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**WORKING DOCUMENT**

**INCARCERATED GANG MEMBERS  
IN BRITISH COLUMBIA:  
A PRELIMINARY STUDY**

**Robert M. Gordon, Ph.D.  
Simon Fraser University**

**1994**

**WD1994-13e**

**UNEDITED**

**Research and Statistics Directorate /  
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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The files of 41 gang members held in British Columbia's provincial correctional centres were analysed as part of a general census of youth and adult facilities. Special interviews were conducted with 25 of these inmates. The majority of the incarcerated gang members were 25 years of age or younger. All the subjects were males. Eleven gangs were represented. The largest single ethnic group was Caucasian, the second largest group was Asian. The majority of gang members, regardless of ethnicity, were born in Canada. The majority of subjects had been charged with crimes of violence. Information was gathered about: the family and school backgrounds of gang members; the processes of joining and leaving a gang; the professed reasons for becoming involved with gangs; and the organization, composition and activities of gangs. This report concludes by (a) proposing a scheme for standardizing the definitions of the various groupings that are referred to as "gangs;" (b) discussing the multicultural composition of gangs and the importance of not focussing solely upon immigration issues when trying to understand the emergence of gangs; and, (c) examining the reasons why young people become involved with gangs.

### ETHNOCULTURAL CENSUS MANAGEMENT TEAM

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

A census of all of British Columbia's provincial correctional centres was undertaken in April 1993 (see, Gordon & Nelson, 1993). The census had several subsidiary objectives, including a special study of the inmates of adult and youth facilities who were known to be the gang members.

The rationale for such a study needs little articulation. British Columbia, in particular the Greater Vancouver area, has been experiencing a period of youth and young adult gang activity since about 1985 (Girard, 1992). Surprisingly little is known about youth and young adult gangs in Canada, let alone British Columbia, and while there is a sizeable body of American literature and research on the topic of gangs (see, e.g., Goldstein & Huff, 1993; Huff, 1990; Spergel, 1990) this is viewed, quite rightly, as being of limited value to theorists, policy makers and practitioners in Canada, and particularly in British Columbia. Although a body of Canadian knowledge is slowly developing (see, Girard, 1992; Lee, 1992; Young, 1993), a dearth of Canadian research renders this study especially useful.

As the title indicates, this is a preliminary study. A further and larger study is being planned and will be implemented at the earliest opportunity. The second study will benefit immensely from the lessons learned during the research reported here, which was very much a pilot project. Similar work had not been undertaken before and there were no finely tuned research instruments that could be used. At the outset, there was considerable scepticism about the likelihood of conducting interviews with known gang members and, even if interviews took place, that the information gathered would be accurate. It was assumed by many that incarcerated subjects would not cooperate or, if they did, that they would spend the interviews hoodwinking the researchers. In any event, a surprisingly large number of subjects agreed to be interviewed and most of these individuals were remarkably eager to speak candidly and at length to researchers about both themselves and gang issues.

The total population of the provincial correctional centres on the day of the census was 1,952. Of these inmates, 41 were identified by correctional centre staff (usually either a centre director, assistant director, or classification officer) as gang members. The information had been passed to centre staff by a variety of formal and informal sources which are best referred to as the "law enforcement network".

The correctional centre files of these inmates were examined by researchers and relevant information was culled from them. The subjects were then asked if they would participate in an interview and 34 agreed. Ten were adults and 24 were youths. Of the subjects only two denied being gang members and they declined to be interviewed. File data indicated that they were members of gangs. Another two inmates admitted to being the members of a criminal group, but not a gang. These inmates were interviewed but they were not included in the count of interviewed gang members. In the end, full interviews were conducted with 25 subjects who agreed that they were gang members and two subjects who admitted being part of a criminal group. Partial interviews were conducted with a further seven subjects who initially agreed to speak to a researcher but who declined to participate further while the interview was underway.

The interviews were conducted by researchers with extensive experience working with incarcerated populations. In the case of the Lower Mainland facilities with the highest concentrations of gang members (New Haven Correctional Centre and the Youth Detention complex in Burnaby), the researchers were individuals with graduate qualifications in social work, additional qualifications in family therapy and youth counselling, more than 10 years experience working with troubled and in trouble youth and young adults, and extensive research experience. The backgrounds and experiences of all researchers proved to be invaluable and contributed to the quantity and quality of the data.

The reliability of the data is further strengthened by the use of a combination of file and interview data. The accuracy of the information provided by interviewees could be easily checked by referring to the subject's correctional centre file which usually contained background information including the inmate's full criminal history. This is especially true of the files of young offenders which contain copies of detailed pre-sentence reports and other information collected by probation officers and other individuals and agencies. In addition, issues not clearly addressed in the inmate's file (e.g., information about migration to Canada) could be explored or clarified by interview. Although no attempt was made to measure the accuracy of interview data by comparison with file data (a test of veracity), the researchers reported that interviewees were more likely to withhold information, or to lapse into vagueness, than they were to deliberately lie.

Two additional methodological observations: (i) skilled and experienced women interviewers appeared to be particularly effective in encouraging young males to deliver their life stories; and, (ii) young people in correctional centres suffer from junk food withdrawal and will be encouraged to participate in research if there is some kind of semi-nourishing reward for doing so (notably, pizza).

Copies of the file data retrieval forms and the interview protocols used in the research can be found in Appendix A.

## **2.0 INCARCERATED GANG MEMBERS: A BASIC PROFILE**

All of the 41 subjects in the study were males. The mean age was 19 and the age range was 14 to 37. Thirty eight (92.6 percent) were 25 years of age or younger. Twenty seven subjects aged 14 to 18 were detained in youth facilities (mean age, 17). Fourteen subjects were in adult facilities. Most were school students (20), manual workers (8), or had no occupation (12).

The subjects represented eleven gangs: Lotus, Big Circle Boys (Dai Huen Jai), Viet Ching, Los Diablos, East Van Saints, Los Cholos, Countess, K.C.K., Laraza, Powerhouse, and North Van Locals.

### **2.1 Ethnicity**

The largest single group were of Caucasian ethnic origin (16/41). Of these, 14 were Canadian Caucasians. The next largest ethnic group (14/41) was Asian: five Canadian Asians, four Vietnamese, two from Hong Kong, and one each from Cambodia, the Phillipines, and China. There were five Indo-Canadians, three Aboriginals, two Hispanics (one from South America, the other from Central America), and one Black.

Ten of the Caucasians were young people (17 years of age or younger), six were adults (18 years of age or older). The three Aboriginals, two Hispanics and one Black were young people; there were no adults in these ethnic groups. Three of the Indo-Canadians were young people, two were adults. Eight Asians were young people, six were adults.

A total of 22 subjects (53.6 percent) were from visible minorities (excluding Aboriginals). As a point of comparison, 8.6 percent of the total population of provincial correctional centres were members of visible minorities on the day of the census while an estimated 13.3 percent of the provincial population are from non-Aboriginal visible minorities (Gordon & Nelson, 1993). Clearly, members of visible minorities are over-represented among the gang members in facilities on the day of the census but no definitive conclusions should be drawn from these data because of the size of the sample.

### **2.2 Immigration**

Seventy four percent (20/27) of the young people (17 years of age and younger) and 50 percent (7/14) of the adults were born in Canada, primarily in British Columbia. No particular region or country was dominant among the seven youths not born in Canada. Of the seven adults not born in Canada, three came from Vietnam, one came from Hong Kong, one from China, and another from the Phillipines. In total, 32 percent of the gang members were not born in Canada.

As a point of comparison, 11 percent of the population of provincial correctional centres were immigrants on the day of the census, compared with approximately 22.3



percent of the British Columbia population (Gordon & Nelson, 1993). The percentage of immigrants among young gang members (17 years of age and younger) was 26 percent. This is considerably higher than the inmate population as a whole but only slightly higher than might be expected in a normal and equitable distribution.

The total percentage of immigrant gang members (32 percent) is higher than both the correctional centres population and the provincial population. The percentage of immigrant adult offenders is considerably higher (50 percent). No definitive conclusions should be drawn from these data because of the size of the sample and particularly the small number of adults in the study (14).

Of the immigrants in the study for whom immigration information was available (10/14), all had arrived in Canada since 1980. Only two could be described as "recent immigrants" (i.e., subjects who had arrived within the past five years). One had arrived in 1989, and the other in 1990.

Four had travelled to Canada alone, the rest had migrated with their extended family or other family members. Most had been brought to Canada by their parents or had migrated to join their families. Two subjects were refugees, one being the son of a South Vietnamese army officer who had been a political prisoner following the defeat of South Vietnam and the subsequent unification.

Only one subject appeared to have difficulty speaking English, the others spoke English well, even though in each case the subjects' families still spoke their native language at home. The reasonable proficiency in English may be due to the fact that the majority of subjects (and their families) had not made their homes in enclaves populated by people from the same country of origin. Only four subjects - three Vietnamese and one Cambodian - had settled in areas of Vancouver where other people from their home countries had also settled, but not in such great numbers (and to the exclusion of other ethnic groups) that the areas could be properly described as cultural enclaves.

### **2.3 Offences and Offence Histories**

The majority of gang members (63.4 percent) had been charged with crimes of violence. This is a far larger proportion than is found in the general inmate population (24.9 percent) (see, Gordon & Nelson, 1993). In descending order of frequency, the charges were robbery, aggravated assault, assault, kidnapping and confinement, extortion, possession and use of firearms, and murder. Of the 25 subjects charged with violent crimes, 18 were young people (17 years of age and younger) charged, primarily, with robbery and/or aggravated assault.

A correspondingly smaller proportion of gang members had been charged with property crimes (14.6 percent, compared with 40.1 percent in the general inmate population) and sex offences (4.0 percent, compared with 7.1 percent). However, a slightly larger percentage of gang members had been charged with narcotics offences, primarily trafficking heroin or cocaine (9.0 percent, compared with 6.3 percent in the general inmate population).

Those sentenced for property crimes were serving an average of 12 months imprisonment, while those sentenced for crimes of violence were serving an average of 15.5 months. The average sentence for an adult charged with a violent crime was longer than for a youth charged with a violent crime (adults, 19 months; youth, 14 months). However, because of the absence of remission or parole, young offenders may serve a period of imprisonment equal to or longer than that served by adults. In keeping with the rest of the inmate population, those charged with crimes of violence were serving longer sentences than those charged with other offences.

Full offence histories were available for the majority of subjects. Twenty-two gang members (53.6 percent) had five or less prior convictions, six had eleven or more. Of those with extensive criminal histories, one 23 year old had 60 prior convictions for property crimes and crimes of violence (e.g., possession of machine guns and a semi-automatic carbine, robbery, break and enter, and car theft). An 18 year old had 88 prior convictions including numerous charges of theft and possession of stolen property, possession of weapons, aggravated assault, robbery, and kidnapping.

Gang members with 10 or less prior convictions tended to have consistent offence histories. A subject who had a history of property crimes (e.g., break and enter, possession of stolen property, and theft) was most likely to be serving a sentence for a similar property crime. A subject with a history of violent crime would be most likely to have been convicted of a crime of violence. However, those with 11 or more prior convictions tended to have a more varied criminal history, primarily a mixture of property and violent crimes.

### 3.0 JOINING A GANG

In the majority of cases, the first contact with a gang was at an early age through either a close relative or a friend or group of friends who were already involved with a gang. One subject first made contact at the age of 10 and at the encouragement of his brother, while another stated that he simply began to "hang out" with a group at a very early age and "just grew up with them." Twelve subjects reported that they had made some kind of contact with their gang when they were 14 years of age or younger. Some subjects stated that they had made contact with a gang because gang members lived in their neighbourhoods, others reported that they had met gang members in their schools. One subject described how he had been a member of a hockey team that had started at a high school, whose members had started to commit crimes together, and which gradually evolved into a gang.

Two key points become clear from an analysis of the subjects' accounts of how they became involved with gangs. Firstly, the subjects felt that they were not coerced or otherwise pressured into joining a gang. If anything, it was the subject who sought out the gang, or showed an interest in the gang, and either asked to join or simply associated with gang members until he was absorbed into the gang itself. There were no reports of specific recruitment by gangs in, for example, high schools in the sense that a gang member who was not already part of the school community would enter the school grounds to actively recruit members by bullying or other forms of intimidation.

Second, the subjects felt that they had joined a gang gradually, rather than abruptly. They had "drifted" into a gang in the company, or with the encouragement, of friends or close relatives. At first they simply "hung out" with gang members and then slowly became more involved with gang meetings and gang activities until admission occurred, sometimes following an initiation ceremony. In each case, there was no single moment at which it could be said that the subject made a conscious and deliberate decision to join a gang. Instead, to quote one young adult gang member, "it just kinda happened."

Initiation ceremonies for new gang members were reported by just under one half of the subjects. In most cases, prospective members were either beaten up by other gang members or required to fight with one or more gang members. One member of Los Diablos, for example, described the process of "Taking Five", whereby a new member was beaten for five minutes by 20 gang members. The initiators would use their fists and feet but were not allowed to strike the victim on the head. The applicant passed the test if he did not run away or cry. In another gang, a prospective member had to fight a larger gang member for five minutes, without running away or being overwhelmed by his opponent. Other subjects reported that they had to engage in some kind of criminal activity such as stealing, assaulting a person, or cutting a person with a knife. However, these kinds of admission requirements were unusual.

In most cases the subjects joined a gang because of the material and/or psychological rewards associated with membership. The majority joined in order to be with their friends or relatives and to do what their friends or relatives were doing. Seven subjects stated that they had joined to make money. Other reasons included the following:

- "It felt good to join, to be a member. It was fun to be in a gang."

- "It felt good to belong to a group."
- "I had no life, the gang was like a family."
- "It made me feel proud."
- "I felt more powerful, I had nothing else to do and I had more friends if I joined."
- "It felt good, I felt protected."

Some joined because of boredom and because the gang offered some excitement.

It was thought that some additional information about why the subjects joined gangs would be forthcoming from a review of their personal, family and school histories. Of the 32 subjects for whom the relevant information was available, 13 (40.6 percent) had backgrounds characterized by both family and school problems. These included drug, alcohol and physical abuse in the family coupled with truancy, fighting, suspensions and expulsions in school. It is unclear whether the school problems were a function of the family problems or whether the two problems were a function of another unidentified variable.

The majority of subjects (22, or 68.7 percent) had experienced problems in school. Nine subjects (28 percent) had had problems in school but did not have family problems. The school problems tended to be less serious (e.g., truancy and some difficulty complying with school discipline) than in the case of those with both family and school problems. Only two subjects had family problems but no schooling problems while eight (25 percent) had neither family nor school problems. However, six of these eight subjects were adults and the background information on file was either absent or incomplete.

Where family problems existed they included situations such as the following:

- A youth from a family where the father abused alcohol and the mother abused both alcohol and other drugs. The youth had been removed from home on two occasions and placed in group homes.
- A young adult who had been abused and neglected by his parents and who had been removed from the family home at age 12. The person had been placed in numerous foster homes and seven group homes during his childhood and adolescence.
- A young adult who expressed a hatred of his father because his father had been physically abusive to him and to his mother throughout his youth.

Where school problems were reported they included the following:

- A youth who was doing poorly in high school and was expelled for truancy and drug use. The subject's problems began when he was moved from a small high school to a large one. He missed his friends and skipped class to visit them.

- A youth who was in E.S.L. classes to grade 11, who had problems with mathematics, who was continually late for class and who was eventually expelled. The subject stated that he got involved in crime because of his poor command of English when he entered school at age 12. He never caught up and gave up.
- A young adult with a learning disability who attended alternate school to grade 10, was doing well and was liked by his teachers, but who let his grades slip. In his words, "I just stopped trying."

A preliminary analysis was undertaken of the relationship between the professed reasons for becoming involved with a gang and the subject's experiences in school and in his family to see if the reasons and the experiences matched. The subjects were arranged into one of three groups: those who had both family and school problems (n = 13); those who had either family or school problems (n = 11); and those who had no reported problems at school or in the family (n = 8).

In the first group - subjects who had experienced problems with both school and family - it was clear that the gang provided what the individuals' families and schools could not or would not provide, or had not provided when needed. To paraphrase Christopher Lasch, these gang members, who often had tragic family backgrounds, may well have found the gang to be a significant haven in an especially heartless world. Two case examples help to illustrate this point:

#### The Case of L.

A 14 year old Caucasian youth serving one month for three counts of assault, possessing an illegal firearm, and breaking and entering. He had numerous previous convictions for fraud, mischief, and wilful damage. He joined gang "B" because he "had no life". In his view, the gang "is the only thing I had. It was my family, they helped."

L had been removed from his home because of undisclosed problems (probably physical and/or sexual abuse) within the family and placed in four different foster homes. More recently he had been moved to a group home. He had received psychiatric counselling and was being educated by correspondence because of school problems. These problems included persistent truancy and disciplinary problems. He had been suspended and expelled from regular school.

#### The Case of S.

A 15 year old Caucasian youth serving six months for theft and possession of stolen property. He had numerous previous convictions for theft and break and enter. He joined gang "D" because it gave him "more power" and because he "had more friends and money by joining the gang."

S's parents had produced a large family (7 children) but had separated and were living with new partners. His mother abused alcohol and other drugs and S had been abused emotionally. His parents constantly referred to him as "stupid" and an "asshole". He had

been placed in four foster homes and four group homes. He had a stomach ulcer and had received psychiatric counselling. He had been placed in an alternate school because of discipline and truancy problems. He had been in and out of school, having dropped out, been suspended and, eventually, expelled.

A combination of family and school problems was not present amongst the subjects in the second group (n = 11). However, these gang members had experienced either school or family problems. The following is an example of this kind of case:

The case of E.

A 15 year old Japanese-Canadian born and bred in Burnaby serving one month for breach of probation. He had been sentenced to probation for theft and robbery (his only prior convictions). He joined gang "C" because gang members had approached him and asked him to join and because he was "known to be good at doing crime."

E. came from a close and supportive family with no reported problems. E. stated that his mother strongly disapproved of his involvement with gang "C" but that his father, who had once been involved with a gang in Japan, was less concerned. E. had experienced some problems in school and was two grades behind (but catching up fast). He had missed large blocks of school time because of truancy and his teachers reported discipline problems.

In these cases there was no clear connection between the professed reasons for becoming involved with gangs and the family or school background. These individuals became involved with gangs with the encouragement of, and to be with, friends or relatives. They liked the feeling of belonging to a recognized group and found that the gang was a way of obtaining both relief from boredom and material goods.

No family or school problems were reported amongst subjects in the third, and possibly the most puzzling, group (n = 8). Very little information was available about the family and school backgrounds of five of these subjects and it is possible that with such information in hand the subjects would fall into one of the other two groups. However, in three cases the relevant information was available. A case example follows:

The Case of T.

A 23 year old from Hong Kong serving two years less one day for trafficking in heroin. He had numerous previous convictions for offences such as robbery, forcible confinement, and extortion.

T had a stable family background, with four siblings and both parents in regular and steady employment. He had attended a regular public school without any reported problems, and had graduated at grade 12. His teachers had described him as pleasant, well mannered, courteous, and eager to excel. After leaving high school he had been in regular employment as a waiter in several Chinese restaurants. Correctional centre staff described T as a model prisoner with a good attitude.

In these kinds of cases factors other than family and school problems undoubtedly account for the subjects' behaviour although these factors were not identified during the analysis of the available data. Most drifted into gangs because their friends were members and had encouraged them to participate. Others became involved because they had nothing else to do and because being in a gang was enjoyable and exciting. Two subjects indicated that they joined gangs partly because it was a way of making money.

## 4.0 LEAVING A GANG

Subjects were asked whether they felt they could leave their gang when they wanted to. The purpose was to ascertain whether individuals were coerced into remaining in gangs and, if so, what might be done to help those who wished to leave but could not.

Contrary to expectations, the vast majority of subjects (75 percent) stated that there were no barriers to departure and that they could leave a gang at anytime. The primary problem for some of these individuals lay with the fact that the gang was where the person felt the happiest. The other gang members were friends and leaving a gang would require a major life adjustment, including a geographical relocation. Some were prepared to do this, to live somewhere else on release and to start over. Others felt that it would be a difficult transition.

Two subjects stated that leaving would be a problem but they did not know what the gang members might do if they tried to leave. A further two subjects reported that they could only leave if they first fought with another gang member, in a repeat of the gang's initiation ceremony. In each case, those who thought that leaving might, or would, be a problem were young gang members (two aged 17 and two aged 15) who may have been more intimidated by older gang members. Indeed the older gang members who were interviewed thought that leaving would not be difficult. As one 22 year old put it,

"I would have no problem leaving. I've grown up and I just left. Anyway, the gang (Los Diablos) has gone, it became Los Cholos."

Age may, therefore, be a factor in a gang member's perception of the extent to which he is forced to remain in a gang. Indeed, the possibility of unimpeded retirement may arrive when gang members are in their early twenties; considerably earlier than is the case in most occupations.



## 5.0 THE ORGANIZATION, COMPOSITION, AND ACTIVITIES OF GANGS

Subjects were asked a series of questions about the general organization and activities of gangs. Although there was some disagreement about the use of the term "gang" - one subject had strong views on the misuse of the term by the media and by the researcher who interviewed him - several interviewees offered extensive tutorials on the way in which gangs were structured.

Three "models" emerged from these discussions, each worthy of further exploration:

- (i) The hierarchical model, with a traditional management pyramid: a leader or leaders at the top, different levels of intermediate command, and foot soldiers at the bottom. This model might be found in gangs with no more than 50 members.
- (ii) The bonded single group that, because of its small size, is able to make decisions collectively, "like brothers" as one subject described it. If discipline has to be applied the task falls to those who have been in the gang for the longest period, who are more seasoned, and who consequently command respect. Seasoning is, in part, acquired through a period of imprisonment. This model might be found in gangs with no more than 30 members.
- (iii) The large gang with a leader or leaders at the head but comprised of several groups or sub gangs each mustering between 10 and 30 members and each with a leader.

An example of this model was provided by a Los Diablos member (retired). In his view, Los Diablos was actually a set of small gangs or groups, divided along ethnic lines (i.e., Hispanic, Indo-Canadian, Chinese and Caucasian) each with a leader. The leaders of these sub gangs would meet periodically to coordinate activities.

Another example of this model was provided by a subject who claimed to be a member of the Big Circle Boys. In his view, the gang is a large organized group with different branches or groups each steered by a representative of the main, or parent, gang. Decisions are made by the parent gang and passed to the branches for action.

The subject with strong views on the misuse of the term "gang" stressed the importance of distinguishing between organized crime groups (or "real" gangs) and groups of friends who band together to commit crime. In his view, groups of friends should not be considered gangs even though they may be called gangs by, for example, the police. An example of this is the relatively recent case of the so-called "626 gang":

The 626 gang was a group of eight youth and young adults who committed a series of armed robberies of banks, stores, credit unions and other places in the Greater Vancouver area over a four month period in 1992. The group were named the 626 gang by the police because they used stolen Mazda 626 vehicles to escape from the scenes of the robberies. Members of the gang were arrested, charged and imprisoned and some were interviewed by researchers.

In the view of the members of the group, they were not a gang. They saw

themselves as a group drawn together by friendship and a common interest in (and experience with) crime who decided to try their luck at armed robbery. The equipment needed for the robberies (primarily firearms and ammunition) was easily obtained: the group drove a truck through the front window of a Surrey gunshop and helped themselves. They had no structure or organization; did not recruit members; had no rituals or particular kinds of dress or territory; had no name that they had chosen and used; and had no perception of themselves as a gang.

This distinction between a gang and a group is of considerable importance and is discussed further in the concluding section of this report.

Although there are some gangs which have members drawn predominantly from particular ethnic groups (e.g., Hispanics, Blacks, or Caucasians), most gangs have a multi-cultural composition. For example, one former member of Los Diablos stated that the gang was comprised of a mixture of Hispanic, Chinese, Indo-Canadian, and Caucasian people in their teens and early twenties. Other interviewees reported other combinations in their gangs:

- Caucasian, Chinese, Filipino, and Black.
- Chinese, Filipino, and Caucasian.
- Blacks, Aboriginals, and Hispanics.
- Vietnamese and Chinese.
- Vietnamese, Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese.
- Caucasian and Chinese.

The list is not exhaustive and merely underscores the point that, from the perspective of the interviewees, single ethnicity gangs either do not exist, or are a rarity.

Few, if any, gangs have female members and there are no gangs comprised solely of females. According to the interviewees, females are either barred from membership in gangs, or allowed to participate only on the periphery (e.g., at social events).

The majority of gangs appear to have staked out some kind of territory. This can be as large as a single town (e.g., Abbotsford), a general area within a city (e.g., downtown Victoria), or a specific area or location within a city (e.g., Metrotown in Burnaby). Specific areas within a city can include the streets around two major intersections such as, Broadway and Fraser or Broadway and Nanaimo. Interestingly, this is a continuation of a tradition first established by street gangs in Vancouver in the 1950s (see, Young, 1993). Two subjects claimed that their gangs had territorial claims over several intersections and areas; for example, East Kingsway and Victoria, the 29th Avenue Skytrain Station, and Robson Street. In some cases, the boundaries of the territory might be marked with gang graffiti, although this practice was reported by only six subjects. If graffiti were used, it might also appear in another gang's area as a way of indicating the presence of a rival gang.

Even though some gangs might have established territories, only four subjects stated that their gangs had an interest in seizing the territory of another gang. Fights with other gangs were reported by a majority of subjects (16) but in only four cases was it claimed that the conflict was over territory. Most often, fighting would be for "fun", to secure respect, or to protect the gang's

business interests.

Insofar as graffiti were not used by the majority of gangs, neither were hand signals, tattoos, or other identifying symbols except clothing. Only seven interviewees stated that their gangs used hand signals such as a special handshake or a series of hand movements in quick succession (e.g., a clap, a punch, and then a forming of the fingers of one hand into the shape of a gun). Nine subjects stated that tattoos were used primarily as identifying marks and as signs of seniority (i.e., badges of rank). These tattoos included:

- initials, such as "O.C.P." and "K.C.K."
- particular signs such as a crucifix with two circles on each arm of the cross, or a pitchfork.
- dragon tattoos, or the symbol of the person's year of birth, on the chest.

One subject reported that the darker a tattoo appeared the greater the seniority of the wearer. Only one subject reported other signs of membership, namely a pendant worn around the neck with a Chinese symbol on one side and a dragon on the other.

The most common form of identification was the clothing of a gang member although, for some subjects, these kinds of overt symbols of membership were neither desirable nor beneficial. As one subject pointed out, if a person is serious about what they are doing why would they advertise the fact? He had been told to be always neat, presentable and business-like, and to wear well tailored suits. Nevertheless, the majority of interviewees (15) reported that their gangs wore particular kinds of clothes or "colours". These clothes and colours included the following:

- Bright blue jeans with bandanas.
- Red and black clothes, usually black jeans and a red jacket.
- Black and white bandanas.
- Black and blue clothes of any kind.
- All black clothes.
- All blue clothes.
- All purple clothes.

Interviewees were asked to comment on the kinds of criminal activities their gangs committed. In some cases, there was an understandable reluctance to answer this particular question but the vast majority provided at least an outline of their gangs' activities. The following is a list in rank order of frequency, as reported by subjects (multiple responses were permitted):

- Vehicle theft, 18;
- Drug importation and distribution, 11;
- Break and enter, 8;
- Robbery, 6;
- Extortion, 4;
- Prostitution, 3;
- Weapons acquisition and sale, 1;
- Selling stolen property, 1;

Two subjects reported that their gangs also engaged in fighting with other gangs. Another stated that his gang provided shelter for homeless gang members, a rather interesting twist to the notion of corporate welfarism and to employee benefits packages.

It was reported that gangs did not concentrate on specific activities, targets, or target groups such as the members of particular ethnic communities. In some cases, gangs would work in company with affiliated gangs but the nature and extent of inter-gang relationships appeared to be vague, possibly because of interviewee reluctance to provide sensitive information. Nevertheless, some cooperative relationships were reported. For example, the East Van Saints had worked with the Clark Park Gang, the Patook Boys, and the Red Eagles. Lotus was reported to have (or to have once had) a close relationship with Los Diablos; the former would supply the latter with guns and drugs when needed.

It was evident that gangs are more than just criminally oriented enterprises. They also function as social clubs for many members. When asked if gangs engaged in activities other than crime, the majority of subjects reported a variety of social activities: attending night clubs and dances; sports such as soccer and swimming; watching television and videos; general partying, and even the occasional picnic!

## 6.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

At least three interesting issues emerge from the results of this preliminary study: the problem of distinguishing between the different groups that are lumped together under the heading "gangs"; the confirmation of the multicultural composition of gangs and some clarification of the relationship between gangs and immigration; and, the need for a careful exploration of the reasons why young people become involved with gangs.

### 6.1 Defining Gangs

It is axiomatic that the use of clear, standardized and accepted terms (e.g., definitions and concepts) is crucial to any effective research and, ultimately, to sound policy-making. Unfortunately, gang research and policy-making tends to lack such clarity and standardization and, until this problem is resolved, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners will probably continue to talk either at cross purposes, or past each other.

At the same time, an enormous amount of time and energy can be wasted in endless debates about the meaning of words and the composition of definitions. Often times, a solution can be found by recourse to the realm of the empirical rather than the rhetorical and the following scheme attempts to take the first step in that direction.

On the basis of the preliminary research reported here, and a review of the general literature and research on gangs (see, e.g., Goldstein & Huff, 1993), it is possible to identify and distinguish between five groupings which are frequently lumped together under the label "gang:" youth movements; youth groups; criminal groups; street gangs; and criminal business organizations.

**Youth Movements** are extensive national, and often international social movements, which are characterized by a distinctive mode of dress or other bodily adornments, a leisure time preference, and other distinguishing features. Examples include, the "zoot-suiters" (1940s and 1950s), the "mods and rockers" (1960s), the "skin-heads" (1970s onwards), and "punk rockers" (1980s onwards). The vagaries of adolescent fashion and other larger social and economic developments tend to determine the life spans of these movements. To the extent that birds of a feather flock together, adolescents who subscribe to a movement often accumulate in groups and may be erroneously referred to, usually by the media, as a "gang".

**Youth Groups** are also sometimes referred to as "social gangs" insofar as they are comprised of small clusters of young people who "hang out" together in public places such as Shopping Malls, fast food outlets, and large convenience stores. They are often quite visible and noisy, and can seem intimidating. At one time these groups were referred to as "Mallies" because of their frequent appearance in places such as Metrotown. They may be referred to, by the media, as "gangs of kids" or just "gangs."

**Criminal Groups** are small clusters of friends who band together to commit crimes, usually for financial gain. A good example of a criminal group is the so-

called "626 gang" discussed and described in the body of this report. They can be composed of young people and/or young, and not so young, adults and may, mistakenly or carelessly, be referred to as a gang, again usually by the media.

**Street Gangs** are those groups of young people and young adults who have banded together to form a semi-structured organization the primary purpose of which is to engage in profitable criminal behaviour. Street gangs can be distinguished from other groupings by, (i) a self perception of the group as a gang, (ii) a name that was selected by and is used by gang members, (iii) some kind of distinctive identifying marks such as clothing or colours. There may be other criteria which can be added to the definition.

**Criminal Business Organizations** comprised of individuals - predominantly adults - that are also referred to as criminal gangs. Aspects of the definition of "criminal gangs" currently used by the British Columbia Interministerial Committee on Criminal Gangs captures these entities quite well: "organized (groups) that exhibit a formal structure and a high degree of sophistication. These groups engage in criminal activity primarily for economic reasons." These organizations almost invariably maintain a low profile which is one factor that distinguishes them from street gangs.

There may well be some cross-fertilization between the different categories, particularly in the case of youth movements and youth groups. Young people in youth groups may wear the uniform and copy the behaviour of their chosen youth movement and the two entities can be easily confused. Similarly, youth groups or criminal groups may evolve into street gangs. The categories are not perfectly defined but the scheme may be a helpful first step towards some long overdue clarity and standardization.

## **6.2 Gangs, Multiculturalism, and Immigration**

The ethnocultural composition of youth and young adult gangs in British Columbia tends to reflect the provincial mosaic. The gang members who were interviewed by researchers reported that all the main ethnic groups are represented in gangs - Caucasians, Aboriginals, Asians, Indo-Canadians, Hispanics, and Blacks - and they provided descriptions of the ways in which the different ethnic groups are (or were) combined within different gangs.

The members of visible minorities were over-represented amongst the gang members who were included in this study. Over one half of the subjects were from visible minorities (excluding Aboriginals), and they came primarily from Asian groups.

Unfortunately, the numbers of gang members involved in the study was not large enough to warrant the drawing of definitive conclusions about gangs and ethnicity but it is probably safe to say that gangs are not the hallmark of a particular ethnocultural group or community (e.g., "Asians" or "Vietnamese"), to the exclusion of any other group or community.

Similarly, there is evidence to support the conclusion that gangs are not composed primarily of immigrants, and especially immigrants from Asian countries who have recently arrived in Canada (i.e., who have been in the country for five years or less). Although 32 percent of gang members were not born in Canada - a higher than expected percentage that exceeds the percentage of immigrants in the provincial population (22.3 percent) - the majority (68 percent) were born in Canada. This includes 75 percent of the young people in facilities and 50 percent of the adults in facilities. Of those who were not born in Canada, and for whom the relevant information was available, only two had migrated to Canada in the last five years.

None of this should be taken as a signal to abandon an exploration of ethnocultural and immigration issues in the field of gang research. However, it is clear that these issues must be explored in conjunction with an examination of other variables that may account for gangs and the reasons why young people, regardless of where they are born, become involved with gangs.

### **6.3 Why do Young People Become Involved with Gangs?**

This preliminary study does not pretend to provide a definitive answer to this fascinating and critical question. However, it does provide grounds for a rephrasing of the question. The issue is not "why do young people become involved with gangs?" but "why do young people choose to become involved with illegitimate, rather than legitimate, gangs?" This rephrasing is appropriate because, in most cases, the professed reasons for becoming involved with a street gang are no different from the reasons why young people become involved with other kinds of "gangs" such as the boy scouts, school bands, baseball teams, and hockey teams: friends or relatives encourage them; being with the group is thought to be enjoyable and a lot of fun; for the relief of boredom; because it feels good to be part of a group; and because of the feeling of pride associated with belonging to the group. There is nothing strange or pathological about any of these motives, the problem lies with the choice of gang.

If it is a question of choice, then what is it that determines the choice of gang "A" rather than hockey team "D"? Is it a function of the values of a youth subculture that dictates that a young person will be regarded as "cool" when he is a member of Los Cholos but not when he is the second trombone in the school band? If so, there is no mystery: there are few adolescent males who would willingly embrace the label "band geek."

Clearly, there is more to the process of drifting into gangs than just the pressures of adolescent value systems. The choice of illegitimate, rather than legitimate gang, is likely a function of an individual youth's domestic circumstances, the nature of the opportunities that surround him and to which he is exposed by parents, relatives, and friends, and the extent to which the youth views an illegitimate gang as a more rewarding prospect than a legitimate gang.

This may sound like a partial restatement of Cloward & Ohlin's celebrated theory

of gang delinquency and opportunity (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960): a compelling explanation for the American urban street gangs of the 1950s that resulted in a number of inner city youth projects designed to create a system of attractive legitimate opportunities that would draw young males away from the streets. If Cloward & Ohlin need to be revisited there is no shame in this, and no harm in using aspects of their theory to guide research. The realities of British Columbia in the 1990s will determine whether the theory is to be adjusted and used to guide policy, or rejected and replaced by something else.

It is apparent from this research that young people and young adults who become involved with gangs, and end up in provincial correctional facilities, come from one of three main groups:

**GROUP A:** Those with tragic home circumstances (such as abuse of drugs and alcohol by parents, and physical and sexual abuse resulting in several removals to foster or group homes at an early age and throughout adolescence), coupled with severe problems in school such as truancy and fighting. Young people and young adults in this group comprised about 40 percent of the gang members in the study.

**GROUP B:** Those who have not experienced severe family and school problems, but who have had problems in either their family, or their school, and who have friends or relatives who encouraged them to become involved with gangs. Young people and young adults in this group comprised about 35 percent of the gang members in the study.

**GROUP C:** Those who have experienced neither family nor school problems. Young people and young adults in this group comprised about 25 percent of the gang members in the study. However, the size of this group was swollen by subjects for whom little background information was available. This group may, therefore, be much smaller.

The reasons why the individuals in Group A became involved with gangs are reasonably clear but the same is not true for those in Groups B and C.

The composition of these three groups should be explored further with a view to determining the reasons why young people become involved with gangs. Initially, the research should be guided by two hypotheses:

- 1) Young people in group A become involved with gangs at the encouragement of friends or relatives in order to escape from, and substitute for, (a) abusive and neglectful home circumstances, and (b) serious problems at school which are a product of the family circumstances.
- 2) Young people in group B become involved with gangs to continue associations with friends, to make money, and for the relief of boredom, and because illegitimate gangs are perceived to be more likely to provide these kinds of rewards than legitimate youth groups.



No hypotheses are offered at this stage with respect to the subjects in Group C. Further literature reviews should be undertaken, together with discussions with practitioners involved with these kinds of subjects, following which a testable hypothesis might be developed.

Research should be conducted with incarcerated gang members, gang members under the supervision of probation officers, and, if possible, gang members who are not being dealt with by the criminal justice system. Appropriate control groups should be used (e.g., a matched group of young offenders who are not gang members).

In conclusion, it must be stressed that this report sets out preliminary research results that are intended to be the basis for further work. The sample size was small and the time available to study inmate files in detail and to interview subjects was limited. Many questions should have been asked but weren't because their importance has only been realized as a result of this study. Hindsight is invariably 20/20 and the experience with this pilot study will result in stronger and more comprehensive research during the second phase. Nevertheless, the results of the current study are interesting and hopefully will be of some assistance to those developing policy in the area.

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## **APPENDIX A**

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### **FILE DATA RETRIEVAL INSTRUMENTS AND INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS**

**(This appendix is not presently available)**