



Addressing Street Gangs

BUILDING A SAFE AND RESILIENT CANADA

Comprehensive gang crime reduction strategies target crime with prevention, intervention and suppression efforts. Single strategy programs have been of limited effectiveness.

According to the Criminal Intelligence Service Canada (CISC) the problem of street gangs is growing in Canada. In its 2006 report, CISC estimated that there were over 300 street gangs with about 11,000 members. While street gangs were formerly limited to major urban centres, gangs now exist in many smaller communities and rural areas. Some street gangs have moved beyond their home communities, become more sophisticated, and now have an older membership that includes men in their twenties and thirties.

The goal of this report was to present some ideas about the best ways to deal with street gangs in Canada. In particular, the paper looked at some specific programs that use prevention, intervention, and suppression efforts and reviewed the literature on what works in gang crime reduction with an emphasis on comprehensive, anti-street gang programs. This report also discussed the need to utilize a strategic planning model and to develop a structure to implement comprehensive programs.

Prevention programs are intended to keep children from joining gangs. These efforts can be broadly directed at all young people in a community, or can be targeted to children and youth who are at greater risk of becoming involved with gangs. A review of the research on the causes of crime among these offenders found that factors including individual characteristics and social variables, such as the neighbourhood, the family, the peer group, and the school should be addressed in prevention programs. The best ways of dealing with these factors are through: (i) prenatal and perinatal parenting programs; (ii) parental training; (iii) preschool programs; (iv) school programs; (v) employment programs; and (vi)

neighbourhood revitalization initiatives.

Intervention programs are intended to help gang members leave gangs and to prevent young people who are on the periphery of gangs from joining. The author of this report suggests that the most effective intervention programs use wraparound strategies that involve youth, their families, service providers and community agencies. These programs provide individualized programming that is available in community settings. However, community based approaches need to be augmented by interventions in correctional settings, as well. Street gang members are frequently imprisoned. When they return to their communities and they often return to their gangs.

With regards to suppression strategies, the police have traditionally used tactics such as crackdowns, the use of informants, enhanced prosecution efforts and tougher laws to deal with street gangs. These efforts have not often been evaluated, but the report asserts that there is little evidence that they have a lasting impact. For example, one review of police crackdowns showed that there were often positive, short-term effects, but that these were rarely sustained. More positive findings came from an evaluation of the Dallas Anti-Gang Initiative which involved saturation patrol, aggressive curfew and truancy enforcement.

Comprehensive gang crime reduction programs are designed to combine the three categories of gang crime reduction strategies (prevention, intervention and suppression). According to the author, these combined programs have the greatest potential to provide lasting reductions in gang crime. Comprehensive programs are designed to hit all “pressure points” at the same time. Several of these comprehensive programs have demonstrated reductions in crimes committed by street gangs, but others have had implementation problems because

of their complexity. Thus, if comprehensive programs are to be successful, they must include a strategic planning process and operate within a structure that will facilitate success. Characteristics of this organizational structure include: (1) the structure should flow from the program; (2) municipal governments must play a central role in crime reduction; (3) leadership must come from the top; (4) there must be a high-level responsibility centre responsible for planning and implementation; (5) the program must have adequate resources; (6) the program must have a data gathering and analysis capability; and (7) process and outcome evaluation are necessary.

The author of this study concluded that only comprehensive efforts will have a lasting impact on street gang crime. Such efforts require a multi-agency approach that focuses on prevention, intervention and suppression. All levels of government need to work together to ensure that street gang problems are addressed. Project planning and implementation teams should include criminal justice officials (police, prosecutors, and corrections), community representatives, researchers, and others who can bring knowledge and resources to help address this issue.

The author suggests that sufficient resources should also be allocated to comprehensive street gang reduction programs. Entrenched street gangs are often the result of serious long-standing problems, such as poverty, family dysfunction, and community disorganization. The report asserted that small-scale interventions will not be sufficient to alleviate these problems in order to reduce the crimes committed by street gangs. Resources must provide for long-term funding of successful programs. Projects with short-term funding almost always have short-term futures – even highly successful programs have been cancelled because long-term funding was not available.

Finally, this report highlighted the importance of structure and leadership to enable the collaborative work required to plan and implement comprehensive street gang reduction strategies. Such programs require a high level responsibility centre that has the authority to make decisions and is accountable for results.

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