

• Defining the "Problem"

It is evident from the interviews that the phenomenon of youth gangs/groups cannot be reduced down to a simple "problem" statement. There are a number of associated concerns, both at the level of the individual youth and in the systems that serve young people, that together make this a complex social phenomenon. We must be cautious of the labels and definitions we use when working with young people involved in gangs/groups. Adults' judgment, hurtful words, and official labels can quickly become internalized as part of a youth's self-concept. Young people are often very successful at "living down" to our expectations of them.

When examining this phenomenon, it will be important to ensure that our discourse does not become critical and blaming toward youth without looking in the mirror first. Defining gangs/groups as a problem in the individual youth puts the focus on identifying causes of deviance and delinquency, and on finding solutions for correctional, law enforcement, school safety purposes. Defining the problem as societal and systemic places the focus on issues concerning social relations, social power, employment opportunities, social learning, and institutional and professional practices that encourage and support violence toward and by youth. A more thorough analysis of these micro- and macro-social perspectives is warranted, though beyond the scope of the present study.

It is evident from discussions with study participants that our failure now to name what appears to be an emerging and serious problem will lead to minimization and denial, which in turn will slow our response and leave victims of youth gangs/groups and youth violence vulnerable and unprotected. According to study participants youth gangs/groups and youth violence are a problem in southern Ontario and growing in terms of incidence and in the level of violence. Official statistics support the view that there has been an increase in youth violence in recent years, though they limit our understanding of the true picture because they are based on police charging patterns only. However, objective assessments of the "seriousness" of offences cannot capture the impact on victims or the climate of fear that can build in a school environment from persistent incidents of what might appear to an outside observer to be "less serious" forms of intimidation.

Basing our understanding solely on official charge rates it is easy to overlook what participants identify as an important fact in the phenomenon, namely, that youth gang/group activities and youth violence is significantly under-reported. Though their property offences may target businesses, adults, and teens alike, gang/group violence appears to be targeted primarily toward other youth or other gang/group members. The majority of victims of youth gangs/groups are other youth who tend to be smaller, weaker, younger, isolated, friendless, awkward, or "walking victims". Girls tend to be the targets for a majority of the incidents of sexual violence, boys for physical violence, though either sex can be victims of each. Minority youth are also targeted, especially if they possess any of the characteristics above.

Teen victims are extremely reluctant to report their victimization to parents, teachers, school officials or the police. Their reluctance is based on a number of different factors: fear of retaliation; fear of getting friends or neighbourhood peers into trouble with the law; fear of not being believed or that nothing will be done by adult authorities which would leave the youth exposed to further violence and to ostracization; fear of being perceived as a "rat" or tattletale; fear of appearing friendless, vulnerable, and socially rejected; and fear that parents will be upset with them for "losing" articles of clothing or other possessions.

There are also some gender dimensions that effect reporting. Because of our apparent social tolerance of aggressive male sexual behaviour, i.e., "boys will be boys", young girls often do not recognize unsolicited and unwanted sexual behaviours toward them as sexual assault or sexual harassment. One police officer in the study shared a story about young women in a high school who had their nipples twisted by young men "teasing" them. The young women did not report this or feel that it was unusual until one of the girls showed her parents her bruised breast.

When a girl is part of a gang/group and her "boyfriend" forces her to have sex with other members she will either accept what happens as a norm of the group or feel too intimidated or even terrified to report her associates to the

police. Girls will also be shamed into silence because of the stigma associated with having had sexual relations, albeit forced on her against her will, with a number of boys. Words such as "slut" and "tramp" can be powerful silencers.

Male victims are doubly victimized by gender role scripts that silence and shame boys and young men for not being "man enough" to stick up for themselves or for showing fear or other feelings associated with being victimized. Boys or teen males assaulted by individual girls or girl gangs/groups would most certainly refrain from reporting. Quite simply, we do not permit males to be victims in our society, which likely contributes significantly to the under-reporting of most forms of male victimization (Mathews, 1993a).

A rise in the involvement of girls in the phenomenon of youth gangs/groups and youth violence is a special concern of any of participants in the study. Police and school officials report finding female perpetrated crime and violence becoming more frequent, that their violence can be as vicious and extreme as the males, and that their victims tend primarily to be other girls. It is hard to draw conclusions about the apparently sudden upturn in female participation in these activities. Young girls, who after all, possess most of the same developmental needs as their male peers, may be buying into patriarchal models of power relations once they see how effective they are for boys in meeting these needs.

Youth gangs/groups are a particular problem for schools. Though violence in schools is not yet out of control, the presence of gangs/groups "poisons" the learning environment for other students and compromises teachers' and school officials' efforts to maintain a safe environment. Teens and older children who are being intimidated by gangs/groups will simply stay away from school. Youth involved in gangs/groups find the fun and allure of illegal activities more enjoyable than school and will let their education suffer for the short-term thrill of involvement.

Young people spend a significant part of their day at or around schools so it is easy to see how they become a focal point for gang/group organizing, planning, and activities. Intruders and gang/group members from outside the school who trespass to "show force" with their friends inside create special problems for maintaining school safety.

Schools also provide a readily available supply of victims. Vulnerable and friendless youth cannot hide in this very public setting. Unsupervised halls, empty classrooms, and washrooms provide ample opportunities for gangs/groups to intimidate and practice extortion. Female targets for group sexual assaults known as "sexing", follow predictable routines based on class timetables, so it is easy to predict when a girl will be anywhere in the school at any given time.

However, the "problem" is not simply one of maintaining a safe environment. The frank and candid comments of school officials reveal that there are institutional and administrative practices in the school that appear to be contributing in a significant way to the growth of the phenomenon. Institutional practices in the form of performance and promotion criteria force some school administrators to deny or minimize the incidence of youth gang/group activity in their schools or the level of students' fear. Career focused educators who see their positions simply as a stepping stone to the next level of authority will be reluctant to draw attention to serious problems in their schools. Some school officials who fear being labelled "racist" or "alarmist" will not report to police or senior level administrators the activities of minority youth gangs/groups or inter-racial gang/group conflict, even when it is quite serious. In other cases, teachers and administrators mistake a low incidence of reporting to mean an absence of problems, when in fact fear and intimidation by gangs/groups and students' mistrust that educators will respond to their disclosures keeps young people silent.

70

Students continue to fall through the cracks of our educational system. Many students' learning disabilities go unrecognized. Large class sizes, early streaming, and an increased narrowing of curriculum send many youth down an aimless and empty educational path. Unprepared for the needs of young people from so many different cultures, schools are struggling under a heavy burden. Given that so many of these new demands were unanticipated, change has been slow. Consequently, many of these students are vulnerable to school failure, marginalization, and victimization within the school setting.

Given the rapid social change that has become a part of life in Canada it would appear necessary for the professional preparation of educators to go beyond learning to teach the three R's. Basic skills that will enable

teachers to identify abused, neglected, vulnerable, and failing to thrive students need to be a part of their training. Teachers and administrators need to focus on their "at risk" students and plan interventions that will make them less vulnerable to the lure of gangs/groups or to being victimized.

Schools who wish to be on the cutting edge of education should be planning now for the introduction of a student wellness focus within guidance and counselling, linked to resources, supports, and other youth-serving organizations and agencies in the community. School officials who embrace this concept of an "open community school" with resources provided to students on site will be in an optimal position to support and assist their vulnerable students.

- Defining "Gangs/Groups"

Arriving at a simple definition of a "gang/group" proved challenging. Study participants identified a continuum of gangs/groups ranging from the loosely associated group of peers or friends to the more hard-core and organized crime-focused gang. A single criteria for distinguishing a youth peer group from the youth "gang" was identified, namely, involvement in illegal behaviour. "Illegal behaviour" included anything from sexual harassment, intimidation, and uttering threats to drug dealing, robbery, and murder.

Two main types of gang/group configurations emerged from the interviews. First, there was the "group of friends". This configuration breaks down further into roughly three subsets: school peers, long-term associations of childhood friends, and neighbourhood friends and associates. The "group of friends" can be mixed race or gender, or single race and gender. Some give themselves names, others do not. Their activities range from hanging out together to simple mischief, some petty thefts and impulsive vandalism, to the occasional assault on other youth or youth groups, and even more serious crime. When a "group of friends" crosses the line between mischief and illegal behaviour they are viewed as becoming a "gang", both in their own perceptions and in the eyes of adult authorities and peers. The "crossing" can sometimes be well-planned and intentional, but also spontaneous.

The second configuration is the "hard core gang". This configuration breaks down into three subsets: political/pseudo-political/paramilitary (such as Skinhead groups), mixed race organized and crime-focused/delinquent, and culturally homogeneous and organized crime-focused/delinquent. The hard core gang uses weapons extensively and could be equipped with everything from knives and explosives to powerful automatic weapons.

Combining all the perspectives of study participants yielded the following definition:

A youth gang/group is a group of three or more youths whose membership, though often fluid, consists of at least a stable core of members who are recognized by themselves or others as a gang/group, and who band together for social, cultural, or other reasons and impulsively or intentionally plan and commit anti-social, delinquent, or illegal acts.

71

- An Exploratory Typology of Youth Gangs/Groups

The findings of the study appear to support an exploratory model of youth gangs/groups developed in a previous study conducted in Metropolitan Toronto (Mathews, 1990). The model provides 8 categories for differentiating among subsets of the two main gang/group configurations above.

The eight categories in the typology do not constitute, nor were they intended to be, a definitive typology. There is some overlap in the categories because of the wide diversity of individuals who comprise the membership of these groups and the similarity of many of their activities. The descriptors used highlight some of the specific characteristics that distinguish each group/gang in terms of membership or activities, but they should be considered only as a conceptual framework to assist further refinement and analysis.

1. Fashion or Social

This appears to represent the single largest proportion of the youth gang/group phenomenon. They are a relatively

loose configuration usually centred around a school, community centre, sometimes a neighbourhood, mall, or strip plaza and consist of "middle class" youths. The activities are largely social in nature, i.e., "hanging out", though their mischievous behaviour or adolescent pranks can sometimes get out of hand. Gatherings of these youths are often perceived as threatening by business persons, adults, and other youths who encounter them.

However, members of this type of gang/group do participate occasionally in group assaults or thefts, i.e., "swarmings". These group assaults can be both impulsive, based more on situational factors, or deliberately planned. This swarming activity can occur at school, in shopping malls, in subway stations, and sometimes on the street. The motivation for some of this group's more violent activities can arise from "macho posturing" and the need to impress girlfriends and male peers by bullying or harassing others.

Their perception of having power comes from the number of members in the group/gang. When apprehended for involvement in assaults or other crimes committed with their gang/group, police report that individual members will often display timidity, remorse, and fear.

Group members sometimes, though not always, wear common articles or styles of clothing ("Roots" sweat shirts, baseball caps, football jackets, bandanas, etc.) or have some type of "look" that signifies membership. Some have names but most do not. Leadership of the group is fluid and appears to be based on popularity. Members can be local youth or live anywhere in the city. Some youth belong to two or more gangs/groups simultaneously.

2. Ethnocultural

This is only a slightly more stable configuration centred around a community, public place, or school. New Canadians or other visible minority youths whose customs, beliefs, or values differ markedly from mainstream Canadian culture and who often feel cutoff or isolated sometimes form themselves into groups. These young people have one foot in both cultures and live often a very fractured and disorganized life. Young persons in this position will use a group of peers to gain a sense of identity and belonging and to share their problems and concerns.

Denied full and equal access to education and employment opportunities because of language barriers, assimilation problems, age, or other forms of discrimination and prejudice, many young people from these groups simply give up hope and turn to one another for support and a livelihood. Sometimes these groups organize along willfully criminal lines possibly as a "community development" and "employment creation" scheme (selling drugs, theft rings, extortion, etc.).

Leadership in these groups appears to come from those members who are best at whatever they do in terms of illegal activity, from popularity, or from those who are most aggressive or violent.

72

Socializing is typically confined to members within the group. This type of gang/group appears to be increasing in Ontario, especially in urban areas with diverse and rapidly changing population demographics.

3. Political, Pseudo-Political

The best example of this type of gang is the 'Skinheads'. There are various types of Skinhead groups - "Sharps", "Trojans", "Alternatives" - though the "Neo-Nazi" and "White Supremacist" individuals get most attention in the media. Originally, the Skinhead movement was a British-based, pro-working class, and basically non-violent youth movement. In Canada, the regalia of the British Skins has been appropriated but evidently not a great deal of the political or class analysis. With some young people, being a Skinhead, or dressing in the regalia of Skins, is more an act of rebellion against convention than it is a statement of particular political beliefs.

The Skinhead movement in Toronto is small and marginal relative to other types of youth gangs/groups. Though a few street fights, swarmings, and racially motivated assaults involving Skinheads have been reported in the press, the

media appears to make them a larger part of the youth gang/group phenomenon than they really are. However, they are becoming more organized and aligned with adult groups, particularly the neo-Nazi and White Supremacist Skins, and their activities are spreading throughout southern Ontario. These groups are also growing in British Columbia, Quebec, and Alberta.

4. Violent (Sociopathic)

This group represents perhaps the smallest proportion of the youth gang/group phenomenon. Though their numbers are small, their activities present a threat to community safety because of the sociopathic dimensions that can be observed in the violent behaviour of some of these youths, i.e., limited feelings of guilt or remorse for destructive acts against others, limited feelings of compassion or empathy for others, and acting-out behaviour characterized by high egocentrism. The term "wilding" has been used to describe the activities of this gang/group.

Membership consists of largely marginalized youth, some former or current psychiatric outpatients, and street "hangers-on". Group membership is unstable and leadership unstructured and shared. Their activities are almost always spontaneous and impulsive. Some of the activities of this type of group include common assault, sexual assault, vandalism, and theft.

5. Crime-Focused/Delinquent

This gang/group can be both organized and relatively stable or loosely defined and "project specific". These youths organize themselves to carry out group thefts, to sell drugs or stolen property, or to commit physical assaults such as gay-bashing. This type of gang/group is still a relatively small part of the phenomenon but evokes the most fear in adults and other youth and the most concern for law enforcement officials. What distinguishes them from other groups is the fact that the members are willfully criminal in their activities.

One variation of this type of group is the one that gets involved in "sexing" or group sexual assault. Typically, the victim is an adolescent female who is fondled over or under her clothes, often at school or on school property during regular hours. This group can consist of three or more boys who may otherwise have no other formal or informal association apart from being in a peer group of friends.

6. Street Youth

Street youth are not really a gang/group per se but an extremely fluid and unstable collection of marginalized youth, kids fleeing abusive home environments, and "weekend street kids" who are drawn to the romantic myth of life "on the street". These loosely associated groups can sometimes

73

be involved in assaults, thefts, drug-trafficking, and vandalism. There appears to be no leadership or identifiable group structure. It should be noted that not all street youth participate in these gangs/groups.

7. Volatile Group

This is more a situationally defined phenomenon of group/gang activity than anything organized or defined by members. In fact, there is no real membership per se, and such groups can consist of large numbers of strangers. Hooliganism or spontaneous acts of violence, thefts, and assaults that occur after rock concerts or sporting events are the typical behaviours perpetrated by this type of gang/group. They are a relatively small part of the phenomenon though their actions receive a great deal of media attention.

8. Vigilante

The vigilante gang/group is usually made up of familiar friends, relatives, or acquaintances all or most of whom could be simultaneously in any of the above types of gangs/groups. What distinguishes this type of gang/group from the

others is not the membership per se but the motivation for their actions. The vigilante gang/group is usually formed to get revenge for acts of violence, thefts, or other perceived slights committed against their friends, brothers, sisters, or associates.

Young people say they get involved in this type of gang/group activity because they feel school officials protect offenders instead of holding them accountable. Young people involved in vigilante groups say they don't see school officials or police doing anything to protect them so they decide to "settle their own scores" .

- The Gang/Group Involvement Cycle

A key to understanding much of the motivation to become involved in youth gangs/groups can be found in the developmental needs of adolescents. These include the need for: affiliation with likeminded peers, self-esteem and personal efficacy, the formation of an identity independent from parents and family, limit-testing, challenging authority, the search for novelty, stimulation, and pleasure, the expression of assertiveness and aggression, and the development of a sexual and gender identity. Many of these needs are met through involvement in youth gang/group activity, and are met quickly and easily. Vulnerable youth living in poverty, in dysfunctional families, or who have histories of abuse or neglect may have needs in any or all of these areas that are more keenly felt, and hence a stronger motivation to meet them. Other characteristics normally associated with adolescence such as egocentricity, impulsiveness, and omnipotence, i.e., "I won't get caught", etc., may also play a role.

Forming secret clubs with exclusive membership is a feature of childhood and adolescence. These clubs or groups work as a micro-community where members can associate and play in agreement. They provide a sense of security and safety in a rapidly changing society and offer refuge for youth experiencing a difficult transition to adulthood.

Through their peer associations in gangs/groups young people can experiment with roles, rules, and their new found freedom. They can obtain a sense of power, status, order, safety, and communion with others free from the scrutiny of the adult world, that is, until members come up against societal limits imposed by the rule of law. The powerful draw and influence of peers in early and middle adolescence gives these groups enormous power and influence over young people. Gangs/groups can take on a life of their own with rules of conduct and association that adults or outsiders would never understand.

Some communities are beginning to evolve a "gang culture" similar to that seen in inner city areas of large U.S. cities. It appears that some young people have adopted patterns for intra- and interracial gang/group conflict observed in the American media and are copying this behaviour in their

74

own communities. At some point, and unfortunately it may already be too late, it will matter little that the roots of this violence were mimicry as inter-racial tensions build and the need to "settle scores" and "save face" erases all civility between these groups of young people.

There is no typical gang/group or individual who becomes involved. However, the process of joining, staying in, and leaving appears to follow a pattern that can be articulated in the following model.

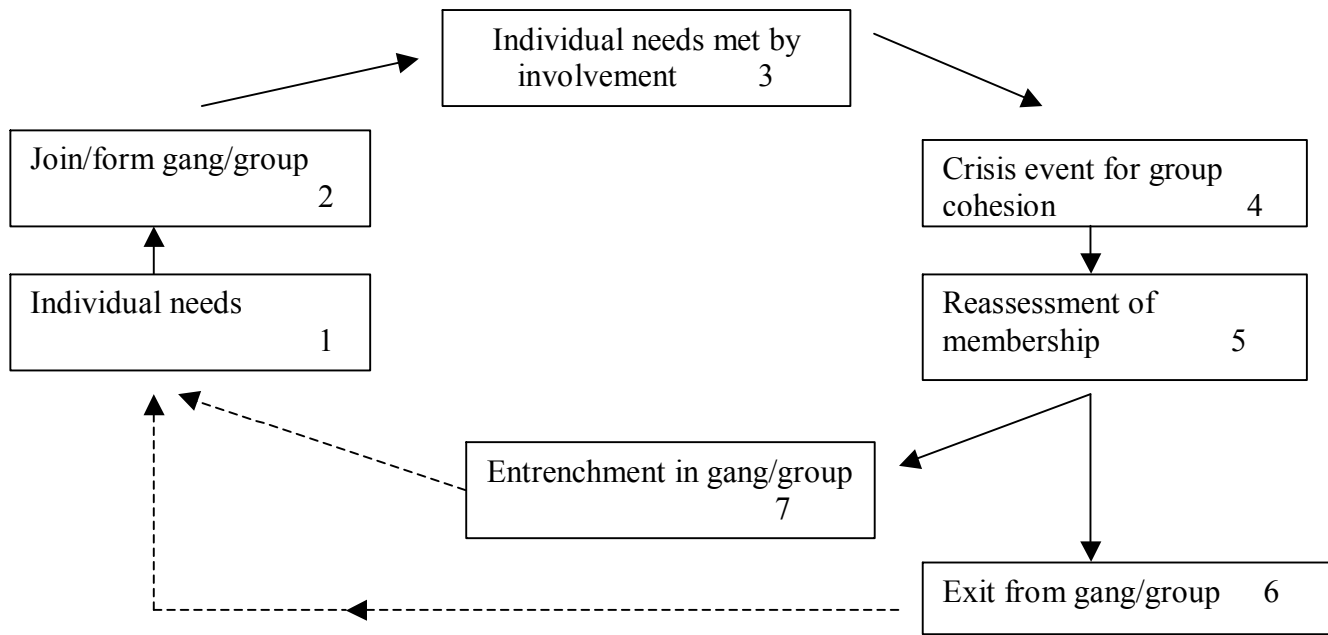


Figure 1: Gang/Group Involvement Cycle

The *gang/group involvement cycle* model delineates 7 stages which describe a young person's path concerning gang/group membership and is based on the comments of study participants. The stages are not mutually exclusive and may apply in varying degrees to different forms of gangs/groups or individual members. The model should be considered descriptive and exploratory.

1. Awareness Of Individual Needs

The first step in forming or becoming involved in a gang/group is usually precipitated by a perception of need. One major need is in the area of self-protection. A remarkable degree of fear permeates the social and learning environment of many elementary, middle level, and high schools. Young people in these schools often perceive themselves to be at risk of harm if they do not join a gang/group, thus a need for protection is a major motivator. The need to establish a sense of personal efficacy, as measured by popularity or acceptance or membership in a gang/group will also supply a youth with motivation. Other needs described earlier will also influence a young person's decision to join or form a gang/group.

2. Joining/Forming A Gang/Group

Forming or joining is not always marked by any particular event. As mentioned previously, many, gangs/groups simply drift into an association they or others eventually label a "gang". Some gangs/groups are formally organized and have rules of conduct and expectations for behaviour clearly spelled out, including an initiation.

75

3. Rapid Transformation Of Self Through Meeting Of Individual Needs

Once in, or when the gang/group begins to achieve a group identity, young people begin to notice changes occurring within themselves. As their needs are met they experience a sudden transformation and elation. They achieve almost instant power and status within the group or in the school or community. Affirmation of personal efficacy needs are met through acceptance by other members. There is a "honeymoon" period when other associates are friends and the gang/group is one big happy "family". Attempts by friends, families, school personnel, police, or other adult authorities to discourage gang/group involvement or to sever the bonds and friendships between peers at this stage, however well intended, will almost certainly meet with strong resistance.

4. Crisis Event For Group Cohesion

A crisis event, typically a brush with the law after involvement in anti-social or illegal behaviour, being challenged or attacked by another gang/group, or death or injury of a member will precipitate a crisis that will challenge group cohesion. As long as the payoff for being involved remains high or outweighs the risks members will remain committed. Every crisis successfully weathered tends to strengthen the bonds between members and build group cohesion. Conversely, failing to pass successfully through the crisis will lead to the dissolution of the gang/group. Youth committed to a lifestyle of crime will pass through this stage quickly or with little effort.

S. Individual Reassessment of Membership

Regardless of how fellow gang/group members respond to the crisis, some youth may experience cognitive dissonance, especially if they find themselves participating in activities that challenge previously held anti-criminal and pro-social values. When the dissonance cannot be resolved by a renewed commitment to the gang/group or peer pressure the youth may decide to leave or exit.

6. Exit

There are several means by which a young person can exit. Some mature or "grow up and grow out" of the gang/group or learn to meet their needs in other or more positive ways. As youth mature they tend to be less influenced by peers and more capable of independent thought and actions. It is often at this point that youth raised in families who support pro-social, anti-criminal values, attitudes, and beliefs will return to their early training. Some youth leave because they see diminishing returns for their involvement in illegal activity and the risk of serious physical harm, punishment and incarceration is no longer outweighed by the perceived benefits. Some leave when their families move away from the neighbourhood. Others leave after they are arrested and imprisoned or when the gang/group simply decides to break up.

After exiting the gang/group, members are still vulnerable to their lure. If a youth does not acquire employment skills, make new friends in a non-delinquent, non-criminal peer group, or address the other need/risk factors that motivated him/her to get involved in the first place, he/she may return in a moment of crisis, This is marked by the longer broken line in Figure 1.

7. Entrenchment

Once the crisis event has passed and the gang/group has passed the test of its cohesion, many members start to become entrenched. When a youth has been involved over a period of time, it becomes difficult to give up the protection and security that goes along with membership. It is difficult to forfeit the material gains, power, status, and esteem needs that are met through being in the gang/group. Since leaving often means abandoning lifelong friends and familiar neighbourhood peers, few youth do so without much pain and some backsliding. And then there are those gangs/groups that threaten to kill or seriously injure exiting members, making leaving too difficult if not impossible. Concerns about being harmed by one's own members, fears of being at risk for

76

violence from other gangs/groups if he/she leaves, and the reinforcement of having needs met lock the youth into a cycle of fear, need, and crisis that will characterize his/her life until exit is possible .

- Implications of the "Gang/Group Involvement Model" For Prevention/Intervention

The *gang/group involvement cycle* model illustrates some of the different decision points and stages of commitment a young person passes through in the process of becoming involved in a gang/group. It also provides some insight into potential courses of action that might be taken to address issues of prevention and intervention.

Preventing youth from becoming involved in gangs/groups in the first place makes most sense. However, it is difficult to know exactly where to start focusing prevention efforts. Avoiding labelling non-criminally involved youth groups

"gangs" and individual youth "gang members" is important. De-glamorizing gangs/groups and warning young people about the dangers and personal consequences associated with involvement will be necessary to address. De-mythologizing the gang/group as "family" and gang/group activity as being purely fun and not harmful to self, family, school, community, and others will also need to be considered.

Schools will need to address a number of issues: "flagging" isolated, vulnerable, and at risk youth; security and vigilance with respect to the physical plant of the school, including the elimination of intruders; students' feelings of fear for their safety; the development of sexual harassment and zero tolerance policies; and the protection and support of victims who disclose. Meeting the protection needs of students and holding offenders accountable would almost certainly reduce the need for gang/group involvement and the formation of vigilante type gangs/groups.

Parents, schools, community service organizations, youth-serving agencies, business, and government will need to work cooperatively to find or create opportunities for young people to experience success and self-esteem, particularly in association with positive anti-criminal peers and in pro-social ways. This could include things such as after school and evening sports and recreation programs, employment, mentoring, skills development and job training, and community-focused pride or work projects.

Young people in the study claim that the best time to get out of a gang/group is the first time you get caught doing something illegal. For some youth strong first interventions are necessary to deter them. For others simply being caught or confronted once is sufficient. Better differential assessment for the correct application of sanctions and "alternative measures" appears to be key at this point.

As youth become more entrenched in gangs/groups new challenges emerge for those trying to assist them. Young people trying to leave need to find pro-social ways to meet the needs and address the risk factors that motivated them to become involved in the first place. Meeting income, employment, and sustenance needs and treating addictions is fundamental for some youth as is enlisting family members or other adults as support persons or mentors in the community.

Also, once youth are entrenched in gangs/groups it takes a different kind of outreach to connect with these young people. Police need to consider linking with community-based street workers connected to community-based local social service programs. These street workers could provide a mediation or bridge-building role between youth and police while officers work to establish their own rapport and connection with gang/group members.

77

• An Interactional Model Of Youth Gang/Group Crime And Violence

Understanding youth gang/group crime and violence will require us to look beyond simplistic models and explanations that focus exclusively on the individual or youth-serving organizations and institutions or the social context of youth violence. Relying on one perspective to the exclusion of the other will result in only partial understanding and seriously compromise our efforts to develop comprehensive and relevant policy and program responses.

The following is an exploratory, multi-level interactional model of youth gang/group crime and violence based on the responses of study participants and previous work of the author (Mathews, 1993). The model is not additive or linear but simply delineates those factors which appear to influence the behaviour of youth in gangs/groups.

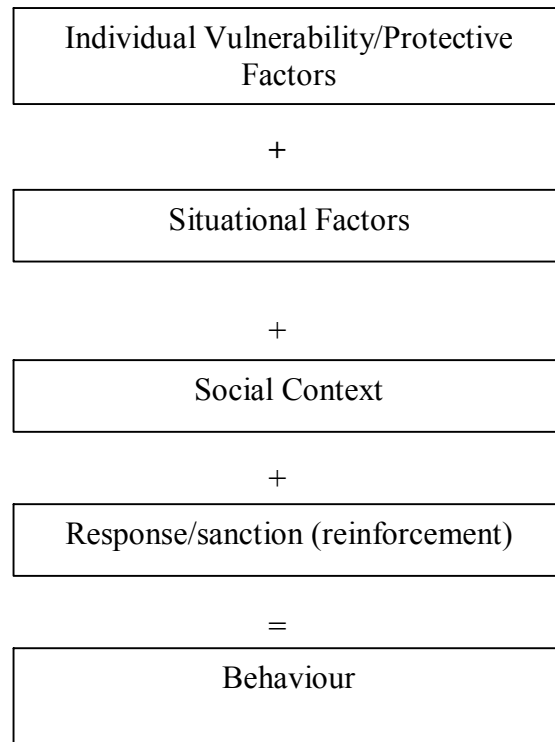


Figure 2: Interactional Model of Youth Gang/Group Crime and Violence

Individual Vulnerability/Protective Factors

Individual vulnerability and protective factors are in essence strengths and weaknesses in a young person's background that have some bearing on their decision to become involved in a youth gang/group or illegal gang/group activity. Every individual possesses varying combinations of the two.

Vulnerability factors. Vulnerability factors are those elements in the young person's family and developmental history that would either predispose the youth to involvement in youth gangs/groups or in aggressive, violent, or anti-social behaviour. Examples of these factors can include:

Previous history of physical or sexual abuse or neglect Criminal, or dysfunctional family

Substance abusing parents

Difficulties in adjusting to new life in Canada Being unemployed

Child poverty

Undiagnosed learning problems or difficulties at school Presence of current or chronic life stressors

Protective factors. Protective factors are those elements in the young person's family and developmental history that have the potential to attenuate the effects of any vulnerability factors and

reduce the youth's chances of becoming involved in youth gangs/groups or in aggressive, violent, or anti-social behaviours. Examples of these factors can include:

Pro-social family values, attitudes, and beliefs

Presence of supportive family or access to supportive extended family members Opportunities to build positive self-esteem

Firm, fair boundaries and affection from family or extended family members Positive ego strength and internal locus of control

School success

Good health and proper nutrition

Situational Factors

Situational factors, or the "psychology of situations", comprise those elements in the immediate environment that can influence the behaviour of the individuals in youth gangs/groups by providing behavioural cues. Examples of these situational factors or behavioural cues are:

The presence of others (in large or small numbers) the presence of a gun or other weapon Anonymity

Darkness or other things that mask or hide identity Opportunities to flee

The interaction effects between individual vulnerability/protective factors and situational variables can perhaps be understood by using the model of a pan scale. Literally, young people bring their mixture of vulnerability/protective factors to every situation they encounter in their lives. In circumstances where there are many behavioural cues to act aggressively with little chance of getting caught the balance of the two along with any current life stressors are likely to guide the person's choice of actions.

Social Context

The concept of *social context* of youth violence and criminal behaviour, as used in the model, both includes and extends beyond a "social learning" model of behaviour acquisition. According to "social learning theory" (Bandura, 1977), young people learn how and when to behave aggressively by passively observing models (in this case youth observing other youth or adults receiving gain from the use of aggression, violence or coercion).

Learning in a *social context* extends beyond behaviour to include the acquisition of values, attitudes, and beliefs, many of which can be learned by observing violent images in entertainment or news media. Depictions of gratuitous violence, especially when shown through more passive communication mediums such as film and television, become subtle "background" supporting and promoting attitudes and beliefs about victims and the true impact of crime and violence on victims. The greatest example of this can be found in pornography that portrays women who initially resist aggressive sexual advances only to submit and enjoy it. This image supports the myth than women really mean "yes" when they say "no" and that use of a little force will elicit their enthusiastic compliance. By *social context* we also need to consider the influence of gender role socialization, child poverty, and unemployment on the violent and aggressive behaviour of youth.

In essence, when we talk about violence and youth in a social context we need to approach the discussion from two perspectives - violence done *to* youth and *by* youth. Though it may be difficult for many adults to admit, we are a society that is violent towards children and youth. One only need examine the statistics concerning the widespread prevalence of child abuse and adolescent prostitution to understand this point. Young people are keen observers of adult behaviour, especially that which brings swift rewards, and unfortunately many are choosing to use violence as a means to solve their problems.

Many of us don't realize that violence permeates our society so extensively that it has become almost invisible. Young people witness violence in the intimate relationships of parents and other adults, in sports, in news coverage, in war, in politics, and in various forms of media entertainment. Critics who argue that most youth can separate fantasy from reality when watching violence in entertainment overlook vulnerable, marginalized, and impressionable youth for whom such "entertainment" is instructive.

The socialization of males is worth highlighting for a moment. Raised to take charge, have power "over" others and to ignore physical pain and deny their emotions, boys may be able to swarm, assault, and sexually assault others with no awareness of the impact on victims. This may be one important reason why a majority of youth gang/group members are male and a majority of incidents of youth violence involve males. Unfortunately, it is also true that, with the exception of sexual violence, males appear to be the victims in most types of violent crime.

Response/Sanction (Reinforcement)

Response/sanction can perhaps best be understood in terms of reinforcement. When the rewards are high and the consequences minor young people will continue to engage in such behaviours. Young people who participate in less serious criminal or anti-social activities and experience mild or no consequences may be tempted to test the boundary further and escalate the level of seriousness of those activities. Peers provide each other with non-judgmental support and reinforcement for involvement in crime. Status enhancement among peers is a strong reinforcer.

Response/sanction also applies to the actions of victims. When youth report their victimization to adult authorities and see no remedial action taken to support their disclosure, protect them, or hold the offender accountable they will eventually stop reporting. Some will settle the scores themselves. Others will lose interest in and avoid school and become mistrustful of adults and adult run institutions.

Behaviour

Behaviour refers simply to the illegal, aggressive, violent, or anti-social actions perpetrated by youth in the gang/group.

A typical trajectory for a gang/group member through the model might proceed as follows. Youth members bring a mix of vulnerability/protective factors to situations that may provide "behavioural cues" to act in a violent, aggressive, or anti-social manner. Youth with high levels of protective factors and low vulnerability factors might choose to resist peer pressure, ignore environmental cues, and simply refuse to participate. Others with low levels of protective factors and high vulnerability factors responding to behavioural cues and feeling supported by a social context or "background" that diminishes victim impact or validates the behaviour may proceed. If they are not apprehended or punished for their actions the thrill of breaking the social taboo against harming others and the absence of punishment reinforces the behaviour increasing the likelihood it will be repeated or escalated.

Implications of "The Interactional Model" For Prevention/Intervention

While the *involvement cycle* model outlines a process for becoming and staying involved In a gang/group the *interactional model* provides an account of the factors that appear to have impact on whether or not members' decide to become involved in crime and violence. This multi-level analysis locates violent youth gang/group behaviour in a social context and places the individual youth, with all his/her strengths and weaknesses, vulnerability and risk factors, in a tension between social norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs, and the social institutions that are mandated to support and serve young people.

Two categories of the model overlap to some degree with two of those in the gang/group involvement cycle model.

Individual needs is roughly equivalent to vulnerability/protective factors. *Crisis event* possesses some features of

response/sanction. Prevention measures designed to address a youth's *vulnerability factors* may have the effect of lowering motivation to commit crime, whether it be for personal or material gain. Enhancing *protective factors* may have the effect of "inoculating" young people against the effects of *situational factors* and empower them to resist committing illegal or anti-social behaviour or discourage others from doing the same. Lowering the rewards and increasing the cost of involvement in illegal behaviour through the application of appropriate legal or other sanctions, especially when a youth is first apprehended, may have important specific deterrence value. General deterrence may be achieved through the development and application of appropriate sexual harassment and zero tolerance policies and procedures providing they are clear, communicated to young people, and consistently enforced. It involves controlling young people's access to guns owned by family members and increasing the severity of consequences for weapons use and possession.

Addressing the *social context* means demanding accountability from systems, professionals, young people, and government. It involves our reassessing teaching and learning as it pertains to critical thinking skills, life skills, media literacy, cultural differences, and gender role socialization. It also involves holding the media accountable for portrayals of gratuitous violence, the omission of positive images or the transmission of harmful images that stereotype, demean or denigrate persons, and for sensationalizing and oversimplifying complex social phenomenon. In fact, we are unlikely to make any significant process against rising levels of violence in Canada until we become "re-sensitized" to its impact on victims.

Situational factors are often unpredictable and thus difficult to control. However, things such as better lighting, improved building security, and consideration for the safety of persons in the design of public spaces are tangible and relatively straightforward to address. Impulsiveness and peer pressure and the presence of weapons are more difficult. "Inoculation" against the situational factors, in the form of life-skills training, is perhaps the best if not the only defense we have. The best method of teaching young people to be prepared to deal with ambiguous or highly arousing or stimulating situations, is through role-playing. Knowledge acquired through lectures or reading materials may not generalize to the community because the youth's emotions do not get engaged or the examples are unfamiliar. A better way to prepare young people for what they will need to know to resist situational factors is to observe or participate with peers in role-playing scenarios that are realistic and likely to be encountered in their own community .

• Media Origins of the Phenomenon

Debate over the effects of media images of gratuitous violence on young peoples' behaviour has yielded little consensus. There is no question that these images are present in all forms of youth subculture from music videos to computer games, films, television programs, comic books, cartoons, and advertisements. Violence as a form of entertainment titillates, arouses, and sells consumer products, it is that simple. Visual media appeals to adolescents and serves as a passive educator providing them with models of behaviour in a rapidly evolving universal youth subculture. For young people searching for an identity and a place in the world media images are a major source of information.

Claims that the youth gang/group phenomenon is, or was, media created are not without some merit. News coverage of the American gang scene in places such as Los Angeles and New York has provided Canadian youth with the scripts, regalia, and models for gangs and gang behaviour. In essence, much of what we are seeing here in Canada has been imported and appropriated from the United States. There is ample evidence of mimicry. Also) the media, through selective coverage of youth gang/group and other forms of violence, has created an impression in many peoples' minds that Canada is as violent as the U.S., an impression which is not supported by the statistics on violence in Canada.

However, as the debate continues, two larger and perhaps more important points have been missed. First, the media reports only the more sensational aspects of the phenomenon such as Neo-

Nazi group incidents, "swarmings", "riots", and the occasional shooting, but provides few accounts of the widespread, though subtler, kinds of intimidation, characteristic of gangs/groups in schools. In fact, a comparison of police charges records and clippings from Toronto newspapers reveals that only a small number of all occurrences of gang/group activities is ever brought to public attention (Banner, Ryan, and Mathews, 1993; Banner and Mathews, 1993).

Second, the youth gang/group phenomenon, in its present manifestation in this country, has now become an entrenched part of youth subculture that is being passed down to younger teens and children. Even banning all depictions of violence in the media immediately would not change this situation. Debate over media origins of the youth gang/group phenomenon is purely academic now .

• Power and Control

One major reason why young people become involved in youth gang/group activity or stay involved is for the feeling of power and control it gives members. On their own these young people often feel vulnerable. It is worth noting that many, though not all, of the youth interviewed in the study were small or slight in build. However, large physical size did not appear to attenuate the need or desire for power and control and protection.

This aspect of power and control over others is a key dimension to understanding youth gang/group involvement. Power and control over others gives a sense of power and control over one's own life, over one's own insecurities, over the uncertainties of life commonly experienced by young people struggling with the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is evident that these young people have acquired a model and understanding of power that is predominant in our culture, namely "power over" as opposed to "shared power".

Needs for power and a sense of personal efficacy can be achieved very quickly in a gang/group. This speed is a powerful reinforcer and something which makes involvement somewhat addictive. This addictive quality makes exiting or giving up certain behaviours or gang/group involvement difficult to do .

• Responding to Youth Gangs/Groups

Planning a comprehensive intervention strategy will be an enormous challenge because the youth gang/group phenomenon in Canada is a moving target. Gang/group activities, membership, names, and locations and kinds of activities are constantly shifting. Our present lack of information and understanding about youth gangs/groups is unfortunate, especially when some immediate action is necessary. The use of weapons, sexual and common assaults, gay-bashing, robbery, vandalism, and other criminal aspects of the phenomenon certainly call for immediate attention.

Enhancing the Role of Police

In addition to parents and schools, police are one of the key partners in the struggle to respond to youth gangs/groups. Study participants see a reactive (law enforcement) and pro-active (education) role for police.

There is no question of a need for law enforcement. Comments from both adults and youth about just how serious the problem can get is ample evidence of that. However, most of the suggestions made about the role of police had to do with the manner in which law enforcement is practiced, specifically the behaviour and attitude of individual officers.

Young people are looking for three things from police: involvement, open communication, and respect. Youth want police officers to get to know them and the communities they serve, to be someone who is tuned in to the needs and the joys and the hurts and the pains of the people they protect and serve. They want to see police "live and interactive" with community members, themselves included. They want to know that the local police officer is "their cop", someone they can

trust and depend on. But most of all young people want respect from police and officers who will be straight with them. Young people admit that police officers can have a strong impact on them when they are shown respect and genuine concern.

Obtaining the kind of knowledge and skills necessary to work effectively with adolescents takes time. Unfortunately, youth work is not a high priority in most police forces or among police officers. Many officers feel Youth Bureaus are where you spend a brief period of your time before moving on to "real" law enforcement. What police need to understand is that the time they spend providing a professional police service to youth today will have a significant impact on the criminal lifestyle choices of many young people tomorrow.

In terms of a pro-active role participants see the police as a valuable information resource for parents, youth, school administrators, and teachers. Police are important sources of information for a community but they need to demystify the law enforcement process and help people understand what a citizen can expect from a police officer, and why. Educating teachers and youth about the existence of and dangers associated with youth gangs/groups, and helping parents identify the early warning signs of their son's or daughter's involvement is crucial. Without this information a community has only rumor and fear to guide its actions.

Police can play a significant support role in maintaining school safety if it is managed properly. A pilot project of such a partnership is currently underway in Toronto and involves D.A. Morrison Junior High School and the #5 District Street Crime Unit of the Metropolitan Toronto Police Force (Ryan, Mathews, and Banner, 1993b). The key features of the program are:

1. Teachers, students, staff, and parents are invited to attend a meeting or assembly where they are informed about the purpose and nature of the program and invited to ask questions;
2. The police officer is not in the school but on call to school administrators;
3. The same police officer responds to calls from the school. This helps the officer to get to know the students, community, administrators, and non-teaching staff and vice versa;
4. The officer acts as both a law enforcement and information resource to students, administration, and staff;
5. The police officer maintains an intimate connection with students through involvement in non-law enforcement activities such as teaching, showing up at dances or sporting events, or dropping by the school at lunch hour just to talk.

Schools

The presence of large numbers of young people, the large size of many school buildings and grounds, the constant interactions of the student body in halls and classrooms, and the presence of intruders all add to the problem of maintaining safe schools. School administrators need to be vigilant with respect to the physical plant factors that may contribute to gang/group violence or other activities. Defining or strengthening student disciplinary procedures to reflect a zero tolerance attitude towards violence and ensuring consistent enforcement are important first steps. Policies addressing violence must balance the rights of offenders and victims and ensure both have access to supports and resources.

Students should be encouraged in every appropriate and possible way to take ownership and responsibility for the safety and security of their schools. Organizing a "school watch" program or school safety committee, and allowing anonymous disclosure of potential or actual crime and delinquency activities on or off school property may assist law enforcement officers to apprehend persons threatening school safety or to confront potentially dangerous situations before they escalate. Of course inviting students to take ownership of their schools means sharing power and decision-

making responsibilities which may be difficult for some Boards or administrators.

Across the curriculum themes that confront and address conflict, sexism, racism, heterosexism, and provide critical thinking skills and visual or media literacy will be of enormous benefit to the process of preventing some of the behaviour seen in gangs/groups. Schools should consider offering peer counselling, anger management, and conflict resolution skills, and "gang-proofing" to students.

Peer learning and influence models suggest that positive peer groups have the potential to provide an optimal environment in which gang/group members can learn pro-social values and behaviours. Young people whose impulsive or situationally influenced choices are toward antisocial or criminal actions could be encouraged and supported to change their behaviours through exposure to positive peer interactions.

Some School Boards are using police officers to educate their students about the hazards and illegalities of carrying and using weapons. This kind of activity helps build a bridge between police and the schools and is an example of the kind of linkages to external community resources that schools need to develop further.

School Board officials and administrators should consult regularly with all personnel, teaching and non-teaching, to keep informed about individual trouble-makers and gang/group activities in their schools. School Boards and administrators need to be very supportive of all personnel and assist them in all ways possible when they are forced to confront violent or threatening students in their classrooms, respond to attacks on their person or property, or choose to pursue legal actions against a student or intruder who assaults or threatens them.

Social Services

Social service agencies can also play a supportive role in providing support and assistance to young people in schools. Linking up with the guidance and counselling department in high schools professionals in community-based social service agencies could help students deal with the personal and family problems and pressures that leave them vulnerable to exploitation and at risk of either joining a gang/group or being victimized by one.

A number of vulnerable young people involved in gangs/groups are in need of attention from social services. However, it is extremely unlikely that any more than a few would ever find their way to agencies. Community outreach is the most practical and realistic method for reaching young people involved in gangs/groups. In most communities the police are the only ones who see young people on their own turf and they simply are not trained or prepared to deal with all the complex issues affecting the lives of these youth. Social services, churches, or other community groups have to go into the malls, onto the streets, and into the schools if they want to be of real assistance.

Government

The Young Offenders Act was mentioned repeatedly in the study, some participants in support of it, others critical. Some youth felt that the Y.O.A. benefited them and were grateful for the second chance it gave them to get their lives back together. Others exploited its provisions and used those opportunities to further their criminal careers. What were benefits to some were loopholes to others. This points to a problem in our ability to differentially assess offenders perhaps more than it does to problems in the Act.

However, there was strong consensus concerning the need to amend the Y.O.A. to allow for harsher sanctions against violent or repeat offenders and weapons offences. Sadly, it was apparent from speaking with the youth that no changes to the Y.O.A. would affect the behaviour of chronic young offenders who feel they have nothing left to lose.

Critics of the Y.O.A. fail to realize that it works for most young offenders. A little over half of all youth who are charged each year under the Y.O.A. are first offenders. That means many, if not most, are not returning to court a second time.

Many young people have an impression that the Y.O.A. is lenient, that youth can get away with anything, and that nothing really happens to them. It is this impression that the government needs to address, and soon. The tragic part of this assumption is that much does indeed happen to them. Charged offenders miss time away from school which can result in failure or lower grades. The stigma attached to being arrested and charged lives with the young person for a long time. Criminal records close many doors just as the young person is trying to start out in his/her life. Being known to police and other community members as a former gang member makes them suspect even if they are staying out of trouble with the law. Contrary to popular opinion young offenders' records are not automatically wiped clean.

But the costs go even farther. The loss of former neighbourhood friends who chose a different and non-criminal path can leave the youth isolated back in their communities. Criminal skills acquired in the gang/group are of little use in the conventional employment world. Gang/group members acquire few opportunities to achieve success and establish themselves or obtain positive self-esteem outside the gang/group context. This can leave them feeling very vulnerable, alone, and afraid, which often lures them back into criminal gang/group activity.

When discussing the Young Offenders Act or strengthening certain sanctions it is important to heed the cautions of "labelling" theorists who suggest that we may need to be careful when we attempt to define or describe the actions of youth gang/group members. Not all young people involved in gangs/groups or illegal activities are "bad" or criminal. Many adults forget that some of their own teen behaviour may have skirted the line between crime and prank. Labelling theorists would certainly advocate for a judicious use of the criminal justice system and for more and better use in Ontario of "alternative measures" under the Young Offenders Act.

The adult professionals in the study report much dissatisfaction with the way certain Acts of Legislation impede their ability to respond effectively to the youth gang/group phenomenon and youth violence. Mentioned specifically were the Freedom of Information and Privacy legislation, the Education Act, the Child and Family Services Act, and the Young Offenders Act (for a more detailed discussion of these concerns see Mathews, Banner, and Ryan, 1992).

Legislative issues aside, there are other dimensions of the youth gang/group phenomenon that will require a more macro-social level of government intervention. For example, ethnic-based gangs/groups, especially those composed of youth who are recent immigrants, are sending us a message that their communities are in distress and ill equipped to help members adjust to their new lives in Canada. Governments will need to address this issue and do everything possible to increase these peoples' access to education, jobs, housing, social services, and other supports.

The influence of poverty and high youth unemployment are also factors which need to be addressed as does strengthening the social bonds between youth and their families. This means involving families in individual interventions and in the development of a comprehensive intervention strategy. It also means that government needs to be conscientious in resourcing families, however defined, to provide the best possible level of care to children and youth .

• Freedom Without Limits Has A Dark Side

Listening to the words of the youth who wanted to be caught it was hard not to hear a cry for boundaries and limits. As strange as it may sound to adults or non-involved youth, breaking the social taboos against harming others and crossing the boundary between pro-social and anti-social behaviour leaves many of these young people ungrounded and often afraid.

The social taboo against harming others gives us limits and norms through which guide our social

relations. Through them we obtain a sense of safety and predictability. Once young people cross the line and break the taboo, the forbidden becomes known to them. If they don't get caught there is a temporary thrill and euphoria that comes with the behaviour. If they continue to cross with impunity there is a tendency to up the stakes and risk testing stronger taboos and limits.

The problem is that as they keep crossing the thresholds the whole idea of a boundary can disappear. At this point gang/group members may start to feel that there may be no limits. They may murder, they may die violently. Such awareness can put these youth in a strange land with no maps to guide them. At this point they typically face an existential crisis of meaning and will review their lives and decide to alter their path. Tragically, some decide to go on .

- Addressing the Social and Systemic

Responding to youth gangs/groups and youth violence should not be a process of simply focusing on the youth themselves but must include thoughtful reflection on the institutions and the professionals who serve them. There is much in our institutions and professional practices that support and encourage youth violence.

Violent acts do not simply or necessarily reflect pathology in an individual or in groups of individuals. They are also social in nature and have a social meaning. One need only look at the differences between the youth who lashes out violently against a perpetrator after giving up on school officials to respond to his/her victimization, the minority youth who gathers with friends from a similar background to defend themselves against the assaults of racist groups, or the youth struggling for survival on inhospitable streets who joins a gang/group for protection and material gain to understand this simple point.

At the broadest conceptual level, the development of a comprehensive response strategy will need to proceed along short and long-term timelines and address the individual and social/systemic factors that have some bearing on the phenomenon. Most important of all, any comprehensive strategy that does not include input and cooperation from schools, police, business, community groups, ratepayers, churches, government, and young people and their families, will likely fail.

Our attempts to understand and address youth gangs/groups and youth violence must be self-reflexive. We as a society, as youth serving professionals, as parents, as adults, must stand in the circle with young people and search out the place we ourselves occupy in the perpetuation of pro-violence, racist, sexist, anti-gay, or "youthphobic" attitudes, values, and beliefs.