

Australian Multicultural Foundation

Ethnic Youth Gangs in Australia
Do They Exist?

Overview Report

by
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Part 1:

Background to the Research

1.1 Introduction

The present report provides an overview summary of six studies undertaken on 'ethnic youth gangs' in the Melbourne metropolitan area over the period 1996-1998. The six specific 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 Young People

This report presents the overall findings of the study, and involves comparisons between the different groups as well as highlighting common features. It discusses further 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., 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, socio-economic 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 been limited 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., 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 they 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 were 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 over-whelming 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 Boddies 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 '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 are 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 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 Somali 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:

Findings Summary

2.1 Social Histories

This section of each study provided a brief history of the particular ethnic group in question, and outlined issues relating to migration patterns, re-settlement processes and general socio-economic circumstances pertaining to the particular community.

Vietnamese Young People

The bulk of Vietnamese migration to Australia took place between 1975 and 1985. Most of this migration consisted of refugees. More recent migration has generally been under the family migration program. Vietnamese settlement has tended to be spatially concentrated in particular suburbs, predominantly in Melbourne and Sydney. The Vietnamese community is one of the youngest, in terms of age profile, in Australia. Problems faced by many Vietnamese immigrants have included language difficulties, social dislocation, reduced social and economic opportunities, poverty and lack of adequate qualifications.

Turkish Young People

The migration of Turkish people began en masse from 1967 onwards. Most migrants have settled in Melbourne and Sydney, in particular residential areas. Turkish migration was generally for employment purposes, and was initially perceived by many immigrants as a 'guest worker' experience. The community has placed great emphasis on maintenance of the Turkish language, community values and Islamic religion. By the mid-1980s, the children of Turkish immigrants were exhibiting much higher educational participation and school retention rates than had previously been the case. Problems faced by many Turkish immigrants have included language difficulties, maintenance of distinctive ethnic identity and religious affiliation, disadvantages in the labour market, and economic hardship.

Pacific Islander Young People

The Pacific Islander community is comprised mainly of Polynesian people, including for example, the Maori, Samoans and people from Fiji. There are about 100,000 Pacific Islanders in Australia, from a diverse range of islands and cultural backgrounds. Immigration has generally been due to economic and social factors, such as the search for employment and over-population in the homeland. The social structure of Pacific Islander communities tends to emphasise kinship networks and reciprocal obligations, within a highly stratified system with clear hierarchies of status and control. Problems faced by many Pacific Islander immigrants relate to feelings of dislocation and isolation, unemployment, and the tensions between the norms and expectations of Pacific Islander ways of life, and the wider Australian social and economic culture.

Somalian Young People

There are only a few thousand Somali people who have immigrated to Australia. The majority are refugees, who have fled drought and war. Most Somalis are Sunni Muslims, and most speak Somali, complemented by Arabic and English. The migrant population is relatively young, in terms of age. Problems experienced by Somali refugees include difficulties with language, low occupational skill levels, inability to find employment, and economic disadvantage. A particularly important problem relates to the trauma associated with famine and war in their homeland, and in the migration process itself.

Latin American Young People

The immigration of Latin American people took place mainly in two major waves in the 1970s and 1980s. The largest groups of people have come from Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, Uruguay, Peru, Columbia, Brazil and Ecuador. The reasons for migration were often linked to civil war and political repression in the home country, although a proportion of migrants was also driven by economic considerations. Over fifty per cent of Latin American immigrants have settled in New South Wales. They have tended to be fairly dispersed throughout the metropolitan areas of Sydney and Melbourne, and other regional centres. Problems faced by Latin American immigrants have included cultural differences, language difficulties, non-recognition of overseas skills and qualifications, unemployment and low income.

Anglo Australian Young People

The largest category of migrants is the Anglo Australian, which consists of people from the British Isles and selected English-speaking countries with European ancestry. The Anglo Australian community is diverse, and includes people from a range of ethnic and national backgrounds, such as Scotland, England, Ireland, the United States, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. It is the dominant group in Australia in terms of numbers, and in terms of socio-economic and political status and power. Problems faced by Anglo Australian immigrants, and their descendants, tend not to be linked to ethnicity per se, but to processes of class division and gender inequality in general.

Except for the Anglo Australian population, issues of *racism and discrimination* feature prominently in the identification of problems associated with settlement processes of the ethnic minority groups, and their longer term position and status in Australian society.

2.2 Profile of Youth Interviewed

This section of each study provided information on the nature and composition of the youth sample, including reference to the gender composition, religious orientation, migration experience and socio-economic background of parents.

Vietnamese Young People

This sample was comprised mainly of young Vietnamese people, and also people who identified themselves as Chinese, Anglo Australian, Filipino and Laotian. There were 17 young men, and 3 young women. Ten of the young people were Buddhists, and 7 Catholics.

18 of the young people had been born outside of Australia, and had experienced leaving their home country. Most had moved residence a number of times since arrival. Few of the mothers of the young people were in paid employment, and the majority of fathers worked in the industry and manufacturing areas. The young people did not have significant family resources upon which to draw.

Turkish Young People

This sample was comprised of 7 young women and 13 young men. Although only 14 of the young people were born in Australia, most of the sample were well established in the Australian context having been here a considerable period of time. They all had a strong Turkish ethnic identification, most spoke Turkish at home, and all of them held Muslim religious beliefs. Most of the young people lived at home, regardless of age or economic circumstance, and most had lived in the same area for a number of years. A minority of fathers were in paid employment, and only a handful of mothers. The economic resources of the households were thus very limited.

Pacific Islander Young People

This sample was comprised of mainly Maori young people, and also included those who identified themselves as Tongan, Samoan, Polynesian and Fijian. Eight of the respondents were female, and 12 were male. In terms of religious affiliation, 8 young people said they were Christians, 8 had no religion, and 4 held traditional Maori religious beliefs. Almost all of the young people had migrated to Australia with their families, and all had experienced frequent moving around. Half of the respondents' mothers were engaged in paid work, as were the majority of fathers. The families were relatively secure financially, although the paid work was concentrated in lower paying occupational and industry areas.

Somalian Young People

This sample was comprised of young people who all had been born in Somalia. There were 8 young women, and 12 young men. All of them were Muslim in terms of religious affiliation, and they mainly spoke Somali at home. The migration experience was difficult and posed a number of language and cultural difficulties. The respondents were particularly enthusiastic about participating in formal education. Only a handful of the mothers and fathers were in paid employment, and the overall socio-economic situation of the young people and their families was generally very poor.

Latin American Young People

This sample was comprised of young people from Chile, Argentina and El Salvador, and most of them were born overseas. The sample consisted of 9 young women and 11 young men. The majority said that they were Catholics. Most of the young people commented on the difficulties of the migration experience, in terms of language, culture and leaving friends behind. Most lived with both parents, and 14 of the young people spoke Spanish at home. A majority of the fathers were in paid employment, and 8 of the mothers were in paid work. This was generally concentrated in the clerical and service industries, and in trades and manufacturing.

Anglo Australian Young People

This sample was comprised of Anglo Australian young people, all of whom had been born in Australia. The sample group consisted of 9 young women, and 11 young men. Half of the group had no religious affiliation, the other half were Christians. Most of the young people lived with two parents, they all spoke English at home, and most had lived in the same area for a number of years. A majority of mothers were in paid employment, and almost all of the fathers were likewise employed across a broad range of occupations and industries. The young people all came from financially secure backgrounds.

Except for the Anglo Australian young people, issues of *financial resources and employment opportunities* were significant for most of the ethnic minority young people and their communities.

2.3 Sources of Income

This section of each study examined the economic situation of the respondents and their views on how young people secure an income, as well as exploring the kinds of illegal activities in which young people engage and why.

Vietnamese Young People

The key source of income for the young people in this sample group was some type of government benefit. Paid employment was rare, and in any case was often temporary in nature or paid on a cash-in-hand basis. A significant number of these young people performed unpaid work related in some way to family employment, such as doing piece work at home. Most of their money was spent on immediate household expenses such as rent, food and clothes. Entertainment was also a significant item. In discussion of alternative income sources, drug dealing and property crimes such as theft were prominent. Fighting, car theft and vandalism were all mentioned as activities in which the young people engaged, not for the purposes of money, but as a consequence of boredom or peer pressure.

Turkish Young People

Most of these young people were reliant in some way upon state benefits. Few were in full-time employment, although most had experience in paid work which was generally short-term. Most of their spending was on household related expenses such as food, bills and clothes. Entertainment was also a significant item. The main kinds of activities cited in relation to possible alternative income sources were property crimes, and involvement in drug dealing. That illegal or anti-social activity not motivated by immediate economic need included fighting, vandalism, car theft and drug use.

Pacific Islander Young People

A significant minority of this sample was in full-time employment, and just under half of the group had undertaken paid work of some kind. The main sources of income tended to vary with age and circumstance – and included state benefits of some kind, family, paid work and illegal activity. Regardless of differences in income sources and accommodation

arrangements, a large proportion of the young people's income was spent on items such as rent, food, bills, travel, clothes and school-related materials. Entertainment was also a significant item. Key alternative sources of income included property crimes, and drug dealing. In terms of activity not motivated by economic need, the main things mentioned were fighting, drug and alcohol use, car theft and vandalism.

Somalian Young People

Few of these young people were in paid employment, and only a small number had ever had experience in paid work and this was generally for a short time only. The key source of income was state benefits such as unemployment or educational benefits. The young people nevertheless played an important economic role in sustaining their households through making financial contributions and through doing unpaid work for friends and family. Drug dealing, followed by property crimes, were seen as the most likely way in which young people in their area could supplement their income via alternative means. With regard to illegal activity not undertaken for the purposes of money, the list included drug and alcohol use, fighting, stealing for own use and vandalism.

Latin American Young People

A significant minority of this sample held jobs, but most of these were of a casual nature. Of the few who had ever held jobs, most tended to be short-term. Almost half of the sample was reliant upon state benefits of some kind, while many of the others were dependent upon their family. In addition to immediate household expenses, such as rent and food, a large number of the young people referred to entertainment and leisure as major areas of expenditure. Drug dealing and shopstealing were seen as the major alternative ways in which to supplement one's income. The main types of illegal activities engaged in, but not for the purposes of money, included drug and alcohol use, stealing for own use, car theft, vandalism and fighting.

Anglo Australian Young People

Half of this sample group were in some kind of paid employment. Most of these jobs were part-time or casual, although this is partly explained by the fact that most of the young people were also still in school. Few of them had never had a job. The main source of income for this group was the family, supplemented through part-time work. The young people spent most of their money on leisure and entertainment, and very little went to household related expenses. Perceptions of alternative income sources in the area included drug dealing, and property crime of some kind. Other types of illegal activity, not for the purposes of money, that were identified included vandalism, and drug and alcohol use.

The young people were unanimous in their views that the key sources of alternative income for young people were *drug dealing* and *property crimes* such as shopstealing. *Vandalism* and various forms of *drug use* featured prominently in the types of non-economic activities mentioned, as did *fighting* (with the exception of the Anglo Australian sample group).

2.4 Youth Gangs

This section of each study dealt with the issue of youth gangs, and discussed the nature of youth group formations, group activities and the nature and dynamics of gang membership.

Given the central importance of this section to the overall purpose and objectives of the study, it is useful to first highlight research findings which provide a snapshot of the key issues and perceptions of the young people as a whole. This will be followed by more detailed discussion of perceptions regarding gang membership and behaviour within each specific target group.

One of the common findings of the research was that very often the notion of ‘youth gang’ was ill-defined or contentious on the part of the young people who were interviewed. It could refer to types of activities, group associations and/or use of violence. It could refer to youth group formations involved in legal and/or illegal sorts of activities and behaviours. The ambiguities surrounding the term are apparent in the young people’s perceptions on the types of gangs in their particular areas. This is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:
Young People’s Perceptions of Types of Gangs in the Area**

Types of gangs	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Troublemakers	24	31.2	27.0
Drug dealers	9	11.7	10.1
Just group of friends	22	28.6	24.7
Ethnic group	18	23.4	20.2
Don’t know	12	15.6	13.5
Other	4	5.2	4.5
Total	89		100.0

N= 77

Missing Responses = 5 (4.2%)

Not Applicable = 38 (31.7%)

What this table demonstrates is that ‘gang’ membership is easily conflated or mixed up with membership of particular friendship groups, or with particular ethnic groups. The idea of a ‘criminal’ gang therefore has less relevance to the analysis than concepts pertaining to group identification and social identity.

The importance of group membership, as distinct from gang-related behaviour per se, becomes clearer when we consider the patterns of interaction between the various youth group formations. The study found that street fighting, and school-based fights, were a fairly common occurrence. The young people were asked about which groups get involved in conflicts with other groups, and why this was so. Table 2 presents data on the perceptions of the young people of the different groups that get involved in gang fights.

**Table 2:
Young People’s Perceptions of the Different Groups
That Get Involved in Gang Fights**

Types of groups	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Anglo against other Ethnic	45	38.5	30.8
One ethnic against ‘different’ Ethnic	37	31.6	25.3
Ethnic amongst ‘similar’ Ethnic	9	7.7	6.2
Ethnic within ethnic	4	3.4	2.7
No particular/many different combinations	23	19.7	15.8
Another specific combination	3	2.6	2.1
Not based on Ethnicity	13	11.1	8.9
Don’t know	11	9.4	7.5
Other	1	0.9	0.7
Total	146		100.0

N=117
Missing Responses = 3(2.5%)

The reasons for the fights between different groups of young people are in one sense already suggested by the findings presented in Table 2. That is, there appears to be a strong link between ethnicity and group behaviour involving street and school-based conflicts. Table 3 presents another perspective on why fights of this nature happen.

**Table 3:
Young People’s Perceptions of Why Gang Fights Happen**

Types of reasons	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Racism	32	36.4	27.8
Acting/talking smart	26	29.5	22.6
Drugs	7	8.0	6.1
Power struggles/revenge/territory	31	35.2	27.0
Girls	5	5.7	4.3
Don’t know	5	5.7	4.3
Other	9	10.2	7.8
Total	115		100.0

N=88
Missing Responses = 32 (26.7%)

The specific reasons for fighting between different groups are identified as being due to perceptions regarding what is acceptable or unacceptable ways to relate to particular groups and individuals. Racism and treating people with disrespect are crucial elements in the explanation. So too is the sense of ownership and belonging associated with particular local areas and membership of particular youth groups. Social status is thus something which is

both contested and defended, and this in turn is generally tied to one's identification with certain people and places.

While overall commonalities are apparent in how the young people perceived the issues, specific differences emerged as well, depending upon the group in question. Each group of young people we talked to thus had different experiences and perceptions regarding group formation, gang membership and gang-related behaviour.

Vietnamese Young People

Ethnicity was a major factor in group formation and peer activities. While specific groups of Indo-Chinese young people hung around on the basis of similar interests in fashion and preferred activities, the overall pattern was to be with young people with similar cultural backgrounds. This was explained in terms of being able to understand each other's culture, and more directly, being able to speak the same language. The main motivation for group formation was to socialise and have fun together, as well as support and protection.

There was some confusion and uncertainty over how to define 'gangs', and how to distinguish gangs and groups. Distinctions were drawn between 'street crime' gangs (involved in minor drug dealing and street-related offences), 'social identity' gangs (involved in supporting and protecting each other) and 'organised criminal' gangs (involved in serious drug dealing and violent crime). Drug use was discussed in terms of either being simply part of young people sharing fun-times, or as being related to business activity. Identifiable group formations – whether 'gangs' or 'groups' – were linked to finding safety in numbers, due to racism, and to the need for group support, due to lack of family support or to problems at home.

Gang-related behaviour was associated with violence and illegal activity. In the case of street-level behaviour, fighting, drug dealing and stealing were cited as some of the main types of gang activity. In the case of schools, the main activities identified were those of bullying and fighting. Fighting tended to involve a wide range of different ethnic groups, and included conflicts within the particular ethnic group itself.

Turkish Young People

The reasons why young people hang around together the way they do included sharing similar leisure interests and musical tastes, having the same type of ethnic or cultural background, and living in similar socio-economic circumstances. Most groups of young people were seen simply as 'friendship groups', who socialise together and who support each other.

The sample as a whole was ambivalent about how or even whether or not a distinction could be made between 'gangs' and 'groups'. Distinctions were variously based upon engagement or not in illegal activities, and especially violent activities; perceptions of particular groups of young people who exhibited group solidarity and loyalty; and the impact of racism on group ethnic identification. In other words, groups formed, and were seen by 'outsiders', in very different ways and this was due to a number of different reasons.

Gang-related behaviour was strongly associated with street violence, and with stealing. In the case of street-related activity, gang fights were largely seen as consisting of conflicts

between different ethnic groups. The reasons for these fights were racism, struggles over territory, and someone acting or talking smart. Much was also said about gang-type behaviour in school, which was associated with fights, bullying and giving teachers a hard time.

Pacific Islander Young People

The main things which groups of young people were seen to have in common were shared interests in particular dress styles, images and music. However, a crucial dividing line between different groups of young people was that of ethnicity, regardless of the specific activity preferences of the young people within any specific group. Physical appearance was seen to be a key factor in this regard.

The boundaries between and definitions of 'youth gangs' and 'groups of young people' were often blurred in terms of both the perceptions of each formation, and with regard to the activities of each. The biggest difference between the two was the relative emphasis put on criminal, illegal or anti-social behaviour by the group. Gangs were seen to be particularly predisposed towards the use of violence. Gang membership was based upon ethnic identification and/or certain subcultural styles of dress and activity preferences.

Racism was seen to contribute to gang formation, and gang activities, in several different ways. It constituted a direct threat to particular groups of young people, it served to confirm group identity, and it could also be used as a cover for aggressive action on the part of some gang members. Gang membership was strongly linked to the idea of protection, as well as support, fun and excitement. Gang fights were linked to group conflicts based upon ethnicity. This occurred both on the street, and in the schools.

Somalian Young People

Group formation can be seen in terms of in-group differences, and differences between particular ethnic communities and other ethnic communities. At a general level, there were certain commonalities amongst the Somali young people in regards to shared religious beliefs and cultural practices, and language. Within the community of young people, however, there were particular differences between specific groups based on factors such as musical taste and manner of dress.

The major difference between 'groups' and 'gangs' was whether or not they engaged in illegal or criminal activity. In particular, gangs were defined in terms of a propensity to engage in fights, and to use more extreme forms of violence. However, in practice, there was some ambiguity regarding how gangs should be defined. For instance, not every young person who engaged in illegal activity or crime was considered a gang member. Each formation was seen to be based upon 'common interests', but these varied considerably and ranged from excitement and protection, to gaining social respect.

While few of the respondents had had much direct contact with gangs, they were nevertheless very conscious of the street fighting between different ethnic groups. The main reason for these fights was seen to be racism. However, the status of groups who engage in such activity is somewhat ambiguous, given that certain types of provocation (such as racist name-calling) leads to certain types of violent group behaviour (which has the appearance of being gang-like). Similar types of conflicts and tensions were identified in relation to the school setting.

Latin American Young People

Young people were seen to hang around together because of shared interests and fashion preferences. More generally, however, ethnic differences were identified in how different young people use their time. These differences were seen to be based upon religious and cultural backgrounds, choice in recreational activity, and time spent with one's family.

Gangs were variously defined, and there was some ambiguity over which characteristics marked off a 'gang' from a 'group'. The degree of seriousness in the types of activities engaged in was seen to be a factor, not simply the engagement in crime per se. Differences were identified between groups which engaged in 'fun' and those which were deemed to be 'troublemakers'. The biggest factor in perceptions of gang membership was ethnicity. The sample group perceived that other groups of ethnic minority youth, or Anglo Australian youth, constituted 'gangs', simply by virtue of their ethnic background.

Young people of the same or similar national or ethnic backgrounds were seen to hang around together mainly for the purposes of protection and support. Racism was seen as a major influence on perceived gang membership and gang formation. Fights, both in school and on the street, were predominantly attributed to racism. This in turn could be seen to be linked to the strong ethnic identifications and distinctions amongst various street-present young people, and school students.

Anglo Australian Young People

The main things which groups of young people in general were seen to have in common included similar interests and activities, and similar dress and style preferences. It was acknowledged, as well, that there are certain ethnic differences in the activities of young people generally. These were seen in terms of religious and cultural activities, recreational choices, and the amount of time young people spent with their families. The degree of difference based upon ethnicity was seen to be due, in part, to the extent to which particular individuals or groups had been 'assimilated' into the dominant Anglo Australian way of life.

There was some confusion regarding the distinction between a 'group' and a 'gang'. Sometimes a 'gang' was defined mainly in terms of simply hanging around together, and indicating a strong bonding between different members of the group. The main characteristics of gangs was also defined in terms of violent, criminal and illegal behaviour. Another defining characteristic was ethnicity. Distinctions were made not so much on what people do, but their physical appearance and cultural identification. Racism was seen to play an important role in gang formation.

Gang-related behaviour was associated with illegal social activity (such as use of drugs and alcohol), criminal activity (such as drug dealing and shopstealing) and anti-social activity (such as fighting). Street fighting was highlighted, and the perception was that street level conflict was mainly comprised of the 'Anglos' pitted against ethnic minority groups (such as the 'Asians'). The main reasons for these fights were struggles over territory, acting or talking smart, and racism. Gang fights in school were not seen as a problem in this group's educational experience, although bullying of a one-to-one nature was mentioned.

In most instances, the young people were somewhat *ambivalent* in how best to define or describe gang formations. However, the issue of *street fighting*, and *school-based fights*, was highlighted in most of the discussions.

2.5 Problems & Solutions

This section of each study discusses the young people’s views on media portrayals of ‘youth gangs’, their experiences with authority figures such as the police and security guards, and what different institutions, and government, can do to address youth gang issues.

A common theme of this part of the research was the recognition by the young people across the various sample groups that the best way to respond to ‘gang’ issues was to adopt constructive, developmental approaches and modes of intervention. This is indicated in Table 4, which shows how the young people in general wished to respond to the issues.

Table 4:
Young People’s Perceptions of What Should Be Done about Gang Members

Types of action	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Give them support/help/direction	48	40.7	34.5
Leave them alone/nothing	19	16.1	13.7
Hard to do anything	14	11.9	10.1
More support from parents	5	4.2	3.6
Disband/prevent recruitment	9	7.6	6.5
Gaol/juvenile training programs	11	9.3	7.9
Don’t know	20	16.9	14.4
Other	13	11.0	9.4
Total	139		100.0

N=118

Missing Responses = 2 (1.7%)

The specific nature and types of intervention which were suggested varied somewhat from group to group. However, in general, while there were some doubts expressed regarding the ability of government to deal adequately with gang-related issues, there were also a number of ideas and proposals put forward. These are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5:
Young People’s Perceptions of What the Government Can Do about Gangs**

Type of action	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Education/training	10	8.6	7.0
Employ outreach workers	5	4.3	3.5
Provide free hang out places for young people	22	19.0	15.5
Support/listen to them	9	7.8	6.3
Don’t close schools	4	3.4	2.8
Provide more jobs	17	14.7	12.0
Provide more funding/services for young people	16	13.8	11.3
Increase police funding/presence	4	3.4	2.8
Deal with them more harshly	6	5.2	4.2
Can’t do much	24	20.7	16.9
Don’t know	18	15.5	12.7
Other	7	6.0	4.9
Total	142		100.0

N=116

Missing Responses = 4 (3.3%)

In essence, the young people identified a wide range of services and strategies which they felt would improve the situation for themselves and their friends, and which would provide for positive social outcomes. Specific groups also had specific needs. For example, it is clear that newly arrived individuals require greater and different levels of social and community support than those who are already well-established in Australia. The particular perceptions and suggestions of the different sample groups have to be assessed in the light of the broad social experiences and social position of that group, particularly in relation to the migration settlement process.

Vietnamese Young People

The sample group were highly critical of media representations of ‘ethnic youth gangs’. They felt that they media reports were biased, exaggerated and only showed the bad side of things. The young people were also critical of the role of the police in their lives, saying that they were unfairly targeted by the police, and that the nature of the contact was generally unpleasant. Many had similarly bad experiences with private security guards.

The strong message conveyed by the respondents was that young people involved in gangs or gang-like behaviour need support, help and direction in their lives. It was pointed out that many of the problems experienced by the young people revolved around personal relationships, including family relationships. Schools, social services and migrant services were encouraged to play a greater role in assisting young people and providing greater levels of support and guidance. Governments action was needed in areas such as job creation, providing ‘free’ places where young people can hang out in safety and without undue harassment, provision of outreach workers and providing more funding and services for young people.

Turkish Young People

The sample group was very critical of media reports relating to 'ethnic youth gangs', and felt that such reports were biased and only showed young people in a bad light. The police were criticised for two main reasons. First, the young people said they were hassled, searched on the street or threatened by the police. Secondly, when the police intervened, including in those instances when a crime had been committed, they did not treat the young people with respect or dignity, but treated the young people badly. The young people had had both good and bad experiences with security guards, and most of the latter was associated with shopping centres.

The preferred way of responding to youth gang issues was to engage in pro-active, developmental strategies. These would be oriented toward providing gang members more support, help and direction, and increasing the level of local services and facilities for young people. Social services and migrant services were seen to have a limited role in responding to the young gang phenomenon. However, schools could adopt policies of both education, and expulsion, of gang members in order to improve the situation within these institutions. Government action should be multi-pronged, and include measures such as job creation, better service provision and educational programmes.

Pacific Islander Young People

The media were criticised for being biased and for exaggerating the problem of 'ethnic youth gangs', as well as presenting the wrong kind of role models for younger people. Most of the young people complained of police harassment, and they described their contact with the police as generally bad. They had mixed feelings about security guards, but some young people objected to being kicked out or told to move on from public space areas.

The general feeling was that young people should be given greater support, assistance and direction, that their opportunities should be enhanced, and that in some cases the best thing to do would be to simply leave them alone. Lack of money and adequate recreational outlets were seen as major problems. They were particularly positive and impressed with the assistance provided by a specific Polynesian Support Group, although overall felt that social services and migrant services were limited in what they could do. Schools could adopt policies of talking to gang members, or separating them from the rest of the student body, as well as engaging in a range of creative ways to deal with gang behaviour in the school environment. Government action was needed in areas such as work, housing, education and income support.

Somalian Young People

The sample group spoke about the fact that there were insufficient activities for young people in their neighbourhoods, and that there should be more sporting facilities, recreational and leisure activities, and support and skill providing activities. They were conscious of the issue of police harassment, and the negative reputation of the police had an impact on their movements outside of the parental home. However, in practice, few had had direct contact with either police or security guards. The general impression of harassment and negative relations nevertheless still has to be addressed.

The favoured response to gang issues was a positive, developmental form of intervention, with an emphasis on providing advice, education and teaching young gang members about more positive ways to behave. Schools, social services and migrant services should likewise adopt strategies which offer positive activities, which offer assistance with money, and which offer a wider range of services and facilities.

Latin American Young People

The sample group was very critical of the media portrayals of 'ethnic youth gangs'. Such accounts were seen to be biased, exaggerated, and to reproduce particular negative 'ethnic' stereotypes. Most of the young people had had some type of contact with the police, and of these, most said that this contact had been good and that they had been treated well. Some of them objected, however, to being questioned, searched or threatened by the police on the street. Interaction with security guards exhibited a similar pattern.

The strongest suggested course of action was to give the young people more support and help. The preferred strategy was to increase the number of services and to create better community resources. The school could take a role in educating gang members about the consequences and alternatives to gang life, providing positive after-school activities and ensuring that young people do not get mis-labelled as 'gang members when they are not. It was also suggested that gang members be expelled or separated from the rest of the student body. A strong theme regarding services and government action was that institutions and agencies need to spend more time listening to young people and addressing their needs, and that better communication was of great importance.

Anglo Australian Young People

The sample group was critical of the media for biased and exaggerated accounts of 'youth gangs', although the media images of gangs were not seen to be particularly relevant to the Anglo Australian young people directly. Generally speaking, they had good relations with both the police and with security guards, and they felt that they were treated well when stopped or questioned.

The response of this group to youth gang issues was to offer gang members greater support, help and direction. With regards to policing, the young people suggested a combination of surveillance and active intervention as measures to prevent youth gangs from engaging in violence and other anti-social activity. They also spoke about the need for police to establish better communication with the young gang members. Schools were not seen to play a major role, beyond that of teaching people the consequences and alternatives to gang life. Social services were seen as possible avenues for provision of support and assistance with work, education and money. Many of these respondents felt that migrant services could be beneficial by providing support groups for ethnic minority youth.

The main response to youth gangs was one which stressed adoption of supportive measures and a broadly *developmental approach* to the issues. *Schools* were seen as key actors in this process, as was the *government* in terms of provision of a number of different services, opportunities and benefits. Better communication with young people, and careful assessment of some aspects of existing practices, on the part of *police and security guards* was also suggested.

2.6 Conclusions

This series of studies has examined the issue of 'youth gangs' by talking directly with young people about the nature of group formation and group activities in their communities and neighbourhoods.

The reports are based upon in-depth interviews with 120 young people from six different ethnic and cultural backgrounds across metropolitan Melbourne. Each study provides a qualitative analysis of the issues, and is based upon discussions with a wide range of young people. The young people in each sample were specifically targeted to reflect the dominant ethnic group in their particular region of the city. The interviews were carried out with young people who are often difficult to access or who are rarely consulted about such matters. Each ethnic group includes a cross-section of young people within the particular community.

A major focus of the research was to investigate the specific problems, challenges and opportunities faced by ethnic minority young people – from Vietnamese, Somalian, Turkish, Pacific Islander and Latin American backgrounds. Young people from Anglo Australian backgrounds were also interviewed.

The ethnic minority young people spoke about the difficulties of migration, of leaving familiar homes and cultures, to settle in a new, often quite alien, environment. Differences in language, religion and community values were frequently associated with problems in the re-settlement process, and finding a place within the Australian social mosaic.

There was considerable variation in the circumstances and family situation of the young people, both within groups and between groups. For many, the family was not stable, nor was it able to offer adequate emotional and financial support. For others, however, the family was central to their well-being.

Most of the young people lived in low-income households, in low-income areas. Unemployment was a significant problem for both the young people, and quite often their parents.

The young people noted the lack of adequate social services, employment opportunities and recreational venues. The issue of having appropriate non-commercial activities and outlets in which to spend their time was highlighted.

According to the research findings, there was the perception that many young people across the diverse communities and neighbourhoods engaged in various forms of illegal activity. This was generally related to drugs (both the use of, and dealing in, illicit substances), and to property (including theft of various kinds, and vandalism). The reasons given for engagement in these kinds of activities were lack of money, young people's attempts to deal with boredom, and having few community resources to draw upon in their leisure pursuits.

There was much confusion and ambiguity over the difference between 'gangs' and 'groups'. In each case, membership tended to revolve around similar interests (such as choice of music, sport, style of dress), similar appearance or ethnic identity (such as language, religion and culture), and the need for social belonging (such as friendship, support and protection). Group affiliation was sometimes perceived as the greatest reason why certain young people were singled out as being a 'gang', and why particular conflicts occurred between different groups of young people.

Two main types of group conflict were mentioned. On the one hand, there was often reference to 'street fights'. These were seen as violent, occasionally involving weapons, and often linked to racism. Fighting occurred between different ethnic groups, as well as within particular communities. On the other hand, group conflict was also evident in the form of 'school fights'. These included verbal and physical assaults, and again were often associated with racism. In both cases, the young people tended to make assumptions and generalisations about other groups of young people from different ethnic backgrounds, including assumptions about Anglo Australian young people.

Most of the ethnic minority young people had a mainly negative relationship with authority figures such as the police and security guards. This was primarily due to their perceptions of unfair treatment, harassment, constant surveillance and intervention by such figures.

All of the groups criticised the media for presenting biased and exaggerated accounts of youth gangs. They talked about the use of ethnic stereotypes in media portrayals of young people, and the negative ways in which the media deal with young people generally, and with some ethnic minority communities in particular.

The young people in these studies generally emphasised the need for pro-active and developmental strategies to deal with youth gangs, and gang-related behaviour. They spoke of the need for more support services, youth employment programmes, greater dialogue between youth and authority figures, and positive strategies which provided young people with constructive ways in which to use their time and energy.

The studies highlight the importance of dealing with the youth gang phenomenon across a number of dimensions. This is reflected in the recommendations arising from the studies (see below). Some of these included: anti-racist and cultural sensitivity education; government action on job creation and provision of better income support; adoption of appropriate conflict resolution and anti-bullying strategies in schools; expanded re-settlement and migrant services; and public affirmations of the multicultural nature of Australian society.

These reports constitute the first in-depth investigation of 'youth gangs' in Australia. They identify a number of issues facing young people from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. They expose the myths and confusions surrounding youth activities and group formations. They provide strategic recommendations to address important social issues.

It is clear from the reports that a key desire and wish of most young people today is to gain acceptance for who they are, and to enhance their social belonging. For this to occur, action must be taken, now, to support them.

2.7 Recommendations

To put the specific recommendations arising from these studies into context, each report also includes a brief summary of other relevant studies which have examined the nature of youth gangs, or issues relating to the use of public spaces by ethnic minority young people.

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 be 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 the six studies range across a number of diverse areas. A number of recommendations were put forward. These can be summarised as follows:

General Educational Strategies

- 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

Specific Institutional Strategies

- *Specific spaces and facilities should be reserved*, perhaps at designated times, exclusively for certain young people (e.g., swimming pools, rooms that could be used for prayers), in order that religious and cultural practices be acknowledged and respected in a dignified and inclusive manner
- Attention must be directed at providing *quality educational facilities and services* for the young people, particularly those which are based upon a multicultural curriculum and atmosphere, where students are provided with adequate individual and group support, and where anti-racist strategies and practices are applied across the whole school population.
- Concerted action is needed on the specific issue of school bullying 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 gang-related 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 adoption of appropriate *community policing practices*, and establishment of protocols for positive and constructive interaction between ethnic minority youth and police/security guards, is essential in restoring social peace and dampening negative relations on the street.
- The police and security guards, as well as shopping centre managers and retail traders, need to be encouraged to develop *positive and constructive methods of public space management* and social regulation, in ways which will include the concerns of young people themselves, and which will reduce instances of unfair treatment and unnecessary intervention as these pertain to young people

Broad Government Strategies

- It is essential to undertake a *mapping of existing community services and contemporary settlement policies* in order to better determine what does or does not exist specifically for young people in specific geographical areas, and to assess the possibilities for further development of appropriate support agencies and services.
- *Family support structures* are needed, and appropriate forums devised for greater *community engagement* with and involving the young people directly, insofar as what happens to young people is very much a social phenomenon and implies collective solutions to complex problems.
- There is a need to provide more in the way of a social and economic infrastructure to assist recent immigrants as part of the *re-settlement process*, especially given the difficulties experienced by some young people because of language differences, lack of immediate employment opportunities, the effects of war-related trauma and so on
- Strategic action is needed in the area of *youth unemployment* and in the creation of jobs for particularly disadvantaged groups and communities, especially since there is increasing evidence that certain neighbourhoods are likely to become ghettoised if sustained intervention on these matters is not undertaken
- The levels and types of *income support* for young people needs to be increased and made relevant to the real needs, living costs and spending patterns of young people, as well as taking into account their contributions to the household income

Media Strategies

- 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
- The media and politicians need to have adequate information sources and/or pressure placed upon them to report events and situations accurately, and to respond to specific groups in a non-racialised manner, highlighting the necessity both for the active presence of *independent bodies* such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, and for governments to take the lead in *promoting reconciliation* and anti-racist ideals.
- Governments at all levels should adopt pro-active campaigns which convey in a positive and constructive manner the *realities and strengths of cultural diversity* and which show how, collectively, the fabric of Australian society is constituted through and by the contribution of many cultures, religions, nationalities, languages and value systems, rather than being based solely upon a monoculture linked to British inheritance.

If we, as a society, are to tackle the 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 phenomena. It is clear from these studies that there will be serious long-term consequences if appropriate and positive strategic action is not taken to address the young people's concerns. The time to take such action is now.

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