporting and enforcing this “less tolerance” philosophy. Reporting violent behaviours by youth gang members to police has become a more common procedure for community agencies than dealing directly with the behaviour. This type of response adds to the number of individuals convicted and, therefore, adds to the perception of escalated youth crime and violence (FCM, 1994, p. 6). Research has provided evidence that individuals in gangs are more prone to violent and criminal acts. Therefore, a “less tolerance” policy will be enforced more frequently against individuals involved in gangs.

There appears to be little attention paid to the fact that there has been a steady decrease in youth crime throughout Canada. In Alberta, from 1999 to 2000, youths charged with violent crime dropped 3.3% (Alberta Justice, 2000a, p. 1). At a national level, in the year 2000, the cases of youth processed in courts decreased 4% from 1999 and 11% from 1992 (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics [CCJS], 2001, p. 1). There is a contradiction between the consistent decrease of youth charged with violent crime and the consistent increase of public concern and fear (FCM, 1994, p. 4).

As stated above, youth crime has decreased in recent years (CCJS, 2001, p. 1). Therefore, increased public concern and fear cannot be based on facts alone. It is likely that these concerns result from the increased number of charges and sentences that are applied to youth. This is not a reflection of increased crime rates, but of the “zero tolerance” policies implemented by legislative bodies throughout Canada. This “zero tolerance” attitude appears to result from individuals, communities and law enforcement services putting pressure on governments to respond to the “gang problem” (FCM, 1994, p. 6).

Responses

A cross country evaluation of current responses from governments, law enforcement, communities and individuals suggests that gangs are primarily considered a law enforcement concern. Evidence supporting this claim is seen in the massive funding directed at law enforcement, with minimal funding directed to social and community agencies. Although law enforcement is a necessary and essential aspect to the overall goal of reducing gang activity, law enforcement alone will not prevent individuals from initially choosing to join gangs, and has had minimal effect on gang members deciding to leave a gang. There are other, more community based solutions that should be considered.

A system of improved communication between law enforcement and community groups may be a valuable first step in responding to gangs and gang activity. A community wide response could focus more on community based policing and education regarding the law and legal consequences to parents and youth (Mathews, 1993, p. 59). A collaborative effort between community groups and law enforcement to document and monitor gang activity may be beneficial in obtaining a more accurate picture of the gang phenomenon and how it is evolving.

It is necessary to take high risk youth seriously in order to appreciate the needs and issues that they are dealing with. Many youth involved in gang activity have described feeling that the adults around them are unconcerned (Mathews, 1993, p. 41). As a result, many youth have lost faith in adults and the criminal justice system. Meanwhile, adults and other social institutions are under the assumption that youth have positive role models who inspire hope, courage and respect (Mathews, 1993, p. 44). Youth have stated that involvement, communication and respect from police and other adults would be meaningful to them (Mathews, 1993, p. 89). The response to youth involved in gangs should not focus solely on youth themselves, but should consider the institutions and adults that can assist them. Ideally, a comprehensive response strategy should include input and cooperation from law enforcement, community groups, government and most importantly, the youth who are involved in gangs (Mathews, 1993, p. 93).

Conventional research into gangs and gang members is fundamental to the future direction of social and community programming. This research acts as a prime resource because it focusses on the direct experiences of gang members. It accesses the social issues and emotional conditions that lead to gang attraction and delinquent behaviour. If community agencies can effectively use these insights when designing programming and policy development, there is hope that individuals will reconsider joining or remaining in a gang.

Terminating membership in a gang is a difficult choice to make. Once a member of a gang, it is very difficult for an individual to leave. The difficulty lies in determining when the membership is over. Quite often, friendships and acquaintances precede gang membership and, therefore, ending these relationships is not straightforward (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 262). As well, rival gangs, police forces and schools may still maintain the view that the individual is a gang member. Despite efforts to leave the gang, complications may arise when past antagonisms between rival gang members persist. Rival gangs are unlikely to accept that a gang member has left his or her gang, and this may draw an individual back into a gang for protection. Social institutions may also be unable to forget prior gang affiliations, and police and school officials may not take such claims seriously. It is unfortunate, in many cases, that the reasons individuals join gangs in the first place continue to dominate the lives of those who have decided to leave (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 264). Programming and support is an essential requirement, and a much lacked resource, for individuals attempting to leave a gang.

Risk for gang involvement does not end just because a person decides to leave a gang. Youth at risk require a strong support network and skills to help them build a mainstream life and regain their identities outside of a gang (NCPC, 1999, p. 9). Programming to assist youth attempting to leave their gang might include anonymous reporting programs in schools to keep track of the problem, increased funding for school clubs and after school activities, and the development of programs in the community to work with parents and students to break down ethnic barriers (VVCCMC, 2000, p. 10). Anti-gang programming aimed at potential or new gang members may be more effective than programs aimed at existing or well established street gang members. Regardless of the level of

involvement of a gang member, it is very important that youth have information on how to exit gang culture if they choose to do so.

Targeted outreach programs appear to have the greatest success among social and community programming initiatives. The Boys and Girls Club of America is a good example of a well researched and implemented initiative that has proven to positively redirect individuals involved in gangs (Thornberry & Burch, 1997, p. 5). The main difference between this program and other programs presently being run is, instead of starting a program and waiting for individuals to take interest, it targets and recruits youth through direct outreach efforts. Youth at risk are recruited into club programs in a non-stigmatizing, non-threatening manner. When youth are in the club, they participate in structured recreational and educational activities. These focus on personal development in order to enhance communication, problem solving, self esteem and decision making skills. Youth are involved in a referral network that links them with local clubs, courts, police departments, schools, social service agencies and other organizations. The most important aspect is that youth at risk have an alternative to gang life (Thornberry & Burch, 1997, p. 7). Encouraging findings have been reported from this targeted outreach approach. Almost 100% of youth received recognition for in-club and outside civic activities and 48% of youth showed improvement in their grades. Since this initial evaluation in 1992, 137 other "Targeted Outreach" sites have evolved throughout the United States (Thornberry & Burch, 1997, p. 8).

In Edmonton, the Edmonton Native Alliance (ENA) has been established. The ENA is an outreach and intervention group modelled on the successful Winnipeg Native Alliance. It is comprised of three ex-gang members who have implemented standard outreach practices and aboriginal spirituality to connect with native youth involved in gangs (Hanon, 2001, p. 6). There are three components of the group's work. First, a direct outreach to Aboriginal youth involved in street gang culture has been developed. Second, the alliance plans to move into schools affected by gang activity to reach kids before they drop out and get involved in gangs. Third, alliance members will contact kids already in custody, where gang recruiting commonly takes place. The impact of the ENA's work is expected to be positive. The fact that the leaders of the ENA are ex-gang members allows them to understand gang culture and what the personal and social issues and needs of individuals involved in gangs are. The program focusses on Aboriginal spirituality and healing which encompasses culture specific needs that other social and community programs may not consider as seriously.

Appropriate programming is critical to gang members who want to leave a gang and require additional support. With a programs like the Boys and Girls Club and ENA, gang affiliated youth have a better chance of successfully departing from a gang. Individuals who have managed to leave their gangs have identified a number of factors that prompted them to leave, including fear for their safety and desire for a new life, losing interest in maintaining a deviant identity (the gang member label), or incarceration. An uncontrollable factor that leads to the removal of individuals from gangs is incapacitation from death or drug abuse (NCPC, 1999, p. 7).

Issues faced by members of gangs can not be comprehended by the majority of people in Canadian society. With awareness of the reality of gang life, support and assistance should be provided to these individuals attempting to remove themselves from gang life. Increased rates of criminal charges, harsher sentences and incarceration alone are not adequate to reduce gang activity.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to speculate as to the extent to which gangs are present in Canada. Gangs are a confusing issue for Canadians. Information given by media, law enforcement and government sources often contradicts information given by theoreticians and statisticians. These contradictions rise from different groups and organizations attempting to control the gang situation, whether it be informally or formally. Therefore, general impressions of gangs are abstract and enigmatic, resulting in a concerned and fearful public. There is no clear solution to the gang problem in Canada. Research in Canada regarding gangs has not been abundant. However, as research in the field expands, social and community programs will be better equipped to work with individuals involved in gang life. The continuation of formal social control, without some implementation of dealing with social and personal issues, will not effectively reduce gang activity.

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