Youth Gangs, Violence

and

Anti-Social Behaviour
ABOUT ARACY

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SUMMARY

This paper provides an exploration and overview of issues pertaining to gang formation, and to gang violence.

The first part of the paper basically argues that gangs are variable, diverse and difficult to define in precise terms. A range of possible identifiers is considered, and gang characteristics as well as gang membership are discussed. Distinctions are made between gangs and other types of youth group formations. Likewise, a distinction is made between gangs, as such, and gang-related behaviour. The latter involves activities, such as drug use and street fighting, that may be perceived as gang-like but which do not require gang membership. A key theme of this section is that knowledge of gangs must go beyond stereotypes and presumptions about particular groups of young people to include grounded research and local area assessments.

The second part of the paper examines the issue of group violence. It begins by briefly surveying recent research from Perth, Melbourne and Sydney that specifically deals with matters of gang violence. It is established that young people who identify as being a gang member are more likely to engage in violence than those who are non-gang members. This violence also tends to be more extensive, more frequent and more group-based. The social dynamics of violence are then explored from the point of view of social factors, the processes whereby situations develop into violent events, and the rituals and meaning of violence for participants. Explanations for violence are also sought in examination of the interplay between ethnicity, masculinity, class and neighbourhood context. A key theme of this section is that gang violence is produced within specific social, economic and cultural contexts, and that to understand this violence requires consideration of
forces and factors outside of the conscious control of those participating in the violence.

The paper identifies issues for further research consideration, particularly in regard to the development of typologies of different youth group formations at the local level, and investigation of the kinds of violent and anti-social activities engaged in by young people in different locales.
INTRODUCTION

This is the first 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 explore the nature, patterns and causes of youth gang violence. The first part of the paper provides an overview of definitions of youth gangs, and of gang-related behaviour, and preliminary observations regarding the importance of gang membership. This is followed in the second part by a review of recent gang research findings, drawing upon studies in Perth, Melbourne and Sydney, with a specific focus on gang violence. Accompanying this is discussion of the social dynamics of violence and varying explanations for the occurrence of violent and anti-social behaviour.
PART 1: DEFINING THE PROBLEMS

Identifying the Problem

Effective and appropriate responses to gang issues requires a thorough assessment of local communities and neighbourhoods, and careful appraisal of the nature of the problem. As Howell (2000: 55) observes:

Both denial of gang problems and overreaction to them are detrimental to the development of effective community responses to gangs. Denial that gang problems exist precludes early intervention efforts. Overreaction in the form of excessive police force and publicizing of gangs may inadvertently serve to increase a gang’s cohesion, facilitate its expansion, and lead to more crime.

American research has concluded that a few general facts about gangs can be applied across assorted geographic, demographic and ethnic settings (United States Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997: 5-6):

- **Gangs are diverse** – they vary for example in ethnic composition, criminal activities, age of members, propensity toward violence, and organisational stability.

- **Gangs change** – they evolve due to direct factors (such as prevention, intervention and suppression efforts) and in response to indirect factors (such as demographic shifts, economic conditions, influence of the media).
• **Reactions to gangs vary** – some communities deny they exist while others sensationalise them if one is identified, some communities establish task forces to address gang issues while others conduct assessments to determine the nature and scope of gang problems.

• **Effective responses are diverse** – communities have developed various responses to gangs, including prevention, intervention and suppression or enforcement.

The message here is that gang research and the development of anti-gang strategies must begin with the premise that there is no one single model of ‘gang’ as such. The great variability in youth group formations precludes reliance upon either stereotypes of youth gangs or narrow definitions of what constitutes a gang. The sensitivities required of gang scholars is captured in what is known as the ‘Eurogang Paradox’: the denial that there are ‘American style’ street gangs in Europe, based on a ‘typical’ American gang, a model that is not at all typical of gangs in America (Klein, 2002). In other words, reliance upon stereotypes to define gang life not only allows the denial of youth gangs but it misrepresents the actual diversity of gangs in the United States.

**Defining Gangs**

The issue of youth gangs has received considerable media, political and police attention in Australia in recent years. Periodic media reports about the perceived proliferation and criminal or anti-social activities of youth gangs have long featured in press stories about young people in many parts of the country – from Melbourne to Adelaide, Perth to Sydney (see for examples, Collins, Noble, Poynting & Tabar, 2000; Healey, 1996; Pudney & Hooper, 1999; Bessant & Hil, 1997; Sercombe, 1999).
Until recently, however, there has been little concerted research into the nature and dynamics of youth ‘gangs’ in the Australian context (Aumair & Warren, 1994; White et al., 1999; Collins et al., 2000; White, 2006a). Much of our knowledge of youth groups, including ‘gangs’, has been based upon anecdotal information and popular media imagery.

Contrary to popular images, in 1991, the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence (ABCI, 1991) concluded that while a number of different types of ‘gangs’ could be identified, the vast proportion of crime committed by these group formations was opportunistic in nature, rather than highly organised. The Standing Committee on Social Issues in the New South Wales Legislative Council (1995) likewise found no evidence of highly structured gangs in Australian communities, and questioned the relevance of the term ‘gang’ to Australian youth activity. Similar findings have been evident in academic research examining city-based and ethnic-based ‘gangs’ in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth among other centres (White et al., 1999; Collins et al., 2000; White & Mason, 2006; White, 2006a).

Much of the disputation regarding the existence and magnitude of the alleged ‘gang’ problem in the Australian context hinges on key definitional parameters, principally the appropriate conceptualisation of youth collectivities. Settling on culturally suitable distinctions to be drawn between the various youth group formations is one of the fundamental precursors to the accurate quantification of ‘gangs’ and ‘gang-related’ incidents. Although a source of ongoing consternation, this definitional ambiguity is not unique to Australian conditions.

For instance, American researchers have developed a range of gang typologies to describe diverse youth group formations from the criminally instrumental to the purely recreational (see for example, Miller, 1992; Huff, 1996; Sanders, 1994; Klein, Maxson & Miller, 1995). Moreover, US, Canadian,
European, Australian and South African research has increasingly emphasised that gang formation is a social process involving complex forms of membership, transformation and disintegration (Klein, 1995; Spergel et.al., 1994; Gordon & Foley, 1998; Gordon, 2000; Bjorgo, 1999; White, 2006a; Standing, 2005). Indeed, recent American research challenges popular media images based on traditional stereotypes, and demonstrates for example, that in many cases gangs typically are not highly organised, and that the gangs, drugs and violence connection applies more to adult gangs than to youth gangs (Howell, 2000).

Klein (2002) distinguishes between five different street gang structures by comparing groups on the basis of:

- whether or not they have subgroups or internal cliques;
- their size in terms of numbers of members;
- the age range of membership;
- the duration of the gang over time;
- whether or not it is territorial; and
- its crime versatility versus whether it specialises in particular kinds of crime.

The importance of this typology is that it indicates further the diversity of street gang formations, and thus reinforces the fact that gang stereotypes do not match gang realities. A feature of contemporary American gang research is the general observation that the composition of youth gangs is changing and that there are large differences in how groups are structured and organised (Howell, 1998). Again, the emphasis is on analysis and close examination of specific youth group formations rather than making
assumptions and presumptions about the character of youth gangs. This point is reinforced in South African research that argues that the obsession with gangs ‘has not been backed up with a detailed description of what gangs are and what they mean to different people. The little research that has been done on gangs reveals only that the term has developed a special ambiguity and that in the South African context, the notion of gangs is plagued with stereotypes, false assumptions and half-truths’ (Standing, 2005). Canadian discussions of gangs make much the same point:

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 (John Howard Society of Alberta, 2001: 16).

Interestingly, it is the diversity and ambiguity surrounding gang formation that in its own way may create disquiet among general members of the public.

**US Youth Gang Identifiers: Composite of Distinguishing Characteristics**

- A self-formed, complex association of youths (aged 12-24 and predominantly male) united through mutual interest, the members of which (customarily numbering in excess of 25) maintain regular, ongoing contact

- Formalised structure and organisation maintained through strong inter-group solidarity and loyalty

- Identifiable leadership and rules
- Distinctive geographic, territorial, ethnic and/or other forms of domain identification; may involve self-designated names and may be associated with specific symbols such as distinctive articles of clothing, tattoos, hand-signals, vocabulary or graffiti tags

- Specific and purposive role rationale and group norms, including structured, continuous engagement in criminal conduct.


US-style gangs, as customarily defined in terms of being highly structured, organised and criminally motivated (see box above), are less prevalent in Australia (e.g., in the shape of some well known bikie gangs), and particularly do not feature among teenager group formations as such. Nevertheless, it can be argued that gang-like behaviour is a problem requiring further study in Australia. For example, White et.al. (1999) in their study of ethnic minority youth in Melbourne found that group conflict, and especially street fights, were common across the sample group. Whatever the ambiguities of the term ‘gang’ amongst academics and young people themselves, membership of certain groups or collectivities was nevertheless associated with varying degrees of violence and illegal activity. To ‘outsiders’, such street activity could well be interpreted as hallmarks of ‘gang’ membership and engagement. For ‘insiders’, however, group membership was often linked to a form of protection against racism and street violence, rather than a violent outlet. For many, there are major positive benefits to be derived from group participation with young people from similar class, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Miller’s definition of youth gangs is considered one of the better: ‘a self-formed association of peers, united by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership and internal organization, who act collectively or as individuals to achieve specific purposes, including the conduct of illegal activity and
control of a particular territory, facility, or enterprise’ (Miller, 1992: 21). This definition is meant to exclude motorcycle gangs, prison gangs, racial supremacists and other hate groups, and to exclude gangs whose membership is restricted to adults. While there is no standardised definition of a gang, nevertheless there is some agreement on the basic elements as outlined above and in Miller’s definition. Further to this, Maxson and Klein (1989) identify three criteria for defining a street gang that have implications for the development of suitable anti-gang strategies:

• community recognition of the group

• the group’s recognition of itself as a distinct group of adolescents or young adults

• the group’s involvement in enough illegal activities to get a consistent negative response from law enforcement and neighbourhood residents

These criteria have been echoed in South African legislation that provides a list of factors that are relevant for the identification of a gang member during prosecution and sentencing (Standing, 2005). These include:

• admits to criminal gang membership;

• is identified as a member of a criminal gang by a parent or guardian;

• resides in or frequents a particular criminal gang’s area and adopts their style of dress, their use of hand signs, language or their tattoos, and associates with known members of a criminal gang;

• has been arrested more than once in the company of identified members of a criminal gang for offences which are consistent with usual criminal gang activity;
• is identified as a member of a criminal gang by physical evidence such as photographs or other documentation.

In practice, the specific features of any particular youth group formation will vary greatly (see for example, Howell, 2000; White et al., 1999; Standing, 2005; White, 2006a). But if the group sees itself as a ‘gang’, and is perceived by others around them as a ‘gang’, primarily because of its illegal activities, then this constitutes the minimum baseline definition of a gang. But are all groups of young people gangs?

**Street Groups and Youth Gangs**

Research into youth gangs has to locate these specific kinds of groups within the context of other types of youth group formations. That is, it is important that distinctions be made between different sorts of groups – that may include gangs, youth subcultures, friendship networks, school cohorts, sports teams and so on. Similarly, the reasons for group formation and the typical focus of activities can provide insight into differences between groups – as with distinguishing between social-centred and criminal-centred activity.

Gangs research in Canada provides a useful series of benchmarks in distinguishing different types of street-present groups. These are particularly useful given the many similarities in social structure and cultural life between Canada and Australia. A typology developed by Gordon can be used initially to distinguish diverse kinds of groups and gangs (see Gordon, 1995, 1997, 2000; Gordon & Foley, 1998). The typology consists of six categories:

• **Youth movements** – which are social movements characterised by a distinctive mode of dress or other bodily adornments, a leisure time preference, and other distinguishing features (e.g., punk rockers)
• **Youth groups** – which are comprised of small clusters of young people who hang out together in public places such as shopping centres (e.g., sometimes referred to as ‘mallies’)

• **Criminal groups** – which are small clusters of friends who band together, usually for a short period of time, to commit crime primarily for financial gain (may contain young and not so young adults as well)

• **Wannabe groups** – which include young people who band together in a loosely structured group primarily to engage in spontaneous social activity and exciting, impulsive, criminal activity including collective violence against other groups of youths (e.g., territorial and use identifying markers of some kind)

• **Street gangs** – which are groups of young people and young adults who band together to form a semi-structured organisation, the primary purpose of which is to engage in planned and profitable criminal behaviour or organised violence against rival street gangs (e.g., less visible but more permanent than other groups)

• **Criminal business organisation** – which are groups that exhibit a formal structure and a high degree of sophistication, comprised mainly of adults, and which engage in criminal activity primarily for economic reasons and almost invariably maintain a low profile (e.g., may have a name but rarely visible).

This typology can be refined further by taking into account recent Australian research (especially White et al., 1999; Collins et al., 2000; White, 2006a) that describes forms of group association among young people from diverse socio-ethnic backgrounds. Issues of group membership, formation and
activity have to be analysed from the point of view of where members are coming from, as well as how ‘outsiders’ view the group.

Identification of Gang Members

There are major difficulties in defining what a gang is. So too, there are major problems in trying to identify who a gang member is, and what their precise relationship to a particular youth group formation might be. The question here is not so much the presence of the group, but a particular individual’s involvement with that group. Group membership is largely a fluid process, with specific individuals having varying degrees of association over time.

Consider the following. A young person may occasionally associate with a ‘gang’, but not be a member. A young person may participate in the activities of the ‘gang’ once in a while, but not be a member. A young person may desire to be a part of the ‘gang’, but not actually become a member. A young person may say they are part of the same crowd or ‘gang’, but not actually be a member of the relevant core group. A young person may have all the external trappings of a gang member (street gang culture in the form of dress, posture, talking style) but not be a member of a gang.

Gang membership is not absolute or fixed, but highly variable and changing. Indeed, there is often no clear dividing line between those who are in a gang and those who are not. Recent Sydney-based research carried out by the author found that group membership and friendship networks are perhaps best conceptualised as being highly variable – there are layers of belonging and connection that vary according to circumstances and activities (White, in press). Different ethnic groups would collaborate or have alliances with other groups. They might share together in drug taking, making music or even fighting. In some instances, the neighbourhood connection
was stronger than ethnic identity as such, as when ‘outsiders’ entered into the local area to have it out with a particular ethnic minority group, and various ethnic groups would combine against the intruders. In other cases, the local ‘gangs’ were part of larger ethnic networks and sub-groups, incorporating large geographical areas and relationships across distances (including international boundaries). Being a member of a ‘gang’ was generally a contingent process, one defined by specific activities, special relationships and specific networks at any particular time.

Gang membership also tends to be marked by different degrees of commitment and association. Any particular group tends to be loosely organised around a core group (the hard core or leaders), fringe members (who participate in gang-related activities on a less frequent basis), and ‘wannabes’ (those who aspire to be hard core members of the main group). Again, these categorisations are fluid and may not always apply to actual group formations. In general, is no set pattern of recruitment and membership; in the Sydney research there was only one mention (out of 50 interviews) of a gang initiation ceremony. Otherwise, who belonged to what group and in what capacity tended to be highly variable depending upon the individual, and on the circumstances that might bring together groups of young people. People could drift in and out of particular youth formations, including those self-described by the young people as ‘gangs’. For some, it was a short-lived passing phase, for others it might constitute a longer-term commitment. Other relationships and networks, particularly those revolving around ethnic networks, were more permanent, but not gang-centred as such.

Depending upon who is defining gang membership, according to what criteria, there may be dispute over whether or not a particular individual is in fact a gang member. Variables that might be considered include: symbols or symbolic behaviour that tie the person to a particular gang; self-admission
of gang membership; association with known gang members; type of criminal behaviour; location or residence; police identification as a gang member; other informant identification as a gang member; other institutional identification as a gang member (see Howell, 2000). In the end, the issue of individual gang membership can be as contentious as defining particular youth group formations as being gangs. In either case, there are major areas of ambiguity and uncertainty. In both cases, as well, things have a tendency to change over time.

Gang membership is also shaped by how others outside of immediate social networks perceive youth group formations. Whether it be the media, politicians, law enforcement officials or academics, the portrayal of certain groups of young people as ‘gangs’ may well produce the very thing that is being described. In other words, most gangs are not that organised, but treating them as if they are has potentially serious social ramifications: ‘Treating them like cohesive groups may create a self-fulfilling prophecy…It can provide the group with a common point of conflict as well as a label and identity, setting a self-fulfilling prophecy in motion’ (McGloin, 2005: 610). If we call a particular group a ‘gang’ enough times, then the group may well transform into the very thing that it has been named.

It is not only perception by others, but self-perception, that is crucial to the development of a gang identity. Sydney research has found, for example, that some of the young men who were interviewed presented themselves as a ‘gang’ in order to gain a measure of ‘respect’ (Collins et al., 2000). The symbolic representation of themselves as members of a gang, however, was more at the level of overt performance (i.e., presenting an image of being tough and dangerous), than in relation to particular kinds of professional criminal activity. The point of claiming gang status was to affirm social presence, to ensure mutual protection and to compensate for a generally marginalised economic and social position. A slightly different example of
this naming process is provided by the ‘Glenorchy Mafia’ in Tasmania. Here what was once a sports team for ‘disadvantaged kids’ that was jokingly referred to, by the young people themselves, as the Glenorchy Mafia, evolved over time into that which was being mocked – namely, a publicly identified ‘youth gang’.

Significantly, research indicates that where young people themselves claim gang membership, they tend to engage in substantially more anti-social and criminal behaviour than those who do not profess to be gang members (Esbensen, Winfree, He & Taylor, 2001, p. 123). Who you say you are thus has implications for what you do and with whom. Group identification is thus intertwined with group activity.

**Gang-Related Behaviour**

**Gang-related Behaviour**

**Criminal** – in which the main focus of the activity is directed at making money through illegal means (such as property theft, drug selling). This kind of activity may be sporadic and episodic, and may not be central to a group’s overall activity. Or it may involve complex relationships, techniques and skills, in essence a whole culture and highly organised division of labour within which profit making occurs.

**Conflict** – in which the main feature is that of street fighting and where violence is associated with gaining social status and street reputation. This kind of activity is marked by an emphasis on honour, personal integrity and territoriality (defending one’s physical or community boundaries). Issues of self-esteem and identity, constructions of masculinity and self-protection loom large in consideration of why conflicts occur and persist over time.
Retreat – in which the main activity is that of heavy drug use and generally a withdrawal from mainstream social interaction. Illegal activity mainly lies in the use of drugs as such, rather than in violence or other forms of anti-social activity. However, due to the drug use, property crimes and crimes of violence may result, often on an impulsive and senseless basis. The presence of drug users may create moral panic or disturb the sensibilities of other members of the public who are witness to them.

Street Culture – in which the main characteristic is adoption of specific gang-related cultural forms and public presentation of gang-like attributes. The emphasis is on street gang culture, incorporating certain types of music, ways of dressing, hand signals, body ornaments including tattoos, distinctive ways of speaking, graffiti and so on. It may be ‘real’ activity in the sense of reflecting actual group dynamics and formations. It may also simply be a kind of mimicry, based upon media stereotypes and youth cultural fads.

An important feature of this description of different types of activities is that the activities actually pertain to young people in general, rather than to youth gangs specifically. That is, young people may engage in one or more of the activities described, at different times and in different locations, to a varying extent depending upon social background and other factors. They may do so on their own or with a group, and involvement in particular activities may be for short or long periods of times. In other words, what is described here as gang-related activity does not equate with gang membership. Nor does gang membership necessarily translate into participation in these activities. For example, it has been observed that ‘In some gangs, using drugs is an important means of gaining social status. In others, drug use is forbidden, especially if the gang is involved in selling them’ (United States Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1998: 21). In addition, it may be the case that individual members of a gang may engage in specific types of
illegal activity, such as selling drugs or homicide, but this may not be a function or outcome of the gang as a whole.

The visibility and group nature of much youth crime lends itself to gang explanations for juvenile offending. That is, most youth crime involves more than one person, it is usually easier to detect and the activities of young people tend to be more public than other groups (see Cunneen & White, 2007). However, the group nature of juvenile offending should not be confused with gang-related criminality as such. The vast majority of youth crime tends to be episodic, opportunistic and trivial in nature, and either arises out of the spontaneous activities of social groups or is linked to a small number of chronic offenders who account for the bulk of juvenile crime. While youth offending cannot be equated with gang activity, nevertheless, membership of a gang can play a major part in criminal engagement. American research, for example, has shown that there are significant differences between the criminal behaviour of youth gang members and non-gang, but similarly at risk, young people. It was found that gang membership increases the likelihood and frequency that members will commit serious and violent crimes (Huff, 1998). This is similar to findings of recent gang to non-gang comparative research in Australia (White & Mason, 2006). In other words, gang membership does not explain juvenile offending in general, but it can exacerbate juvenile offending in practice.

**Gang Problems**

A distinction can be drawn between gangs and gang-related behaviour. A further analytical point also needs to be made. That is, not all gang behaviour is necessarily criminal, illegal or ‘bad’. Therefore one must distinguish between different kinds of gang behaviour. More importantly, the question can be asked: when do these gang behaviours become a problem? The following elements have been identified as central to what
constitutes a problem (Spelman & Eck, 1989 in US Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997: 12):

- A problem involves a group of harmful incidents [and thus a long-term solution to prevent its re-occurrence]

- The incidents that make up the problem must be similar in some way [on the basis of time or place, the people or behaviour involved, the social or physical environment within which it takes place]

- A problem must be of direct concern to the public [usually involving injury, or stolen or damaged property, or serious social and economic costs].

In the 1999 Melbourne gang research, there was much confusion and ambiguity over the difference between ‘gangs’ and ‘groups’ (White et al., 1999). In each case, membership tended to revolve around similar interests (such as choice of music, sport, style of dress), similar appearance or ethnic identity (such as language, religion and culture), and the need for social belonging (such as friendship, support and protection). Group affiliation was sometimes perceived as the greatest reason why certain young people were singled out as being a ‘gang’, and why particular conflicts occurred between different groups of young people.

**Key Questions for Gangs Assessment**

Do gangs exist in our community?

How do we know they exist?

How long have these gangs been in operation?

Approximately how many youth are involved in these gangs?
How are youth recruited into these gangs?

What behaviours do these gangs engage in?

What specific harm do these behaviours cause?

Is someone being injured?

Is something being stolen? If so, what?

Is property being damaged?

Could serious social or economic costs result from these behaviours?

Who carries out these behaviours?

What efforts, if any, have already been made to control gang membership or harmful activities?

Are specific individuals, businesses, or community groups complaining about gang activities? If so, what specific behaviours or activities are they reporting?

Are there behaviours being carried out at certain times and places?

PART 2: EXPLAINING THE ISSUES

Gang Violence: Recent Research

This section reports on recent gang research – first, from a school-based questionnaire that was delivered to students in a number of schools in and around Perth, Western Australia; secondly, from street-based interviews with young people in Melbourne; and thirdly, from street-based interviews with young people in Sydney.

Recent Perth Research

The Perth study was funded by the Department of Premier and Cabinet. The aim of the project was to provide information about the nature and prevalence of youth gangs in the Perth metropolitan area, and to identify appropriate strategies to deal with gangs. It consisted of a survey questionnaire targeting high school students. The key concern of the survey was to investigate the nature of school-based or school-related gang formation and gang-related behaviour in a Western Australian setting (see White & Mason, 2006).

A total of 743 students responded to the questionnaire, that aimed to find out information about a wide range of issues, including for instance, how safe young people feel in their local neighbourhood; what recreational and social activities young people engage in; whether racism is a problem at their school; drug and alcohol use among students; what kind of youth groups exist within local areas; whether students had experienced or witnessed violence; the reasons young people join particular groups; and so on. The sample comprised a selection of students from Grades 10 through to
12 at six schools throughout the Perth metropolitan area and one country school.

The survey was based upon a synthesis of questions and ideas used in research instruments employed in Europe (by the Eurogang Research Network), the United States and Australia. For the purposes of the research, students were asked two interrelated questions in order to identify gang status:

‘do you consider your special group of friends to be a gang’? and,

‘are you a member of a gang’?

These questions are related to what Klein refers to as the ‘funnelling technique’, as a means to operationalise the distinction between gangs and other kinds of non-gang youth group formations (see Klein, 2002).

One of the key findings of the Perth research is that gang culture is largely a culture of violence. To understand this we need to appreciate both the nature of gang membership, and the nature of gang-related violence. The study demonstrated that there are significant differences between those young people who identify as being gang members, and those who do not. The accompanying chart outlines the key differences across a range of relevant dimensions.
## Chart 1: Dimensions of Gang and Non-Gang Membership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Gang Member</th>
<th>Non Gang Member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formation</td>
<td>Large groups, includes older members</td>
<td>Small to medium sized, peer based on age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Criminal, anti-social</td>
<td>Social, recreational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locations</td>
<td>Street based, city, parks, licensed premises</td>
<td>Privately based (own and others homes), commercial outlets (malls), beaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of membership</td>
<td>Status, protection, illegal activities</td>
<td>Friendship, belonging, group based activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender composition</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mixed gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts and violence</td>
<td>Intensive and extensive experience of violence, as both perpetrator and victim</td>
<td>Spontaneous and sporadic experience of violence, as both perpetrator and victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>Poly drug use, regular and recent use, hard drugs,</td>
<td>Experimental, sporadic use, soft drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of School</td>
<td>Social isolation, exclusion, low commitment, high truancy, outside problems, drug use</td>
<td>Socially connected with school community, enjoy school, do well at school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study also indicated that while many young people in school experience and/or witness conflict of some type, the nature of the violence differs greatly depending upon whether or not one is a gang member.
### Chart 2: Dimensions of Gang and Non-Gang Violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Gang Member</th>
<th>Non Gang Member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group Dynamics</td>
<td>Violence and conflict tends to involve groups</td>
<td>Violence and conflict tends to be individually based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Revenge, ongoing dislike, protection of territory, influence of drugs</td>
<td>Spur of the moment, ongoing dislike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Outside school as well as inside school, street locations</td>
<td>Primarily inside school, institutional locations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Recent, regular, and often, and involving ongoing group conflicts</td>
<td>Occasional and sporadic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensity</td>
<td>Multiple experiences of victimisation and as perpetrators, with high degrees of violence exhibited</td>
<td>Infrequent experiences as victim or perpetrator, and low levels of violence exhibited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapons Use</td>
<td>High proportion of weapons ownership, and use</td>
<td>Low proportion of weapons ownership, and use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injuries</td>
<td>Frequent experience of injuries such as wounds, with majority respondents experiencing an injury</td>
<td>Low incidence of injury, and injuries relatively minor when experienced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to Drugs</td>
<td>Poly drug use and extensive use of drugs linked to violence, also tied to drug selling</td>
<td>Alcohol linked to violence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recent Melbourne Research

The Melbourne study was part of a national research project funded by the Australia Research Council recently carried out by the author. The subjects included 50 young people under the age of 25, and over the age of 15, of both sexes and from a range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Interviews took place in institutional settings (e.g., schools), agency settings (e.g., youth drop-in centres) and street settings (e.g., shopping malls acknowledged within the local community as ‘hang outs’). The interviewees were recruited on the basis of expressions of interest by the young people themselves; those young people who were identified by service providers as important sources of information and who agreed to participate; and those young people who were drawn into the ‘orbit’ of the study because of the participation of their peers. The ‘snowball’ sampling method – where young people assist in the recruitment process by suggesting friends and peers who might wish to be interviewed – was a useful way of recruiting subjects.

Membership of group formations tended to be based on ‘ethnicity’. Also, the main members were boys and young men, rather than girls and young women. The latter were rarely mentioned in relation to questions concerning ‘gangs’ and ‘gang-related’ behaviour. Gang activity is still very much tied up with ‘masculinity’ and ‘boys in groups’. Girls may engage in gang-related behaviour (e.g., illegal drugs, occasional street aggression), but gang membership is another question.

The Melbourne interviews indicated that gangs are a problem in the sense that being associated with a ‘gang’ usually means involvement in some kind of conflict with another group or gang. [The Perth study also showed that gang members were more likely to be victimised and injured than non-gang members].
Illegal behaviour in general was common among gang members. The interviewees also indicated that mugging of non-gang people (around ATMs and in relation to mobile phones) occurred, as did car theft for the purposes of stripping and selling of components.

The violence tends to be group-based and involve trouble with other groups. All of the self-identified gang members reported fighting with other groups, compared to two-thirds of non-gang members [see Perth study above for similar types of findings]. In some cases, a gang would engage in ‘mobbing’ – that is, surrounding an individual member of another recognised ‘gang’ or group and violently assaulting them.

It is very difficult to gauge what proportion of serious and violent crime is associated with youth gang members, since we need fine-grained analysis of particular kinds of criminal activity. For instance, a number of recent youth homicides have been related to gang behaviour, but then again, others have been linked to groups of young people meeting up at gate-crashed parties and getting into fights. We need to distinguish gang members from non-gang members. Each group can and does commit crime. The only real difference is that gang members tend to commit more crime relative to non-gang members. But gang members also need to be distinguished from smaller groups of teenagers who might commit crimes (such as break and enters) but who have absolutely no association with a gang. We have to also recognise that most young people offend in some way at some time as they grow up. However, as criminal justice experience shows, the vast bulk of juvenile crime is committed by a small handful of young people (most of whom would probably not be classed as gang members).

Overall, two-thirds of the sample did not carry weapons. Of those who did carry weapons, knives were the most popular. Proportionately, more gang members carried knives compared to non-gang members. The vast majority
of the interviewees, 87% of the whole sample, said that weapons were an increasing problem on the streets.

As well, there was some indication that the ‘rules of engagement’ have changed between diverse groups on the street and in the school. The gang problem seems to be intensifying with respect to apparently heightened levels of physical violence, use of weapons and frequency of the violence. This is particularly so in relation to those young people who self-identify as gang members [see Perth study for similar types of findings]. For many of these young people, street fights are something to go out for – to seek and to actively engage in. Violence of this nature appears to be premeditated, with identified ‘enemies’ and in some cases venues (e.g., knowledge that certain groups tend to hang out in certain places, such as a park, and if a fight is on, then that is the place to go for it).

It is important to acknowledge, as well, that many non-gang members also frequently engage in fights with others. However, this violence tends to be spontaneous to a degree, and sporadic rather than regular. If a fight breaks out between two individuals, then in many cases a group fight will result. This may take the appearance of a ‘gang’ fight, but in actual fact not be related to gang membership, identification or motivation at all. This is certainly one of the ‘grey’ areas of gang research and development of anti-gang strategies.

**Recent Sydney Research**

As part of the national study, 50 young people in the western suburbs of Sydney were also interviewed. The interviewees mainly consisted of young men, from Samoan, Vietnamese and Lebanese backgrounds. For present purposes, the key concern is with street violence, and the differences that
emerged between different ethnic groups in relation to this (see White, in press).

While everyone who was interviewed mentioned fighting, the nature and dynamics of fighting varied depending upon social background. Conflicts occurred within groups and between sub-groups, as well as between identifiable ‘ethnic’ conglomerations. The latter refers to instances when literally up to a hundred or more young people would travel outside their area, usually into the city centre. Inevitably this type of swarming would result in some kind of group punch-up. Many of the young people also mentioned occasional fights involving members of their immediate social group. In other instances, the fighting was intra-communal but involved different groups from the same ethnic minority community – for example, Vietnamese fighting Vietnamese.

The nature of the violence, and in particular the attitude towards and actual use of weapons, varied greatly according to distinct ethnic group. Some Samoan young men, for example, were very reluctant and seemed regretful about having to carry weapons. Their logic was that if everyone carries weapons, then everyone has to carry weapons.

For others, such as the Vietnamese Australian young men, weapons use was associated with a graduated learning experience. The idea is that, depending upon age and experience, one progresses to different types of weapon use – from fists to poles to machetes to guns. This ‘progression’ varies, however, depending upon with whom you talk. For example, some interviewees said that it was mainly the older young men who handled the guns and/or used them. Others, by contrast, said that it was the younger men – those around 15 and 16 years of age – who used guns to impress others around them. The older boys in fact had ‘matured’ and gone beyond the need to ‘put on a show’.
Among the sample, it was the ‘Asians’ who were most associated with weapons use. In fact, the other two main groups, the Lebanese and Samoans, were disdainful of the generalised use of weapons on the streets. For some Vietnamese, the use of weapons was intrinsically tied to body size, in particular being smaller people compared with their Samoan and Lebanese Australian peers.

Physicality is directly related to ethnicity. This takes the material form of different body sizes and shapes. For example, the Samoan young people tend to be heavier and more thick-set than the Vietnamese, who are of slighter build. The physical body is also the site for cultural construction. Every Samoan young person who was interviewed said that they had played rugby (either rugby union or rugby league). Many of the Lebanese young people likewise had experience in playing rugby, or engaging in contact sports such as boxing. The Vietnamese, if they played a sport, tended to pick basketball or martial arts. It was clear from the interviews that the Samoan young people, in particular, really enjoyed the physicality – the roughness, the aggressiveness and the body pounding – of their chosen sport.

Consideration of the intersection of ethnicity and class as this relates to the body helps us to understand the quite different perceptions regarding weapons use and masculinity, which vary according to social background. It is generally acknowledged that being tough and putting one’s bodily integrity at risk is associated with traditional working class male culture. Matters of physique and the physical have been central to working class forms of aggressive masculinity that celebrate strength, speed, agility and ability to withstand pain. Those young men who are socialised into experiencing, and enjoying, more brutalising forms of contact sport, are more likely to favour violence that tests their physical prowess in some way. Those who do not share these experiences or whose physical size limits their ability to engage in unarmed combat are derided by those who ‘can do’.
Interestingly, there was some suggestion in the interviews that those young men who adopted this kind of attitude were also those most likely to enjoy fights as a form of recreation and fun. They were also most likely to resort to violence as a ‘normal’ and first reaction to conflict. Fighting, for these young men, is ‘naturally’ enjoyable, and a ‘natural’ part of their everyday life. They don’t even think twice about resolving an argument by ‘giving ‘em a smack’. It is an ingrained reflex into which they have been socialised – at the neighbourhood level, at home and in sports. Fighting is fun precisely because of its physicality and the adrenaline rush accompanying such violence.

Thus violence is not only made natural by its prevalence in the lives of boys and men, but in many cases it is an important source of pleasure. It parallels experiences of the physical in pursuits such as sports, yet offers a different way in which to vent aggression, passion, and emotional angst. Violence is desirable because it can and does offer pleasure, for some people, for some of the time.

**Recent Gangs Research in General**

Youth gangs need to be distinguished from fully-fledged criminal organisations. Yet, the findings from national and city-based research (summarised in White, 2006a) suggest that such youth group formations are especially problematic for two key reasons:

- Gangs are associated with high levels of conflict and violence, usually involving other groups of young people, but also extending to general members of the public [there are significant differences between those young people who identify as gang members and those who do not – especially when it comes to violence]; and
• Membership of gangs may be a precursor to future involvement in adult criminal organizations [many of the activities of gangs incorporate illegal elements, or bring young people to the notice of authority figures in ways that may well entrench a ‘deviant’ status over time, thus cutting off legitimate options and moving young people on to the pathway of a criminal career].

Of major concern, therefore, are the immediate harms stemming from gangs and gang-related behaviours, and the potential for gang members to move into longer-term ‘criminal careers’. Intervention strategies have to be conscious of these considerations, as well as the importance of local community factors in fostering gang formation.

Social Dynamics of Youth Violence

A processual account of group violence focuses on the specific factors in any given situation that influence the presence or absence of violence. For example, we might examine pre-fight conditions (do people know each other?) and fight precipitators (are they teasing or making fun of someone?) and the escalation from verbal abuse to physical contact. We might also examine a wide range of contextual factors. It is the linking of situational and contextual factors that allows for social analysis of the dynamics of youth violence.

Contextual Factors

Factors relating to Setting

e.g., time of day/night, location

Factors relating to Situation

e.g., absence of guardians, drugs/alcohol use, presence/absence of peers
Factors relating to Interaction

e.g., exchange of words, bullying, racism, peer pressure, ‘being tough’

Factors relating to Social Structure

e.g., age, class, gender, ethnicity

Factors relating to Local History

e.g., intergenerational gangs, urban stories & legends

Situational Factors

Analysis of situational factors includes consideration of the triggers to violence. For example, violent incidents among school students often occur from an escalation of seemingly trivial events without premeditation to fight. Although they do not intend the outcome (e.g., a fight), the students suffer the consequences (e.g., direct harm, punishment). The interesting thing about these accounts is that we can distinguish between situational factors pertaining to individuals, and those relevant to groups. In other words, non-gang members tend to engage in fights on a spontaneous basis, rather than as part of ritualised violence or on-going group conflict. Lockwood (1997) for example, discusses school violence among individuals in the following terms:

- Disputants know each other.
- The dispute occurs at school or home.
- There are distinctive ‘opening moves’ (e.g., minor slights, teasing, unprovoked offensive touching, insults).
- A ‘character contest’ may develop, in which neither party will back down (e.g., an offence requires saving face).
• Verbal attempts to influence the other person, escalate into insults, then to violence in the form of fights.

• Violence is justified or excused on the basis of particular values-systems within which violence is acceptable. These rationalisations include:
  
  • Retribution – punishing the antagonist for something they did
  
  • Compliance – convincing the antagonist to desist from an offensive course of action
  
  • Defence – of one’s self or others
  
  • Promotion of one’s image – by saving face, defending one’s honour, or enhancing or maintaining one’s reputation

• Violence is rationalised on the basis of either ‘justifications’ (e.g., the other disputant had done something to deserve harm) or ‘excuses’ (e.g., free will was impaired by anger, they were pushed into the incident by aggressors, they did not mean to do it).

By way of contrast, Decker (1996) describes gang violence as involving a process in which group violence undergoes a series of ebbs and flows:

• Gang members feel loose bonds to the gang.

• Gang members collectively perceive a threat from a rival gang (which increases gang cohesion)

• A mobilising event occurs, that may or may not be violent

• Activity escalates

• One of the gangs lashes out in violence
• Violence and activity rapidly de-escalate

• The other gang retaliates

The group dynamics described here apply to both ‘gang’ and ‘non-gang’ groups of young people. However, it is those who identify strongly with a gang who are more likely to respond this way and to reinforce their identity through such interactions. In many cases, group protection from perceived and actual threats is integral to both group identity and to the use of violent means to protect oneself.

Timeline Accounts

A timeline type of account can also be used to illustrate the process dynamics of violence. For instance, we can identify the dynamics of violence as these evolve over time, starting from pre-fight conditions, such as the participants knowing each other, through to post-fight conditions and the possibility of ongoing reasons, such as continued hostility, as grounds for further fighting.

Time 1  Pre-fight conditions - fight 1
         e.g., know each other

Time 2  Fight precipitators
         e.g., teasing, touching

Time 3  Escalation in verbal abuse
         e.g., insults

Time 4  Violence
         e.g., fight
Group violence, therefore, is bound up with certain temporal processes, geographical spaces and social factors that shape when, where and why it occurs.

**Rituals and Meaning of Violence**

What also needs to be looked at are the rituals and dynamics of violence (see White, 2006b). Rituals, in the present context, relate mainly to the ‘rules of engagement’ of violence. These rules of engagement vary depending upon the individual, the group and the social context within which violence occurs. They also imply a familiarity with violence itself.

In the normal course of events ‘Social rules govern violence and these rules render violence intelligible and rewarding for those who participate in it’ (Moore, 1994: 65). Thus, for example, gang-related violence is often guided by rituals of restraint when a gang member fights another member of the same gang, whereas ‘outsiders’ are more likely to suffer from a no holds barred approach.

However, in situations where there are large groups of people, the rules and rituals become less clear. McDonald (1999) observes that when young people venture outside of their local neighbourhoods they are extremely
wary of who they might meet up with, in part because there does not seem to be any restraint on the level of violence they might suffer if drawn into a street conflict. In other words, violence with ‘strangers’ is inherently unstable and ambiguous, since neither party ‘knows’ the rules of engagement.

In the context of a large crowd, the rules become even less defined. Mob rule is precisely about lack of restraint, the unbridled use of force against an opponent. In small-scale fight situations a ‘ritual mediator’ may step in to end the potential escalation of conflict (e.g., a mate who intervenes to cool things down) (see Moore, 1994: 76). In crowd situations, such mediation is much less likely. Rather, the transformation into the mob precludes such mediation and opens the door to unrestrained violence.

As applied to gang research, these observations translate into the proposition that affiliation with a gang alters individual behaviour in certain ways. Specifically, it is argued that ‘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’ (John Howard Society of Alberta, 2001: 7). When violence occurs in a group context, the ‘crowd dynamic’ described earlier tends to come into play, and it is the group rather than the individual that actively promotes violent behaviour.

The use of drugs appears to be a factor in gang violence, although in what ways is less than clear. For example, the Perth study (White & Mason, 2006) found that gang members were more likely than non-gang members to be engaged in poly-drug use. To what extent this is a causal factor in the violence is uncertain. The type of drug would most probably include methamphetamine (crystal meth, ‘ice’), since research tells us that gang members partake in a wider variety of drugs than their non-gang counterparts. This drug has been associated with violent behaviour, although
it is not necessarily a direct causal reason for increased violence as such (see McKetin et al., 2006). Gang violence has been related to drug dealing, as part of the dangers and processes associated with criminal transactions. It has also been linked to individual use of drugs. In the latter case, interviews as part of the national gangs study indicated that sometimes particular members of gangs ‘got off their heads’ and would get ‘aggro’ as a result of drug use. Occasionally where one person did go ‘loopy’ and pick a fight with strangers, the rest of the gang would intervene on their mate’s behalf to either stop the fight or to provide group back-up for their comrade. The influence of drugs in relation to gang violent behaviour seems to be more indirect than direct.

The place of violence in society generally, and in the lives of young men in particular, also shapes the propensity for specific violent incidents to occur. In contemporary Australian society, there appears to be a certain ‘naturalisation’ of violence as an everyday phenomenon, and as a significant form of anger management and conflict resolution. This is especially so for boys and men. We know, for example, that teenage males have a much higher rate of fighting than females. Studies also show that early engagement in anti-social behaviour tends to lead to ongoing, long-term involvement in such behaviour among teenage males (Smart et al., 2004). The majority of boys are familiar with violence – as perpetrators, as victims, as observers (White & Mason, 2006). Violence is not new, or particularly disturbing for many boys. For others, however, exposure to violence can have socially toxic effects – for themselves, their families and their communities – in regards to self-esteem, fear, performance at school and building trust relationships.

But violence in groups or involving group action, is different from fights between individuals. Group dynamics very much affect the pretext for violence and the outcome of disputes. Recent American research, for
example, demonstrates that much gang violence relates to norm violations (such as annoying behaviour, defending others), identity attacks (such as in regards to the gang or in the Australian context, ‘ethnic’ identity), and retaliation (such as action taking in revenge against some prior wrongdoing) (Hughes & Short, 2005). Australian gang research likewise highlights the importance of reputation, group identity, social belonging and physical protection in how groups are socially constructed (Collins et al., 2000; White, 2006a). A threat to the group is enough to warrant violence. And specific types of threat, especially in regards to norm violations, give rise to even greater levels and use of violence (Hughes & Short, 2005). The particular type of group formation (such as a ‘gang’) will influence what are deemed to be acceptable justifications for violence, and the ‘appropriate’ sorts of group response in any given situation.

Violence is not only made natural by its very prevalence in the lives of boys and men, but in many cases it is an important source of pleasure. It is the occasions when ‘exceptional’ violence occurs that provide the excitement and the break from the ordinary routines of everyday life. From the perspective of cultural criminology, physical violence and other types of anti-social behaviour can be interpreted as meaningful attempts to ‘transgress’ the ordinary (see Hayward, 2002; Presdee, 2000). In a world of standardised diversity and global conformities, it is exciting and pleasurable to break the rules, to push the boundaries, to engage in risky and risk-taking activities. To transgress is to deviate. It is to go beyond the ordinary, to seek that adrenaline rush that pushes the boundaries of emotion and convention.

Related to this, we also have to account for the inherent attractions of violence, as violence, in its own right: ‘many people feel drawn towards violence because it can give pleasure’ (Schinkel, 2004: 19). From one point of view, force or violence may be viewed as rational behaviour to the extent that it is designed to effect change in the target of violence. For example,
many young people fight not because of an absence of values, but because of values that hold such behaviour to be a justifiable, commonsense way to achieve certain goals (Lockwood, 1997). This is especially understandable in the context of concerns about masculine identity, and violence that relates to defence of ‘male honour’ (Polk, 1994). But the rationale behind the violence need not be simply due to cues or triggers imposed externally. For there is increasing evidence, including recent gang research (see White & Perrone, 2001), that violence also stems from the efforts of young people themselves to engineer situations and events with the intended aim of increasing the likelihood of violence occurring (Jackson-Jacobs, 2004; Schinkel, 2004). From this perspective, the gang provides a forum or ready-made structure within which to engage in what is felt to be exhilarating activity. Gangs provide an avenue to increase the thrill factor beyond the norm (White & Mason, 2006).

The ‘will to violence’, as Schinkel (2004) describes it, provides its own reward. However, this ‘will’ may be overlooked in social scientific research that looks to external causes (such as unemployment, masculinity, social inequality). Or, it may be subject to varying forms of ‘denial’ at the level of personal engagement. For example, interviews with gang members in Melbourne revealed that in some instances individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds did not just fight in order to defend themselves or to confirm their group identity. The study found that periodically some of these young people used the notion of racism as a convenient cover for their own aggression. That is, in some cases the violence was motivated by a desire to engage in the violence itself, rather than in responding to racism as such (White & Perrone, 2001: 172). This phenomenon is not specific to ethnic minority young men as such – rather, it is an attribute that finds general purchase across the diversity of ethnic backgrounds, including mainstream Anglo-Celtic. Violence is thus
its own attractor, regardless of the techniques of neutralisation that may be
evoked to deny responsibility or wrongdoing.

**Class, Masculinity & Ethnicity**

The construction of violence as a (predominantly) working class
phenomenon partly stems from the importance of physicality - the body - in
working class life and culture. Traditionally paid work was largely reliant upon
performing physical tasks (in the factories, in the mines, in the trades, in the
army). The centrality of physique and the physical translates into forms of
aggressive masculinity that celebrate strength, speed, agility and general
physical prowess.

At the same time, it is bound up with specific class codes of conduct and
permissibility. Solidarity, dependability and co-operation demand strict
parameters on what violence is allowed, to what degree, involving whom,
and to what social end. Conflict between workers and bosses, for example,
has typically involved disputes over the limits to which a body might be
pushed, and the level of violence workers will endure for the sake of their
employer’s profits. Fights outside the pub, on the other hand, are a normal
occurrence that reflects the ‘protest masculinity’ of the working class man at
leisure (Tomsen, 1997). Using the body in this particular way provides a class-
based acknowledgement of social identity as well as pleasure.

But the social limits on and propensities for aggression can become skewed
in the case of some working class males. Legitimacy and regulation become
harder to sustain under circumstances in which violence permeates social
life, rather than being instrumental to the rules of the (sports, military,
occupational, leisure) game. This is especially so for members of the so
called underclasses of society. The very poor have been forced to eke out
an existence in a context of increasing residential ghettoisation, economic
marginalisation and political disenfranchisement (Vinson, 2004; Lee, 2006). This has a number of implications for how men act.

For a start, given the lack of financial resources, the ‘body’ may literally be one of the only ways in which to secure an income - through prostitution, fighting, stealing, mugging. It can be both commodity (i.e., something to sell to another) and instrument (i.e., to secure something for oneself). How the body is viewed, and used, is in turn tied to particular conceptions of masculinity.

Masculinities differ considerably according to ethnic differences, generational differences, class patterns and sexual preferences, but often these are subordinated to the dominant definition of what it is to be a ‘man’. The dominant or hegemonic conceptions of masculinity prescribe male behaviour in very particular ways (Connell, 1995). Real men are those who are tough, competitive, public, heterosexual and active. Real men see themselves as having higher social status than, and authority over, women. The maintenance or attainment of this notion of manhood, however, depends not only on the idea of what it is to be a ‘man’, but on the material resources to do so (Connell, 1995; 2000).

Opportunity, choice and group affinity all have an impact on how individuals construct or attempt to construct a masculine identity for themselves. The specific social context of the individual is crucial to understanding how different groups of men attempt to negotiate, reconcile or oppose the masculine ideal, in the light of the actual resources at their disposal. For those men who traditionally established their masculine credentials via paid work, but who are now unemployed, homeless or generally marginalised from mainstream institutional life, the expression of masculinity has to take on different, and potentially much more anti-social forms. A lack of institutional power and accredited social status often leaves
little alternative than physicality itself as the main form of self definition -
whether this manifests itself as self-destructive behaviour or as violence
directed at the other. Much of the violence is in fact directed at other young
men, many of whom are likewise in vulnerable social positions.

Groups of young people band together for social, cultural and familial
reasons. They also do so for protection. Youth group formation, which in
some cases may include the evolution of the group into a gang, is thus often
intertwined with violence or the threat of violence in the lives of young
people (Collins et al., 2000; White et al., 1999; Standing, 2005). Over time,
group identification becomes central to individual social identity, and the
fate of the collective is inseparable from the security and social belonging of
the individual. In some locales, group membership is accompanied by group
rivalry. Violence becomes both ‘grouped’ in nature (rather than
individualised), often around particular construction of ‘ethnicity’ or
‘territory’, and ritualised in content and execution (vis-à-vis times, locations
and weapons).

The institutional racism and economic marginalisation experienced by ethnic
minority young people is directly linked to group formations that function in
particular ways to sustain a sense of identity, community, solidarity and
protection. The assertion of identity, and the ‘valorisation of respect in the
face of marginalisation’ (Collins et al., 2000: 150), manifests itself in the form
of group membership and group behaviour that privileges loyalty and being
tough (individually and as a member of the identified group) in the face of
real and perceived outside threats. It also sometimes takes the form of
contempt for ‘Aussies’ (or whatever the dominant social group is) and
wariness of other ethnic minority groups that likewise are struggling to garner
respect and reputation in a hostile environment. Marginalisation is thus
associated with the idea of ‘dangerousness’.
There is also a strong cultural component to violence, especially for males (see Polk, 1994; Messerschmidt, 1986, 1997). Particularly for working class young men, physical prowess or toughness is a form of social capital. In most social milieu, a young man’s reputation depends in part upon the credible threat of violence (Polk, 1994). Quick resort to physical combat – as a measure of daring, or courage, or defence of status – appears to be a standard cultural expectation, especially for working class boys and young men. Physicality itself, relying upon the body, is one way in which to ‘prove oneself’. Yet, the expression of physicality is itself variable and is heavily influenced by social context and situational factors. Whether to use fists as the weapon of choice, for example, is partly a matter of how the choice is shaped by cultural fields and material realities (see White, in press).

A Sydney study of young Lebanese Australians was particularly conscious of the dynamics of marginality and masculinity (Collins et al., 2000). As mentioned earlier, some of the young men in this study presented themselves as a ‘gang’ in order to gain a measure of ‘respect’. There was an intersection of masculinity, ethnicity and class – in such a way as to affirm social presence, to ensure mutual protection and to compensate for a generally marginalised economic and social position.

This performance of the ‘gang’ functions in several ways: it provides a venue for cultural maintenance, community and identity; and at the same time provides the protection of strength in numbers in the face of physical threats by other youth, and harassment by police and other adults….Central to their partial negotiation of their experience of racialisation, they affirm a masculine and ‘ethnic’ identity of toughness, danger and respect (Collins et al., 2000: 150).

Thus, assertion of gang membership is interpreted in the context of attempts by the young men to ‘valorise’ their lives and empower themselves in the
face of hostility, disrespect and social marginalisation. One of the ironies of media representations of gangs is that it makes membership of such a group appear even more attractive than otherwise may be the case.

**Crime, Communities and Neighbourhoods**

Social problems such as unemployment, poverty and declining opportunities directly affect the physical and psychological well-being of young people. Local neighbourhood conditions therefore have major ramifications for schooling and employment prospects. This is significant insofar as poverty and unemployment are being entrenched at a spatial level; they are being increasingly concentrated in specific locations around the country (Vinson, 2004). It has been observed that income inequality across households ‘exert a strong and systematic neighbourhood effect’ that, in turn, results in fewer opportunities for young people and greater likelihood of negative ‘neighbourhood pathologies’ (Gregory & Hunter, 1995). At a very general level, then, it would appear that local community context is an integral part of why some young people have a greater propensity than others to engage in violence and crime.

But the circumstance of economic adversity, in and of itself, is insufficient to explain fully the relationship between disadvantaged youth and crime. Weatherburn and Lind (1998: 4) argue, for example, that living in a high crime rate area influences the likelihood of a person from a low-income background engaging in criminal behaviour. They point out that, in addition to a correlation between reported parental neglect and poverty, there are higher rates of crime in those neighbourhoods in which the level of economic stress is sufficient to push the number of juveniles susceptible to crime past a certain limit. Thus, according to Weatherburn and Lind (1998: 4), ‘Low socioeconomic status neighbourhoods will generally have larger populations of delinquents and will therefore produce higher rates of
interaction between juveniles susceptible to involvement in crime and juveniles already involved in crime’.

The precise nature of peer group interaction is also influenced by other local neighbourhood factors. It is not simply a case of there being a critical mass of young people who together collectively contribute to the creation of a crime-prone neighbourhood. The social dynamics of specific areas also shape the nature and extent of juvenile offending. American (Sampson, 1991, 1993) and British (Hirschfield & Bowers, 1997) research has pointed to the importance of ‘social cohesion’ in understanding the relationship between crime and disadvantage. Here it is argued that areas of disadvantage with high levels of social cohesion will tend to have lower levels of crime than similarly disadvantaged areas with low levels of social cohesion. Social cohesion, albeit a difficult concept to define and measure, generally refers to ties at the local level that bind people together in a positive way – such as familiarity with one’s neighbours, shared interests, sense of community, engagement in formal and voluntary organisations, presence of local friendship and acquaintance networks, and so on.

Neighbourhoods that have strong social cohesion (which tend to be fairly stable in terms of residential tenure and home ownership) are able to exert greater degrees of informal social control by the area’s residents. This takes the form of the monitoring of play by local children, intervention to prevent acts of truancy or vandalism by local youth, ostracising ‘troublemakers’, through to confrontation of persons who are exploiting or disturbing public spaces (Foster, 1995; Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997). These types of analysis suggest on the one hand that, ‘The more that an area that is at a disadvantage economically pulls together as a community, the greater its capacity to combat crime’ (Hirschfield & Bowers, 1997: 1296). On the other hand, it is argued that concentrated disadvantage will decrease collective
efficacy, and thus informal controls will be undermined (Sampson et al., 1997).

The Sydney study of young Lebanese Australians (Collins et al., 2000) pointed out that the groups that exhibit the highest rates of imprisonment, including for example the Lebanese, Vietnamese and Turkish, also have the highest unemployment rates. Put simply, the issue of social exclusion appears to be central in any explanation of youth offending involving particularly disadvantaged groups. Marginalisation was also central to explaining the perception of widespread involvement in ‘youth gangs’ among Lebanese youth. Collins et al. (2000) observe that the main forms of association among Lebanese young people were first and foremost friendship groups. As in a previous Melbourne study (White et al., 1999), the groups also functioned as a defence against experiences of racism and exclusion from the cultural mainstream.

The marginalisation of people economically, socially and politically is uneven, and is based upon wider social divisions in Australian society linked to class position, ethnicity, indigenous background, and gender relationships. The social costs of marginality are inevitably translated into the economic costs of crime. But the social costs of marginality are also transformed into behaviour that is officially defined as ‘anti-social’ and ‘dangerous’. All of this is bound to have an impact on the self-image of marginalised young people and their efforts at self-defense in a hostile environment. The pooling of social resources and the construction of identities that are valued by others (if only one’s peers) finds expression in a range of cultural forms, including various youth subcultures and ‘gang’ formations (see for example, Collins et al., 2000; White, 2002).
ISSUES FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

There are two major dimensions of youth gang research that ought to be pursued as part of an ongoing study agenda dealing specifically with youth group formation, and the nature of group violence. The first concern relates to identification of gangs in the Australian setting.

What kinds of group formation can be identified in the Australian context, and what is the relationship between these different group formations and the concept of gangs?

In working towards the development of a youth group formation typology, a number of important aspects of youth group participation need to be explored, including:

- **Issues of ethnicity**: that is, the impact that ethnic background has upon a person’s recreational opportunities, preferences and type of group membership.

- The differences and similarities in the activities engaged in by **gang versus non-gang members**. Particular account will be taken of the importance that anti-social, illegal or criminal activity plays in terms of their overall patterns of activity.

- The differences, similarities and links between **school-based gangs and non-school based gangs**, and exploration of the distinction between gang members who might attend school and the presence of distinctive gangs at school.

- **How and why religious, cultural and economic influences** within and between various communities affects group membership and activity, including gang membership and gang-related activity.
The second research concern relates specifically to the issue of violence and anti-social behaviour.

What kinds of violent and anti-social activities do groups of young people engage in, and are there significant differences in how different groups use, experience and respond to violence?

Answering these questions would direct us to examine specific issues such as:

- the use of **weapons**,  
- the social dynamics of **specific violent events**,  
- the reasons why some **forms of anti-social behaviour** are seemingly tolerated (e.g., hate speech, racial vilification) by authorities while other kinds are condemned (e.g., particular styles of hanging out),  
- the place of gang members as **witnesses, perpetrators and victims** of violence, and  
- the connection between youth gang violence, and the objectives and activities of **adult criminal organisations**.

In general, gangs research has to take into account that issues of group membership, formation and activity have to be analysed from the point of view of where members are coming from, as well as how ‘outsiders’ view the group.
CONCLUSION

Social structure and social being shape broad propensities in a society, and individual life circumstances are reflected in, and reflective of, identifiable social patterns.

Social exclusion of young people often results in them becoming disaffected, without a sense of engagement or investment in society or their communities. Disaffected young people tend to have low levels of self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation. Disaffection is seen as a major factor leading young people into truancy or exclusion from school, early sexual behaviour, substance misuse, anti-social behaviour and offending. The consequences of these can serve to further reinforce their sense of separation and social exclusion, thus perpetuating the cycle of disaffection. In areas where socially excluded young people are concentrated in high numbers, this can often lead to a youth culture of disaffection. This culture reinforces negative, anti-social values and behaviour, often putting young people into direct conflict with their communities (Wolverhampton Crime and Disorder Co-ordination Group 2001).

This paper has provided an introduction and overview of literature dealing with youth gangs and with gang violence. There are major ambiguities and difficulties in providing a definitive description and explanation for gang formation, and certainly more research is needed in the Australian setting on these matters. Likewise there are many dimensions and elements to group violence that warrant further theoretical and empirical exploration. Gangs and group violence are neither natural nor normal. Each is fired up in the crucible of lived experience and shared realities. This has implications for both how we understand phenomena such as gang violence, in its specific
manifestations, and how social responses to this violence might best be constructed.

The second paper in this series looks at the question of anti-gang strategies. It maps out the varying ways in which intervention has been developed in regard to gang formation and activities. As with this paper, rather than providing answers as such, it raises important questions of theory and practice surrounding gangs. Again, as with this paper, the key message will be one of sensitivity to local conditions, acknowledgement of socio-structural processes, and appreciation of research-based interpretation and intervention.
REFERENCES

Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence, Strategic Analysis Section (1991) Australian Youth Gang Assessment. Canberra: ABCI.


51


