

# **Gangs:** **Territory, values,** **sanctions, rituals.**

## **Support Material Pack**

Specification Area(s):	Gangs: Territory, values, sanctions, rituals.
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**The main areas we need to cover in relation to gangs are:**

1. **Territory**: [Eg: how are areas defined and protected?]
2. **Values**: [What are the main ideas that define and guide gang behaviour?]
3. **Rituals**: [Eg how are people made to feel they belong to a gang?]
4. **Sanctions**: [How are gang members socially controlled with the gang?]
5. **Theories**: [How can we apply these to explain gang behaviour?]

**The sheets provided will help you make notes on the above.**

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**In addition there are further questions to consider / answer:**

1. How can "a gang" be **defined**?
2. How do gangs differ in terms of **ethnic** background?
3. How do gangs differ in terms of social **class**?
4. How do gangs differ in terms of **gender**?
5. How is **age** related to gang membership?
6. What **characteristics** of gangs can be identified?
7. What **types** of gang-related behaviour can you identify?
8. Are there different **types of street gang**?
9. How are **group identities** created within gangs (think about the Self and the Other)
10. How do gangs **change** (in terms of **formation**, **membership**, **disintegration**)?
11. What **cultural factors** (**social** / **psychological**) generate gangs?

## **Basic Issues for Educators :Donald W. Kodluboy**

The problems presented to schools by Asian gang-involved youth are neither overwhelming nor insurmountable. Facing the problem of any type of gang activity requires administrative foresight and commitment to peaceful problem prevention and resolution.

Vigilance, close supervision, respect for students, high expectations of respect from students to adults and to each other, cultural sensitivity and commitment to building a strong sense of community can help prevent problems, strengthen positive student behaviour, and mediate against the culture of gang violence.

Before 1975, Asian gangs were largely limited to disaffected Chinese youth living in the "Chinatown" of larger cities. Such youth, alienated from the greater community, were also largely marginalized within the Chinese community itself due to a variety of social and economic conditions.

Prior to the departure of American forces from Viet Nam in 1975, the stereotypical American concept of Asian gangs derived largely from the image of San Francisco tongs or triads of an earlier era. Since that time, the image of Asian gangs has changed to include new immigrant groups, such as Vietnamese, Vietnamese-Chinese, Laotian, Cambodian and Hmong gangs, which can now be found in communities across the nation where recent Southeast Asian immigrants have settled.

Triads are enduring, secret societies born of the political turmoil in China during the 1600s. Modern-day triads are generally viewed by law enforcement as criminal organizations. Conversely, tongs or family associations are primarily legitimate organizations, which formed in America during the 1800s to provide social and financial support systems to Chinese immigrant communities.

Racial and language isolation are common for recent immigrant groups, both for reasons of self-selection and rejection by the community in which they settle. Some adults dream of a return to their homeland, and intentionally limit their acculturation. Language-isolated immigrant adults who do not learn the predominant language and customs of their new homeland often find themselves estranged from their own English-speaking children and separated from the greater community. Thus, a generation gap often expands within a single family and between the immigrant and the greater community as well.

### **PREVALENCE OF GANG INVOLVEMENT**

It is critical to remember that gang membership for school-age youth is usually limited to only a small percentage of age-eligible youth, regardless of prevailing social conditions. While in some highly isolated neighbourhoods or in particular schools gang membership may be high, it is estimated that typically less than 1 percent and rarely more than 3 percent of age-eligible Asian youth in a given community are involved in gangs. Gang-involved youth tend to be those who feel only marginally related to their own community and to the greater community. Gang-involved youth are often poorly supervised, frequently truant or tardy students who are in conflict at home, at school, and in the community.

Asian youth can be influenced to engage in criminal and gang activity if gang-generating and – maintaining forces exist in the communities where the youth live. Despite the historically low levels of Asian youths' criminal involvement, recent trends in several American cities suggest dramatically rising arrest levels for some youth, primarily due to gang-related criminal activity.

The presence of divisive forces, such as social, economic and racial is as sure to support gang presence in gang communities as it is in other communities.

The social group to which the gang belongs may determine gang structure and significance. Gangs may arise and form their structure either as an accepted or as an unofficial subset of established community groups. For example, youth who join soccer teams, community associations or church groups may form gangs within such groups with or without the knowledge of supervising adults. In some instances, criminally involved adults affiliated with a generally legitimate social organization may influence and provide support for youth gang development within the structure of the organization. Though generally not sanctioned by the community elders, such gangs may nonetheless derive some support from acceptance or tolerance within the sponsoring group. Therefore, legitimate social structures may provide the converging and cohesive forces necessary to allow a gang to form.

For other Asian gangs, formations may be independent of any recognized social structure in the community, and may even be formally rejected by the community. Gang members may be viewed as outcasts or "lost boys" within both the immediate and the greater communities. As with other ethnic gangs that are an illicit part of their larger community, so are some gangs within the greater Chinese American community. The number of these illicit gangs escalated in the 1960s. While some Chinese youth gangs are largely independent street gangs, others are associated with influential members of criminally involved tongs, especially those involved with illegal gambling enterprises. The role of tongs or of individual members of the tongs in maintaining youth gangs varies. (Most tongs are legitimate business and social enterprises, long established in Chinese communities across North America). Some Chinese gangs are involved with Hong Kong-based criminal triads. It is estimated that several thousand high school youth are recruited into the triad youth contingents each year in Hong Kong. In some cities, youth gangs maintain a formal but variable relationship with criminally influenced tongs or Hong Kong-based triads. These gangs may engage in both tong-related and independent criminal activity, especially extortion and robbery. Responding to stepped-up law enforcement pressure, Chinese youth gangs in other cities are increasingly separate and independent of tong influence or shelter.

Ethnic Vietnamese or ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese gangs are also a known, recent illicit subculture within their greater communities. Vietnamese youth gangs may develop independently of adult influence, or may arise when adults within the community develop influence over youth gang members, introducing them to more organized criminal activity. For example, within Vietnamese communities, a new form of gang is becoming well-known. It is called the "hasty gang"—a loose, quickly formed, mobile, nomadic gang that forms and disbands following a brief crime spree such as home invasions or burglaries of occupied dwellings. These gangs commonly lack adult leadership or organization.

Many Asian gangs originally formed in American cities as protection or fighting gangs. The reasons for their formation in the absence of any historical or cultural basis include racial, geographic, economic and linguistic isolation as well as direct rejection by established community groups where the recent immigrants settled. Simple imitation of gang behaviour present in other ethnic communities is the most likely explanation for the visible identifiers of gang life which have been adopted by Southeast Asian youth. For example, Cambodian and Hmong gang members in several American cities have adopted the dress, slang, nicknames, hand signs and names of Black and Hispanic gangs of the West Coast and Midwest. Many Hmong, Laotian and Cambodian gang members tell of forming self-defence groups following assaults or intimidation by other ethnic gang members. Groups have clashed when competing for space and status in public housing complexes in several American cities.

Other Southeast Asian gang youth report joining protective gangs to allow safe travel to community areas where they might be victimized. Still others who live in locations remote from urban centres elect to join ethnic affinity groups or form gangs or "proto-gangs." They then may choose common identifiers initially for no other reason than to be together with friends having similar backgrounds and experience.

## **ASIAN GANG STEREOTYPES**

Asian gang structure, activities, status in the ethnic community and greater community, relationships with other ethnic gangs and roles in the schools vary according to several factors. These variables include the following:

- degree of social isolation, such as living in public housing, in "Chinatowns" or in newly formed "Asia Towns";
- rejection and mistreatment of Asians by proximate populations;
- acceptance or rejection in schools;
- exposure to gang-organizing forces;
- lack of access to culturally appropriate social and recreational opportunities;
- employment policies discriminatory against Asians; and
- the presence of other gangs in the neighbourhoods surrounding Asian enclaves.

The perception that frequent, extreme violence among Asian gang members is the norm may be due to the publicizing of some of the more violent episodes. These highly publicized violent crimes committed by some Asian gang members present a marked contrast to another public perception, that of Asian youth as quiet, respectful, academically high-achieving students. It is perceived that the strong family bonds within the Asian community provide a protective factor which largely inhibits *marginal* gang affiliation among Asian youth. Thus, age-eligible youth are seen as either avoiding gangs completely or as characteristically making a break with the traditional family structure and establishing a primary affiliation with a gang.

## **"Deviance in Gangs: Why Join a Gang?": Mark Sirignano**

Since the beginnings of human existence gangs have served as a means of protection for humans. The issue of gang activity has recently, however, come to the forefront of dilemmas facing our nation. While cities like Chicago and Los Angeles are chronic gang sites, other cities such as "Miami, Portland, Columbus, Dallas, and Milwaukee have only recently (within the last decade) had what they termed as a gang problem".

Gang numbers have, without question, skyrocketed over the past 10 to 20 years. Los Angeles, for example, has recently been estimated to have as many as 90,000 gang members (Conly 14). The importance of these numbers cannot be overlooked. However, to fully understand the problems that gangs may pose to society, the term gang must be defined. Without a definition the impact of gang maliciousness on society may be lost.

Throughout its history the term "gang" has possessed a diverse usage, being linked to outlaws in the "wild west" and organized crime groups among others (Decker and Van Winkle 2). Due to this, a clear-cut definition of a gang does not exist. However, most agree that a gang is a group of mostly males that engages in delinquent activities. However, the definition goes much further than that. A police officer, for example, may call a gang "an on-going, organized association of three or more persons who individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in criminal activity" (Conly 5).

Notwithstanding, this definition is terribly obscure. That definition could include a group of boys who occasionally drink alcohol. On the other hand it could also include a group of youths that rapes and steals from old ladies. This definition obviously ranges from one extreme end of the spectrum to the other end. While images of boys drinking in the woods does not conjure up representations of hard core gang activity it does fit under the umbrella of the definition given above. This definition, obviously, leaves much to be desired. A sociologist, on the other hand, may describe the term gang with another set of values.

As a result, a sociologist may describe a gang as a group who:

Are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighbourhood, recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name) and have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighbourhood residents and/or enforcement agencies. (Sanders 9)

This definition is less obscure than the previous one. However, it still leaves much to be desired. As one can see a "clear cut" definition is extremely hard thing to determine. In order to define the term gang one must take a combination of several definitions.

Gangs, for our purpose, can be characterized in the following manner:

A group of youths that commit crimes that recognizes themselves as a "gang". As a result of a sufficient definition being unearthed, the focus of this paper can next be turned to the reasons for joining a gang.

While there are a variety of reasons one may choose to enter into the gang environment, there are three prominent reasons that stand out. These reasons are: psychological, financial, and physical.

The psychological aspects of gang life are plentiful. Many youths in the inner city come from broken homes. As a result, these youths may turn to the gang life as a “pseudo” family. The gang, which has a definite family hierarchy, becomes the family for the youth. However, the purpose of a family is to provide support, love, and protection.

The hazardous gang life-style often provides injury and death as well. In addition to psychological support, gang life often provides financial support as well. Teens who would normally be making fifty to sixty dollars a week at a part time job can rake in as much as a thousand dollars per week by stealing or selling drugs in a gang setting. In fact, many gang members claim to “join and stay in gangs for financial reasons”(Spiegel 94). The attraction to gang life is obvious when looked at from that standpoint.

The final attraction to gang life is simply the physical aspect. Gangs provide the “safety in numbers” sense of security for many youths who are forced to reside in what is in reality a war zone. Consequently, joining a gang may result from “a rational calculation to achieve personal security, particularly, by males new to a particular community, school, or prison”(Spiegel 92). Many feel a sense of security when joining a gang. Nevertheless there is the ever-present threat of death from a wall of bullets in this lifestyle.

There are, of course, some that feel these reasons are not the main contributing factors to gang enrolment. The main detractors of this theory will point to the emergence of gangs in affluent areas. These areas contain children who may not come from broken homes and may not have problems with money or being bullied. However, dysfunctional families are present in all areas of society. Moreover, if one or two children are of dysfunctional families, their influence will spread throughout a social setting of other children. Some feel that gangs result simply out of an “inordinately large number of children crowded into a limited area...spontaneous play groups are forming everywhere - gangs in embryo”(Spiegel 71).

While the overcrowding of youths in a limited area may play a role in the formation of gangs, the main contributing factors to the creation of gang activity are the fulfilment of psychological (family), financial, and physical needs. Perhaps the most significant draw to the gang arena of life is the psychological fulfilment that gangs provide. Many youths that join gangs come from a family that is deemed dysfunctional.

In order to escape from this dysfunction, a youth may turn to the family hierarchy of a gang for family fulfilment. The family hierarchy of a gang that was previously mentioned is definite and closely resembles that of a non-dysfunctional family, or that of a “normal” family. In the case of gangs there are four distinct levels that resemble those of a family. These four levels are, namely, the core members, floaters, wannabes, and the veterans.

The core members may make key decisions and set the standards of the group. Moreover, core members may support or sanction the actions of other members of the group. The core members are, in effect, the parental figures of the gang.

The next level of the gang hierarchy consists of a group that is called the “floaters”. The floater is not exactly a gang member, as they often exist across and between gang lines (Spergel 84). Nevertheless, the floater still commands high status and respect from other gang members. The floater often sets up meetings between gangs. These meetings may, for example, set up drug deals, gun deals, or just encounters between friendly and opposing gangs.

The next level of the gang hierarchy is that of the “wannabes”. The wannabe is, in actuality, the child of gang life. Actually, this is very fitting, as the wannabe group is mainly comprised of young children and teenagers. The wannabe or recruits are, more often than not, “younger, aspiring, potential gang members” (Spergel 84). This group services the needs of the group through theft and drug sales. However, this does not follow that of a “normal” family. In a “normal”, or non-dysfunctional, family the parental figures are the breadwinners. Conversely, in a gang setting, the children are actually the breadwinners. This role reversal is extremely interesting.

The final, or third level, of the gang hierarchy is comprised of the veterans. The veterans are old gang bangers who are “no longer active in gang involvement, but still serve as important, symbolic reference persons”(Spergel 84). The veterans command a high amount of respect for their previous efforts to help the gang. Moreover, a veteran who has served time in prison for their efforts to help the gang is almost revered as a demi-god. The veteran serves as that of a grandparent. In other words, the veteran no longer mingles in the day to day activities of the gang, but still serves to influence the gang from previous occurrences that serve to teach the new members of the gang.

Like most families, gangs have sets of rules. The rules imposed by most parents and those imposed by most gang leaders are extremely different, however. In addition, unlike those rules imposed by most parents the rules imposed by gang members are “understood” and do not need “formal articulation”(Decker and Van Winkle 100). The most outstanding of these unspoken rules are:

Being a perp (in 2 gangs at a time),  
running from a gang fight, or  
letting your gang rag touch the ground.

These violations are punishable through many ways ranging from beatings to even death. In an attempt to enter into a family hierarchy, many youths will choose gangs as a substitute family. That of a “functional” family in gangs replaces the dysfunctional family that many of these youths arrive from. The gang provides support and even love that may be lacking at the homes of many of these youths. Furthermore, the gang also provides something that is also not easy to come by for many of these youths. That thing being money.



Financial opportunities are very abundant in the gang lifestyle. These opportunities are much more lucrative than part time jobs. However, these opportunities do not come without drawbacks, as some of them are extremely dangerous. Prostitution, for example, is a way that many gangs raise revenue. This is one of America's oldest professions, however it is also one of the most dangerous. Many gangs use drug addicts as hookers. These drug addicts are primarily young girls who are actually not members of the gang (Sanders 141). These women are often termed as "hoes". In addition to prostitution, many gangs resort to theft in order to increase earnings. Gang members have been known to steal anything ranging from cars, jewels, wallets, and an assortment of many other things. Thievery, however, is a very risky business. Police or even worse, an opposing gang member can easily apprehend one. In this case a gang member may rather be apprehended by police officers rather than feel the wraith of an enemy gang.

Furthermore, theft has slowly but surely been eroded from the main dish of gang members as a way of attaining money. The prosperity associated with the next topic, drugs, has dwarfed and, in some ways, caused the demise of theft as a major way of earning money in gangs. Drug sales, are without doubt, the gangs most prosperous method of making money. Drug sales emanating from gangs often deal with many other criminal elements.

Along with the sales of drugs going out, comes a massive amount of money coming in. Youths who choose to venture into the drug sale market can make a massive amount of money in a relatively short amount of time. Some children can make anywhere from nine hundred to fifteen hundred dollars per day (Sanders 141). While the money is clearly rolling in to these youths, many are neglecting other responsibilities. School, for instance, is very rarely attended by these youths. When one is making that kind of money on the streets it is difficult to make him or her stop and attend school.

There is another reason that many youths join gangs. Gangs provide the protection in numbers that many youths seek. A youth who is not enrolled in any particular gang who is encountered on the street by youths who are in a gang may be beaten or even killed. In fact, most youths are "genuinely afraid of becoming victims of gangs" (Trump 1993).

Conversely, that same youth will command respect if he or she is enrolled in a gang. However, the theory of gang "protection" is sometimes challenged by gang war eruptions. Safety in numbers often leads to death in numbers when dealing with the world of gang wars. The hatred and primal circumstances of gang wars are described below: The two gangs, the "Circle" and the "Avenue", would stand atop the hills at either end of the football field and throw curses and threats across the gridiron for long minutes at a time. This chest pounding served a practical function for locals: They knew they had five or ten minutes to scramble for cover before shooting began. (Dickerson 22) One may ask themselves how a youth could actually feel safer in an environment like that.

The answer is clearly the safety in numbers factor. Many youths would rather be exposed to the realities of a gang war rather than that of fighting a war all on ones own. In fact, students in schools with a gang presence are "twice as likely to report that they fear becoming victims of violence than their peers at schools without gangs" (Trump 1993). A gang member who is attacked by rival gang members is almost assured to

have retaliation by their own gang on their side as well. That sense of a back up is a driving force in the desire to join gangs. For anyone who does not join a gang is playing Russian roulette, in effect. Donald Thomas, of Dallas, found this out the hard way in 1991 when he was assaulted and killed by 3 assailants who were all described as gang members and all being "15 years old and from broken homes"(Korem 43). Any youths that do not form an alliance with any one gang are forced to form some kind of truce at least. This truce enables them to walk to and from school or to the store.

In conclusion, the number of gang members in this country has skyrocketed over the past recent decades. This increase in gang population can directly be attributed to the attraction of many youths to an appealing gang lifestyle. The appeal of this lifestyle, for example, can be directly attributed to three main reasons. The three main reasons are psychological, financial, and physical. The massive breakdown of a "normal" family structure In the United States, especially in inner city neighbourhoods, has led to a breeding ground of gang activity.

Many psychologists agree that children descending from a dysfunctional family are much more likely to join a gang. Moreover, the number of dysfunctional families in this country is at almost fifty percent of American families. This, in turn, does not deem well for anti-gang advocates. The family that these youths strive to obtain through the pseudo family given through gangs closely resembles that of a "normal" family. These pseudo families possess a definite hierarchy that instils rules, support, and discipline in its members. As a result, many youths join gangs to obtain a sense of family and belonging to something special. In turn for this sense of belonging, youths will often fight, kill, rob, steal or sell drugs to support the family.

The next draw to a gang lifestyle is the financial aspect of gangs. Gangs, without a doubt, provide a substantial base for obtaining money for a group of young people that may otherwise have problems earning money. Money is namely earned through stealing, prostitution, and drug sales. As a result of all of this money making, most gang members ignore other "responsibilities" such as school. While prostitution and drug sales are on the rise in gang activities, theft is on the decline. This decline is mainly due to the fact that it is risky and no longer as lucrative a trade as the prostitution or sales of drugs. The final attraction to gang life is the protection that the gang provides. In order to avoid being bullied one must join a gang or suffer the consequences. These consequences are, namely, harassment, beatings, robberies, or even murder. In order to avoid these fates, youths often will join a gang. While joining a gang may even heighten the threat of attack from rival gangs, many feel the trade off is better than the fate of not joining a gang. Moreover, the safety in numbers that is provided by gangs is much greater than chancing it on ones own in the ghetto.

## **Gang membership spirals among under-16s**

**Tony Thompson**

**Sunday September 8, 2002**

**The Observer**

Children as young as nine are flocking to join violent street gangs and taking part in crimes such as drug dealing, theft and even murder.

Alarming figures suggest there are now as many as 30,000 gang members across England and Wales and the numbers are rising rapidly. The number of gang members aged under 16 has doubled in the past year and nearly half of all gang murders committed with firearms now involve victims under the age of 18.

London, Birmingham and Manchester have the most extreme problems, closely followed by Liverpool, Leeds and Bradford, while other towns and cities are increasingly experiencing problems associated with gang culture.

Steve Shropshire, an expert on gangs and youth culture and co-author of a new report that highlights the problem, said: 'Young people are being drawn into the gangs and crews in ever increasing numbers and the average age of new members is falling dramatically. The gang culture is now inextricably linked with gun violence.'

Many gangs are sophisticated and some have access to private doctors who will treat gunshot wounds without reporting the incident to the police.

Increasingly, he reports, gang activity is centred around schools. A typical secondary school in a gang area will have up to 20 hardcore members among the pupils, 30 or 40 associate members and up to 100 or more who are marginally involved.

The members listen to gangsta rap and idolise the heroes of films like Scarface, Goodfellas and Menace II Society, adopting their values and some of their language.

## **'It's lawless out there'**

On Monday, 10-year-old Damilola Taylor was stabbed to death in Peckham, south London. His death is just the latest tragedy for a community blighted by teenage gangs and violence, says Sarah Helm

**Wednesday November 29, 2000**

**[The Guardian](#)**

They call it the Peckham frontline. It is a desolate stretch of road, lined by rundown shops. The children and teenagers who loiter along this stretch of Peckham high street, on their way to and from school, are used to violence. Backpacks slung over shoulders, they pass by, oblivious to the yellow police boards calling for witnesses to the latest assault or stabbing. They are also, by and large, oblivious to the drug dealing - often conducted openly on these streets, and often by youths much like themselves.

And just as they accept the violence here, the children accept that it will follow them into the school playgrounds. It is not uncommon for schools in this part of south-east London to have security guards patrolling their playgrounds and CCTV cameras monitoring their corridors.

But however accustomed these schoolchildren may have become to violence, nothing could have prepared them for the news that the blood of a 10-year-old had been spilt on these same streets. "He was just a tiny kid," says Ellen, 13, tears welling in her eyes as she stares towards Oliver Goldsmith primary school.

It is, of course, far too early to speculate about what led to the stabbing of Damilola Taylor as he was returning from the primary school's computer club to his council flat on the nearby North Peckham estate. His body was found just outside a social services office building where the Southwark's youth offending team is based.

Whatever led to Damilola's death, the killing must surely draw attention to what is happening to all the children of Peckham, and other parts of inner-city London. For Damilola's killing took place against a burgeoning subculture of youth violence which has been taking root, seemingly beyond the control of any agency, and beyond control of the police. To put it simply, this is the subculture of the gang and, as such, is nothing new for inner-city London. But the gang culture of today is perhaps more disturbing than ever because of the extreme youth of those it attracts - and the extreme youth of some of its victims.

In Peckham, where the black population is the majority, both gang members and their victims are usually black. "What we are seeing is more extremes of violence among teenagers and young kids. We are seeing extreme lifestyles and a willingness to use weapons. There is a thing among young people to use violence at the moment," says one black police officer, who works with families affected by violence in this area.

Nobody disputes that gang culture is spreading here. Not far from where Damilola bled to death, another teenager was stabbed and killed just a week ago. Seven people were injured at a nightclub shooting along the same stretch of road about a month ago. A 17-year-old, Andre Drummond, was knifed to death outside McDonald's in nearby Camberwell earlier this year. Andre had recently been excluded from school.

The latest statistics for the area show that while crime in general is down, violent crime is rising. In October 2000 there were 854 instances of violent crime in the London borough of Southwark, 54 more than occurred in October last year and part of a steady rise.

One local community worker explains what is happening: "Young people in these areas are more desperate than ever. Those who are black and excluded feel there is nothing in mainstream culture for them. They are lonely and uncared for. They are looking for a way of finding their identity and many cannot resist turning to the gangs."

Youth provision for children in areas such as Peckham is pitiful. The schools are usually too hard-pressed, trying to achieve targets to focus attention on youth clubs or other youth services. The borough of Southwark is one of the most deprived in the country, where vulnerable teenagers often come from broken homes and find little hope of breaking free of the cycle of poverty around them. "They feel they have to give 200% just to stand still," says a black youth worker.

As one former Peckham gang member puts it: "It's lawless out there on the street, but the laws are our laws, right. We want respect and we make sure we get it." The gang subculture also comes with its own ready-made economy: drugs. "It's easy money. I started selling puff to kids on their way to school. I was good at it," says another former gang member, now in Feltham prison for young offenders.

"They look around and feel there is no future for them," says another community worker. "But they are kids and like all kids they need to feel good about themselves. They are confused about their identity so they join a gang. It gives them a recognition. It gives them their own set of rules and relationships. It means you can hang out with those who are like you rather than those who want to change you."

There is also little doubt about the extreme levels of violence among the youth gangs, or that they are recruiting younger and younger members. At Kids Company, a young people's club on Camberwell Road, former gang members talk of joining gangs as young as 12 or 13. "It's the norm for kids like us. It's what everyone does. Maybe you go to prison. Maybe you don't. But if you do, you'll find all your mates there, so why not?" says one who says he has decided to leave the gang life behind. "It's good money for a few years but then what?" he asks.

The gang members say the recruiting grounds are often in the schools or among children excluded from schools. Southwark schools all have high numbers of children barred for disruptive behaviour. Many of these youngsters fall through the education net and are excluded several times before being effectively lost to the authorities. Some are as young as 14.

While the extent of the crisis among alienated children and teenagers is evident, however, nobody working in the field claims to have any answers. Police appear frustrated, unable to penetrate the operations of the gangs, and fear a community backlash should they probe too far. "They are like a defeated army. They don't know how to handle it," says one London solicitor.

Community workers also despair of being able to reach the alienated youngsters who are attracted by the gangs. Two youth clubs in the Peckham area have recently had to close down due to gang violence on their premises. The schools, meanwhile, will play down any suggestion that youth violence spills on to their playgrounds for fear of destabilising their already vulnerable children. Headteachers prefer to turn a blind eye. The question is: where, after the killing of Damilola Taylor, will it be possible to turn a blind eye to?

## **Analysing the problem**

The main findings of the analysis were that:

- violence in general, gun violence and fatal shootings in particular are concentrated in specific small areas of South Manchester
- victims of gun violence in South Manchester are mainly young, black or mixed race males, who themselves have criminal records
- those who have been victims of shootings are at increased risk of being a victim again
- perpetrators of serious gun violence in South Manchester are mainly young black or mixed race males, who have criminal records
  
- about 60 per cent of shootings are thought to gang related
- there are strong social norms (in particular in providing evidence in court) inhibiting co-operation with police enquiries into gang-related shootings, which undermine successful prosecution of offenders
- alliances are sometimes formed between South Manchester gangs, but conflict is endemic and easily triggered
- gangs in South Manchester are loosely turf-based
- there are significant differences in the origins, activities, and organisation of the four main South Manchester gangs known to the police, though members of all the gangs are involved in a wide range of criminal behaviour
- gang-related criminal behaviour includes drug-related offences, but only as one element of a patchwork of violent and non-violent crime
- gang membership is not just about criminality; for some young males it incorporates a credible lifestyle choice
- gang-membership comprises a mix of same-age local friendship groups, blood relatives and recruits
- the carrying of firearms by gang-members is part protective, and part symbolic, though they are also sometimes used in the commission of violent crime

## Gangs and Violent: Incidents in Manchester. Karen Bullock and Nick Tilley

The definition of gangs is problematic. In one sense almost all who belong to informal groups might be deemed to be 'gang' members, though few of these would include crime as a major focus of activity. Most adolescents, in particular, belong to peer groups. These often act collectively and many are involved in minor crimes of various kinds (see Gabor, 1994).

In this sense, though gangs whose activities include low-level delinquency are not universal they are common. Mares (1998) identified a wide range of groups of people which could loosely be described as gangs in many areas of Manchester, including some suburban parts. The delinquency, characteristics and organisation of these groups was enormously diverse. For the purposes of this paper 'gangs' will given a more restricted meaning. The term will be used to refer to relatively enduring identifiable groups of young people who see themselves as members of those groups, and who commit crime as part of that membership. This accords with a recent description used in a US Department of Justice Publication. A youth gang is said 'commonly to be thought of as a self-formed association of peers having the following characteristics: a gang name and recognised symbols, identifiable leadership, a geographic territory, a regular meeting pattern, and collective actions to carry out illegal activities' (Howell, 1997).

There are currently four major South Manchester gangs as defined here for the purposes of this research, and currently known to the police.

These are Gooch, Doddington, Pitt Bull Crew and Longsight Crew. It must be remembered, though, that the situation regarding gangs is fluid – groups break up, new groups form, members come and go. What we have is a snapshot of the situation in 2000/2001.

### Characteristics of the main South Manchester gangs and their identified members

Members of all four known South Manchester gangs live in Greenheys and Longsight but particular gangs are represented in individual areas. The Longsight Crew and Pit Bull Crew are found especially in parts of Longsight, and Gooch and Doddington in parts of Greenheys.

	Gooch	Doddington	Longsight Crew	Pitt Bull Crew	Total
Number of known members aged under 25	64	30	67	26	187
Proportion of members under 17	8%	3%	12%	19%	10%
Proportion of members 17 to 20	35%	13%	42%	46%	35%
Proportion of members 21 to 24	58%	83%	45%	35%	54%
Annual arrests per member under 17*	1.9	2	1.8	2.8	2.1
Annual arrests per member 17-20*	1.8	1.1	1.7	3.4	1.8
Annual arrests per member 21-24*	0.7	0.8	0.5	1.6	0.7
Percentage of known members who are black	86%	100%	75%	73%	79%
Percentage of known members who are male	92%	100%	100%	88%	96%
Conflicts with other groups	Doddington Longsight Crew	Gooch Pitt Bull Crew	Gooch Pitt Bull Crew	Doddington Longsight	
Alliances/truces with other groups	Doddington Longsight Crew Pitt Bull Crew	Gooch Longsight Crew	Gooch Pitt Bull Crew Doddington	Longsight Crew Gooch	
Year gang first emerged	1988 to 1990	1988 to 1991	1996 to 1997	1999	

Apart from their attachment to different areas, there are other distinct attributes of the individual gangs. Assuming the police data available are representative Gooch and Longsight are substantially bigger than Doddington or Pit Bull Crew. Doddington and

Gooch are more ethnically homogeneous than Longsight or Pit Bull. The age profiles of the gangs vary. Newer gangs tend to comprise younger members. At the time of writing the Doddington gang has relatively few known young members: two-thirds are 23 or over. The Longsight Crew seems to comprise two main cohorts – one aged about 18 and the other 21 to 22. The Pit Bull Crew has no major age groups but members are evenly spread from their early teens to 20s: two to four at every age between 15 and 23. The Gooch Gang has a normal, 'bell-shaped' distribution, peaking at 20 to 22. It appears Doddington's criminal activities are reducing or becoming less visible. We were told by GMP staff that their leader has moved to another city and that the gang may be reestablishing itself there. Relocation also presumably offers a way of withdrawing from dangerous and costly inter-gang hostilities. Recruits appear to come mainly from blood relatives of those who already belong, friends of members, and disaffected street youths interested in finding a gang home and able to provide services to more senior members.

The gang may have provided a refuge for some where they could be free from domestic pressures. It also offered a source of respect as well, of course, as an apparently relatively rich and glamorous lifestyle, notwithstanding the risks.

Leaving gangs presents problems. Many of those interviewed were reluctant fully to identify with gangs, and those who admitted to being fully immersed said they would prefer to leave, but faced difficulties in doing so. Reasons for wanting to withdraw had to do with the dangers associated with membership. These were in part related to the punishments received and expected, and in part to the risks from violence from other gangs. The difficulties in leaving had to do with gang loyalty, with continuing inter-gang conflicts, and with lack of perceived alternative opportunities.

Asked about where he might be in five years' time one incarcerated respondent said he expected to be dead. Gang loyalty and gang protection both conspired to pull people in, and keep them in. Moreover, realistically non-gang related alternative lifestyles would be hard for most members easily to take up. Several also felt attached to their local areas. Here, however, others defined them in terms of their gang-associations. Immersion in gangs in these ways can bestow a respected and valued identity that becomes hard to shake off. Though gang life might appeal initially because of its promise of freedom from one set of real problems and limitations, it comes eventually to hem members in with another set of problems and limitations.

### **Summary**

- There are differences in the make-up, origins, activities, and organisation of the four main South Manchester gangs, though members of all are involved in a wide range of criminal behaviour.
- Gang-membership comprised a mix of same-age local friendship groups, blood relatives and recruits.
- Gang-related criminal behaviour includes drug-related offences, but only as one element of a patchwork of violent and non-violent crime.
- Rates of arrest for gang-members tend to fall as they age.
- Gangs in South Manchester are loosely area-based.
- Alliances are sometimes formed between some South Manchester gangs, but conflict is endemic and easily triggered.
- Firearms carrying by gang-members is at least partly protective and police intelligence records suggest that it may also be part symbolic and part instrumental for the commission of violent crime.



## **Gangs in Schools**

Gang culture among young people, in itself, is nothing new. Indeed, youth gangs have been a major part of the urban cultural landscape since at least the 1830s, when Charles Dickens described Fagin's pack of young boys roaming the streets of London in *Oliver Twist*.

In the late twentieth century United States, however, gangs have taken on a different character and have moved into areas unimagined by Dickens. Most significantly, they are spreading from inner cities to "edge cities"--cities at the outskirts of large urban centers--and to suburbs; indeed, while gang activity has been stabilizing in urban areas, it has increased significantly elsewhere (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993). At the same time, gangs have become a growing problem in public schools, which historically have been considered "neutral turf."

### **Characteristics of Gangs**

Researchers agree that most gangs share certain characteristics. Although there are exceptions, gangs tend to develop along racial and ethnic lines, and are typically 90 percent male (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993). Gang members often display their membership through distinctive styles of dress--their "colors"--and through specific activities and patterns of behavior. In addition, gangs almost universally show strong loyalty to their neighborhood, often marking out their territory with graffiti (Gaustad, 1991). All of these representations can be visible in the schools.

As Gaustad (1991) points out, however, the specifics of gang style and activity can vary tremendously from gang to gang, and can even change rapidly within individual gangs. For instance, African American gangs tend to confine their activities to their own communities, although the Bloods and the Crips, two gangs originating in Los Angeles, now have members nationwide. In contrast, Asian gangs often travel hundreds of miles from home in order to conduct their activities (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993). In addition, African American and Hispanic gangs are much more likely to display their colors than are Asian gangs. Anglo gangs are often made up of white supremacists. Gangs can also vary tremendously in numbers and age ranges of members.

### **The Impact of Gangs on Schools**

Despite their high profile in the media, relatively few young people join gangs; even in highly impacted areas, the degree of participation has rarely exceeded 10 percent. In addition, it has been reported that less than 2 percent of all juvenile crime is gang-related (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993).

Such low numbers, however, may camouflage the impact that the presence of gangs has on a school. For one thing, they play a significant role in the widespread increase of violence in the schools; indeed, school violence has steadily increased since a 1978 National Institute of Education study, *Violent Schools-Safe Schools*, found that school-aged children were at a higher risk of suffering from violence in school than anywhere else (cited in Gaustad, 1991).

Because gangs are, by definition, organized groups, and are often actively involved in drug and weapons trafficking, their mere presence in school can increase tensions there. It can also increase the level of violence in schools, even though gang members themselves may not be directly responsible for all of it; both gang members and non-gang members are arming themselves with increased frequency. Students in schools with a gang presence are twice as likely to report that they fear becoming victims of violence than their peers at schools without gangs (Trump, 1993). Moreover, a 1992 Bureau of Justice Statistics survey reports that schools with gangs are significantly more likely to have drugs available on campus than those without

gangs (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993). In Gaustad's words, gangs create a "tenacious framework" within which school violence can take root and grow (1991, p.24).

Far from remaining neutral turf, schools not only suffer from gang-related violence "spilling over" from the streets, but are themselves rapidly becoming centers of gang activities, functioning particularly as sites for recruitment and socializing (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993; Arthur & Erickson, 1992). An interview-based study by Boyle (1992) suggests that gang members see school as a necessary evil at best, and at worst as a form of incarceration. Although many gang members acknowledge the importance of the educational objectives of school, school is much more important to them as a place for gathering with fellow gang members for socializing and other more violent activities. Significantly, Boyle also found that even those gang members who had been suspended or had dropped out of school could be found on campus with their associates, effectively using the school as a gang hangout rather than as an educational institution.

Finally, gangs can spread unexpectedly from school to school as students transfer from gang-impacted schools to gang-free schools, causing an unintentional spillover of gang activity in the new school.

### **Why Gangs Develop and Why Students Join Them**

Gangs take root in schools for many reasons, but the primary attraction of gangs is their ability to respond to student needs that are not otherwise being met; they often provide youth with a sense of family and acceptance otherwise lacking in their lives. In addition, gangs may form among groups of recent immigrants as a way of maintaining a strong ethnic identity. Understanding how gangs meet these student needs prepares schools to better respond to them. Four factors are primary in the formation of juvenile gangs (William Gladden Foundation, 1992):

- First, youth experience a sense of alienation and powerlessness because of a lack of traditional support structures, such as family and school. This can lead to feelings of frustration and anger, and a desire to obtain support outside of traditional institutions.
- Second, gang membership gives youth a sense of belonging and becomes a major source of identity for its members. In turn, gang membership affords youth a sense of power and control, and gang activities become an outlet for their anger.
- Third, the control of turf is essential to the well-being of the gang, which often will use force to control both its territory and members.
- Finally, recruitment of new members and expansion of territory are essential if a gang is to remain strong and powerful. Both "willing" and "unwilling" members are drawn into gangs to feed the need for more resources and gang members.

Taken together these four factors interact to produce gangs that become more powerful and ruthless as they work to maintain and expand their sway over territory and youth.

## Gangs in USA

There has been an explosion of awareness and concern about gang membership and gang activity in the United States since 1990. Parents, schools, city and state government and law enforcement officials have attempted to confront this phenomenon, often with limited success. Street gangs have existed in the U.S. since the late nineteenth century, and sociologists have studied them since the 1920s. But the current interest in gangs has been fuelled by their rapid growth, by the spread of violence in the schools, child-to-child attacks, drive-by shootings, drug trafficking, and murder. A recent study released by the U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that from 1985 to 1991, the annual rates at which young men aged 15- to 19-years-old were killed jumped 154 percent. Virtually the entire increase was attributed to the use of guns, mostly in gang situations.

Historically, gangs have been found in inner-city areas that are economically depressed and lack resources. Gang activity sometimes is passed down through family generations, and experts believe it arises for many reasons, including several **social, psychological** and **family** factors. Some of the **social** factors that have facilitated gang development include: poverty, divorce, abuse of alcohol and other drugs, unemployment and antisocial behaviours (Lawson and Lawson, 1994). The following data suggest the possible relationship between these factors and the participation in gangs.

### Socio-Economic Factors

**Poverty.** About half of the children who are poor in any given year live in poverty over an extended period of time. Nearly one-third of all children in the U.S. are poor at least once before age 18. Family poverty is associated with poorer health, lower cognitive development, less completed schooling, less labour market success as an adult, and increased behaviour problems. Fewer children residing in poor families receive any kind of welfare today than during previous decades.

**Divorce, and other transitions.** Almost 50 percent of all children are expected to experience the divorce of their parents and to spend about five years in a single-parent household. And, 40 percent of adults currently in first marriages will become members of stepfamilies before their youngest child reaches 18 years of age. Of young adolescents in stepfamilies, 28 percent will experience the end of that family within five years due to divorce. While studies indicate that adolescents experiencing parental divorce have lower well-being than those not experiencing the divorce of their parents, the well-being of adolescents who experience multiple parental divorces is most compromised (Kurdick, 1994).

**Alcohol and drug abuse** have been linked to numerous health and developmental problems in adolescents--including family conflict, low self-esteem, depression, academic problems, automobile accidents, delinquency, and crimes of violence. Alcohol and cigarettes are "gateways" to the abuse of other illicit drugs. Thus, substance abuse unfolds in predictable sequence: from alcohol and/or cigarettes, to marijuana, and then to hard drugs, such as cocaine and heroin. While the statistics vary, between 40 and 60 percent of adolescents in grades 7 - 12 have reported drinking alcohol during the previous year, and between 15 - 25 percent reported using illicit drugs. Thus, children may search for acceptance and nurturance in a gang when it is not available at home (Farrell & Barnes, 1994).

**Violence and antisocial behaviour.** Acquaintance homicide increased by 65 percent in the past 20 years, with the largest increase (88%) among 10-14 year-olds. Recent data show that 14 percent of murders, 16 percent of forcible rapes, and 14 percent of aggravated assaults were

committed by youth. Homicide ranks as the second leading cause of death among adolescents. The homicide rate among African-American youth is eight times higher than for Caucasian youth. Firearms are used in 60 percent of homicides. Forty five percent of car thefts, 47 percent of arson crimes and 45 percent of vandalism are committed by adolescents (Gullotta, 1994). They also are likely to be victims of acts of family violence. Forty-seven percent of victims of all maltreatment were between the ages of 12 to 17.

Other **social, economic and cultural** factors include: **(1) a family history of gang involvement**, (some experts suggest that 50% of present gang members had at least one family member who is or was involved in a gang); **(2) living in a community where gang involvement is a community norm** -- everyone does it, (it is part of the culture and social fabric of the community and adults and older teens become role models for younger children); **(3) being part of a family with a limited view of the world** and a lack of awareness of opportunities outside the neighbourhood (because of ethnic or social isolation, attachment to family rules, beliefs, and expectations); **(4) cultural barriers and prejudices** (that often produce an "us against them" mentality, and may keep a person from attempting to join the workplace); **(5) lack of employment possibilities and education**, (because of low reading or writing or other workplace skills); **(6) media glorification of gangs** (as seen in movies, on TV, in magazines, and heard on music videos, compact discs and tapes); and **(7) safety and protection from other gangs** (in many inner cities, barrios, neighbourhoods, and schools, violence, or the threat of violence, is a real fact of life).

### **Family Factors**

Family problems and parenting difficulties can increase the risk of kids joining gangs. Many kids who join gangs come from middle-class families with two biological parents at home. However, many of these youth come from homes that are deeply troubled. They seek from the gang what they are not getting (or will not accept) from their families. They are looking for acceptance, love, companionship, leadership, encouragement, recognition, respect, role models, rules, security, self-esteem, structure and a sense of belonging. When children's emotional needs are met in families, the results are positive; otherwise they may look to gangs, and the outcome is usually negative. Consider the following parent-adolescent data related to potential gang participation: **Parent- adolescent distancing can lead to conflict.** This separation, while considered normal adolescent development, decreases emotional closeness and warmth, increases parent-adolescent conflict and disagreement and increases time adolescents spend with their peers. Rigid or ineffective parenting styles also contribute to a parent's loss of control of adolescents. If the parent overcompensate with harsh discipline, physical abuse may occur. Data from the National Family Violence Survey revealed that 54 percent of preteen and early teenage children (10 -14 years of age) were struck by a parent, while 33 percent of teens (15 - 17 years) were also hit during a one-year period (Gelles, 1994) (Montemayor, 1994).

**In 10 percent to 20 percent of families**, parents and adolescents are in highly distressed relationships characterized by emotional coldness and frequent outbursts of anger and conflict. If the marriage is conflicting and dissatisfying and the home environment cold and uncaring, it affects the developing adolescent. Youth in these families are at high risk for a variety of psychological and behavioural problems (Montemayor, 1994).

**From 50 to 85 percent of gang members come either from a single-parent home, or one in which no parent resides.** If the parent is not available to provide structure, supervision, support, and caring during this crucial time of adolescent development, teens may turn to gang participation to fulfil their needs.

**Increase in family strains (economic pressures, divorce, violence)** have prompted teenagers to depend more on peers for emotional support. By the high school years, most teens report feeling closer to friends than parents. Job layoffs, parental violence, separation, divorce, or absence of one parent in the lives of youth, create strain and hardship for the adolescent as well as the parent. Although divorce *per se* does not lead to gang involvement, complications of divorce such as decreased financial resources may create child-care crises, leaving children unattended.

## **Psychological Factors**

Many parents, teachers and other adults today have a difficult time in understanding the attraction of today's youth to a gang. If the family or community is to be successful in combating gangs, they need to understand several **psychological** factors regarding adolescent development (Lawson &, 1994):

**The need for affiliation.** Adolescents are in a stage of development in which fashioning a personal identity is a primary goal. This has been a problem for immigrant families whose children are caught between two cultures with opposing value systems and incompatible behaviour standards. Often these adolescents seek an identity by joining gangs with similar backgrounds to their own. A gang member may appear to have more loyalty to the gang than with his or her family. This was not the case, however, for the 194 gang members recently interviewed in a three-year research project. Gang members were asked, "If you had to choose between family and gang, who would you choose?" Ninety-seven percent said they would choose their family. Ninety-six percent cited as the reason, "My family raised me." Moreover, 95 percent of these young men responded that they would not want their sons to join gangs (Lale, 1992).

**The need for achievement** in an environment that offers no prospects to achieve it. The American Dream has included the idea that achievement is the way out of the ghetto. Parents in these circumstances however, may be unable to be role models and help their children be successful in school. Many gang members were not successful in school due to learning disabilities or special education needs that were not diagnosed. Once children have failed in school and dropped out, their chances to be successful, productive citizens are small. At this point, the gang can offer a social network of friends, income, and a chance for them to "make it" that the larger culture does not.

**Lack of self-responsibility and an openness to outside influences.** At many levels, adolescents question adult authority and the emotional dependence they have on their parents, who they regard as controlling and lacking in understanding. During this turbulent and rapidly changing period of their life, many adolescents are unable or unwilling to turn to their parents for help. It is not surprising that their peers become important during this period.

**Learned helplessness.** When adolescents fail in school and fail at getting a job, it creates a sense of helplessness. Teens develop a "Why bother?" attitude that drains them of self-confidence, fosters depression, robs them of resourcefulness and blinds them to opportunities. A gang may seem to be the only hope.

**Risk-taking behaviour.** Adolescents tend to believe they are invincible and that nothing can harm them. These beliefs make risks seem non-threatening and, worse, a necessary part of their lives. Children raised in deprived environments are at risk for seeking high levels of stimulation. Seeking stimulation often involves breaking the law and incurring risks that may even be life-threatening.

**Low self-esteem.** Adolescents whose self-esteem has been damaged by peer rejection, school failures, discrimination, or physical development that is too fast or too slow, may find a new identity and sense of self-worth in a gang. When an adolescent has no activities which provide a sense of accomplishment or competence, gangs can provide acceptance, affiliation, a substitute family, a way to succeed, money, drugs and power.

**Lack of positive role models.** Power and fame are major factors in motivating kids to become gang members. Often, gang members believe that money and weapons can give them power and fame they believe they deserve in a society that discriminates against them. They may view their struggling parents as powerless people unable to show their children how to achieve the good life, while they view a veteran gang member, who drives a flashy car, carries a beeper, and wears expensive clothes as a role model for success.

**Boredom:** In many neighbourhoods where gangs exist, there are no recreational activities to meet teenagers' needs. Churches, schools and private facilities are not open to youth because of fear of violence and destruction of property. School dropouts who are unemployed or young people with nothing to do after school are good candidates for chronic boredom. As soon as boredom sets in, hanging out with the neighbourhood gang becomes an attractive alternative which adds some excitement to life.

## **The Gang Phenomenon The Cultural Dimensions of Crime**

### **Introduction**

Among criminologists and others, there are two primary explanations for why people behave the way they do. The free will or choice theorists believe people behave the way they do because they choose to. On the other hand, the determinists believe people behave the way they do as a result of forces acting upon them over which they have little or not control.

The forces to which the determinists are referring are one's biological or psychological make up and the influence of one's society or culture. Clearly, Taft is a determinist. As the title of his work notes, it is the "cultural dimensions" of a society that may generate criminality.

I should note that Taft was using his notion to explain *crime* not gangs. Extrapolating his ideas and applying them to gangs is something I am trying to do in an effort to gain a better understanding of gangs and to be able to more clearly communicate what I've learned in my research.

Finally, there is the matter of solutions. I am concerned about why people join gangs. I want to find solutions to the gang phenomenon so that fewer people join them. Towards that end, I will identify examples of solutions which suggest themselves according to each of Taft's six cultural dimensions.

### **Taft's Cultural Dimensions of Crime**

#### **1. American society is dynamic.**

By this, Taft means that American society is in a constant state of change. The Europeans that settled in this new land created, for the most part, a rural society. Few cities were large and most people (nearly 80%) lived on farms.

Over time, things have changed and, in response to the Industrial Revolution of the mid-1800s, we have become an urban society with nearly 80% of our people living in cities. We have also become mechanized. More about these technological changes in a moment.

These changes, accompanied by mass immigration during the latter part of the 1800s and the early 1900s, resulted in producing an environment in which opportunities for conflict between different peoples increased.

Not only did they share divergent values, beliefs, and opinions, even today it seems that these things are in a constant state of change. That which was wrong yesterday is right today. How is one supposed to act? Which behaviours are legal and which ones are not? One day a given behaviour is immoral and unethical and the next it is not, and *visa versa*. In a society experiencing so much change, where are its roots? What impact may this condition have on the society's youth? Which set of values are they to embrace?

I use this concern of Taft's to explain much of what I have been learning about gangs and their members. Gangs form, sometimes, in response to the changes of which Taft speaks. Gangs are an island of stability in a sea of change. They are in control of their own destiny (or at least they believe that). As people move in and out of neighbourhoods, gangs offer a "home," a

"family" for children and adolescents in the neighbourhood who see nothing but life passing them by.

**Technology:** Think about all the changes taking place in our society (as in most). Technological changes (i.e., computers and the communications revolution) can have a significant impact on our youth. If our youth are not prepared to participate in an increasingly technological society/work place, what are they to do? How will they get bread on the table? Earn respect? Have power? Gangs can offer all those things and you don't have to be a rocket scientist to join one! We shouldn't be surprised that technological change impacts our youth - and everyone else. Back in the mid-1800s it was the onset of the Industrial Revolution that brought about radical changes in our society....and the role children have to play in it.

You may recall that, in the early stages of the Industrial Period, children were worked very hard. They were not required to go to school but were, instead, pressed into labour - and under the most terrible of conditions (poor pay, poor ventilation, long working hours, dangerous work settings, no protection, etc.). As a result, the "Child Saving Movement" was started and two of the most significant outcomes of that movement were the new Child Labour Laws it spawned and the creation of the first juvenile justice system in the western world (back in 1899 in Cooke County, Illinois [Chicago]).

But that meant that children were removed from the world of work and had to go to school until they were at least 16 years of age. The resulting extension in the period of adolescence is, by some, blamed for the irresponsibility of youth and some of their deviance (including delinquency and gang behaviour).

And don't forget about automation - sometimes referred to as robotization and its impact on manufacturing. Where the manufacture of a car (washer, dryer, refrigerator, television, radio, etc.) once took many people, it now takes very few - most of them operating the computers that direct the robots in their work of wiring, welding, moving materials, etc.

**Globalization:** The impact of globalization has also been significant and places individuals with scarce resources in an even more precarious position. With globalization comes the need to lower prices in order to better compete overseas. Lowering prices often means mechanizing production lines, once the shelter for unskilled labour and one of the lower rungs on the ladder up to success. The underprivileged and outcast now find it even harder to make the leap from gang activity to being a normal working Joe.

As the minimum level of skill needed to enter the work force rises we find a concomitant reduction in the number of youths completing high school. The gap between the two results in more and more youth being left behind. What do they do in their desperation?

#### **Related theorists/theories:**

##### **Shaw and McKay and the Ecological Theory of Crime:**

The composition of neighbourhoods are changing as the centre city expands to accommodate a growing business sector. The old residential areas adjacent to the centre city are overrun by commercial growth.

That area, that "zone," if referred to by Shaw and McKay as the *interstitial zone* (*the "zone in transition" from residential to commercial use*). It is a zone that exhibits the greatest amount of transience and a breakdown of the social institutions which used to provide informal social



control. They refer to it as a zone which exhibits a great deal of social disorganization (its social institutions are weak).

The interstitial zones show the highest degree of social disorganization exhibiting a rise in crime and delinquency as well as infant mortality and other measures of social pathology.

You can see that, in the context of the concept of social disorganization, and realizing that most human beings want to be in a social organized environment, gangs provide the social organization that is missing in a social disorganized neighbourhood (like in the interstitial zone - sometimes called the "inner city").

## **2. American society is complex.**

We aren't just male and female, young and old. We are Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Jewish, African-American, Asian, First People (Indians), Caucasians, etc. And there are many conflicting values in our society (those in favour of abortion and those against it, those who favour the death penalty and those who don't, etc.) Taft believed this diversity may lead to conflict ... and that conflict may lead to criminality.

Turning our attention to gangs, one may suggest that if we were to talk about "gang war" we may understand that it may be the result of two gangs conflicting with one another - one gang Asian the other Hispanic, or one Afro-American, the other Hispanic, or one Caucasian and the other Afro-American and the list goes on and on.

My experiences in the field support the notion that much that is called gang activity is, in effect, one group attacking another group due to the differences between them (differences ethnicity, race, religious belief, etc.).

Not all conflicts between gangs are about drugs, sexual relations, and personal vendettas. Some are genuine expressions of the racial, ethnic, and other differences they exhibit and their desire to defeat those who are different.

### **Related theorists/theories:**

#### **Albert Cohen:**

Albert Cohen and the clash, in our schools, of middle- and working- class populations and their respective values. In a nutshell, Cohen believed that schools are run primarily by people from the middle-class. He was referring to the administrators, teachers, and counsellors.

Some of the children who attend those schools, he says, are not from the middle-class and do not exhibit the kinds of behaviours which the middle-class expects to see and approves. This is done by use of a "middle-class measuring rod" whereby all children are measured to determine their social class standing.

Children who do not measure up to the middle-class standards may, Cohen posits, develop "status frustration" and, as a result, may begin acting out. He believed that the acting out takes the form of reversing the very middle-class values against which the working-class children were measured.

For example, if middle-class children are to be polite, working-class children, acting out due to their status frustration, will be impolite (i.e., be loud, rude). If middle-class children are supposed to respect the property of others, the working-class children who are acting out will show no respect (i.e., vandalize, steal, and destroy others' property).

Were we to apply Cohen's notion to gangs we might suggest that, due to being rejected by the school, working-class children may devalue school, become truant and/or vandalize the school (among other things) and, as a consequence may be attracted to gangs. Gangs through which they will find acceptance, share their frustration/anger, and find support for their acting out. Quoting Yablonsky in *Gangsters* (p. 171): "In the gang the norms of the larger (middle-class) society are reversed so that non-utilitarian deviant behaviour...becomes a legitimized activity. The gang thus provides a legitimate 'opportunity structure' for working-class boys to strike back at a larger society that produces their status-frustration problems."

### **Walter Miller:**

Walter Miller and the clash of middle- and lower-class values as a natural outcome of life in the inner city. For Miller, being lower-class simply means that one's values will be different than those of a middle-class person. He posits that the values of the lower-class are functional and make life in lower-class neighbourhoods possible.

He talks about such lower class values in terms of being "focal concerns." Among them are being tough, having street smarts, accepting fate, and seeking excitement, to name a few. The middle-class, on the other hand, has its own set of focal concerns, most of which are diametrically opposed to those of the lower-class. Street smarts are looked upon as crude and below a middle-class person. Instead, book smarts are admired.

Being tough is looked down upon by the middle-class where "brains over brawn" is admired. And so it goes. Of course, if the middle-class has the greater likelihood of creating law, they will criminalize toughness (assault, battery, etc.), street smarts (con men, etc.) and, as a result, will criminalize being lower-class. That's how the theory goes.

So, why, according to Miller, do gangs form? Quoting Yablonsky, in *Gangsters*, (p. 174),

"...lower-class youths who are confronted with the largest gap between aspirations and possibilities for achievements are most delinquency-prone. Such youths, according to Miller, are apt to utilize heavily the normal range of lower-class delinquent patterns of 'toughness, shrewdness, cunning, and other devices in an effort to achieve prestige and status...toughness, physical prowess, skill, fearlessness, bravery, ability to con people, gaining money by wits, shrewdness...seeking and finding thrills, risk, danger, freedom from external constraint, and freedom from ... authority.'" [quoted from Miller, see p. 226 of the text, note #10].

Yablonsky believes that a youth's efforts to achieve status in a gang is a consequence of the dynamics Miller identifies. What do you think?

Gangs may also form as a result of the middle-class labelling behaviours of lower-class youth as delinquent (smoking cigarettes, having sexual intercourse, being truant from school, running away from home, etc.). Once labelled as delinquent, a youth may seek out others who have been similarly labelled. Gangs may form.

### **3. American society is materialistic.**

That which is most valued in American society is that which is material - personal possessions, objects. Taft, and others, believed) that this breeds consumption and greed ... there is concern more for one's "self" than for "others."

Those who would be the primary beneficiaries in such a society would also have the greatest stake in maintaining the status quo. They may criminalize some groups (i.e., poor, homeless, vagrant) to eliminate them. From another perspective, if having things is what is valued, and if a

person can not gain access to those things legitimately, is it not possible that this person would attempt to obtain those valued things illegitimately?

**Related theorists/theories:**

**Robert Merton and Strain Theory:**

When a significant portion of the population is denied access to the culturally legitimated means for reaching the culturally legitimated goal, one may expect some of the excluded to utilize innovative (sometimes criminal) means for achieving the goal.

The culturally legitimated means are getting an education then working hard in a job. Through these means one achieves the culturally legitimated goal of financial success (and all the trappings like a home, cars, fine clothes, jewellery, having a family and sending one's children to college, etc.).

Merton would say that everyone in the culture has the goal thrust in their face several times every day of their conscious lives (in TV, radio, magazine, newspaper ads, etc.). The problem is that not everyone has equal access to the culturally legitimate means. And those who, out of sheer will power, try to work their way up in a job, often hit a glass ceiling (they can see that there are positions above them - better paying ones, but they can not reach them).

Merton tells us that the barrier to a good education and a good job is discrimination. All kinds of discrimination including racial, ethnic, religious, gender and age.

**Cloward and Ohlin and the Illegitimate Opportunity Structure:**

There exists a structured opportunity of illegitimate means for the disenfranchised to use in order to reach the culturally legitimated goal. Organized crime, theft rings, trafficking in drugs and other forms of structured illegitimate opportunities/means are, perhaps, more accessible to the lower class while legitimate opportunities/means are more readily available to people in the middle class.

A concern more for material things than for values such as fairness, humanity, generosity, caring, may result in an undue emphasis on "making it," and making it any way necessary. If the legitimate path to success is denied or made too difficult, perhaps a youth will choose an illegitimate path to the same goal. In so doing, he or she may join up with others in order to increase the likelihood of their success. Gangs may form.

**4. American society is becoming increasingly depersonalized.**

Taft believed that many individuals in American society are not known to the larger group and are, therefore, not persons - they've become numbers, titles, statistics. They are not socially "connected." Because humans are inherently social animals, it is believed that the resulting depersonalization and isolation may lead to depression, anger, anxiety, and attacks upon one's self (i.e., suicide, substance abuse) and/or others or property.

In studying gangs, it's conceivable to believe that this condition of being stripped of or not having a unique identity may result in looking for someplace to be recognized as the individual that one is. A gang may be able to do this. In a gang the individual may be given recognition and may achieve status, prestige, power and all the other trappings provided people who are known.

## **Related theorists/theories:**

### **Social Control Theory:**

Some theorists posit that crime is the result of a loss of social control normally imposed through social institutions such as the family, faith, education, and the community or one's neighbourhood. If such informal social control is weakened, formal means of social control may be imposed - the juvenile- and criminal justice systems.

### **Walter Reckless and Containment Theory:**

Reckless believed that people are kept from violating the law in several ways. If properly socialized by their parents and peers, the individual will control him- or herself. That is, the individual provides their own containment (containing their natural impulses which may lead to law violations).

If individuals fail to contain themselves, their families and or peers may try to contain them (talk with them, try to counsel them, etc.). If that fails, the other social institutions of informal social control may provide containment - schools, the faith institutions, and the community or neighbourhood residents.

If all of those fail, the criminal justice system, as a social institution of formal social control, may attempt to contain the individual (through arrest, confinement, etc.).

Reckless also suggests that everyone is exposed to various "pushes" and "pulls," forces that push or pull an individual into law violation. We can see such pushes when children are threatened by other children to join a gang. An example of a pull may be when a child sees that, in order to get money to buy things, he or she can join a gang and reach their objective. They are pulled into the gang by its attraction as a way of earning status and making money.

### **Travis Hirschi and Control Theory:**

People refrain from violating the law because they have a *stake in conformity*. They know that, if they follow the society's rules, they will be rewarded with success.

According to Hirschi, when a member of society's *bond* to that society is weak or broken they may become criminal. Attachment, involvement, commitment, and belief in the values and goals of the society are what keep people from offending.

But what of children born into situations in which the bond to the larger society is already weak? Perhaps the parents are law violators. Maybe, if we look at things the way Miller and Cohen do (see above), being born into the working- or lower-class presents some real challenges in terms of bonding with the larger society. A lower-class person can suffer rejection and discrimination (see Merton, above).

What is the response of those children? Is it possible that some of them might join a gang because, lacking a bond to the larger society, they believe they will find a bond to the gang? Will they develop attachment, involvement, commitment, and belief in the gang culture? I think it's interesting to turn Hirschi's notion inward as a way of explaining a gang member's relationship to his or her gang (having a *bond* to the gang).

In summary, without informal social controls - from families who care about their children, schools that educate and prepare local youth for success in making a legitimate living, faith institutions that teach acceptance and learning to live with diversity, business communities that offer meaningful work and opportunities for advancement in pay and responsibility - who controls our youth? No one? Gangs? The criminal justice system?

If, in fact, our youth respond by simply satisfying their self interests (have fun, sex, gain power, etc.), they may resort to gang life where such attributes of "making it" are more readily available and acceptable.

### **5. Depersonalization leads to limited group loyalties.**

Taft believed that depersonalization leads to an erosion of ties to the larger society and fosters restricted group loyalties. That is, feeling unattached from society, some people may seek out a group or groups within society to be loyal to rather than be loyal to the larger community.

Application of this concept to gangs may help us understand why it is that some gang members can violate the laws of the society with no remorse. After all, wasn't the behaviour in accordance with what the gang expected of the gang members? Isn't that more important to them than what the rest of society thinks of their behaviour? The gang members are loyal to the gang, not to society. Their depersonalization from the larger society has resulted, according to Taft, in their loyalty to the gang.

### **Related theorists/theories:**

#### **Graham Sykes and David Matza and the Techniques of Neutralization:**

One becomes free to commit crime by using one or more techniques of neutralization (denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, appeal to higher loyalties). That is, if the individual feels any guilt over breaking the law (feeling guilty about stealing something from someone, etc.), the offender can neutralize their guilt by using any one or more of the techniques identified above.

I highlighted "appeal to higher loyalties" because this is the link I make between Sykes and Matza's notion and gangs. Some individuals will find it easy to violate the law because doing so is approved of by their fellow gang members. In fact, violating the law takes precedence over law violating behaviour. Some offenders remove feelings of guilt (which normally would limit their deviance) by appealing to what the gang expects of them.

Matza also wrote about the subterranean value system. It is not uncommon, he believed, for parents and other such authority figures to tell children that behaving one way or another is "wrong." They tell children they shouldn't do "that" (i.e., smoking, drinking, using recreational drugs, assaulting other people).

He also believes that it is not uncommon for those same authority figures to be involved in behaving in the very same ways they've told their children (or other youth) not to behave. Matza, therefore, suggest that there is a subterranean value system in our culture ... a value system that exists just below the level of the "right" value system. Adults tell the youth that something is wrong but then the adults behave in those wrongful ways (smoking, drinking, using recreational drugs, assaulting other people, etc.).

What is a child to believe? Which value system is relevant to their lives? Should they refrain from doing what they are told is wrong or should they behave the way they see the adults behaving? Matza believes that the existence of the subterranean value system confuses youth and often results in the mimicking of the inappropriate adult behaviour. Understandable, isn't it? Monkey see, monkey do.

Matza also wrote about drift. For Matza, drift is the tendency of some youth to drift in and out of delinquency. This characterizes many of today's gang members who only participate in gang activity occasionally and, when not doing so, behave in "normal" or non-criminal ways.

### **Edwin Sutherland and Differential Association:**

We learn to become criminal from other people and from the media.

During the first 10 years of life, who does a child come into contact with earliest, most frequently, and maintain a relationship with over the longest period of time? And who do they typically hold in the highest regard? You're probably thinking about their parents .... and you would likely be right.

But what about the at-risk youth we think about when we think of gangs? What about their parents? Do they live with them? Is there both a father and mother? Is there substance abuse and child abuse in the home? What values do their parents have? Would Sutherland's notion suggest that what some of these children learn is that gang-banging is O.K.?

Who might these children learn this from? Parents who are involved in gangs? Peers who are involved? And so the notion goes.

### **Labelling Theory:**

If a person commits a crime (primary deviance), he or she may be labelled as a delinquent or criminal. The person being labelled may accept that label (secondary deviance) and begin to consistently behave in ways that confirm the appropriateness of the label. In effect, the labelling process may condemn an individual who may have otherwise remained non-committal to a life of crime, to that life of crime.

I have included Labelling Theory under this category in Taft's model because, one rejected by society at-large, the individual may join a group/gang and, once recognized as a member of that group/gang, will be labelled as a member. The individual may even do certain things to assure that s/he is recognized as a member (wear appropriate clothing, colours, throw signs, wear identifying tattoos, etc.).

Edwin Lemert developed the concept of primary deviance and secondary deviance. The primary deviance refers to the act of delinquency or criminality committed by the individual. If caught, the individual may face the labelling process and, at the end of that process, may accept the label of "delinquent" or "criminal" as a part of their personality.

Lemert called the adoption of a label as secondary deviance. The delinquent or criminal now perceives of him/herself as a delinquent or criminal and begins behaving in that manner on a more consistent basis.

My field research alerted me to the fact that police sometimes label the friends of gang members as gang members whether they are or not. If they are associating with a know/documented gang member, then the police are likely to label them as gang members.

At the very least, they will document the "friend" as an "associate," and the label often sticks. If it's used often enough by police, Lemert would suggest that we run the risk of changing the friend/associate into a real and active gang member through the labelling process. See how it works?

In summary, human beings are, above all else, social animals. They appear to be healthiest when they have opportunities for social interaction with other human beings. If depersonalized

by society, they seek out attachments in other ways, perhaps to a smaller group. And, once attached to that group, they are more likely to support the values and norms of that group than of the larger society.

If that group is a gang, it is easy to understand how a gang member can prey upon the larger society and do so without remorse. Who cares about the larger society?! It's my gang members to matter - they care about me!

#### **6. The survival of the frontier ethic.**

According to Taft, the frontier ethic of American society is that people may take the law into their own hands to right a wrong committed against them by other people. The relationship between this dimension of American society and gangs is clear. When a gang member offends another gang member (either in the same gang or in a different gang) it is not uncommon for the offended member to settle the matter personally through an attack of some sort.

No appeal is made to the legitimate authorities (police). The matter is *taken into one's own hands*. In fact, the police are not viewed as legitimate authorities. Fellow gang members are the legitimate. If you couple that thought with Taft's notion of restricted group loyalties (#5 above) then you are beginning to see how the six dimensions are interrelated. The offended gang member views his/her gang as the group to be loyal to, not the larger society.

I'm not sure what theory or theorists apply here. But I do know, from personal experiences gained in the field and from secondary research, that gangs are a good example of a society run amok where the members of the gang feel compelled to take matters into their own hands if things go astray. To rely upon "the authorities" is a sign of weakness.

Could it be that one of the reasons for the formation of gangs is that they are a response to neighbourhood incidents of assault, theft, rape, and other crimes against the neighbourhood residents? Gangs may form as a way to get revenge on the alleged perpetrators.

Are gangs a way in which youth, who feel they are being victimized, can get back at their attackers? Could it be that some poor, inner-city, minority youth, feeling oppressed by the middle-class, gather together in gangs to defend themselves from such victimization?

## GANGS IN THE SCHOOLS

Gang culture among young people, in itself, is nothing new. Indeed, youth gangs have been a major part of the urban cultural landscape since at least the 1830s, when Charles Dickens described Fagin's pack of young boys roaming the streets of London in *Oliver Twist*.

In the late twentieth century United States, however, gangs have taken on a different character and have moved into areas unimagined by Dickens. Most significantly, they are spreading from inner cities to "edge cities"—cities at the outskirts of large urban centers—and to suburbs; indeed, while gang activity has been stabilizing in urban areas, it has increased significantly elsewhere (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993). At the same time, gangs have become a growing problem in public schools, which historically have been considered "neutral turf."

### Characteristics of Gangs

Researchers agree that most gangs share certain characteristics. Although there are exceptions, gangs tend to develop along racial and ethnic lines, and are typically 90 percent male (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993). Gang members often display their membership through distinctive styles of dress—their "colors"—and through specific activities and patterns of behavior. In addition, gangs almost universally show strong loyalty to their neighborhood, often marking out their territory with graffiti (Gaustad, 1991). All of these representations can be visible in the schools.

As Gaustad (1991) points out, however, the specifics of gang style and activity can vary tremendously from gang to gang, and can even change rapidly within individual gangs. For instance, African American gangs tend to confine their activities to their own communities, although the Bloods and the Crips, two gangs originating in Los Angeles, now have members nationwide. In contrast, Asian gangs often travel hundreds of miles from home in order to conduct their activities (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993). In addition, African American and Hispanic gangs are much more likely to display their colors than are Asian gangs. Anglo gangs are often made up of white supremacists. Gangs can also vary tremendously in numbers and age ranges of members.

### The Impact of Gangs on Schools

Despite their high profile in the media, relatively few young people join gangs; even in highly impacted areas, the degree of participation has rarely exceeded 10 percent. In addition, it has been reported that less than 2 percent of all juvenile crime is gang-related (Bodinger-deUriarte,

1993).

Such low numbers, however, may camouflage the impact that the presence of gangs has on a school. For one thing, they play a significant role in the widespread increase of violence in the schools; indeed, school violence has steadily increased since a 1978 National Institute of Education study, *Violent Schools-Safe Schools*, found that school-aged children were at a higher risk of suffering from violence in school than anywhere else (cited in Gaustad, 1991).

Because gangs are, by definition, organized groups, and are often actively involved in drug and weapons trafficking, their mere presence in school can increase tensions there. It can also increase the level of violence in schools, even though gang members themselves may not be directly responsible for all of it; both gang members and non-gang members are arming themselves with increased frequency. Students in schools with a gang presence are twice as likely to report that they fear becoming victims of violence than their peers at schools without gangs (Trump, 1993). Moreover, a 1992 Bureau of Justice Statistics survey reports that schools with gangs are significantly more likely to have drugs available on campus than those without gangs (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993). In Gaustad's words, gangs create a "tenacious framework" within which school violence can take root and grow (1991, p. 24).

Far from remaining neutral turf, schools not only suffer from gang-related violence "spilling over" from the streets, but are themselves rapidly becoming centers of gang activities, functioning particularly as sites for recruitment and socializing (Bodinger-deUriarte, 1993; Arthur & Erickson, 1992). An interview-based study by Boyle (1992) suggests that gang members see school as a necessary evil at best, and at worst as a form of incarceration. Although many gang members acknowledge the importance of the educational objectives of school, school is much more important to them as a place for gathering with fellow gang members for socializing and other more violent activities. Significantly, Boyle also found that even those gang members who had been suspended or had dropped out of school could be found on campus with their associates, effectively using the school as a gang hangout rather than as an educational institution.

Finally, gangs can spread unexpectedly from school to school as students transfer from gang-impacted schools to gang-free schools, causing an unintentional spillover of gang activity in the new school.



## Why Gangs Develop and Why Students Join Them

Gangs take root in schools for many reasons, but the primary attraction of gangs is their ability to respond to student needs that are not otherwise being met; they often provide youth with a sense of family and acceptance otherwise lacking in their lives. In addition, gangs may form among groups of recent immigrants as a way of maintaining a strong ethnic identity. Understanding how gangs meet these student needs prepares schools to better respond to them.

Four factors are primary in the formation of juvenile gangs (William Gladden Foundation, 1992):

- First, youth experience a sense of *alienation and powerlessness* because of a lack of traditional support structures, such as family and school. This can lead to feelings of frustration and anger, and a desire to obtain support outside of traditional institutions.
- Second, gang membership gives youth a *sense of belonging* and becomes a major *source of identity* for its members. In turn, gang membership affords youth a sense of power and control, and gang activities become an outlet for their anger.
- Third, the control of *turf* is essential to the well-being of the gang, which often will use force to control both its territory and members.
- Finally, *recruitment* of new members and *expansion* of territory are essential if a gang is to remain strong and powerful. Both "willing" and "unwilling" members are drawn into gangs to feed the need for more resources and gang members.

Taken together these four factors interact to produce gangs that become more powerful and ruthless as they work to maintain and expand their sway over territory and youth.

## Gangs and School Response

Still, despite the significant influence that gangs have upon violence and crime in schools, it would be a great disservice to portray them as so potent that schools are powerless to respond. Indeed, the perception of gangs as omnipotent frequently leads schools either to react harshly with overly punitive and restrictive actions or to be so intimidated that they refrain from taking any action at all.

What is needed instead is a strategy that mobilizes school and community resources to offer viable alternatives to youth gang membership. To be successful, however, a school's strategy must be built upon the above-described sociopsychological reasons for why gangs develop and attract youths; in particular, schools must find ways to address students' feelings of powerlessness and low self-esteem. A strategy that embodies an understanding of "gang psychology" increases the probability that gangs will be less able to attract new members and retain old members.

## Effective Interactions for Combating School Gangs

The following eight interventions have each been shown to be effective on their own, but can also be the basis of a comprehensive schoolwide strategy:

- Target students vulnerable to gang recruitment for special assistance, particularly through the use of peer counselors and support groups. Mentoring, conflict resolution programs, and tutoring can be particularly effective.
- Establish moral and ethical education, values clarification, and conflict resolution as important components of the school curriculum.
- Create an inviting school climate where every student feels valued.
- Educate all school staff, including support staff, about how gangs develop and how to respond to them.
- Offer special programs for parents on gangs and how to deal with them as a parent. Present information in a culturally sensitive way, and in a variety of languages, to reflect the diversity of the community.
- Monitor youths who are not enrolled in school but "hang out" on or near school property. This can help school officials assess the existence of gangs in the neighborhood, and anticipate and prevent their formation in the school.
- Offer educational programs for students about gangs, their destructiveness, and how to avoid being drawn into them, preferably in small groups where they can express their feelings comfortably.
- Provide regular opportunities for students individually and/or in small groups to discuss their experiences in school and make future plans that offer hope and personal rewards.

Though the above steps offer no magical solution for eliminating gangs, they offer valuable interventions that may make gangs appear less attractive and prepare individual students to more effectively resist gang pressure to join with them.

— Gary Burnett, ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education and  
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No. 237

# Understanding Youth Gangs

Rob White

*“Youth gangs” range from harmless groups of young people who simply hang around together to those engaged in serious law breaking. There is very little empirical material in Australia that would tell us how many “gangs” exist, who is in them and what they do.*

*The recently formed Ozgang Research Network, of which Associate Professor Rob White, the author of this paper, is a key member, is concerned with systematic research into youth group formations and anti-gang strategies in Australia. It is hoped that the Network, which plans to undertake cross-national research, will also fill many of our knowledge gaps in relation to youth gangs.*

*This introductory paper sets the scene for understanding the complexity of gangs in Australia. It provides us with a framework of what gangs are, what sorts of behaviour they engage in, how they are structured, how they change over time, and how they form and disappear.*

*The Australian Institute of Criminology will, over the next few months, publish more papers by Rob White on how to deal with gangs from the perspective of the community, law enforcement, schools and parents.*

**Adam Graycar**  
Director

An important part of gang research is to explore ways that criminal gangs can be prevented from forming or growing. Gang membership can affect criminal behaviour—it can increase the risk of involvement (that is, prevalence) in serious and violent crime, and increase the frequency of serious and violent crime. The key question here is: what strategies can be employed to prevent the development of criminal or violent youth gangs and what forms of intervention are most appropriate to diminish gang-related activity?

To start, it is crucial to know what gangs are (and are not) and what they do. There is no agreed consensus on gangs—there is disagreement about the key aspects of gang-related behaviour, identification of gang members and the formation and disintegration of gangs. But gangs, however they may be described, are fairly transient, with members coming and going. So knowledge of how they form and how they disintegrate is important.

Simply put, if a group sees itself as a “gang”, and is perceived by others as a gang, *primarily because of its illegal activities*, then this constitutes the minimum baseline definition of a gang.

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## Do Youth Groups Equal Gangs?

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It is important that distinctions be made between different sorts of groups. These 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

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provide insight into differences between groups—as with distinguishing between social-centred and criminal-centred activity.

Recent work from Canada (see Gordon 1995, 2000; Gordon & Foley 1998) helps distinguish 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 six-category typology developed by Gordon consists of:

- youth movements—social movements characterised by a distinctive mode of dress or other bodily adornments, a leisure time preference, and other distinguishing features (for example, punk rockers);
- youth groups—comprising small clusters of young people who hang out together in public places such as shopping centres (for example, sometimes referred to as “mallies”);
- wannabe groups—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 (for example, territorial behaviour and the use of identifying markers of some kind);
- criminal groups—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);
- street gangs—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 (for example, less visible but more permanent than other groups); and
- criminal business organisations—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 (for example, may have a name but are rarely visible).

### Box 1: Gang-related Behaviour

#### Criminal

The main focus of the activity is directed at making money through illegal means (such as property theft or drug selling). This kind of activity may be sporadic and episodic, and may not be central to a group’s overall activity. 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

The main feature is street fighting and violence 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, and constructions of masculinity and self-protection loom large in consideration of why conflicts occur and persist over time.

#### Retreat

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 antisocial 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

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.

Whether described as “gangs” or “groups”, membership tends to revolve around similar interests (such as choice of music, sport or 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) (White et al. 1999). Group affiliation is sometimes perceived as the greatest reason why certain young people are singled out as being part of a “gang”, and why particular conflicts occur between different groups of young people.

### What is Gang-related Behaviour?

Gang-related behaviour can initially be categorised into four types of activities (in another context, some of these activities have been associated with different types of gangs; see United States Bureau of Justice Assistance 1998, pp. 11–14). The

four types of activities are criminal, conflict, retreat and street culture (see Box 1).

Many of the activities described in Box 1 actually pertain to young people in general, rather than to youth gangs specifically. Young people engage in one or more of these activities, at different times and in different locations, and 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 time. In other words, what is described in this paper 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, p. 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 robbery, but this may not be a function or outcome of the gang as a whole.

While youth offending cannot be equated with gang activity as such, 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). In other words, gang membership does not explain juvenile offending in general, but it can

exacerbate juvenile offending in specific cases.

### Are All Gangs the Same?

American, Canadian and European research has increasingly emphasised that gang formation is a social process involving complex forms of membership, transformation and disintegration (Spergel 1995; Gordon 2000; Bjorgo 1999). Indeed, recent American research challenges popular media images based on traditional stereotypes. This research 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). 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; Klein, Maxson & Miller 1995).

Klein (2002) illustrates the diversity of street gang formations, and thus reinforces the fact that gang stereotypes do not match gang realities. He distinguishes between several 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 the gang is territorial; and
- its crime versatility versus whether it specialises in particular kinds of crime.

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; and
- the group's involvement in enough illegal activities to get a consistent negative response from law enforcement and neighbourhood residents.

#### *Identification of Gang Members*

There are major problems in trying to identify who a gang member is, and what his or her precise relationship to a particular youth group formation might be. Variables to consider 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; and
- other institutional identification as a gang member (see Howell 2000).

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.

Social inclusion and exclusion appears to be central to the processes of gang identification. One Sydney gang study found 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). Rather than espousing particular kinds of professional criminal activity, there was symbolic representation of themselves as members of a gang (that is, presenting an image of being tough and dangerous). 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. Significantly, research indicates that where young people themselves claim gang membership, they tend to engage in substantially more antisocial and criminal behaviour than those who do not profess to be gang members (Esbensen et al. 2001, p. 123). Who you say you are has implications for what you do and with whom.

Group identification is intertwined with group activity. American research on the nature of gang activity, for instance, delineates a process in which group violence undergoes a series of ebbs and flows (see Decker 1996):

- 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-escalates;
- the other gang retaliates.

The interesting thing about this process model of gang violence is that it appears to match, at least to some extent, the experience of group violence among young people in Australia—including those young people who do not identify as being a gang member as such. Furthermore, it is clear from recent studies (White et al. 1999; Collins et al. 2000) that group protection from perceived and actual threats is integral to

### Box 2: Key Factors in Gang Disintegration

- Growing out of gang life through natural maturation and new priorities in life.
- Defeat of the group by external use of force.
- Loss of external enemies or threat.
- Loss of identity, status and image.
- Decay of group cohesiveness, solidarity and attraction value.
- Fragmentation of the group into smaller units which may be too weak to survive.

Source: Bjorgo 1999

both group identity and the use of violent means to protect oneself.

### How Do Groups Change Over Time?

Recent European work on the movement of individuals and groups from one type of group formation to (or away from) a gang formation have relevance for Australian gang research. For example, Bjorgo (1999) points out that street gangs have usually emerged out of something else, such as a play group, a clique of friends or a loose subculture. Significantly, he describes how an immigrant youth gang (the “Warriors”) in Copenhagen emerged in response to White Power gangs. Australian research (see White et al. 1999; Collins et al. 2000) has highlighted the ways in which racism permeates the lives of ethnic minority youth and that group formation (and street fights) are directly linked to issues of protection, social status and group identity. Analysis of factors affecting entry and exit to youth gangs is important here (see Bjorgo 1999). For example, entry factors could include various “attractions to join” (for example, thrill-seeking) and “incentives to stay” (for example, friendships). Exit factors could include “push factors” (for example, negative social sanctions) and “pull factors” (for example, establishing a family).

Issues of entry and exit are complex. They are also highly specific to particular social contexts and particular types of youth group formation. American research on membership processes, for example, challenges the notion that individuals face difficulties in either entry or exit. It is pointed out that in most instances young people can refuse to join gangs without reprisal, and that gang members (especially marginal members) typically can leave the gang without serious consequences (Howell 2000, pp. 49–50). One implication of this is that if gang entry and exit is fluid, and if individuals tend not to remain gang members for long periods of time, then members can be drawn away if given attractive alternatives.

For many young people gangs provide a sense of social inclusion. Gangs can provide support and security for vulnerable groups of young people. They can provide opportunities for status, group identity and excitement. They provide a mechanism for young people to cope with oppressive environments, and represent one response or option to chronic marginalisation and social exclusion. All of these features point to the importance of peers and peer networks in the lives of young people, but leave open the

matter of the social content of youth group formation. The problem is not with youth groups as such, it is with what youth groups do.

*Change and Continuity in Gang Formation*

Developing anti-gang policies or anti-gang intervention strategies requires a knowledge base about specific youth groups in particular areas (for example, identification of youth group formations, processes of group transformation) and knowledge of how and why particular groups disintegrate (see Box 2).

Interpreting how gangs change over time depends on two things: the concepts deployed to explain gang formation in the first place, and the empirical history of the group in question. Gangs may enjoy a short life span, or they may persist over time as quasi-institutionalised groups. If they are short-lived then gang formation is more probably due to temporary peer group dynamics, fluctuations in local regulatory situations or employment markets—in other words, trends and fashions that ebb and flow according to immediate circumstances. If they are long-lived then it would appear that entrenched long-standing cultural and socioeconomic factors are determinate. Either way, it has been observed that gangs tend to be linked to “underclass” conditions, and that they arise wherever and whenever these become evident. Their persistence is thus best understood in the context of the wider political economy (see Moore 1988; Gordon 2000).

Although certain “gangs” may be seen as more or less a permanent fixture of some neighbourhoods (suggesting a basic continuity in gang life) the actual composition and activities of each gang formation need to be examined closely because the character of particular gang

formations will be different depending upon who the current members are. As Moore (1988) observes, new cliques or “gangs” may start up every few years, each with their own name and separate identity. They may identify with previous gangs or cliques that have gone on before them, yet they are separate from previous generations. The presence of gangs in a neighbourhood over time does not therefore equate to the same gang persisting over time. Each generation of young people constructs the kind of group formation suited to its specific time and circumstance, while drawing upon past examples to guide them in this process.

**Conclusion**

A few general observations about gangs can be applied across assorted geographic, demographic and ethnic settings (United States Bureau of Justice Assistance 1997, pp. 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 and 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.

Clearly there is no one single model of a “gang” as such (see Perrone & White 2000). Often commentators rely upon either stereotypes of youth gangs or narrow definitions of what constitutes a gang. Policy and practice options likewise need to be devised in relation to analysis of specific groups, incidents and situations. Practical examples and case studies from diverse jurisdictions can nevertheless provide insights into how best to respond to perceived gang problems. These will be explored in later papers in this series.

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<b>Territory</b>	<b>Related Concepts</b>



Values	Related Concepts

Rituals	Related Concepts

<b>Sanctions</b>	<b>Related Concepts</b>

Definitions	Related Concepts



<b>Types of Gang</b>	<b>Related Concepts</b>

Theory	How it relates to gang behaviour
Concentric Zones - Shaw and McKay	
Differential Association - Sutherland	
Strain Theory - Merton	
Status Frustration - A. Cohen	
Delinquent Subcultures - Cloward and Ohlin	

Theory	How it relates to gang behaviour
Resistance - CCCS	
New Left Realism	
Labelling - S.Cohen	
Deviancy Amplification - Wilkins	
Delinquency and Drift - Matza	



Theory	How it relates to gang behaviour

Territory	Related Concepts
1. Gangs mark their "turf" using variety of features (landmarks, road boundaries, parks, graffiti, etc.)	
2. Always a strong sense of loyalty to "their neighbourhood"	
3. Working class areas (economically-depressed areas)	
4. Urban areas (usually cities, sometimes towns)	
5. "Turf" has symbolic importance in terms of ownership and the need to defend / expand territory	
6. Regions marked by ethnic loyalties (eg Hispanic / White / Black neighbourhoods)	

Values	Related Concepts
1. Excitement / "kicks"	
2. Loyalty	
3. Respect (for yourself and your gang members) Increase in self-esteem / self worth	
4. Disrespect (for "ordinary people" / other (rival) gangs)	
5. Concept of "family" important to gang members and their identity. Marriage and permanent relationships often form within gangs) Children raised within gang culture	Primary socialisation Cultural reproduction
6. Proving your worth (e.g. in gang fights)	
7. Having "heart" (i.e. being tough)	
8. Taking care of fellow gang members	
9. Commitment (to gang as "family"	
10. Social status	Status frustration
11. Power (over own life and lives of others)	
12. Fame	

Rituals	Related Concepts
1. Gang names / Nicknames: "Playboys"; "Crews"	
2. Gang colours (e.g. Bloods and Crips in USA wear different gang colours)	
3. Initiation ceremonies (e.g. "jump-ins" of female Latino gangs) specific to particular gangs	
4. Bodily adornments (e.g. tattoos, piercing): may reflect gang symbols	The sacred ("special") and the profane ("ordinary")
5. Dress	
6. Slang	Self and Other
7. Hand signs	Non verbal communication

Sanctions	Related Concepts
1. Desire for financial rewards	
2. Fear others in gang (physical violence)	
3. Gang members may be only people who care for each other	Social solidarity
4. Lack of any other opportunity structures in lives of young men / women	Illegitimate opportunity structures(Cloward and Ohlin)
5. Sense of security / safety in numbers inhibits desire to leave gang	

<b>Definitions</b>	<b>Related Concepts</b>
1. If a group sees itself as a gang it is a gang	The Self
2. If others in a neighbourhood see a group as a gang, it is a gang	The Other
3. An organisation that exists over time, consisting of 3 or more people who on their own or as part of a group engage in delinquent / criminal behaviour.	
4. People who are generally seen as a distinctive group by others in a neighbourhood and who recognise themselves as a group / gang.	The Self and the Other

Social / Psychological Factors Influencing Gang Development	Related Concepts
1. A sense of belonging to a “family-type” group.	
2. Boredom / lack of leisure facilities	
3. Lack of “positive” (law-abiding) role models	
4. Presence of “negative” (law-breaking) role models	Delinquent subcultures (Cloward and Ohlin)
5. Desire for love and self-worth / self-esteem.	
6. Financial rewards	
7. Physical safety in potentially hostile environment	
8. Need for physical protection (from gangs) eg. Experience of prejudice / discrimination	
9. Marginalisation by mainstream society (e.g. through poverty / gender / ethnic background)	
10. Survival mechanisms (a way of surviving in harsh economic and social environment).	
11. Poverty	
12. Divorce within family	
13. Alcohol and drug abuse	
14. Conflicts at home / school	
15. Rigid and ineffective parenting / lack of parental controls	
16. Working class culture - gangs as “community norm”	Differential Association

Types of Gang	Related Concepts
1. Most gang members are young (late teens in the main)	
2. Different types of gang member: a. Core members - the mainstay of the gang (main decision makers) b. Floaters - move between different gangs c. Wannabes - usually very young who aim to eventually join a gang d. Veterans - older (ex-) gang members who are no longer active (late 20's+)	Hierarchy
3. Little evidence of ethnic diversity within gangs.	Ethnic homogeneity
4. Examples of ethnic gangs: - Triads (Chinese) - Asian (for example: Indian / Pakistani) - White (for example, skinhead gangs) - Black (for example, Afro-Caribbean) - Hispanic (USA)	Ethnic diversity Ethnic identities
5. Most gang members are male (estimated approximately 90%)	Masculine Identities
6. Evidence of female gangs (sometimes affiliated to male gangs). Eg.: Latino female gangs Glaswegian female gangs	
7. Different types of gangs (organised for different purposes): a. Criminal - make living through selling drugs, robbery, etc.) b. Conflict - exist mainly to gain status through street violence) c. Retreatist gangs - usually heavy drug users (gang provides environment for drug use) d. Street gangs - usually seen as disorganised "wannabe" gangs.	Social status



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