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Police and Community Responses to Youth Gangs

Rob White

Although there are no national data on youth gangs in Australia there is a perception that youth gangs are an emerging problem. This paper draws largely on overseas attempts to deal with gang related activity and the extent to which they have been successful. The most successful interventions have some combination of coercive and developmental measures. A key issue for both policy makers and practitioners is the weight given to particular measures within the context of an overall strategy. While for tactical purposes, coercive force may occasionally be necessary, positive approaches to gang issues also require developmental strategies and active community involvement.

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There is a widespread public perception that 'youth gangs' are a major and growing problem in Australia. This perception is strengthened by media images of youth violence and anti-social youth group behaviour (Collins et al. 2000; Sercombe 1999). The perception is further 'confirmed' in frequent negative pronouncements by politicians about particular youth groups, and by the introduction of measures such as anti-weapons legislation (Lozusic 2003).

There is very little in the way of empirical data that tell us how many 'gangs' actually exist, who belongs to them, and what they do. Research undertaken in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide (White et al. 1999; Collins et al. 2000; Foote 1993) has provided some indication of the social dynamics of youth group formation, and the tensions and inequities associated with social marginalisation. Current research by members of the OzGang Research Network, of which the author is a member, will hopefully provide further qualitative and quantitative information about diverse youth group formations in the future.

Regardless of the 'realities' and 'myths' surrounding youth gangs in Australia today, three intervention issues nevertheless stand out. First, the perceptions that youth gangs exist and are a danger to the community will almost inevitably generate action on the part of authorities, regardless of what is happening at the grassroots level. Secondly, analysis suggests that the political and economic conditions for potential growth in gang-related behaviour presently exist, and that action is required now in order to forestall future problems (White et al. 1999; White 2002). Thirdly, the discourses of 'gang' have largely been racialised in most places around Australia, with ethnic minority youth the main subjects of such public discourses (Collins et al. 2000; Poynting, Noble & Tabar 2001; White et al. 1999). These observations require that we be sensitive to the implicit and explicit social issues that inevitably accompany any consideration of police and community responses to gang-related behaviour.

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The question is not whether anti-gang strategies should be developed (given that this is already occurring); rather, what kinds of strategies look most promising and least harmful from the point of view of overall (and specific) community relations and youth rights. A major source of consternation about young people, and the key site where gang activity and youth group formations occur, is the street. Dealing with gang formations and gang-related behaviour has generally involved a combination of coercive and developmental approaches. These are used in varying ways, with differing emphasis and under changing circumstances (Cunneen & White 2002). American evaluations of youth anti-gang programs (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 long-standing versus emerging or more recent gang problem cities. Thus, for example, the provision of social opportunities is seen to be more effective in places with chronic gang problems, whereas 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).

Gang suppression and police intervention

Gang suppression takes a number of different forms, from explicit anti-gang targeting by police through to adoption of measures that, while not particularly linked to gang control, may have an indirect impact upon gang activities.

Police powers

The policing of gang-related behaviour and of groups of young people perceived to be gang members can take many different forms. A variety of intervention measures may therefore be drawn upon for the purposes of gang suppression, regardless of original intent. For instance, while the legislative basis for action varies from state to state, the general trend around Australia has been for police to be granted extensive powers in relation to young people (Blagg & Wilkie 1995; Mukherjee, Carcach & Higgins 1997). These range from casual use of 'name-checks' (asking young people their names and addresses), 'move-on' powers (the right to ask young people to move away from certain areas) and search for prohibited implements, through to enhanced ability to take fingerprints and bodily samples of young alleged offenders.

The removal of young people from public spaces has also been accomplished through specific legislative measures. In 1997 the *Children (Protection and Parental Responsibility) Act* was proclaimed in New South Wales. The Act allows the police to remove young people under 16 years of age from public places without charge, if the police believe that the young people are 'at risk' of committing an offence or of being affected by a crime, are not under the supervision or control of a responsible adult, or if it is believed the young person is in danger of being physically harmed or injured, or abused. The Act does not specify the sort of offences which might be committed; but if an offence were actually committed, the police would not be detaining the young person under this Act.

In the first six months of 1999, 145 young people were removed from public places in the four local government areas where the legislation was operational. Of these, 90 per cent were Aboriginal children (Chan & Cunneen 2000: 53).

Weapons

The issue of weapons is prominent in any discussion of gangs and gang-related behaviour. There are several ways that this issues may be addressed:

- 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;
- 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; and
- 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 implications for police-youth relations, and for consolidation of group identities. For example, as with similar cases overseas, 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 & 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. 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, 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. The most common age group to carry knives were 17 year olds. 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. 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 people aged 17 years or younger affected by the directions power is higher than for the knife searches'. The police data indicates that 48 per cent of people 'moved on' were aged 17 years or younger, while 42 per cent of people 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 general community or sections of the community subject to such activity.

Coercive force

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 USA, 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; and
- 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 (Dixon 1998).

Nevertheless, critics agree that selective use of coercive measures is warranted in specific situations and is an appropriate tactical measure when applied judiciously (White 1998; Mitchell & Wong 2002). 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 & Kosky 2001).

Curfews and anti-loitering laws

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 USA, although the specific features of each curfew vary considerably in terms of times, activities, target populations and enforcement. There has also been a recent extension of the scope of youth curfews in the United Kingdom (Walsh 2000). 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). Issues remain, however, with regard to the overall effectiveness and purposes of curfews, the negative implications they hold for human rights and freedoms, and whether they may inadvertently criminalise youth behaviour that is in and of itself not illegal or criminal (Simpson & Simpson 1993; Jeffs & Smith 1996; White 1998; Walsh 2000).

In the context of anti-gang strategies, a number of attempts have been made in the USA to strengthen 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 a 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 (Santos 2001). Nevertheless, such measures are seen to be 'weak' tools in the overall struggle to diminish gang membership and activity. Much greater faith is put in community involvement and community wide strategies, since these go to the heart of the gang problem.

Community responses to youth gangs

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 tap into underground or criminal economies that can result in some residents in poorer working class neighbourhoods becoming dependent on illegal sources of income; and
- 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).

Policy development and formulation of intervention strategies at a community level is a complex task. The starting point, therefore, should be a careful analysis of what precisely 'the problem' is. Canadian researchers such as Gordon (2000) and American criminal justice agencies (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 formations, as well as the dynamics of opportunity structures and communal relations (especially in relation to ethnic minority groups). It is clear that the prevention of criminal youth gangs must be broad-based and developmental in orientation, rather than simply coercive.

A problem-solving model

Methodologically, addressing perceived gang problems requires adoption of a problem-solving model. Understanding gangs and gang problems is ultimately about what people can do at a local level to provide local solutions. 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 (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.

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 are also 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.

Specific community strategies

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 programs. These workers go to where the young people are, 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 programs in influencing individual gang membership and group processes (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 (Klein 1995). Whether it be welfare or suppression programs,

the inadvertent effect of direct intervention with street groups is to increase gang cohesiveness. This is problematic in that 'the more cohesive gang usually is the more criminally involved' (Klein 2002: 247). In regards to the development of groups such as the 'Glenorchy Mafia' in Tasmania, this observation provides an important cautionary warning to practitioners. What was once a sports team for 'disadvantaged kids' that was jokingly referred to as the GM, has over time evolved into that which was being mocked—namely, a publicly identified 'youth gang'. Youth and community detached work is most strategically effective when merged with wider community development types of interventions and citizen participation. Another example of an anti-gang initiative 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 programs, 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 (e.g. by building a skateboard ramp), and to change perceptions and attitudes among residents and non-residents about these areas (e.g. 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. 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. 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. Enhancing the community's reputation through communal development is one way in which to address these issues.

An essential principle underpinning this type of intervention is that investment in people is the best way to reap social rewards (Wolverhampton Crime & Disorder Co-ordinating Group 2001). 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.

Initiatives that have built upon many of the principles and practices outlined above have recently been instituted in Sydney (Mitchell & Wong 2002). In addition to coercive tactical measures targeting particular gang members, police and community members have intervened in Bankstown and Campsie through an Innovative Models of Police and Community Training (IMPACT) Project since 1999. The project identified a number of local issues, particularly those centering on an escalation of tension between police and Arabic speaking youth. After a series of consultations, the following four stages of the project were developed and implemented:

- community induction for probationary and new constables through visits to community and government agencies, mosques, youth centres, etc;
- a two-day intensive training course for all police on local and cultural issues, and how to provide culturally competent service delivery to ethnic minority communities;
- mediated small group discussions between police and young people to increase greater understanding of each others' perspective and to foster support; and
- community information forums on policing issues, community expectations, crime prevention and public safety.

As a result of the adoption of these measures, the climate in the community improved significantly (Mitchell & Wong 2002) with, among other things, a noticeable reduction in violent confrontations between police and Arabic youth, and an increase in police morale and job satisfaction.

Conclusion

One of the important features of the leading comprehensive community-wide intervention model in the USA (Howell 2000: 34) 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 also involve provision of services and opportunities (through education and job programs) that make attractive pro-social alternatives to gang membership and engagement in gang-related behaviour. This is perhaps the key message of gang research—that police and community responses to gangs must combine several different kinds of measures, in ways that enhance the participation and social inclusion of young people generally.

Another lesson to be drawn from overseas research and program implementation is the importance of evaluation. Particularly in the context of interventions that are frequently experienced by young people as racially-based and anti-youth, evaluation of any tactic or strategy is essential.

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