

Chapter 1

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF GANGS/GROUPS & YOUTH VIOLENCE

"(We're) not a gang. We're friends with a name." (Barry, 17)

- Perspectives on Youth Violence

The young people in the study were asked to provide their views on youth violence in Canadian society. Their responses reflect a range of opinion, though all see youth violence as a problem. Some see conflict and disagreement among youth as "natural", though not when it turns into a group assault on one victim. Others see it as an escalating problem likely to end in serious injury or even death for some young persons. Violent clashes can result from the most minor incident between youth. A look, perceived slight, name-calling, or accidentally bumping into someone in a school hallway can lead to serious conflict and injury. Fear and acceptance characterize most of the responses along with a sense that youth are being left to deal with the problem of violence themselves.

If they don't fight for themselves nobody will. They can't rely on many people. (Mary, 17)

They just think it to be cool. It's just the "in" thing. Everybody wants to get into a fight because it boosts their reputation, and if you get into a gang then that will make your reputation even higher. It depends. Youth violence is natural. You're going to have some disagreements, some fights. But, when it turns into a group sort of thing, when they start beating up on one person, that's when it starts getting dangerous.

(Joe, 14)

I know people that are like just waiting to shoot somebody, like dead. Like if you go out and do some guy in then it's like you're badder than he is because he's all punched out and whatever.

(Tim, 16)

- Is the problem of youth gangs/groups serious?

Young peoples' comments concerning youth gangs/groups also reflect a range of opinion, though there is strong consensus that it is a serious problem. They express concern about the physical harm involvement can bring gang/group members. There is concern about the casual attitude some young people have towards gangs/groups and that it is an avenue to popularity. Some youth worry that gang/group membership or using violence has become status enhancing. Perhaps most significant is the expressed fear that youth gang/group violence is out of control and adults cannot control or limit it.

Oh yeah (it's serious) 'cause if another group threatens us or whatever and they threaten to get more buddies down and, oh yeah, they'll bring knives and guns sure. It's all about intimidation. You know, if the other group is tougher and ... kind of like stronger. It's kind of like a macho thing too. If anybody does try to touch us we'll beat the shit out of them. If they try to use weapons or whatever we'll get bigger and stronger ones.

(Gary, 16)

It's easier to get involved with the gangs than probably it used to be. In Ontario, in Toronto ... it's becoming a larger

problem than it used to be. It's starting to get almost as bad as L.A. It's getting really scary that way.

(David, 19)

- Youth Gangs/Groups In Schools

Much concern was expressed over the impact of youth gangs/groups and youth violence on schools. The presence of youth gangs/groups makes young people feel unsafe and seriously affects the learning environment. According to the young people schools fail to acknowledge or understand the emotional impact on students of observing or being aware of other youths' victimization.

Conflicts arising between youth gang/group members and originating outside the school or after school hours can continue into the classroom and hallways. Involvement in gangs/groups often starts with peer associations at school and can begin as early as grade one. Drug dealing, extortion, and intimidation of teachers and other students were all identified as gang/group activities that occur regularly in schools.

Violence is not limited to senior level high schools. Young people report that acts of violence perpetrated by older students can also be observed in the behaviours of children as young as six or seven years of age.

Yeah, they're becoming more of a problem. Nowadays, you're getting more and more cases of somebody walking up behind you and stabbing you in the back or shooting you just for whatever reason because Johnny walked down the wrong side of the street last night, "Oh, we've got to stab him." Like, it's definitely, definitely becoming more of a problem in high schools and in elementary schools.

(David, 19)

(They're a problem in) some schools. They can stop, literally stop, kids from learning, even make them miss time from school. Some of the gang members that were in schools, they can even discourage teachers (and prevent them from) teaching to their ability. (Teachers) don't take it to the Board but they should. If (gangs) know people are afraid of them they'll keep going and doing the same thing. If people don't stand up (to them) they'll just keep going on and on.

(foe, 14)

It's actually bad now that I think about it, but it would depend on the school. Extortion is the biggest (problem). I know myself personally more than once I walked up to someone and punched them in the nose and took something of theirs. That's just how it is I guess. Why not just go and take whatever you want to take. That seems to be the attitude. If you want it just go out and take it. It's that simple. There's always drawbacks but if you want it there doesn't seem to be too much stopping you.

(Brad, 19)

Like if you've got a gang, a couple of kids that are involved in a gang in a school, it's very bad for the school, very detrimental for the school because they could definitely bring down the school in not just violent ways or in drug ways but also bringing down ... the kids. A lot of the kids will backtalk to the teachers because they think they've got more authority over the teachers, just because they either have a knife in their pocket or that they're involved in the gang.

(David, 19)

That's where it mostly starts is in schools. A lot of the problems start in schools like right now six, seven, eight, the grade six, seven, and eight kids.

(Wayne, 18)

- What is a gang?

The youth identified a continuum of gangs/groups ranging from the loosely associated "group of friends" to the more

hard core crime-focused "gang". One youth saw himself as being in a group of friends who, despite having a name and involvement in conflicts with other groups, and the law, did not see themselves as being in a "gang". Another saw herself in a "family" that took care of

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her. Some used the descriptor "group of friends" despite the fact that they committed crimes and carried weapons and used them in conflicts. Two youth felt that others outside the group of friends would use the label "gang" to describe them when they themselves did not.

The youth identified a single criteria for distinguishing a "group of friends" hanging out from a youth "gang", namely, involvement in illegal behaviour. The illegal activity could be planned or spontaneous. The minimum number of members required to constitute a gang or group appears to be three.

I think a gang is more or less a group of people that does crimes together, causes trouble together, and more or less goes out to look for trouble, to do wrong by other people. A group is a group of friends. A gang is a group of trouble.

(Steve, 17)

A group, I think, of the same race or a few races together that hang around together all the time, do things with each other, and if anybody has trouble we're all there. That's it.

(Gary, 16)

Like for myself, when I was in a gang, there was a lot of us. I really didn't see it as a gang. I saw it as a bunch of friends. In the eyes of society I guess people see it as a gang because whenever there is a whole bunch of young people hanging together and doing crime or beating up on people and taking over territories and stuff like that the society calls that a gang. But most young people don't see it as a gang. They see it as friends.

(Wayne, 18)

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Chapter 2

GETTING INVOLVED

IN YOUTH GANGS/GROUPS

"Gangs cannot exist without the fear of others. " aoe, 14)

- Unintentional Gang/Group Formation - "Drift"

The formation of some gangs/groups can be quite unintentional resembling more a kind of "drift" than a planned development. It can be a reaction to challenges from other groups of youth who perceive the group as being a gang, a consciousness that evolves from a neighbourhood "gang culture" or other peoples' labelling, or a "club" of friends that turns serious when group members get into interpersonal difficulties with others.

We were just a couple of friends who all like to play basketball and football on occasion. We've been the best of friends for three years. We all just started wearing stuff (clothing items with an American university logo) and like it wasn't even the red, white, black uniform yet. It was just I had a hat, he had a jacket and what not and we were playing basketball. The police and other people labelled us a gang and then this other gang tried to pick a fight with us and that made us want to get them back and so it just started. It escalated from there.

(Bill, 21)

Sometimes it's just the area you live in, it's like a gang neighbourhood so everybody thinks they're in a gang, so everybody starts up gangs. Because like I knew all the people and they were like all my friends. A lot of them I have known since I was seven years old ... and younger. It's just who I hung around with.

(Tim, 16)

We don't really think of (ourselves) as a gang. We originated last year. We hang out together. Any problems ... we're together. One of my friends said, "We need a name." At first I thought it was a joke. I really treated it as a joke. Then when things started going wrong ... people started to get to know us better and said, "Let's put these people to a test." They started poking at us and started trying to start fights with us. They kind of gave us an attitude. They kind of like said, "All right these guys have a name. They're a gang. Let's see what they can do."

(Barry, 17)

- Intentional Gang/Group Formation

At other times gang/group formation can be planned and quite deliberate. Some organize to commit robberies, deal in drugs, sell stolen property, or procure and sell weapons. A few of these types of youth gangs/groups go on to become highly organized adult crime-focused gangs.

There are also groups of young people that come together ad hoc to settle a score or defend a schoolmate and are often perceived by others to be a "gang" even though the "membership" disperses after their task is completed. These vigilante type configurations, though intentional and purposeful, form for a specific purpose then disband.

I used to be a Skinhead and Skinheads is totally different. I mean Skinheads is military. It's like you're not allowed to smoke, drink, do drugs, even though there are Skinheads who are into that. The real hard core White Power Neo-Nazi Skinheads don't drink. They don't do drugs. They keep themselves in shape in case there is a race war that they think is coming. Whereas these other gangs ... that's just new era. That's like 90's, late 80's, that's totally different. They're into

drugs. They're into drug dealing. They're into stuff that Skinheads would never see as right.

(Bill, 21)

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The owner of the gang (J was in) was forty-five, fifty. (He) had the full intention to develop a gang and have younger people running (it) for him so that he could make money and profit off it. That was the intention of the gang that J was involved with.

(David, 19)

• Protection & Safety

Many young people get involved in gangs/groups gangs because of a perceived need for protection. Though schools in Canada remain relatively safe places it is evident from the interviews that young people possess a remarkable sense of fear for their personal safety while at school. A remarkable number of the young people interviewed in the study are small in stature. Some articulate specifically that their physical size and fear of being hurt by older or larger boys was a contributing factor in their decision to join a gang/group. The safety and protection provided by the gang/group meets very important wellness needs for these youth. The refuge provided by the gang/group also makes leaving much more difficult.

Well for me when I was 13 J was scared. I was a small boy. I was scared 'cause J was just about to go in the high school. When I did get into high school and stuff J was picked on because I was only live five foot (tall). I was like maybe 90 pounds at the most. So in grade ten ... I joined the Skinhead group. Like I read a book about it and J was fascinated because the look is intimidating. To have a shaved head and tatoos and big boots and a flight jacket is intimidating. People look at you and they don't want to go near you. Even teachers were scared of us. I got thrown out of school like two years in a row for beating up the teacher, and it wasn't the same one. It was a supply teacher and stuff like that. It was cause he got so scared that he tried to kick me out of class and I told him where to go and he tried to grab me and pull me out of class. I didn't want him to touch me because it reminded me of when the bullies were touching me and it just made me snap again and J lost it and took it out on him. And that's how I got into the gang. It was a security blanket for me. It made me feel good. It made me feel powerful too.

(Bill, 21)

People joining gangs and stuff like that ... some people don't have a sense of personal security so some people might join a gang as a result of getting beat up by a group of people. Like I have known people like that just because they were jumped by a group of people a couple of times. You know, they fell they had an anger inside. They joined the gang to get back although it's not really getting back. It's just getting that anger and frustration out.

(Wayne, 18)

• Power and Control Through Intimidation

Most violence characterized by the expression "swarming" is directed against other youth. Y Dung people at school or in the neighbourhood make easy and available targets. The material gain from these group assaults and robberies is secondary to the thrill of controlling the victim and ego boost of making him/her fearful. The feeling of power and control over another person is equated with the high of a drug, both of which can become addictive. Since most of these young people would not rob someone if they were on their own it is difficult to see their acts of power and control as anything other than expressions of powerlessness.

I mean if you see someone quivering at your feet it makes you like. "Yeah, I have power over this person." It's a head buzz. It's better than actually really getting high. Even though the guy might be six foot six and you're only five foot ten and you've got four of your friends (so) this guy is scared of you. I mean one on one you would never do that. It's a real

big high. It makes you feel like you're untouchable. If somebody sees a pair of shoes that they want and they're in a gang, (they) and three of their friends will go up and take this kid's shoes just because the one guy wanted it. Even though he might be able to afford it, that's not the point. The point is the thrill of watching this person take off his shoes in front of you to give them to you because he is scared.

(Bill, 21)

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I always used to like to live on the edge. I just like living on the edge. I like to do things to get an adrenaline rush. It made me feel good that I had power over (another guy) because I was involved in the gang. I could do what I wanted and I felt free to do it.

(David, 19)

- Who Is More Vulnerable to the Lure of Gangs/Groups?

The youth identified young people whom they felt were more vulnerable to the lure of gangs/groups. Young people living in poverty or in communities and neighbourhoods with a "gang culture", youth who had been previously abused or neglected, youth who were failing or experiencing other school-related problems, and youth motivated by excessive material gain were all thought to be more vulnerable.

Those people (that) want to have the clothes that the rich people or the better off people have ... will turn them into going out, stealing it, joining a gang possibly. Youth who have been abused are more likely to be in a gang ... I mean abused sexually, physically, even mentally. I was abused men-

tally. I got yelled at all the time and after a while it's too much. It's just too much. You can't handle it. If I wasn't mentally tortured by my parents that way, I wouldn't know how to play with other people's minds as well as I (do). That's why I am a leader of most of the gangs I'm in because I know how to intimidate other people. If you've been physically abused you know how to physically abuse other people. You've been taught how to do it. If you have been sexually assaulted for your first 12 years of living you know exactly how to sexually assault other people and intimidate them in a way that they won't go to the police.

(Bill, 21)

Kids that have problems at home or have problems in school...younger people ... from 11 to 13. Cause when they deliver drugs nobody suspects them.

(Mary, 17)

The way I see it the kids that would probably be more likely (to get involved with gangs) is (one) of two types. People who just want to be part of that lifestyle because they think it's attractive or people (who) just grew up around it and as far as they're concerned that's life. Like it's all one big package.

(Brad, 19)

- Youth From Wealthy Families

Boredom and the desire for extravagant sensations lead some young people into gang/group involvement. Youth from wealthy families who would have no pressing or urgent need for material gain commit crimes in gangs/groups purely for the fun and excitement of it.

There are some rich gangs. Rich kids that (join) a gang, they make their own gang. They're not doing it to survive. They're only doing it because they want the thrill. They do it because they think it's cool. They think it's fun.

(Bill,21)

Children from wealthy families. Some of them don't have anything to do with their lives. This is exciting and it's dangerous and (they) enjoy their success if they're not getting caught.

(Mary, 17)

- Differences Between Males and Females

Girls are definitely a part of the youth gang/group phenomenon and they can be just as violent as the boys. The young people interviewed in the study had a wide range of opinion concerning male/female differences in terms of gang/group involvement. Some see girls using the gang/group to

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meet the same power and esteem needs as the boys.

Girls are often the instigators of gang/group fights. They will egg on their own gang's/group's male members to start a fight or provoke a conflict with a rival gang/group. Many gang/group fights start over conflicts between two girls and spread to include their boyfriends and other gang/group members. Girls are also used by gang/group members to carry weapons into nightclubs and quantities of drugs to be sold in the community.

I think girls get involved in gangs because they want to be popular. Like when I was a leader of (specific gang) my girlfriend went around and actually picked fights ... because she thought she was so hot and popular because she was my girlfriend. (Girls get) an attitude because their boyfriend (has) a bad attitude and you know he (is) the leader of the gang or he (is) a member of a gang. So they could be bad mouthing people too because they know that their boyfriend would whatever, pull a gun, shoot the guy, whatever. They know they are protected, that they can do whatever they want and get away with it.

(Bill, 21)

A lot of girls they don't think the way they used to. They think a lot more like guys. Girls never used to fight but now they are always fighting each other, actually fist fighting and knifing each other.

(Wayne, 18)

- Gangs/Groups as "Family"

The theme of gangs/groups as a "family" emerged often in interviews with the youth participants. However, there was also recognition that this family can be "dysfunctional" and over time even more dangerous to the young person than their original or biological family.

I was in a gang before I came here. I was 11 then. I ran away from home. I started using drugs, delivering them for some money so I can get something to eat. They took care of me. After that I ended up in a reform school for two years. When I got out I went there and met my boyfriend there and when I wanted to get out it was pretty dangerous. Another friend of mine wanted to get out of the gang and they killed him. When I came to Canada I was new here. I didn't know anyone. I went outside one day for a smoke and I met a couple of guys there and we started talking and they invited me to a party. Pretty soon I was in it again and it was good because I got kicked out (of home) a lot. (Being in a gang) I (knew) I had a place to stay and some money on the side and I can get something to eat. I learned how to survive. This was a good part of it. Because being in a gang (is) very dangerous. You have to satisfy everyone there and if you (make) one mistake or they don't like something you said or something you did ... I mean you are going to get it.

(Mary, 17)

Generally I think ... they don't have anybody else. They do have a family but they don't feel comfortable with that family. They don't feel safe with that family. That or they don't have much money. They want to receive quick easy money and when you're in a gang ... they call it a family ... you're with your friends. You're safe with your friends.

(David, 19)

- Youth Don't Really Know What They're Getting Into

There was overwhelming consensus among youth interviewed that they did not really appreciate what they were getting into when they became involved with a gang/group or crossed the line into serious criminal activity. Most often described was a perception of a "drift" into gradually escalating levels of serious crime.

Some people might be on the streets and they just want somebody to be with and they (don't) really know what they're really getting involved with. A person sort of gets involved with it and gets

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caught up in it and doesn't understand what's going on and the wheels are just turning too fast and they wind up involved with this hard core gang. They thought it was just like, "Oh buddy, buddy, chum, chum, let's go out and party. Let's do a couple lines of coke." Then the next day, "You know so and so down the street. He's involved with this gang. Well here is a gun. I want you to kill him." A lot of kids sometimes just don't know what they're getting involved with.

(David, 19)

Ever since I was a kid we grew up together, the whole bunch of us. As we got older we (didn't have very good) role models so as we got older even when we were 12, 13 years old we were already getting into crime and getting into fights and stuff. There were always people coming in and going, joining and leaving. But there was a group of us that always stuck together. I guess I didn't really see where I was going. I just thought I would hang around with my friends. I didn't really see myself getting into that much trouble.

(Wayne, 18)

- Unemployment and Money As A Motivator

Several young people mentioned the lack of a job and a need to earn money as a motivator for committing crime with their gang/group associates.

I do crime for money. If there was a job I'd take it but there (aren't any). Money. The only reason. I love money. I love buying clothes. I love going to clubs and taking girls out. Just money.

(Danny, 15)

The young people that are involved (in gangs), most of the youths that are involved in violence and crime and stuff like that see it as a way of life. It's a way of making money. If you can't find a job or something you know that is one of the ways to make money.

(Wayne, 18)

- Involvement of Youth Under 12 Years of Age

The involvement of youth under the age of 12 in youth gang/group activity has recently come to the attention of police and schools. Despite differing opinions among the youth interviewed in the study about the extent of minor involvement in the illegal activities of youth gangs/groups, it appears evident that it is a serious and growing problem.

Say (a gang) wanted to break into a house. We can send a guy in there that's just say about 12 years old or even eight. You tell him, "You go through that window there. You go upstairs and open the door, simple as that. You look around for walls, the windows, you see if there is any alarms around, any wires." You'd be surprised how (well) they know alarms. They know alarms because these guys train them and he opens the door and smack, boom you're in.

(Joe, 14)

(Young kids get involved) usually as runners, they call them runners or gophers. They would be ... given drugs (to take from) point A to point B.

(David, 19)

There are a lot of kids who are homeless that are 11, 12 years old. They get into the gang for the protection and shelter and all that stuff. Their role would be like spying or if you send a ten year old kid into a store he's not going to look too threatening. He goes in and looks around to see if everything is all right and then he comes out and gives you the sign and then you go in and rob it.

(Wayne, 18)

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- Influence of the Media, Music, Videos

The study provided an opportunity for youth involved in youth gang/group activities, much of which involved violence, to add their own voices to the debate on the influence of the media on youth violence. Their remarks leave little doubt that they feel surrounded and disturbed by the widespread prevalence of graphically violent images. The young people see this violence as instructive, providing them with ideas and supporting anti-social attitudes and beliefs.

That's the way everything is made out to be like, all the music and stuff. Like you listen to music, any kind of music and they're always talking about ... shooting people and it's sort of like an expectation sort of deal.

(Tim, 16)

One (reason why youth get involved in gangs) is really important (and that is) the kind of society that we live in, the kind of media that goes on. Like when people watch movies about gangs and stuff. Although it's showing the bad side of the thing people (like) looking at it and they like that living on the edge of life, especially teenagers because they're looking for ... when you are a teenager you think you can take on anything. Like when you see a movie ... you see a whole bunch of people in a gang and they do all of this stuff and say five of them get caught and they go to jail but they never show you what goes on in jail. They are all tough and looking bad and they don't show you what went on. They don't show you what went on during those five years. You know, the guy goes in and two minutes later he is out and people don't see what goes on.

(Wayne, 18)

I think it will get worse with all the shows too on TV. Everybody looks up to TV. Everybody watches TV six to maybe eight hours a day so I would say with all the cop movies and all those gangs that you see on TV, mobsters and you just want to be like that. Like it's exciting to watch and everything like that but I don't know I guess little kids or kids my age take that a little too far. (Gary, 16)

Youth Perceptions of Recent Change in Youth Gangs/Groups and Violence

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There has been much debate recently about whether the youth gang/group phenomenon and youth violence is truly increasing in terms of actual numbers or if it just being reported more. This circular argument takes no note of the fact that, according to the young people, we are not coping with the level of violence we already have.

Young people in the study feel that there has been a noticeable change in youth gang/group activity and youth violence in recent years. They identify the presence of and easy access to guns and the use of all kinds of weapons in interpersonal and gang/group conflicts as a major part of the shift.

It ain't like before, a couple of years ago. If everybody went out and got into a scrap there was a fist fight and that was it, you know, maybe some baseball bats. Now it's rarely ever a fist fight (there are more weapons now). Thirty years ago and all that there wasn't as many shootings and stabbings as there is today. More and more people are doing it and a lot of people aren't paying attention. They know what's going on but they don't want to believe what's going on.

(Tim, 16)

There's probably more murders now. There's easier access to guns. A lot of kids nowadays just don't care. They really don't. Drug dealing, large drug dealing. The drugs are too easy to get and the thing that's bad about it is that you don't really know what you're getting.

(Bill, 21)

Gangs have been around for a long time, right? They had fights and everyone would meet in a baseball field and everyone would have bats and stuff. It's not like that anymore. There is a lot

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more guns now. If you don't have a gun in your gang then people look down on you. Nowadays, everybody doesn't come together and go to the other people's area and start fighting. Now you sit in the car and go and do a drive-by or something.

(Wayne, 18)

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