



**Immigration, Social Disadvantage and Urban Youth Gangs:
Results of a Toronto-Area Survey¹**

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Abstract

Both media coverage and public opinion suggest that immigrants are responsible for a high proportion of youth gang activity in Canada. Unfortunately, very little academic research has actually examined the extent and nature of youth gang activity in this country. Our paper attempts to address this gap in the literature through an analysis of data from a survey of Toronto high school students and street youth. Our results suggest that: 1) immigrant youth are less likely to report gang affiliation than their Canadian born counterparts; 2) although Black and Hispanic youth are more likely to report gang activity than youth from all other racial backgrounds, the majority of gang members in Toronto are Canadian-born whites; and 3) racial differences in gang involvement can be explained by racial differences in economic and social marginalization. The policy implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: Toronto, gangs, immigration, disadvantage

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Introduction

Over the past decade, youth gangs and gang-related violence have emerged as major social problems in many of Canada's urban centres. Much of the recent concern stems from an apparent increase in gun-related homicides in cities like Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. Many of these high-profile murders have been directly attributed to gang activity because they often take place in public settings and frequently involve young, minority males as both victims and offenders. The involvement of minority males has further contributed to the public perception that gangs are an immigration issue. Extensive media coverage of Jamaican posses, Chinese Triads, Tamil gangs, Vietnamese gangs, the Russian mafia and well known American gangs like the Bloods and Crips, has also likely strengthened the belief that the gang issue in Canada is an "imported" phenomenon. Unfortunately, youth gangs in Canada have attracted much more media attention and public concern (see Shepard 1998) than academic research. Thus, to date, there is no empirical basis for the hypothesized link between patterns of immigration and gang activity in Canada.

Much of the Canadian gang research that has been undertaken is at least a decade old and based on extremely small samples. The problem of youth gangs in Toronto was, for instance, addressed in the early 1990s with information gained from interviews with a total of twelve youths (see Mathews 1993). Other research has been similarly modest in scope, often employing qualitative methods to investigate already identified and quite distinctive groups of young people residing in specific geographic locations: for example, Chinese immigrant gangs in British Columbia (Delbert and Norman 1980); Aboriginal gangs in the Prairies (Nafekh 2002); and skinhead gangs in both Calgary (Young and Curry 1997) and Edmonton (Baron 1997). To the best of our knowledge, there has been no previous large scale investigation of the extent of gang-related activity among more general populations of young people.

In the absence of an equivalent body of research in Canada, much of the way we think about youth gangs derives from the American experience. It is perhaps inevitable—given Canada's close physical and cultural proximity to the United States—that any investigation of youth gangs in Canada will invite comparisons with the U.S. However, significantly higher rates of violent crime in America, along with easier access to lethal weapons, makes it unlikely that gang activity in this country will take exactly the same form as gang activity in comparable American jurisdictions. Nonetheless, it is no longer plausible to argue that gangs are a uniquely American phenomenon. Indeed, regardless of how superficial its impact has been, large segments of Canadian youth have been exposed to American gang imagery and have adopted linguistic codes and dress styles associated with American gang culture (Klein 2002). How similar youth gangs in Canada are to their more frequently studied American counterparts remains to be seen.

One of the important lessons that we've already learned from American researchers is that there is little agreement about how we might go about recognizing or defining youth gangs. The following questions summarize some of the problems that those who study and work with gangs have to face: How do we distinguish youth gangs from other informal social groups? What are the defining characteristics of youth gangs? Are gang members always involved in crime? Do gangs always have specific names, clearly defined organizational structures (i.e., leaders and followers), initiation rituals and common colours? Do youth gangs claim control of particular urban territories?

These definitional issues are extremely important. American studies strongly suggest that how youth gangs are defined will have a major impact on how many gangs are identified in a particular community. For example, if gangs must have a name, display specific colours, practice initiation rituals, have clearly identified leaders and followers and engage in criminal activity, then fewer of them are going to be found than if one concludes that all groups of young people that hang out together are involved in gang activity. In other words, the larger the number of criteria that have to be met, the smaller the gang count is going to be. Thus, if you employ a restrictive definition of a gang, you stand a good chance of underestimating the true number of gangs in a community. By contrast, if you employ a broad definition, you run the risk of overestimating the magnitude of the gang problem. Overestimating the scope of youth gang activity may elevate people's fears of gang crime and could result in the inappropriate allocation of police and social service resources. On the other hand, underestimating youth gang activity could mean that a serious problem goes unchallenged. Quite clearly, policy-makers, non-government organizations (NGOs), educators and researchers need to know: "When is a group a gang?"

The purpose of this article is to update and broaden our general knowledge of youth gangs in Canada with information from a recent survey of Toronto high school students and street youth. Five specific research questions frame our analysis: 1) What proportion of Toronto youth claim gang membership? 2) What types of legal and illegal activities do gang members engage in? 3) Are self-identified gang members more involved in crime and victimization than non-gang youth? 4) Are immigrant youth more involved in gangs than youth born in Canada? and 5) What other social factors (gender, social class, ethnicity, etc.) are correlated with gang membership? We hope that the answers to these questions may help us construct a basic profile of youth gang activity in this country at the beginning of the new millennium. Furthermore, the information gathered may contribute to 'big picture' debates about the relationship between youth participation in gang activities and other dimensions of their lives.

Research Methods

We present findings from a large study of “in school” and “out of school” youth from Metro Toronto. In our opinion, Toronto is an ideal city for investigating the relationship between immigration and youth gang activity. First of all, Toronto has been described as one of the most diverse cities in the World and annually receives more immigrants and refugees than any other Canadian jurisdiction. Secondly, Toronto has recently experienced a sharp increase in gang-related crime—particularly gang-related homicides. However, we caution that the results of this survey may not be easily generalized to other regions of Canada. Indeed, different urban areas in Canada experience different patterns of immigration and different patterns of crime. Thus, in our opinion, future research should be pan-Canadian in scope and enable comparisons in gang activity between regions.

Our study was undertaken between June 1998 and June 2000. The first stage of the project involved intensive focus group discussions with both street youth and high school students. As well as an important source of qualitative information on the lived experiences of young people, these focus group sessions helped us identify important issues and develop survey items for the final questionnaire.

The second stage of the project involved an extensive survey of Toronto street youth. Street youth were contacted through three local shelters and four drop-in centers that cater to the needs of the homeless population. Most of these shelters were located in the downtown region of Toronto—where most street youth in the city congregate. Overall, the questionnaire was completed by 396 street youth.

The third stage of the project involved a survey of Toronto high school students. We randomly selected 30 schools (20 from the larger Public School Board and 10 from the Catholic School Board) to take part in the survey. The final school sample consisted of institutions from all areas of the city. Nine schools (30.0%) were randomly selected from the urban core and 21 schools (70.0%) were selected from the vast suburban region. The final sample consists of 10 schools (33%) from economically disadvantaged areas, 15 schools (50.0%) from “middle-class” areas and 5 schools (17%) from relatively affluent regions of the city.

Once a school was selected, we received a list of all home-room classes. From this list, we randomly selected a single class from each grade (Grades 9 through O.C.)² to take part in the study. In the end, the survey was administered to 3,393 students from 202 different home-room classes. The class lists indicated that there were 4,127 students enrolled in the 202 classes selected for the study. Thus, we were able to achieve a response rate of approximately 82 percent. The questionnaire was administered in a classroom setting during regular school hours. It took the typical student 50 to 70 minutes to complete.

Sample Description

The final high school sample ranges in age from 14 to 20 years (average age=16.6 years). Approximately 50% of the student respondents are male. Consistent with recent Census data, the high school sample is very ethnically and religiously diverse. For example, almost half (46%) of the high school students we surveyed were not born in Canada. In addition, most of our immigrant respondents (54%) have resided in Canada for less than five years. In addition, less than half (45%) of the high school sample self-reported a “white” or European racial identity. By contrast, 18% of the high school respondents reported that they were Asian, 13% reported that they were Black, 12% reported that they were South Asian, 4% reported that they were West Asian (i.e., Middle-Eastern), 3% reported that they were Hispanic and 5% reported that they belonged to some “other” racial group.³ Finally, over a third of our high school sample reported a non-Christian religious affiliation (e.g., Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, etc.).

Compared to the high school respondents, the street youth sample tends to be older (average age=19.3 years) and are more likely to be male (69.9%). Compared to high school students, street youth are also more likely to be born in Canada (79%) and are more likely to report a “white” or European racial identity (67%). However, it should be noted that one out of every five street youth respondents (20%) are Black (compared to only 12% of our high school respondents) and 5% are Aboriginal (compared to less than 1% of our high school respondents).⁴ It appears that both Asians (3%) and South Asians (3%) are significantly under-represented among street youth. Interestingly, most of our street youth respondents (93%) report no religious affiliation.

Findings

We began our analysis of the youth gang phenomena by asking our respondents whether they thought youth gangs were a major problem in the Toronto region. The results suggest that the vast majority of Toronto youth – much like other segments of the public—strongly believe that gang activity is a serious social issue. For example, three out of every four high school respondents (75%) report that they think gangs are either a very serious (52%) or serious social problem (23%) in the Greater Toronto Area. By contrast, only 4% think that gangs are “not a problem at all.” As crime researchers, however, we recognize that public perception does not always mesh with reality. The next obvious question, therefore, is how much gang activity is there? To what extent are Toronto youth involved with the gang culture?

Rather than impose a particular academic definition of gang activity on our respondents, we simply let them decide for themselves whether they felt they belonged to a youth gang or not. We began by asking all respondents “Have you ever belonged to a gang?” Approximately one out of every ten high school

youth (11%) and one out of every four street youth (27%) claim that they have been a gang member at some point in their life (see Table 1). We then asked our respondents “Do you belong to a gang now?” Less than 6% of our high school students admitted current gang membership, compared to 16% of street youth. Thus, street youth are approximately three times more likely to report current gang membership than their high school counterparts. This finding is consistent with other research results which suggest that street youth are much more involved than other young people in a wide range of deviant activities (Hagan and McCarthy 1997). It is important to note that our estimate of current gang membership among high school students (5.7%) is only about half that estimated by an “unscientific” Toronto Star study released in 1998 (see Shephard 1998). Two explanations for this lower estimate are possible: gang membership among Toronto high school students has dramatically declined since 1998, or differences in gang estimates between the two studies are the result of major differences in the quality of research methodology (i.e, sampling strategies, questionnaire administration, etc.)

Table 1. Percent of Respondents who Report that They have Belonged to a “Gang” at Some Time in Their Life

	High School Students	Street Youth
Never Been a Gang Member	88.9	73.2
Former Gang Member	5.4	10.4
Current Gang Member	5.7	16.4
Sample Size	3393	396

The Nature of Youth Gang Activity in Toronto

What does it mean to be a “gang member” in Toronto? What do students and street youth mean when they say they are the member of a gang? Are they specifying that they are involved in organized criminal activity or are they simply communicating the fact that they frequently hang out with a familiar group of friends who provide them with both companionship and a sense of belonging? In order to address these issues we asked all those respondents who admitted a gang affiliation about the types of activities they have engaged in as the member of a youth gang. The results suggest that a great deal of gang activity involves “social” rather than “criminal” behaviour (see Table 2). For example, 83% of high school gang members claim that they just socialize or hang out with other gang members. Similarly, 73% report that they go to parties, 64% admit that they play sports and 56% claim that they use alcohol and/or drugs within the gang context. By contrast, only 39% of high school gang members admit that

they have ever sold drugs or engaged in property crime within the context of the gang.⁵

However, we can not discount the fact that gang membership is often associated with certain forms of violence. Indeed, over half of all high school gang members (57%) admit that they have participated in street fights in which their gang was pitted against another gang. It is also important to note that four out of five student gang members (78%) maintain that their gang serves a protective function: fellow gang members look out for or protect each other when they are at school or on the street. It could be that bullying and victimization experiences cause some youth to seek sanctuary in gang membership. Being known as a gang member—as someone who has associates who will stand up for you and seek revenge if you are attacked or challenged—may cause other predatory offenders to think twice about choosing you as a victim.

Table 2. Percent of Current and Former Gang Members who Report that They Engaged in Various Activities within the Gang Context

	Students	Street Youth
Sold Illegal Drugs	39.3	76.2
Used Alcohol and Illegal Drugs	56.2	76.2
Engaged in Property Crime	39.5	53.3
Fought Against Other Gangs	56.8	64.8
Used the Gang for Protection	77.5	81.0
Played Sports Together	64.2	50.5
Socialized or Hung Out	82.8	84.8
Went to Parties or Clubs	73.2	80.0
Sample Size	377	105

The fact that many of the routine “gang” activities described by our respondents do not involve criminal behaviour encouraged us to re-conceptualize gang membership. In our new classification, we distinguish between the members of “criminal” and the members of “social” gangs. Respondents were classified as the member of a “criminal” gang if they indicated that they had either sold drugs, stolen property or fought against other gangs as part of their regular gang activities (see Table 3). According to this new classification scheme, only 4% of our high school respondents are currently the member of what might be called a “criminal” gang.⁶ It is also important to note that approximately one-third (31%) of all high school students who originally claimed gang membership were, in fact, only the member of a “social” gang. These types of social groupings are not, by definition, involved in any criminal activity. Thus, while journalistic calculations of the number of high school students claiming lifetime gang membership are

roughly accurate, the numbers alone do not tell the whole story. Indeed, students who claim gang membership are often not involved in any criminal activity. Current criminal gang membership, however, is much more common among street youth (15%) than high school students (4%). In fact, over ninety percent of all street youth who originally admitted gang membership were involved in a gang that engaged in some form of illegal activity.

Table 3. Percent of All Respondents Who Reported That They Belong to Either a “Criminal” or a “Social” Gang

	Students	Street Youth
Never Been a Gang Member	88.9	73.2
Former Member of a “Social” Gang	2.0	1.5
Former Member of a “Criminal” Gang	3.4	8.8
Current “Social” Gang Member	1.5	1.8
Current “Criminal” Gang Member	4.2	14.6
Sample Size	3393	396

Gang Membership and Crime

As a reliability check, we decided to compare our five basic gang categories with respect to independent measures of both criminal behaviour and illicit drug use. It is important to note that no matter what type of criminal activity we asked about—minor theft, major theft, vandalism, car theft, break and entering, drug dealing, carrying weapons or physical violence—current criminal gang members report much higher rates of criminal involvement than all other groups. Compared to social gang members and non-gang youth, former criminal gang members also report relatively high levels of criminal behaviour (see Table 4). For example, over half of all current criminal gang members (51%) report that they have sold drugs on ten or more occasions in the past year, followed by 21% of former criminal gang members. By contrast, not a single social gang member—and only 2% of non-gang members—report selling drugs at this level. Clearly, drug dealing is an activity that is highly associated with membership in a criminal gang. Furthermore, 35% of criminal gang members report that they broke into a home or business in the past year, compared to only 2% of social gang members and 2% of students who do not report a gang affiliation. These dramatic differences between gang members and non-gang youth also exist for all other forms of property crime (Table 4).

With respect to violence, nine out of every ten criminal gang members (91%) report that they were in a physical fight in the past year, compared to only 27% of social gang members and 26% of students who do not belong to a gang.

Similarly, 43% of criminal gang members report that they engaged in extortion or robbery in the past year (i.e., used physical force to take money from another person), compared to only 6% of social gang members and 5% of non-gang youth. The potential seriousness of gang-related violence can be demonstrated by the fact that almost 70% of current criminal gang members report that they carried a knife or gun with them during the past year. By contrast, only 11% of current social gang members and 12% of non-gang youth report that they carried a weapon.

Table 4. Percent of High School Students Who Have Engaged in Various Criminal Activities Over the Past Twelve Months, by Type of Gang Affiliation

	Never a Gang Member	Former Social Gang Member	Current Social Gang Member	Former Criminal Gang Member	Current Criminal Gang Member
Broke into a car to steal something	2.8	4.5	5.8	13.8	45.5
Stole a motor vehicle	0.9	6.0	1.9	11.2	37.3
Broke into a home or business	2.0	7.5	2.0	13.8	35.2
Sold drugs - ever in the past year	7.2	9.0	1.9	40.5	67.6
Sold drugs 10 or more times in past year	2.1	0.0	0.0	21.6	51.4
Vandalism	18.0	28.4	28.8	44.8	62.0
Minor theft (less than \$50)	17.8	15.9	25.0	40.5	69.5
Major theft (\$50 or more)	6.6	11.9	5.8	31.0	60.0
Carried a gun or knife	11.2	20.9	11.8	48.2	68.3
Extortion/Robbery	5.6	4.5	5.9	21.1	43.0
Attacked to seriously harm someone	7.4	6.0	5.9	45.6	57.7
Involved in a Fight	26.5	32.8	27.5	58.8	90.8
Involved in a Gang (Group) Fight	12.7	19.7	23.5	47.4	79.6
Sexual Assaulted Someone	0.3	3.0	0.0	3.5	11.3
Used Marijuana	26.3	31.8	19.6	65.5	84.6
Used Cocaine/Crack	1.6	4.5	2.0	11.2	17.5
Used Other Illicit Drugs	5.3	7.6	2.0	26.7	25.2
Sample Size	3,015	67	52	116	143

Both current and former criminal gang members also report much higher levels of illicit drug use than either social gang members or those with no gang affiliation (see Table 4). For example, among high school students, 85% of current criminal gang members report that they used marijuana in the past year, 17% report that they used cocaine or crack and 25% report that they used other illicit drugs. By comparison, only 20% of current social gang members and 26%

of non-gang youth report that they used marijuana in the past twelve months. Similarly, only 2% of current social gang members and 1.6% of non-gang youth report that they used cocaine or crack in the past year.

In sum, our results strongly suggest that membership in a “criminal” gang is strongly related to high levels of criminal offending and illicit drug consumption. However, it is important to stress that high school students who claim “social” gang membership report only slightly higher levels of deviance and criminal offending than those who have never been the member of a gang. Indeed, differences in offending behaviour between social gang and non-gang youth rarely reach statistical significance. Clearly, many youth who identify themselves as “gang members” are not overly involved in deviant or criminal activities. It should also be noted that differences in offending behaviour between non-gang members and “criminal” gang members are much greater among high school students than street youth. For example, among high school students, “criminal” gang members score 6.5 times higher on our “total criminality” scale than non-gang members. By contrast, among street youth, “criminal” gang members only score 1.7 times higher than those who are not the member of a gang (see discussion in Tanner and Wortley 2002). Thus, while street youth who are “criminal” gang members have the highest overall levels of offending, they are not that different from street youth who are not members of a gang. We suggest that this pattern of results is a further illustration of what has been consistently reported in the research literature: life on the streets is sufficiently harsh that it makes little difference whether an individual is involved in a gang or not. Among street youth, encounters with crime are sufficiently routine that gang membership has only a small additive effect.

With cross-sectional data it is somewhat difficult to explain the exact nature of the relationship between gang membership and criminal offending. One possibility is that young people who already demonstrate high levels of criminal activity are attracted to—or recruited by—criminal gangs (i.e., birds of a feather flock together).⁷ On the other hand, some young people may be introduced to crime, or become more criminal, once they join a gang—perhaps as the result of peer pressure or socialization into the gang culture. In our opinion, both selection and socialization processes are likely at work. Indeed, the fact that former gang members report significantly less involvement with crime than current gang members suggests that the nature of gang context does have at least some crime-promoting effects.

Gang Membership and Victimization

Both popular and academic discussions about youth gangs have tended to focus exclusively on criminal offending. Very little is known about differences in the victimization experiences of gang members and non-gang youth. In order to

address this gap in the literature, we asked all of our respondents whether or not they had been the victim of nine different types of crime in the past year. The results of our survey suggest that criminal gang members are much more likely to experience various forms of criminal victimization—including major and minor theft, vandalism, physical threats, threats with a weapon, physical assault, assault with a weapon and sexual assault—than all other youth. By contrast, youth who have never been the member of a gang are the least likely to be victimized (see Table 5). For example, among high school students, eight out of every ten criminal gang members (79%) report that they were physically assaulted in the past year, compared to 50% of social gang members and only 35% of non-gang youth. Similarly, almost half of current criminal gang members (45%) claim that they were assaulted with a weapon over the past twelve months, compared to 10% of current social gang members and only 5% of students who have never belonged to a gang. The results also suggest that gang membership puts one at risk of sexual assault. This is particularly true for female youth. For example, one out of every four female respondents (25%) who claims current membership in a criminal gang also report that they were sexually assaulted in the past year. By contrast, only 8% of females in social gangs and 2% of female students who claim no gang affiliation report being the recent victim of a sexual assault. This finding is somewhat consistent with other ethnographic research which suggests that female gang members are sometimes forced to have sex as part of gang initiation rituals.

Table 5. Percent of High School Students Who Have Experienced Various Forms of Criminal Victimization Over the Past Twelve Months, by Type of Gang Affiliation

	Never a Gang Member	Former Social Gang Member	Current Social Gang Member	Former Criminal Gang Member	Current Criminal Gang Member
Victim of Minor Theft (<\$50)	35.9	44.8	36.5	45.7	54.0
Victim of Major Theft (>\$50)	14.5	19.4	12.5	20.7	34.0
Victim of Vandalism	25.2	28.4	23.5	41.4	45.4
Threatened (no weapon involved)	36.7	44.8	52.9	56.9	73.8
Threatened with a Weapon	13.8	17.9	19.2	31.0	56.7
Received Death Threats	6.0	7.5	13.5	18.1	44.7
Assaulted (no weapon used)	35.2	43.3	50.0	63.8	79.4
Assaulted with a Weapon	5.2	4.5	9.6	20.7	44.7
Sexually Assaulted	5.9	11.9	1.9	13.8	12.1
Sample Size	3,015	67	52	116	143

How can we account for the positive relationship between gang membership and criminal victimization? One possibility is that frequent victims of crime actually seek out gang membership as a means of protection. In other words, fear of further victimization causes some youth to join gangs. An alternative explanation is that the very nature of gang activity itself dramatically increases the risk of victimization for those involved. In other words, gang membership causes victimization. For example, gang members may be required to vigorously protect specific gang territories—a task that may often bring them into violent conflict with other youth. As discussed above, a high proportion of criminal gangs are also involved in the illicit drug trade and other forms of illegal economic activity.

Previous research suggests that drug dealers are particularly vulnerable to violent victimization because they often possess large quantities of both money and drugs and they cannot report victimization experiences to the police because of the illegal nature of their economic activities. Combined, these two factors may render gang members attractive targets for other predatory offenders—including the members of rival gangs—and dramatically increase their overall risk of violent victimization.

Immigration Status and Gang Activity

In the next stage of our analysis, we employed a variety of statistical techniques in order to identify the social correlates—or predictors—of current membership in a criminal gang.⁸ We were particularly interested in determining whether or not immigrant youth are more involved in criminal gangs than youth born in Canada—controlling for other relevant factors including gender, age, social class and feelings of social alienation. The identification of these correlates is important because it provides insight into the causes of gang formation and could ultimately lead to the development of effective social policies that can target harmful gang activity. It should be stressed that—in general—the predictors of gang activity identified by our research (and discussed below) are highly consistent with the results of other youth gang studies conducted in both the United States and Europe (see bibliography).

As discussed above, a great deal of public concern has been recently expressed over the concept of the “immigrant youth gang.” The idea is that youth gang activity in Canada may be increasing because of recent immigration from certain “gang-prone” nations. In other words, serious youth gang activity is being imported from other countries into Canada. Interestingly, the results of our study simply do not in any way support this hypothesis. In fact, Canadian-born high school students are slightly more likely to report current membership in a criminal gang (5%) than students born in other countries (4%). Further analysis reveals that immigrant gang members are not more involved in crime—as either

offenders or victims—than their Canadian-born counterparts. In other words, Canadian-born gang members are just as likely to sell drugs, carry weapons and engage in violent assaults as gang members born in other countries. Furthermore, the data indicate that, among immigrants, gang activity actually increases with time spent in Canada. Recent immigrants are the least likely to report gang membership, while immigrants who have been in Canada for more than 10 years (i.e., youth who for all intensive purposes have been raised in this country) are most likely to report a current gang affiliation. These findings suggest that youth gangs are not being imported to Canada from other nations. Rather, youth gangs are a domestic phenomena with roots in the Canadian experience.

With respect to the immigration-gang connection, the results of our survey are completely consistent with the views of many Toronto-area police officials.⁹ For example, when asked if immigrant youth are more involved in gangs than youth born in Canada, one Toronto-area police officer, with extensive gang experience, stated that: “This is just another myth routed in those marginalization theories. I can tell you that all of the Greater Toronto Area’s biggest gang problems are from Canadian born gangsters. I have personally only come across two major non-Canadian gang leaders in my 6 years of work on this issue. To put this into context, I have interviewed or had contact with in excess of 500 major gang members.” Another gang-unit officer, with more than 10 years of gang-related experience, stated that: “I don’t think there is a connection to immigrant youth. In Toronto, a large number of gang members are born here. Ten to fifteen years ago there may have been more immigrant youth involved—but those persons now are having children born here. These are the same persons who were in the housing projects then and their children are growing up in the projects now. The only connection to immigrants would be that they would appear an easy mark for a gang recruiter as they would be less educated and easy to intimidate.” Another officer involved in gang-related investigations acknowledges that gang membership has much more to do with social status than immigration: “Immigration really has nothing to do with gangs. It has more to do with poverty and disadvantage. Some immigrant groups are pretty well-off. You don’t see gangs coming from those people. But if you are poor—well it doesn’t really matter if you are an immigrant or not. You are gonna be tempted to take up the gangster lifestyle.” This opinion clearly reflects some of our other results, discussed below.

The Social Correlates of Gang Activity

In addition to immigration status, we were very interested in identifying other social correlates of youth gang activity. The results of our analyses are outlined below.

RACE/ETHNICITY: Although our findings reveal that gang activity is not

related to immigration status, additional analysis reveals that gang membership is quite strongly related to racial background. Interestingly, the historical record reveals that early North American gangs were largely composed of youths from various disadvantaged European ethnic groups (i.e., Irish, Italian and Jewish immigrants). More recent studies, however, suggest that gang activity in the United States has become increasingly concentrated among certain racial minority groups—particularly African and Hispanic Americans (see Howell 2004; Short 2002). The results of our Canadian survey also suggest that Black, Hispanic and Aboriginal youth are more likely to report gang activity than youth from other racial backgrounds. For example, 8% of Black youth report that they are currently the member of a criminal gang, followed by 7% of Hispanic youth and 6% of Aboriginal youth. By contrast, only 4% of white youth report being the current member of a criminal gang. Importantly, relatively high levels of gang activity are not characteristic of all racial minority groups. Both South Asian (3%) and Asian students (2%), for example, report significantly lower levels of gang involvement than white students. Finally, although Black, Hispanic and Aboriginal youth may be somewhat over-represented among current gang members, whites are still the most prevalent racial group within Toronto's gang community. Overall, 36% of all criminal gang members self-identified as white, 26% are Black, 11% are Aboriginal, 10% are South Asian, 10% are Asian and 7% are Hispanic.

The fact that Black, Aboriginal and Hispanic students are more likely to report gang membership can largely be explained by the fact that they are also more likely to report lower class backgrounds and current residence in a housing project. Black, Aboriginal and Hispanic students also report significantly higher levels of alienation from mainstream Canadian institutions. Indeed, once the impact of social class and social alienation have been taken into statistical account the impact of race on gang membership disappears. The implications of these findings are clear. Social policies that are designed to reduce gang activity among these ethnic groups will also have to significantly reduce racial discrimination and existing racial inequalities. Without improving the relative social position of these minority groups, social programs and other gang suppression efforts are likely doomed to failure.

GENDER: As with crime and delinquency in general, males report much higher levels of gang activity than females (see Table 6). For example, 16% of male high school students report that they have belonged to a youth gang at some point in their life, compared to only 6% of female students. Similarly, approximately 7% of male students report that they are currently the member of a criminal gang, compared to less than 2% of female students. According to our data, males represent over 80% of all criminal gang members within the high school population. Gender differences in gang membership, how-

ever, are less pronounced among street youth. Indeed, 22% of female street youth report that they have been a gang member at some point in their life, compared to 29% of their male counterparts. Furthermore, 11% of female street youth report current membership in a criminal gang, compared to 16% of male street youth. Interestingly, current membership in a criminal gang is actually more prevalent among female street youth (11%) than male high school students (7%).

AGE: Previous research suggests that gang activity is highly concentrated among adolescents and young adults. Curry and Decker (1998), for example, estimate that the average age of an American gang member is 17 or 18 years. We found that, among our high school respondents, the average age of a criminal gang member is only 16—slightly lower than American estimates. Furthermore, we found that criminal gang membership is somewhat more prevalent among younger than older students. For example, 6% of 14-15 year-olds report current criminal gang involvement, followed by 5% of 16 year-olds. By contrast, only 3% of 17 year-olds and 2% of students over 18 report that they are the current member of a criminal gang. This “aging out” effect strongly suggests that much of the gang activity among high school students is “adolescent limited.” Thus, even without government intervention, most youth will likely exit gangs by the time they reach their late teens. However, it is important to note that, among street youth, gang membership seems to be more persistent. Indeed, the average age of street youth involved in criminal gangs is 18.4 (over two years older than their high school counterparts). It is quite possible that gang membership is much more enduring among severely disadvantaged youth who have become totally disengaged from mainstream society and the legitimate opportunity structure.

Table 6. Percent of Respondents Who Report that They Have Belonged to a “Gang” at Some Time in Their Life, by Gang Type and Gender

	Students		Street Youth	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Never Been a Gang Member	94.0	83.7	78.2	71.1
Former Social Gang Member	1.9	2.0	0.8	1.8
Current Social Gang Member	0.7	2.4	0.8	2.2
Former Criminal Gang Member	1.7	5.2	9.2	8.7
Current Criminal Gang Member	1.7	6.8	10.9	16.2
Sample Size	1696	1697	119	277

SOCIAL CLASS: Previous American research suggests that gang activity is most prevalent among lower class populations. Studies indicate that, in general, youth gangs are most likely to flourish in poor, inner-city neighbourhoods where financial resources and legitimate economic opportunities are scarce (Howell 2004; Spengel 1995). The results of our study are completely consistent with this research. Our analysis, for example, suggests that current criminal gang membership is strongly related to low levels of parental education, high levels of parental unemployment, residence in public housing projects and subjective assessments of lower class position. Indeed, 18% of students who described their family as “poor” report current membership in a criminal gang, compared to only 3% of students who report that their family income is “above average.”

Living in a public housing project also seems to be a very strong predictor of gang activity. Indeed, 14% of all youth who live in public housing report current membership in a criminal gang, compared to only 4% of youth who live in other rental accommodation and 3% of those who report that their home is “owned.” The particular combination of extreme poverty with specific geographical location may render housing projects ideal breeding grounds for youth gangs. Young people who reside in housing projects may feel particularly stigmatized, isolated and excluded from the outside world and come to believe that they are being systematically denied access to legitimate opportunities. As a result, they may identify more with other housing project residents than role models from mainstream society. Subsequently, young people in housing projects may be more likely to organize into criminal gangs in order to achieve social status or respect, acquire a sense of belonging or gain access to financial resources through the illicit economy.

FAMILY STRUCTURE: Consistent with previous American research, our survey also found that family structure is an important predictor of gang activity. In general, students who come from single parent households are more than twice as likely to report current membership in a criminal gang (8%) than youth who live with both parents (3%). Of course, family structure is highly related to social class. In other words, the relationship between single parent households and gang membership might be partially explained by the fact that single parent family units are more likely to be poor. However, it should be stressed that gang membership is also much less common among lower class youth who live with both parents than youth who live with their mother only. Therefore, it is possible that low levels of overall parental supervision—and perhaps a lack of a male role model within the household—may further contribute to the relationship between family structure and gang activity.

EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS: Consistent with previous research, we also found that current and former crimin-

al gang members tend to receive much lower grades in school than non-gang youth. Furthermore, compared to non-gang youth, gang members are less likely to report that they want to pursue a university or college degree and are much more uncertain about their career goals. The nature of relationship between educational performance and gang activity, however, is difficult to interpret. On the one hand, it has been argued that under-achieving students are more likely to drift into youth gangs in an effort to obtain the social respect and sense of belonging that they do not receive within the formal educational system. On the other hand, it has also been argued that school performance further deteriorates once youth become involved in the gang subculture.

SOCIAL ALIENATION: It has been argued that individuals who feel alienated or excluded from mainstream society are much more likely to seek solace in gang membership. Evidence from our study tends to support this hypothesis. For example, young people who feel that members of their own racial group suffer from severe discrimination—in housing, employment, education and at the hands of the criminal justice system—are much more likely to report current gang membership than youth who feel that Canadian society is fundamentally fair. Thus, perceptions of social injustice may be an important factor in explaining why some youth reject conventional social activities and decide to join criminal gangs. It is also important to note that perceptions of social injustice seem to develop as a result of actual experiences with discrimination (i.e., racial profiling, hate crime victimization, etc.). Thus, racism in Canadian society should also be seen as a possible cause of gang activity in this country.

CONCLUSION: Our results indicate that gang activity is much more prevalent—and more serious—among street youth than high school students. However, contrary to public opinion, our research suggests that criminal gang membership is not associated with immigration status. Nonetheless, serious gang activity is quite prevalent among poor people and among certain disadvantaged racial minority groups. The implication is that social policies designed to reduce serious gang activity should target those disenfranchised segments of the population that suffer from the greatest levels of inequality and social disadvantage—regardless of immigration status. This does not mean that our immigration policies should ignore the gang issue. Indeed, our findings suggest that all efforts should be dedicated to ensuring that new immigrants are quickly integrated into the economic and social fabric of the nation. The more immigrants suffer from economic and social marginalization, the greater the risk that some immigrant youth will be tempted into gang activity. Furthermore, the greater the suffering of new immigrants, the greater the risk that their Canadian-born children will turn to gangs as a means to attain power, money and respect.

In conclusion, we feel that our study is an important “first attempt” at docu-

menting the nature and extent of youth gang activity in Toronto. However, while our study may have told us many things that we did not previously know about youth gangs, there are important issues that we have been unable to address. For example, the results of our survey cannot help us determine whether youth gang activity is becoming more prevalent in Canada or if the members of youth gangs are engaging in more serious behaviours than they did in previous decades. We simply have no comparable information from 40, 30, 20 or even 10 years ago. There is also a need for pan-Canadian research on this issue. Such studies are needed to determine the extent and nature of youth gang activity in different regions of the country. These gaps in our knowledge should underscore the importance of future research on the gang issue. If we do not conduct periodic studies of youth gangs across Canada—using standardized research procedures—how will we ever know if the “gang problem” is getting better or worse? How will we be able to determine if the anti-gang policies and programs that we develop are effective or not? In sum, we feel that good research must be considered part of the solution to the problem of youth gangs in Canada.

Notes

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² O.C. was previously known as grade 13. O.C. or grade 13 has since been eliminated from the Toronto high school curriculum.

³ Including those who reported multiple racial identities.

⁴ For more detailed information on the research methodology and sample characteristics see Tanner and Wortley 2002.

⁵ Criminal gang activity is much more common among street youth. For example, although less than 40% of high school gang members have sold drugs as the member of gang, this figure rises to over 70% when we examine those street youth with a gang affiliation.

⁶ It should be noted that our current definition of a “criminal” gang is quite liberal. Indeed, if we define “criminal” gangs as those which must involve either drug selling or property crime (i.e., we take fighting out of the definition), the proportion of current criminal gang members drops to only 3% among our high school respondents.

⁷ With respect to street youth, one might argue that they naturally “flock together” due to their homelessness. Thus, street youth may in fact represent “ready-made” gangs because of their common adverse living circumstances.

⁸ A series of logistic regression analyses were conducted in order to determine what demographic and social characteristics—including immigration status—are associated with gang membership and gang-related criminal activity. Please contact the authors for the details of these analyses.

⁹The following quotes were collected as part of an ongoing qualitative study of youth gang activity in Toronto that includes in-depth interviews with police officers, community workers and gang members. To date we have interviewed over 30 police officers involved in anti-gang initiatives.

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