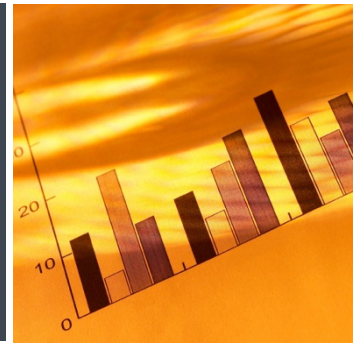


Youth Gangs in Canada: A Review of Current Topics and Issues



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BUILDING A SAFE AND RESILIENT CANADA

Highlighting advances in research on youth gangs and understanding involvement among key populations of interest.

BACKGROUND

Youth gangs are not a new phenomenon in Canada. Over the past 25 years, increased interest in this group has led to continuing theoretical and empirical research and evaluation efforts with the goal of better understanding and responding to this issue. Advances have been made in defining the nature of youth gangs and their activities, the motivations for joining, and the risk and protective factors that influence involvement in a gang lifestyle.

While a precise measure of youth gang involvement and prevalence of their activities in Canada is not currently available, strides have been made in understanding affiliation among three key populations of interest: Aboriginal youth, immigrant youth, and young women. Public Safety Canada continues to work to support the development and dissemination of Canadian knowledge to assist in the implementation of future initiatives to address youth gangs.

METHOD

This research report presents a review of the research and evaluation literature on key topics and issues related to youth gangs in Canada in order to assist in the development of prevention and intervention solutions to address youth gang involvement and gang-related activities.

The majority of theoretical knowledge and empirical work on youth gangs has come from the United States. Although there are advantages in learning from the American experience, there is a danger in assuming that the causes and structure of gangs are the same in the United States and in Canada. To that end, this publication uses Canadian research and resources as much as possible.

ANSWER

Given the lack of a widely-agreed upon definition of ‘youth gang’ within and across various sectors, some generally recognized criteria have been established: a group phenomenon related to youth; self-formed association of peers who have mutual interests, and who may use symbols of belonging; organization is necessary though not sufficient; control or claim to a specific territory in which the group operates; and engagement in delinquent and/or criminal behaviour (including violence).

Those who become involved in youth gangs do so to address a variety of unfulfilled needs, with the gang often offering them the following: protection; economic benefits; social benefits; emotional support and sense of belonging; and opportunities to overcome structural level socioeconomic disadvantages.

Youth gang members account for a large amount of criminal behaviour and a variety of offences have been linked to gang membership, including: property offences; drug trafficking; weapons offences; robbery; sexual and aggravated assault; and homicide. Beyond immediate injuries to individuals, youth gangs and their activities are harmful to communities (e.g., promoting a culture of violence) and society as a whole (e.g., financial costs on justice and health care systems). Involvement in a gang lifestyle can also lead to problems for members, including: lack of education or employment success; exposure to and involvement with substance use; teenage parenthood; and exposure to violence, victimization and trauma.

Risk and protective factors, although not in and of themselves indicative of causal mechanisms, provide insight into understanding youth gang involvement.



Risk factors consistently supported in research studies include: experiencing negative life events; exhibiting early problem behaviours; holding delinquent beliefs; being poorly supervised by parents; associating with delinquent peers; and commitment to those peers. Considerably less research exists on protective factors, but some possible characteristics include: positive coping and decision-making skills; involvement with prosocial peers and activities; educational aspirations and commitment to school; strong family connections and support; and living in a cohesive neighbourhood.

Aboriginal youth are often involved in street gangs and ‘wannabe’ groups and participate in less lucrative criminal activities such as drug trafficking, assaults and break-and-enters. They often have high rates of internalized violence (e.g., self-injurious behaviour). Gang involvement has clear precursors that can be traced back to the historical and cultural losses, social and political inequalities, and economic barriers faced by Aboriginal people for generations. The presence of structural inequality and collective trauma require continuous understanding and form an important component when working with this population. All efforts to assist youth should be culturally adapted and utilize local community and cultural strengths.

Immigrant youth may face a number of barriers to acculturation and integration to Canadian society. Compounded with other risk factors for gang involvement, this leaves them with what appear to be insurmountable challenges and makes the gang a viable option for obtaining financial support, acceptance, and a sense of social status and respect. Most immigrant youth are involved in either an ethnically-based gang or in a multicultural gang, commonly organized with the clear purpose of committing criminal activity for financial gain. In order to support these youth, collaboration among diverse stakeholders is needed to promote the development of positive identities and to achieve a healthy sense of belonging at home, at school and in the community.

In the past, young women were typically seen as adopting gender-specific marginal roles in the gang. Now there is variation in the positions they adopt and they are involved in multiple types of gangs (e.g., auxiliary, co-ed, independent). Exposure to violence and victimization are particular factors that enhance the

appeal of gangs for young women. However, once involved in the gang they continue to experience exploitation, vulnerability and victimization. Gender-informed prevention and intervention efforts for young women should include: a safe and nurturing environment; building resilience to protect against future victimization; fostering respectful and positive relationships; and combating the ‘gang lore’ that promotes the gang as a safe haven.

IMPLICATIONS

Public Safety Canada continues to support effective youth gang prevention and intervention strategies that are known to work based on empirical evidence and lessons learned from past implementation and evaluation experiences. In conjunction with the insights gained throughout the literature review process, this information has been and will continue to be incorporated into the development and implementation of future initiatives to address youth gangs. The work conducted to date demonstrates the importance of developing a comprehensive approach to prevention and intervention that captures the complex nature of youth gang involvement and addresses the specific dimensions of the problem for key populations of interest.

SOURCE

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