



• From the Australian Institute of Criminology •

Understanding youth gangs

Currently, there is no empirical work in Australia to allow us to determine the number of gangs or the number of gang members. A paper published recently by the Australian Institute of Criminology examines some of the complex issues surrounding youth gangs in Australia. It considers what gangs are, what sorts of behaviour they engage in, how they are structured, how they change over time, and how they form and disappear. International research has increasingly emphasised that gang formation is a social process involving complex forms of membership, transformation and disintegration. These elements challenge the standard stereotypes of gangs. Gangs can differ from each other in many ways including their size, members' ages, whether they are territorial and whether they have criminal tendencies. For many young people, gangs serve to provide a sense of social inclusion, support and security. They can also provide opportunities for status, group identity and excitement.

Types of gang-related behaviour

CRIMINAL. Main focus is making money through illegal means (such as property theft and drug selling). This kind of activity may be sporadic and episodic, and may not be central to a group's overall activity.

CONFLICT. Main focus is street fighting and violence associated with gaining social status and street reputation. This kind of activity is marked by an emphasis on honour, personal integrity and territoriality.

RETREAT. Main focus is drug use and generally a withdrawal from mainstream social interaction. Illegal activity mainly lies in the use of drugs, rather than in violence or other forms of antisocial activity.

STREET CULTURE. Main focus is adoption of specific gang-related cultural forms and public presentation of gang-like attributes, emphasis on music, fashion, ways of speaking, and so on. May simply be a form of mimicry, based upon media stereotypes and youth cultural fads.

SOURCE: White, R. 2002, "Understanding Youth Gangs", *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, no. 237, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

Full report available on AIC web site: <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi237.html>

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