#### **Australian Multicultural Foundation**

# Ethnic Youth Gangs in Australia Do They Exist?

# Report No. 5 Latin American Young People

by Rob White Santina Perrone Carmel Guerra Rosario Lampugnani

1999

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the young people who took time to speak with us about their lives, opinions and circumstances. Their participation ought to be an essential part of any research of this nature.

Particular thanks goes to Maria Plenzich, and to Marcela Nunez, for making contact with the young people and conducting the interviews.

The Criminology Department at the University of Melbourne hosted the research project, and we are most appreciative of the staff support, office space and resources provided by the Department. We wish to acknowledge as well the assistance provided by Anita Harris in the early stages of the project.

Thanks are due to the Australian Multicultural Foundation for financial support, information and advice, and for ensuring that the project was able to continue to completion. We are also grateful to the National Police Ethnic Advisory Bureau for financial support.

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# **Contents**

# Acknowledgements

Par	rt 1: Background to the Research	1
1.1	Introduction	2
1.2	The Study	4
1.3	The Notion of Youth Gangs	8
1.4	Research Contribution	18
Par	rt 2: Latin American Young People	16
2.1	Social History	17
2.2	Profile of Youth Interviewed	18
2.3	Sources of Income	21
2.4	Youth Gangs	24
2.5	Problems & Solutions	34
2.6	Conclusion	38
2.7	Recommendations	40
2.8	References	43

# **List of Tables**

Table 1:	Type of Accommodation Upon Arrival in Australia
Table 2:	Who the Young People Live With
Table 3:	Types of Unpaid Work Undertaken for Favours by Young People 21
Table 4:	Sources of Income for Young People Interviewed
Table 5:	Ways in Which Young People Spend Their Money22
Table 6:	Interviewees' Perceptions of Sources of Income for Young People in the Area
Table 7:	Interviewees' Perceptions of Types of Illegal Activity in Which Young People Engage for Money
Table 8:	Interviewees' Perceptions of Types of Illegal Activity (not for the purposes of money) in Which Young People Engage
Table 9:	Perceptions of What Young People's Groups have in Common
Table 10:	Young People's Perceptions of Gender Differences in the Activities of Young Men and Women
Table 11:	Characteristics by Which Young People Defined Gangs
Table 12:	Young People's Perceptions of Types of Gangs in the Area
Table 13:	Young People's Perceptions of What Members of Gangs Have in Common
Table 14:	Young People's Perceptions of the Kinds of Activities in Which Gangs are Involved
Table 15:	Young People's Perceptions of How Gangs are a Problem in School 30
Table 16:	Young People's Perceptions of the Trouble that Groups Experience on the Streets
Table 17:	Young People's Perceptions of the Different Groups that Get Involved in Gang Fights
Table 18:	Young People's Perceptions of What Schools can Do about Gangs 37

# Part 1: Background to the Research

#### 1.1 Introduction

The present report is one of six reports which present findings from a study of 'ethnic youth gangs' in the Melbourne metropolitan area over the period 1996-1998. The six reports in this series include:

- No.1 Vietnamese Young People
- No.2 Turkish Young People
- No.3 Pacific Islander Young People
- No.4 Somalian Young People
- No.5 Latin American Young People
- No.6 Anglo Australian Young People

In addition to these reports, which deal with specific groups of ethnic minority and Anglo Australian young people, there is also a broad overview report. The latter report presents the overall findings of the study, and involves comparisons between the different groups as well as highlighting common features. The overview report also discusses further the general issues relating to perceptions of, and responses to, 'youth gangs' in the context of a culturally diverse society.

#### i. Ethnic Minority Youth

For present purposes the term *ethnic minority* refers to non-Anglo Australians who are non-indigenous (Zelinka, 1995). Australia is a polyethnic society, with a population comprised of over 100 different countries and speaking over 150 different languages. While ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse, it is nevertheless the case that Australia remains dominated by the majority Anglo-Australian population and that particular non-Anglo groups thereby have 'minority' status (Guerra & White, 1995). This is reflected in a number of different ways, in terms of culture, economic patterns and institutional arrangements (see Jamrozik, Boland & Urquhart, 1995).

To appreciate fully the situation of ethnic minority young people, analysis also has to be sensitive to the diversity of backgrounds and life circumstances of different young people. It is worth noting in this regard that the migrant experience varies considerably. It depends upon such factors as time period of migration (e.g., job opportunities in the 1950s versus high unemployment in the post-1974 period), place of origin and circumstances of migration (e.g., war refugees, flight from an authoritarian regime), relationship between first and subsequent generations (e.g., conflicting values) and availability of appropriate services (e.g., settlement, English-language courses). Particular groups of ethnic minority young people, such as unattached refugee children, are more likely to experience disadvantage, for example, than young people with well established family and community networks.

The notion of *ethnic youth gangs* has featured prominently in media reports of youth activities over the last few years. Around the country, tales are told of ethnic-based or multi-racial groups of young people being involved in a wide range of illegal, criminal and anti-social activities (see, for example, Healey, 1996). Allegations of a 'Lebanese youth gang' participating in a drive-by shooting of a police station in Sydney in 1998 is but a recent example of the kind of media coverage and public outcry relating to ethnic minority youth in Australia today.

The police, too, have expressed considerable concern over a perceived rise in ethnic youth involvement in crime, and in particular, serious crimes such as heroin and other drug dealing. This is reflected to some extent in figures relating to the increasing number of Indo-Chinese young people held in detention in New South Wales on drug offences (Cain, 1994).

Concern has also been expressed by the police and others that the relationship between ethnic minority young people and the police at the street level is deteriorating. This was reflected in the first National Summit on Police Ethnic Youth Relations held in Melbourne in 1995, and is a topic raised in several recent academic and community reports on police-youth interaction (Youth Justice Coalition, 1994; White, 1996; Maher, Dixon, Swift & Nguyen, 1997).

While media and police concern over 'ethnic youth gangs' has appeared to be on the rise, there has in fact been very little empirical information regarding the actual activities of ethnic minority young people (but see Guerra & White, 1995; Pe-Pua, 1996). Specifically, little is known about the *demographic characteristics* of the ethnic minority people in question – for example, their ages, gender composition, level of education, employment status, socioeconomic background and migration experiences. Nor do we know much about what they do with their time, and where they spend it. This is particularly the case with respect to young women of ethnic minority background.

Even less is known about those ethnic minority young people allegedly involved in drug-related activities and other kinds of offending behaviour. Concern has been raised regarding state responsibilities to collect relevant data on these issues (see Cunneen, 1994), but to date there has been a dearth of systematic statistical material regarding welfare, criminal justice and employment trends in relation to these young people. Within the criminal justice sphere specifically, there has, however, been some movement toward analysis of the nature and extent of ethnic minority youth offending (Easteal, 1997), to examine sentencing disparities in relation to the ethnicity of juvenile offenders (Gallagher & Poletti, 1998) and to consider the special requirements of ethnic minority offenders held in detention (NSW Ombudsman, 1996). However, much more study and conceptual work is needed if we are to appreciate fully the place of ethnic minority youth in the criminal justice system, and the reasons for their involvement with this system.

The limited work which has been undertaken in the area of ethnic minority group experiences has nevertheless indicated that there are strong *social reasons* and *economic forces* which are propelling increasing numbers of these young people into extremely vulnerable circumstances (Lyons, 1994; Guerra & White, 1995). A number of factors are seen to affect their social development and integration into mainstream Australian society – including, for example, conflicts between their parents' expectations and their own behaviour and lifestyle choices; lack of parents; homelessness; unemployment; illiteracy and semi-literacy; poor self-esteem; racism; stress and trauma associated with settling into a new country; trying to adjust to a different cultural environment; language difficulties; and so on (Byrne, 1995; Moss, 1993; Pe-Pua, 1996).

#### ii. Diverse Assumptions

The published material on ethnic minority young people tends to be based upon a number of diverse and at times competing assumptions. For instance, on the one hand, they

themselves are seen as *the problem*. This is usually the substance of media stories and sometimes police reports about 'ethnic youth gangs'.

On the other hand, assumptions are also made regarding the *problems experienced by* these young people. In particular, mention is made of their poor economic and social status, their position as refugees or recent migrants, and difficulties associated with family life.

A third area where assumptions are made relates to the *consequences* of allowing such ethnic youth gangs to exist and operate in the wider community. Much attention, for instance, is given to the need for coercive police methods to rein in gang activity. Issues of police resources, special units and police powers are at the centre of these discussions.

Others argue that much more is needed to support the young people before they are forced into a position of committing crime for either economic reasons, or to establish a sense of communal identity with their peers. Discussion here might centre on changes to immigration settlement policy and services, and the concentration of particular ethnic groups in specific geographical areas.

A further issue which is occasionally raised in relation to 'ethnic youth gangs' are the costs associated with their activities and visible presence in some communities. Reference can be made here to things such as the direct costs of crime (e.g., property damage, losses due to theft, social and health costs); the costs of crime control and security (e.g., policing, private security guards and systems); the costs to business (e.g., negative media attention leading to damaged reputation of some commercial districts); and the costs to specific ethnic minority communities (e.g., the fostering of negative stereotypes based on the actions of a few).

The assumptions made about ethnic minority young people have direct consequences for the *development of appropriate strategies* to deal with issues relevant to their livelihood and lifestyles.

Rather than responding to media images and unsubstantiated assumptions regarding youth behaviour and activity, it is essential therefore to frame policy and service-provision on the basis of grounded knowledge. For example, whether a coercive or a developmental strategy is called for, or a mix of the two, really depends upon what is actually happening in the lives of the specific ethnic minority group in question. Fundamentally, this is a matter of research – of talking with the young people directly.

# 1.2 The Study

The specific impetus for the present study arose from media and political concerns over 'ethnic youth gangs' in Melbourne in the early 1990s. An informal meeting of youth and community workers, academics, and government representatives was held in 1994 to discuss the rise in public attention on this issue, and to consider whether or not there was in fact such a problem in this city. What emerged from this meeting was a general acknowledgement that there was a lack of systematic research on 'ethnic youth gangs', and thus the moral panic over so called gangs had largely been untested empirically. Nevertheless, there was a generally shared feeling that many of the young people in ethnic minority communities were experiencing major economic and social difficulties. It was also pointed out that there were periodic conflicts between different groups of young people, and that in some instances

criminal or illegal activity was occurring, although not necessarily within a 'gang' setting or structure. It was decided that more research was needed on these issues.

Initially, the instigation for, and organisation of, research in this area was carried out by the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research. The Bureau began to gather information about ethnic minority involvement in gang-related activity and crime, in Australia and overseas. A research advisory team was put together to contribute and oversee the project. However, with the closing of the Bureau's Melbourne office in 1996, the project was forced to go elsewhere for financial and community support. The Australian Multicultural Foundation, and the National Police Ethnic Advisory Bureau, met with the research team and after careful consideration of the study proposal, provided the resources necessary for the undertaking of the research.

#### i. Aims of Research

The aims of the research were:

- To develop a workable and precise definition of 'gang' in the Australian context, and to distinguish group and gang activity
- To explore the perspectives of young people regarding youth activities, according to:
  - i) 'ethnic' versus 'non-ethnic' [i.e., Anglo Australian] background
  - ii) gang versus non-gang membership and activities
  - iii)diversity of religious and cultural influences within and between various ethnic minority groups, and how this affects gang membership and activity
- To examine the specific place and role of young women in the context of gang membership and activity
- To develop a description of the social background of gang members, including such things as age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, employment status, socio-economic background and migrant experience
- To identify the types of activities engaged in by gangs/groups of ethnic minority young people, and where illegal or criminal activity fits into their overall activities
- To explore possible underlying causes for gang membership, and any common themes regarding background experiences and difficulties
- To obtain information on how welfare, educational and police officials respond to the needs, and activities, of ethnic minority young people, including gang members
- To provide possible strategies and programme directions which will assist ethnic minority young people and the wider communities dealing with gang-related issues.

Importantly, in devising these research questions, the team was highly conscious that a central question would have to be answered: namely, *do ethnic youth gangs exist?* As the discussion in the following section indicates, the existing material on youth gangs in Australia renders this question somewhat contentious. This is so because of the different definitions used in relation to the term 'gang', and the diverse types of group formation among young people, not all of which may signify gang-like behaviour or social relationships.

The research team was also motivated by a desire to deal with issues surrounding the perceptions and activities of ethnic minority youth in a *socially constructive* manner. For example, given anecdotal and existing academic knowledge about the marginalised situation of some ethnic minority young people, an important consideration of the research was to assist in devising ways to promote policies which are socially inclusive.

#### ii. Methods of Research

The research methodology adopted for the study consisted of:

- Review of relevant Australian and overseas literature on youth gangs and 'ethnic youth gangs'
- Collection of information and relevant statistical data on ethnic young people in Australia, with a special focus on Melbourne
- Interviews with 20 young people across 5 different areas of Melbourne (for a total of 100 young people) which have reportedly a high incidence of 'ethnic youth gang' activity
- The main sample of young people was comprised of youth aged 15 to 25, with the main focus of attention on the 'dominant' ethnic groups in particular regions
- Interviews with 20 young people with an Anglo Australian background, in order to make comparisons with the ethnic minority young people
- The utilisation of youth and community workers to contact and conduct the interviews, so as to have the best available knowledge and expertise when it comes to street-level group formations and interactions.

While specific local areas were the initial focus for the research, on the assumption that certain ethnic minority groups tended to reside or hang around in these locales (e.g., Vietnamese youth in Footscray), we discovered early on in the research that a more sophisticated and complex pattern of movement often took place. Indeed, it was often the case that there were certain corridors within the metropolitan area within which the young people moved, and that while these were not suburb specific, they did range in specific territorial directions (e.g., fanning out from the city centre toward the Western suburbs for one group; mainly concentrated along the coastal beaches for another group). In addition, many of the young people spoken with did not in fact live in the place within which they spent the most time.

In recruiting interviewers, care was taken to ensure that, where possible, the person spoke the first language of the target group and/or they had prior contact with or were members of the particular ethnic minority community. To ensure consistency in the interview approach and technique, each interviewer was briefed on the project, and was provided with information kits which described the ethics and procedures of undertaking research of this nature. In some cases, the interviewers were de-briefed about their interaction with the young people.

The research was informed by the basic principles of ethical social research. These include an emphasis on 'voluntary consent' to participate, 'anonymity' of information sources, and complete 'confidentiality' of the participant and their contribution to the research project. Due care was taken to protect the privacy and rights of each participant. In addition, a 'plain

language' statement was prepared, as well as a 'consent' form, and each participant was briefed fully on the nature of the project and their role in the research process.

There was considerable variation in how the samples of young people were selected, and in the nature of the interviewer-young person relationship. As much as anything this had to do with the contingencies of social research of this kind: the diverse communities and the sensitivity of the subject matter was bound to complicate sample selection and the interview process in varying ways.

The specific sample groups for each defined ethnic youth population were selected and interviewed according to the social connections and research opportunities of each community-based interviewer. The Anglo-Australian young people, for example, were selected at random, and were drawn from local schools, and from the local shopping centre. The Vietnamese sample was based upon prior contacts established by the interviewer, who had had extensive experience in working with and within the community. The Somalian sample was comprised of individuals chosen at random on the street, and recruitment of primarily female respondents through friendship networks (this form of sample selection was influenced by the nature of gender relations within the community, especially as this relates to street-frequenting activity). The Pacific Islander sample was shaped by the fact that two separate interviewers were involved, each of whom tapped into different groups of young people. In the one case, the young people who were interviewed tended to be involved in church-related networks and activities; in the other, the sample was mainly drawn from young people who were severely disadvantaged economically and who had experienced major family difficulties. Two interviewers were also involved with the Latin American young people. Each interviewer had difficulties in obtaining random samples due to the reluctance of individuals and agencies to participate in the project. Accordingly, the sample was constructed mainly through family members and friends who assisted in the process of making contact with potential subjects. The Turkish sample likewise involved two interviewers, reflecting the cultural mores of having a male interview young men, and a female interview young women. Again, family and friends were used extensively in recruitment of interview subjects.

The composition of the sample, and the dynamics of the interview process, were thus bound to be quite different depending upon the group in question. It is for this reason that direct comparisons between the groups needs to be placed into appropriate methodological as well as social contexts. Methodologically, it is important therefore to acknowledge that the prior research background and ethnic background of each interviewer will inevitably play a role in facilitating or hindering the sample selection and information gathering processes. The presence or absence of guardians, the closeness to or distance from the young person's family on the part of the interviewer, and the basic level of familiarity or trust between interviewer and interviewee, will all affect the research process.

So too will the social experiences and social position of the particular group in question. For example, in cases where the interviewer was not known to a particular migrant family, the young people (and their parents) tended to be suspicious about what was going on: suspecting that perhaps the interviewer was a government employee sent by child protection services to determine the fitness of the family to raise children. In another instance, there was longstanding antagonism between the particular ethnic minority young people and Anglo

Australians. Given that one of the interviewers was Anglo Australian, and given the high degree of intervention into their lives by social welfare agencies of various kinds, some of the young people may have been very suspicious of the questions being asked. There were also instances where young people may have been reluctant to speak about certain matters. This was most apparent in the case of some refugees who were deeply suspicious regarding questions about authority figures such as the police. In a similar vein, the notion of 'gangs' was also culturally bounded for many refugees from war-torn countries. In their experience, 'gang' referred to men brandishing weapons, who roam the streets robbing people, pilfering, raping and engaging in all manner of serious offence, including murder. Such 'gangs' clearly do not exist in Australia.

The research process was very complex and required that we take into account a wide range of methodological and social issues. While there was considerable variation in the sampling and interview contexts, nevertheless the research findings indicate strong lines of *commonality* across the diverse groups. In other words, regardless of specific methodological differences and variations, the information conveyed through the interviews proved to be remarkably similar and consistent across the sample groups. The approach adopted for this study has generated important information about the youth gang issues. We also feel that it provides a useful template for future research of this kind, taking into account the limitations and strengths of the present study.

## 1.3 The Notion of Youth Gangs

The term 'gang' is highly emotive. Yet, rarely does it have a fixed definition in terms of social use or legal meaning. It can be used to cover any group and any kind of activity engaged in by young people, such as 'hanging out' together. Or, in a more specific sense, it may just refer to those young people who combine together on a regular basis for the purposes of criminal activity. It may be associated with groups which act to defend a particular patch or territory from other young people, including the use of violent means. It may simply refer to any type of illegal or criminal activity engaged in by young people acting in groups. The notion of gang can mean different things to different people. Imprecise definitions and perceptions of young people based on stereotypes, however, often feature prominently in media treatments of ethnic minority youth. Drawing upon material presented in a recent major report on young people and public space, the following discussions examine the nature of youth gangs in greater detail (see White, 1999).

#### i. Criminal Youth Gangs

Much of the public consternation over youth gangs seems to be driven by images of 'colour gangs' in the United States. Close examination of the Australian social landscape, however, makes it hard to substantiate the presence of such gangs in this country. Nevertheless, the presence of large groups of young people on the street, or young people dressed in particular ways or with particular group affiliations, appears to have fostered the idea that we, too, have a gang problem.

There certainly is a long tradition of gang research in the United States (see for example, Miller, 1975; Huff, 1996; Sanders, 1994; Klein, Maxson & Miller, 1995). There appears to be good reason for this. A survey of police departments in 1992 across the USA, for example,

found that (Curry, Ball & Fox, 1994: 1):

- · gangs are a problem in the overwhelming majority of large and small US cities surveyed
- gang-related crime is above all a violent crime problem, with homicide and other violent crimes accounting for about half of all recorded gang-related crime incidents
- the proportion of females in gangs and committing gang-related crime is relatively small
- although the overwhelming majority of gang members are black or Hispanic, the proportion of white youth involvement is increasing

While discussions and debate continues over the precise definition of a gang, as defined by different police organisations and by sociologists, the key element in the American definitions is that of violent or criminal behaviour as a major activity of group members. From this point onward, however, the definitions vary considerably. Sanders (1994: 20) provides an example of a contemporary attempt to differentiate different types of groups (such as skinhead hate groups) according to the following criteria:

A youth gang is any transpersonal group of youths that shows a willingness to use deadly violence to claim and defend territory, and attack rival gangs, extort or rob money, or engage in other criminal behavior as an activity associated with its group, and is recognized by itself and its immediate community as a distinct dangerous entity. The basic structure of gangs is one of age and gender differentiation, and leadership is informal and multiple.

Statistically (through recorded incidents of, for example, youth homicide rates), experientially (through visible street presence, such as use of 'colours' as symbolic markers) and in popular knowledge (through media reportage of events and groups, and fictional film accounts), youth gangs have a major presence in the American city. This is regularly confirmed in sociological and criminal justice research. Gangs exist, and they are engaged in violent and criminal activity.

In Australia, while historically there has long been concern with street-present young people, some of whom have been presented as constituting 'gangs' (e.g., the Sydney push larrikins at the turn of the century, the Bodgies and Widgies in the 1950s), the cultural and social environment is quite different to the American case. Unlike the U.S., for example, there is not a strong academic tradition of gang research, in part demonstrating the lack of a need for one in the first place. What research there is, has tended to find that 'gangs' in this country are very unlike their American counterparts.

For instance, a recent New South Wales inquiry received little or no evidence that the overseas style of gangs exist in that State, and commented that a usage of the term, which implies violence and an organised structure, has little relevance to youth activities in Australian communities (Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1995). Furthermore, while the police service reported the existence of some 54 street gangs in 1993, there was no other evidence to support either this or related allegations of extensive memberships.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that certain types of youth gangs do exist, albeit not to the extent suggested in media accounts (Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1995). Even here, it is noted that most gangs limit their criminal behaviour to petty theft, graffiti and vandalism.

Few gangs have a violent nature. Moreover, when violence such as homicide does involve a gang member, it is usually not gang-related.

#### ii. 'Gang' Characteristics

By and large, it can be concluded that most bands of young people in Australia are not 'gangs', but groups (Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1995; White, 1996). Social analysis of 'youth gangs' in Melbourne, for example, found that while some characteristics of the groups mirror the media images (e.g., the masculine nature of youth gangs, their preferred 'hang outs', and shared identity markers such as shoes or clothes), the overall rationale for the group is simply one of *social connection*, not crime (Aumair & Warren, 1994). This is an important observation and worthy of further comment.

In their study, Aumair and Warren (1994) cited five key characteristics of youth 'gangs'. These included:

- overwhelming male involvement, which in turn reinforced certain 'masculine' traits (such as fighting prowess, sexual conquest, substance use, minor criminal acts) in the group setting
- *high public visibility*, given the lack of money and therefore a reliance on free public spaces for recreational purposes
- *an outward display of collective identity*, in the form of the wearing of similar styles of clothing, adopting a common name for the group and so on
- organisation principally for social reasons, and consequently low rates of criminal activity, as indicated in the absence of formalised gang rules and a social rationale for gathering together, rather than a criminal objective
- differences between public perceptions of the 'gang problem' and the real nature of the problem, as illustrated by the fact that most criminal activity seemed to be inwardly focused, involving one-on-one fights and substance abuse.

Much of the criminality exhibited by 'youth gangs', therefore, is inward looking and linked to self-destructive behaviour such as substance abuse, drinking binges and the like. The popular perception is that gangs seek to violate the personal integrity and private property of the public in general; closer investigation reveals the insular nature of much of their activity (Aumair & Warren, 1994).

Groups of young people may well engage in anti-social or illegal behaviour. But it is a criminological truism that so do most young people at some stage in their lives. The key issue is whether the activity is sporadic, spontaneous and unusual for the group, or whether it is a main focus, thereby requiring a greater degree of criminal commitment and planning. The evidence certainly suggests the former is the case. Likewise, the statistics on youth crime indicate that use of criminal violence by young people in general is relatively rare (Cunneen & White, 1995; Mukherjee, Carcach & Higgins, 1997; Freeman, 1996).

When the available evidence on 'gangs' in Australia is weighed up, the picture presented appears to be something along the following lines (White, 1996). Rather than being fixed groups, with formal gang rules, most 'gangs' are transient groups of young people, which vary in size and which have informal structures of interaction. Rather than being inherently

anti-social, most of these groups involve 'hanging' out in a manner in which crime is incidental to the activities of the group as a whole. Rather than crime, the basis of activity is social activity, peer support, personal identity and self-esteem, and friendship networks. Rather than being exclusively of one ethnic background, many groups have members from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds. Rather than seeing themselves as 'dangerous' or 'gangsters', the young people speak about things such as 'loyalty', 'fun' and supporting their 'mates'. Rather than seeing themselves as the source of conflict on the streets, groups complain about constant police harassment and unfair treatment by adults.

In the specific case of 'ethnic youth gangs', the activities and perceptions by and of ethnic minority youth present a special case. The over-riding message of most media reports, for example, is that such 'gangs' are entirely negative, dangerous and threatening. Indeed, in recent years the hype and sensationalised treatment of 'youth gangs' have tended to have an increasingly *racialised* character. That is, the media have emphasised the 'racial' background of alleged gang members, and thereby fostered the perception that, for instance, 'young Lebanese' or 'young Vietnamese' equals 'gang member'. The extra 'visibility' of youth ethnic minority people (relative to the Anglo Australian 'norm') feeds the media moral panic over 'youth gangs', as well as bolstering a racist stereotyping based upon physical appearance (and including such things as language, clothes and skin colour). Whole communities of young people can be affected, regardless of the fact that most young people are not systematic law-breakers or particularly violent individuals. The result is an inordinate level of public and police suspicion and hostility being directed towards people from certain ethnic minority backgrounds.

#### iii. Youth Formations

Confusions over the status of 'youth gangs' in the Australian context stem in part from the lack of adequate conceptual tools to analyse youth group behaviour. Recent work in Canada provides a useful series of benchmarks, especially considering the many similarities in social structure and cultural life between the two countries. Gordon has developed a typology of gangs and groups based on work done in Vancouver (see Gordon, 1995, 1997; Gordon & Foley, 1998). The typology consists of six categories:

- Youth Movements, which are social movement characterised by a distinctive mode of dress
  or other bodily adornments, a leisure time preference, and other distinguishing features
  (e.g., punk rockers)
- Youth Groups, which are comprised of small clusters of young people who hang out together in public places such as shopping centres (e.g., sometimes referred to as 'Mallies')
- Criminal Groups, which are small clusters of friends who band together, usually for a short period of time, to commit crime primarily for financial gain (may contain young and not so young adults as well)
- Wannabe Groups, which include young people who band together in a loosely structured
  group primarily to engage in spontaneous social activity and exciting, impulsive, criminal
  activity including collective violence against other groups of youths (e.g., territorial and
  use identifying markers of some kind)
- Street Gangs, which are groups of young people and young adults who band together to form a semi-structured organisation, the primary purpose of which is to engage in planned

and profitable criminal behaviour or organised violence against rival street gangs (e.g., less visible but more permanent than other groups)

• Criminal Business Organisations, which are groups that exhibit a formal structure and a high degree of sophistication, comprised mainly of adults, and which engage in criminal activity primarily for economic reasons and almost invariably maintain a low profile (e.g., may have a name but rarely visible)

An important observation made by Gordon (1997) is that street gangs tend to appear and disappear in waves. This appears to be due to a combination of factors, ranging from effective targeting of key individuals by the police, the maturation of gang members and community development schemes as to why they disappear; and on the other hand, the spawning of new branches from an existing formation, creation of gangs in defensive response to other gangs, and the pressure of youth fashion as to why they may emerge. In a telling comment, Gordon (1995: 318) indicates the importance of social and cultural infrastructures in keeping street gangs as a cyclical, rather than permanent, phenomenon:

Unlike the situation in many American cities, street gangs have not become an entrenched feature of the Canadian urban landscape, and the chances of them doing so are still fairly slim. Cities like Vancouver tend not to have, and are unlikely to acquire, the decayed and disorganized inner urban areas containing large populations of disenfranchised, dissolute, and desperate youths and young adults. There is relatively strict gun control in Canada and not much opposition to making such control stricter. Canadian cities have an educational and social service apparatus that provides an effective social safety net that is staffed by generally optimistic personnel who are concerned to address the issues of youth disenchantment and prevent the entrenchment of street gangs. Every effort should be made to preserve these critical preventative factors.

These are words which need to be well heeded in Australia. So too, we need to learn from the Canadian experience, where again until recently there has been little research on gangs available, and develop models and appraisals of gangs and gang-related behaviour which are indicative of Australian local, regional and national realities and contexts.

#### iv. Youth in Groups

Meanwhile, what is known about street gangs in Australia seems to confirm that their actual, rather than presumed, existence is much less than popularly believed, and that their activities are highly circumscribed in terms of violence or criminal activity directed at members of the general public. Nevertheless, the image of 'gangs' is a powerful one, and has engendered varying kinds of social reactions.

For example, the social status and public perception of young people in groups very much influences the regulation of public space. Many groups of young people, some of whom might be labelled 'gangs', for instance, tend to hang out in places like shopping centres. Difficulties in providing a precise, or uniform, definition of what a 'gang' actually refers to, and the diversity of youth dress, language and behaviour associated with specific *subcultural forms* (e.g., gothics, punks), means that more often than not young people are treated as 'outsiders' by commercial managers and authority figures on the basis of appearance, not solely actual behaviour.

The combination of being 'bored' and feeling unwelcome in such public domains can have a negative impact on the young people, and make them resentful of the way in which they are always subject to scrutiny and social exclusion. This, in turn, can lead to various kinds of 'deviant' behaviour, as in the case of young people who play cat-and-mouse with security guards for the fun of it. It is unfortunate that the perception of gang membership may lead to exclusion or negative responses from authority figures, and that this in turn may itself generate gang-like behaviour on the part of the young people so affected.

To a certain extent, much of the concern about gangs is really a misunderstanding of the nature of youth subcultures, of how young people naturally associate with each other in groups, and of the material opportunities open to them to circulate and do things in particular places. The diversity of youth subcultural forms, especially the spectacular youth subcultures, has historically been a source of consternation among certain sections of the adult population (Murray, 1973; Stratton, 1992; White, 1993). It has also been associated with conflicts *between* different groups of young people, and youth fearfulness *of* certain young people, based on certain social and cultural affiliations (e.g., Homies, Surfies, Skinheads, Punks). In most cases, however, the presence of identifiable groups is not the precursor to activity which is going to menace the community as a whole.

Having said this, it is still essential to recognise that the pre-conditions for more serious types of gang formation are beginning to emerge in the Australian context. A recent review article of American gangs points out that turf- and honour-based violence are best understood as arising out of particular political economic contexts, marked by patterns of unemployment, immigration and social marginalisation (Adamson, 1998). It is related to both attempts to engage in alternative productive activity (such as the illegal drug economy), and alternative consumption activity (in the form of dealing with lack of consumer purchasing power by taking the possessions of others). It also relates to attempts to assert masculinity in a period where traditional avenues to 'manhood' have been severely eroded for many young men. Given the trends toward ghettoisation and social polarisations in this country (see Gregory & Hunter, 1995), major questions can be asked regarding the potential for such gang formations in Australian cities.

With respect to these developments, it is significant that the increased frequency of involvement with the criminal justice system on the part of some ethnic minority young people, particularly in relation to drug offences and use of violence, has led to heightened media attention of ethnic young people generally. However, the extent of the shifts in criminal justice involvement do not warrant the intensity and universalising tendencies apparent in much media coverage, which tend to provide negative images of ethnic minority people as a whole. The concern about the propensity of the media to perpetuate negative images of ethnic minority young people is not new. For example, the 1995 First National Summit on Police & Ethnic Youth Relations recommended the development of a joint project with the media industry and unions which would help to foster more positive portrayals of youth (National Police Ethnic Advisory Bureau, 1995). The problems associated with police-ethnic minority youth relations have probably contributed to the negativity as well, and forms an important part of the 'image-building' in relation to ethnic youth gangs.

A New South Wales study, for example, found that ethnic minority young people were more likely than other groups of Australian young people (with the exception of indigenous people)

to be stopped by the police, to be questioned, and to be subject to varying forms of mistreatment (Youth Justice Coalition, 1994). Young Vietnamese Australians in Melbourne and Sydney have complained about unfair treatment, and racism, in their dealings with the police (Doan, 1995; Lyons, 1995). This is confirmed in a recent study of encounters between police and young Asian background people in Cabramatta, which found that the young people (who were heroin users) were subject to routine harassment, intimidation, 'ethnic' targeting, racism and offensive treatment (Maher et.al., 1997). Furthermore, there were a number of specific problems relating to cultural issues in that: 'Crucial norms of respect, shame and authority are routinely transgressed by police officers' (Maher et.al., 1997: 3). In the context of police rhetoric about adopting harm minimisation policies in dealing with drug issues, these coercive strategies were viewed by the young people as counter-productive.

More generally, a negative interaction between ethnic minority young people and the police breeds mistrust and disrespect. A minority of people in any community is engaged in particularly anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. The problem in this case is that the prejudicial stereotyping often leads to the *differential policing* of the whole population group (White, 1996). This kind of policing not only violates the ideals of treating all citizens and residents with the same respect and rights, but it can inadvertently lead to further law-breaking behaviour.

For example, as victims of racist violence, ethnic minority young people may be reluctant to approach state authorities for help, when these same figures have done little to entrust confidence or respect. As with similar cases overseas, the lack of police protection can lead some young people to adopt the stance that 'self-defence is no offence' and thus to arm themselves against racist attacks (Edwards, Oakley & Carey, 1987). Concern about the carrying of weapons not only justifies even more intense police intervention, it feeds media distortions about the problem of 'ethnic youth gangs'. Clearly there is a need for concerted efforts to modify existing police practices and to re-think community policing as this applies to ethnic minority young people (see Chan, 1994, 1997). The implementation of the recommendations arising out of the First National Summit on Police & Ethnic Youth Relations would certainly assist in making significant improvements in police-ethnic minority youth relations in Australia (National Police Ethnic Advisory Bureau, 1995). To this end, the establishment of State/Territory Support Implementation Teams by the National Police Ethnic Advisory Bureau appears to be a step in the right direction. The teams, which are comprised of a police representative in charge of youth affairs in every jurisdiction and a representative from the youth sector, will be the main vehicles for advocating the implementation of the Summit Recommendations (National Police Ethnic Advisory Bureau, 1997).

#### 1.4 Research Contribution

The contribution of this research project is to expand our empirical knowledge about 'ethnic youth gangs'. As can be seen from this brief review, there has been very little systematic empirical examination of the phenomenon. There have been examples of critical analysis and interpretation of what little material has been collected (by government bodies as well as academic and community researchers), but quite often this has been ignored by the press and by political leaders as selected events, such as drive-by shootings, come to public notice.

Research projects such as this may be able to provide a better and more informed analysis of the concrete basis for the fear of crime in some neighbourhoods, as well as the extent and nature of existing 'gang' crime. It builds upon other recent studies undertaken on street-frequenting youth of non-English speaking background in Sydney (Pe-Pua, 1996), stories collected about the street youth of Cabramatta (Maher, Nguyen & Le, 1999), and the experience of homelessness among young people from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in Melbourne (Frederico, Cooper & Picton, 1996). It further develops our knowledge of more recent immigrant youth (such as Somalian young people), as well as considers the experiences of groups which have been established in this country for some time (such as Turkish young people).

It is our hope that the research will contribute, as well, to closer examination of how street-level activity is related to existing service provision, programme development and policy implementation. How federal, state and local government agencies carry out their work, and the policy context within which this occurs, are important variables in the quality of life for young people, and ultimately for the welfare and safety of all citizens and residents.

Finally, given the Melbourne focus for the current project, we would hope that the research opens the door to further work of a comparative nature, particularly in places such as Sydney and Brisbane which have large immigrant populations and diverse ethnic communities. The issues are of national importance, however, and should be responded to with policies and practices which acknowledge the cultural diversity, and changing nature, of Australian society.

# Part 2: Latin American Young People

## 2.1 Social History

People of Latin American origin have migrated to Australia from a wide variety of countries. They have come from South America, Central America and the Caribbean islands.

#### i. Migration

Immigration from Latin America has largely been due to economic and political factors, although these have carried varying weight depending upon the country of origin, the social background of the migrants, and the time at which they migrated to Australia.

Two major waves of Latin American immigrants have been identified. The first wave, during the 1970s and early 1980s was mainly comprised of migrants from Chile, Argentina, Peru and Uruguay. This wave was partly driven by economic considerations, as indicated by the fact that it was predominantly made up of young people mostly from middle-class, urban backgrounds. Some of them were professionals. Some brought capital with them and were looking for a better financial future, especially since the economy in their home country was undergoing substantial deterioration, particularly in Chile.

At the same time, political disorders were occurring in many of these countries (Jupp, 1994; Julian, Franklin & Felmingham, 1997). For example, Chile experienced a military coup in 1973, and military dictatorships were established in Argentina and Uruguay during the 1970s. These had the effect of forcing many people into exile, and in pushing many to seek political asylum in countries such as Australia. This was also reflected in Australian government immigration policy. For example, the Whitlam government expanded the refugee intake from the region in 1973, thus allowing for a substantial number of migrants from Chile in particular. By the end of 1973, there were an estimated 4,500 Chileans in Australia, by far the largest group from Latin America (BIMPR, 1995).

The second wave of migrants was mainly comprised of people from Central America, and especially El Salvador. This occurred in the 1980s, a period in which civil war, counter-revolutionary activity and brutal repression was taking place in countries such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras. For instance, 75 former political prisoners of the Salvadoran regime arrived in Australia in 1983, to be followed by thousands of people from El Salvador who entered the country under the Refugee/Special Humanitarian Program. Between 1982 and 1988 the Australian government issued 3,521 humanitarian visas to Salvadoran citizens (Jupp, 1994: 20). The flow of refugees from this region peaked in 1989-1990, and has now virtually stopped (Stone, Morales & Cortes, 1995).

#### ii. Settlement Patterns

According to the census count in 1996, there were 75,673 persons of Latin American origin in Australia (ABS, 1998). The largest groups of Latin American born persons in Australia are from Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, Uruguay, Peru, Columbia, Brazil and Ecuador.

The majority of Latin American migrants (52.4 per cent) have settled in New South Wales, while a sizeable number (24.5 per cent) have also settled in Victoria. The rest are spread across Queensland (9.8 per cent), Western Australia (6.4 per cent), South Australia (3.5 per cent) and the Australian Capital Territory (2.4 per cent) (ABS, 1998). Almost all of these migrants have settled in metropolitan areas, often in the outer suburbs.

In Victoria, Latin American settlers have tended to be dispersed throughout the Melbourne

metropolitan area, although there are some areas of substantial concentration. These include Sunshine, Springvale, Keilor, Broadmeadows, Melbourne and Dandenong.

#### iii. Demographic Profile

Most immigrants from Latin America speak Spanish as their primary language, apart from Brazil where the primary language is Portuguese. Many also share a common religion, in this case Catholicism.

There is relatively little information on Latin American communities in general, although a profile of the Chilean community was undertaken in 1995 (BIMPR, 1995). Available evidence suggests, however, that some communities have a disproportionately high number of young people relative to the general population. For example, Salvadoran-born immigrants in Australia have one of the youngest age structures of all overseas-born groups. In 1991, 32.8 per cent of the Salvadoran community were under 15 years of age, compared with 26.7 per cent of the Australian-born population (Hugo & Maher, 1995).

#### iv. Labour Market Participation

Latin American immigrants have generally possessed skill levels which have been higher than that for most other non-English speaking settlers. Yet they are nevertheless experiencing some of the highest rates of unemployment and underemployment in Australia.

There seem to be several reasons for the high unemployment rates. Some of these include: cultural differences; lack of knowledge of the English language; the inaccessibility of appropriate language education courses for professionals and technicians; the non-recognition of overseas skills and qualifications; lack of training and re-training opportunities; and discrimination in hiring and workplace practices (Barreto, 1992; Stone, et.al., 1995).

Further to this, it appears that many young Latin American people, particularly those aged between 17 and 19 years of age, have encountered great difficulties in adjusting to school and adult English education classes. This has contributed to their delay in engaging in further studies and employment (Stone, et.al., 1995). A lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of service providers and a lack of appropriate strategies for encouraging these young people to participate in various government programmes and specialised services have also been cited as factors in their employment difficulties (Stone, et.al., 1995). In some cases, it appears that many were considered to be either too young, or too old, to be trained and thus to gain the necessary experience to be able to obtain a job.

#### 2.2 Profile of Youth Interviewed

Twenty young people were interviewed about gang activities as these relate to the Latin American community. Of these young people, 10 were born in Chile, 5 in Argentina, 2 in El Salvador and 3 in Australia. Regardless of whether they were born in Australia or not, the young people as a group identified as being 'Latin American'.

The sample consisted of 9 young women and 11 young men. Their ages ranged from 12 to 25, with half the sample under the age of 18. While two of the young people said they did not have a religion, the other 18 identified themselves as being Catholics. Many of the young people lived in the Dandenong and surrounding areas, with a few others living in the suburbs of Springvale and Cranbourne.

The young people came directly to Australia from their country of origin (if born outside of Australia), except for one young person whose family was forced to flee from El Salvador, and who spent time in a camp in Costa Rica. Most arrived between 1985 and 1994. Of the 17 who migrated to Australia, 9 said they entered under 'migrant' status, 2 under 'special humanitarian', 5 under 'family reunion' and 1 under 'other'.

The experience of leaving their home country and coming to a new one was experienced as both exciting and sad. The issue of language, and culture, loomed large for many of the young people. Almost all of them commented on how difficult it was to leave friends and relatives behind. This is reflected in the comments of some of the young people:

LA1: 'It was exciting in a way that I had never flown in a plane, so it was exciting and I was young, so it was really exciting. But, it was sad, because you had to leave all your uncles and aunties and cousins. It was scary in a way because I didn't know my family down here; I'd never seen them before.'

LA3: 'The experience was very different. We didn't know the language, we didn't know anyone in Australia, we had to adapt to a new country, a new experience. I think that the most difficult thing was to learn the language and school.'

LA4: 'Well, it was very different, difficult. It was difficult to learn a new language, even though in Chile they teach you a little bit of English at school, but it's not enough. You think you learn something, but you really haven't; talking to people, trying to understand what they're saying, (the) different accent makes it difficult.'

LA6: 'I wasn't scared. I don't know, everything was different. It was an easier life I thought.'

LA7: 'The good experience was that since I've been in Australia I've met a lot of people from different cultures and I've learnt more about other countries. The bad experience was that it was really hard for me to adjust to society I could say and mainly learning English. It was difficult for you and your family to adapt here. And friends, 'cos I didn't have anyone. Like, I made friends when I went to language centre and then I didn't have any friends when I went to high school and I had to make new friends and it was hard for me.'

LA9: 'I was very nervous. Our family, we couldn't speak any English. We were very scared. We were scared of what to expect when we got to the airport. We didn't know what we were gonna do after we got to the airport, so it was very scary for my family.'

LA11: 'It was a good experience in the case that I was really excited and a bad experience that I was real sad to leave my home country. I was excited 'cos I thought there would be Kangaroos hopping around the place so I was really excited and when I got here, there were no Kangaroos anywhere.'

LA12: 'Exciting, but sad. I was excited 'cos I was gonna be in a new place, but I was sad 'cos I was gonna leave my family and friends and stuff.'

LA13: 'Some bad experiences were leaving my family and my culture behind and my, you know, the only way I knew how to live. And the good experiences were coming to a new country and going through new experiences, meeting new people, making new friends.'

On arrival, most of the Latin American young people stayed with family friends and relatives. This is shown in Table 1. Thus, most had the opportunity to make the transition to a new society and new culture in a relatively supportive and familiar environment.

Table 1:

Type of Accommodation Upon Arrival in Australia

Type of accommodation	Response to each category			
	Number	Percent	Valid Percent	
Migrant hostel	4	20.0	20.0	
Relatives/family friend	13	65.0	65.0	
Not applicable	3	15.0	15.0	
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The relative stability of the home situation of the young people is indicated in Table 2. Here it can be seen that most lived with both parents, or their mother [1 father was deceased, 1 was overseas], at the time of interview. 14 of the young people spoke Spanish as their primary language at home. A couple spoke dual languages (Spanish and English), while 5 spoke English only. Among their peer groups, however, only 4 spoke exclusively Spanish. Most of the young people communicated with their friends in English or in dual languages.

Table 2: Who the Young People Live With

Type of accommodation	Response to each category			
	Number	Percent	Valid Percent	
Mum	7	35.0	35.0	
Both parents	11	55.0	55.0	
Partner	1	5.0	5.0	
Other	1	5.0	5.0	
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

There appeared to be a fairly close family and community bonding among the young people. This may be due to cultural factors relating to the importance of the family, the advantage of having friends or relatives assist with the settlement process, and the fact that most of those who migrated came with their families.

The socio-economic background of the young people was indicated by a series of questions on the type of income sources and paid work of their parents. The 8 mothers who worked did so in the clerical and service sectors. 16 fathers were in paid work, generally involving the trades and manufacturing industries. 3 fathers were on unemployment or other social security benefits, and 8 mothers relied upon social security payments, including 4 who drew the single parent benefit. Basically, given the geographical location (most of those interviewed lived in Dandenong) and the nature of work in the local area, it can be said that the class background of the young people was working class.

The educational profile of the young people varied greatly, reflecting mainly the age spread of the sample. However, all of the young people were currently enrolled in some kind of educational programme – including school, TAFE, university, and language classes.

#### 2.3 Sources of Income

The economic situation of the young people was ascertained by asking a number of questions relating to sources of income and employment experiences. At the time of interview, 14 of the young people considered themselves unemployed. Nine of the respondents had received job training. Only one person was in full-time paid work, and a further 6 had casual jobs. Of those in paid work, 3 performed labour on a cash-in-hand basis.

Only a handful of the young people had held jobs, and these tended to be short-term in nature. The types of work included cleaning, painting, waitressing and doing odd-jobs.

Half of the young people did perform unpaid labour for their family or friends. The types of activities undertaken for favours (such as use of the car, living at home, etc.) are shown in Table 3. Most of these activities are related to household tasks of some kind. Caring for other members of the household, as in the case of childcare, featured prominently.

Table 3:

Types of Unpaid Work Undertaken for Favours by Young People

Types of Unpaid work	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent	Percent
		(respondents)	(responses)
Childcare	10	100.0	43.5
Domestic labour/chores	4	40.0	17.4
Gardening/mowing/car washing	4	40.0	17.4
Car repairs	3	30.0	13.0
General jobs	1	10.0	4.3
Other	1	10.0	4.3
Total	23	100.0	100.0

N= 10

Missing Responses = 1 (5%) Not Applicable = 9 (45%)

Table 4 outlines the main sources of income for each of the individuals in the sample group. Almost half of the sample were reliant in some way upon state benefits of some kind. When experiencing financial problems the typical response was to go to their parents for assistance. Only a few of the respondents said they would do otherwise. However, one young person did comment that: 'If I needed money, well I can't really go to my parents, because they don't have any money. It's very hard, because my dad's on a benefit. I wouldn't know where to go' (LA10).

Table 4: Sources of Income for Young People Interviewed

Sources of Income	Response	to each catego	ry	
	Number	Percent	Percent	
		(respondents)	(responses)	
Unemployment/DSS benefits	7	36.8	30.4	
Austudy	2	10.5	8.7	
Family	7	36.8	30.4	
Work	3	15.8	13.0	
Casual/part time job	3	15.8	13.0	
Other	1	5.3	4.3	
Total	23		100.0	

N=19 Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

The ways in which the young people used their limited financial resources is shown in Table 5. In addition to immediate household expenses, such as rent and food, a significant number of young people referred to entertainment and leisure type expenses. Given that young people who wish to socialise do so in circumstances which generally involves commercial (rather than 'free') recreation and leisure outlets, this is hardly surprising. Teenage and young adult entertainment tends to involve financial costs as a matter of course.

Table 5: Ways in Which Young People Spend Their Money

Ways in which money is spent	Response	to each categor	ry
	Number	Percent	Percent
		(respondents)	(responses)
Rent	7	35.0	15.2
Food/bills	10	50.0	21.7
Entertainment	10	50.0	21.7
Travel	5	25.0	10.9
Clothes	4	20.0	8.7
Save	3	15.0	6.5
Cigarettes/alcohol	2	10.0	4.3
Drugs	1	5.0	2.2
Other	4	20.0	8.7
Total	46		100.0

N=20

The young people were asked about how other young people in their area make ends meet. Their responses are shown in Table 6. It can be seen from this table that the casual work constitutes a perceived major source of additional or supplementary income for young people. This includes working at local fast-food outlets and supermarkets, as well as delivering newsletters.

Table 6: Interviewees' Perceptions of Sources of Income for Young People in the Area

Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)	
F	(respondents)	(responses)	
F		· · · /	
5	25.0	13.9	
2	10.0	5.6	
4	20.0	11.1	
9	45.0	25.0	
16	80.0	44.4	
36		100.0	
	4 9 16	4 20.0 9 45.0 16 80.0	4 20.0 11.1 9 45.0 25.0 16 80.0 44.4

N=20

The Latin American young people were then asked about what kinds of illegal activities young people might be engaged in as a means to gain an income.

Table 7: Interviewees' Perceptions of Types of Illegal Activity in Which Young People Engage for Money

Types of illegal activity	Response	to each catego	ry	
	Number	Percent	Percent	
		(respondents)	(responses)	
Drug dealing	13	65.0	35.1	
Burglary/robbery	3	15.0	8.1	
Shoplifting/sale of stolen goods	12	60.0	32.4	
Theft (other than shoplifting)	3	15.0	8.1	
Mugging/jumping	1	5.0	2.7	
Don't know	3	15.0	8.1	
Other	2	10.0	5.4	
Total	37		100.0	

N=20

As can be seen in Table 7, drug dealing and shopstealing were perceived to be the major types of crimes with which young people might be involved. Most respondents felt that young people who engaged in these types of activities did so because they needed money. To a lesser extent, these activities were seen to stem from boredom or problems at home. Another reason put forward was the poor level of pay available to young people in the formal labour market: 'To make quick, easy money and plus, they don't pay young people much money. It's only \$7.50 per hour. It's easier (to steal) 'cos in 20 minutes you can make way more than you can working for "Coles" or whatever' (LA12). Lack of family support or poor parenting were also cited as reasons why some young people might engage in these kinds of illegal activity.

As shown in Table 8, not all the perceived illegal activity was seen to be tied to monetary considerations. A number of activities were undertaken without a financial incentive. Interestingly, only 1 of the young people interviewed said that they drink or smoke marijuana when they personally got bored.

Table 8: Interviewees' Perceptions of Types of Illegal Activity (not for the purposes of money) in Which Young People Engage

Types of illegal activity	Response	to each catego	ry	
	Number	Percent	Percent	
		(respondents)	(responses)	
Car theft/joy riding	5	25.0	16.7	
Drug/alcohol use	9	45.0	30.0	
Fighting/assaults	3	15.0	10.0	
Vandalism/graffiti	3	15.0	10.0	
Stealing for own use	6	30.0	20.0	
Don't know	2	10.0	6.7	
Other	2	10.0	6.7	
Total	30		100.0	

N=20

In explaining why some people do engage in the activities described above, the main answers were boredom, the need for fun and excitement, and peer pressure. It was observed that 'there's nothing to do in this area', and this was seen as a contributing factor in why some young people hang around 'bad people' who engage in such activities.

## 2.4 Youth Gangs

A series of questions were put to the young people about the nature and activities of 'youth gangs' in the neighbourhoods and involving members of the Latin American communities. We started by asking them where young people hung out in the local areas. The most often referred to places included shopping centres, the street outside shops, train stations and commercial venues such as amusement centres and sports facilities.

Young people were seen to hang around in groups. As can be seen from Table 9, there were varying perceptions regarding what groups of young people have in common. The importance of ethnicity, as well as dress, came through in the interviews. For example, one person commented that 'A lot of them dress the same. It's just the fashion, like street fashion' (LA16). Another observed that: 'They're (referring to her friends) the same ethnic background. Some of them are Australians, but they don't mix, like they're separate, a separate group of friends' (LA2). It was also pointed out that there is a lot of 'mixture groups' as well.

Table 9: Perceptions of What Young People's Groups have in Common

Aspects of Group	Response to each category			
	Number	Percent	Percent	
		(respondents)	(responses)	
Ethnicity/culture	4	20.0	10.5	
Same interests/activities	8	40.0	21.1	
Image/dress/style	10	50.0	26.3	
Music	7	35.0	18.4	
Same school	1	5.0	2.6	
Same area	1	5.0	2.6	
Nothing in common	2	10.0	5.3	
Don't know	2	10.0	5.3	
Other	3	15.0	7.9	
Total	38		100.0	
N 20				

N=20

Specific questions were asked about any gender or ethnic differences in what kinds of activities young people engage in, and what they do with their time. The majority of respondents felt there were clear gender differences in youth activities. Table 10 describes the kinds of differences identified by the young people.

Table 10:
Young People's Perceptions of Gender Differences in the Activities of Young Men and Women

Types of Differences Response to each category				
	Number	Percent	Percent	•
		(respondents	(response	es)
Girls into shopping	clothes/	5	29.4	25.0
Girls help/stay at home more	4	23.5	20.0	
Girls talk/gossip	1	5.9	5.0	
Guys violent/rough	1	5.9	5.0	
Guys engage in illegal activities	1	5.9	5.0	
Guys play games/sport/pinnies more	7	41.2	35.0	
Other	1	5.9	5.0	
Total	20		100.0	

N=17

Not Applicable = 3 (15%)

In general, girls were seen to spend more time in their homes or friends' houses, and when out, to engage in activities such as talking with each other, shopping or going to movies. The young men, by contrast, were presented as being actively engaged in rough-house play, sporting activities such as soccer, and to be looking for excitement on the street.

The interviewees were also asked whether or not there were ethnic differences in how different young people used their time. Differences were identified, based upon religious

and cultural backgrounds, choice in recreational activity, and time spent with one's family. However, significantly, many of the young people were hard pressed to actually identify what the specific differences in activity might consist of – due to a lack of knowledge about other groups of young people. This is indicated in the following comments.

LA3: 'People from Asia do different things than we (Latin Americans) do. I really don't know, but I would think that they do different things. I don't know, I don't really have friends from different backgrounds, so I don't really know.'

LA8: 'I don't know what other people from different backgrounds do, but I believe it's different.'

LA9: 'I think there's a difference in what they do, but I don't know what's different. You know, we never get together with other ethnic groups, so I don't know.'

LA11: 'Not really, maybe a bit. I don't know. If you're...like say Italian...you're probably lucky. You probably have a lot of spaghetti or lasagne.'

LA12: 'No not really. I just think that like, if you're like with all Spanish people, you do different things. You would like listen to your own kind of like music from where you come from, like Spanish music.'

The young people were asked about the difference between a group and a gang. As with the academic literature on gangs, there was some confusion and uncertainty over what demarcated a gang or not. The broad characteristics of a 'gang' as perceived by the young people are presented in Table 11.

Table 11:
Characteristics by Which Young People Defined Gangs

Attributes	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent	Percent
		(respondents)	(responses)
Violent	6	30.0	23.1
Drug users	1	5.0	3.8
Do illegal activities	14	70.0	53.8
Just a group of friends	2	10.0	7.7
Other	3	15.0	11.5
Total	26		100.0

N=20

In discussion, however, these characteristics were much more fluid and ambiguous than might first appear to be the case. For instance, some young people saw gang-related behaviour as more a matter of degree of seriousness, than as something which was entirely removed from the experience of youth 'groups'. As one person observed: 'It depends what kind of activities they get up to really. I would say you know, a group of people can get up to even as much trouble, or even more, than a gang once they get altogether and decide to be stupid' (LA13).

Other young people made reference to the age of members of a group as being a key factor in how the group might be described. Basically, a 'gang' was perceived to include both younger and older people, and to engage in various kinds of illegal or criminal activity:

LA6: 'A gang is a group of not just kids, but all the guys – mature age guys that are into crime. That's all they tend to do; they live for the crime – to support themselves. While just a group of kids (are) just a group of young kids hanging out. They just hang out. It's just a way to kill time, to communicate with their friends and stuff.'

This was contrasted with the activities of groups, which were characterised more in terms of being groups of friends, who like to hang out together and socialise. Gang behaviour was related to drug dealing, theft and robbery. It was also associated with causing trouble, such as starting fights. The main differences between the different groups which hang out on the streets were between those who engaged in 'fun', and those who were 'troublemakers'.

When asked about what types of gangs there were in their particular neighbourhoods, the young people emphasised 'ethnicity' more than age or criminality. This is shown in Table 12. This perception of gangs is particularly interesting given the Latin American young people's general lack of knowledge about other ethnic young people, as discussed above.

Table 12: Young People's Perceptions of Types of Gangs in the Area

Types of Gangs	Response to each category			
	Number	Percent	Percent	
		(respondents)	(responses)	
Troublemakers	1	7.1	6.3	
Drug dealers	3	21.4	18.8	
Just group of friends	1	7.1	6.3	
Ethnic group	8	57.1	50.0	
Don't know	3	21.4	18.8	
Total	16		100.0	

N= 14 Not Applicable = 6 (30%)

The perception that other groups of ethnic minority youth, or Anglo Australian youth, constitute 'gangs', simply by virtue of their ethnic background, is clearly conveyed in the following quotations. In some cases the ignorance regarding the affairs of other young people is manifest in the use of racist descriptions of them:

LA4: 'Yeah, there are heaps. Well, there's the Vietnamese group, also the drugs – drug dealers. Well, I seen some Africans too; I don't really know if they're gangs or not- the Latinos.'

LA5: 'Aborigines, Australians, Albanians and the "Wogs."

LA8: 'There are many gangs in my local area. Well, most of them are Vietnamese – from an Asian background. There's lots of 'em from Africa – Somalia.'

LA11: 'I've only been here three weeks. I haven't seen any of them. But in my old local area, there were packs. There's the "Gooks" – that's what everyone else calls 'em. And there's "Skips in Control" – which they think. There's the "Wogs" and there's the "Niggers" and there's the South Americans, which are called "Latins".'

When specific detail about 'gangs' was asked, many of the young people were unsure about things such as the size of such groups. The names of local 'gangs' either referred to a specific geographical location (e.g., the 3174 gang, based upon the post code for Noble Park), or

ethnic background (e.g., the 'Skips in Control' gang). Largely, however, gang membership was perceived to consist of particular kinds of ethnic identification, which was reinforced by the concentration of certain groups of young people in certain suburbs. The importance of ethnicity is once again indicated in Table 13.

Table 13: Young People's Perceptions of What Members of Gangs Have in Common

Common attributes of gang members	Response	to each categor	у	
	Number	Percent	Percent	
		(respondents)	(responses)	
Dress/style	2	10.5	5.3	
Ethnicity/culture	8	42.1	21.1	
Having fun	1	5.3	2.6	
Interests	7	36.8	18.4	
Fighting	2	10.5	5.3	
Hangout/suburb	1	5.3	2.6	
Problems at home	1	5.3	2.6	
Unemployment/low socio-economic st	tatus 4	21.1	10.5	
Drink/drugs	1	5.3	2.6	
Don't know	2	10.5	5.3	
Other	9	47.4	23.7	
Total	38		100.0	

N=19

Missing Responses = 1(5%)

One respondent commented that: 'I know for a fact that the majority of groups I see, they tend to be one kind of nationality. For instance, I now where I come from there's a group of Macedonians that always get together' (LA19). Some insight into why young people of the same or similar national or ethnic backgrounds tended to hang around together was provided in responses to a question on why young people join gangs. The key reasons were 'protection' and 'support'.

The problem of racism was identified as a major influence on perceived gang membership and formation. There appeared to be considerable tensions between different groups of young people, as well as some groups experiencing particular negative attention in society at large.

LA1: 'Depends (whether racism is a reason) on what kind of gang you are, because if you're in a gang that you've got – you are with Asian people and European people, and Latin people, I don't think so they could be a racist gang. But, if you're like in the skinheads, you wouldn't see an Asian in there, or you wouldn't see a Latin person. So, it depends on what kind of gang you're getting into.

LA5: 'Yes, because everyone calls 'em "Niggers", "Abos", "Kooris", "Skips", "Wogs".'

LA7: 'Even my brother, sometimes when he goes out with his friends, like they hang out in a little group. They're all a mixture, but they don't feel comfortable when people actually make comments, like racist comments.'

LA8: 'I think racism is a reason for Vietnamese gangs, because there's a lot of people against Asians.'

LA9: 'Yes, especially the gangs in school. The Asian gangs in school, they gang up on the teachers because the teachers are all racist towards them. They make fun of their accents and stuff like that. And you know, they all call us lazy. All the ethnics are lazy; they don't do anything.'

LA11: 'Yeah, 'cos probably the Australians don't like Italian and South American and like Asian people and Asian people don't like Australians or like Italian or South American people, and so all around it's like they join each other. They like, sometimes the Italians go onto the Asians and then the Asians'll fight the Australians and then the Australians'll like go onto the Italians...'

LA12: 'Yeah, sometimes. For the Asians and that maybe. Like, for the Asians they usually just get together to like, you know, fight everyone else and that.'

LA13: 'Yes, racism is one big reason actually and is becoming worse and worse as the years go past in Australia unfortunately. I believe that Australia's getting further and further closer to the Americans' way of living. That races are being divided or initiated by one person. But then a lot of people do feel the same way. We think that Australia is not a racist country because we're so isolated from the rest of the world, but we do get the influence through the media and other sorts of ways. And people are starting to divide themselves a lot more than what they used to before, looking out for their own culture and they believe "multiculturalism" is a bad word.'

LA15: "cos knowing all the Asians you know are coming in, lots of people you know, they actually gang up and actually like tease the Asians and that."

LA16: 'I suppose sometimes there's a lot of tension between different ethnic groups, so when there is that tension like you see people sticking to their own race or whatever. I don't know, just when there is trouble between groups, you like to stick with your own race or something like that. I suppose that's what a lot of people, or ethnic gangs do.'

While ethnic identity and racism feature strongly in the classification of some groups as gangs, the reasons for joining a gang included other factors besides protection and mutual support. For example, lack of parental support and control, personal problems, being easily influenced by peers, and simply a quest for excitement and fun were mentioned.

Major differences were perceived, however, in why young women might be associated with a gang. As one person observed:

'I think that young women get involved for the wrong reasons. I mean, men are more into the partying and the control of the whole thrill of being part of a gang. The women probably just get involved for protection; for the thrill of you know, being part of a man gang.' (LA13).

Young women generally were not seen as gang members as such. Their link to gangs was primarily seen in terms of having relationships with their male counterparts.

The kinds of activities in which gangs are perceived to be involved are described in Table 14. In discussions, a number of respondents talked about how much of this activity was basically 'thrill-seeking'. It provided the participants with a sense of excitement and danger, and a chance to test boundaries with authority figures such as the police and mall security guards.

Table 14: Young People's Perceptions of the Kinds of Activities in Which Gangs are Involved

Kinds of activities	Response	to each categor	ту	
	Number	Percent	Percent	
		(respondents)	(responses)	
Fighting	8	40.0	17.0	
Having fun	3	15.0	6.4	
Drug dealing	4	20.0	8.5	
Stealing/mugging/robbery	12	60.0	25.5	
Vandalism/graffiti	4	20.0	8.5	
Unspecified illegal	4	20.0	8.5	
Drinking/drug use	5	25.0	10.6	
Sport	1	5.0	2.1	
Don't know	1	5.0	2.1	
Other	5	25.0	10.6	
Total	47		100.0	

N=20

Most of the activities shown in Table 13 refer to sites such as shopping centres and streets. However, gang behaviour in schools tended to be more specifically related to 'bullying'. This is indicated in Table 15.

Table 15:
Young People's Perceptions of How Gangs are a Problem in School

Type of Problem	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent	Percent
		(respondents)	( responses)
Scare/pick on students	7	50.0	31.8
Start fights	4	28.6	18.2
Racism	2	14.3	9.1
Bad influence	2	14.3	9.1
Problematic for teachers	1	7.1	4.5
Deal drugs	2	14.3	9.1
Don't know	3	21.4	13.6
Other	1	7.1	4.5
Total	22		100.0

N=14

Missing = 1 (5%)

Not Applicable = 5 (25%)

Physical assault was seen as a significant issue, whether this involved fights between rival groups or individual students being harassed and threatened. A distinction was made between aggressive individuals who had been in school a long time, and young people who more closely identified with specific groups. In the case of the former, for example, it was pointed out that: 'They tend to take drugs into the school and harass other kids in school, like picking on them and stuff like that' (LA6). With regard to 'gangs', the concern was with both the group fighting that could occur, and the effects of gang behaviour on individual students (and on teachers, who likewise may be threatened):

'They're a problem in school because once the gangs go in the schools, they can cause a lot of problems for the school and for other peers as well if they attend that school. They can cause problems like people not turning up to classes because they fear the people that go to school. Kids have been traumatised, and kids being bashed and being harassed in a place where they should feel safe' (LA13).

Whether it be on the street or in the school, most of the young people interviewed felt intimidated by the presence of gangs. Many felt that such gangs were dangerous, and that they contributed to a general feeling of not being safe in the local neighbourhood.

At the same time, it was acknowledged that for the young people involved, gang membership offered some degree of protection, respect and personal security. The down side of this was that young people who were identified as belonging to a 'gang' would be more likely to be forced by peer pressure to engage in criminal acts. Furthermore, they would become targets for police intervention, and for assault on their person, precisely because of their membership:

LA1: You're forced to do something you don't want to. Deep inside you don't want to and they'll laugh at you, or they'll tell you that you're a girl, or something like that. I think most of all, the peer pressure in the same gang really pushes you to do something you don't want to do.'

LA9: 'That you know, people always recognise you, that you belong to that gang. And other members of other gangs always know you, so if you're alone, they beat the crap out of you.'

LA12: 'You're gonna get caught by police doing drugs or something like that.'

LA15: 'You get involved in crimes. Things you're not meant to do and you can get in trouble for it.'

If they were not in a gang, then it was felt that these young people would spend more time in school and engaged in more productive pursuits. However, it was also pointed out that if they weren't in a gang they would be doing 'Nothing. I mean, there's nothing to do here, so what could you possibly be doing?' (LA9). In a similar vein, some of the respondents thought that

individuals would simply continue stealing or taking drugs, regardless of being part of a larger group or not.

Most young people hang around in a group. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between a 'group' and a 'gang'. Questions were asked, therefore, about the experience of groups on the streets. In particular, the Latin American youth were asked about any trouble they might experience.

Table 16: Young People's Perceptions of the Trouble that Groups Experience on the Streets

Types of trouble	Response	to each catego	ry			
	Number	Percent	Percent			
		(respondents)	(responses)			
Police harassment	15	75.0	48.4			
Fighting	6	30.0	19.4			
Trouble with parents	1	5.0	3.2			
Trouble with shopkeepers	2	10.0	6.5			
Public disapproval	3	15.0	9.7			
Don't know	1	5.0	3.2			
Other	3	15.0	9.7			
Total	31		100.0			

N=20

As indicated in Table 16, being harassed by the police generated the greatest number of responses to this question. Comments relating to this included for example:

LA3: 'If you have a group of young people, you know, there is quite a number gets together and they hang out and the police sees them and they will think that they're a gang so that they, you know, they go and say something to them and even if they tell them that they're not a gang, don't have anything to do with a gang, they're just a group of friends, you know, the police will still tell them off. The police doesn't believe them, so that's where they create the problem.'

LA5: 'Police pull you over for no reason and they think they're gonna beat the fuck out of you and they try to beat the fuck out of you.'

LA14: 'Police always stop and talk to them all the time.'

LA9: 'Always the police and the business people. You know, they're always very scared. They always call the police when they see a group which looks very big, so they always call the police to come and take them away.'

LA10: 'They're always bothered by the police. Maybe they're not doing anything. Maybe they're just sitting there not doing nothing. They should stop hassling them.'

The second biggest issue relating to street life was fights, and being threatened by gangs of other young people. As one young person put it: 'It could happen that you could be with your friends, like you could go to the beach and a gang could be there and they could tease you and not harm you...just approach you in a different way' (LA11). However, when group fights occurred, more serious things might happen.

This was indicated in discussions of the use of weapons by gangs. Knives, guns, baseball bats, machetes, bricks, sticks and bottles were all mentioned as gang weapons. How these were used in practice was unclear. However, an interesting comment regarding the importance of 'postering' provides some idea: 'Yeah, they use like knives and they might have a gun. It might not even have bullets in it, but they'll just show it just to get everyone scared or something' (LA12). The use of more lethal weapons, such as guns, was associated with young adults, rather than with young people under the age of 20.

Gangs were seen to use weapons for very specific purposes and under very specific conditions. In particular, 'gang fights' and 'only in emergency and for self defence' were cited as the main occasions when weapons might be used.

Who the protagonists in any 'gang' fights actually are, and why they engage in fights, are important research questions. Table 17 details the perceptions of the young people in regards to who was fighting whom.

Table 17:
Young People's Perceptions of the Different Groups
that Get Involved in Gang Fights

Types of groups	Number	to each categor Percent	Percent
		(respondents)	(responses)
Anglo against other Ethnic	6	30.0	28.6
One Ethnic against 'different' Ethnic	3	15.0	14.3
Ethnic amongst 'similar' Ethnic	3	15.0	14.3
Ethnic within Ethnic	1	5.0	4.8
No particular/many different combinatio	ns 2	10.0	9.5
Another specific combination	1	5.0	4.8
Not based on Ethnicity	1	5.0	4.8
Don't know	4	20.0	19.0
Total	21		100.0
N=20			

The comments on gang fights offer intriguing insights into the nature and dynamics of such activity.

LA3: 'You can't generalise that one group fights with another. You know, Latin Americans like fighting and they fight against anyone, it doesn't really matter. For example, with the Latin Americans you know, they have two different gangs or groups you know – (one) from one country and (the other) from another country of Latin America and you know, there's always fighting between countries from Latin America because they have different beliefs, so they fight about practically everything from you know, drinking, to what do you think or how do you speak Spanish – "Do you speak better than me?".. But Latin Americans usually prefer to fight between each other, but for example, if they have a fight against another group – the Australians or the Vietnamese or any other race – they unite. For example, the gang from El Salvadorians or the Chilean gangs or whichever gang, they get together and both of them fight against the other gang.'

LA4: 'Well, around here is mainly the Asians against the Asians.'

LA8: 'The Asians get involved in gang fights, especially the Vietnamese in Springvale. You see some of the El Salvadorians getting involved in that, but the Vietnamese are the main ones in Springvale.'

LA12: 'It's usually like Asians versus like Australians.'

LA13: 'I would say at the moment, Australians against Asian people.'

LA15: 'From what I know, it's mostly Lebanese, Turkish, Asians.'

LA16: 'Well around this area, I suppose you hear a lot of trouble between like Turkish and like other countries around that area and Asians against Australians as well.'

Fights of this nature were predominantly attributed to 'racism'. As indicated earlier, there appear to be strong ethnic identifications and distinctions amongst the various street-present young people. In addition to tensions between these groups, and within particular communities, there is the additional factor of a volatile social climate engendered by the rise to prominence of the One Nation party:

LA13: 'Because of, you know, the racial hatred that there is at the moment in Australia. The Asians are hated by Pauline Hanson and then by every body else. Not every body else, but a lot of people do support her opinions. And in numbers, you'd be surprised how many people do think, do agree with Pauline in Australia, but they're just silent because they fear that you know, the people might think badly of them.'

Another young person commented that a large part of the problem is ignorance: 'Because they don't like understand their cultures – like the other groups' cultures – and like the story behind their lives' (LA17). The lack of appreciation of other young people's backgrounds, histories and cultures thus is seen to contribute to at least some of the tension between the diverse groups.

# 2.5 Problems & Solutions

The young people who participated in this study were very critical of media representations of 'ethnic youth gangs'. They considered media coverage of these issues to be exaggerated, biased and as only showing one side of the story. Few positive stories and representations ever took place. On the matter of exaggeration, one young person commented that:

LA2: 'I think they damage a lot of the rest of the people. They show just the bad things and the gangs and I think there's a misperception about gangs. Say if there's a fight and there's a group of friends, they label them straight away gangs and they could be just a friend that got into a fight and then you go and protect your friend and it blows up to a really big fight and it's just gangs; they blow it out of proportion.'

A number of the young people expressed concern with the portrayal of Latin Americans in movies and television programmes, particularly those programmes produced in the United States. These were seen to stigmatise the whole Latin American community.

LA3: 'I think many gangs, you know, they're always put in a bad way, but 'specially with the Latin American groups you know, even if you're just a group you know, 'specially the television. The television shows Latin Americans, you know, 'specially American television shows Latin Americans as all of them being members of gangs you know, dealing drugs. But maybe here (in Australia) it isn't the same, but because they show too much American TV and in America they generalise too much and they say the Columbians do this and the El Salvadorians do this – they generalise thinking that in here they do the same thing. You know, American television uses Latin American too much and they always give them bad reputation.'

LA4: 'Well, you can see on the TV you know, what they say about, you know, they generalise a bit – all Latinos are gang members; it's not really true you know. Some are members of gangs, some are not, but people watch too much American television so they see all these bullshit that comes on and they generalise that all, everyone, is a gang member.'

As one young person put it: 'They never have anything good to say about young people from different backgrounds' (LA8). As another commented: 'The media sucks' (LA5).

When it came to what could be done to address issues surrounding gangs, the strongest suggested course of action was to give the young people more support and help. This sentiment is reflected in the following comment:

LA1: 'If you like, get to know somebody that's in a gang, talk to them and they know maybe it's OK to be in a gang, as long as it's a nice safe gang, you know, without having any racism, or without trying to harm people in the same country, or even a different one. Try to talk to them, ...you know, make them understand it's not very good like to steal, or to do illegal stuff, "What do you get out of it?" Maybe just you or other members of your gang can say "Oh, good done", but you don't get nothing out of it.'

Increasing the number of services and creating better community resources was the preferred strategy.

LA6: 'There's not much you can do, 'cos if they're gonna join it, they're gonna join it whether everyone puts a stop to it or not. The only thing I could think of is instead of putting a stop to it, 'cos it's not gonna stop, is just provide more facilities for young people to do other social functions and things, so they could get them away from those sort of things.'

LA13: 'Well, there should be, I'm sure there's a lot of support programs for these kids and a lot of services available for them to be able to get out of the lifestyle of a gang. So, I would say just, you know, more services for kids, more you know, youth groups, more things like that to just keep the kids out of the streets into programs that they do enjoy and that are actually doing something for their lives, their futures.'

A significant majority of the young people (15) felt that there were insufficient activities for young people. The young people thought that there ought to be more recreational and leisure activities, and more sporting facilities for youth in their area.

It was not only the lack of facilities and services which influenced what the young people do with their time, and where they do it. A consistent theme in the discussions is that they wanted somewhere to go where they felt safe and welcome, accepted and supported. The feelings of being unsafe were partly related to their fear of gangs, especially gangs comprised of other ethnic groups. They were also linked to the harassment they suffered at the hands of security guards and the police. The latter is worthy of further consideration and qualification.

Most the young people interviewed had had some kind of contact with the police. More young people felt that this contact was generally good (8), than those who felt that it was

generally bad (5). The good experiences included being treated well when stopped or being helped by the police when they were a victim of crime. Police were seen to be doing their job, but how they do their job was important to the young people. It is important to bear in mind as well that many of these young people's parents and families had had direct experience of repressive policing in their country of origin.

LA8: 'We always have contact with the police 'cos we're always in the streets, so the police like to bother us. It's been okay. The police, you know, they always ask us what are we doing here, if we're doing something stupid or illegal. They're always asking us questions, but they never hurt us or kick us out, unless we're doing something really stupid.'

LA9: 'We were arrested once for gratifying the back of a wall in the back of the swimming pool and the toilets in the park. So, we got caught and the police arrested us, (and) took us to the station.' Even though it was bad, because we got arrested, it wasn't that bad. They always say the police are gonna kill you, hurt you and that shit, but they didn't do anything to us.'

Some of the young people, however, objected to being questioned, searched or threatened by the police on the street. One objected to the police judging young people simply on the basis of their appearance. Another commented that they wanted the police to be more accessible and responsive, and to offer more protection for young people in their area. Overall, however, routine police stopping and questioning was accepted as commonplace and 'normal'.

Interaction with security guards exhibited a similar pattern. Here most of the young people said that they had had generally bad contact with security guards, usually those involved with nightspots and with shopping centres. Nevertheless, they had had a range of positive experiences with them as well. They were friends with security guards, and in some cases had been helped or protected by the security guards. The bad experiences related to being moved on or kicked out of certain sites, or being denied entry into a club. Several young people referred to instances when they had drank too much, and the security guards had intervened to remove them from the premises.

The relationship with their parents and families was very important to the Latin American youth. Their family was seen to 'always be there', and in one case since the young person did not have many friends in Australia, to be a vital social connection. While almost half of the sample said they were experiencing 'family problems', the kinds of problems alluded to tended to be seen as typical of teenager-parent relationships. For example, one young person commented that:

'I think everyone you know, has problems with their family. You know, arguing about what time I go out, or what time I come back, you know, what I can do and what I can't do because they don't really know what is in this culture and they're a bit scared, but in my country I didn't have that sort of problem' (LA4).

In other words, the 'family problems' were seen as part and parcel of the usual pains of adolescent development. They were not related to deeper issues such as abuse or being forced to move out of home.

When the young people were experiencing problems of their own, they tended to rely on their parents or on friends, or simply to sort things out for themselves. They were aware of various support services which could provide assistance as well, including youth and social 36

workers, the phone Helpline, and the school welfare co-ordinator. The main type of assistance gained from these agencies was advice and information, and support. Just over half of the young people had received financial assistance from a government department.

When it came to what the various agencies and institutions might do, generally, to assist them and to deal with gang-related problems, the answers varied depending upon the institution in question. The police were not seen as being able to do very much, except perhaps maintain a public presence or, conversely, to leave young people alone. The difficult juggling act required of the police is reflected in the following comments:

LA12: 'There's not much they can do 'cos like sometimes they're either too pushy on them and they'll even repel them more, and then (sometimes) they're not pushy enough.'

LA18: 'I don't know that it comes down to the police doing something. I guess try to help them in a way. You know, try to help the youth group or whatever that might be in trouble. But then again, I don't know if the police will be the right people to do that or not.'

LA20: 'They can't really do much because there's so many gangs around that there's not enough police to actually cover them all. But maybe more patrols may help it.'

The young people's perceptions about what schools can do about gangs are shown in Table 18. Given the problems identified with gang disruptions in schools, and of bullying of particular individuals and groups, it is not surprising that some of the suggested options are based upon clamping down hard upon any racism or physical aggression. In discussions, the young people emphasised the importance of having positive after-school activities, as well as ensuring that young people do not get mis-labelled as 'gang members' when they are not.

Table 18:
Young People's Perceptions of What Schools can Do about Gangs

Type of action	Response to each category			
	Number	Percent	Percent	
		(respondents)	(responses)	
Teach them about consequences				
/alternatives to gang life	4	21.1	16.0	
Get to know them/talk to them	1	6.4	4.0	
After school activities/programs	1	6.4	4.0	
Enforce stricter rules	1	6.4	4.0	
Expel them	5	26.3	20.0	
Separate them	2	10.5	8.0	
Can't do much	6	31.6	24.0	
Don't know	2	10.5	8.0	
Other	3	15.8	12.0	
Total	25		100.0	

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

The importance of support and guidance, and of having organised activities in which to engage, was also emphasised when it came to what social services could to about gangs.

One young person said that such services should '*Not be so goddamn critical, like they tend to be'* (*LA6*). Another emphasised the importance of communication:

LA1: 'I don't think they can do much, but maybe they can get through them in some way, like go to one of the gangs and try to see and try and talk to them. I don't know, maybe do these things like a free lunch for the gangs, blah blah blah and then try to talk to them. Then they would get people because it would be something free, so they can get information out of them and give something back.'

Beyond offering a support group, it was generally felt there was little that a specific migrant service could provide with regard to the particular issue of gangs.

Governments, including local governments, were seen to be able to provide limited answers to the youth gang phenomenon. The biggest demand was for provision of free hang out places for young people. In general, the feeling was that governments need to spend more time listening to young people and addressing their needs:

LA5: 'Instead of criticising them so much, not criticise them that much, and give them more help.'

LA12: 'Pay more attention to them; help them out more, like give them more services.'

LA13: 'The government can give a lot more of, more funding for programs for kids, like drop-in centres and things like that.'

Governments were invited by young persons to try to reach out and try to get to the bottom of the problem as to why gangs exist.

The young people were asked about what they will be or would like to be doing in five years. The answers indicated fairly conventional mainstream aspirations – to be working, to be enrolled in tertiary education, to own a house and car, to be married and have a family. Longer term, the majority emphasised that the key thing they wanted was to have a paid job. As recognised by one person, this could often be difficult to achieve:

LA1: 'I could try to make my life better, but the world itself outside (is a problem). I could really study really hard to become a professional or whatever I want to do, but the way things are now, the jobs and stuff, there are a lot of professionals out there that really studied hard and because simply there are no jobs. It's not just only because of you, because of how the system is. I might be specialised and apply and send a thousand resumes and I will call a thousand places, but they might have somebody there already, they can't take nobody else, but if I have contacts of a good company, I knew somebody in the company could get me (a job). That's the difference I reckon; the outer world plus you could make something. You dream of a goal, but if you don't have the other – an acquaintance to help you reach it.

Thus there are structural impediments which are acknowledged as having a major impact on the opportunities and developmental possibilities for contemporary young people. How these are overcome continues to be a major dilemma for governments and communities.

#### 2.6 Conclusion

This study has been based upon interviews with 20 young people drawn from the Latin American communities of Melbourne. The young people interviewed were part of fairly stable family and community networks. Almost all of the young people were engaged in

some type of education or training. They were generally reliant upon parents, and state benefits, for financial support. They appeared to have strong peer relationships with other members of the Latin American communities.

On the specific issue of gangs, the study revealed three major types of identified 'gang' behaviour:

- 'street gangs' consisting of mainly young people and young adults, which were seen to be criminal in orientation. These did not feature strongly in the day-to-day interactions and experiences of the young people
- 'social identity' groups consisting of young people who were usually identified on the basis of general ethnic background (e.g., Asians, Anglo Australians, Latinos), which were seen to be highly visible in public spaces, and who congregate in such places mainly for social reasons
- 'school gangs' consisting of groups of young people, usually from similar ethnic backgrounds, whose activity included the harassment and use of violence towards individual students, teachers and other groups within the school.

The rationale for most of the group formations was social, rather than criminal. However, whether deemed to be 'groups' or 'gangs', the issue of violence or the threat of violence at the hands of other young people did emerge as a matter of some concern. The young people interviewed were often fearful of going to certain public places due to worries about apparently aggressive groups of youth. Furthermore, the presence of 'gangs' and individual 'bullies' in the schools was a source of much consternation.

One of the key findings of the study is that ethnic background and identity was often equated with gang membership. These were also linked to street level violence, usually in the form of fights between and within various groups. It is clear from the interviews, as well, that most of the Latin American young people with whom we spoke, had very little knowledge of or positive interaction with other 'ethnic' minority youth.

The perception of 'gangs', therefore, seemed to be heavily influenced by general ignorance of the life situations, life styles and cultures of other groups of young people. It was also influenced by periodic conflicts between, and within, these ethnically identified groups.

It is interesting to note in this regard that a major complaint of the young people was the way in which the media typically provided distorted and one-sided portrayals of Latin Americans, particularly in relation to drug-related issues. Such images not only reproduce the 'silences' or general lack of knowledge about Latin American people themselves in the wider public domain. They can also reinforce public stereotypes regarding 'dangerousness' and 'criminality' within these communities. These, in turn, may be related to inter-group conflicts on the streets or in the schools insofar as young people tend to have particular conceptions regarding the social attributes of young people from different ethnic backgrounds.

The young people who were interviewed had reasonably good relations with authority figures such as the police and private security guards. Where this was not so, it was due to either perceived unwarranted questioning or being asked to move on, or to the lack of appropriate responses by authority figures to their desire for protection and assistance.

The young people wanted to feel safe and secure in their neighbourhoods and in the classroom. They had conventional work and social aspirations, and generally positive attitudes towards parents and authority figures. They felt that gang membership should be responded to by increasing the range and quality of existing services, including schooling, and by selectively excluding gang members and bullies, where appropriate, from mainstream institutions.

### 2.7 Recommendations

### i. Canadian Gangs and Ethnicity

In the study of youth gangs in Vancouver, Gordon and Foley (1998: 127) make the observation that:

while the number of individuals involved in organizations, gangs and groups is small (tiny might be a better adjective) immigrants who are from visible ethnic minorities are significantly over-represented. This may be a function of ethnic and economic marginality. The lack of language, and a lack of both money and the means to obtain money and material goods legitimately may result in individuals clustering in supportive groups where they are understood and can make money, albeit illegally.

The report goes on to note that it appears that settlement services are not reaching some individuals and families, and that there is a need for more social workers who understand the structures, customs, values and norms of particular immigrant cultures and who can speak the languages of newly arrived individuals and families.

The report recommends that the ethnic minority families and young people would benefit from some or all of the following (Gordon & Foley, 1998: 127-128):

- Education about Canada and the Canadian way of life prior to leaving the country of origin
- Opportunities to discuss Canada and the Canadian way of life, and the probable impact on the family unit, before leaving the country of origin
- Access to adequate settlement services immediately upon arrival, and for an extended period thereafter
- ESL [English as Second Language] classes for adults that are free and available during the day, in the evenings and at weekends
- · ESL classes for children that are free and available outside regular classroom time
- Access to community kitchens and similar programmes that address the problem of family isolation
- Programmes specifically designed for immigrants from war zones to help reduce the long term effects of exposure to violence
- Access to 'buddy' systems whereby support can be provided for individuals and families during their first few years of life in Canada

It is further recommended that there by additional programming for immigrants aimed at assisting individuals to find rewarding employment, especially young adult males who are at risk of drifting into criminal activity.

### ii. Public Spaces and Ethnicity in Australia

The most sustained analysis of how young ethnic minority people actually use public space – which has obvious implications regarding gang-related perceptions and activities – has been a study undertaken in four local government areas in Sydney (Pe-Pua, 1996). A wide range of issues relating to the lives of 100 street-frequenting non-English speaking background young people were investigated. The discussions and interviews covered topics such as family issues, housing and accommodation issues, social and recreational needs, financial needs, employment issues, educational and training issues, physical and mental health, legal issues and youth services.

With respect to the specific issue of public space use, the study found that (Pe-Pua, 1996: 115):

The activities associated with street-frequenting ranged from illegal activities to fun activities, socialising, fighting or stirring up trouble, smoking and others. The reasons for street-frequenting were boredom, family-related, for economic or moral support, because of the freedom it provides, and others. The perceived benefits were: widening one's social network; having fun; learning experience; freedom and a sense of power; escape from problems; economic gains, and others. The perceived disadvantages were related to problems with the police; a negative image or bad treatment received from others, especially adults; getting into trouble or being involved in fights; health or drug and alcohol problems; lack of adequate shelter or food; financial worries; emotional burden; and general safety.

On the basis of the study's findings, a number of recommendations were put forward, some of which are relevant to the present study. These include (Pe-Pua, 1996):

- that different strategies for disseminating information on the background and needs of street-frequenting young people be undertaken, to be targeted at different groups
- that the culture or practice of service provision (e.g., police, youth and community, health) be changed to have a more effective ethnic minority youth focus, while maintaining a high level of customer service and professionalism
- that youth services incorporate a mobile outreach and street-based service delivery model to access street-frequenting young people
- that a multi-skilled, multi-purpose type of structure for a youth centre be set up
- that more street workers be hired, or street and outreach work be strongly encouraged as part of youth work, provided adequate funding support and human resources are made available
- that the recreational needs of these young people be addressed by making alternative forms of recreation available

Pe-Pua (1996) concludes that the key to providing for the needs of ethnic minority street-frequenting young people are education and employment opportunities. Changes to existing

services would be a step in the right direction, and assist in developing further these opportunities.

# iii. Recommendations Arising from the Present Study

The key issues arising from this study pertain to the nature of inter-ethnic relations involving ethnic minority groups, as well as Anglo Australian young people; and the impact of violence or the threat of violence on young people's use of public spaces and educational institutions.

Following from the perceptions of the young people themselves, and the findings of this and other reports, the following recommendations appear warranted:

- It is essential that young people in general be provided with *specific education in cross-cultural issues* in order that the backgrounds, cultures and patterns of life pertaining to specific ethnic groups be better understood by all concerned
- Attention must also be directed at the provision of *anti-racist education*, so that issues of discrimination, prejudice and unequal power relations be analysed and discussed in an enlightened, informative and empathetic manner
- Following the example of the City of Adelaide (see White, 1998: 47), there should be developed at the local, regional and state levels a series of *youth reconciliation projects*, that will promote the diversity of cultures among young people, aim to reduce violence between them, and give young people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds the practical opportunity to get to know each other at a personal and group level
- Concerted action is needed on the specific issue of school bullying, as this relates to both
  individuals and to 'gangs' within the school context, so that appropriate conflict resolution
  and anti-violence strategies be put into place in order to reduce the number of such incidents
  and to reassure students of their safety and security within the educational institution
- Special provisions are needed for those young people who, due to their bullying or gangrelated behaviour, might normally be excluded from school, but who still require community support and appropriate educational programmes to ensure that they have the chance to contribute positively to society, rather than to be marginalised even further from the mainstream
- The media need to be strongly encouraged to review programme and reporting content, with a view to providing greater information and more rounded accounts of specific ethnic minority groups, and so that the use of gratuitous images and descriptions based upon stereotypes be monitored and actively discouraged

If we, as a society, are to tackle issues surrounding 'youth gangs', then, as a society, we must also recognise our responsibilities in creating the conditions which generate the perceptions of, fear of, and negative responses to such phenomenon. In the context of the present report, this means that many more community resources need to be directed toward the youth population. These are needed in order to better educate young people about the diverse nature of the Australian population; to provide them with creative leisure outlets, and safe and secure public spaces; and to engage with them about how best to deal with issues of violence, racism and social conflict involving different groups. The time to provide such community resources is now.

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