



Australian Research Alliance
for Children & Youth

Anti-Gang Strategies

and

Interventions

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**Australian Research Alliance
for Children & Youth**

ABOUT ARACY

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) was founded by a group of eminent experts and organisations in reaction to increasingly worrying trends in the wellbeing of Australia's young people.

ARACY is a national organisation with members based across Australia.

ARACY asserts that by working together, rather than working in isolation, we are more likely to uncover solutions to the problems affecting children and young people.

ARACY is a broker of collaborations, a disseminator of ideas and an advocate for Australia's future generation.

ARACY has two primary goals:

1. To promote collaborative research and agenda setting for children and young people
2. To promote the application of research to policy and practice for children and young people.

This paper is one of a series commissioned by ARACY to translate knowledge into action. This series of papers aims to convert research findings into practical key messages for people working in policy and service delivery areas. This paper has been supported by funding from The Telstra Foundation.

The ARACY topical papers may also be the focus of workshops or seminars, including electronic mediums.

This paper is also available to a wider audience via the ARACY website www.aracy.org.au

SUMMARY

This paper reviews anti-gang intervention strategies and the limits and possibilities for positive action in regard to gang formation and activities.

The first part of the paper provides a general overview of intervention strategies. For example, a distinction is drawn between coercive and developmental approaches to youth issues. It is observed that a comprehensive approach to gang issues must first consider the nature of the problem, its source and varying ways in which to respond. A key theme of this section is that concerted attention must be given to scoping the issues at a local level, and to answering a series of concrete questions about the nature of gangs and gang-related behaviour in a particular geographical area or amongst a specific community group. As part of this discussion, the dynamics of group participation, including entry and exit of groups, as well as group transformations, including changes in a gang over time, are canvassed.

The second part of the paper briefly reviews some of the ideas and strategies that have informed government and community action around gang issues at the grassroots level. Areas of interest include the family and parenting; school-based interventions; coercive street-based approaches; community-based strategies; proposals relating to the media. Although very few programmes and strategies have actually been evaluated, the discussion provides a broad spectrum of approaches and programmes that might inform future local practice. A key theme of this section is that the best forms of intervention are those based upon principles of participation and social inclusion, including young people themselves.

The paper concludes with a few observations about the need for a holistic and comprehensive approach to issues of gangs and youth violence.



INTRODUCTION

This is the second of two papers on the nature of and responses to youth gang violence in Australia. The purpose of the papers is to identify key issues and trends surrounding 'gangs' and to provide background material that may be useful in fostering better understanding of youth group formations of this nature. The intention of this series as a whole is to encourage informed discussion and debate over these matters with a view to developing community strategies that positively and constructively address the main issues.

The aim of this paper is to document interventions and policies that are intended to prevent or respond to anti-social group-based activity. The paper focuses directly on anti-gang strategies and on what various jurisdictions and communities have done to deal with perceived youth gang problems.

The review explores those policies and programmatic interventions that have purported to have some success in preventing young people from engaging in gang or gang-like illegal and anti-social behaviours. It also includes those measures designed to facilitate their exit from such structures and practices. A primary emphasis throughout the paper is on initiatives that empower practitioners and local communities to develop holistic and proactive early intervention responses that involve strategic partnerships across a range of agencies (e.g., government, schools, commercial enterprises, and welfare and service sectors). The review also provides some indication of initiatives or policies that have had limited success in addressing youth gang or gang-related structures and behaviours, or that create more problems beyond what they are meant to address.



The actual behaviour and activity of young people is shaped by their position as producers and consumers in society, their relationship to the major social institutions, and by the ways in which they are subject to various social control measures by the state and private policing agencies. Structural dislocations and changing cultural expectations are affecting a large and growing number of young people, giving rise to a range of experiences. These experiences are shaped by situational factors, such as the nature of a local community and the type of policing in particular social locations. Young people respond with diverse personal coping strategies, the negative ones of which include petty crime and substance abuse through to suicide. Any strategy designed to address youth crime and gang activity must therefore seek to transform the reality of young people at the structural, situational and personal levels.



PART1: INTERVENTION STRATEGIES - GENERAL OVERVIEW

Types of Intervention

Generally speaking, there are two broad approaches to dealing with youth gangs, and crime prevention generally (Cunneen and White, 2007). Specific strategies, programmes and policies tend to reflect either of the following orientations:

Coercive Approaches – where the favoured approach is to use coercion or the threat of unpleasant sanctions as the principal way to keep young people in line, with a particular emphasis on law enforcement. Measures within this framework include street sweeps, zero tolerance policing, electronic surveillance, extensive use of private security and private police, youth curfews, mall and shopping centre bans and anti-gang legislation.

Developmental Approaches – where attention is directed at enhancing the opportunities of young people through encouraging their participation in activities that reflect their interests and needs. Measures within this framework include those focusing on the individual, in the form of remedial education programmes or drug treatment programmes, through to reform of institutional processes that disadvantage and marginalise young people, such as dealing with racism, poverty, unemployment and other social ills.

As demonstrated in much of the gang research literature (see below), most comprehensive attempts to address gang issues involve some combination of coercive and developmental measures. A key matter of concern is the weight given to particular measures within the context of an overall strategy. While not mutually exclusive, the main message of criminological analysis of



youth crime and gang life is that *comprehensive community-based approaches* are preferable to narrowly focused coercive strategies. This is because gang issues ultimately reflect wider political, economic and social processes (generally relating to structural issues of racism, inequality, blocked opportunities, poverty, and oppressive regulatory practices) and, as such, can be curtailed, but not fully addressed, by reliance upon coercive measures.

Another consideration is what young people themselves have to say about gangs and possible anti-gang strategies. It is notable in this regard that the young people in a 1999 Melbourne gang study (White et al., 1999) generally emphasised the need for pro-active and developmental strategies to deal with youth gangs, and gang-related behaviour. They spoke of the need for more support services, youth employment programmes, greater dialogue between youth and authority figures, and positive strategies that provided young people with constructive ways in which to use their time and energy. In essence, the young people identified a wide range of services and strategies that they felt would improve the situation for themselves and their friends, and which would provide for positive social outcomes. Specific groups also had specific needs. For example, it is clear that newly arrived individuals require greater and different levels of social and community support than those who are already well established in Australia. The particular perceptions and suggestions of the different sample groups have to be assessed in the light of the broad social experiences and social position of that group, particularly in relation to the migration settlement process. The Melbourne gang research (White et al., 1999) highlighted the importance of dealing with the youth gang phenomenon across a number of dimensions, taking into account the very different social histories and socio-economic circumstances of the young people.



It is also essential to consider the policy implications of gang research in regards to the institutional measures that might be designed and utilised to curtail gang formation and gang-related activities. The starting point for policy development and formulation of intervention strategies is careful analysis of what precisely 'the problem' actually is. Canadian researchers such as Gordon (2000) and American criminal justice agencies (United States Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997, 1998) emphasise the importance of local community-based anti-gang programming based upon an appreciation of the diversity of youth group formations, as well as the dynamics of opportunity structures and communal relations (especially in relation to ethnic minority groups). Similarly, recent South African commentary on gangs and anti-gang strategies is particularly critical of one-dimensional, coercion-based methods. Rather, the answer is seen in strategies that do not criminalise gangs, and in better understanding where young people themselves are coming from (Standing, 2005). It is clear that the prevention of criminal youth gangs must be broad-based and developmental in orientation, rather than simply coercive and reliant upon law enforcement measures.

Australian (White et al., 1999), Canadian (Gordon, 2000), European (Bjorgo, 1999), South African (Standing, 2005) and American (United States Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997, 1998) recommendations regarding anti-gang strategies share common concerns.

Key elements of a comprehensive approach

Identifying the problem – the construction of group behaviour as a problem hinges upon wider community recognition of a particular group as a 'gang', and the group's involvement in enough illegal and/or violent activities to get a consistent negative response from law enforcement personnel and neighbourhood residents. An effort should be made to establish various



contributors to the construction of the gang phenomenon, and this can be contrasted with the perceptions of the young people at issue. In particular, perceptions of the nature and extent of youth gang activity and young people's activity generally, can be gauged from the perspective of young people, the general public, public space regulators (for example, police, shopkeepers and security guards), teachers and youth workers;

Identifying the source of the problem – this involves definition and classification of different groups and different types of activities, and examination of the immediate local context and socio-structural factors that foster gang-related behaviour. As intimated above, it is imperative to note that the perceived problem may actually differ substantially from reality. Hence there is a need to examine problem sources from a variety of perspectives. For instance, there are some indications that differential policing practices as they are applied to young people lead to mutual distrust and disrespect. Thus, both police perspectives on young people's collective use of public space, and young people's perspectives on the regulation of their public space usage, need to be examined;

Developing general strategies to reduce group conflict and the propensity to commit crime – these would include measures designed to address social and economic marginality, racism, educational strategies, job training and placement, dealing with inadequately supported family systems, health service provision and development of social and economic infrastructure; and

Programmatic approaches at the community level – these would include the development of specific strategies to discourage gang membership and to provide young people with avenues for positive pro-social group formation, and development of measures designed to minimise any hero worship of



'gang leaders' (for example, through support for and endorsement of alternative mentors and role-models).

Youth gang strategies and programmes can be conceptualised in very general terms (as above) or considered in greater levels of specificity, as indicated in the following list (Howell, 2000):

- **Prevention programmes** (including early childhood, school-based, and afterschool initiatives)
- **Intervention programmes** (including crisis intervention, youth clubs, gang summits)
- **Suppression programmes** (prosecution programmes, police intelligence, geomapping and tracking systems)
- **Strategies using multiple techniques** (community policing, gang task forces)
- **Multi-agency initiatives** (inter-governmental task forces, local and state governments)
- **Comprehensive approaches to gang problems** (gang violence reduction programmes, community-wide approaches to gang prevention, intervention and suppression)
- **Legislation** (specific federal, state and local anti-gang legislation, use of court injunctions)

American evaluations of youth gang programmes (see Howell, 2000) have indicated that the approaches deemed to be most effective from a law enforcement perspective included:



(a) **community collaboration** (information exchange or gang awareness education);

(b) **crime prevention activities** (modification of environments and opportunities);

and

(c) **suppression tactics** (street sweeps).

Different approaches are seen to be effective in chronic or longstanding versus emerging or more recent gang problem cities. Thus, for example, the provision of social opportunities is seen to be more effective in sites with chronic gang problems, while community mobilisation of resources to specifically address gang problems is seen as the most effective way to deal with emerging gang problems (Howell, 2000: 45).

Intervention Processes

A clear message from national and international gang research is that any intervention be based upon close and careful examination of local conditions and youth group formations. Rather than making assumptions about youth gangs, or drawing upon media and other stereotypes of gang life, it is essential to undertake a comprehensive and systematic assessment of a perceived gang problem. This assessment must take into account a range of views and perceptions, including and especially those of local young people themselves.

It is very clear, as well, from the literature on youth gangs and from general sociological literature on the nature of juvenile offending that any strategy to reduce gang activity will necessarily have different dimensions and strands. For instance, analysis of 'risk factors' relating to gang membership show that



multiple factors influence potential gang membership (see Howell, 2000). Childhood risk factors include those associated with:

- **Neighbourhood** (availability of drugs, number of young people in similar troubled situations)
- **Family** (poverty, parent behaviour, family management)
- **School** (low school commitment, low academic achievement)
- **Peers** (association with peers who engage in problem behaviours)
- **Individual** (anti-social beliefs, use of drugs)
- **Personality/Individual Difference** (hyperactivity, poor refusal skills)

However, 'risk' based analysis and interventions have been criticised for their unfounded generalisations about the 'normalisation' of certain types of behaviours regardless of social context, their imprecision in relation to how difference 'risks' interact in specific individual circumstances, and their tendency to reduce major social problems to matters of individual deficiency and/or responsibility (see Cunneen & White, 2007; White & Wyn, 2008). Certainly a simple checklist approach to risk is insufficient to do justice to the social processes that underpin youth gang formation and gang-related behaviours.

Depending on the focus of the strategy – whether it is directed at structural change and immediate situations, chronic gang problems or newly emergent ones, specific groups of young people or entire neighbourhoods – a wide range of approaches will need to be canvassed in order to select the most appropriate approach to deal with the issue at hand.

Methodologically, addressing perceived gang problems requires adoption of a problem-solving model, rather than responding through knee-jerk



reactions or reliance upon coercive gang suppression methods. Understanding gangs and gang problems is ultimately about what people can do at a local level to provide local solutions. In the United States, a process to solve gang problems has been developed by the Department of Justice (United States Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997, 1998). The problem-solving model applied to gang problems has four steps.

A Gang Problem-solving Model

Scanning – this is a process of searching for and identifying gang problems, and narrowing the community's view of a general gang problem to more specific problems (such as graffiti, drug sales, violence).

Analysis – this involves investigating the specific gang problem in greater detail, by considering what form the problem takes, who is harmed and how, and when the problems occur.

Response – this involves an effort to conceptually link specific problems with specific local responses, and to survey potential approaches and projects that might provide insight into how best to address this specific issue in this specific community context

Assessment – this involves an evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategies, whether or not the problem has been diminished, or whether the problem needs to be redefined, and the development of appropriate criteria regarding community safety.

Source: United States Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997, 1998.

It is recommended that each community undertake a systematic needs assessment so that it can make informed decisions as to what can be done with the resources available. This would involve the steps outlined above, and include a profile of current youth activities and community services in a



neighbourhood, as well as establishing planning teams, setting priorities among needs and developing a consensus regarding what ought to be done. The specific questions that a community might include in a needs assessment are outlined in the first paper of this series under the box heading 'Key Questions for Gang Assessment'.

Group Transformations

A key question for those interested in developing appropriate anti-gang strategies is: what are the social processes involved in the movement of individuals and groups from one type of group formation toward (or away from) a gang formation? Recent European work on this question provides insights that are particularly relevant to the existing Australian gang research. For example, Bjorgo (1999) points out that street gangs have usually emerged out of something else, such as a play group, a clique of friends or a loose subculture. Significantly, he describes how an immigrant youth gang (the 'Warriors') in Copenhagen emerged in response to White Power gangs. Australian research (see White et al., 1999; Collins et al., 2000; White, 2006a) has highlighted the ways in which racism permeate the lives of ethnic minority youth and that group formation, and street fights, are directly linked to issues of protection, social status and group identity. Analysis of factors affecting entry to and exit from youth gangs is important here (see below). A mapping out of such factors for specific groups at a local level in Australia would enhance understanding of the nature, dynamics and attractions of youth gangs.



Entry Factors in relation to Extremist Youth Subcultures

Attractions to join:

- Ideology and politics
- Provocation and anger
- Protection
- Drifting
- Thrill seeking
- Violence, weapons and uniforms
- Youth rebels go to the Right
- Search for substitute families and father figures
- Search for friends and community
- Search for status and identity

Incentives to stay:

- Positive characteristics of group such as friendships
- Fear of negative sanctions from the group
- Loss of protection against former enemies
- Nowhere to go
- Fear that career prospects are already ruined

(Source: Bjorgo, 1998).



Exit Factors in relation to Extremist Youth Subcultures

Push Factors:

- Negative social sanctions
- Lose faith in the ideology and politics of group or movement
- Disillusioned with inner workings and activities of group
- Losing confidence, status and position in the group
- Become exhausted and can no longer take the pressure

Pull Factors:

- Longing for the freedoms of a 'normal' life
- Getting too old for what they are doing
- Jeopardise their career prospects and personal futures
- Establish a family with new responsibilities for spouse and children

(Source: Bjorgo, 1998).

Issues of entry and exit are nevertheless complex. They are also highly specific to particular social contexts and particular types of youth group formation. American and South African research on membership processes, for example, challenge the notion that individuals face difficulties in either entry or exit. It is pointed out that in most instances young people can refuse to join gangs without reprisal, and that gang members (especially marginal members) typically can leave the gang without serious consequences



(Howell, 2000: 49-50; Standing, 2005). One implication of this is that if gang entry and exit is fluid, and if individuals tend not to remain gang members for long periods of time, then members can be drawn away through provision of attractive alternatives.

It is important in consideration of anti-gang strategies to bear in mind the positive features of gangs for many young people (and, in some cases, for their parents and other family members). Gangs can provide support and security for vulnerable groups of young people. They can provide opportunities for status, group identity and excitement. They provide a mechanism for young people to cope with oppressive environments, and represent one response or option to chronic marginalisation and social exclusion. All of these features point to the importance of peers and peer networks in the lives of young people – but leave open the matter of the social content of youth group formation. The problem is not with youth groups as such, it is with what youth groups do.

This kind of the research can draw upon the Eurogang Network research design (Bjorgo, 2000) that is attempting to address questions of gang emergence and joining; gang maintenance and transformation; and gang dissolution and disengagement.

Group members can be profiled with a view to ascertaining commonalities in background, experiences and difficulties. Particular account should be taken of their demographic details and socio-economic conditions, (for example, age, gender, ethnicity, educational and employment and financial status, geographical residence and where relevant, migration experiences). The rationales offered in support of group membership (for example, thrill seeking; protection and security against real and perceived threats; search for friends and community, status and identity, perhaps in response to hostile media environments) could also be explored.



Change and Continuity in Gang Formation

An important part of gang research is to explore ways in which to stop criminal gangs from forming and/or growing into the future. The key question here is: what strategies can be employed to prevent the development of criminal/violent youth gangs and what forms of intervention are most appropriate to diminish gang-related activity?

An important part of strategic thinking is that any policy or intervention proposal be considered and evaluated in the light of the baseline information generated in other facets of gang research (e.g., identification of youth group formations, processes of group transformation). Knowledge of how and why particular groups disintegrate is also essential.

Gang Disintegration

Key Factors:

- Growing out of gang life via natural maturation and new priorities in life
- Defeat of the group by external use of force
- Loss of external enemies or threat
- Loss of identity, status and image
- Decay of group cohesiveness, solidarity and attraction value
- Fragmentation of the group into smaller units may weaken survival chance.

Source: Bjorgo, 1999.



Interpreting how gangs change over time depends on two things: the concepts deployed to explain gang formation in the first place, and the empirical history of the group in question. Gangs may enjoy a short life span, or they may persist over time as quasi-institutionalised groups. If the latter, then it would appear that entrenched long-standing cultural and socio-economic factors are determinate. If the former, then gang formation is more probably due to temporary peer group dynamics, fluctuations in local regulatory situations or employment markets – in other words, trends and fashions that ebb and flow according to immediate circumstances.

Groups that persist over different generations of young people would appear to involve a transfer of some type of commonality within communities. To put it differently, the persistence of a 'gang' or specific group identity can be explained in terms of, for example, sharing the same ethnic background and social experiences as earlier generations (e.g., Lebanese youth). Or, it may be the case that gangs of young people are linked to 'underclass' conditions, wherever and whenever these become evident, and that their persistence is best understood in the context of the wider political economy (see Moore, 1988-89; Davis, 1990). Or it could be a combination of social and economic factors that pertain to specific groups or geographical areas. As will be discussed below, the persistence of gang formations has implications for intervention strategies insofar as gangs often occupy an ambiguous position within local communities – and may, therefore, not be perceived as quite the threat outsiders may deem them to be.

Although certain gangs may be seen as more or less a permanent fixture of some neighbourhoods, suggesting a basic continuity in gang life, the actual composition and activities of each gang formation needs to be examined closely and empirically. That is, the character of particular gang formations will be different depending upon who the current members are. As Moore



(1988-89) observes, new cliques or 'gangs' may start up every few years, each with their own name and separate identity. They may identify with previous gangs or cliques that have gone on before them, yet they are autonomous from previous generations. Having 'gangs' in a neighbourhood over time, does not therefore equate to the same gang persisting over time. Each group of young people constructs the kind of group formation dictated by its times and circumstances, while drawing upon past examples to guide them in this process.

Analysis of the life course of locally based gangs is vital to understanding membership patterns and preferred activities. For instance, one can ask whether or not gang membership is 'inherited'? Do young teenagers join certain groups because of siblings and/or other relations being associated with these groups? What role do family ties have in both the persistence of gangs, and gang membership, over time? What impact does this 'cultural tradition' have on gang processes and the possibility of breaking the pattern? How does one become an 'ex-gang' member? What social processes entrench gang status and gang membership over time (such as imprisonment and release of gang leaders back into the same community)? These are important practical questions, especially given that there is evidence that as gangs mature, the criminal involvement of their members grows more serious (Howell, Egley, Jr & Gleason, 2002). The longer and more established the gang, the more likely it will engage in higher levels of violence and criminal activity.



PART 2: SPECIFIC INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Family Issues and Interventions

The family is considered one of the key elements in both the predisposition toward joining a gang and in reducing the appeal or attraction of gang membership or gang-related behaviour. American, British, New Zealand and Australian research, for example, has established a strong correlation between offending behaviour and factors relating to family life (see Farrington, 1996; Hawkins & Catalano, 1996; McLaren, 2000; Weatherburn & Lind, 2001). These factors include things such as family history of the problem behaviour (e.g., substance abuse, violence); family management problems (e.g., too much or too little discipline); family conflict (e.g., domestic violence) and favourable parental attitudes towards and involvement in criminal behaviour (e.g., parent criminal record).

The 'parenting theme' (Gelsthorpe 1999) has long been prominent in debates surrounding youth crime and youth justice (see especially Goldson and Jamieson 2002). As indicated, the usual language alludes to families in crisis, or bad parenting, or parental neglect. There are problems and limitations with this perspective, however, which are discussed below. On the one hand, the nature of family life does seem to have a major bearing on youth offending, particularly with respect to younger offenders. On the other hand, what the identification of these 'risk factors' often fails to do is to link young people's lives with broader social processes, beyond simply family dynamics, of which they and their families are also a part.



There is undoubtedly a connection between family situation and potential engagement in criminality, including gang activity. However, rather than seeing the issue simply as one of management, it is essential to consider structural factors that impinge upon families and that shape parental management practices. For example, how parents interact with their children is highly contingent upon resources available, stability of the family, family size and local community context. As Weatherburn and Lind (2001) point out, there is a strong relationship between poverty and delinquency, but it is a relationship that is mediated by parental neglect. That is, parental management strategies are heavily influenced by the resources available to the family, and the life conditions generally of the parents. Thus, there is 'strong evidence to suggest that economic stress exerts a very disruptive effect on the parenting process, increasing the risk that parents will neglect or abuse their children or engage in discipline which is harsh, erratic and/or inconsistent' (Weatherburn & Lind, 2001: 44). In essence, the local neighbourhood context (incorporating factors such as employment opportunities, community facilities and amenities, social services and housing patterns) becomes a crucial variable in shaping the manner and ability of parents to spend adequate and appropriate time with their children.

Frequently these social differences are ignored, however, when it comes to criminal justice practice. Here, the key considerations tend to be:

- **Good/bad parenting** – that is, a focus on parenting as a type of practice
- **Good/bad parents** – that is, a focus on parents as a type of person
- **Sanctioning of parenting/parents** – that is, use of coercive measures to enforce particular kinds of behaviour



The lack of adult male role models is seen as a contributing factor to gang membership, particularly in cases where men are absent from the family household. On the other hand, the presence of an adult male is not sufficient in its own right to prevent gang involvement. Fathers may themselves have been gang members in their youth, and this may become something of a family tradition. Or, either parent may presently engage in illegal behaviour and in the process transmit particular criminal values, attitudes and knowledge to their offspring. Thus, parental criminality may beget criminality amongst the next generation.

Regardless of individual circumstance, public policy increasingly dictates that it is the parent(s) who should take most responsibility for the actions of their offspring. This is seen both in terms of the street presence of young people and the ways in which some jurisdictions are responding to youthful offending that has already occurred. For instance, the threat of fines for parents who do not 'control' their children and seemingly endless public discussion about the deteriorating quality of parenting places the focus of responsibility for youth behaviour squarely on the back of the parent. The idea is that crime and gang involvement is essentially a matter of 'bad parenting' and that ultimately the issue is a moral problem, stemming from lack of adequate, or the wrong kind, of socialisation. The legislative response can involve several different kinds of sanction. In the state of Oregon in the USA, for instance, parents can be charged with failing to supervise a minor in the event of a young person's illegal acts and be fined as well as directed to undertake a 'parent effectiveness' programme (see United States National Crime Prevention Council, 1996). In the United Kingdom, a Magistrates' Court may impose a 'Parenting Order' on a parent for things such as when a child aged 10-17 is convicted of an offence or where a parent is convicted of failing to make sure that the child attends school. This basically requires



parents to control the behaviour of their children (United Kingdom National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, 2000: 41).

The identification of family 'risk' characteristics, and the emphasis on parental 'responsibility', places the conceptual emphasis at the micro level of parent-child relations and individual personality. As Goldson and Jamieson (2002: 95) observe in the British context:

From the 'improper conduct of parents' at the beginning of the nineteenth century, to the 'wilful refusal of parental responsibility' at the end of the twentieth and the outset of the twenty first century, a discourse rooted in individual agency has served to displace any sustained analysis of structural context. This way of 'seeing' is particularly resonant within the contemporary realm of youth justice, and it shows no sign of abating.

However, in many cases structural explanations – for example, those that link economic adversity and crime – are very evident (see Goldson & Jamieson 2002).

By circumventing discussion of social inequality, the focus on bad parents and bad parenting serves to justify increased punitive intervention into the lives of working-class families and youth in ways that simultaneously stigmatise them for their apparent shortcomings. Individualising the problem is achieved through making it appear to be a matter of parental (and, thereby, youth) choice in how people behave and act. Moralising the problem is achieved through stressing its origins as lying in permissiveness or lax discipline. Each allows scope for the imposition of ever more stringent rules to guide certain families deemed to be 'at risk'.

A major problem with such policies, however, is that they tend to be based upon very specific concepts of 'parenting' and 'child-rearing', and very narrow conceptions of whose responsibility it is for children's health and



wellbeing. Such measures do not take into account different family and parenting contexts, even though they are intended to reinforce the responsibility of parents to control their children. Universalistic assumptions and criteria are invoked about 'good parenting', but these ignore the diversity of actual traditions and practices across different communities.

The concept of childhood varies greatly according to cultural and class norms, and these often involve quite different degrees and types of adult supervision and parental control over children. For example, in Australia there are marked differences between some Anglo-Australian forms of parenting (and conceptions of childhood) and that practiced by many indigenous communities (see Johnston, 1991). Moreover, as alluded to above, differences in social and economic resources at the household and neighbourhood level can also impact on the capacity of some parents to regulate their offspring's behaviour even where this is deemed to be desirable or warranted. The poor material circumstances of some communities, and the particularly disadvantaged position of many sole parent families, means that enforcement of a universal rule regarding parental responsibility will have unequal, and unfair, application. And, in the end, the major socio-economic problems that generate difficulties for many parents and children are too deep and entrenched to be overcome simply by ad hoc parent support programmes or parent penalty schemes.

These observations raise big questions about existing communal support given to parents and children, and the appropriateness of designing strategies of intervention that are based upon what is in essence defined as a 'parenting deficiency'. Family relationships are crucial in the developmental formation of individuals. The task is to nest and nurture positive familial relationships within a web of financial, social and institutional supports. Where these supports are not available, it is hardly just or socially effective to place the burden of 'good parenting' (in this context referring to



parenting that can act as a protective factor in prohibiting gang involvement) on those least able to respond in conventional ways.

More positive forms of intervention, that are explicitly designed to assist rather than penalise parents, are possible. Supporting families before breakdown occurs is vital in this regard. This can be achieved to some degree through provision of crisis support services that offer non-stigmatising home visits, and parenting skill programmes established at a local level in high crime local government areas (see Wolverhampton Crime and Disorder Co-ordination Group, 2001).

Educational and School-Based Strategies

Any discussion of crime and gangs must also take into account the role played by schools in shaping the social resources and social identities of young people. For example, student alienation within the school context can lead to detachment from the institution, feelings of resentment or failure on the part of the young person, the turning toward alternative peer groups (such as 'gangs') for support and identity networks, and active resistance to what the school has on offer (White, 1996a). What happens at school to and with individuals, and groups, has a major bearing on youth behaviour. Factors such as early anti-social behaviour at school, lack of commitment to school and academic failure are all associated with delinquency. So too is absenteeism, particularly that associated with truancy as such. Bullying also has a major impact on school experiences and in-group and between-group activities (Rigby, 2003). Increasingly there is recognition that these kinds of issues have a profoundly negative impact on school students and those who absent themselves from school. Accordingly, much greater attention is being directed at improving whole of school environments, and in dealing with school 'troublemakers' and 'truants' in ways that keep them



in-system rather excluded from schools and educational opportunities (see Ingersoll and LeBoeuf, 1996; Garry, 1996; Stranger, 2002).

A summary of school-based gang prevention and intervention programmes in the United States has been compiled by Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1999). The list includes a wide range of activities and approaches.

School-based Gang Programmes

- Prevention curriculum, instruction or training
- Behavioural or behaviour modification intervention
- Counselling/social work/psychological/therapeutic interventions
- Individual attention/mentoring/tutoring/coaching
- Recreational, enrichment and leisure activities
- Referral to other agencies or for other services
- Improved instructional methods or practices
- Improved classroom management methods or practices
- Distinctive culture or climate for interpersonal exchanges – or improvements to inter-group relations or interaction between school and community
- Use of external personnel resources in classrooms
- Youth roles in regulating and responding to student conduct
- School planning structure or process – or management of change
- Security and surveillance



- Services to families
- Rules, policies, regulation, laws or enforcement
- Provision of information
- Reorganisation of grades, classes or school schedules
- Exclusion of weapons or contraband
- After school composition
- Training or staff development intervention
- Architectural features of the school
- Treatment or prevention interventions for administration, faculty or staff.

(Source: Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1999).

Space precludes discussion of each of these techniques and approaches. However, several strategies and programmes can be explored in order to illustrate potential measures that might be adopted.

Australian researchers have recommended a number of general educational strategies that might be implemented to address gang-related issues (see White et al., 1999):

- It is essential that young people in general be provided with **specific education in cross-cultural issues** in order that the backgrounds, cultures and patterns of life pertaining to specific ethnic groups be better understood by all concerned
- Attention must also be directed at the provision of **anti-racist education**, so that issues of discrimination, prejudice and unequal



power relations be analysed and discussed in an enlightened, informative and empathetic manner

- There should be developed at the local, regional and state levels a series of **youth reconciliation projects**, that will promote the diversity of cultures among young people, aim to reduce violence between them, and give young people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds the practical opportunity to get to know each other at a personal and group level
- Attention must be directed at providing **quality educational facilities and services** for the young people, particularly those which are based upon a multicultural curriculum and atmosphere, where students are provided with adequate individual and group support, and where anti-racist strategies and practices are applied across the whole school population.
- Concerted action is needed on the specific issue of school bullying so that appropriate **conflict resolution and anti-violence strategies** be put into place in order to reduce the number of such incidents and to reassure students of their safety and security within the educational institution
- **Special provisions** are needed for those young people who, due to their bullying or gang-related behaviour, might normally be excluded from school, but who still require community support and appropriate educational programmes to ensure that they have the chance to contribute positively to society, rather than to be marginalised even further from the mainstream



For specifically anti-gang programmes in schools, it has been suggested in US research that three types of strategies must be included at any one time. These are:

- in-school safety and control procedures;
- in-school enrichment procedures that make the school experience more meaningful, effective and enjoyable; and
- formal links to community-based programmes (Goldstein and Kodluboy, 1998).

Importantly, any programme development ought to rest upon extensive collaboration between school and community agencies, and with parents and students.

American research has determined that the most cost-effective approach to reducing serious youth and adult gang crime is to discourage children and young people from joining gangs (Howell, 2000). In this regard, the Gang Resistance Education and Training programme (G.R.E.A.T.) is perceived to be one of the more promising programmes. It involves uniformed law enforcement officers teaching a 9-week course to middle school students. The curriculum includes the following components (Howell, 2000: 11-12):

- Introduction
- Crime, victims and rights
- Cultural sensitivity/prejudice
- Conflict resolution
- Meeting basic needs



- Drugs/neighbourhoods
- Responsibility
- Goal setting

The intention of this programme is to assist students in learning about their school and neighbourhood, and the importance of pro-social behaviour. In particular, the curriculum stresses the negative impact of drugs and conflict, while simultaneously promoting the positive things young people can do for their communities and for themselves.

Preliminary evaluation of this approach indicated positive, if somewhat modest, programme effects (Esbensen and Osgood, 1999). Specifically, students completing the GREAT programme had more pro-social attitudes and lower rates of some types of delinquent behaviour than students in the comparison group. An important observation by the evaluators is that the research supports the notion that trained law enforcement personnel can serve as prevention agents, as well as law enforcers (Esbenson and Osgood, 1999: 237). However, subsequent evaluation revealed that there was a need for greater involvement of the regular classroom teacher and more focus on active learning than lecturing (Esbensen et al., 2001). Another evaluation found that GREAT programme met two of its three main objectives (more favourable attitudes toward police and greater awareness of the negative effects of gang involvement), but the third objective of reducing the effects of gang involvement was not met (Ashcroft et al., 2004). Thus, the programme has benefits, but will not keep children out of gangs or reduce delinquent behaviour.

In an Australian context, programmes such as this raise interesting possibilities for, and questions about, relevant 'Police In Schools' programmes, particularly in relation to curriculum matters. There is also consideration to be



given to whether or not the introduction of such a programme in the Australian context, in which gangs research and gangs 'moral panics' are less prevalent than in American jurisdictions, might not inadvertently foster the formation of gangs. By granting attention to the phenomenon, it could well encourage some young people to become interested in gang membership.

In the US (see Howell, 2000) and Australia (White et al., 1999), bullying at school has been seen as a possible contributor to either joining gangs or the perception that gangs exist. The need for protection is a major reason why some young people hang around in particular groups. The formation of self-defence peer groups, in turn, can foster a sense of group identity, pride and assertiveness. Anti-bullying programmes that attempt to address these issues are frequently based upon provision of information to teachers, students and parents about the phenomenon. It can also involve periodic surveys of students, as a means to monitor the issue and to reassure students that authority figures are conscious of its importance to school life. Such programmes are already well established in Australia and have received substantial federal and state funding (see Rigby, 2003; New South Wales Cabinet Office, 1996).

In addition to school-based activities, some consideration ought to be given to after-school activities and how these may be linked in some way to anti-gang initiatives. These activities can be tied into anti-gang strategies either directly by recruitment of young people at risk of gang membership, or indirectly through provision of general pro-social alternatives to gang membership and activity.

Another type of school and community intervention involves the use of adult and peer mentors. Designated and trained mentors can provide guidance and assistance to younger cohorts. Closely related to this is the use of peer



mediators – students whose role is to work through cooperative ways to resolve and reduce conflicts within school settings. The point is to make 'gang stuff' unattractive as a peer group option. As Gordon (2000: 57) emphasises:

Anti-gang programming appears to be most effective when it is aimed at the supply of new gang and group members, rather than existing and well-established street gang members. Programs in high schools can reduce fear and intimidation, dry up the source of gang personnel, and help generate a broader, negative perspective of gang membership, especially among younger adolescents.

According to experienced youth and community workers, realistic anti-gang strategies have to start where the young people are coming from, rather than solely reflecting the interests or thinking of service providers including teachers and police (White, 2002). School strategies have to likewise be sensitive to these concerns, and include active input from young people themselves.

Street-Based Interventions

A major source of consternation about young people, and the key site where perceptions of gang activity and youth gang formations occurs, is the street. What happens on the street therefore is important both to diminishing anti-social and gang-related behaviour, and to reducing fear of groups of young people in public places.

In specific circumstances, it may be necessary to institute coercive measures to deal with groups or situations that have got out of hand. In the United States, for example, specific city sites [hotspots] and specific youth group formations [identifiable gangs] have been targeted for aggressive street



policing. In Dallas, Texas, for instance, three main suppression strategies were employed (cited in Howell, 2000: 24):

- **Saturation patrols/high visibility patrols in target areas.** The patrols stopped and searched 'suspected gang members' and made arrests as appropriate.
- **Aggressive curfew enforcement.** In the USA, many local jurisdictions have enacted youth curfew laws, and where these were in effect, ordinances were strictly enforced whenever suspected gang members were encountered.
- **Aggressive enforcement of truancy laws and regulations,** that involved close collaboration between schools and police.

Aggressive street policing and zero tolerance approaches have been criticised, however, for unduly restricting the rights of young people, being linked to racist assessments of who gets targeted for intervention, for creating resentment amongst young people toward authority figures, and for sending the wrong message about how best to resolve social conflicts (see Dixon, 1998). Nevertheless, even the critics agree that selective use of coercive measures is warranted in specific situations and is an appropriate tactical measure when applied judiciously (White, 1998). For example, a shopping centre in Cairns was experiencing major problems with a small group of teenage boys who frightened patrons and caused persistent damage to the premises. For a short time only, the management worked with police and security guards to 'stamp out' the offending group, and with it the offending behaviour. Afterwards, the management strategy no longer relied upon coercive threat, but much more friendly and interactive forms of social regulation (White, Kosky and Kosky, 2001).



At a legislative and policy level attempts to restrict the street presence of gangs have taken the form of youth curfews or anti-loitering statutes. Curfews are used extensively in the United States, although the specific features of each curfew vary considerably in terms of times, activities, target populations and enforcement. Evaluation of curfews has indicated that their success is best guaranteed when coercive measures are accompanied by opportunity enhancement measures such as leisure and recreation, educational activities, musical forums and so on (Bilchik, 1996). Big issues remain, however, with regard to the overall effectiveness and purposes of curfews, and whether they may inadvertently criminalise youth behaviour that is in and of itself not illegal or criminal (White, 1996b).

'Street cleaning legislation' has long been linked to efforts of the establishment to deal with the most destitute sections of the population. In particular, the history of vagrancy laws in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States is a history of social control over selected population groups – the poor, the unemployed, the ethnic minority, the indigenous, the transient (see Brown et al., 2001; Santos, 2001). In the context of anti-gang strategies, a number of attempts have been made in the United States to beef up anti-loitering legislation to specifically target street gangs. In many cases, these laws have been struck down by the Supreme Court as being unconstitutional. It has been observed, however, that where governing bodies enact ordinances or laws that are directed at specific kinds of loitering (e.g., that which blocks city footpaths) or specific kinds of behaviour (e.g., particular gang-related activities), then anti-loitering legislation may pass constitutional scrutiny (see Santos, 2001). Nevertheless, such measures are seen to be 'weak' tools in the overall struggle to diminish gang membership and activity. Rather, much greater faith is put in community involvement and community wide strategies, since these go to the heart of the gang problem.



The issue of weapons also looms large in any discussion of gangs and gang-related behaviour. There are several ways to deal with weapons:

- to conduct **community education campaigns** to discourage young people from carrying offensive implements
- to **enact and enforce laws** that prohibit the carrying of offensive weapons and that allow for the confiscation of knives that are clearly being carried for unlawful purposes
- to assure young people in policy and practice, especially those who feel vulnerable to attack from other groups, that they will be **protected by the police** and therefore do not need to arm themselves in self-defence
- to negotiate with communities about the presence and place of weapons among young people and the community generally, with a view to **discouraging parental approval and encouragement of weapon carrying.**

How weapons issues are dealt with in practice has major implication for police-youth relations, and for consolidation of group identities. For example, as with similar cases in the UK, the lack of police protection can lead some young people to adopt the stance that 'self-defence is no offence' and thus to arm themselves against racist attacks (Edwards, Oakley and Carey, 1987). Concern about the carrying of weapons not only justifies even more intense police intervention, it feeds media distortions about the problem of 'ethnic youth gangs'.

The enforcement of anti-weapons laws can affect large groups of young people in negative ways. Thus, for example, some legislation that increases police powers may be designed in a manner that is age-neutral, but in



practice implementation frequently has a disproportionate impact upon young people. For instance, the *Crimes Legislation Amendment (Police and Public Safety) Act 1998* commenced in July 1998 in New South Wales. The Act made amendments to the *Summary Offences Act 1988*, so as to make the custody of a knife in a public place an offence, permit police to conduct searches for knives and other dangerous implements, and enable police to give reasonable directions in public places to deal with persons whose behaviour or presence constitutes an obstruction, harassment, intimidation or causes fear. The Act was monitored by the NSW Ombudsman over the first 12 months of its operation.

The Ombudsman found that people from 15 to 19 years of age were much more likely to be stopped and searched for knives than any other age group. While there were more knives found on 17 year olds than anyone else, the proportion of productive searches was relatively low for teenage suspects. In other words, there was a particularly high number of knife searches of young people in which no knife was found. In a similar vein, it was observed that a high number of teenagers were given directions by police under the terms of the Act. Significantly, it was also pointed out that 'the proportion of persons aged 17 years or younger affected by the directions power is higher than for the knife searches. The police data indicates that 48% of persons 'moved on' were aged 17 years or younger, while 42% of persons searched were juveniles' (NSW Ombudsman, 1999: 37). The Ombudsman recommended that the New South Wales police service closely monitor the use of these powers, and be aware of the adverse impact this activity might have on police relations with the community in general or sections of the community subject to such activity.

In general, the pro-youth anti-gang literature has tended to be critical of approaches that rely exclusively or predominantly on coercive force, and the assumptions that underpin such an approach (see for example,



Standing, 2005). In part this is due to perceived discrimination and abuses of human rights associated with the use of such force. But it is also due to the social nature of gang formation and why they exist in the first place. In other words, to deal with gangs requires acknowledgement of and response to the social, economic and cultural reasons why they form in the first place.

Community-Based Approaches

One of the limitations of street-based coercive approaches to gang activity is that very often gangs occupy a rather ambiguous position within local communities (Soulliere, 1998; Howell, 2000; Collins et al., 2000). This is so for several reasons.

- there are frequently **close ties between gang members and other members of their community**, whether through family, religious or cultural linkages.
- gang members do not simply and solely engage in criminal activities, but in a wide **range of conventional activities** that bring them in close contact with other people in the local community.
- gang membership (however loosely defined) may be a continuous feature of some communities, and thus have a measure of **traditional legitimacy** attached to it.
- gang-related activity may in fact tap into **underground or criminal economies** that are on the whole beneficial to many ordinary residents in poorer working class neighbourhoods (in that they provide a source of income and purchasing power that allows money to circulate within community agencies and businesses).
- gang membership may be viewed by adult members of a community as an important way in which to **protect each other**, and



to maintain a particular social identity important to the community as a whole (visible expression of ethnic pride and strength).

In the light of the connections between community circumstances that give rise to gangs and community relations that sustain them, it would appear that community processes also are most likely to provide the best opportunities for their transformation.

Community based approaches have a number of dimensions, that include both direct service provision and efforts to build pro-social relationships at the local level. Some are directed at youth specifically; others are designed as whole-of-community strategies that benefit people across the local area in a variety of ways.

An example of youth-oriented strategy is the employment of detached youth and community workers to provide supervised recreation and leisure activities and after-school programmes. These workers go to where the young people are at, and they intervene in a low-key supportive fashion that is founded upon trust and mutual respect. American research has demonstrated the importance of detached youth worker programmes in influencing individual gang membership and group processes (see Howell, 2000). Significantly, some of this research has shown that the intervention of practitioners can itself lead to gang cohesion by fostering joint activities, common identification and overall group cohesiveness (see especially Klein, 1995). Whether it is welfare or suppression programmes the inadvertent effect of direct intervention with street groups is to increase gang cohesiveness. This is problematic insofar as 'The more cohesive gang usually is the more criminally involved' (Klein, 2002: 247). Youth and community detached work is most strategically effective, therefore, when merged with wider community development types of interventions and citizen participation.



Another example is having youth facilities available that provide young people with safe places in which to hang out, while simultaneously providing an opportunity (through adult and youth mentors) to develop an alternative sense of belonging, identity and self-worth compared to the 'gang'. This is a youth service approach, in which the young people come to the centre (which, to attract a diversity of youth, must cater to their specific needs and interests).

With regard to services for youth, whether intended to be youth-specific or for the community as a whole, it is also important to cater to particular social differences within communities. For example, specific spaces and facilities should be reserved, perhaps at designated times, exclusively for certain young people (e.g., swimming pools, rooms that could be used for prayers), in order that religious and cultural practices be acknowledged and respected in a dignified and inclusive manner (White et al., 1999).

Community-based approaches also include those that involve large-scale, and often non-youth specific measures. Urban renewal projects and community empowerment programmes, for example, are meant to increase work opportunities for and civic participation among local residents. The intention of such interventions is to change the material situation and infrastructure of specific sites and neighbourhoods (for example, by building a skateboard ramp), and to change perceptions and attitudes among residents and non-residents about these areas (for example, by fostering participatory activities such as sports or card-player clubs). Low neighbourhood attachment, economic deprivation and adversity, and low community organisation are implicated in the constitution of crime-prone areas, so any solution will have to address these kinds of issues.

The development of pride in one's place can be important in changing negative attitudes and anti-social behaviours into more positive, pro-social



directions. For instance, Bridgewater and Gagebrook (outer suburbs of Hobart, Tasmania) had a very negative image, were linked to extensive crime and anti-social behaviour, and together were rated as one of the unhealthiest communities in Australia. The Bridgewater Urban Renewal Programme (BURP) was designed to change this situation, by changing the circumstances of the community. Four main avenues for change were identified (Whelan, 2001):

- **Marketing and promotion** – through creation of a local newspaper that explicitly attempts to provide positive stories and coverage of the area, and through employment of a public relations firm
- **Community leadership and community involvement** – through conscious efforts on the part of community and state agencies to work together rather than independently, and use of strategic initiatives that involve citizens [such as creation of local sports teams]
- **The building of pride and aspirations** – through continual assertion that local residents deserve and ought to expect the best in the way of living standards, and by an emphasis on people taking responsibility to make the neighbourhood something to be proud of.
- **Physical renewal and design** – through projects such as tree planting, mural painting, landscaping of parks and shopping complexes, and painting of homes by tenants, and by initiatives such as establishment of a local garden club

Community reputation, especially if accompanied by stigma associated with gangs, crime and anti-social activities, has a dramatic impact on life within particular locales. Young people who live in stigmatised areas are more likely than others who do not to suffer the consequences in the form of reduced job opportunities and difficulties in moving out-of-neighbourhood



(see Lee, 2006). A 'bad' community reputation may occasionally translate into a gang mentality based upon defensiveness and re-assertion of worth in the face of a hostile 'outside' world. Changing the community's reputation through communal development is one way in which to address these issues.

An essential principle underpinning a community approach to gang problems is that investment in people is the best way to reap social rewards. A community strategy (focussing on human beings) ought not to be confused with a neighbourhood approach (focussing on geographically defined physical environments), although the two are obviously interrelated. It has been noted that, 'Regeneration priorities need to emphasise the personal development of residents of disadvantaged communities, as physical regeneration alone has been demonstrated to have little impact on the conditions nurturing social exclusion' (Wolverhampton Crime and Disorder Co-ordinating Group, 2001: 33). Changing local social environments is ultimately what counts, and this means engaging and involving young people and their communities in finding solutions to their own problems, with the support of expert advice and contributions by each tier of government. Also essential to this task is giving particular attention to those young people who are particularly at risk of becoming gang members or who are presently gang members, so that they too have a meaningful role to play within the regeneration of their neighbourhoods (see Davis, 1990; Diacon, 1999).

Changing Environments

To address potential conflicts and fears relating to gangs and gang-related behaviour it is essential to create social spaces that are convivial and safe. This requires a careful assessment of particular sites, and a weighing up of potentially competing objectives. For instance, when public space is over-regulated and 'sanitised' it tends to be less frequented, to the detriment of citizens and businesses alike. Public space that does not convey a sense of



security and safety, on the other hand, will also tend to be less frequented and to be reserved for the select few who claim it as their own.

Diffusing potential tensions on the street – between groups of young people and other groups of young people, and between young people and older people and authority figures – can initially involve a series of audits of a particular local environment (White, 1999, 2001; White and Sutton, 2001). Briefly, these audits might include:

- the **physical environment** [identifying sites considered to be unsafe or threatening];
- the **social environment** [different users and uses of public space];
- the **regulatory environment** [nature of police and security approach];
- types of **amenity** [youth-specific and youth-friendly]; and
- **movements** through public places [flow of people through particular areas].

The purpose of such mapping exercises is to gain accurate information on how public spaces are used at different times and by different groups. They can also be used to provide an avenue for youth participation in planning and design of communal spaces (see also Malone, 1999). Different perspectives and the contributions of diverse sections of the wider community can provide useful insights into how local environments can be modified in ways that reassure and restore confidence. Suggested measures may be as simple as providing better street lighting, through to more intensive community discussion forums on conduct associated with skateboarding.



Changes to various facets of a particular public site ought to be premised upon certain key principles if gang-related activity and fear of youth group formations is to be addressed. The general strategy should be based upon the notion of social inclusion, rather than exclusion. Making everyone feel welcome in a space is important to the creation of a sense of communal wellbeing and collective sharing. Social inclusion also refers to the provision of various ways in which young people can participate in decisions relating to a particular site – decisions over use, decisions over regulation, and decisions over design and planning.

The adoption of appropriate community policing practices, and establishment of protocols for positive and constructive interaction, especially between ethnic minority youth and police/security guards, is essential in restoring social peace and dampening negative relations on the street (White et al., 1999). This is partly a matter of addressing aspects of policing culture (including private policing) to ensure that young people, regardless of appearance or background, are accorded respect and dignity. It is also a practical issue of how best to improve police-youth relations at the point of contact.

Rather than using certain tactics (telling young people to move on, asking them their name and address) as a means to exclude young people from certain streetscapes, a problem-oriented approach attempts to devise a strategy that deals with underlying issues. Community policing is both an important means of gaining intelligence about gangs as well as providing alternative means of conflict resolution when violence is perceived to be a problem (see White, 2004).



The Media and Changing Perceptions of Youth

The media is directly implicated in both the formation and continued encouragement of youth gangs. It does this in various ways. First, it creates a cultural climate within which negative perceptions of young people are in the foreground. Hardly a day goes by, for example, in which there is not some reference to young offenders in newspapers, on radio talkback shows and in television news coverage. The persistence and pervasiveness of such reporting and commentary means that it is hard not to be fearful of crime, and to be suspicious of young people (see Bessant and Hil, 1997).

Secondly, much of the coverage of youth crime is couched in the language of 'youth gangs', and especially 'ethnic' youth gangs (Sercombe, 1999; White et al., 1999; Poynting et al., 2001; Collins et al., 2000). This reinforces the perception that groups of young people are 'out of control' and 'terrorising' ordinary citizens. Thus, any portrayal of 'youth' tends to be linked to criminality, and the media discourses on 'law and order' frequently portray youth groups as criminal gangs.

Thirdly, in order to sell a story the media often attempt to get young people directly involved through interviews and pictures. If there is no gang as such, then at times young people have been asked to 'pretend' to be gang members 'for the camera'. Not only is this unethical and a gross misrepresentation of actual youth group formations, but it can, ironically, lead to identification of some young people with gang membership. That is, the thrill and excitement of media attention may amplify the desire to be seen as a gang member. Reputation and status thus may be artificially created but have material and longer lasting consequences for the young people and communities involved.



Collins et al. (2000) were very critical of the media for attributing criminality to 'cultural' factors (in this case related to being Lebanese). The clear implication is that everyone associated with this particular community shared similar negative attributes (see also Poynting et al., 2004). Conversely, they argued that existing research demonstrates that crime is more of a socioeconomic issue than a cultural one. There is in fact very little reliable evidence that shows that 'ethnic crime' as such is a problem. What is a problem, however, is the 'racialised' reporting of crime when the media deals specifically with 'Lebanese' youth. Ethnic identifiers are used in relation to some groups, but not others (such as Anglo-Celtic Australians). Moreover, the 'explanations' for such 'ethnic crime' tends to pathologise the group, as in there is something intrinsically bad about being Lebanese or more generally Middle Eastern. Such racialisation has a major impact upon public perceptions of the people and the issues, and on how state agencies such as the police respond to these perceptions.

Melbourne gang research in the late 1990s made a number of recommendations pertaining to the media (White et al., 1999):

- The media need to be strongly encouraged to review programme and reporting content, with a view to providing greater information and more rounded accounts of specific ethnic minority groups, and so that the use of gratuitous images and descriptions based upon stereotypes be monitored and actively discouraged
- The media and politicians need to have adequate information sources and/or pressure placed upon them to report events and situations accurately, and to respond to specific groups in a non-racialised manner, highlighting the necessity both for the active presence of independent bodies such as the Human Rights and



Equal Opportunity Commission, and for governments to take the lead in promoting reconciliation and anti-racist ideals.

- Governments at all levels should adopt pro-active campaigns which convey in a positive and constructive manner the realities and strengths of cultural diversity and which show how, collectively, the fabric of Australian society is constituted through and by the contribution of many cultures, religions, nationalities, languages and value systems, rather than being based solely upon a monoculture linked to British inheritance.

Police services have also been encouraged to support responsible media reporting. It is acknowledged by governments, for example, that negative media reporting may in fact result in increased levels of gang activity (a type of amplification of deviancy via media spotlighting). Such reporting may also cause unnecessary fear among members of a community. One response to this is to ensure that police provide to the media information that is appropriate and factual, and that will not contribute to sensational media reporting (see New South Wales, Cabinet Office, 1996). Another response has been to agree not to use ethnic identifiers in public descriptions of alleged offenders (Australasian Police Multicultural Advisory Bureau, 2006).

ISSUES FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

A major research consideration relevant to the development of appropriate intervention strategies relates to the emergence or disappearance of youth gangs.

What are the social processes involved in the movement of individuals and groups from one type of group formation toward (or away from) a gang formation?



This aspect of research would need to focus on processes of group transformation and individual choices.

- **Gang emergence and joining** – investigation of how and why specific gangs emerge and the issues around which groups crystallise; and why some young people join these groups and what needs are met by group membership of this kind;
- **Gang maintenance and transformation** – investigation of how gangs maintain and reinforce group cohesion and how they sometimes transform into another type of group; and how gang membership influences individual members; and
- **Gang dissolution and disengagement** – investigation of how and why gangs dissolve; and how, when, and why individual gang members disengage from the group.

Another area for research consideration pertains to the prevention of criminal gang formations.

What strategies can be employed to prevent the development of criminal/violent youth gangs and what forms of intervention are most appropriate to diminish gang-related activity?

This aspect of the research needs to address the policy implications of gang research in regards to the institutional measures that might be designed and utilised to curtail gang formation and gang-related activities. Specific issues that could be addressed as part of this research include:

- **The place and use of drugs in group activity**, and how these relate to periodic anti-social behaviour and street violence as well as longer term effects detrimental to the health and well-being of individuals



- **The nature of swarming** (i.e., unplanned and ad hoc coming together of large numbers of people on the street) from the point of view of how and why it occurs, what a 'critical mass' size might be, why and if the phenomenon is a social problem
- **How to develop an inclusive strategy** that builds upon existing competencies and interests in a way that is meaningful for the participants, that is non-coercive and that is not patronising

CONCLUSION

This report has provided a general overview of issues pertaining to gang research and intervention strategies. In addition to the matters raised herein, it is useful to reflect on the following concerns.

Australian gang research has argued that broad government strategies are necessary if the root causes of potential social problems and social conflict are to be addressed (White et al., 1999; Collins et al., 2000). A realistic, meaningful and humane response to the issues surrounding young people, gangs and group violence would have to be built upon interrelated policies which acknowledge and attempt to transcend the unequal distribution of power and resources in current socio-structural arrangements. Briefly, these might include the following (Cunneen and White, 2007).

- **More action to redistribute community resources:** The right to the means of life should not be contingent upon activity but should be based on need. For both the working poor and the unemployed, there is a great need to increase social resources such that physical survival and enhanced social functioning are guaranteed institutionally.



- **Concerted action on employment and job creation:** The right to work could be concretely grounded in policies which recognise the transformation of paid work, the essential creativity and necessity of labour in the self-worth of human beings, and the necessity to involve all members of society in the carrying out of tasks essential to preserving and improving the social and natural environment.
- **Acknowledgement of the importance of community space in the construction of social life:** The right to space of one's own means that there needs to be greater community control over privately owned areas which have a high public usage, such as shopping centres, and the managers of such space should be compelled to provide greater control and usage of such space by young people.
- **Greater community involvement in local decision-making, particularly public service provision:** The right to accountability is crucial in the case of institutions and agencies such as the police and social services. As the wielders of legitimate violence in society and/or the holders of considerable social power, public service providers must be fully accountable for their actions.

Such measures are central to a reform program that sees young people first and foremost as active, valued members of their communities. When society disenfranchises the young and the communities of which they are a part, youth crime and greater state intervention in the lives of the young necessarily follow. This is a recipe for social conflict, not social empowerment.

A model of comprehensive community-wide intervention has been worked out in great detail in the USA (Howell, 2000: 34). The model involves five core strategies delivered through an integrated and team-oriented problem-solving approach.



A model of comprehensive community-wide intervention

- Community mobilisation – including citizens, young people, community groups and others
 - Provision of academic, economic and social opportunities – with a particular emphasis on school training and job programmes for older gang members
 - Social intervention – meaning in this case the use of detached youth workers to engage with young people on the street
 - Gang suppression – involving formal and informal means of social control via a range of state and community groups
 - Organisational change and development – involving for example the re-allocation of resources among participating agencies and new ways of working together.
- Source: Howell, 2000.

One of the important features of this model is that it places great importance on dual forms of intervention. Namely, intervention must not be exclusively coercive (through increased supervision and suppression of youth), but must involve provision of services and opportunities (through education and job programmes) that make attractive pro-social alternatives to gang membership and engagement in gang-related behaviour.

Encouraging youth participation is not as simple as it may seem. This is especially so if the object of the exercise is linked to anti-gang strategies. For example, who is going to work with whom can be a big factor in the success or failure of a project or programme. An evaluation of a multi-faceted intervention programme in the US found that, while the project incorporated opportunity enhancement and youth participation principles, a major difficulty was that the 'case workers were all white, middle-class adults



working with lower-class adolescents' (Pappas, 2001: 10). Assessment of the program demonstrated the need for and importance of having local people from within the community serve as case workers and organisers. This example also highlights the potential of peer mentors in addressing local youth issues.

Perhaps the weakest area of academic, government and community research and intervention on gang problems has been in the area of evaluation. How do we know that what is being done is achieving what is intended? How do we know what works, and what does not work? How do we measure if community problems or community efforts are changing over time? Whatever strategy or approach is adopted, it is vital that there be systematic efforts to assess them. Importantly, evaluation criteria need to be developed, and an evaluation management team and process put into place, at the *beginning* of anti-gang intervention discussions.

Finally, it needs to be reiterated that dealing with real or imagined gang problems is necessarily a complex process. It will involve many different sorts of intervention, analysis and evaluation. It embodies different ideological perspectives and conflicting viewpoints. Constructive responses also demand political will for positive change.

Making our urban areas safer places in which to live and work means tackling a wide range of social disorders and incivilities. It means trying to strengthen the bonds that link people to their families, to their schools or workplaces and to their communities. It means trying to give all people, especially the marginalised and dispossessed, a place and value in society. This will only be achieved with political will at all levels of government. It also needs people to be placed at the centre of the process, where they are part of the solution and not simply the problem. (Diacon, 1999).



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