



## NATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION CENTRE

Building the Evidence – YOUTH GANGS

2007-YG-1

# YOUTH GANGS IN CANADA: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

The National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) of Public Safety Canada is committed to developing and disseminating practical knowledge to address the problem of youth gangs. This information sheet is part of a series on youth gangs. It includes highlights from the 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs as well as other sources of information on youth gangs.

To implement effective prevention and intervention strategies, we must start by understanding the nature and scope of the youth gang problem. This document presents an overview of current knowledge about youth gangs in Canada, including their connections with guns and drugs.

### What is a youth gang?

Youth gangs typically consist of young people who:

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

There are other important characteristics of a youth gang that help us to understand the phenomenon.

The Montréal Police Service's definition of youth gang explicitly incorporates the anti-social and delinquent behaviours that are distinctive of youth gangs. It defines a youth gang as:

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

### Who joins youth gangs?

The 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs and other sources suggest that youth gang members cut across many ethnic, geographic, demographic and socio-economic contexts<sup>3</sup>. However, youth at risk of joining gangs or already involved in gangs tend to be from groups that suffer from the greatest levels of inequality and social disadvantage<sup>4</sup>.

Aboriginal youth are more vulnerable to gang recruitment and organized crime than non-Aboriginal youth and they are increasing in numbers and influence in Western Canada<sup>5</sup>.

Many youth who join gangs have also been identified as youth who are using drugs and already involved in serious and violent crime. Furthermore, youth who display higher levels of previous delinquency are more likely to remain in the gang<sup>6</sup>.

The reasons for joining a youth gang are various. Some seek excitement; others are looking for prestige, protection, a chance to make money or a sense of belonging<sup>7</sup>.

### Results of the *Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs*

Youth gangs are not just an urban phenomenon. They are active across the country in both large and small communities<sup>8</sup>.

Results of the Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs and other sources suggest that youth gangs are a growing concern in many Canadian jurisdictions. Although not to the same extent as in the United States, comparisons between the two countries show that almost twice the percentage of jurisdictions in the United States report active youth gangs as compared with those in Canada (see Table 1).

The Survey asked police officers to estimate the number of youth gangs in their jurisdiction. According to these estimates:

- Canada has 434 youth gangs with roughly 7,000 members nationally. (See Table 2).
- Ontario has the highest number of youth gangs and youth gang members in absolute terms, with 216 youth gangs and 3,320 youth gang members. Saskatchewan is second (28 youth gangs and 1,315 members), followed by British Columbia (102 youth gangs and 1,027 members)<sup>9</sup>.
- For the country as a whole, the vast majority of youth gang members are male (94%)<sup>10</sup>.
- Almost half (48%) of all youth gang members are under the age of 18. Most (39%) are between 16 and 18 years old<sup>11</sup>.
- The largest proportion of youth gang members are African Canadian (25%), followed by First Nations (21%) and Caucasian (18%)<sup>12</sup>.
- Police agencies and Aboriginal organizations indicate that there is a growing percentage of female gang membership in western Canadian provinces, including British Columbia (12%), Manitoba (10%) and Saskatchewan (9%)<sup>13</sup>.

### Gangs, crime and violence

The movement of gang members from one jurisdiction to another appears to have an impact on the criminal activities and involvement of youth, as does the return of gang-involved youth or adult inmates from correctional facilities<sup>14</sup>.

From a prevention perspective, it is vital to understand that youth involvement in crime and violence is linked with the experience of the gang itself<sup>15</sup>.

In the United States, studies of large urban samples show that youth gang members are responsible for a large proportion of all violent adolescent offences. On average, 20% of gang members were responsible for committing about 80% of all serious violent adolescent offences<sup>16</sup>.

While similar offence data is not available in Canada, a quasi-national study of the criminal careers of a birth cohort<sup>17</sup> found that 16% of alleged young offenders who were classified as chronic offenders were responsible for 58% of all alleged criminal incidents<sup>18</sup>.

### Gangs, guns and drugs in schools

Gun violence in major cities in Canada has been a growing concern, especially in Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver and Montréal<sup>19</sup>.

Gun violence is also more prevalent among street gangs that involve primarily young men less than 30 years of age<sup>20</sup>.

The Drugs, Alcohol and Violence International (DAVI) study, a joint Canada-U.S. effort, provides important evidence about the relationships between gangs, guns and drugs in Toronto and Montréal. A total of 904 male students (grades 9 to 12), school dropouts and young offenders were interviewed. The results indicate that:

- There is a correlation between gang presence in schools and the availability of both guns and drugs in schools.
- 18.7% of boys (ages 14 to 17) in Montréal and 15.1% in Toronto have brought a gun to school.
- School dropouts who get involved in drug selling are at higher risk of being involved in gun-related violence<sup>21</sup>.

### Conclusion

Most youth who join gangs have already been involved in crime, violence and illegal drug use. The prevalence and scope of youth gang involvement varies across the country, but the “gang effect” of increased delinquency, drug use and violence is a common thread.

Integrated, targeted and evidence-based community solutions are necessary to reduce and prevent the proliferation of gangs, drugs and gun violence.

More information is available on youth gangs in Canada at: [www.publicsafety.gc.ca/ncpc](http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/ncpc) and [www.safecanada.ca](http://www.safecanada.ca).



## Notes

- 1 Canada. Royal Canadian Mounted Police. *Environmental Scan: Features: Focus on Youth Gangs*. Ottawa: Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2006.
- 2 Montréal. Montréal Police Service. *Provincial Action Plan on Street Gangs*. Québec: Department of Public Security, National Coordinating Committee, 2004 [Meeting, Toronto, May 25, 2005].
- 3 Astwood Strategy Corporation. *2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs*. Ottawa: Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, 2004.
- 4 Wortley, Scot and Julian Tanner. "Social Groups or Criminal Organizations? The Extent and Nature of Youth Gang Activity in Toronto" in *From Enforcement and Prevention to Civic Engagement: Research on Community Safety* / edited by Bruce Kidd and Jim Phillips. Toronto: Centre of Criminology, University of Toronto, 2004: 59-80.
- 5 Richter-White, Holly. *Direct and Indirect Impacts of Organized Crime on Youth, as Offenders and Victims*. Ottawa: Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Research and Evaluation Branch, Community Contract and Aboriginal Policing Service, 2003; RCMP, 2006.
- 6 Gatti, Uberto, Richard E. Tremblay, Frank Vitaro and Pierre McDuff. "Youth Gangs, Delinquency and Drug Use: A Test of the Selection, Facilitation, and Enhancement Hypotheses," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 46(11), (2005): 1178-1190.
- 7 RCMP [2006]; Wortley et al., 2004.
- 8 RCMP [2006]; Astwood Strategy Corporation [2004].
- 9 Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2004.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.; Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN) [2003]. *Alter-Natives to Non-Violence Report: Aboriginal Youth Gangs Exploration: A Community Development Process*. Saskatchewan: FSIN, 2003.
- 14 Canada. Correctional Service Canada [2002]. *An Examination of Youth and Gang Affiliation within the Federally Sentenced Aboriginal Population*. Ottawa: Correctional Service Canada, 2002; Astwood Strategy Corporation [2004].
- 15 Gatti et al., 2005.
- 16 Thornberry, Terence P., David Huizinga and Rolf Loeber. "The Causes and Correlates Studies: Findings and Policy Implications," *Juvenile Justice* 10, 1, (2004): 3-19.
- 17 The study used linked data from Statistics Canada's *Youth Court Survey* and *Adult Criminal Court Survey* to describe the court careers, up to the 22nd birthday, of Canadians born in 1979/80.
- 18 Carrington, Peter, Anthony Matarazzo and Paul deSouza. "Court Careers of a Canadian Birth Cohort," *Crime and Justice Research Paper Series*, no. 6. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2005.
- 19 Dauvergne, Mia and Geoffrey Li. "Homicide in Canada, 2005" *Juristat* 26, 6, (2006). Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.
- 20 Canada. Criminal Intelligence Service Canada (CISC). *2006 Annual Report on Organized Crime in Canada*. Ottawa: CISC, 2006.
- 21 Erickson, Patricia G. and Jennifer E. Butters. *Youth, Weapons and Violence in Toronto and Montréal*. Report prepared for Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, Ottawa, 2006.

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**Astwood Strategy Corporation.** 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs. Ottawa: Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, 2004.

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**Canada. Criminal Intelligence Service Canada [CISC].** 2006 Annual Report on Organized Crime in Canada. Ottawa: CISC, 2006.

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

**Carrington, Peter, Anthony Matarazzo and Paul deSouza.** "Court Careers of a Canadian Birth Cohort," *Crime and Justice Research Paper Series*, no. 6. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2005.

**Dauvergne, Mia and Geoffrey Li.** "Homicide in Canada, 2005" *Juristat* 26, 6, (2006). Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.

**Erickson, Patricia G. and Jennifer E. Butters.** *Youth, Weapons and Violence in Toronto and Montréal*. Report prepared for Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada. Ottawa, 2006.

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## Appendix A: Tables

**TABLE 1:** Comparison of Youth Gangs in Canada and the United States

	U.S. (2000)	Canada (2001)
Population	281,421,906	30,007,094
Percentage of jurisdictions reporting youth gang activity	40%	23.7%
Estimated number of youth gangs	24,500	434
Estimated number of gang members	772,500	7,071
Density per 1000 population	2.75	0.24

Source: Astwood Strategy Corporation (2004)

**TABLE 2:** Estimated Number of Youth Gangs and Youth Gang Members, Nationally and by Province, 2002

Area	Number of Youth Gangs	Number of Youth Gang Members	Youth Gang Members per 1,000 pop.
Canada	434	7071	0.24
British Columbia	102	1027	0.26
Alberta	42	668	0.22
Saskatchewan	28	1315	1.34
Manitoba	15	171	0.15
Ontario	216	3320	0.29
Québec *	25	533	0.07
Nova Scotia	6	37	0.04
New Brunswick	0	0	0
Prince Edward Island	0	0	0
Newfoundland and Labrador	0	0	0
Yukon	0	0	0
Northwest Territories	0	0	0
Nunavut	0	0	0

\* Notes: Data was collected on only four police agencies in the Province of Québec. As a result, the percentage of jurisdictions reporting active youth gangs in Québec (i.e., 100%) must not be considered representative of the entire province.

Source: Astwood Strategy Corporation (2004)