

Definitions of youth gangs

1. Overview

This project aims at preventing crime, violence and victimization by firearms among young people, especially for those at risk of entering a gang or already in a gang. Although in Montreal crime has been reduced, gang violence is a growing problem and community based approaches seem to be the most effective response.

2. Definitions

There are still no common definition of gangs, gang members and gang activities in Quebec. One of the key findings of the project is that the very notion of “gangs” is subject to interpretation. Many of the youth workers and young people we spoke to suggested that there were often groups of young people who were stigmatized with the label even though their main activities and purposes were primarily social (often as a function of limited prospects and social activities) and only occasionally did members get involved in criminal activities. These are in distinct contrast to criminal gangs which are better organized.

Youth gangs typically consist of young people who:

- self-identify as a group (e.g. have a group name)
- are generally perceived by others as a distinct group
- are involved in a significant number of criminal incidents that produce consistent negative responses from the community and/or law enforcement agencies.¹

The Montréal Police Service’s defines a youth gang as:

“An organized group of adolescents and/or young adults who rely on group intimidation and violence, and commit criminal acts in order to gain power and recognition and/or control certain areas of unlawful activity.”²

At the same time, not all youth gangs are criminalized to the same extent and not all groups of young people are really street gangs. This is an important issue as many community groups and youth maintain that young people are being labelled as gang members unfairly and stigmatized in spite of having no or limited involvement in criminal activity.

A street gang is a more or less structured group made up mostly of teenagers and young adults who use group intimidation and violence to carry out criminal acts in order to gain power and status or control lucrative activities (eg. taxing, drug trafficking, prostitution, etc.).³ In 2002, street gangs were added to the list of national priorities of the Quebec Ministry of Public Security. In 2003 the Ministry noted three different gang profiles⁴:

1. Teen gang

- Unstructured group of teenagers who commit minor infractions.
- Prevention and awareness are the preferred intervention measures for these packs of teens.

2. Emerging gang

- Group of individuals, usually teenagers, who model themselves on major gangs.
- Their activities are less structured and more improvised: emerging gangs focus on acquiring and defending a territory.
- The gang members make use of taxing, make threats and commit armed assaults in the areas around certain public places. They are the first choice of recruits for major street gangs.

- The best intervention for this type of gang is prevention and suppression.
3. Major gang
- Group of adults or teenagers who commit high-level crimes with targeted violence.
 - For this type of gang, suppression is the only viable type of intervention.

Principal Characteristic of Youth Gangs⁵

| Gang Characteristic | Very much | Somewhat | Very Little | Not at all | # of observations |
|---|------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Code of silence | 58% | 27% | 9% | 7% | 45 |
| Participation in illegal activities | 53 | 38 | 7 | 2 | 60 |
| Lack of respect for authority | 52 | 43 | 3 | 2 | 58 |
| Gang-specific dress code/colours | 47 | 26 | 17 | 10 | 58 |
| Use of monikers/nicknames | 42 | 46 | 11 | 2 | 55 |
| Defined cliques/posses/ sets | 38 | 31 | 23 | 8 | 48 |
| Use of violence during commission of crimes | 36 | 42 | 20 | 2 | 59 |
| Violent exit rites | 36 | 19 | 29 | 16 | 31 |
| Violent initiation rites | 31 | 21 | 31 | 18 | 39 |
| Use of gang communications methods (graffiti, hand signs) | 29 | 39 | 27 | 5 | 56 |
| Fluid gang affiliations | 23 | 47 | 19 | 12 | 43 |
| Intimidation of crime witness | 23 | 50 | 19 | 8 | 52 |
| Established hierarchy/leadership | 23 | 44 | 27 | 6 | 52 |
| Recruitment of females to work in sex trade | 23 | 21 | 27 | 30 | 44 |
| Rivalries with other gangs | 18 | 43 | 25 | 14 | 49 |
| Affiliation with organized crime groups/syndicates | 17 | 35 | 30 | 19 | 48 |
| Aggressive recruitment of members | 15 | 43 | 36 | 6 | 53 |
| Territorial in nature | 12 | 54 | 29 | 5 | 56 |
| Recruitment of females to assist in commission of crimes | 10 | 43 | 39 | 8 | 51 |

Note: The percentages within each area may not total 100 percent because of rounding.

Additional Characteristics Used to Define a Youth Gang, Canada 2002⁶

- Corroboration of affiliations or members of gangs through proven sources
- Recognized by other youth as youth gangs
- Admits to being a gang member; types of crimes committed; types of clothes and colours
- Group of youth who gather together to intimidate or harass or damage property
- Self-acknowledgement
- Street gang mentality displayed
- Create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation within the community
- Level of violence, possession of firearms
- Association to established organized crime groups
- Self-admission of membership, specific types of crimes committed (e.g. home invasions)
- Intimidation tactics, use of violence to achieve their goals
- Commit specific crimes- counterfeit, money, assaults
- Reliable source of information, association with known gang members, acknowledgement of gang membership, involvement in gang motivated crime, court ruling, wears gang identification

3. Gang Typology and Activities

“Street gangs are the foot-soldiers of organized crime. National and international gangs depend on them to do their dirty work at the local level. (...) Most often, too, they’re the violent side of crime. They fight other street gangs for turf; attack small business people in hold-ups and use violence or threat of violence to intimidate. Often, it is an innocent bystander who suffers from this violence.”⁷

The Police Service (SPVM) believes there are about 20 major gangs within the territory of Montréal, divided in two distinct groups (the Red and the Blue), numbering between about 300 and 500 members. There are also about 30 emerging gangs. The gangs are known to be unpredictable and unstructured. They are constantly forming and re-forming, moving from one place to another, and the length of time individual members belong to a gang may be very short. Usually boys approach street gangs to become of their members while the gangs recruit girls.

Emerging gangs are short-term and their affiliation patterns are temporary. While they model themselves on major gangs, their activities are less structured and more improvised. The violence of this type of gang is more spontaneous. These gangs includes teenagers with recurring activities including actively recruiting youth of all backgrounds, in many public places such as schools, parks, around metro stations, etc. This situation leads to people frequenting these locations feeling insecurity.

The SPVM says that street gangs may commit acts of violence impulsively, with no objective of financial gain. Street gangs look for opportunities to acquire territory and make money quickly. Their activities largely involve drug and weapons trafficking, juvenile prostitution, theft, loan-sharking, extortion and fencing stolen goods.⁸

It is difficult to determine gang activities and whether is increasing.

- Media coverage has increased but accessing reliable statistical data is problematic
- No consistency on definitions/classifications of youth and youth gangs
- Over-reliance on self-identification by individuals involved in youth gangs
- Communities may under-report gang-related violence to avoid stigma associated with gangs

Table 1- Typology of Some Gangs⁹

| | Spontaneous Group/Gang | Purposive Group/Gang | Youth Street Gangs |
|--------------------|---|---|---|
| Description | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Largely social in nature as they congregate to spend time together and "hang out". -The purpose of spending time together is generally not crime focused, although criminal activity sometimes occurs spontaneously and is situation-motivated, these groups may or may not have a defined group/gang name and do not generally define a territory or "turf" that they defend. -Members are sometimes influenced by glamorized portrayals of gangs in media. -These groups can be of any age, and of mixed or same gender. They are generally large in size because their power, popularity and social image are based on the extent of their social or friendship networks. - Many of the members of group have other options in life and are less committed to the gang or its culture than more serious type gangs. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Sometimes gang/group formation is planned with the purpose of carrying out specific criminal activity. -Often smaller in size than spontaneous gangs, size depends on type of activities conducted or the purpose of the gang. -Generally assume a lower profile (although still visible) in order to evade prosecution or police intervention -Can emerge from within existing larger groups/gangs or may come about for a specific purpose and be disbanded once the activity or plan has been carried out. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Groups of young adults come together as a semi-structured organization to engage in profit-driven criminal activity or organized violence against other gangs. -Identify themselves as such through the adoption of a gang name; common brands; styles, colours of clothing, and/or jewellery; and tatoos to openly display gang membership to other gangs. -Not part of a larger criminal organization and often have a definite territory or "turf" that they claim and defend as their own. -Graffiti is often used as a form of marking a gang's territory and as a means of communication. |
| Activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Spontaneous social activity and exciting, impulsive, criminal, violence/activity (sometimes against other youths); - Centrality of criminal activity is low, but activity sometimes involves (mostly) males "hanging out" and occasionally getting into troubles; - Criminal acts generally includes : shoplifting, thefts from vehicles, vandalism, occasional assaults, loitering, mischief bullying, swarming, intimidation, | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Purpose is objective-specific, consisting or premeditated and planned activities; -Centrality of criminal and/or violent activity is high; -Purpose of the gang's criminal activity may be economic, idealistic and/or emotionally-based. -Criminal acts can include: robberies, drug trafficking, breaking and entering, selling stolen property, | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Organized violence against other street gangs; -Planned, organized and calculated criminal activity for the goals of profit and image; -Centrality of criminal activity within the gang is high; -Activity is generally economically or territorially driven; -Use of intimidation and violence is moderate to high for the purposes of protecting economic and territorial interests; |

| | | | |
|----------------------|--|--|--|
| | <p>extortion, sexual/non-sexual harassment, and graffiti;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Importance is put on maintaining a highly visible profile within the community because the group/gang's sense of power and identity comes from the acknowledgment of their presence by outsiders | <p>procurement and trafficking of weapons, etc.</p> | <p>-Criminal activities include sexual and non-sexual harassment, robbery, murder, selling and/or procurement of weapons, assault, etc.</p> |
| Organizations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Loose, fluid structure; - No structured or permanent leadership or hierarchy; - Youths can identify themselves as a gang/group or can be identified by community stakeholders as a gang; - Individual members can be part of multiple groups/gangs through social connections without negative consequences; - There are few or no connections to organized crime groups present - Weapons used generally include: knives, bats, some handguns, and homemade weapons. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Loosely structured or more definite leadership structure; -Generally male-dominated groups; -Membership is small in size; Group comes together for specific purpose and then may be disbanded once the group's objectives are achieved; -Few or no links to criminal organizations. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Moderately structured hierarchy; -May or not have connections to organized crime groups; -Moderate levels of leadership are present where expectations are spelled out by the leaders (often older youth or adults); -A code of conduct and/or a set of rules is present; -There is a more permanent organizational structure; -High levels of integration, cohesion, and solidarity resulting from conflict and habitual criminal activity; -Multiple levels of involvement. |
| Recruitment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Drifting" where a group of friends come together and are labelled as a gang; -Youth are offered physical protection; - The individuals share the same interest; - These groups may come together because they are generally school peers, childhood friends/long-term associates, or neighbourhood friends or associates. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -"Drifting" where a group of friends come together for a common purpose or to achieve shared goals -Recruitment most often occurs within friend or social groups. Strangers are not generally invited due to elevated level of risk because of the nature of the criminal activities. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Recruitment of disenfranchised or "at risk" youth looking for potential monetary payoffs or access to drugs. -Youth are exposed to gang activity by having parents or older siblings engaged in criminal and/or gang activity; -Escalation in severity of criminal activity sometimes results in offers of further criminal affiliation and protection within other gang types; -Recruitment of new members from correctional institutions. |

4. Summary

- Not all youth gangs are criminalized
- Not all groups of young people are really street “gangs”
- There are different degrees of formality within the “gangs”
- Youth may move in and out of “gang” activities
- Individuals on periphery may facilitate gang activity actively or passively

¹ Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Environmental Scan: Features: Focus on Youth Gangs. Ottawa: Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2006.

² Montréal Police Service. Provincial Action Plan on Street Gangs. Québec: Department of Public Security, National Coordinating Committee, 2004 [Meeting, Toronto, May 25, 2005].

³ SPVM website available on-line at: http://www.svvm.qc.ca/EN/service/1_4_3_1_phenomene.asp

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Astwood Strategy Corporation. 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs. 2003.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Government of Canada. http://www.organizedcrime.ca/gangs_e.asp

⁸ SPVM, Allocution de Mario Plante, 20 juin 2006, available on-line at: www.svvm.qc.ca

⁹ Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family « Youth Gangs in Canada: A Preliminary Review of Programs and Services », September 2005.