



NATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION CENTRE

Building the Evidence – **YOUTH GANGS**

2007-YG-2

YOUTH GANG INVOLVEMENT: WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS?

The National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) of Public Safety Canada is committed to developing and disseminating practical knowledge to address the problem of youth gangs. This information sheet is one of a series providing information related to youth gang involvement. It is designed to assist those who are concerned about youth gangs and who are working to help prevent youth from becoming involved in gangs or to help them leave gangs.

The vast majority of young people never get involved in crime or join gangs. Those who do join gangs tend to have specific risk factors that influence their involvement and membership in gangs.

To effectively prevent youth from joining gangs it is essential to understand these risk factors.

What is a risk factor?

Risk factors can be defined as life events or experiences that are associated with an increase in problem behaviours, such as drug use or gang activities¹.

For example, being the child of a single-parent who is often absent from the home and lacks adequate support, can be considered a risk factor. The negative influence of a friend² or sibling can be another.

Risk factors can be divided into five categories:

- Individual characteristics
- Peer group
- School
- Family
- Community

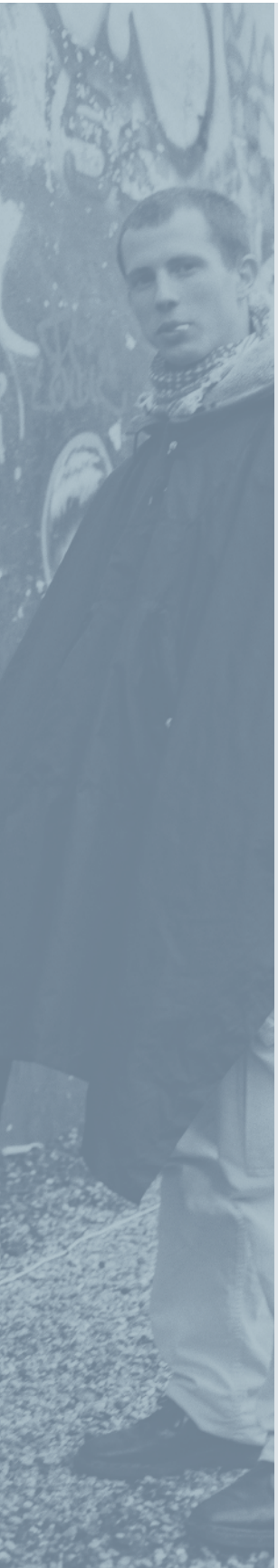
Major risk factors

Long-term studies of adolescents in Canadian and American cities (Montréal, Seattle, Washington and Rochester) suggest that the most important risk factors for gang involvement include:

- negative influences in the youth's life
- limited attachment to the community
- over-reliance on anti-social peers
- poor parental supervision
- alcohol and drug abuse
- poor educational or employment potential
- a need for recognition and belonging

The Seattle study found that children and youth are two to four times more likely to join gangs if they are affected by these factors³.

Youth at risk or already involved in gangs tend to be from groups that suffer from the greatest levels of inequality and social disadvantage⁴.



Major risk factors associated with youth gang involvement

INDIVIDUAL

- Prior delinquency
- Illegal gun ownership
- Drug trafficking
- Desire for group rewards such as status, identity, self-esteem, companionship and protection
- Anti-social attitudes
- Aggression
- Alcohol and drug use
- Early or precocious sexual activity
- Violent victimization

PEER GROUP

- High commitment to delinquent peers
- Street socialization
- Gang members in class
- Friends who use drugs or who are gang members
- Interaction with delinquent peers
- Pre-teen exposure to stress

SCHOOL

- Poor school performance
- Low educational aspirations, especially among young females
- Negative labelling by teachers
- High levels of anti-social behaviour
- Few teacher role models
- Educational frustration
- Low attachment to school
- Learning difficulties

FAMILY

- Family disorganization, including broken homes and parental drug and/or alcohol abuse
- Family violence, neglect and drug addiction
- Family members in a gang
- Lack of adult and parental role models, parental criminality, parents with violent attitudes, siblings with anti-social behaviours
- Extreme economic deprivation

COMMUNITY

- Social disorganization, including high poverty and residential mobility
- High crime neighbourhood; neighbourhood youth in trouble
- Presence of gangs in the neighbourhood
- Availability or perceived access to drugs in the neighbourhood
- Availability of firearms
- Cultural norms supporting gang behaviour
- Feeling unsafe in neighbourhood

Source: Adapted from Howell (1998, 2005).



Evolving risk factors

Gang involvement is a process that happens over time. This process is influenced by the life trajectory and individual, familial and social experiences of a young person.

Several studies indicate that risk factors associated with gang involvement are present long before a youth joins a gang⁵. For example, youths who were the most behaviourally and socially maladjusted in childhood were found to be the most likely to join and stay in gangs for several years⁶.

Unless appropriate actions are taken to address the factors that result in more serious crime or gang involvement, early negative life experiences and subsequent involvement in crime will only reinforce the path towards continued delinquency.

Additionally, it appears that not only entry into gangs, but also prolonged membership is associated with a greater risk of delinquency⁷.

Risk factors and prevention

The identification of the specific risk factors associated with youth gang involvement helps us determine where and how to focus prevention efforts.

Briefly, we know that:

- The more risk factors that a youth experiences, the more likely he or she is to join a gang. Research also suggests that the presence of risk factors in *multiple categories* increases the probability of gang involvement⁸.
- The increase in gang violence and crime in some Aboriginal communities has been attributed in part to an increasing youth population, inadequate housing, drug and alcohol abuse, a high unemployment rate, lack of education, poverty, poor parenting skills, the loss of culture, language and identity and a sense of exclusion⁹.
- Gang cohesion, culture and lifestyle are also important considerations. A Montréal study of 756 boys showed that gang members display higher rates of delinquent behaviours and drug use than non-gang members¹⁰.

The above-mentioned Montréal study also provides evidence for a significant “*gang effect*” among youth gang members linked to the experience of the gang itself. This gang effect adds to the social and family risk factors that may be present prior to joining a gang.

Protective factors and prevention

In addition to preventing youth from joining gangs, it is important to reduce membership duration for youth who belong to a gang and to provide appropriate services (drug treatment, employment and educational opportunities) once they leave the gang.

Strengthening protective factors plays an important role in reducing youth gang involvement. Protective factors are positive influences that mitigate the impact of risk factors and decrease the likelihood of problem behaviour.

Drawing on evidence regarding gang prevention, the *Community Solutions to Gang Violence* project in Edmonton helps increase protective factors among youth by:

- building positive relationships and patterns of interaction with mentors and pro-social peers
- creating positive social environments through community, family and service organizations
- promoting social and economic policies that support positive youth development.

Community Solutions to Gang Violence (CSGV)

This initiative is most concerned with young people who come together to engage in profit-driven criminal activity and violence.

With a large number of partners in the fields of law enforcement, health, and child and social services, this project put together a community-wide action plan and network of support to find solutions to the gang violence problems in the Greater Edmonton Area. This involved developing a comprehensive listing of risk and protective factors related to gang involvement.

In addition, CSGV has launched a website (www.cs gv.ca) that keeps people informed of ongoing activities and provides resources, tools and information that can be used to prevent young people from being drawn into gangs.

Conclusion

Understanding why some young people join gangs while others do not is key to effective prevention efforts.

Current research suggests the need to address specific risk factors that lead youth to violence and gangs. It is also important to enhance protective factors that can play a role in keeping youth out of gangs.

More information on prevention strategies to address the risk and protective factors associated with youth gang involvement is available at: www.publicsafety.gc.ca/ncpc and www.safecanada.ca.

Notes

- 1 Howell, James C. "Moving Risk Factors into Developmental Theories of Gang Membership," *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 3, 4 (2005): 334-354.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Hawkins, J. David and John A. Pollard, (1999). "Risk and protective factors: Are both necessary to understand diverse behavioral outcomes in adolescence?," *Social Work Research* 23, 3: 145-158.
- 4 Wortley, Scot and Julian Tanner. "Social Groups or Criminal Organizations? The Extent and Nature of Youth Gang Activity in Toronto" in *From enforcement and prevention to civic engagement: research on community safety* / edited by Bruce Kidd and Jim Phillips. Toronto: Centre of Criminology, University of Toronto, 2004: 59-80; Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN), 2003.
- 5 Howell, James C. (2005).
- 6 Gatti, Uberto, Tremblay, Richard E., Vitaro, Frank and McDuff, Pierre. "Youth gangs, delinquency and drug use: a test of the selection, facilitation, and enhancement hypotheses," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 46, 11 (2005): 1178-1190; Hill, 2001.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Wyrick, Phelan and James C. Howell. "Strategic Risk-Based Response to Youth Gangs." *Juvenile Justice Journal* 9, 1 (2004).
- 9 Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN). *Alter-Natives to Non-Violence Report: Aboriginal Youth Gangs Exploration: A community development process*. Saskatchewan, FSIN, 2003; Lafontaine et al., 2005; Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2006.
- 10 Gatti et al., 2005.

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