

# National Forum on Youth Gangs

*December 9-10, 1999*



Solicitor General Canada  
Solliciteur général Canada



Department of Justice Canada  
Ministère de la Justice Canada



National Crime Prevention Centre  
Centre national de prévention du crime

The National Forum on Youth Gangs was convened December 9-10, 1999 by the Solicitor General of Canada and the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada in response to calls from the police community and others who have expressed the need to network and share information and strategies in dealing effectively with youth gangs.

The Forum brought together more than 120 participants and observers representing police, government, community service agencies and research institutions to share information and strategies in dealing effectively with youth gangs. Young people themselves were key participants at the Forum. Sixteen youth delegates worked together the day before the Forum began to develop a report which they presented to the group. They also shared their views with participants throughout the Forum.

The Forum focused on how the police can work in partnership with community stakeholders to respond to youth involvement in gangs, and emphasized prevention with a social development approach. Sessions included presentations of results of research conducted in Vancouver, Manitoba and Montreal, as well as examples of community and police based prevention, intervention and reintegration programs.

Key discussion themes included:

- ▶ The need for a range of prevention activities, including those aimed at broad social development and those targeted specifically to assisting youth at risk of becoming involved with gangs or returning to gang life.
- ▶ The need for expanded programs which provide marginalized youth with opportunities to engage in prosocial activities.
- ▶ An effective response to youth involvement in gangs includes elements of prevention, suppression and intervention/reintegration. It is essential that a number of sectors within the community, including police, community services, education, cultural communities and youth themselves come together, supported by sound research. Attention must be paid to building trust among these sectors and encouraging coordinated action.
- ▶ Young people must be meaningfully involved in all aspects of policy and program development and implementation related to youth involvement in gangs. Young people have a great deal to contribute to the development and implementation of programs and interventions with their peers.

The Solicitor General Canada and the National Crime Prevention Centre would like to thank the following individuals and organizations for their assistance in the planning and organization of the National Forum on Youth Gangs.

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## INTRODUCTION

The National Forum on Youth Gangs was convened December 9-10, 1999 by the Solicitor General of Canada and the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada in response to calls from the police community and others who have expressed the need to network and share information and strategies in dealing effectively with youth gangs.

Recent media reports have highlighted incidents of youth violence that have been attributed to youth gangs. Currently the level of public perception of the involvement of young people in violent crimes is high. Although a minority of young people is involved in crime, and an even smaller minority is involved with gangs, some Canadian communities are finding the need to respond to this issue. However, this issue is not new. The National Forum on Youth Gangs built upon initiatives previously undertaken and supported by Solicitor General Canada and Justice Canada:

The 1993 User Report *Youth Gangs on Youth Gangs*, produced by Solicitor General Canada, looked at the issue of youth involvement in gangs through the eyes of youth.

In 1994 Solicitor General Canada and Justice Canada sponsored a national conference on youth violence and gangs, hosted by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. Based on discussions at the conference, the manual *Youth Violence and Youth Gangs: Responding to Community Concerns* was developed to assist communities to mobilize around preventing youth crime and violence.

The Solicitor General Canada, along with the Ministry of Health and Social Services of Quebec provided funding (from 1997 to 1999) to the Montréal Urban Community Police Service to undertake Phase II of the *Youth and Street Gangs* project, comprised of research into the situation of youth involvement in gangs in Montreal.

The Forum complemented other federal government initiatives aimed at addressing risk factors among young people for crime and victimization, particularly the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention which emphasizes community partnerships and intervention on root causes of crime. The Strategy, which provides \$32 million in funding per year, identifies children, youth, aboriginal people and women's personal security as priority concerns. In addition, the Youth Justice Renewal Strategy emphasizes crime prevention and measures to strengthen meaningful consequences and rehabilitation.

While the face of youth gangs may be different from one community to another across the country, and while there is not a great deal of Canadian research that has been done on the issue, a number of potential risk factors for youth entering gangs can be identified. These include a broken social network, weak family bonds as a result of numerous crises, a general disinterest in school, low self-esteem and a need for recognition and belonging. As with all risk factors, it is important to recognize that not all youth-at-risk become involved in crime, let alone become gang members. As such, the Forum was intended to further explore this

issue to help identify why some youth enter gang life so that effective prevention activities may be implemented.

It should also be noted that while the Forum focused on “Youth Gangs” there exists no standard definition of a youth gang. Indeed, many of the presenters provided various working definitions which they use. The phenomenon that the Forum intended to explore was that of groups of (primarily) young people, including those in their twenties, who self-identify as a gang and commit criminal and/or violent behaviour.

The Forum brought together more than 120 participants and observers including police, government officials, community practitioners, researchers and youth themselves to discuss how to address youth gangs. Sixteen young people, aged 16-22, representing organizations from British Columbia (841-KOZ), Winnipeg (Teen Talk) and Montreal (Centre des jeunes l’escale 13/17) attended the Forum and worked together the day before the Forum began to develop a report and recommendations which they presented to the group. All the youth participants work actively in their home communities with their peers to address issues including crime, violence and gangs.

The Forum focused on how the police can work in partnership with community stakeholders to respond to youth involvement in gangs, and emphasized prevention with a social development approach. Often the police are called upon first when a community begins to experience the early signs of youth gang problems. However, effectively addressing the root causes of youth involvement in gangs requires a coordinated community response involving a number of partners from different sectors.

The Forum was co-chaired by Ms. Yvette Aloïsi, Director General, Policing and Law Enforcement Directorate, Solicitor General Canada and Ms. Monique Collette, Executive Director, National Crime Prevention Centre. Chief Pierre Sangollo of the Ste-Julie, Quebec Police Service moderated the Forum discussions. Delegates were welcomed to the Montreal Urban Community by Chief Michel Sarrazin of the Montreal Urban Community Police Service, which has identified youth and street gangs as a priority and is developing strategies with prevention as a key element. Mr. Jean T. Fournier, Deputy Solicitor General of Canada brought greetings from the Solicitor General and congratulated participants for recognizing that the problem of youth involvement in gangs is not the responsibility of any one agency or sector alone and for coming to the Forum to discuss how best to form effective partnerships to address the issue.

Over the course of the two-day Forum, representatives from a number of communities made presentations to the group. These presentations outlined the issues that communities are facing with respect to youth involvement in gangs, and some of the responses that have been developed and are being implemented through projects and programs. These presentations focused on three broad themes: community-based prevention/intervention programs; police-based prevention/intervention programs; and community-based reintegration programs. Presentations by researchers from Vancouver, Manitoba and Montreal helped to set the context for roundtable discussions.

In closing the Forum, Mr. Jacques Saada, Parliamentary Secretary to the Solicitor General indicated that the Forum had been an important first step in identifying the issues that communities are facing in developing effective, coordinated responses to youth involvement in gangs. He committed, on behalf of the government, to carefully considering the recommendations put forward by Mr. Sangollo on behalf of the participants.

## SUMMARY OF FORUM SESSIONS

### *Youth Gang Involvement in the Canadian Context - Presentations*

*Robert Gordon, Ph.D.  
Simon Fraser University  
British Columbia*

Dr. Gordon described the gang phenomenon in Vancouver as having occurred, historically, in waves – that is, a pattern of gang involvement and activity expanding then dissipating over a period of time. The last such wave took place in Vancouver from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. His presentation focused on the three phases of a “gang wave”.

Definitions are important when discussing gangs. In the Greater Vancouver Gang Study (Phase I completed in 1997) the following definitions were established: *criminal business organizations* -- organized criminal groups with a formal structure and a high degree of sophistication; *street gangs* -- semi-structured groups of youth and young adults who engage in planned and profitable criminal behaviour or organized violence against rival gangs; and *wannabe groups* – unstructured groups of young people who engage in spontaneous social activity and exciting, impulsive criminal activity, including collective violence against other groups of youth.

While criminal business organizations are usually easily distinguishable from the other groups, often the line between street gangs and wannabe groups is not as clear. While street gangs may have a stronger negative impact on a community, through crime and violence, wannabe groups tend to be very visible. This can result in an inflated perception of a gang problem. In general, members of wannabe groups tend to be younger than those of street gangs (hence the term “youth gangs”) and often claim affiliations with street gangs, which may or may not exist. While wannabes may appear to be more of a nuisance than a serious threat to public safety, Dr. Gordon advised that these groups should be taken seriously but addressed in a strategic manner.

While it is difficult to pinpoint why a wave of gang activity begins, it is much easier to identify the issues which can draw young people into gangs. Dr. Gordon identifies three issues which are common to all adolescents: identity exploration (including deviant identity); peer group acceptance; and need for family/parental attachments. Joining a gang is a normal part of adolescence. For most young people, such a gang takes the form of a sports team, the school band or a group of friends who “hang out” together at the local mall. For some, the choice between affiliating themselves with a “normal” gang such as these or with a street gang may be a function of the cohesiveness of the community and the resources available (e.g., recreation, youth organizations). Fashion may also play a role. At times, “gang member” becomes a highly prized label for adolescents, and one that they actively seek out, as it



provides them with power, status and peer group acceptance. For some, the gang provides a surrogate family where close attachments with parents do not exist.

The expansion of a gang wave can occur as new groups “branch off” from existing street gangs. Also, new gangs may form as a defensive measure (to defend territory or personal safety). In addition, the media can play a role in the expansion of gang activity by bolstering the “cool factor” of gang membership and enhancing the value of the gang member label. Entertainment media can glamourize gang membership and influence copycat behaviour (e.g., almost immediately following the release of the movie *Colors*, which depicts Los Angeles street gangs, behaviour from the movie, including tagging, jargon and wearing “colours” began to be mimicked on Vancouver streets). The news media may also amplify the problem by publicizing gang activity. Former gang members have indicated that they felt validated when their activities appeared on the news. Aggressive reporting of gang activity (including attributing non-gang activity to gangs) can create widespread fear among the public which may lead to political concern and ultimately, to misdirected investment of resources in the problem.

Dr. Gordon identified the following reasons for the dissipation of a gang: individuals may lose interest in maintaining their deviant identity (the gang member label); targeted enforcement which removes (incarcerates) key individuals; incapacitation (via death or drug abuse); and maturation.

***Sandra DeLaronde-Cook***  
***Winnipeg, Manitoba***

*A bear hosted a dinner party in the forest for all of the other animals. When his guests arrived he laid out a grand feast, but the other animals did not eat. When he asked why they were not eating the food one of the animals replied that the food must be covered in grease in order for them to eat it. Upon hearing this the bear began to sing and to dance around the fire. He sang and danced and rubbed his hands together. He rubbed the grease from his hands onto the food and the animals ate.*

*The jay, who had witnessed this scene decided to host a party of his own. He invited the other animals and laid out a grand feast. Then he began to sing and dance in order to cover the food with grease as the bear had done. He started to sing bear’s song and dance around the fire but he fell into the fire. When he hopped out of the fire his feet were charred black and he had to hop from one place to another, as all jays do today.*

The moral of this story is that if you want to do something or to create change, you must sing your own song, not someone else’s. Ms. DeLaronde-Cook argued that the involvement of Aboriginal youth in gangs is based on “someone else’s song”. The behaviour of Aboriginal youth gang members in Manitoba is influenced by popular culture (e.g., wearing “colours”). Aboriginal youth are drawn to the collectivity of gangs and the sense of protection rooted in

traditional warrior societies. However, today's gangs bear little resemblance to traditional warrior societies, and their members may identify with traditional warriors, without assuming the responsibility, commitment and social order which were cornerstones of the traditional societies.

Ms. DeLaronde-Cook conducted many interviews with youth, adults and elders in Aboriginal communities in Manitoba in writing a background paper for this Forum. She found that, for Aboriginal youth, their involvement in gangs (or not) was rooted in their sense of self, of who they are and who their people and communities are. It is here that she recommends intervention. She advises that interventions need to be focused at the individual youth and their family, and that they need to address the roots of problems that exist in Aboriginal communities. It must be recognized that a single solution to the problem of Aboriginal youth involvement in street gangs is not sufficient. Ms. DeLaronde-Cook recommends that we look to Aboriginal communities to provide tools to help their youth.

She concluded by reminding forum participants that much talking has been done about Aboriginal youth crime and gang involvement and that "There are no more days left to talk but only time to work with the youth to create change".

***Sylvie Hamel, Ph.D.***

***Institut de recherche pour le développement social des jeunes***

***Marie-Marthe Cousineau***

***University of Montreal***

***Montreal, Quebec***

Beginning in 1996 the Institut de recherche pour le développement social des jeunes (IRDS) and les Centres jeunesse de Montréal undertook the research project *Youth and Street Gangs* for the Montreal Urban Community Police Service. Phase I of the project was a review of the literature to obtain a general picture of street gangs in the United States and Canada and to develop a list of known solutions and their effectiveness. Phase II, which was funded by the Solicitor General Canada and the Ministry of Health and Social Services of Quebec involved field research to determine whether the findings of the literature review reflected the experience of young Montrealers who had gang involvement.

The Phase II research involved 31 young people from the Montreal region with gang experience and 15 expert professionals. It addressed the following issues: the processes of joining and leaving the gang, experiences of gang members and means to be adopted to address the problem of youth involvement in gangs.

According to this research, the process of becoming affiliated with a gang is often gradual. Young people are drawn into gang life through a network of acquaintances with gang ties. A number of reasons for joining a gang were identified, including a sense of belonging, recognition, appreciation, protection, fun and financial gain. A number of common characteristics were found among the study participants, including lack of close family ties, difficulty in school and a social network that included gang members. Gang affiliated youth

identified a number of factors which prompted them to leave gang life, including fear for their safety and a desire for a new life. The youth found that the most difficult part of leaving the gang life is not so much leaving the gang itself as rebuilding one's self identity afterwards.

Dr. Hamel and Dr. Cousineau outlined the strategic plan they developed as a result of the research. The primary objective of this plan is to create the conditions necessary for young people to become as attached to and integrated into the community as they are with gangs. They have developed a pilot project which aims to involve various players, including schools, the community, families and youth themselves in developing partnerships to facilitate the development of meaningful ties between young people and the community in an effort to prevent young people from joining gangs and to assist those who have left gangs to reintegrate into the community. They plan to test the pilot project, which includes a strong evaluation component, in three Montreal communities, Villaray/La Petite Patrie, Montreal-North and Verdun/Côte-St-Paul.

## ***Presentation by Youth Delegates***

Sixteen young people, aged 16-22, representing organizations from British Columbia (841-KOZ), Winnipeg (Teen Talk) and Montreal (Centre des jeunes l'escale 13/17) came together the day before the Forum to discuss the issue of youth involvement in gangs. The results of their discussions are detailed in the report *Gangs and Drug Dealers Know How to Reach Our Youth, Why Don't We? A Canadian Youth Perspective on Youth Gangs* (attached). The young people also presented the key themes of this report and their recommendations to the Forum participants.

The group began by presenting their definition of a gang: "A group of people drawn together by interests and experiences, working towards a common goal." It is important to note that this definition is not limited to groups with criminal or violent intent. This was done intentionally, as the young people felt that it was important that the definition be broad enough to include gangs or groups with both "positive" and "negative" intent. Many of the youth participants had experienced harassment and discrimination (from adults) while out with a group of friends. They felt that it was crucial to reinforce for professionals that not all groups of youth should be looked upon as street gangs.

In their report and presentation the youth delegates made specific recommendations aimed at addressing the needs of youth at various stages of gang involvement:

- ▶ Mainstream youth are not immune from gang life. They require supportive families, communities and schools, as well as preventative awareness training on issues like gangs and violence.
- ▶ Youth at risk of gang involvement should be targeted for initiatives which are meaningful to THEM. These may include mentoring or skills training. Most importantly, professionals need to reach out to these young people rather than expecting that they will seek out services.

- Youth who are currently in gangs also require assistance from professionals to limit the harm caused by their lifestyle, such as safe houses and anonymous health care. It is also important that these young people have information about how to exit gang culture so that they may access services when they choose to do so.
- Risk for gang involvement does not end when a young person leaves a gang. These youth require a strong support network and skills to help them build a mainstream life.

The youth delegates also brought some key messages:

Young people, particularly those to whom initiatives may be targeted, must be involved in the development of policies, programs and services for them.

Programs based on a youth-helping-youth model – peer support, peer counseling, peer education – should be strongly supported. Youth know how to talk to one another and convey key messages.

Young people must be actively recruited into programs. Professionals should not assume that youth will access programs simply because they are offered.

Following the presentation of the report, each of the three groups of youth conveyed messages to participants through powerful dramatic and musical presentations.

## ***Community-Based Prevention/Intervention Programs - Presentations***

***Lan Chan-Marples  
Edmonton Chinese Cultural Centre/  
Edmonton Safer Cities Committee  
Edmonton, Alberta***

Ms. Chan-Marples spoke of the work of both the Edmonton Safer Cities Committee and the Edmonton Chinese Community Services Centre. The Edmonton Safer Cities Committee is active within the city of Edmonton on a number of crime prevention and community safety issues, including prostitution, personal safety and Youth Justice Committees. The Committee has a number of sub-committees which look at specific issues, including race relations.

The Edmonton Chinese Community Services Centre (ECCSC) is a non-profit organization which provides programming to address the needs of Edmonton's Chinese-speaking community. Programs and services address a variety of issues including language training, immigration, family support and youth leadership. Recently the ECCSC launched a program called "A Safe Healthy Community for Us: An Asian Canadian Youth Team Project" with funding under the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention. A team of Chinese youth aged 12 to 16 work with others to plan and participate in community education

and other activities aimed at preventing crime and victimization, including gang recruitment and activity, among Chinese youth.

***Pamela Zorn***  
***Winnipeg Street Gang Prevention Program***  
***Winnipeg, Manitoba***

The Winnipeg Street Gang Prevention Program was introduced in 1997 with the mandate to reduce gang recruitment by 25%. The program is an initiative of the Winnipeg Police Service and works in collaboration with the Service's Street Gang Unit.

As a representative of the Winnipeg Police Service's Street Gang Unit had been invited to the Forum but was unable to attend, Ms. Zorn began her presentation by speaking of the work of the Unit. The Street Gang Unit had its beginnings in 1993 when a Sergeant in the Youth Division was assigned to gang-related intelligence gathering. The Street Gang Unit was formally established in 1995, and operates under the Crime Division to reflect the fact that the gang problem in Winnipeg is not solely a youth issue. Suppression is a primary role of the Unit but they recognize that effectively tackling the problem of street gangs requires an approach that also includes prevention measures. To that end, the Unit works closely with community groups, social workers and schools to protect young people from victimization by gangs and to prevent youth from becoming involved in the gang lifestyle.

The work of the Street Gang Prevention Program complements that of the Street Gang Unit. Since studies show that children generally make their gang connections by the time they are in grade 4, many prevention activities are directed at youth for maximum effect. The Program seeks to establish networks for sharing information with other community groups that work in prevention and intervention with youth and gangs, particularly those with a social development approach.

An example of the product of such networking is the Winnipeg Gang Coalition for Healthy Communities, a group of approximately 55 agencies who work in different communities with gang members and those deemed at risk. These organizations address the problem using a variety of approaches, including an anti-graffiti program, alternative dispute resolution between and among gangs, assisting at-risk youth to develop skills and find employment and the multi-systems training approach discussed by Eric Edmonds<sup>1</sup>.

One of the Street Gang Prevention Program's projects highlighted by Ms. Zorn is the Decision Point project. Decision Point is an internet-based project being undertaken in partnership with a number of organizations. It is an interactive tool aimed at young people. It presents a series of case studies in a mixture of text, live video, illustration, animation and sound, and prompts the individual to make a variety of decisions.

In closing, Ms. Zorn reinforced the link between street gangs and broader social problems by pointing out that a number of programs exist in Winnipeg which provide recreation and skill

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<sup>1</sup> See page 12

development opportunities to youth and young adults. While these social development programs may not identify themselves as street gang prevention programs, they can go a long way to addressing the problem of youth involvement in gangs.

***Constable Kim Hall***

***B.C. Youth Police Network***

***841 KOZ***

***Ministry of the Attorney General of British Columbia***

In the mid-1990s, faced with sensationalized news reports of gang violence and increased fear in the community, the government of British Columbia (Ministry of the Attorney General) took action. To try to minimize the potential amplification of the problem by the media, officials worked with local media to inform them of the impact that sensationalized reporting can have and to develop strategies. They also developed a number of initiatives which take a “by youth, for youth” approach to violence prevention.

It was recognized that youth in many communities did not have access to positive social and recreation activities in the evenings. The Nights Alive program, which operates in communities across the province, with the assistance of the B.C. Youth Police Network (BCYPN), provides nighttime activities organized by local youth. Youth Action Teams are groups of young people who develop and implement community and youth safety projects which foster peer mentorship, conflict resolution and community leadership among youth.

The Youth Against Violence Line is a toll free, province-wide youth violence prevention line. Young people are encouraged to call to “take a stand against youth violence” by providing information about incidents that have happened or are about to happen. The Line provides an opportunity to give information anonymously. If callers wish to speak to someone they may leave their name and number and their call will be returned by trained members of the BCYPN.

841-KOZ (Eight for One Cause) is a group of young people who undertake interactive workshops in schools across the province, using skits, role plays and facilitated discussions to explore issues and options for youth in dealing with youth violence and gangs. Participants and observers at the National Forum had the opportunity to interact in a lively 841-KOZ demonstration workshop dealing with public perceptions of youth and violence.

At the heart of the Ministry’s anti-violence youth programming is the message that it is everyone’s responsibility, including and especially youth, to fight against youth violence, crime and gangs.

## ***Police-Based Prevention/Intervention Programs - Presentations***

***Brad Parker***

***Organized Crime Agency of British Columbia  
(formerly Sergeant with Vancouver Police Gang Crime Unit)  
Vancouver, British Columbia***

Mr. Parker identified a number of issues of concern within Vancouver related to youth involvement in gangs, including violence in schools, extortion and threatening by youth, young people forming groups as a defense against bullying and extortion, and the proliferation of designer drugs. Three units within the Vancouver Police Department work together to deal with these issues. These are School Liaison, Youth Services and Gang Crime.

Each of these units has a specific mandate: School Liaison officers work in schools across the city and carry out a range of duties, related to both enforcement and prevention; Youth Services officers deal with all enforcement issues relating to youth violence and youth crime and engage in a number of preventive and community awareness initiatives; and Gang Crime officers are focused on targeted enforcement of known gang leaders and associates. With respect to youth gangs, these three units work collaboratively in a manner that addresses prevention, suppression and intervention.

Schools can be common settings for youth crime and gang activity and recruitment. School Liaison officers have strong relationships with students, teachers and administrators and, as such, are well placed to promote prevention activities such as peer mentoring and to provide intelligence to Youth Services and Gang Crime Unit officers. The Youth Services Unit, with its presence in and around schools, helps to enhance the intervention and enforcement efforts of the Gang Crime Unit with youth gang members.

Mr. Parker indicated that while specialized units such as these deal with youth issues and youth crime exclusively, it is vital that all police officers be knowledgeable about youth issues and take youth crime and violence seriously.

***Detective Constable Joey Matthews***

***Detective Constable Dan Robinson  
Toronto Police Service  
Toronto, Ontario***

Detective Constables Matthews and Robinson indicated that youth gangs in Toronto generally fall into one of two categories: “Inter-community gangs” are generally comprised of a diverse group of youths who engage in violent or criminal activity within or to defend a specific territory, while “Sporadic gangs” are groups of youth involved in crime and/or violence (often motivated by thrill-seeking or influenced by popular media) but do not have true gang affiliations. Youth may become involved in gangs for a variety of reasons, including peer

pressure from friends/schoolmates, influence by media, a means of seeking attention, excitement, financial benefits, and exposure to gang activity through family members. The different types of gangs may attract young people for different reasons.

The Toronto Police Service sees its core responsibility as law enforcement and accountability to the community (victims). With respect to youth gangs, they have implemented an approach that combines elements of prevention, suppression and intervention within both proactive and reactive policing models. Proactive initiatives include presentations in schools and communities to raise awareness among youth, parents, teachers and community members, as well as programs that involve youth in positive activities, assist youth to leave the gang lifestyle and encourage mentoring. Reactive initiatives include intelligence gathering, targeted enforcement, ‘zero-tolerance’ of gang-related incidents and enforcing specific conditions on recognizance and probation orders.

While Detective Constables Matthews and Robinson work in a dedicated Street Crime Unit, they indicated that in cities facing emerging youth gang problems it is important that all police members be knowledgeable about gangs, including indicators of gang involvement and activity (e.g., graffiti) so that they may more accurately identify gang-related incidents and situations and respond appropriately.

***Constable Eric Edmonds***  
***RCMP, “D” Division***  
***Winnipeg, Manitoba***

Constable Edmonds indicated that street gangs in Manitoba continue to be seen by many as an inner city problem but that gangs are no longer confined to urban areas and have spread to suburbs and rural communities. Along with this increased gang presence across the province has come an increase in violent incidents.

A number of social and economic influences, including demographic shifts and the lure of seemingly easy profit, contribute to young people becoming involved in street gangs in Manitoba. As a result, Manitoba recognizes the need for communities to develop collaborative, effective, comprehensive programs for gang prevention, intervention, and suppression. Manitoba Family Services, in partnership with the RCMP and others, has implemented *It takes a whole Community: A Multi-System Approach to Street Gangs*. The program includes a 21-hour curriculum based on a “train the trainers” approach and is designed to assist social workers, justice personnel, community members and other service providers who work with gang members and those at risk and their families and communities.

Multi-system, multi-sector approaches are at the core of this curriculum, which seeks to build awareness among service providers about street gangs, including trends and factors which draw individuals into gang life. Other sections of the curriculum are designed to reinforce the need for multi-system partnerships in assessing and responding to the needs of young people involved with gangs and their families and in building strategies to mobilize community resources to develop healthful alternatives to street gang lifestyles.



*Commandant Michel Doucet*

*Commandant André Lapointe*

*Maurice Chalom*

*Montreal Urban Community Police Service*

*Montreal, Quebec*

The Montréal Urban Community Police Service (MUCPS) first recognized local street gangs in 1985. In 1989, the Service formed an anti-gang section staffed with police officers familiar with youth issues, devoted to intelligence gathering and gang investigation. Currently, there are street gang units within each of the MUCPS's policing districts.

The MUCPS sees gang members today as being younger and more violent. Conflicts and confrontations between ethnic groups and also between and within schools are becoming more frequent. The "gang member" label holds appeal for many youth who want to be recruited into gangs. More established street gangs with more formal, organized structures benefit from recruiting youth to sell drugs because these youth know the environment or area better and provide better access to more customers. The MUCPS recognizes that youth gang members have the potential to engage in serious criminal careers and have developed internal responses to prevent youth gang members from making the transition to hard core, adult, organized gangs.

To address prevention in a community focussed way, the MUCPS recognized the need for some changes in the way they police their communities. Issues such as lingering community perceptions and mistrust of police, as well as police perceptions of their own role in the community must be addressed. Attitudinal barriers may prohibit the effective communication needed to resolve problems. While the public is dependent on police to enforce the law and maintain order, the police are equally dependent on communities for information. In this respect, community safety depends on the existence of mutual trust between the police and community members.

Maurice Chalom of the MUCPS stated that police need to develop mechanisms for action through effective partnerships. Partnerships should be forged around three actors – local communities, schools and the business community. Communities need to cooperate with police in reporting all criminal activity of street gangs. The more informed the police are, the better the opportunity for police officers to retain the trust and confidence of the community and the greater the potential to have that relationship reciprocated from the police. Schools need to collaborate with police to develop academic programs, anti-drug, and anti-violence activities that will reach youth, and to provide information to parents about the stake involved in the phenomenon of street gangs. The business community needs to give priority to youth employment opportunities and can, with help from the police, organize meetings to discuss common problems related to security and identify their potential contribution to community wellness.

## ***Community-Based Reintegration Programs – Presentations***

***Troy Rupert  
Winnipeg Native Alliance  
Winnipeg, Manitoba***

The Winnipeg Native Alliance is a community-based organization that serves youth in Winnipeg. One of the Alliance's goals is to reduce the involvement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth in street gangs by helping those involved with gangs to leave the life and by preventing other youth from becoming involved.

The Alliance offers a variety of programs out of three Winnipeg community centres, including recreational drop-in programs, outreach in schools and on reserves featuring speakers who speak about Aboriginal traditions and their life experiences, and an Institutional Outreach program that provides support to young people in institutions like the Manitoba Youth Centre and who, upon their release, have decided not to return to their gang lifestyle. All of the Alliance's programs are based in traditional Aboriginal culture. The Alliance involves former offenders and gang members in its programs to help to dispel myths about gang and criminal lifestyles.

The goal of the Institutional Outreach program is to work with young people in institutions to assist them to break ties with their gang. Once they leave the institution, the program offers assistance to prevent them from returning to the gang life and re-offending. The program offers intensive, one-on-one counseling focused on building self esteem and life skills and completing high school. The program has had some demonstrated successes and has helped to change the lives of young people for the better. The Alliance plans to expand the program to take referrals from the community so that it can offer its services to young people involved in gangs. The objective of these referrals would be to intervene to prevent these young people from entering the criminal justice system.

***Pierre Poupart  
Guylaine Boudreault  
les Centres jeunesse de Montréal  
Montréal, Quebec***

Mr. Poupart and Ms. Boudreault spoke of three programs offered for youth by les Centres jeunesse de Montréal, in partnership with other organizations: *R.A.P. V.I.H.*; *Connais-tu ma gang?* (Do you know my gang?); and a public awareness campaign using various media.

The *R.A.P V.I.H.* program is a prevention project by and for young people. Ten youth, ages 17 to 24 were recruited to work in prevention programming with other young people. The objective of the project was twofold: first, to provide assistance in building self esteem and work-readiness to the young project workers, all of whom had had some problems, including

gang involvement, drug abuse and relationship violence; and second, to provide assistance to other youth in the community through prevention programming related to issues of violence, prostitution, sexuality and gangs.

*Connais-tu ma gang?* (Do you know my gang?) is a program designed to assist parents of youth at risk or already involved with gangs. Part of the program is aimed at raising the awareness of parents with respect to indicators of gang involvement. A questionnaire was developed and distributed through newspapers to assist parents in recognizing signs that their children may be involved in a gang. The other component of the program provides support to parents whose children have been arrested for gang-related crimes. This support aims to increase the parents' awareness of gangs, provide them with information about organizations that may be of assistance, assist them in exercising their parental role and authority and guide them in communicating more effectively with their child.

Young people also participated in developing a public awareness campaign aimed at youth and those who work with young people. The campaign focused on a variety of issues including relationship violence and the realities of life on the streets. Various media were utilized including television, drama, animation and fact sheets.

## **SUMMARY OF ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS – KEY THEMES**

The issue of youth involvement in gangs is a complex one, and one that is related to a range of social factors. It is understood that many youth join gangs because their needs, such as belonging, security, and attachment, are not being met within the family or the community. Gang involvement is seen as a symptom of broader social problems including poverty and dysfunctional families and communities. While initiatives aimed at broad social and economic development are necessary, it is equally important to target activities at the “symptom” and address youth gang involvement in proactive ways. There was consensus among Forum participants and observers that the key to addressing youth involvement in gangs lies in prevention.

There is a strong sense that existing programming is not sufficient to reach youth at risk, particularly those outside urban centres. Young people do not have enough opportunities to engage in prosocial activities. Many activities are not easily accessible or simply not interesting to youth, particularly those who are most marginalized. Often recreation programs are offered seasonally or are funded on a limited or pilot basis. Those which are ongoing are often over-subscribed. Participants and observers raised the issue of the lack of consistent, ongoing funding for programs that target youth at risk of gang involvement.

There was consensus among the group that the whole community must work together to respond to youth involvement in gangs. An effective response is one that includes elements of prevention, suppression and intervention/reintegration. Such a response will require that a number of sectors within the community, including police, community services, education, cultural communities and youth themselves come together, supported by sound research. While such a coordinated, comprehensive response is required, this is difficult to put into practice. Trust needs to be built among the sectors. Each sector must understand its role and recognize the value in the role of each other partner. Each sector brings specific, necessary expertise to certain aspects of the overall response. By working together and sharing tools and expertise, a more holistic approach can be achieved.

The meaningful involvement of youth in all aspects of policy and program development related to youth involvement in gangs was a recurring theme in the discussions. The Forum benefited greatly from having youth participate as presenters and roundtable participants. It is clear that young people have a great deal to contribute to the development and implementation of programs and interventions with their peers. It is important to recognize the diversity among youth across Canada and within communities and to reach out to a variety of youth with different backgrounds and experiences, particularly those youth who have been marginalized from mainstream society. It is also important for adult community partners to recognize that involving youth in meaningful ways may mean adapting the standard ways of doing business (for example, scheduling meetings outside of school hours).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

At the close of the Forum, a number of recommendations were made by the Forum Moderator, on behalf of the participants. They recommended that:

1. Forums similar to this one, which bring representatives of different sectors together, be held at the regional level across the country;
2. Another National Forum with this group be convened in one year so that participants may update one another and share information on local initiatives;
3. Models of multi-sectoral partnerships to address youth involvement in gangs be tested and the results of those initiatives be shared;
4. The Solicitor General and Minister of Justice write to their federal colleagues (especially the Ministers of Health and Human Resources Development) and their provincial counterparts about the Forum and these recommendations, and encourage them to support multi-sectoral partnerships at the community level.