

**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
<b>Total</b>	<b>146</b>		<b>100.0</b>

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
<b>Total</b>	<b>115</b>		<b>100.0</b>

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
<b>Total</b>	<b>142</b>		<b>100.0</b>

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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**Australian Multicultural Foundation**

**Ethnic Youth Gangs in Australia**  
***Do They Exist?***

**Report No. 1**  
**Vietnamese Young People**

by  
Rob White  
Santina Perrone  
Carmel Guerra  
Rosario Lampugnani

**1999**

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# **Part 1:**

# **Background to the Research**

## **1.1 Introduction**

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

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

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

### *i. Ethnic Minority Youth*

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

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

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

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

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

While media and police concern over 'ethnic youth gangs' has appeared to be on the rise, there has in fact been very little empirical information regarding the actual activities of ethnic minority young people (but see Guerra & White, 1995; Pe-Pua, 1996). Specifically, little is known about the *demographic characteristics* of the ethnic minority people in question – for example, their ages, gender composition, level of education, employment status, 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, however, been some movement toward analysis of the nature and extent of ethnic minority youth offending (Easteal, 1997), to examine sentencing disparities in relation to the ethnicity of juvenile offenders (Gallagher & Poletti, 1998) and to consider the special requirements of ethnic minority offenders held in detention (NSW Ombudsman, 1996). However, much more study and conceptual work is needed if we are to appreciate fully the place of ethnic minority youth in the criminal justice system, and the reasons for their involvement with this system.

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

#### *ii. Diverse Assumptions*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **1.2 The Study**

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

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

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

*i. Aims of Research*

The *aims of the research* were:

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

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

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

**ii. Methods of Research**

The *research methodology* adopted for the study consisted of:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **1.3 The Notion of Youth Gangs**

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

#### *i. Criminal Youth Gangs*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*ii. 'Gang' Characteristics*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *iii. Youth Formations*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### *iv. Youth in Groups*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **1.4 Research Contribution**

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

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

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

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

## **Part 2:**

# **Vietnamese Young People**

## 2.1 Social History

In the 1950s Australia became increasingly involved in Asia due to its participation in the Colombo Plan. In 1958, the first Vietnamese students arrived in Australia to study. By the end of June 1975 there were 335 Vietnamese Colombo Plan students attending Australian universities, as well as about 130 private Vietnamese students (Coughlan, 1989a).

### *i. Migration*

Due to the escalation of hostilities between South and North Vietnam, Australia sent military advisers and combat troops in 1965. In all, more than 50,000 Australian soldiers served in Vietnam (Burstall, 1993). Many of these soldiers, including other Australians working in Vietnam, married Vietnamese persons, and when they returned to Australia, their Vietnamese spouses came with them. This was the first wave of Vietnamese settling permanently in Australia.

Between 1972 and 1975, Australian families adopted 537 Vietnamese children who had been orphaned due to the war. These orphans represented the second wave of Vietnamese to settle permanently in Australia (Coughlan, 1989a). The war also displaced many people and by the end of it, there were about 2 million stateless persons fleeing Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. In 1975 just over 1000 refugees were admitted to Australia, while a further 7000 were accepted in 1978, as a result of a resettlement program. In 1976, the first boat carrying refugees (otherwise known as the 'boat people') seeking asylum arrived in Australia, and in the following years a further 50 boats arrived carrying more than two thousand refugees.

The first refugee policy implemented as part of the overall immigration program took place in 1978, during the Fraser government. In 1982 the Australian government accepted the first Vietnamese immigrants under the Orderly Departure Program (ODP), which began in 1979 as a result of negotiations between the Socialist government of Vietnam and the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, in the late 1980s this program was officially termed the Vietnamese Family Migration Program in Australia. Under this program, Vietnamese persons with family members residing in Australia, were able to migrate directly from Vietnam after having satisfied the standard immigration criteria.

These changes in the immigration policies in relation to Vietnamese people resulted in changes in the composition of Vietnamese immigrants. Therefore, during the period 1975-1981, almost all of the 49,616 Vietnamese that arrived in Australia were refugees. During 1981-1986, 92.8 per cent of the 44,972 Vietnamese who arrived were refugees, and during 1986-1991 only 45.1 per cent of the 44,984 Vietnamese who arrived were refugees. From 1991 to 1993 only 15,243 Vietnamese settled in Australia, of whom only 22.7 per cent were refugees (Viviani et al., 1993).

In summary, the history of Vietnamese immigration to Australia can be divided into three main stages:

- The first stage, pre-1975, was based on a *humanitarian program* characterised by the intake of orphans.
- The second stage, 1975-1985, comprised mainly a *refugee* resettling program.
- The third stage, since the mid-1980s has been characterised by a *family reunion* program.

The majority of Vietnamese immigrants arrived in Australia between 1981 and 1985, although a substantial proportion arrived in the years 1976 to 1980. While the earlier waves of migration (from 1975 to the mid 1980s) were principally made up of 'political' refugees fleeing Vietnam out of fear of persecution, the period between 1986 and 1991 also saw a sharp increase in the number of 'economic' refugees arriving in Australia.

*ii. Settlement Patterns*

As with all immigrant groups, the geographic distribution of Vietnamese born persons has been substantially uneven. The majority settled in NSW and Victoria. Notably, given the context of the present study, there was a 24.9 per cent increase of Vietnam born persons, from 44,215 to 55,229, in Victoria between 1991 and 1996. The settlement pattern of the Vietnamese-born immigrants followed that of other immigrant groups and of all Australians in general. That is, they have settled mainly in urban areas with particular concentrations in the main capital cities. Most of the concentrations were in Sydney and Melbourne, but sizeable numbers also settled in Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth.

One of the most striking features of the Vietnamese immigration is the high degree of residential spatial concentration (Coughlan, 1989b). Indeed, such a degree of spatial concentration has been unknown in the history of Australia even during the major influx of European immigrants in the post-WWII period. These concentrations are not related only to State and city areas, but also, and most important, to Local Government Areas. For example, the 1991 Census shows that the majority (19,316) of Vietnamese persons had settled in Fairfield in NSW. After that, but well behind, there were Springvale in Victoria with 6,517 persons; Bankstown in NSW with 6,233 persons; Sunshine (Victoria) with 5,917, Footscray (Victoria) with 4,948, and Canterbury in NSW with 6,655 persons.

The analysis and understanding of the spatial concentration of a group is important because patterns of settlement are inevitably intertwined with a whole range of social and economic factors which impinge directly on the lives of these immigrants, particularly young people. That is, they have a major influence on their means of livelihood, and their social contacts within and without their group. Although group concentrations may be considered as the natural consequence of attempts to adjust to a new and strange environment, they are also an indicator of less integration into mainstream society. In general, these concentrations are characterised by people with language problems, social dislocation, reduced social and economic opportunities, and other general problems.

The major factors influencing the settlement pattern of Vietnamese immigrants are: the initial place of reception for most Vietnamese immigrants; cheap housing; the proximity of unskilled workplaces and opportunities; the effect of Vietnamese shops, and restaurants established by previous settlers; and the nature of specialised services for these immigrants (see Viviani, 1996). However, Viviani (1996) has pointed out that while Vietnamese persons have tended to settle in areas of major Vietnamese concentrations, there are now figures that indicate that dispersal is occurring. Many Vietnamese have begun to move out of the areas where they initially settled and are moving into neighbouring suburbs or new housing estates. Nonetheless, it is argued that this movement is still rather limited due to poor labour market conditions affecting Vietnamese residents (Viviani, 1996).

*iii. Demographic Profile*

It is interesting to note that in Vietnam the population consists of some 53 minority groups. Yet the Vietnamese community in Australia is made up of two main ethnic groups: Vietnamese and Chinese. During the period 1975-81, the Chinese prevailed. However, by 1986, those of Vietnamese ancestry outnumbered (64 per cent) those of Chinese ancestry (33 per cent), and by 1991 the former increased to about 70 per cent and those of Chinese ancestry decreased to about 27 per cent.

At the 1991 Census, the Vietnamese population in Australia numbered 121,813 representing 3.3 per cent of the total overseas born persons, and there were an additional 25,151 Australian-born persons who had one or both parents born in Vietnam. This group comprised the second generation of Vietnamese origin. Most Vietnamese immigrants (71 per cent) settled in Australia since the beginning of 1981. They comprise one of the newest and perhaps youngest communities in Australia.

As in other communities, there is a degree of imbalance among the sexes, in that there is a higher proportion of males (52.3 per cent) than females (47.7 per cent). According to the 1991 Census, 37.1 per cent of the Vietnamese immigrants were aged less than 25 years of age, 65.5 per cent were aged less than 35 years, and only 8.1 per cent were aged 55 years or older. The median age was 29.0 years, up from 26.2 years in 1986. At the same time, in 1991, the median age of the total Australian population was 32.0 years.

In the 1991 Census, there were 35,812 Vietnamese families in Australia. The majority of these (79.9 per cent) were families with offspring. Of all these, 94 per cent had dependent children. A substantial number (38.8 per cent) of these families had three or more children. This represents a significant higher number than the total Australian population with the same number of dependent children (25.1 per cent).

*iv. Labour Market Participation*

According to the 1991 Census, a fairly low number (20.3 per cent) of Vietnamese-born immigrants aged 15 years and over, had any type of qualification. This was particularly so when contrasted with the total Australian population. The proportion of Vietnamese-born immigrants with post-secondary qualifications was very low indeed, only 6.8 per cent, while only 3.1 per cent had received any skilled or basic vocational training. Males (22 per cent), overall, were more qualified than females (18.3 per cent).

The labour force status of Vietnamese immigrants has fluctuated over the years. In 1981, it was around 65 per cent, and in 1986, it had increased to 72.2 per cent, but by 1991, it had declined to 66.6 per cent. However, the labour force participation of Vietnamese-born persons is higher than all other immigrants of Non-English speaking countries, which is about 59.8 per cent. This is mainly due to the fact that Vietnamese born immigrants in Australia are in general younger than all other immigrants, particularly European immigrants who came out as young adults at the end of the Second World War, and who are now mostly retired or are deceased. In 1991, 74 per cent of Vietnamese males were in the labour force, while married females comprised 67.6 per cent and 'other females' were 47.6 per cent.

However, unemployment rates among males and females have been very high. The total unemployment rate for all Vietnamese persons in 1991 was 39.8 per cent, or more than three

times the rate for the Australian population in general. The unemployment rate for Vietnamese females was 44.9 per cent compared with 36.1 per cent for males, and the unemployment rate for unmarried females stood at 50.7 per cent compared with 41.5 per cent for married females. In May 1993, the unemployment rates for Indo-Chinese immigrants were as follows: Cambodia (34.7%), Laos (45.5%) and Vietnam (30.5%) – although these figures are probably underestimates due to the number of marginally attached and discouraged workers in the workforce (Moss, 1993: 143).

Not surprisingly, the median annual income of all Vietnamese persons has tended to be much lower than that for all persons aged 15 years and over in Australia. Two major factors have contributed to this low-income level: the high unemployment rates among Vietnamese persons, and their concentration in blue-collar occupations, predominantly in manufacturing, which has been in decline over the last decade.

In summary, it can be observed that the bulk of Vietnamese-born persons are young, most do not have qualifications, they experience very high rates of unemployment, and they have a fairly low income which entails a high degree of poverty. Those employed are mostly concentrated in blue-collar jobs in manufacturing. This has major implications with regard to community and family resources available to present refugee children and second generation Vietnamese.

## **2.2 Profile of Youth Interviewed**

Twenty young people were interviewed in relation to the question of Vietnamese youth gangs. Of these young people, 2 were born in Australia, 13 in Vietnam, 1 in Thailand, 2 in Laos and 2 in the Philippines. In terms of how they saw their own 'ethnicity', 1 said she was from an Anglo-Celtic background, 14 said Vietnamese, 1 Chinese, 1 Filipino and 3 referred to themselves as Laotian. While the topic was 'Vietnamese' or 'Indo-Chinese' youth gangs, the young people were approached on the basis of their affiliation with each other, regardless of their specific country of birth or ethnic identification.

17 of the respondents were male, the other 3 female. Their ages ranged from 16 to 27, with 8 individuals being 17-18 years old, and a further 8 being 21-25 years old. Ten of the young people said that they were 'Buddhist' in religious orientation, 7 Catholic, 1 Other Christian and 2 'none'.

Most of those interviewed had spent time in other countries before coming to Australia. While the country of origin generally was Vietnam, it is notable that half of the sample group had lived in several other countries (such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Thailand) prior to settlement here. Those who had migrated to Australia did so over a period of years stretching from 1978 to 1991. The key times of arrival were 1980-84 (5 people), 1985-89 (7 people) and 1990-94 (4 people).

The experience of leaving their home country was often associated with great hardship, and dealing with problems such as inadequate food, transport and accommodation. As some of the young people expressed it:

V8: *'I escaped by boat from Vietnam and learnt how to survive. We ran out of food, the engine broke down. The good experience was seeing the big ocean, being the only boat on the ocean. I went to school in the refugee camp. It was freedom.'*

V9: *'I was only 8 when I left. We escaped the country through the night; I didn't know where I was going. I found myself in a refugee camp in Thailand by the next day. I think by coming here I'd have a better job and a better life. That's my hope: education and a free life.'*

V10: *'I was young, so it didn't leave a big impression, but a few times on the boat we were near death. But we had an experienced captain. In the camp in Hong Kong we could go out, it was an open camp, so I learned a lot about Hong Kong people and life.'*

V11: *'I left the country, so I missed my family, but I had to go for freedom. We ran out of food, but my boat was lucky.'*

V12: *'It was a good experience, but we left behind everything to escape for our freedom. In the camp it was hard. Not enough food and it was disgusting, dirty. They only provided food, not money, so it was hard to get clothing. If you have family overseas who can send some money it's OK. And the school would shut down because the Government didn't have enough money for teachers.'*

Of the 18 young people who migrated, 9 said they entered under 'refugee' status, 6 under the 'special humanitarian' category, 2 under 'family reunion' and 1 as a 'migrant'. Many of the young people did not remember too much about their journey, and most were somewhat ambivalent about the overall migration experience. Table 1 provides an indication of the type of accommodation they lived in upon arrival in Australia.

Table 1:  
Type of Accommodation Upon Arrival in Australia

Type of accommodation	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent	Valid Percent
Holding camp	1	5.0	5.6
Migrant hostel	7	35.0	38.9
Relatives/family friend	8	40.0	44.4
Private rental	2	10.0	11.1
Missing	1	5.0	0.0
Not applicable	1	5.0	0.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

Since their arrival, the young people had moved residence a number of times. For example, 6 had moved eight or more times, 6 individuals five to seven times and 6 have re-located two to four times. In our sample group, 16 currently lived in the Western suburbs of Sunshine and St. Albans, with the other four living in nearby areas. Most had been living in this part of the city for over 3 years.

Table 2 shows who the young people were living with at the time of interview. When asked why they had moved to their present accommodation, they generally referred to positive things such as moving to a better neighbourhood or a better house. However, a quarter of the sample said that they had moved into their current accommodation due to family problems.

Table 2:  
Who the Young People Live With

Type of accommodation	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent	Valid Percent
Mum	1	5.0	5.0
Both parents	9	45.0	45.0
Other relatives	2	10.0	10.0
Friends	6	30.0	30.0
Parents' friends	1	5.0	5.0
Homeless	1	5.0	5.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0

When asked about the main language they used at home, 11 of the young people said that they spoke Vietnamese, and a further 6 said that they spoke dual languages (including English). Amongst their peers and friends, most spoke English or a combination of Vietnamese and English.

Some indication of the socio-economic background of the young people was provided by a series of questions on the type of income sources and paid work of their parents. Only a handful of mothers were engaged in paid work, and this was in the service and manufacturing industries. Almost half of the mothers were in receipt of Department of Social Security Benefits. Of the fathers (several of whom were deceased or overseas), the majority were in paid work, in the industry and manufacturing sectors. Basically, given the geographical location and nature of work in the local area, it can be said that the class background of the young people was working class.

With regard to educational experience, half of the sample group had completed Year 12. Of the remainder, 2 had completed Year 11, 6 had finished Year 10 and 2 had undertaken Years 8 and 9. A quarter (5) of the sample was still in school. The young people were mostly positive about their school experiences, citing things such as friends, supportive teachers, the chance to learn and opportunities for the future as reasons why they like or liked school. The most disliked aspect of schooling was 'homework'.

The social background of the sample group indicates that many had migrated to Australia at a fairly young age. Since that time, they had undertaken schooling and had generally

lived in the same part of the city for most of the time. They did not have significant family resources, and in some cases experienced problems with their families to the extent that they moved into alternative accommodation. In one case, that of a homeless person, they had moved out of home due to conflicts with their step-mother.

## 2.3 Sources of Income

The economic situation of the young people was ascertained by asking a number of questions relating to sources of income and employment experiences. At the time of interview, only 4 of the young people indicated they were in formal paid work, and 2 of these involved cash-in-hand jobs. Most had undergone some type of job training, generally of a 'work experience' nature, in areas such as retail and hospitality, office work, and industry and manufacturing.

7 of the young people had never had a job before, 3 had held one job, 4 had experience in two jobs, and 6 of the young people had undertaken work in three or more jobs at different points in time. Almost all of the jobs held, or once held, by the young people were of a temporary nature, lasting under 6 months in duration and generally much shorter. The main reasons for leaving including being made redundant, the job was temporary or because of school pressures.

Many of the young people did perform unpaid labour for their family or friends. This is shown in Table 3.

Table 3:  
Types of Unpaid Work Undertaken by Young People

Types of unpaid work	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Child care	1	9.1	6.7
Domestic labour/chores	6	54.5	40.0
Gardening/mowing/car washing	1	9.1	6.7
Piece work	5	45.5	33.3
Family business	1	9.1	6.7
Other	1	9.1	6.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=11

Not Applicable = 9 (45%)

It can be seen from this table that about half of the work performed on an unpaid basis was related to a business enterprise of some kind. The rest is associated with domestic labour and household duties.

Table 4 outlines the main sources of income for each of the individuals in the sample group. When the young people were experiencing money problems they tended to go to their parents or friends for assistance, or to other relatives.

Table 4:  
Sources of Income for Young People Interviewed

Sources of Income	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Unemployment/DSS benefits	13	65.0	44.8
Austudy	4	20.0	13.8
Family	2	10.0	7.0
Work	2	10.0	7.0
Casual/part time jobs	3	15.0	10.3
Other illegal activity	1	5.0	3.4
No income	2	10.0	6.9
Other	1	5.0	3.4
Don't know	1	5.0	3.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

As can be seen, most of the young people were reliant upon some type of government benefit as their key source of income.

The ways in which their limited financial resources were used is indicated in table 5.

Table 5:  
Ways in Which Young People Spend Their Money

Ways in which money is spent	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Rent	10	55.6	20.4
Food/bills	11	61.1	22.4
Entertainment	14	77.8	28.6
Travel	3	16.7	6.1
Clothes	6	33.3	12.2
Family	3	16.7	6.1
Save	1	5.6	2.0
Other	1	5.6	2.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=18

Missing Responses = 2 (10%)

Most of the responses have to do with immediate household expenses such as rent, food and clothes. Entertainment is a significant item, although in the context of young people wishing to socialise in circumstances which generally involve commercial (rather than 'free') recreation and leisure outlets, this is hardly surprising. Teenage and young adult entertainment tends to involve financial costs as a matter of course.

When the sample group was asked about how other young people in the area make ends meet, the list of possible sources of income changes in notable ways. This is illustrated in Table 6.

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

Source of Income	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Unemployment/DSS benefits	14	70.0	18.2
Austudy	10	50.0	13.0
Family	4	20.0	5.2
Work	5	25.0	6.5
Casual/part time jobs	14	70.0	18.2
Drug dealing	14	70.0	18.2
Other illegal activity	13	65.0	18.2
No income	1	5.0	1.3
Other	2	10.0	2.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

We can see here that drug dealing and illegal activity begins to feature prominently in discussions of alternative income sources, as do casual (including cash-in-hand) jobs. A more detailed breakdown of the types of illegal activity perceived to be engaged in by young people in the sample group's area is provided in table 7.

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

Types of illegal activity	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Drug dealing	19	95.0	30.2
Drug running	1	5.0	1.6
Burglary/robbery	14	70.0	22.2
Shoplifting/sale of stolen goods	9	45.0	14.3
Theft (other than shoplifting)	12	60.0	19.0
Mugging/jumping	3	15.0	4.8
Cheating the DSS	1	5.0	1.6
Don't know	2	10.0	3.2
Other	2	10.0	3.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

When asked why young people might engage in these kinds of activities, the sample group referred to factors such as needing money, trying to be 'cool' and for the image, problems at home, for fun and excitement, peer pressure and due to drugs. The economic, and social, pressures to engage in criminal activity of these kinds is indicated in the comments of the young people:

V12: *'Lack of government support, not enough jobs, they probably have problems at home, nowhere to live, nowhere to go, and that's the only way to survive.'*

V13: *'Some people don't have dole money, they don't have anyone to advise them what to do, maybe they live away from home or their parents are still in another country. People on the street don't have family or money from Social Security, they don't have anyone behind their back telling them life, how to live life. That's what brings them to all this. They don't have any youth worker or Government help.'*

V18: *'I was out of home for a year and sometimes you had to do things to get money, to get food. That was a necessity. But it wasn't always you needed to break the law, 'cos I knew people that could have given us food and helped, but you don't want to ask all the time, you don't want to be a charity case. So most people would rather break the law than be, or ask from other people.'*

It was also pointed out that not all illegal activities are motivated by financial need. This is seen in table 8. If anything, this table under-represents the use of drugs and alcohol among the young people. For example, when asked separately about what they do with their time when they are bored, almost half of the respondents cited drinking and the taking of drugs.

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

Types of illegal activity	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Car theft/joy riding	11	55.0	28.9
Drug/alcohol use	2	10.0	5.3
Fighting	19	95.0	50.0
Vandalism/graffiti	4	20.0	10.5
Don't know	1	5.0	2.6
Other	1	5.0	2.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

The main reasons given for engagement in these kinds of activities were boredom, fun and excitement, showing off, revenge against other young people, peer pressure and problems at home.

## **2.4 Youth Gangs**

A series of questions were put to the young people about the nature and activities of 'youth gangs' in the neighbourhoods and involving members of the Indo-Chinese/Vietnamese communities. We started by asking them where young people hung out in the local area. The most often referred to places included amusement centres, the street outside of shops, shopping centres and restaurants/cafes. They made the point that young people generally hang around in groups. To go out on their own meant that the young person probably did not have any friends.

It is important to acknowledge, as well, that the young people spent most of their time at home or at a friend's house. Most felt bored sometimes or very often, and going out was one way of relieving their boredom.

Table 9 provides information of what the young people felt were the main reasons why young people hung around with certain other young people. Notably, the key feature of their response is that they shared similar interests in fashion and preferred activities.

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

Aspects of Group	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Ethnicity/culture	4	20.0	18.2
Same interests/activities	5	25.0	22.7
Problems at home	1	5.0	4.5
Image/dress/style	7	35.0	31.8
School	1	5.0	4.5
Nothing in common	4	20.0	18.2
Total	22		100.0

N=20

As the following comments attest, however, while 'ethnicity' per se did not top the list of things in common, it does play a big part in why and how certain individuals socialise with each other.

V1: 'People from Asian backgrounds because they're in a different country they can hang around together and support each other. Because there are so few Vietnamese they stick together. Not a gang but just join together to go out and talk, sit together and have a smoke. There's a lot of support if you're in a group together.'

V2: 'Mostly my friends are Vietnamese because it's easier to talk to each other.'

V3: 'Asians hang with the Asians and Wogs hang with the Wogs. When they mix they can be more powerful. There's always the Chinese and the Vietnamese, but you can't say much about the Thai or Lao because they hang with the Chinese or Vietnamese. It depends on the way they dress.'

V4: 'They tend to stick to their own groups when they're Asian, like Vietnamese with Vietnamese, Chinese with Chinese. But with the European ethnics they mix more.'

V5: 'To an extent there's some sort of racial segregation. Asians tend to stick with Asians, Wogs stick with the Wogs. But then you'll have subgroups as well – a little hierarchy.'

The young people pointed out that they do share much the same culture, and because they understand each other it is easier to get along. Speaking the same language was also a major influence in terms of whom they wished to associate with.

Another point of common interest revolved around gender differences. It was pointed out that girls basically have different interests and engage in different kinds of activities than young men. For example, girls were seen as more into shopping and clothes than boys, and

to stay at home more – which also partly explains the preponderance of young men in this particular study. Public spaces were constructed as male domains, and it is young men who tend to both use such spaces and to garner the most attention when it comes to popular images of gangs.

The similarity in background, and the fact that they tended to hang around together, does not, however, mean that the young people were involved in ‘gangs’ or gang-related activity. The young people made it clear that they were ‘groups’ of young people, who simply spent time together to have fun. Even where some illegal activity might occur, this was not equated with being involved in a ‘gang’. Likewise, coming to the aid of a friend, for example to defend them against an attack from another person, was not seen as an indication of ‘gang’ behaviour. It was simply supporting each other when they are in trouble.

As with the academic literature on gangs, there was some confusion and uncertainty over what demarcated a gang or not. When asked about the characteristics of a gang, the young people responded as in table 10.

Table 10:  
Characteristics by Which Young People Defined Gangs

Attributes	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Organised/rules	7	35.0	17.1
Leader	5	25.0	12.2
Particular dress or style	1	5.0	2.4
Carry weapons	2	10.0	4.9
Violent	2	10.0	4.9
Drug users	5	25.0	12.2
Do illegal activities	10	50.0	24.4
Just a group of friends	3	15.0	7.3
Other	6	30.0	14.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

It is the combination of variables which seem to indicate whether or not a particular group is a ‘gang’ or not. These included some type of organisational structure, hierarchical leadership and a primary focus on undertaking illegal activities. Distinctions were also drawn between ‘street crime’ gangs (involved in minor drug dealing and street-related offences), ‘organised criminal’ gangs (involved in serious drug dealing and violent crime), ‘social identity’ gangs (involved in supporting and protecting each other). The young people commented:

*V1: ‘They have organised members and the leader can give orders to the others. A social group just goes out for fun, pick up girls, whatever. A tough group uses weapons, get influenced by the movies.’*

*V3: ‘There’s street gangs and organised crime gangs. Street gangs are out there dealing drugs, making trouble on the streets. The organised crime people are into extortion or*

*selling and buying, but you won't see it on the streets.'*

*V4: 'The word "gang" means in any case we will stick together. We have to stick together. Once you call yourself a gang you mean business. Fighting to protect the gang's name.'*

*V5: 'A group of people who get together for illegal activities. But it's not like there are initiation rites and all that. They don't even call themselves gangs, they're just groups of friends.'*

*V7: 'Gangsters are different, like mobsters or triads. I think of really bad people when I think of gangs.'*

*V9: 'A gang supports each other. With more people you get more help. Some people join gangs so they're not out there by themselves. They're more secure and safe all together.'*

*V12: 'A gang is a bunch of people who do things together, they share. Maybe there's drugs involved, they use them or sell them. They do everything together. They're just like brothers.'*

*V14: 'Gangs operate like a support network. Older members of the gang look after and support younger members.'*

*V18: 'Gangs break the law. Most of the people I know who are in what adults would classify as gangs are just a group of friends that are close for some reason like they all don't get along with their parents and they treat each other as family. The same way a family would support each other if someone is in trouble, a gang would support each other as well. What they're trying to do isn't bad, but it ends up being bad. Gangs are also in poorer areas. The problems that kids have are bad. Their parents have problems with money and security. They're under survival pressure, which rubs off on the children. The parents might not be able to give their kids emotional or financial support because they're struggling themselves. You wouldn't be in a gang if you weren't getting support from each other.'*

The type of 'gang' talked about, then, very much depended upon perceptions of which young people were 'troublemakers' or drug dealers, and which were simply groups of friends who supported each other in various ways. Some activities were also distinguished on the basis of whether it was simply young people sharing fun (including drug use), or whether it was related to doing things as part of a 'business' (such as dealing drugs).

There was no clear consensus on the size of 'gangs', with figures ranging from 10-20 members through to 100 members. Young people might join a group or gang mainly for protection, for the fun and excitement, for peer support and individual or group respect, and because they share the same dress and style. The name adopted by a particular group is significant insofar as it helps indicate that group's 'territory' or hangout and provides an instant recognition by others of where some young people are from. Having a 'name' for a group is not uncommon among young people generally, and is arguably part of a normal process of social identification. As one young person put it: *'Each suburb, someone owns the suburb. Like the Footscray boys. If you come into their area, you've got to respect them'* (V9).

The sample group was asked why 'gangs' form, and whether or not racism was a reason. From the responses, it is clear that many thought that safety in numbers was a good idea.

*V3: 'Asians used to get picked on a lot by Aussies, so the Asians joined up and said "let's do something about this."'*

*V4: 'Gangs are formed by children on the street. They all come together to get shelter, help and support each other. Some gangs were mistreated when they were younger so now they're fighting back.'*

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V5: *'When you're the minority you feel you have to band together for self-preservation. It's because everybody shares something.'*

V6: *'If you've had enough of what you've copped you'll join up with other people that have experienced it and you'll get together.'*

V10: *'Lots of Asians have been the victim of racism, and that's a very important reason to join a gang.'*

V11: *'That (racism) is a part of it. Maybe a group of Italians or whatever try to hit Asians, so they get a group of their own together to protect themselves.'*

V13: *'Sometimes you walk down the street by yourself and a group of another nationality jumps you because of the way you look, your skin, what you're wearing.'*

V15: *'Gangs provide individual members with protection against racist taunts.'*

V16: *'These days, before it was more racist than it is now. People like to have gangs of all the same ethnic background or nationality 'cos of all the racism around.'*

V18: *'Racism's huge. That's why most of the groups are majority one race. So they can support each other from all the other races attacking them.'*

In addition to racism, however, the idea of joining a group was also directly linked to lack of family support or to problems at home.

V5: *'A lot of people that join gangs are from the same socio-economic group – lower to middle class. And they have problems at home. They're escaping from home because it's a shithole. Their friends become their family.'*

V7: *'It depends on the family life. It all starts at home. If you feel that your parents don't love you you'll be tempted to go and find another family through a gang.'*

V9: *'They feel more secure. If there's trouble you've got people there to help you. If they're left out, if they're on the street they join a big group to be safe, to get more power, make more money. It's easier to live.'*

V12: *'For some of them there's nowhere to go and no other place to turn to get help, and I think that's their only choice, to be in a gang, because they help each other out with accommodation and everything.'*

V18: *'When you're out of home you think, if you go to a refuge, I'm a loser, I need help, I can't handle it, and no one wants to admit that. I used to sleep anywhere rather than go to a refuge. The gang will give you support, financially, emotionally. For young people not born in Australia, it's twice as strong. Because, what do you call the camps when you come over? Refugee camps. And what do you call a place you go for help? A refuge. I don't think so!'*

Family problems was cited as the biggest reason why some young people are more likely to join a 'gang' than others. So too, was lack of support or guidance and difficulties related to schooling. Young women were seen to join gangs mainly for protection, but also due to family problems. For many young people the gang provided a forum where they could be helped out by others, and accepted.

Groups of young people get up to various kinds of things. This is an inevitable part of the dynamics of group activities. When asked about the activities of 'gangs' specifically, the sample group highlighted activities as described in table 11. In describing how gangs are a

problem in schools, the key issues revolved around bullying. 'School' gangs basically involved groups of young people who start fights, and who scare and pick on other students.

Responding to a question on how the participants might feel about engaging in illegal or anti-social activity, the sample group said it very often depended upon the individual, and that various people might feel excited, tough, pressured, guilty or scared. One respondent commented that: *'The older ones know they're doing wrong, they don't really want to do it, but they're in a position where it's difficult to step down. They'll lose face amongst their friends'* (V4).

Table 11:  
Young People's Perceptions of Kinds of Activities in Which Gangs are Involved

Kinds of activities	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Fighting	12	60.0	20.7
Having fun	8	40.0	13.8
Drug dealing	17	85.0	29.3
Stealing/mugging/rob	12	60.0	20.7
Vandalism	2	10.0	3.4
Drinking/drug use	4	20.0	6.9
Gambling	1	5.0	1.7
Other	2	20.0	3.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>58</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

The sample group had mixed feelings about gangs in their local area. Most felt that gangs were 'OK' if not comprised of troublemakers. The feeling was that 'groups' were fine, but some types of 'gangs' are not. One person also pointed out that *'I don't feel like it's their fault, nor am I against what they do on the street. You can't judge a person on what they do because of their circumstances'* (V9). The young people were aware that there were both good things and bad things about gangs. This is shown in tables 12 and 13.

Table 12:  
Young People's Perceptions of Good Things about Being a Gang Member

Positive aspects of gang membership	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Fun/excitement	5	25.0	12.5
Being known/respected	3	15.0	7.5
Protection	7	35.0	17.5
Support/replacing family	12	60.0	30.0
Easy money	4	20.0	10.0
Getting partner/friends	7	35.0	17.5
Don't know	2	10.0	5.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

Table 13:  
Young People's Perceptions of Bad Things about Being a Gang Member

Negative aspects of gang membership	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Contact with police	8	42.1	22.2
Doing illegal things	12	63.2	33.3
Bad reputation in community	3	15.8	8.3
Enemies/other gangs' revenge	8	42.1	22.2
Affects the future	2	10.5	5.5
Hard to get out	2	10.5	5.5
Other	1	52.6	2.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

When asked what gang members would do if not in a gang, the young people referred to concentrating more on school, engaging in more productive pursuits, simply hanging out on the streets with nothing to do and having fun anyway. It was observed that it was mainly 'groups' of young people who hung out on the streets. As one young person explained: *'Any group on the street aren't causing problems. Gangs aren't necessarily hanging out on the streets. Anyone who's doing a crime doesn't take forty to fifty people with them. The harassment by the police of kids is useless – it turns the kids against the police from a young age and teaches them that anything against the police is good'* (V3). The issue of police harassment of groups of young people loomed large in the young people's assessment of the trouble they experienced on the streets.

However, there was also concern expressed at the extent of fighting on the street. Here it appeared to be the case that groups of young people would periodically be in conflict with each other. The possibility and experience of street violence was a central theme in the discussions with the young people (as indicated in the previous discussion of racism). When violence occurred, many different types of weapons may be used: knives, machetes, bottles, sticks, baseball bats and bricks. Guns were also mentioned. The use of weapons was mainly associated with 'gang' fights, although it was pointed out that they are also used only in emergencies and for self defence, or in the commission of specific crimes such as robberies or muggings.

Gang fights are seen to happen due to struggles over 'territory', acting or talking smart, racism, use of or conflict over drugs, and disputes relating to girls. Who is involved in these 'gang' fights varies enormously, as indicated in table 14.

Table 14:  
Young People's Perceptions of the Different Groups Involved in Gang Fights

Types of Groups	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Anglo against other Ethnic	3	15.8	13.0
One ethnic against 'different' Ethnic	4	21.1	17.4
Ethnic amongst 'similar' Ethnic	2	10.5	8.7
Ethnic within Ethnic	2	10.5	8.7
No particular/many different combinations	9	47.4	39.1
Another specific combination	1	5.3	4.3
Not based on Ethnicity	1	5.3	4.3
Don't know	1	5.3	4.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

It would appear that when street violence occurs it is due to many different causes, and can involve a wide number of different participants depending upon the specific circumstances. As indicated in table 14, there is not necessarily an 'ethnic' dimension to all street fighting, although this clearly has a role in some situations. In many cases, the reasons for street violence have more to do with teenage and young adult male bravado (in relation to territorial and sex-related matters), than with racism or criminal activities such as drugs dealing.

## 2.5 Problems & Solutions

The young people who participated in this study were very critical of media representations of 'ethnic youth gangs'. They felt that media reports were biased, exaggerated, only showed the bad side of things and tended to pick on Asians. They also felt that a heavy-handed coercive approach to gangs was not the answer to the problems associated with gang formation or gang-related activities.

In fact, most of the young people felt that it was hard to do anything specifically about gangs, and that maybe the best thing would be to leave them alone. However, a strong message was that, in general, young people involved in these types of groups or activities need support, help and direction in their lives. This is indicated in the following quotations:

V1: *'They should go to a place more like a school than a prison. Where they can learn new things to start a brand new life. Not a prison where they get bashed and raped.'*

V4: *'They need guidance, their confidence built up. Not just locked away.'*

V5: *'You can take measures like try to guide them away from that lifestyle, creating opportunities, finding jobs or some kind of recreational activities, but there's not much you can do. It's up to the whole community- schools, government, friends, police.'*

V7: *'Parents should educate their kids. It starts at home. If parents gave a damn, if they knew or cared enough to know what their kids are doing out on the street... Teachers can help by educating students. Schools and governments can find out about gangs and portray gangs in a negative way, as uncool, showing the trouble they get into.'*

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V8: *'Social workers and the community should teach them the right thing to do. If they get into serious matters they should be in gaol to teach them a lesson. Otherwise they should get another chance.'*

V11: *'The Government should provide social workers who go around and try to help.'*

V12: *'They need a lot of support and help. Something to keep them busy instead of just being on the street where they get bored and there's nothing to do. More jobs so they don't have to do just anything to support themselves in their living.'*

V13: *'More community work needs to be done to support young people in gangs, more street workers.'*

V18: *'It starts at home and school. If you feel secure at home you won't need support from those around you, and if you don't like school you're more likely to hang out in the area. But once they're a part of it it's impossible to get them away. Things like drug education should start at grade 6. The younger they get it the less likely they are to believe lies and rumours.'*

The majority of the young people interviewed felt that there were insufficient activities for young people. They also commented that what was available, often required money. They spoke about the need for more recreational and leisure activities, sporting facilities, jobs, and support and skill-providing activities. As well, they felt restricted in where they could go, or what activities they could engage in, due to lack of adequate transport.

The young people also felt that they were unfairly targeted by the police, and that the nature of the contact was generally unpleasant. As one interviewee put it: *'Sometimes you don't feel good in the street because if the police see Vietnamese they come and search you any time they like. People don't want to be attacked all the time. If police see me they come and search me- just down in Footscray. It makes you feel it's not freedom'* (V9).

All of those interviewed had had contact with the police at some stage. Most of this contact occurred on the street, but almost half of the young people (9) also said they had had contact with the police at their home. Their experiences were 'generally bad'. Some indicated that they had been treated well when stopped by the police. But the negatives far outweighed the positives, as illustrated by the findings presented in table 15.

Table 15:  
Young People's Perceptions of Bad Experiences with Police

Types of Experience	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Hassled/searched on street/threatened	15	78.9	28.3
Physical abuse	14	73.7	26.4
House raid	8	42.1	15.1
Racism	5	26.3	9.4
Falsely accused/arrested	6	31.6	11.3
Caught doing crime	4	21.1	7.5
None	1	5.3	1.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>53</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19  
Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

The strength of feeling about how the police interact with them is indicated in the following comments:

V6: *'They tease you about your culture, the way you look, your eyes and that. And then they beat you.'*

V8: *'They tear the house apart, then get angry that they don't find anything, then they hit you.'*

V11: *'I went to gaol 4 or 5 years ago and they know what I did, but it was in the past and they still won't leave me alone. Wherever I go they find me. We do nothing but they break the house down and hit everybody inside. 6 or 7 of them come in, break the door down, push everyone in the corner and hit everyone. Even friends who just come over get bashed.'*

V12: *'Since I was a teenager, just because I did one crime, they keep hassling me for a few years until now. I'm alright now, I'm working and hardly on the street, but I don't do nothing and they still check on me. The police know my name very well. It's always, "did you steal this car, that car?" They don't let me go. I'm not speeding, drinking, there's nothing wrong with my car, but they just use any excuses. I get ashamed with people I know- getting checked or pulled over I lose a lot of face. Especially with elderly people I know, or friends. I feel embarrassed when I'm searched on the street. Body search on the street and if I'm in amusement (centres), a strip search. Others will think I'm not a good person, and it's not fair.'*

V13: *'Sometimes we're too scared to walk on the streets because of the police. They do body searches on the street and strip searches in houses. Police are racist. They swear at you and tell you to "go back to your own country, you smelly dog." They break into the house, bash us for nothing, then wreck the door, mess everything up and then leave without cleaning up or nothing. Food, rubbish, clothes chucked all over the floor, like they're burgling us.'*

Most (15) of the young people had also had contact with security guards, mainly in relation to nightspots such as discos and pubs, and at shopping centres. While critical of security guards, they nevertheless had a more ambivalent attitude toward them, recognising that their contact was both bad and good depending upon the circumstances. They were friends with some security guards, but overall had had a number of bad experiences as indicated in table 16.

Table 16:  
Young People's Perceptions of Bad Experiences with Security Guards

Types of Experience	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Kicked out/moved on	6	40.0	21.4
Hassled/searched/accused	7	46.7	25.0
Physical violence	2	13.3	7.1
Over-surveillance	2	13.3	7.1
Denied entry to club	2	13.3	7.1
Racism	8	53.3	28.6
None	1	6.6	3.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=15

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

Not Applicable = 4 (20%)

When asked what the police could do about gangs, most of the young people said that there was not much the police could do. On the positive side, several participants did mention that it would be a good idea if the police got to know them better and talked with them. It was also felt that the police need to get more information, and accurate information, about the activities and behaviour of the young people. As one person commented: *'They can't judge by the way people look. Some groups are just for having fun.'* Another added that the police should: *'Stop arresting little kids trafficking. Go up the chain and arrest the people at the top who are importing it'* (V1).

Much of the identification of 'problems' on the part of the young people revolved around personal relationships. Most of those interviewed said that they experienced problems with their families, often relating to issues such as getting into trouble and illegal activities on the one hand, and being dependent and not receiving enough help on the other. The family was nevertheless seen a very important in their lives. This is indicated in table 17.

Table 17:  
Importance of Family to Young People Interviewed

Types of Importance	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Gives support/strength/help	15	78.9	46.9
Need to look after them	2	10.5	6.3
Blood connection	5	26.3	15.6
Always be there	8	42.1	25.0
Don't know	1	5.3	3.1
Other	1	5.3	3.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19  
Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

Where they are not living with their immediate family, then friends sometimes took on the emotional and financial role of the family. When asked where they go to get help when they are experiencing problems, however, the preferred response was 'friends', followed closely by 'parents'. Mention was also made of teachers, partners, girls and social workers, as well as simply relying upon oneself.

The young people were aware of support services in the local area, particularly those involving social workers. The type of help they received from school and welfare agencies (and to some extent the police) included advice, information, support and in some cases money. Most (15) had also received help from a government department, with the majority of cases involving financial assistance. The other types of government assistance included training programmes and courses, and help in looking for work.

When it came to what the various agencies and institutions might do, generally, to assist them, the participants often spoke of receiving greater levels of support and guidance. This is reflected in tables 17, 18 and 19.

Table 17:  
Young People's Perceptions of What Schools Can Do About Gangs

Type of action	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Teach them about consequences /alternatives to gang life	7	38.9	25.9
Get to know them/talk to them	5	27.8	18.5
Give them direction/guidance	7	38.9	25.9
Security guards/surveillance camera	1	5.6	3.7
Can't do much	4	22.2	14.8
Don't know	2	11.1	7.4
Other	1	5.6	3.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=18  
Missing Responses = 2 (10%)

Table 18:  
Young People's Perceptions of What Social Services Can Do About Gangs

Type of action	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Give them support/guidance	7	38.9	33.3
Help with work/housing/skills/education/money	6	33.3	28.6
Organise activities	1	5.6	4.8
Can't do much	4	22.2	19.0
Don't know	3	16.7	14.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=18  
Missing Responses = 2 (10%)

Table 19:  
Young People's Perceptions of What Migrant Services Can Do About Gangs

Type of action	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Offer a support group	4	22.2	20.0
Liaise with support services	3	16.7	15.0
Help keep pride in culture	2	11.1	10.0
Organise activities	1	5.6	5.0
Can't do much	5	27.8	25.0
Don't know	3	16.7	15.0
Other	2	11.1	10.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=18  
Missing Responses = 2 (10%)

A clear concern of the young people was that there be groups or places for young people to meet in order to better understand their communities, and their way of life. They wanted more from their own communities, as well as the resources to enhance their opportunities in mainstream activities.

The needs, desires and issues relating to these young people are many and varied. The complexities of their lives is somewhat mirrored in the kinds of things they would like governments to do in order to assist them. This is shown in table 20.

Table 20:  
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	1	5.6	3.4
Employ outreach workers	4	22.2	13.8
Provide free hang out places for young people	6	33.3	20.7
Not close schools	2	11.1	6.9
Provide more jobs	7	38.9	24.1
Providing more funding/services for young people	2	11.1	6.9
Support/listen to them	1	5.6	3.4
Can't do much	3	16.7	10.3
Don't know	3	16.7	10.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=18  
Missing Responses = 2 (10%)

Government policies were seen to affect them in at least two different ways. On the one hand, some policies were seen to have a negative impact, and to contribute to the 'gang' problem: *'Cutting local schools puts teenagers on the streets more'*. On the other hand, the lack of financial resources and inexpensive recreational and leisure outlets was perceived to be due to government inaction to address their needs. One young person expressed the desire that: *'The Government can get together with local communities and parents to find solutions for young people'* (V13).

The young people were asked about what they will be or would like to be doing in five years. The answers indicated very conventional mainstream aspirations – to be working, to be married and have children, to be economically well-off, to be involved in tertiary education. If they are to achieve these goals, however, significant changes are needed in their lives.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This study has been based upon interviews with 20 young people closely associated with the Indo-Chinese/Vietnamese street scene in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. From the point of view of social resources, most of the young people interviewed were unemployed, reliant upon state financial assistance and could not turn to families for much economic support given the socio-economic situation of their parents (which in some cases included the absence of at least 1 parent). Illegal activity, including use and dealing of drugs, was linked to the economic and social circumstances and opportunities of the young people.

The young people tend to hang around together in groups which had some kind of interest or cultural affinity. They liked to talk with people who could, literally, speak their language, and those who could appreciate them as friends and peers. The main reasons for congregating in groups included support, protection (in some cases related to the threat of racism), excitement, and friendship.

Distinctions can be made between different types of youth formations. In particular, there appeared to be three types of 'gangs':

- Those involving low level 'street crime' – made up of 'tough' young men, who have a visible street presence, and who may occasionally engage in low level criminal activity or anti-social behaviour directed at others, as well as within the group;
- Those involving 'organised crime' – made up of a network of young people and adults, who do not have a strong collective street presence (due to not wanting to bring undue attention to themselves), and who engage in systematic drug dealing and criminal activities; and
- Those involving 'social identity' groups – made up mostly of young men (and some young women), who are highly visible, and who basically congregate for social purposes.

The rationale for most of the youth formations is primarily 'fun' (i.e., as part of a social network), rather than 'business' (i.e., as part of a criminal network). Nevertheless, while the purpose for a group forming tended to be social, rather than criminal, each type of group may, to a lesser or greater extent, engage in illegal activity, fights or drug use. This, however, is not driven by the agenda of the group as such, nor is it particularly unusual for Australian teenagers and young adults generally. Much of what happens on the street is contingent upon specific circumstances and events. Fighting, for example, is a general feature of (male) street life, but arises due to different causes and involves different individuals and groups depending upon specific conditions.

Most of the young people had fairly conventional aspirations. Most also referred to having friends and family as the most important things which would make them happy. They also spoke about having fun, going out, reaching goals and accomplishing things, having a partner, and helping others. They really wanted a chance to 'make a go of it'. And they hated the stigma attached to themselves (particularly by authority figures, such as the police) when in most cases they were only doing what circumstances dictated, or what other young people of their age do when they use public spaces. The young people wanted to be respected and to be treated fairly and with dignity. They wanted to belong.

## **2.7 Recommendations**

A number of possible avenues for action and intervention are suggested by the findings of this study. Before considering these, it is useful to first consider other work which has been undertaken along similar lines.

### *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**

One indication of what the young people in this study would like to see in terms of improving their present circumstances and social relationships is provided in table 21.

Table 21:  
What Young People Felt Would Make Them Happier

Source of Happiness	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Money	3	15.8	11.1
Partner	3	15.8	11.1
Getting somewhere in life	2	10.5	7.4
Job/successful career	4	21.1	14.8
Family changes	4	21.1	14.8
No hassles with police	5	26.3	18.5
Being healthier	1	5.3	3.7
World peace	1	5.3	3.7
Nothing	2	10.5	7.4
Don't know	1	5.3	3.7
Other	1	5.3	3.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

Following from both the perceptions of the young people themselves, and the interpretation of the overall findings of this research project, the following recommendations appear warranted:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

- *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.
- 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 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.

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. The young people involved are not 'bad' people – but, they are dealing with circumstances not of their making, which do have serious long term consequences if appropriate and positive strategic action is not taken. The time to take such action is now.

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**Australian Multicultural Foundation**

**Ethnic Youth Gangs in Australia**  
***Do They Exist?***

Report No. 2  
**Turkish Young People**

by  
Rob White  
Santina Perrone  
Carmel Guerra  
Rosario Lampugnani

**1999**

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# **Part 1:**

## **Background to the Research**

## **1.1 Introduction**

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

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

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

### *i. Ethnic Minority Youth*

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

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

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

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

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

While media and police concern over 'ethnic youth gangs' has appeared to be on the rise, there has in fact been very little empirical information regarding the actual activities of ethnic minority young people (but see Guerra & White, 1995; Pe-Pua, 1996). Specifically, little is known about the *demographic characteristics* of the ethnic minority people in question – for example, their ages, gender composition, level of education, employment status, 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, however, been some movement toward analysis of the nature and extent of ethnic minority youth offending (Easteal, 1997), to examine sentencing disparities in relation to the ethnicity of juvenile offenders (Gallagher & Poletti, 1998) and to consider the special requirements of ethnic minority offenders held in detention (NSW Ombudsman, 1996). However, much more study and conceptual work is needed if we are to appreciate fully the place of ethnic minority youth in the criminal justice system, and the reasons for their involvement with this system.

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

#### *ii. Diverse Assumptions*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **1.2 The Study**

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

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

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

*i. Aims of Research*

The *aims of the research* were:

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

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

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

**ii. Methods of Research**

The *research methodology* adopted for the study consisted of:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **1.3 The Notion of Youth Gangs**

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

#### *i. Criminal Youth Gangs*

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

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

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

- gangs are a problem in the 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 Bodgies and Widgies in the 1950s), the cultural and social environment is quite different to the American case. Unlike the U.S., for example, there is not a strong academic tradition of gang research, in part demonstrating the lack of a need for one in the first place. What research there is, has tended to find that 'gangs' in this country are very unlike their American counterparts.

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

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

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

*ii. 'Gang' Characteristics*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *iii. Youth Formations*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### *iv. Youth in Groups*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **1.4 Research Contribution**

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

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

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

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

## **Part 2:**

# **Turkish Young People**

## **2.1 Social History**

Turkey is a mountainous country located at the north eastern end of the mediterranean sea. It shares borders with Greece, Bulgaria, Iran, and Georgia. Turkey is often described as being part of the middle east, or as being at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. As such, Turkey is the only country to have parts in both Asia and Europe.

Turkey's population is predominantly Islamic, with approximately 98 per cent of the people sharing this religion. Modern Turkey is nevertheless a secular state, and is the only Islamic country where the Islamic code is not official law. About 85 per cent of the population is comprised of ethnic turks. There are also numerous minorities, including for example, Jewish, Christian, Kurdish and Armenian communities.

### *i. Migration*

The Turkish commenced settling in Australia in a structured manner in the 1960s (Basarin & Basarin, 1993). The Turkish/Australian bilateral migration agreement of 1967, lead to some 30,000 Turkish people migrating to Australia over the next 30 years. In the mid 1970's the Australian government reduced the levels of assisted migration from Turkey and the numbers steadily decreased (Elley & Inglis, 1995).

By the 1980s, Turkish migration had levelled off, mainly due to changes in government policy and economic improvements in Turkey. In the 1990s, the numbers of migrants arriving from Turkey were relatively small, and mainly comprised of professionals, or relatives and spouses of earlier immigrants to Australia. The current number of Turkish people migrating to Australia each year is under 1000.

There are over 75,000 people in Australia who are either Turkish born (28,860) or who are of Turkish background or speak the Turkish language (46,204) (ABS, 1996). In Victoria, about 1 per cent of the state's population is Turkish born.

### *ii. Settlement Processes*

The Turkish migrants have mainly settled, in equal numbers, in Melbourne and Sydney. In Victoria they settled pre-dominantly in the North-Western corridor of the metropolitan area, with smaller numbers moving to the more affluent Eastern suburbs. A similar pattern occurred in Sydney, where the community settled mainly in the Western suburbs. The areas settled were mainly near migrant hostels, in areas where housing was affordable or where there were employment opportunities.

The early Turkish arrivals were to enter a country with a very different religious and cultural base, and one which was unfamiliar with Islamic religious spiritual centres. There were also few basic support services provided for Turkish migrants.

The re-settlement process in Australia has gone through several distinct phases (Elley & Ingliss, 1995). The earlier stages of this migratory flow were characterised by the immigrants' clear intention to return to Turkey within two or three years of their arrival in Australia. This view was contrary to the expectations of Australian officials, but was a reflection of the more general Turkish experience of emigration, which did not encompass permanent settlement in another country.

The many difficulties faced by Turkish migrants when they arrived in Australia were thus compounded by the fact that immigration was not seen as a permanent decision. In particular, it was to have a major impact on the experiences of children and grandchildren of the immigrants.

To understand the unique process of migration and re-settlement as this relates to the Turkish population it needs to be appreciated that the Turkish migrant experience was based on the 'guest worker' concept already initiated with Germany and Holland (Basarin & Basarin, 1993). The guest worker concept was based upon the idea of short-term migration. The host country invited workers to migrate as temporary working residents and the workers then returned to their country of origin. The rapidly industrialised post-war European countries needed workers and temporary labour to fill factory shortages. The host countries had no intention of settling the workers permanently; and the workers intention was that they would eventually return to Turkey. Unlike other European countries, permanent migration from Turkey was rare.

The Turkish migration program to Australia, though deemed to be a permanent programme by Australian immigration officials, was not necessarily seen this way by the Turkish migrants themselves. The need to find work and save money was of paramount concern. In the early days of the program the intention to return home was to have a great influence on decisions relating to their children. For instance, learning English and developing stable roots in Australia for their family, were generally seen as pointless. Little emphasis was placed on maintaining children in school beyond the compulsory age. Rather, children were encouraged to contribute to the family, find work, or support younger siblings and undertake family responsibilities. The ultimate aim was to prepare the next generation for their future life in Turkey.

This attitude, coupled with the complication of migrating to a non-Muslim country, led the community to become somewhat insular. In most families, Turkish was the main language, English not seen as necessary, marriage took place within the community, and the values and practices of the homeland were emphasised. Maintenance of the Turkish language, Turkish community values and Turkish religion were thus high priorities. The values of the new country were perceived as undesirable, and encouraging undisciplined, disrespectful social practices in their children.

By the late 1970s, however, attitudes to migration started to change. Many families had made attempts to go back and re-settle in Turkey, but without much success. The Turkey they had left was not the country they found on their return. It had changed. Many people felt that they did not fit and that they should reconsider their place in Australia.

### *iii. Permanent Settlement*

By the 1990s the process of change associated with longer residence and commitment to staying in Australia has gone further. This is illustrated concretely in a number of ways. For example, young Turkish-Australians have begun to achieve levels of educational attainment closer to the national norms, a situation very different to the schooling experience of earlier migrant young people. The school retention rate for young people from Turkish backgrounds, and their participation in tertiary education, has since the mid-1980s been higher proportionately than most other groups in Australia, including Anglo-Australians (Inglis, 1993).

A recent study conducted in Melbourne in 1996, with over 300 Turkish young people between the ages of 12 and 25 provides the most up-to-date profile of the needs and concerns of this group (Fontaine & Kaymacki, 1996). The study found that the distinctive cultural, religious and family background of Turkish-Australians led these young people to consider themselves to be different from the mainstream youth population. They saw their Islamic religion and Turkish background, along with their family, as playing an important part in determining their future in terms of identity, marriage and place of residence. Interestingly, the study also identified that there were also a number of key issues which they shared with their non-Turkish youth counterparts. They saw that education, employment, a stable environment and provision of basic social and recreational services were all highly important.

The social place of Turkish young people of the 2nd and 3rd generation in Australia is complex. It is intrinsically intertwined with questions surrounding their identity, and the barriers they face in being accepted by mainstream society. Many Turkish-Australian young people are still growing up in families where material disadvantage, and a family experience of limited English, and often limited formal education, are the norm (Inglis, Elley & Manderson, 1992). While there have been major changes in educational and occupational mobility and advancement with regard to the young people, many parents and newly arrived immigrants have experienced unemployment and diminished job prospects due to the downturn in the manufacturing industry, and in unskilled and semi-skilled employment generally. Meanwhile, their close ethnic identification and religious affiliation has been associated with various forms of prejudice and racism directed at members of the Turkish community, including the young people.

## **2.2 Profile of Youth Interviewed**

Twenty young people were interviewed in relation to the place and perceptions of youth gangs in the lives of young Turkish people. All of the interviews were undertaken with people living in the Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows, in the northern part of the metropolitan region.

Of the 20 young people, 14 were born in Australia, 1 in Cyprus and 5 in Turkey. Most of those not born in Australia arrived before 1981 (3 came in 1974), while one person migrated in 1990. In other words, the young people were all well established in the Australian context, regardless of place of birth. Nevertheless, in terms of ethnic identification, they all viewed themselves as being distinctively 'Turkish', or in the case of 2 respondents, 'Cypriot Turkish', as well as 'Australian'.

The sample group was comprised of 7 females, and 13 males. All of the young people had Muslim religious beliefs. In terms of age, 11 respondents were between 21 and 25 years old, 6 were 17-18, and 3 were under 16 years of age. The ages ranged from 12 to 25.

Most (18) of the young people lived at home with their parents (10), mother (7) or father (1). Given their ages, this implies that the parental home is a central social location for Turkish young people, until marriage and the setting up of their own households. Most had lived in the same suburb, and the same accommodation, for a number of years. Most also lived in houses, rather than units or flats.

When asked about the main language used at home, 17 of the young people said that they spoke Turkish, 2 speak dual languages, and only 1 used English as the main language at home. With their peer groups, however, most (16) spoke English or English and Turkish (3). Only one person said that the usual language with their peers was Turkish.

Some indication of the socio-economic background of the young people was provided by a series of questions of the type of income sources and paid work of their parents. Only 4 mothers were undertaking paid work at the time of interview (in the manufacturing industry); and 13 were in receipt of state benefits such as the sole parent benefit or invalid pension. Of the fathers (two of whom were deceased, and 1 overseas), only 8 were in paid employment. They worked mainly in the service, trades and manufacturing industries. Many were in receipt of aged pensions, invalid pensions and unemployment benefits. Generally speaking, the economic resources of the households were fairly limited, as reflected in the employment patterns and income sources of the parents.

The majority of the interviewees had left school. Only one of the sample group had completed Year 12. Eight of the young people were presently still at school, while a few of the others were enrolled in TAFE or other educational courses.

### **2.3 Sources of Income**

The economic situation of the young people was ascertained by asking a number of questions relating to sources of income and employment experiences. At the time of interview, only 4 of the young people were in any type of paid employment, and of these only 2 in full time jobs. Three of the young people worked in the formal waged economy; one worked on a cash-in-hand basis. The sorts of jobs in which they engaged included driving a taxi, working in a pizza shop, cleaning and working in a retail shop.

Most (18) of the young people described themselves as being unemployed. Only two of the young people had not had a job at some stage. However, most paid work was short-term, and only one person had ever worked for more than 6 months at a time.

Almost half (9) of the sample had received some type of job training or work experience, usually in the area of trades, or administrative or office work. Of these, 6 had received their job training as part of receiving benefits from the Department of Social Security.

The majority of young people (16) regularly undertook unpaid work at home for friends or family. This work included domestic labour and chores, childcare, gardening, mowing the grass, and washing the car.

Just over half (11) of the group also performed labour for 'favours' – that is, work performed for other people, for which they were not paid, but for which they might receive a favour of some kind, such as, for example, use of a car. In addition to the kinds of work associated with the household, this also included doing car repairs and undertaking various odd jobs for family and friends in the local area.

The main sources of income for the young people are shown in Table 1.

Table 1:  
Sources of Income for Young People

Sources of Income	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Unemployment/Dss benefits	8	40.0	38.1
Austudy	3	15.0	14.3
Family	5	25.0	23.8
Work	3	15.0	14.3
Casual/part time jobs	2	10.0	9.5
Total	21		100.0

N=20

As can be seen, most of the young people were reliant in some way upon state benefits. If they were experiencing money problems, the young people tended to either go to their parents, approach other relatives, or just as likely, to go to their friends for assistance. In some cases, the young people were reluctant to seek help from their parents, given their parents financial situation: *'If I've got money problems, I don't ask (parents for money) 'cause then I just put them under pressure, so I just close my mouth' (T7).*

The ways in which their limited resources were used in indicated in Table 2.

Table 2:  
Ways in Which Young People Spent Their Money

Ways in which money is spent	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Rent	3	16.7	7.0
Food/bills	10	55.6	23.3
Entertainment	7	38.9	16.3
Travel	3	16.7	7.0
Clothes	9	50.0	20.9
Family	1	5.6	2.3
Save	2	11.1	4.7
Cigarettes/alcohol	2	11.1	4.7
books/school	4	22.2	9.3
Drugs	1	11.1	2.3
Other	1	11.1	2.3
Total	43		100.0

N= 18  
Missing Responses = 2 (10%)

Most of the responses have to do with immediate household expenses such as food, bills, and clothes. The purchase of books and school-related items, and travel, indicate that a proportion of money is spent to enable the young person to participate in the worlds of education and work. Entertainment is also a significant item, which as much as anything

reflects the commercial nature of most leisure and recreational outlets and pursuits today.

The young people were aware of various 'quick money' jobs in the local neighbourhood. Some of these included piece work, factory work, babysitting, pamphleteering, supermarket work, working at a fastfood outlet, fruit picking, cleaning and acting as a handyman.

In discussing alternative income sources, the young people were also asked about the types of illegal activity which they thought young people in their neighbourhood might engage in, as a means to make money. Their responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3:  
Interviewees' Perceptions of Types of Illegal Activity in Which  
Young People Engage for Money

Types of illegal activity	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Drug dealing	12	60.0	36.4
Burglary/robbery	5	25.0	15.2
Shoplifting/sale of stolen goods	7	35.0	21.2
Theft (other than shoplifting)	5	25.0	15.2
Mugging/jumping	1	5.0	3.0
Don't know	1	5.0	3.0
Other	2	10.0	6.1
Total	33		100.0

N=20

As can be seen in this table, the main ways in which to supplement income revolved around various kinds of property crime (such as shopstealing, theft, burglary), and involvement in drug dealing.

The main reason for the commission of these illegal acts was financial, although some young people also referred to excitement, peer pressure and drugs as contributing to the reasons why a young person might engage in these sorts of activities. The lack of options was stressed in several interviews. As one young person saw it: *'Because they need the money. Basically because of their financial situation I guess. I don't really know of anyone who does it to get kicks out of it.'*

Not all illegal activity is motivated by economic need, although it may be related to economic circumstance. Accordingly, the young people were asked about the kinds of activities engaged in by young people generally, but not for the purposes of money. Their responses are shown in Table 4.

Table 4:  
Interviewees' Perceptions of Types of Illegal Activity (not for the purposes of money) In Which Young People Engage

Types of illegal activity	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Car theft/joy riding	5	26.3	14.3
Drug use	4	21.1	11.4
Fighting/assaults	9	47.4	25.7
Vandalism	9	47.4	25.7
Stealing for own use	1	5.0	2.9
Don't know	2	10.5	5.7
Other	5	26.3	14.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19  
Missing Responses = 1(5%)

What is notable about this list is the apparent level of aggression directed toward other people (e.g., fights) and property (e.g., vandalism) that is associated with illegal activity of this sort.

The main reasons given for engagement in these kinds of activities were peer pressure, boredom, fun and excitement, and simply showing off. The group nature of the activity, and the recognition that such activity is often closely related to peer pressures of some kind, are highly relevant in any discussion of youth gangs.

## 2.4 Youth Gangs

A series of questions were put to the young people about the nature and activities of 'youth gangs' in their neighbourhoods and schools. We started by asking them where young people hung out in the local area. The most frequent response was the shopping centres, followed by amusement centres, the street outside shops, recreation and sporting facilities and train/bus stops.

It needs to be acknowledged, however, that in general most of the young people spent most of their time at home or at a friend's house. This was the case for both their day-time and their night-time activities. The time spent in the public domains of the shopping centre and street, therefore, was much less than that spent at someone's house, including their own.

The young people were asked about the nature of the groups of young people who hang out on the street. For many, there was no basic difference between the various groups. Others spoke of different leisure interests, or different types of activities which formed the focus of each group's activities. These observations are reflected to an extent in Table 5, which shows the perceptions of the Turkish young people regarding what members of a group have in common with each other.

Table 5:  
Young People's Perceptions of What Groups Have in Common with Each Other

Aspects of group	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Ethnicity/culture	5	26.3	15.6
Same interests/activities	6	31.6	18.8
Image/dress/style	6	31.6	18.8
Music	5	26.3	15.6
Same school	2	10.5	6.3
Same area	3	15.8	9.4
Nothing in common	2	10.5	6.3
Other	3	15.8	9.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

The shared experiences of few employment options, and lack of local services for youth, was seen by some young people as a common condition.

*T9: 'They're all louts, they're all unemployed. Like I said, we're all on the same boat heading towards nowhere – out on the ocean; we don't know where we're going to.'*

*T14: 'There has to be (something that member of a group have in common) to form that bond.... When I came up to this area – pretty much a school boy, pretty much into school – it's just totally different. A lot of it's just a lot of adrenalin you know, nothing to do, nowhere to go but sit around bored and "what should we do, what should we do?"'*

The Turkish young people were ambivalent about how or whether one can make a distinction between a 'group' and a 'gang'. In defining a gang, for instance, many referred to 'just a group of friends'. As one young person put it: 'A gang is a group of people who have made a commitment to stick together' (T4). By this definition, a gang is simply a group of like-minded young people who hang around together and provide each other support. When asked about the types of gangs in the area, there were 8 responses referring to friendship groups, but only 5 which identified groups of 'troublemakers'.

In relation to this latter group, other respondents said that a 'gang' is best characterised in terms of doing illegal activities and engaging in violent activities of some kind. In describing the local gangs, one person said: 'A bunch of guys that think they're tough. After school they haven't got anything else to do and they just hang around in the shopping centres' (T6). Another commented: 'A gang is like just say there's ten people like sticking up for each other no matter what, and just doing stupid things, like really aggressive. They want to prove themselves to people, they wanna like want people to know what they are. They start things because they want people to look at them, want people to respect them.' (T7).

For some, the dividing line between a 'group' and a 'gang' was how other people perceived particular groups of young people. Group connection, and commitments to the group, were seen as simply a normal part of life in the neighbourhood. However, group loyalty and defending members of a group were important parts of this social connection.

A myriad of reasons was put forward as to what gang members might have in common. These ranged from dress and style, to ethnicity, to socio-economic status through to simply having fun. The specific reasons why young people may wish to join a group identified as a 'gang' are outlined in Table 6.

Table 6:  
Young People's Perceptions of Why Young People Join Gangs

Common attributes of gang members	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Fun/excitement	5	26.3	17.2
Problems at home	2	10.5	6.9
Protection	4	21.1	13.8
Support/replacing family	1	5.3	3.4
Respect/power	8	42.1	27.6
Rebellion/showing off	2	10.5	6.9
Other	7	36.8	24.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N= 19  
Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

It is significant that the idea that gangs give respect and power, as well as protection, featured highly in the responses. This is especially so, given the generally disadvantaged economic situation of most of the young people. In other words, issues of social status seemed to be crucial to the young people's understanding of youth gangs.

Related to social status issues is the issue of racism. The young people were asked whether or not racism had anything to do with gang formation or gang-related behaviour. Their answers varied. Some argued that racism, or at the least ethnic identification, is a major reason for gang membership.

*T2: 'Because 'Turks' stick with 'Turks' and 'Lebos' stick with 'Lebos' and the Asians with the Asians. Because, it's like if you need some help, you can go to one of the gang members and get all of the group to come and help you with your situation.'*

*T4: 'A lot of for example 'wogs' don't like 'Aussies' or 'Nips', so it's like you've got something against them, but you don't even know why – just because they're different.'*

*T6: 'I suppose they all can't get along; Turkish can't mix with Australians and I don't know, they just want to see who's tougher.'*

*T14: 'Mainly Turkish – they're just in their packs out and about.'*

*T14: 'Racism could start in the playground at school – getting picked on by some other group and then running to the safety of a majority group.'*

Other young people placed more stress on immediate local conditions and other forms of social connection (such as being unemployed, or drug users) as being the main reason for certain types of gang formation.

*T9: 'Living in Broadmeadows and leaving school in year 10, it doesn't leave you much to do really.'*

*Ethnic Youth Gangs in Australia – Do They Exist?*

T19: *'Mostly the people that are in the gangs are the druggies of the area; they all like to smoke together.'*

T10: *'They're mostly friends, dropouts from the same schools who come together and do things together.'*

T18: *'Kids in areas where unemployment levels are much higher than other suburbs; you know, hooligans hanging around the streets'.*

Still others had the perception that regardless of present social circumstances, the issue of racism was no longer dominant in terms of how groups of young people relate to each other, or as the basis for specific group formations.

T18: *'I wouldn't say racism, because I haven't seen racism for years. Like, Broadmeadows years ago used to be full of racism, like "What are you doing 'wog' down the street, but not any more.'*

T8: *'There used to be (gangs in the area) but not any more. Back in those days there used to be racism. When people like Turkish people, Lebanese or anyone that used to come from overseas, they used to get called like 'wogs' by Australians or the Asians were called 'Nippers' and they'd argue about it and they'll go into a gang to fight 'em and make sure they'd protect one another.'*

In the case of young women, their participation was primarily seen to stem from 'relationships', rather than from other causes, although young women could also find joining a gang a source of respect, power and excitement.

While the Turkish young people were ambivalent about how to define gangs, and whether or not they existed in practice, they were more definite in their views regarding what gang behaviour consists of. Their perceptions of gang-type behaviour are shown in Table 7.

Table 7:  
Young People's Perceptions of the Kinds of Activities in Which  
Gangs get Involved

Kinds of activities	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Fighting	12	60.0	27.9
Having fun	4	20.0	9.3
Drug dealing	3	15.0	7.0
Stealing/mugging/robbery	11	55.0	25.6
Unspecified illegal	1	5.0	2.3
Vandalism	3	15.0	7.0
Drinking/drug use	1	5.0	2.3
Sport	3	15.0	7.0
Other	5	25.0	11.6
Total	43		100.0

N=20

The issue of street violence featured strongly in the discussions of gang activity. With respect to this, mention was made of a wide range of weapons which were perceived to be used by

gang members: mainly knives and baseball bats, but also including guns and whatever else was at hand. While some young people saw weapons as essentially part of street posturing ('They don't actually use them, they just try to scare off other members' - T10), others expressed a concern over apparently recent trends: 'There used to be no weapons at all, but now, as days go past, people are pulling out more weapons, more people are getting hurt, mainly stabbings' (T8). Importantly, however, the broad perception was that weapons were only used for the purposes of gang fights, or only in emergencies and for self defence. Only occasionally were they mentioned in relation to robberies or muggings.

Gang fights were seen as largely consisting of conflicts between different ethnic groups. This is indicated in Table 8.

Table 8:  
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	11	55.0	34.4
One ethnic against 'different' Ethnic	12	60.0	37.5
Ethnic amongst 'similar' Ethnic	2	10.0	6.3
Ethnic within Ethnic	1	5.0	3.1
No particular/many different combinations	4	20.0	12.5
Not based on Ethnicity	2	10.0	6.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

The main reasons cited for these fights were power struggles over territory; racism; and someone acting or talking smart. Each of these was largely constructed in terms of specific ethnic groups, and specific ethnic identifications with certain territories and communities.

*T12: 'In their local area, they don't want other gangs. Like, in Broadmeadows, if there was a Turkish gang, they don't want another gang; they only want the area to belong to them.'*

*T13: 'They want to show their power against other nationalities.'*

*T17: 'Maybe the Australians think they, you know, own this country and the other 'wogs' shouldn't be there.'*

According to the young people, gang related activities primarily centre on property crimes, some of which involve violence, and fighting. Gangs, therefore, are primarily seen as anti-social groups, which break the law, and which engage in aggressive behaviour towards others. There is an element of physical threat associated with groups defined as gangs. As one young person commented: 'All they think about is fights and fun, fun, fun; that's it' (T7).

Similar themes were apparent in the answers to a question about gangs in schools. Table 9 indicates the types of concerns regarding gang activity within the educational sphere.

Table 9:  
Young People's Perceptions of How Gangs are a Problem in School

Type of Problem	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent ( responses)
Scare/pick on students	7	38.9	31.8
Start fights	4	22.2	18.2
Racism	2	11.1	9.1
Bad influence	3	16.7	13.6
Problematic for teachers	4	22.2	18.2
Don't know	1	5.6	4.5
Other	1	5.6	4.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=18

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

Not Applicable = 1 (5%)

Interestingly, the young people had a lot to say about gang type behaviour in the school context. Some of their observations include:

*T1: 'If someone has a fight with one person in a gang, the whole gang turns on that person.'*

*T6: 'There are other kids that want to study and be straight and because of them, (gangs) they can't.'*

*T7: 'Most of the schools here have Turkish people and if you're not Turkish and you're just walking around the school somewhere, you could get like hit or if you looked the wrong way but you really didn't mean it, you could get bashed.'*

*T11: 'Students are afraid of them; they're scared that gangs or gang members might do something to them. They're scared to go next to them or even talk to them.'*

*T12: 'Sometimes they scare you 'cause they want money from you...and you have to pay someone every week. They go "you have to pay us a sum of money to us every week. If you don't pay us, we'll bash you or do this and that." They try to sell you marijuana and smokes.'*

*T17: 'Probably within a classroom, if there's 20 people, there might be, for an example, 4-5 gang members in the room. Those gang members being there, screaming out, you know, it stops other people from studying.'*

Gangs in schools were seen to be highly disruptive to the learning process, and to be a disturbing aggressive force which permeated the schooling experiences of many students. In general the young people we interviewed did not like gangs, whether in school or on the street. However, few expressed the sentiment that they were actually afraid of the gangs, although they certainly were wary of certain groups.

In discussion, the young people said they could understand the positive aspects about being a member of a gang. In particular, they saw gangs as a means of protection, a way of getting a partner or friends, a source of fun and excitement, one way to replace the family for support, and as getting known and respected in one's peer or local community.

Conversely, being a gang member could also foster illegal activity, negatively affect a young

person's future, give them a 'bad' reputation in the community, and lead to greater levels of contact with the police. It was pointed out that it can serve to limit social connection, as well as to constitute a form of social connection. Thus: *'People single you out. You can get respect, but on the other side, people probably don't want to talk to you, or you know, don't want their friends or families to associate with you; they're afraid of you'* (T14).

The young people felt that if gang members were not in a gang, then they would get more out of school. They thought that the young people involved would lead more productive lives, and have better relationships with friends, family and other groups of young people. They could have different kinds of fun in which to engage.

## 2.5 Problems & Solutions

The young people who participated in this study were very critical of media representations of 'ethnic youth gangs'. They overwhelmingly felt that media reports were biased and only showed the bad side of groups. The reports were seen as exaggerated, and as giving all Turkish young people a bad reputation: *'They show them being bad, always causin' trouble. I admit, they do, but they base it on the whole, on a whole basis, whereas when you look, there's only like, not even 10% of most of the ethnic people cause trouble. There's only that small 10% which puts the rest of the youth ethnic people down'* (T19). Interestingly, the media coverage was also criticised for specifically 'picking on Asians'.

The preferred way to deal with youth gangs was not the coercive approach favoured in many media stories and portrayals. To the contrary, the young Turkish people tended to see responding to the perceived gang problem in proactive, social developmental terms. For example, many spoke of providing gang members more support, help and direction. Others suggested simply leaving them alone and not doing anything. Only a handful thought that gaol or juvenile training programmes was the solution. These perspectives are represented in the following quotations:

T5: *'There's nothing that can be done because you don't know if they're a gang or if they're just a group of mates hanging out.'*

T6: *'Police should put a stop to it.'*

T3: *'They should be spoken to about the bad things about being a gang member.'*

T14: *'Awareness; make them aware that it really ain't cool you know, the tough image really doesn't stick. I mean, if you're young and you're out there and you're tryin' to act tough or be in a gang, all high and mighty and that, you know, you could put yourself in a predicament where you may have the bark but you haven't got the bite behind you and get yourself in a bit of trouble. So, in that sense, it may be unhealthy.'*

T15: *'Tell them that gangs are only good for nothing, just a waste of your time and just show them that instead of wasting two-three years of time, everybody's got some ability or something they've got, (something) they can do instead of being in a gang. They don't need that person, or ten-fifteen people telling them that they're better; everyone's got individual things, good in them, and everyone's got to find the best out of each other.'*

The proposals for positive interventions, or no interventions, in relation to dealing with youth gangs stem in part from the experiences of the Turkish young people directly. For

instance, most (15) of the young people felt that there were insufficient activities for young people in their local area. They wanted places which young people could go to that did not cost a lot of money. They wanted more facilities and services which would cater to the needs and desires of young people, especially when it came to recreation and leisure pursuits, sporting activities and youth centres. Most of the young people complained of being bored often.

Simultaneously, the young people also felt restricted in what they could or could not do. This was due to a combination of reasons. For example, there were clear gender differences in what was deemed as appropriate or suitable behaviour for young men and young women. This is seen in Table 10.

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

Types of differences	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Girls into shopping/clothes	4	26.7	22.2
Girls help at home more	6	40.0	33.3
Guys play games/pinnies more	3	20.0	16.7
Don't know	4	26.7	22.2
Other	1	6.7	5.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=15

Not Applicable = 5 (25%)

Young women experienced more restrictions on where they could go and what they could do because of family pressures, concerns about safety, and broad cultural factors. These gender differences are evident in the following quotations:

*T5: 'Definitely when it comes to Turkish people, because the guys, 'cause they're boys, they can go out more. They've got much more freedom than what girls have. It's because of the world, because you don't see guys getting raped, but girls always do; so I guess parents are just scared.'*

*T10: 'Women usually go to school, whereas young men hang around with the boys.'*

*T12: 'Women (Turkish) mostly stay at home because of their religion, 'cause they're not allowed to go out. The men usually go to coffee shops with their friends to play cards.'*

*T1: 'Because I'm female; it would be different if I was a boy.'*

*T6: 'Because of my culture; there's the view that women shouldn't go out too much – stay home and look after the kids, cook, clean.'*

*T7: 'Strict parents; you don't want to put them down, go to the wrong place. If you come home with a black eye or something, your parents would freak out, so you stick to the good places, think before you do something.'*

*T15: 'General safety concerns.'*

For young men, who do have greater opportunity to spend time outside the parental home, the issues pertaining to feelings of restriction are quite different to those of their female counterparts. For instance, when asked about the trouble which groups experience on the streets 14 respondents said 'police harassment', and half this number referred to 'fighting'. This can have an impact on how young people use public spaces, and where they spend most of their time.

Eleven of the young people had had direct contact with the police. Most described the experience as generally bad. One had been helped by the police when they were a victim of a crime. Otherwise, the young people had had a bad experience consisting of one of two kinds of interaction. First, a number said that they were hassled, searched on the street or threatened by the police. They did not think that this was fair.

*T10: 'Every time we hang around with groups they try to disperse us and treat us as if we're just nothing. One day we were hanging around at the shopping centre with friends and talking there and one of the shop owners must have complained and the cops came and just kicked us out of there.'*

*T14: 'Not knowing what the police is going on about and just keep interrogating you for some reason where you get 'pissed off' and you're like "What are you asking me for? What's the problem, what's the drama?" And then when the police 'arse' up a bit and then the situation could get out of control you know, which depends on you know, what you're feeling at the time – whether you want to put up with it, just co-operate, or whether you really don't want to co-operate and feel that your rights are being impeded on.'*

Secondly, five of the respondents had been caught by the police while committing a crime or associating with someone else who was committing a crime. The issue here was not the police intervention per se, but how the police intervened.

*T8: 'Four of my mates and I went to a shopping centre and one of my mates stole something and the police got all five of us and we were all charged for that. Most of the police treat people bad like us. If you look like a gang member, if your looks is different to other peoples', like if you've got a long hairstyle or you've got a beanie on top or your hair's different, you don't look like, you look like a street kid, what they'll do is, they'll treat you like a street kid. They won't treat you like a normal human. They're abusive; they swear, – they're not meant to swear – but what can you do? When you're in the room with a police officer and you're just a street kid, or you just hang around, the police are more higher than you and you can't do nothing about it. Physically, they will usually hit you and kick you, but leave no bruises on you so you can't charge them for none of that; usually (they'll abuse you) with telephone books.'*

*T9: 'When you're in the police station, you've got no such thing as rights; they treat you like an animal. They're not meant to hold you for more than four hours, (but) they'll hold you for six or eight hours, they'll hold you for ten hours. What can you do about it? Once you go into Dimboola road, you don't come out without being touched.'*

*T18: 'The cop that took me to County Court (abused me), not physical-wise, like not in hurting me wise, but mentally, like the way he talked to me, charged me, the way he was harassing me during the court case "You're gonna go to jail, that's it." He was laughing at me.'*

The issue here is less that of the police doing their job, and rightfully enforcing the law, than that of not treating the young people with respect and dignity in the course of performing their legal duties.

When answering a question about what the police can do about gangs, most of the young people responded that the police cannot do much anyway. Some said that they should stop hassling young people, others suggested that the police get to know the young people better. A strong message was that the police should maintain a public presence in the local area, but they should undertake their duties in a more youth-friendly fashion.

Even more of the young people (14) had had contact with security guards, both within shopping centres and at nightclubs. They were evenly split, however, in how they assessed the nature of this contact.

A number of the young people were friends with security guards, had been helped or protected by them, or been let into clubs or discos by them. Most of these experiences related to nightspots.

*T14: 'A lot of it's respect. You know, like, if you walk up to a security guard and just show him that, you know, you're an alright type of bloke or that you're not there to cause any trouble, you're just there to have a good time and you let him know that straight up, you know, everything sort of goes smoothly. Even if it does get a bit outta hand, you say to the bloke " Look, I'm here for a good time, you know, look after me" and maybe just tell him " Look I'm here for a good time, for a long time, you know, I may drink a bit, get a bit outta hand, but you know, I'm gonna be OK."'*

*T15: 'It's been good when I've been outnumbered and they've (security guards) helped us, kicked the other people out instead of us, 'cause we've been less majority of us, so they've protected us in that way.'*

Alternatively, those who did not like security guards and who had had bad experiences referred to being kicked out or moved on from public spaces, being hassled or being subject to physical violence. Most of the bad experiences were associated with the shopping centres.

*T2: 'We went to the shopping centre with 5 of my girlfriends and the security guard sort of came up to us and asked us what we were doing at a shopping centre. Maybe he thought we looked suspicious – not that we did anything or anything.'*

*T7: '[Particular regional area] has got no billiard joint, community areas or game centres where people can go and waste their time and the only place there was the shopping centre. Back a year ago the shopping centre said no more louts, no more little Turkish people or Lebanese or whatever – they're not allowed to go to the shopping centre any more. So, what they (security guards) do when we go there, they'll call the police and the police will come and abuse us. But, now the centre have found an idea of putting Turkish security guards there and Muslim security guards, so they can communicate with us and tell us and we'll listen to them all.'*

Aside from difficulties linked to state police and private security guards, the young people also spoke about the impact of family problems. Most of the young people saw the family as being of great importance in their lives. However, over half of the young people were also experiencing family related problems. Many of these revolved around issues relating to excessive control and restricted freedom (a particularly important issue for the young

women), culture clashes, and to parental perceptions of 'undesirable' friends. Specific issues, such as alcoholism, were also mentioned in particular cases.

When experiencing family problems, the young people would turn to their friends or partners, other relatives, or their parents to try to work things out. They would also keep things to themselves. A number of the young people had also sought advice, information or support from local welfare agencies. Beyond this, their only real contact with government agencies was for the purposes of money, or assistance in looking for work.

The young people were asked what a variety of agencies and institutions might be able to do about youth gangs. In most cases, they were somewhat cynical that anything constructive could be done, or they simply did not know what could be done. They did have more definite ideas when it came to what schools ought to do. On the one hand, they offered the suggestion that schools should teach gang members about the consequences of and alternatives to gang life. On the other hand, there were calls to expel them, or at the least, to separate them from the rest of the student body. Some of their observations and suggestions included:

*T2: 'Teachers aren't there to deal with gangs, they're there to educate the youngsters.'*

*T14: 'Educational videos or something, or just knowledge...show them the effects of gangs, maybe the aftermath of gangs, some big guns that have ended up in hospital, things like that. Just show them the ugly side of it. Me, myself, I've seen the ugly side of it where at the start I thought "Yeah, this is cool, this is great", until I've seen some pretty heavy casualties, where I've thought maybe this isn't so cool and that maybe sometimes it just goes over the line.'*

*T17: 'During the day it helps you, because you're there, you know, and you know their rules, like you can't do anything wrong and you're in their grounds so you know, you can't practically get up to much mischief. But, when you get out of the school, that's where the problem is; that's where the gang problem is, not really in school.'*

*T18: 'Have a special class once a week or something saying that if you get into this sort of, not just in gangs, like when you talk gangs, you talk drugs as well. Maybe get a mixed subject going showing like the effects of all these gangs, like getting into drugs, this and that, talk about the drugs, talk about the jail terms, all these offences you could cop. Make them aware of everything that could, outcomes of being involved in a gang.'*

*T19: 'Educate students more about racism.'*

Social services and migrant services were seen to have a limited role in responding to the youth gang phenomenon. However, as indicated in Table 11, the government was seen to have a role in improving life opportunities for young people.

Table 11:  
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	2	10.5	8.7
Employ outreach workers	1	5.3	4.3
Provide free hang out places for young people	3	15.8	13.0
Provide more jobs	4	21.1	17.4
Provide more funding for young people	1	5.3	4.3
Deal with them more harshly	3	15.8	13.0
Can't do much	5	26.3	21.7
Don't know	1	5.3	4.3
Other	3	15.8	13.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19

Missing Responses =1 (5%)

The need for concerted government action was recognised, as was the urgency for government action now.

*T15: 'Funding; if it's financially backed (programs to tackle gangs), of course it could be done. There's no such thing in Australia that it can't be done. Australia is starting to get a taste of gangs and before it gets big, established, they can stop it if they really wanted to.'*

*T17: 'The government, yes, for sure, if they wanted to. Like I said, the problem is when they leave school. If they could get into every suburb and have like a community centre where everyone could just go around and where they don't have to pay to play billiards...where they can go there and have a free coffee, sit down, associate with people, like be around their own group as well, it keeps them off the street, out of trouble and they get good ideas of the future, not bad ideas where they could get out on the street and come across the worst things.'*

*T18: 'Start doin' some projects, like sport stadiums, anything you know. A bit of entertainment – that's pretty cheap you know 'cause all of them, they're unemployed you know, what can you do?'*

*T19: '90% of the people who are in gangs are unemployed. If they can do something for the unemployed, they'll do something for gangs. But, in my thoughts, not with this government.'*

In the end, it was acknowledged that dealing with youth gangs will require a multi-pronged strategy. There could be no 'quick fix' solution. Rather, commitment was needed across a range of policy and institutional areas. As part of this process, the needs and opinions of young people themselves would have to be an important component if constructive social change is to occur.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This study has been based upon interviews with 20 young people associated with the Turkish community in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. From the point of view of social resources, most of the young people interviewed did not have much money, and few had paid employment. Most came from families which were similarly financially disadvantaged.

The young people lived in an area which appeared to lack adequate services, employment opportunities and leisure facilities for the local youth population in general. When asked about any ethnic differences in activities in the local area, for example, one young person pointed out that:

*T19: 'In this area I don't think so, 'cause we've got a large mixture of ethnic people here – we've got Chinese, we've got Turk, we've got Vietnamese, we've got Australian – and if it's not the 'nips' smoking marijuana at the community centre, it'll be the Australians, if it's not the Australians, it's the Turks, if it's not the Turks, it's the Vietnamese. They all do basically the same thing because as a whole, there is nothing else to do; there is no football grounds, there is no soccer grounds. The closest soccer ground's like a 45 minute walk down the road; guys aren't going to walk that far just to play soccer.'*

A commonality in circumstance, however, did not necessarily translate into a common identity. There appeared, for example, to be substantial differences and conflicts between different groups, frequently based upon ethnic background.

On the specific issue of gangs, the study revealed several propositions regarding the nature of 'youth gangs' in this local area:

- It was very difficult to separate out 'gangs' from 'groups' of young people, and in many cases the *notion of gang was disputed* by participants in this study, although conflict between different ethnic groups was evident
- *Gang behaviour* was generally associated with those groups which engaged in illegal activity, such as property crime, and which indulged in aggressive, violent behaviour, such as street fights
- *School gangs* were identified, and these consisted of groups of young people whose activity generally revolved around physical intimidation of other students (and in some cases teachers) and which was disruptive of schooling in general

It was recognised that most young people were in some way or another associated with a larger group. This was seen as perfectly normal, and not as indicating gang membership as such.

The rationale for most of the youth formations was social, rather than criminal. Many of the young people in this study spent time with friends from similar backgrounds (e.g., sharing a common home language, and religion). There were major gender differences in how the young people spent their time, with whom and in which places. Young men tended to have greater freedom from parental control, although most of the sample group remained living at home after completion of schooling. Young women, on the other hand, were more restricted in their movements and activities, due to parental controls and cultural prescriptions regarding appropriate roles and behaviour.

Most of the young people had a vision of an ideal future in which money and being financially better off were key goals. When asked what they would like to be doing in 5 years time, a majority of respondents mentioned 'working', and the second highest response was 'tertiary education'. While family and friendship relationships were important, social well-being was also intimately related to attaining paid employment and gaining financial security.

Gang behaviour was linked to disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances in several different ways. For example, the situation and experiences of unemployment and lack of income security were mentioned as reasons for criminal and anti-social behaviour. So too, however, was the notion that, lacking the social status that comes with employment or educational achievement, some young people turned to gang membership as a means to assert their identity and worth at the local community level. Another factor influencing gang-like behaviour was the nature of the relationship between groups of young people from different ethnic backgrounds. Racism was a factor here as well.

Whether a member of a 'gang' or not, or whether engaging in illegal or legal behaviour or not, the young Turkish people we spoke to had a strong desire to be respected and to be treated in a dignified and fair manner. They also wanted to make something of themselves in the context of their own community, their local area and the wider Australian society. They were trying to do so, however, in a social climate within which the meeting of their needs, desires and aspirations is becoming increasingly difficult.

## **2.7 Recommendations**

### *i. Canadian Gangs and Ethnicity*

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

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

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

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

- Education about Canada and the Canadian way of life prior to leaving the country of origin
- Opportunities to discuss Canada and the Canadian way of life, and the probable impact on the family unit, before leaving the country of origin
- Access to adequate settlement services immediately upon arrival, and for an extended period thereafter

- ESL [English as Second Language] classes for adults that are free and available during the day, in the evenings and at weekends
- ESL classes for children that are free and available outside regular classroom time
- Access to community kitchens and similar programmes that address the problem of family isolation
- Programmes specifically designed for immigrants from war zones to help reduce the long term effects of exposure to violence
- Access to 'buddy' systems whereby support can be provided for individuals and families during their first few years of life in Canada

It is further recommended that there 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 this study relate to the nature of group formations involving young people from distinctive ethnic minority backgrounds, the tensions between different groups of young people in schools and on the streets, and the socio-economic circumstances of specific ethnic minority youth.

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

- *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
- It is essential that young people in general be provided with *education in cross-cultural issues* in order that the backgrounds, cultures and patterns of life pertaining to specific ethnic groups be better understood by all concerned
- Attention must also be directed at the provision of *anti-racist education*, so that issues of discrimination, prejudice and unequal power relations be analysed and discussed in an enlightened, informative and empathetic manner
- Following the example of the City of Adelaide (see White, 1998: 47), there should be developed at the local, regional and state levels a series of *youth reconciliation projects*, that will promote the diversity of cultures among young people, aim to reduce violence between them, and give young people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds the practical opportunity to get to know each other at a personal and group level
- Concerted action is needed on the specific issue of school bullying 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

- 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
- The media need to be strongly encouraged to review *programme and reporting content*, with a view to providing greater information and more rounded accounts of specific ethnic minority groups, and so that the use of gratuitous images and descriptions based upon stereotypes be monitored and actively discouraged.

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

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**Australian Multicultural Foundation**

**Ethnic Youth Gangs in Australia**  
***Do They Exist?***

Report No. 3  
**Pacific Islander Young People**

by  
Rob White  
Santina Perrone  
Carmel Guerra  
Rosario Lampugnani

**1999**

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# **Part 1:**

# **Background to the Research**

## **1.1 Introduction**

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

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

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

### *i. Ethnic Minority Youth*

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

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

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

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

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

While media and police concern over 'ethnic youth gangs' has appeared to be on the rise, there has in fact been very little empirical information regarding the actual activities of ethnic minority young people (but see Guerra & White, 1995; Pe-Pua, 1996). Specifically, little is known about the *demographic characteristics* of the ethnic minority people in question – for example, their ages, gender composition, level of education, employment status, 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, however, been some movement toward analysis of the nature and extent of ethnic minority youth offending (Easteal, 1997), to examine sentencing disparities in relation to the ethnicity of juvenile offenders (Gallagher & Poletti, 1998) and to consider the special requirements of ethnic minority offenders held in detention (NSW Ombudsman, 1996). However, much more study and conceptual work is needed if we are to appreciate fully the place of ethnic minority youth in the criminal justice system, and the reasons for their involvement with this system.

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

#### *ii. Diverse Assumptions*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **1.2 The Study**

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

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

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

*i. Aims of Research*

The *aims of the research* were:

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

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

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

**ii. Methods of Research**

The *research methodology* adopted for the study consisted of:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **1.3 The Notion of Youth Gangs**

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

#### *i. Criminal Youth Gangs*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*ii. 'Gang' Characteristics*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *iii. Youth Formations*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### *iv. Youth in Groups*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **1.4 Research Contribution**

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

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

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

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

## **Part 2:**

# **Pacific Islander Young People**

## 2.1 Social History

The Pacific Islander community in Australia is culturally and linguistically diverse, coming from a range of cultural groups which live on the relatively sparsely populated islands of the Pacific ocean. The term 'Pacific Islander' in fact refers to a spectrum of communities whose social, economic and cultural organisation differ markedly according to the area of the Pacific in which they live or from where they originate.

While important differences between the communities are evident, there are nevertheless strong cultural themes which cut across the various communities. There are also commonalities in terms of the ways in which members of each community are perceived by and interact with the mainstream institutions of Australian society.

Very little research on the migrant and resettlement experience of Pacific Islanders in Australia has been undertaken (see Francis, 1994). The present research thus constitutes a modest contribution toward enhancing our understanding of the migration and re-settlement processes, and social issues, pertaining to Pacific Islander young people and their communities.

### *i. Community profile*

Pacific Islanders are often incorrectly referred to as being from one community. However, the term generally makes reference to three specific cultural areas of the Pacific ocean: Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. Each cultural group possesses specific and distinctive social characteristics. They also share some broad commonalities. The shared cultural similarities relate primarily to lifestyle and economic structures, for instance they mainly consist of small-scale societies that are farm based, and to social organisation, which is essentially based upon blood and marriage relationships.

Melanesia contains 90 per cent of the land and 75 per cent of the total Pacific Islander population. Culturally and geographically diverse, the main island groups of this region include New Guinea (Papua New Guinea, West Guinea and Irian Jaya), the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and New Caledonia. There are over 5 million people in this group.

North of the equator, Micronesia has a more modest population of about 500,000 people. This group consists of people living among a range of scattered archipelagos and small islands. These islands include Guam, Kiribati, the Maruianna Islands, the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Paulau.

Polynesia is the largest geographic area. It spreads from Hawaii in the north, to New Zealand in the south west and Easter island in the south east. It also includes the Cook Islands, Nue, Samoa, Tahiti, Tokelau, Tonga and Tuvalu. The islands of Fiji, though geographically part of Melanesia, share many social and cultural traits with Polynesia.

The Pacific Islander Community in Australia is predominantly Polynesian, including Cook Islanders, Maoris, Rata Tongans, Samoans, and Tongans. Fijians are the largest single group represented, followed by Maori, if we calculate the number of Pacific Islanders according to 'languages spoken' rather than by 'birthplace'. In using this criteria, there would appear to be over 100,000 Pacific Islander people in Australia (ABS, 1996). There are a smaller number of Melanesians in Australia, mainly New Guineans, and even fewer Micronesians. Due to the predominance of Polynesians in Australia, generally when speaking of Pacific Islanders most people mean Polynesians (Francis, 1994: 37).

These different cultures are linked through the importance attached to the notion that the strength and solidarity of family and community should come before individual need. The extended family is structured in a way that allows members to have access to social and economic supports at all times. Social cohesion is attained through a sense of community, which in turn is based upon the idea of reciprocation. Affluence is measured not in monetary terms, but rather through reciprocity and the ability to meet kinship obligations (Francis, 1995).

The social structures of Pacific Islander communities can be described as “achieved status” systems. In these systems, social organisation is egalitarian, based around the notion that, ideally, from birth each person is given the same chance of achieving a given social status. Emphasis is placed on the idea that someone with ability and ambition can achieve social status through skilful economic manipulation of the system, particularly through trade and the accumulation and distribution of wealth. This is most apparent in the competition surrounding the giving of kinship gifts. These gifts are exchanged between kin at various social occasions such as births and weddings. In these cultures there is a fundamental obligation to reciprocate when a gift is given (Francis, 1994: 37).

Given that the present research is focused primarily on Polynesian-background young people, it is useful to focus in more detail on the specifics of the Polynesian culture and the experiences of re-settlement for young people from those cultures.

The family unit provides the basis for the social education of the young, and is the key structure that determines acceptable behaviour and discipline. It is a highly stratified system, with clear hierarchies of status and control. Great emphasis is placed on maintaining the system, the community as a whole and the extended family network. The extended family is the cornerstone of the community and the network strongly binds people into particular kinds of social relationships between different members of the community and family. Each member comes to know their role and their responsibilities, and how they must perform in order to maintain the system.

The role of the individual is played down, and is only important if you are born into a high status position. Different social classes, based on heredity, and the hierarchical systems of chieftainship, are the norm (Francis, 1995: 182). Power is vested in the hands of those born into a chiefly kinship line. To some people in western societies this stratification may appear strict and inflexible; but to Polynesian people these structures provide a sense of order, purpose and belonging.

The role and social position of the young person is very clearly understood and upheld. The extended family is responsible for the social education of the young person. Young people have ready access to a range of kin and family members in times of crisis, who are expected to provide the support and guidance needed to deal with problems.

#### *ii. Migration and the Re-settlement Experience*

There are a number of factors which contribute to the migration of members of these communities. For example, there has been a steady urbanisation of the islands. This has entailed movement from smaller villages to larger villages and cities, further concentration to the larger islands, and further migration from the large islands to countries such as New Zealand and Australia (Francis, 1994: 39).

Other reasons for migration are similar to those of many other migrants to Australia. These include, for example, the promise of economic and employment opportunities, over population in their homelands, and various other environmental, political and lifestyle factors (Cox & Low, 1986).

Migrating to countries like Australia also creates difficulties, as it is an urbanised Western society, with social and cultural values considerably different to those of the communities of origin. Feelings of dislocation and isolation, for example, are not uncommon. Perhaps of greatest significance is the tendency for the extended family network to disintegrate. This places enormous stress on the individual who is familiar with a social structure where community support is readily available to those in need. Problems of settlement are further compounded by attempts to adjust to customs and social systems which may seem quite foreign and unnatural.

For many Pacific Islanders in Australia, the maintenance of kinship obligations (gift giving) remains crucial. In order to satisfy kinship obligations many Pacific Islanders send money back to their homeland. In many cases, a significant proportion of people's income is allocated to this cause. This obligation can place great stress on the migrants, who often live in poor conditions themselves. The rate of unemployment for many new migrants is generally high (depending upon basis of migration and economic resources), and this is particularly so in the case of the Pacific Islander communities.

For young people of Pacific Islander background, the interface of their own culture with Australian cultural expectations and freedoms often leads to further complications and conflicts in the home. These young people are frequently placed in the position of attempting to incorporate some of the cultural norms and expectations of Australian society, while simultaneously trying to conform to parental and family expectations.

Of most concern for these young people is the change in their relationship with extended family members. They tend to integrate more easily into mainstream Australian society, and this is often accompanied by a rejection of parental guidance and the support available from family members, and the church. Yet, in many cases they are not replacing this social cushion by gaining access to mainstream state-provided support services. Creating both a personal and a cultural identity for themselves is a big issue for Pacific Islander young people as well.

The young people from the Pacific Islander communities frequently share common ground in their experiences of migration and dislocation from their family, and will often seek support from each other. It is common, for instance, for groups of young Pacific Islander people to congregate together and to socialise in large numbers. Their peer groups will often take the place of the role of the extended family that they are familiar with, but which is not available or appropriate in the Australian context.

Pacific Islander young people are a highly visible group: their body size, skin colour and physical characteristics are markedly different to those of the majority Anglo Australians. They are also likely to congregate in public spaces. The visibility and overt differences in appearance of Pacific Islander young people has lent itself to a ready identification, labelling and stereotyping process, much of which has been of a negative and stigmatising nature.

## **2.2 Profile of Youth Interviewed**

Twenty young people were interviewed from the Pacific Islander communities, most of whom were residing in the Frankston area of Melbourne. Of these young people, 2 were born in Australia, 1 in Fiji and the other 17 in New Zealand. When asked about their ethnicity, the young people identified themselves as Maori (14), Tongan (2), Samoan (2), Polynesian (1), and Fijian (1). Most of the young people had come to Australia directly from New Zealand, although several also spent some time in the United States, and Fiji.

Eight of the respondents were female, and 12 were male. Their ages varied from 13 to 20, with 8 young people being under 16 years, 8 who were 17 or 18, and 4 who were up to 20 years of age. In terms of religious affiliation, 8 of the young people said they had no religion, 6 were members of a Protestant faith, 4 saw themselves in terms of traditional Maori religious beliefs, and 2 were identified as belonging to the Catholic church.

Eighteen of the young people had migrated to Australia with their families. Most came through the general migrant entry programme, while 2 were offered places under the Family Reunion scheme. Half of the young people who migrated did so in the years 1985 to 1989. Most of the rest arrived between 1990 and 1997.

The experience of migration was accompanied by mixed feelings. However, there was no strong sentiment, positive or negative, concerning the move. Many young people expressed a sense of confusion and disorientation associated with the migration process.

*PI4: 'I didn't really want to (leave). But, three or four years down the track I began to like this place. I never thought there'd be that many Maoris down here.'*

*PI6: 'I didn't know what to expect here. It was just a last minute thing; I got told I was coming out here just a couple of days before coming out here. Everything was paid for and everything, so my dad said "You've got to go. Come on here, it's an opportunity."'*

*PI11: 'I always thought we were goin' on a holiday. I didn't really want to go. It was alright, I guess I didn't mind; I thought Australia was a grouse place 'cos all I was seeing was Expo '88, every single day.'*

*'I was a bit confused, 'cos I wanted to go home, but you couldn't go home, so you just had to sorta get used to the idea. I still want to go back home.'*

*PI16: 'I don't think it was that big a deal – coming to a new place.'*

*PI18: 'I was unhappy to leave. It was good and bad really. The good bit was moving away and the bad – moving away from my family.'*

*PI19: 'New Zealand will always be home. I came here for a holiday and ended up staying. (Leaving New Zealand) I was out of it. It was really strange when I first came here . . . I didn't wanna leave. First thing I noticed when I came here – 'cos we moved to Frankston - was all the pale faces and everyone's got straight hair.'*

Upon arrival, most of the Pacific Islander young people and their families stayed with relatives or family friends. Only one family spent time in a migrant hostel, and a handful took up lodging in privately rented premises. All of the young people had experienced frequent moves, and 4 of the sample said that they had moved more than 10 times. The reasons for moving included problems in the family, wanting a better house, and simply a parental or family decision.

At the time of the interview, 11 of the young people were living with both parents, 1 with their father, 3 with other relatives, 2 with friends, 2 with their partner, and 1 in a shared house. The majority (15) lived in houses, with the others mainly in flats or units. 14 of the young people had been living in their particular neighbourhood for less than 12 months.

When asked about the language spoken at home, 13 said that they spoke English, 2 Samoan and 1 Maori. Six young people said that they spoke a combination of English and Fijian, English and Maori, or English and Tongan. With their peer groups, they tended to speak English as the main language, and in a small number of cases (5) to use dual languages.

Some indication of the socio-economic background of the young people was provided by a series of questions on the type of income sources and paid work of their parents. Half of the respondents' mothers were engaged in some kind of paid work (2 were overseas at the time, and 1 was studying). Most of this employment was in services and clerical occupations. Four of the mothers were receiving state support in the form of sole parent benefits or an invalid pension. Of the fathers, 15 were in paid employment, 4 were overseas and only 1 was unemployed. The fathers' work was concentrated in the industrial and manufacturing areas, trades, service sector and security industry. The parents of these young people, then, generally had jobs of some kind. Given the nature of the regional labour market and given the range of occupations in which they participated, few of the parents were engaged in high paying or professional types of employment. The families were, however, relatively secure financially, due to the fact that most of the parents had paid work of some kind.

Most of the sample group had completed or were in the process of completing schooling at least to the Year 10 level. Interestingly, when asked what they like about school, the most enthusiastic response had to do with 'friends'. The school was seen as a key site for social connection, a place to see your mates: *'With school if kids aren't doin' well at school, the only reason they go there is for a social life, 'cos once you leave school, if you haven't made friends at school you're stuffed, because you just won't have any when you leave school'* (PI10).

The main criticism of schooling was directed at teachers. Many felt that teachers talked down to them, were too bossy and were focussed too much on discipline. A few of the young people mentioned things such as 'homework' and 'boring subjects'. But overall, it was the teachers who were seen as the major problem.

## **2.3 Sources of Income**

The economic situation of the young people was ascertained by asking a number of questions relating to sources of income and employment experiences. At the time of interview, 6 of the young people were in paid employment, and of these 5 were in full-time work. Their jobs included work in the service sector, the trades (e.g., fitter and turner), and the manufacturing industry.

Just under half of the sample had undertaken paid work of some kind. However, 5 of these young people had never held a job for more than 3 months, while at the other end of the scale 3 of them had held a job for a year or longer. The reasons for leaving particular jobs included being made redundant, being fired, and choosing to because of personal reasons or because the conditions were unsuitable or unpleasant for the young person.

Almost half of the group had undergone some kind of job training or work experience. This mainly took place as part of the Department of Social Security programmes, and was undertaken in the trades, retail and hospitality, and manufacturing areas. For those young people not presently in school, job training was generally tied to receipt of some kind of government unemployment payment.

Virtually all of the young people said that they did unpaid work at home for their family or friends. As one young person explained: *'In the Polynesian way there's no such thing as paying; you do the work for love and respect and obedience of your parents'* (PI10). Another commented: *'It's usually like that in Frankston anyway; you all sort of stick together. Everyone looks after each other'* (PI12). The kinds of work performed for no pay included child care, domestic chores, gardening and lawn mowing, helping out with car repairs and going general jobs.

Short-term jobs for 'quick money' were also identified. Some of these included babysitting, delivering pamphlets, fruit picking, packing merchandise, and washing cars.

The main sources of income for the sample group are outlined in Table 1. As can be seen, the main income sources consist of state benefits of some kind, family, work and illegal activity. Most of the young people would be mainly reliant upon parents for income. For the older group, and especially those who have left or completed high school, there is greater reliance upon outside income sources.

When asked what other young people in the area do for money, the responses were basically the same. However, greater emphasis was placed upon the taking up of casual and part-time work as a means to gain income, and also on drug dealing and other types of illegal activity. Begging for money on the street was also mentioned as one way in which to get extra income.

Table 1:  
Sources of Income for Young People Interviewed

Sources of Income	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Unemployment/DSS benefits	7	35.0	23.3
Austudy	3	15.0	10.0
Family	8	40.0	26.7
Work	6	30.0	20.0
Drug dealing	1	5.0	3.3
Other illegal activities	2	10.0	6.7
Other	3	15.0	10.0
Total	30		100.0

N=20

The ways in which financial resources are used by the young people is shown in Table 2.

Table 2:  
Ways in Which Young People Spend Their Money

Ways in which money is spent	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Rent	12	60.0	19.7
Food/bills	13	65.0	21.3
Entertainment	12	60.0	19.7
Travel	2	10.0	3.3
Clothes	5	25.0	8.2
Family	1	5.0	1.6
Save	4	20.0	6.6
Cigarettes/alcohol	6	30.0	9.8
books/school	2	10.0	3.3
Drugs	3	15.0	4.9
Other	1	5.0	1.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

To interpret this table it needs to be recognised that 6 of the young people are in paid employment of some kind, and only 12 of the 20 young people interviewed were still living with their parents. Nevertheless, regardless of differences in income and accommodation arrangements, a large proportion of the young person's income was spent on items such as rent, food, bills, travel, clothes and school-related materials. Entertainment was a significant item, which is not surprising given the fact that much youth leisure and recreational activity is associated with commercial venues and services.

If the young people experienced money problems, most would turn to their parents in the first instance, or go to other relatives for help. Only one person said that they would ask their friends for assistance. In discussion, one of the respondents also mentioned that they had received assistance from the Polynesian Support Group, which had got them a bed.

The young Pacific Islander people were asked what they thought young people in their area did for money when legal means of attaining it were not available. Table 3 describes their responses.

Table 3:  
Interviewees' Perceptions of the Types of Illegal Activity In Which  
Young People Engage for Money

Types of illegal activity	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Drug dealing	15	75.0	30.0
Burglary/robbery	11	55.0	22.0
Shoplifting/sale of stolen goods	6	30.0	12.0
Theft (other than shoplifting)	11	55.0	22.0
Mugging/jumping	3	15.0	6.0
Don't know	1	5.0	2.0
Other	3	15.0	6.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

As can be seen, the main crimes associated with young people were those relating to property (shopstealing, theft, burglary), and drug dealing. In some cases, the stealing of items was not simply for personal use; it was intended as a way to make money: One person pointed out: *'Just stealing things and going to hock shops and selling them. Stealing CD players and stuff out of cars and going to their friends' houses and selling it to them and tools and all sorts of stuff'* (PI15)

There were a number of reasons put forward to explain these types of illegal behaviour. As might be expected, the need for money was the most common response. However, a number of the respondents also cited 'drugs' as a rationale for crimes of this nature. Others pointed to peer pressure and the idea of being 'cool' and enhancing one's image as a reason to engage in illegal activities. Fun and excitement were also mentioned. There was a strong link made between socio-economic status and certain types of activity: *'In the end it comes down to we've got nothin' to do and I want drugs, I want alcohol, how do I go about gettin' it? And no-one's got money, so we go get it'* (PI11). Lack of parental support and general economic disadvantage were viewed as key factors in why some young people might engage in the activity.

The young people were also asked about illegal activities that were engaged in by young people, but not for the purposes of money. Their responses are shown in Table 4.

Table 4:  
Interviewees' Perceptions of the Types of Illegal Activity (not for the purposes of money) in Which Young People Engage

Types of illegal activity	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Car theft/joy riding	8	40.0	22.9
Drug/alcohol use	9	45.0	25.7
Fighting/assaults	11	55.0	31.4
Vandalism/graffiti	4	20.0	11.4
Stealing for own use	2	10.0	5.7
Other	1	5.0	2.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

The main reasons given for engagement in these kinds of activities were fun and excitement, showing off, peer pressure, boredom, problems at home and revenge against other young people. The intensity of feeling associated with fights in particular is indicated in the following quotations:

*PI19: 'People might feel angry and go out and beat the shit out of somebody, go out and go and you know, like just little things people consider crimes, like going out and getting pissed at the beach, or you know, or smoking drugs, or doing drugs, or – but that's not, is that a crime? Do you think that's a crime?- um stealing cars, just go for a ride. You know, you feel like going for a ride somewhere, so just walk down the street and get someone's car, steal taxis.'*

*PI20: 'The teenagers, that's what they get up to (fighting/assaults). Like the Maoris, especially the Maoris. That's why we've got a really bad name down here. They love beating up the white people, because you know, they can't get to them. Even at school, that's what they do – for fun.'*

Violence directed against oneself, against property and against others indicates a high level of frustration and alienation. They are also usually linked to typical youth gang behaviour.

## 2.4 Youth Gangs

A series of questions were put to the young people about the nature and activities of 'youth gangs' in their local area and involving members of the Pacific Islander communities. We started by asking them where young people hung out in the local neighbourhood. The most often referred to locations included the beach, amusement centres, the street, train and bus stops and shopping areas. Most agreed that young people tend to hang around in groups, and that generally speaking it was safer to do so.

Table 5 provides information on what the young people felt were the main reasons why young people hung around with certain other young people.

Table 5:  
Young People's Perceptions of What Young People's Groups  
Have in Common with each Other

Aspects of group	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Ethnicity/culture	5	26.3	13.5
Same interests/activities	2	10.5	5.4
Image/dress/style	15	78.9	40.5
Music	9	47.4	24.3
Same school	1	5.3	2.7
Same area	1	5.3	2.7
Don't know	1	5.3	2.7
Other	3	15.8	8.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

While the answers to this question implied that image and style were the key reasons for group connection or association, the issue of ethnicity nevertheless permeated much of the discussion. While specific groups of young people may band together because of shared interests in the same music or subcultural fashion, they also tended to be drawn from very similar ethnic backgrounds. It was frequently stated that young Maoris tend to stick together, although the group as a whole may not be exclusive to Maoris young people: *'The Maoris – the boys – they usually hang out, but they've got girlfriends, and they're usually white'* (PI16). Thus, there were interesting gender divisions in terms of specific group formations.

In latter discussions, the Pacific Islander young people expressed the view that the main differences between the groups which hang out on the streets was based on ethnicity. There was no basic difference between the groups – except that, as one person put it, *'Maybe the colour of the skin, otherwise they're all groups'* (PI16). There was some indication, however, that things might be changing. Another young person pointed out that: *'Now it's mixed, but before it was just all Maoris, Polynesians just hanging in one group... You tend to stick together'* (PI12).

The prominence of ethnicity in group formation was highlighted when the young people were asked about the types of gangs in the area. An equal number of respondents (6) referred to 'troublemakers' as to 'just group of friends'. A further 4 responses used the term 'ethnic group'. There were then some ambiguities in regard to the type and presence of 'gangs' in the local area.

Specific questions were asked on the differences between a 'group' and a 'gang'. Table 6 indicates what the young people saw as the defining characteristics of a youth gang.

Table 6:  
Characteristics By Which the Young People Defined Gangs

Attributes	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Organised/rules	3	15.8	9.4
Leader	2	10.5	6.3
Dress/style	3	15.8	9.4
Carry weapons	1	5.3	3.1
Violent	5	26.3	15.6
Drug users	2	10.5	6.3
Do illegal activities	5	26.3	15.6
Just a group of friends	3	15.8	9.4
Other	8	42.1	25.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

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. This was pointed out several times in the discussions with the young people.

PI5: 'People, when they see a group of young people, they class it as a gang. (The) majority of people class people as a gang when they just hang around with each other – they're just a group of people.'

PI7: 'It depends on the group. They (a group and a gang) would have a lot of things in common. You see a bunch of guys just coming back from school. That's not a gang. These are just guys just coming from school. They just run past the house laughing, doing stupid things. Just the same with a gang, they do similar things. For me, the word gang is just crime. When you hear the word gang, it means crime.'

PI11: 'It depends, because you've got your group of young people and then you've got your gang, but there's not a whole lot of difference – they're both in the pool hall, which one's the gang? The only difference is maybe 'cos the gang's wearing colours, or something that make them look like a gang. They might go out and commit crimes, but the other group of people go out and commit crime. Gangs are just a little more organised.'

PI16: 'I suppose you're a gang in your own way. A gang would be, you know, go out, purposely hurt people. A group of friends just hang out. But also, gangs are also just like a group of people, and they give themselves a name; that's all they do.'

PI19: (Referring to the group interviewee belongs to) 'People on the inside think it's a group of people; people in the group think they're just a group of people. But people that aren't in the group, they look at the group as a gang – like the police. I mean, how many times have I just been walking down the street with my friends, or my cousins and stuff, just walking down the street, and they pull you over, search you, go through your socks and pull off your pants and your top and that. (They) think you've got drugs in your pockets. You know what I mean? They think that you're a gang.'

Probably the biggest demarcation between a 'gang' and a 'group' was the relative emphasis put on *criminal, illegal or anti-social behaviour*. The types of activities associated with gangs

included drinking and drug use, stealing, fighting, vandalism and graffiti. In discussions, gangs were particularly seen to be predisposed towards violence.

PI1: 'A group of young people usually go out just to have fun, whereas a gang will have a rotten image and they do things that they shouldn't be doing.'

PI2: 'Gangs go around beating people up. Young people just walk around and then if someone picks on them, then they start beating them up.'

PI15: 'A group of young people just might be hanging out with each other and a gang, they just want to hang out, pick on people or stuff like that.'

PI6: 'A gang go out, drink, smoke, do drugs, fight, be rude to your girlfriends and are dirty. In a group you don't have to go there with your friends. Like, in a group you can go somewhere else and they'll understand. But in a gang, if one person goes, the rest have to follow. There's no leader in a group everyone's all equal.'

PI14: 'People hanging out in a big crowd when they wanna start a fight and that and they like to graffiti and they like to get into trouble.'

Gang membership was also associated with *specific types and styles of dress*, and by a sense of *territoriality*. They would gain reputations based upon appearance, and on where they hung out. Symbolic markers – such as adoption of a name for the group – and a strong sense of ownership over certain 'turf' were identified with particular groups of young people.

PI4: 'A gang would be more known than a group of young people. Just the way a gang would be formed and looks would be different from young people. A gang would look rugged-looking and fierce looking and grumpy looking. I mean, a gang you'd always see a bandanna representing who they are, where they're from, stuff like that. That's how you can pick individual gangs out is by their bandannas; different colours – that's as close as you'll get to a gang in Melbourne. With young people you can just tell. They're looking pretty, going to town all dressed up. Young people take pride in what they wear. They're not like gang members who'll just throw on anything. Gangs hang in a particular area, whereas young people might go there, but don't hang there.'

PI9: 'Gangs tend to hang out in shopping centres I think. My idea of a gang (is that they) hang out in shopping centres and wear big baggy clothes and do lots of stealing, petty crimes and stuff. A gang is a group of people who get together because they don't really care about anything and therefore they're just rebellious. They don't even know what they're rebelling against I don't think. They just want to be cool. If they're in a gang I think they're just too young mentally ... to actually know what really is going on.'

PI10: 'They all get into trouble. A group is the same as a gang. A gang is only a gang if you've got a name. A group is just a group of friends and they just hang out and have fun.'

PI5: 'It's just a group of people who think they've got this territory and that territory and they've got to fight other gangs to keep their territory.' Asians are the ones; they own most of the gangs. There are a few hundred groups, but we just class ourselves as friends.'

The Pacific Islander young people were questioned about the types of street gangs in the local area. Some spoke about the gangs 'back in New Zealand' in great detail. There were also a few specific groups identified as being active at different times in metropolitan Melbourne. Those groups of young people which had specific identifying names included:

- The Station Boys [hang around train stations and whose main focus was stealing]

- MCR [main focus is identity and territorial]
- The Bloods and Crips [Maori membership]
- Skinheads [white membership, particular style of dress]
- Homies [certain style of dress and places to hang out]
- WKS ['we come strapped']
- NIP ['Nips in power']
- SOK ['straight out of counselling']
- RSP ['respect Samoan people']
- Tongan Mafia

This list indicates that 'gang' membership tends to be based upon *ethnic identification* and association in many cases, or on certain *subcultural styles* of dress and activity preferences. This was confirmed in questions regarding what members of gangs have in common with each other. The leading two responses were 'ethnicity/culture', and 'dress/style'.

The importance of a name is that it provides young people with a means of instant recognition by others. A name can be something which is attached to particular groups from the 'outside', as a means of group classification (e.g., to describe different nationalities or subcultures). In this case the naming is done by non-members of an identifiable group. Names can also be devised from the 'inside', as a means for a collective to tell the wider world who they are, in their own descriptive terms (e.g., 'Crips', 'Power', 'NIP'). To a certain extent the naming process itself is indicative of whether or not a group sees itself as a specific 'gang' formation, or simply part of a much larger subcultural grouping which shares similar dress, music and recreational preferences.

The young people were asked why people might wish to join gangs. Their responses are shown in Table 7.

Table 7:  
Young People's Perceptions of Why Young People Join Gangs

Common attributes of gang members	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Fun/excitement	4	21.1	12.9
Problems at home	1	5.3	3.2
Protection	6	31.6	19.4
Support/replacing family	7	36.8	22.6
Respect/power	4	21.1	12.9
Rebellion/showing off	4	21.1	12.9
Don't know	1	5.3	3.2
Other	4	21.1	12.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

Some people were seen as more likely to join a gang due to family problems (such as being kicked out of home, escaping abusive home situations or rebelling against their parents). Another factor was peer pressures, where to join a gang was seen as 'being cool', especially for younger teenagers. For some, the key reason was basically related to a low social and economic status, and the desire to get money and be part of a support network.

The main reason why young women were seen to join gangs was 'relationships'. Basically, young women were linked into gangs through a boyfriend. Once affiliated with a particular group, the young women were tied into relationships of protection, respect, power and excitement.

The Pacific Islander young people were asked specifically if racism was a reason for belonging to a gang. The issue of racism had a number of different dimensions. In some cases, gang membership was perceived to be due to *direct threats* to particular groups of young people.

PI6: *'Maoris stick together no matter what, because they've all been through a lot of racism in schools and elsewhere. They get called "black cunt" and "sheep fucker." I've had rocks thrown at me at school and everything because of racism. Most Aussies reckon that Maoris, Samoans and Tongans are all the same; when you try to explain it, they just go "what?"'*

PI7: *'It could be part of the reason why. Coming to a country like Australia is – I find it a very racist place. Australians are very racist from what I've seen. They've got names for everyone. I didn't know what a "wog" was before I came here. They put everyone into different categories – you've got your "wogs" and you've got your "nips" and you've got your "skips." They don't know respect; a lot of kids seem to not know the word respect.'*

PI2: *'They (different gangs) like to fight each other. Australians always fight people from other races.'*

Another feature of the discussion over racism was the way in which ethnicity came to the fore, not simply as a response to a perceived or actual threat, but as a form of *confirmation of group identity*.

PI11: *'You ask me why do I become a certain part of a group or a gang. That group or gang's basically my network of friends and family. If you looked at your life, you've got a network of family and then friends and you're in that circle; basically you see 'em like that – you could class that as a gang. Why do people do it? Only because people only associate with certain different people. There are all these other mates on the outside of the circle, they (gang members) spend more time with the people in the immediate circle.'*

PI19: *'They usually have the same focus. If you wanna know why Maoris are in gangs, I'll tell you right now. It's because we are tribal people. We've been like tribal people for like thousands of years right, and we, because we group together because that's what tribal people do, right. And because these children that are born here -like the ones that you've been speaking to – they think you know, they identify with culture from America right, because they think: "Oh well, I'm black," you know, "I wanna be cool." They don't know who they are; they're lost. They need their identity.'*

In some cases, however, racism was seen more as a *convenient cover for aggressive action* on the part of some gang members. In other words, the anti-social or violent behaviour was justified on the basis of racism, but the primary motivation was not seen to reside in racism per se.

PI4: *'With some nationalities racism can be a reason. But sometimes I feel that certain Maoris and Samoans or Polynesians, they like to use the word "racism" as an excuse and they give somebody a thump and like the police say "why did you do that?" and say "well, he called me a black such and such." I think sometimes people just use that as an excuse and they don't really know what racism is.'*

PI20: *'I don't like the Maoris down here to be honest, even though I'm a Polynesian myself. But they just really, really think that they can boss around the Australians and all that; you know, the white people. And to me, oh, I just get really, really offended, 'cos I know I'm black, but I'm an Australian but, and I hate it when people do that; it really puts you off. But they wanna be, you know, the number one people here in Frankston.'*

The main good thing about being a gang member was 'protection'. Gangs were also seen as good ways to gain support or replace the family (often due to problems within the family); to get partners and make friends; and as a means to engage in fun and exciting activities. Gang membership provides young people with a sense of belonging, and a sense of security through strength of numbers.

However, the bad side of gang membership was that it is often associated with the doing of illegal things, it can engender attacks from other youth gangs, it brings young people to the attention of the police, and it can affect their overall future. Another problem was that the presence of identified 'gangs' can serve to stigmatise a whole community. As one young person commented: *'The worst thing about it is that people associate you with them just because you're Maori, so people think worse things about you'* (PI19). While at a personal level, many of the young people thought that gangs were OK as long as they stick to themselves, the social consequences of gang formation were seen to affect the whole community.

Street fights featured prominently in discussions about the activities of gangs. Aggression between groups was generally seen to be linked to racism or power struggles over territory. Other reasons for the fighting included taking action 'over a woman', some people being perceived as acting or talking smart, drug-related aggressiveness, or simply some young people just wanting to act tough for the sake of it.

The different groups that were seen as getting involved in gang fights are indicated in Table 8. In general, gangs were seen to use weapons such as knives and baseball bats (guns were rarely mentioned). However, the use of weapons was overwhelmingly related to gang fights, rather than criminal purposes such as robbery or mugging.

Table 8:  
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	10	52.6	43.5
One ethnic against 'different' Ethnic	5	26.3	21.7
Ethnic amongst 'similar' Ethnic	2	10.5	8.7
No particular/many different combinations	2	10.5	8.7
Not based on Ethnicity	3	15.8	13.0
Other	1	5.3	4.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

When it comes to street fights between groups, rather than simply between individuals or small numbers of young people, there was a strong 'ethnic' dimension. This is reflected in the following quotations:

*PI4: 'I find that a lot of Australians, not all Australians, but a lot of Australians, are pretty racist towards Oriental people – Vietnamese, Chinese. I've asked a lot of Australians "why would you want to be racist against the Vietnamese?" and they always say something like "they're always pulling out machetes" and stuff like that and "they'll chop you up" and stuff like that. They say "They should go back to their own country and chop each other up instead of coming over here and chopping us up." I can't see a normal person who's sober say a racist remark to a Polynesian. I mean if a Polynesian and a Vietnamese were sitting together and there was an Australian guy, I believe that he'd say something racist to the Vietnamese, rather than the Polynesian. Australians think if they say something racist towards a Vietnamese they necessarily won't do nothing, because they're smaller – they come in small sizes. That's why they'll pick on a Vietnamese rather than a Polynesian first.'*

*PI9: 'Asians against Australians I'd say. Australians are very racist against the Asian groups.'*

*PI13: 'A few years ago it was Maoris and Australians used to fight each other all the time. But not now; not any more. Vietnamese usually fight against the Cambodians and the Australians (now).'*

*PI15: 'It's mainly, everyone's onto the Asians. Everyone hates Asians. Doesn't matter which gang, you know, everyone hates them.'*

*PI17: 'The Maoris most; (They fight) anybody.'*

*PI18: 'It used to be Aussies versus the Maoris, but it's not as common any more. There aren't any skinheads around here, there are too many Maoris. There are some Vietnamese, but not enough to make one gang. You need about one hundred to make one gang.'*

Similar types of conflicts and problems were also identified in relation to the school. Table 9 outlines the perceptions of the Pacific Islander young people regarding the activities of gangs within an educational context.

Table 9:  
Young People's Perceptions of How Gangs Are a Problem in School

Type of problem	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Scare/pick on students	6	42.9	22.2
Start fights	9	64.3	33.3
Racism	5	35.7	18.5
Bad influence	1	7.1	3.7
Problematic for teachers	1	7.1	3.7
Deal drugs	2	14.3	7.4
Don't know	1	7.1	3.7
Other	2	14.3	7.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=14

Not Applicable = 6 (30%)

In the discussions, some distinction was made between 'gangs' as such, and conflict based simply on group membership. Gang-related behaviour tended to be associated with 'troublemakers' and young people who engaged in various kinds of criminal activity such as drug dealing, vandalism and stealing. There were 'toughs' at school who intimidated other students and who made things difficult for teachers.

Some of the conflict, however, was seen as necessarily related to membership of gangs. Here, racism was cited as a problem, and tensions would emerge between different ethnic groups.

*PI9: 'Gangs were a problem in my school last year. We've got all these Serbian dudes in there. Big, chunky, old guys that started fighting with the Asians and there were a couple of punch ons and stuff'.*

*PI15: 'Not mostly gangs though; it's just a group of kids who hang out with each other. (There's) a lot of racism at school. It's always Asians hanging around Asians, the blacks hang around the blacks, Aussies, whites, you know, hang around in a group. The Asians always win; they're crazy – mad. You can't fight one, you've got to fight a thousand of them 'cos they never fight by themselves'.*

A common thread which ran throughout the discussions was the way in which nationality or ethnicity was seized upon not only to mark social differences between groups of young people, but also to exacerbate the tensions and conflicts between them as well. It was recognised by the interviewees that if they were not in a gang, then many of the young gang members would be able to take better advantage of school, and would be able to engage in more productive work and life pursuits. Nevertheless, it was also acknowledged that in many cases they would be left with nothing to do but hang out on the streets anyway. Furthermore, given the conflicts occurring between groups of young people in the schools and on the streets, issues of racism and inter-group fighting would still have to be addressed. The need for group support, regardless of the name attached to the group (a 'gang', a 'friendship network', a Maori group), was seen as essential.

## **2.5 Problems & Solutions**

How to respond to youth gangs is a complex question. Part of the difficulty lies with the influence of, and need to dispel, the myths surrounding youth activities and group formation perpetrated in the media.

The young people who participated in this study were very critical of media representations of 'ethnic youth gangs'. They felt that the media was biased and only showed the bad side of young people in groups. The media exaggerated the problem, and as several young Pacific Islander people observed, tended to pick on 'Asians'. Maori youth were likewise seen to be singled out for negative treatment in the local newspapers. Another criticism was that media portrayals and television shows tended to provide images and accounts of youth behaviour which could, in some instances, encourage young viewers to emulate the behaviour being depicted.

From the point of view of the young people themselves, the issues pertaining to gang formation, membership and activity did not warrant a coercive response. Rather, the general feeling was that gang members should be given greater support, assistance and direction. One person made the point that *'You've got to sit down and talk to them, give them a bit of discipline. Violence is not the answer. They don't want to listen'* (PI7). Another commented: *'They need to be helped. You can't just put them in jail 'cos that's not gonna change anything'* (PI19).

On the other hand, while encouraging a developmental approach to the issues, and to enhancing the opportunities of young gang members, many of the respondents felt that it was either hard to do anything, or that the best thing to do was to leave them alone. This sentiment was captured by one young person in the following way:

*'There's not really much you can do. If you're feeling like that's where you want to be at, then it's basically the way you're going to go and no matter what anyone tells you, you're not going to change. You have to learn yourself, you have to go through the experience to realise it's not necessarily a good one. And if you can benefit out of it, then you're lucky; chances are you won't'.*

The idea of 'learning the hard way' was conveyed several times. But so too was the influence of the local environment on the choices and opportunities available to young people. Most (13) of the young people felt that there were insufficient activities for young people in their area. The feeling was that *'They should make more teenage things for teenagers around'* (PI13). These would include more in the way of recreation and leisure activities, sporting facilities, under-age youth discos, and youth centres.

In fact, most of the young people we interviewed spend most of their time at home or at their friend's places. A majority of the young people said that they were often bored. When they were bored they frequently resorted to drinking or use of illicit drugs such as cannabis.

Many of the young people felt restricted in what they could do due to things such as family pressures, lack of income, being under-age, safety concerns and racism. Young women, for example, tended to stay home more than young men, partly because of parental fears concerning their safety. If they do go out, they are encouraged to be part of a large group.

Lack of money and lack of adequate recreational outlets were seen as a major problem. As one person put it:

PI11: *'Restricted? what are you talkin' about, we're in jail. Everyone says it. In Frankston where can you go to do somethin' without payin' for it? The only thing you can do is walk on the beach or on the streets. You can't go to escape ordinary life. Nearest one, you have to hop on the train and pay for that. Like you go to the schools on the weekend, you see kids there playin' basketball and stuff, half the schools have decided they're takin' down their rings after hours.'*

Another big issue was that groups of young people often experienced troubles on the street. Most of the young people complained of police harassment. They were also conscious of 'public disapproval' by other people in public places, experienced harassment from private security guards and had trouble with shopkeepers. Often their experiences with authority figures were related to general perceptions regarding the group as a whole.

PI15: *'Police'll always pull ya up, no matter what you do, no matter who you're with, they'll always pull ya up and check ya, search ya, strip ya. And you don't want that. You want to be able to walk down the street and the coppers just drive past ya and look at ya and look away.'*

PI18: *'The public's scared of us. They look at us strangely, call the cops or security guards. The cops are wankers "What's your name? Empty your pockets". They're looking for drugs, for every damn thing. Other groups walk the other way. They fear us.'*

PI13: *'The cops – they were arseholes 'cos we were just known in Frankston, that's all. And they'd pull us up, search us all the time for no reason. A few of us walked into Myers. Like, the security guards are on our tail all the time; they just follow you around – even now. They just piss us off 'cos they just follow us around like we're going to steal something'.*

Most (17) of the young people had had direct contact with the police. In most cases, this contact was described as 'bad'. The young people spoke of being hassled, searched and threatened by the police. A number (8) said that they had been subjected to physical abuse. Only a few spoke of 'good' experiences with the police, which generally referred to being treated well when being stopped on the street. One mentioned that they had felt good about participating in basketball games which had been organised to improve police-youth relations.

Just over half of the young people had had direct contact with private security guards, mostly in the context of shopping centres. Their experiences with security guards was more evenly mixed. Some of the young people were friends with security guards and were treated OK when questioned by security guards. However, other young people objected to being kicked out or told to move on from areas, and of being hassled or accused of doing things that they were not doing.

The generally antagonistic relationship between the Pacific Islander youth and authority figures such as the police and security guards meant that a constructive role in dealing with gangs on the part of these figures seemed a remote idea. Broadly speaking, they were not seen as being on the side of the young people's, or as someone you could turn to for help. According to the young people, the police should get more accurate information about youth in the area, and get to know the young people better. They should maintain a public presence, but do so in ways which did not infringe upon the dignity, rights and respect of local young people.

The family was seen as important to the Pacific Islander young people. They saw it as the source of support, strength, blood connection and continuity in their lives. However, just over half of the young people reported that they were experiencing family problems. These problems related to arguments, the parents' use of drugs including alcohol, sexual assault and rape within the family and kin network, and the young person's involvement in illegal activity or street conflicts. In the light of these conflicts, problems and tensions, it is not surprising that for most of the young people the first place they would turn to for help was their friends, and other relatives. Some would turn to their parents. Others tended to keep any problems to themselves.

The young people were aware of a number of support services in the local area. They were particularly positive and impressed with the assistance provided by the Polynesian Support Group run by a major religious charity organisation. The kinds of support they received from local school and welfare agencies included advice and information, support and money. However, some welfare agencies were criticised insofar as they could '*dislocate you from your own people*'. Most of the young people had received financial assistance from government departments (such as Social Security), and some had been assisted in looking for paid work, undertaking training programmes and gaining advice and information.

In terms of what schools could do about gangs, the major response was 'not much'. However, several young people argued that schools could do more in the way of talking to gang members and getting to know them. Others spoke about expelling them or separating them from the rest of the student body. In discussion, a number of specific strategies were suggested:

*PI7: 'Provide programs. For example, get police officers to come in and talk to them and answer their questions, talk about gangs.'*

*PI9: 'They have to get really strict with their punishments, because the main problem with schools and gangs is that there's fighting in the school ground, which is just not on. If kids are gonna get violent, then straight away just expel them. Don't let them get away with anything like that.'*

*PI12: 'Have uniforms. I'd stop the gang look.'*

*PI15: 'No, unless they kick all gangs out. You know, as soon as someone stuffs up, just kick 'em out, don't give 'em a chance, another chance, 'cos it keeps goin' on.'*

*PI19: 'With their children that go to school, for Maori kids, it's good if they have, if they got in a Maori worker every now and then to deal with that.'*

Even from this brief list, it is clear that the young people themselves have a number of ideas regarding creative ways to deal with gang behaviour in the school environment.

The young people felt that social services, and migrant services, were limited in what they could do, but a strong message was that young people needed more support and guidance, and that they needed help with work, housing, education and money. This theme was also reflected in the Pacific Islander young people's perceptions regarding what government in general can do about youth gangs. Table 10 indicates the kinds of measures which the young people would like to see in relation to these issues.

Table 10:  
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	4	20.0	16.7
Provide free hang out places for young people	5	25.0	20.8
Don't close schools	1	5.0	4.2
Provide more funding for young people	2	10.0	8.3
Support/listen to them	2	10.0	8.3
Can't do much	5	25.0	20.8
Other	5	25.0	20.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19

Missing Responses =1 (5%)

Part of the message conveyed by the young people was that government and community agencies need to be in touch with the realities of the street, and the experiences of young people: *'Go out on the streets and find out what it's about. Like that drug booklet, they let out, that's a load of crap; that's only stuff they get from books. They wouldn't know what real drugs and stuff like that do' (PI5)*. Another concern was that positive efforts in working with young people were already in place, but these were being threatened by government cutbacks: *'Don't cut funding to the organisations that are trying to help our society... All the funding for these new services have been cut so much that they're running out of things they can do' (PI9)*. The issue of community resources, and the involvement of young people as members of the community, were central to many of the proposals for constructively dealing with youth gangs.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This study has been based upon interviews with 20 young people from the Pacific Islander communities in Melbourne. Most of the young people had migrated to Australia at an early age. All of them had a close identification with their ethnic and cultural origins and backgrounds.

The young people came from households where one or more of their parents was in paid employment. Only a few of the young people had employment themselves. Most commented that young people in the area are reliant upon government benefits of some kind, and that some may have to resort to illegal activity (such as shopstealing) to supplement their income.

The young people tended to hang around together in groups which basically shared ethnic and cultural attributes in common. Throughout the study, a number of young people remarked on the centrality of ethnicity in terms of group formation, and in terms of the perceptions of the public and other young people regarding the status and position of certain ethnic minority groups. Physical differences, such as skin colour and body size, were seen to be accompanied by social processes of exclusion and inclusion in the case of group membership.

In the specific area of 'youth gangs', the study reveals several key points. These are:

- There was a *blurring of boundaries* between 'youth gangs' and 'group of young people', and it was often difficult to distinguish between the two given the overlap in membership, how people identified themselves and their friendship networks, and the types of activities in which young people generally engage. The distinction was also made difficult by the fact that fights (usually between groups comprised mainly of young people from specific ethnic and nationality backgrounds), although violent, did not necessarily imply gang formation and organised membership structures as such.
- The strongest definition of a youth gang was reserved for those young people involved in *criminal activity* on a regular, persistent basis. The hallmark of a gang, in this sense, was the relative emphasis placed on illegal and anti-social activity, and, especially, a group ethos which was predisposed toward the use of violence. These young people were made up of 'toughs' who had a visible street presence, and who displayed constant aggression towards others.
- Another related form of group, which was often associated with gang-like formations, was that based upon *certain styles of dress*, and which had a strong *sense of territoriality*. Very often this defence of one's 'turf' was closely linked to ethnic identity. That is, certain areas were seen as belonging to certain ethnic groups. However, in some instances, the mere fact of living in an area was seen as the central connecting point for young people, and ethnic background would not be used as the only basis of exclusion/inclusion for a particular group.

Ethnicity was a major source of social connection for most of the people in the study. There was a familiarity with one another, and a sense of shared experiences.

However, the group nature of youth behaviour also manifests itself in the form of fights on the street, and conflicts between groups and individuals within the school setting. In this context, it is understandable that the young people saw gang formation and membership as a rationale way to protect oneself.

As demonstrated by these findings, the process of gang membership is linked in several ways to racism. For instance, racist violence directed at certain groups, whether on the street or in the school, by other young people or by state police, can be a trigger for collective responses to the threat. Similarly, gang membership can also, simultaneously, be an important way in which to confirm one's group identity, to determine precisely whom one is and where they fit into the wider world.

It needs to be acknowledged as well, that periodically the notion of racism can be used as a convenient cover for the aggression of the victimised group. In other words, it can be used to justify violence which is substantially motivated by a desire to engage in the violence itself, rather than in responding to racism per se. Angry young men lashing out at the world around them is a quite different phenomenon to concerted community action which attempts to foster an anti-racist social environment.

The ambitions of the young people in this study were to achieve some semblance of financial security over the next five years or so. A primary consideration for most of the young people was to find paid employment, and to make enough money to keep them in good comfort.

Basically, the young people had fairly conventional aspirations. They wanted to be economically well-off, and to be free from undue social pressures and hardships. They wanted to take an active role in society. They wanted to have a good life.

## **2.7 Recommendations**

### *i. Canadian Gangs and Ethnicity*

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

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

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

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

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

It is further recommended that there 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 this study relate to the nature of group formations involving young people from distinctive ethnic minority backgrounds, the tensions between different groups of young people in schools and on the streets, and the difficulties experienced by ethnic minority youth in relation to authority figures and other members of the public based upon group affiliation and physical appearance.

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

- It is essential that young people in general be provided with *education in cross-cultural issues* in order that the backgrounds, cultures and patterns of life pertaining to specific ethnic groups be better understood by all concerned
- Attention must also be directed at the provision of *anti-racist education*, so that issues of discrimination, prejudice and unequal power relations be analysed and discussed in an enlightened, informative and empathetic manner
- Following the example of the City of Adelaide (see White, 1998: 47), there should be developed at the local, regional and state levels a series of *youth reconciliation projects*, that will promote the diversity of cultures among young people, aim to reduce violence between them, and give young people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds the practical opportunity to get to know each other at a personal and group level
- Concerted action is needed on the specific issue of school bullying 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
- Strategic action is needed in the area of *youth unemployment* and in the creation of jobs for particularly disadvantaged groups and communities, especially given the aspirations and expectations of young people who desire economic security and participation in meaningful paid work
- 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
- 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

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

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**Australian Multicultural Foundation**

**Ethnic Youth Gangs in Australia  
*Do They Exist?***

Report No. 4  
**Somalian Young People**

by  
Rob White  
Santina Perrone  
Carmel Guerra  
Rosario Lampugnani

**1999**

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# **Part 1:**

# **Background to the Research**

## **1.1 Introduction**

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

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

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

### *i. Ethnic Minority Youth*

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

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

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

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

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

While media and police concern over 'ethnic youth gangs' has appeared to be on the rise, there has in fact been very little empirical information regarding the actual activities of ethnic minority young people (but see Guerra & White, 1995; Pe-Pua, 1996). Specifically, little is known about the *demographic characteristics* of the ethnic minority people in question – for example, their ages, gender composition, level of education, employment status, 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, however, been some movement toward analysis of the nature and extent of ethnic minority youth offending (Easteal, 1997), to examine sentencing disparities in relation to the ethnicity of juvenile offenders (Gallagher & Poletti, 1998) and to consider the special requirements of ethnic minority offenders held in detention (NSW Ombudsman, 1996). However, much more study and conceptual work is needed if we are to appreciate fully the place of ethnic minority youth in the criminal justice system, and the reasons for their involvement with this system.

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

#### *ii. Diverse Assumptions*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **1.2 The Study**

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

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

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

*i. Aims of Research*

The *aims of the research* were:

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

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

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

**ii. Methods of Research**

The *research methodology* adopted for the study consisted of:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **1.3 The Notion of Youth Gangs**

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

#### *i. Criminal Youth Gangs*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*ii. 'Gang' Characteristics*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *iii. Youth Formations*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### *iv. Youth in Groups*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **1.4 Research Contribution**

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

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

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

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

**Part 2:**  
**Somalian Young People**

## **2.1 Social History**

Recent years have seen an increasing number of refugee families from the Horn of Africa resettling in Australia (Ransley & Fotiadis, 1999). These countries include Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and the Sudan. For the purposes of the present investigation, young people from Somalia were interviewed.

Somalia is situated on the Horn of Africa. The official language is Somali, complemented by Arabic and English. About 99 per cent of Somalis are Sunni Muslims. Somali communities are united into a larger social and political unit called a *rer*, each with its own elected leader.

Over the years, Somalia has been colonised by several different countries, including France, Italy and Britain. Despite the impact of these different colonial interventions, the Somali have maintained their specific cultural and religious characteristics.

In recent times various droughts, which have produced famine, have had a major impact on the health and well-being of the Somali population. Simultaneously, intense rivalries between various armed factions have resulted in a situation of bloody conflict lasting many years. Together these factors have contributed to the creation of large numbers of Somali refugees, who were joined by many refugees escaping from similar conditions in nearby Ethiopia. In 1989, there were about 350,000 Somali people seeking protection and refuge.

Many of the Somali refugees were women and children who were victims of abuses carried out by the warring militias of clan-based factions. In the course of these conflicts, thousands of Somalis have been killed, many others have been tortured, raped and mistreated, and children have suffered violence against them. As well, a large number have been left mutilated by the sentences of amputation handed down by the Islamic courts in Somalia. Many government institutions have been destroyed as a consequence of the civil war, which has further exacerbated the hardships faced by many ordinary Somalians (see Batrouney, 1991; Cox et al., 1998).

### *i. Migration*

Many Somali refugees have experienced confinement in refugee camps, and some but not all have been able to find asylum in other countries, including Australia. According to the 1996 Census, there were 2,045 Somali people living in Australia.

The majority of Somalia refugees (1,392 or 68 per cent) are located in Victoria. The next largest group is in New South Wales, while the remainder are spread across the other States (ABS, 1998). The number of Somali persons that settled in Victoria in 1996 represented an increase of 450.2 per cent since 1991.

Most of these migrants are males. This masculine migration is the result of several factors. For example, women in Africa are less mobile than men. This is because women refugees are more likely to have the responsibility for the children, and partly as a consequence of this, the selection process for resettlement tends to favour males (Batrouney, 1991). However, a significant number of migrants have been young people under the age of 24 years, and young African women who are single parents comprise a significant proportion of welfare and social service users from the Horn of Africa region (Ransley & Fotiadis, 1999).

In the last seven years, 820 persons born in Somalia have arrived in Australia under the Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program category. A further 275 Somalis have arrived in Australia under the Family reunion program. This is not unusual, as the initial refugee movements to Australia are usually followed by those entering under the family reunion program.

The occupational skill level for the Somalis has been lower overall than the skill level for all settler arrivals. The majority are semi-skilled or unskilled, and as a result there appears to be an above average level of economic disadvantage, and poverty, in the Somalia-born population residing in Australia.

Most Somalia immigrants are in the 25-34 age group. The groups either side of this range, namely the 20-24 and 35-39, are the next largest age groups. This, too, is not uncommon in most migration trends, given the tendency for young family groups and young single people to predominate in the immigration process. Overall there is a significant population of people in their teens and early 20s. This means that education is an important issue. Likewise, the entry of inexperienced persons into the workforce looms large as an issue for the community. Furthermore, since the migration of Somalians to Australia began, the overall number of Somali children seems to be increasing dramatically – which is not unexpected given the young age profile of the group.

Many young people have suffered disrupted schooling due to the conditions in their homeland, and to the migration process itself, and this can affect their experience of the educational system in Australia (Ransley & Potiadis, 1999). Schooling for these young people is thus a very important issue, as is acceptance by their peer groups (Cox et al., 1998).

#### *ii. Settlement experiences*

The evidence suggests that many of the settlers are experiencing considerable hardship and frustration. Inability to find employment, problems with housing, gaining income support, negative experiences with recognition of qualifications, language difficulties, and so on are problems shared by Somalians with a number of other recently arrived immigrant groups in Australia (Cox et al., 1998; Ransley & Fotiadis, 1999).

In many cases the situation of Somalians is often worse than that of other Black African arrivals. Many arrived as illegal immigrants, or as visitors or students, and then have had to apply for a change of status. This usually entails a long wait (sometimes years) to have their situation determined. They are more likely to arrive alone, and to both need and want to sponsor relatives. Their English is less advanced than other migrants, and so they have a greater need for English language training. Ultimately, these refugee arrivals are more likely to find settlement harder than expected, and they are more likely to be dissatisfied or unhappy here (see Cox et al. 1998; Lampugnani, 1998).

In a recent study, Cox and associates (1998) indicated that the most disturbing finding was the extent of discrimination that Somalis and other Black Africans are experiencing as they settle into Australia. Approximately 7 out of 10 of the sample of 221 Black Africans reported experiences of racial or ethnic-based discrimination. The great majority of Black Africans surveyed said that this antagonism towards them was inhibiting and frustrating their settlement at virtually every turn. They felt that they were discriminated against in the employment market, even when they possessed Australian qualifications. They tended to

see themselves as discriminated against in their attempts to sponsor relatives to Australia. They experience discrimination when they seek out accommodation. And they experienced discrimination and prejudice when they pursued everyday activities like using public transport, as well as in their contacts with police (see Batrouney, 1991: 77).

It needs to be borne in mind that many Somalians have already undergone considerable trauma associated with famine and war in their homeland, and in the migration process itself. The problems they experience in settling into the Australian social and cultural environment adds yet another dimension to the burdens they are forced to endure as they attempt to re-build their lives, families and communities in this country.

## **2.2 Profile of Youth Interviewed**

Twenty young people from the Somalian community in Australia were interviewed for this study. All of the young people had been born in Somalia. Most (12) had spent some time in Kenya before coming to Australia, 5 had been in Italy, 1 in Yemen and 1 person had come directly from Somalia.

Eight of the respondents were female, and 12 male. Their ages ranged from 12 to 26, but most of the young people were aged between 15 and 18 (12 out of 20). All of them were Muslim, in terms of religious orientation and affiliation. At the time of interview, they lived mainly in the Melbourne suburbs of Heidelberg, Preston, Carlton and Braybrook.

Each of the young people had the experience of leaving a home country. They began to arrive in Australia in 1988, with the majority (15) coming between 1992 and 1995. According to the young people, they entered the country under three types of programme: migrant (6), refugee (7) and family reunion (7).

The migration experience has been an uneasy one. Many of the young people referred to the war in their home country, and how they felt safer here. Nevertheless, it was often very difficult for them to adjust to Australian conditions. For instance, there were language barriers, they had to meet new people and make new friends, and the lifestyle and general culture were very different to what they were used to. On the other hand, they uniformly said that being able to participate in formal education was a real plus, and they enjoyed the prospect of learning new things.

When they first arrived, the Somalian young people were put into different types of accommodation. These included:

- Migrant hostel
- Resettlement flat
- Relatives/family friend
- Private rental

Most of the young people and their families stayed in these residences only temporarily. After the first period of settlement, they have tended to move into better housing, including government housing, which offered more room for the families. The type of living quarters was evenly split between houses, and units/flats.

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A majority of the young people lived with both their parents, or with their mother. Somali was the main language used at home for 17 out of the 20 young people. Only 2 spoke English at home, with the other speaking dual languages. With their peer groups, however, 10 spoke English as the main language, 7 alternated between the two languages, and only 3 spoke Somali.

The socio-economic situation of these young people was generally poor. Only 3 of the mothers, and 2 of the fathers were said to be in formal waged employment, and even then the work available tended to be casual in nature. Of the mothers, 1 was deceased, and 2 were overseas. Of the fathers, 4 were deceased, and 3 were overseas. In general, the families were reliant on government social security benefits of some kind, including unemployment and single parent.

Only 1 person in the sample had not gone to school in Australia. As indicated in Table 1, education and schooling generally was basically regarded in a very positive light.

Table 1:  
What Young People Like/Liked about School

Positive aspects about school	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Learning/education	19	95.0	73.1
Friends	2	10.0	7.7
Teachers	1	5.0	3.8
Some subjects	1	5.0	3.8
Opportunities for the future	2	5.0	7.7
Other	1	5.0	3.8
Total	26		100.0

N= 20

The enthusiasm which these young people have for education is captured in the following quotations. They were asked what they liked about schooling:

S6: *'Increasing your knowledge; learning more and more everyday.'*

S7: *'I think school...is the main things... I mean, there's nothing I can do without studying. It might allow me to go high places, to have a better life.'*

S13: *'It's great, because I get to learn a lot. Every year I learn more and I'd like to keep going.'*

S14: *'Education, and you learn a lot of new things, and it's good for your future.'*

S17: *'Oh (laughing) that is a hard question. Well, what do I like about school is, you know, is, is got socialising you know, with your friends; spend time with your friends. Well, teachers – they're, some of them are nice and some of them aren't that nice. And also, you know, I like learning things. Yeah.'*

S18: *'Learning; about knowing new things.'*

S19: *'They teach us things and you get a good education.'*

The positive outlook to education was also reflected in the answers to what the young people did not like about schooling. Here a handful of respondents mentioned 'homework', but a similar number also said 'nothing'. Education seemed to be valued in its own right, as well as being a potential stepping stone to future employment or further study.

### 2.3 Sources of Income

The economic situation of the young people was ascertained by asking a number of questions relating to sources of income and employment experiences. Only 2 of the young people were employed at the time of interview (1 full-time, 1 part-time). Of the 8 young people who had at one time worked, no one had spent more than 6 months in the job (5 had only worked between 1 day and 1 month). Nine of the respondents had undergone some type of job training or work experience, with 4 doing so under the auspices of Department of Social Security training requirements.

Youth unemployment was seen to be prevalent in the local areas in which the Somali young people lived. Not surprisingly, they saw casual and part-time jobs, and state benefits, as major sources of income for young people in their areas. For themselves, the sources of income rarely involved paid work. This is shown in Table 2.

Table 2:  
Sources of Income for Young People Interviewed

Sources of income	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Unemployment/DSS benefits	4	20.0	20.0
Austudy	7	35.0	35.0
Family	4	20.0	20.0
Work	1	5.0	5.0
Casual/part time job	2	10.0	10.0
No income	2	10.0	10.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

Given their family situations, and the economically disadvantaged nature of their living circumstances, the young people appeared to play an important financial role in sustaining their households. Table 3 provides details of how they spent their money.

Table 3:  
Ways in which Young People Spent Their Money

Ways in which money is spent	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Rent	8	42.1	21.1
Food/bills	14	73.7	36.8
Entertainment	5	5.3	13.2
Travel	2	10.5	5.3
Clothes	4	21.1	10.5
Family	1	5.3	2.6
Books/school	2	10.5	5.3
Other	2	10.5	5.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N= 19  
Missing Responses =1 (5%)

In addition to making financial contributions – to rent, food, bills, travel, among other things – a majority (13) of the young people also helped out doing unpaid work for friends or family. Most of this consisted of domestic labour and chores around the house, and also childcare. They did not do this type of work for ‘favours’, but as simply part of the household routine.

Again, reflecting the generally disadvantaged situation of their immediate families, the young people were fairly reluctant to go to their parents when experiencing their own financial problems. Only 8 of the respondents said they would approach their parents in such a case. The next highest response (6) was ‘DSS’ [Department of Social Security], followed by ‘go to other relatives’ (3).

The Somalian young people were then asked what young people in general did for money involving activities of an illegal nature. Their responses are presented in Table 4.

Table 4:  
Interviewees’ Perceptions of Types of Illegal Activity  
In Which Young People Engage for Money

Types of illegal activity	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Drug dealing	15	75.0	46.9
Shoplifting/sale of stolen goods	8	40.0	25.0
Theft (other than shoplifting)	4	20.0	12.5
Mugging/jumping	2	10.0	6.3
Don’t know	3	15.0	9.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

As seen here, the two key areas for possible criminal involvement were identified as drug dealing, and property theft. The main reason why young people might engage in these activities was simply, they need the money. Peer pressure and excitement were also mentioned, but by far and away gaining additional income was seen as the primary motivating force.

Questions were also asked regarding illegal activity that was not done simply or solely for the purposes of gaining money. The responses are shown in Table 5.

Table 5:  
Interviewees' Perceptions of Types of Illegal Activity  
(not for the purposes of money) in Which Young People Engage

Types of illegal activity	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Car theft/joy riding	3	15.8	12.0
Drug/alcohol use	6	31.6	24.0
Fighting/assaults	4	21.1	16.0
Vandalism/graffiti	2	10.5	8.0
Stealing for own use	3	15.8	12.0
Don't know	6	31.6	24.0
Other	1	5.3	4.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19  
Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

The main reasons for these kinds of activities were pursuit of fun and excitement, dealing with boredom, peer pressure and showing off, and problems at home. The notion of gaining status was mentioned by one young person: *'With graffiti, they probably do it to make a statement and say that they exist in the world. It's a trademark or whatever. And fights, I don't know, to prove themselves'* (S13). For another, the problem was seen to stem from how the young people were brought up by their parents: *'Maybe lack of good upbringing, lack of religious beliefs; things like that'* (S16). More generally, the basic feeling was that young people engage in such activity as a means to break from the normal routines and pressures of everyday life.

## 2.4 Youth Gangs

A series of questions were put to the young people about the nature and activities of 'youth gangs' in the neighbourhoods. We started by asking them where young people hung out in the local areas. The most often referred to places were recreation and sporting facilities. After this, they mentioned places such as shopping centres, the street outside shops, friends' houses and commercial venues such as cafes and clubs.

The Somalians agreed that young people do tend to hang around in groups, especially the young men. When asked what young people's groups have in common with each other, a variety of responses were given. These are shown in Table 6.

Table 6:  
Interviewees' Perceptions of What Young People's Groups  
have in Common with Each Other

Aspects of Group	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Ethnicity/culture	2	10.0	5.9
Same interests/activities	5	25.0	14.7
Problems at home	1	5.0	2.9
Image/dress/style	11	55.0	32.4
Music	8	40.0	23.5
Same school	1	5.0	2.9
Nothing in common	3	15.0	8.8
Don't know	2	10.0	5.9
Other	1	5.0	2.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=10

In this account, it would appear that the key distinguishing characteristics of groups are those associated with subcultural preferences in image, dress, style and music. The role of ethnicity is not seen as particularly significant in terms of the membership of specific groups of young people. This only applies, however, insofar as we are talking about activities and group formation within a particular community.

For instance, when questions were asked about the ethnic minority population as a whole, in relation to other ethnic groups, clear social differences emerged. This is demonstrated in Table 7, which deals with perceived differences in the activities of young people from different ethnic backgrounds.

Table 7:  
Interviewees' Perceptions of Ethnic Differences  
in the Activities of Young People

Types of Differences	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Religious/cultural	8	53.3	36.4
Recreational	5	33.3	22.7
Somalian people spend more time with their family	3	20.0	13.6
Don't know	6	40.0	27.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=15

Missing Responses = 2 (10%)

Not Applicable = 3 (15%)

What this seems to indicate is that there are certain *commonalities* amongst Somalian young people in terms of, for example, religious commitments. Simultaneously, they exhibit *particular differences* according to factors such as musical taste and manner of dress. The shared experiences of the Somalian young people tended to be associated with religious prescriptions and proscriptions, as well as general recreational preferences.

S4: *'Young Muslim people, they're meant to be spending their time going to the mosque and learning some Koran.'*

S13: *'It depends on the actual ethnic group, because different people have different focuses in their lives. The religious thing as well will stop you from doing a lot of things if you're from one ethnic group to another.'*

S16: *'Like for female Somalis, it's a lot harder to maybe be involved in other communities, or other activities, so most of our life's more constricted 'cos a lot of things we're not allowed to do. So, we spend most of our time with other people from our society. I think different (ethnic) members, they tend to associate with their own members and their own groups and just spend it doing different things.'*

S17: *'Well, us for example, us Somalians you know, some of my friends, they're not Somalians, they might go and enjoy themselves at nightclubs, but us Somalians, you know, we don't go there.'*

S18: *'Like us, we like, we can't take off our scarves, so (we) can't wear like short stuff, go play sports against the boys. We have to stay home.'*

S19: *'Somalian kids, they play basketball. The Aussie kids usually play football and cricket.'*

S20: *'(Somalian people) read the Koran.'*

Ethnicity is, however, only one of the key points of demarcation between different types of groups of young people. In addition to differences within a community (based upon popular culture and personal taste), and differences between communities (based upon religion and broad cultural interests), there is then another type of distinction that was identified. This is the distinction between 'groups' and 'gangs'.

For example, Table 8 provides insight into how difference is constructed in how young people use the street.

Table 8:  
Interviewees' Perceptions of the Main Differences Between the Groups which Hang Out on the Streets

Group differences	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Ethnicity	3	15.0	11.5
Clothes/style	1	5.0	3.8
Leisure activities	3	15.0	11.5
Fun groups vs troublemakers/criminals	8	40.0	30.8
No difference	3	15.0	11.5
Don't know	4	20.0	15.4
Other	4	20.0	15.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

It was recognised by the Somalian young people that young people may hang out on the street for different reasons. What really distinguished the different groups of young people was whether or not they engaged in illegal or criminal activity, although even this was ambiguous. As one young person observed: *'Not really much difference. They do the same things, but I guess they don't have the gang security and the membership'* (S16). In general, however, the key characteristic of 'gangs' was seen to be crime.

S3: *'Groups are people who get together and gangs are a group of people who get together to commit crimes. They are thieves.'*

S7: *'A gang is mainly criminals, that's how I would describe it. They always do criminal activities and stuff like that. And groups only for going somewhere together, having fun and all that – no criminal activities.'*

S11: *'Gangs, they sell drugs. It's a group who hang around together. They'll be doing the same things as other groups, but these groups have knives, guns, sell drugs in the street; stuff like that.'*

S19: *'Well, a group of kids is like, they don't do bad things, they just hang together. But with a gang, they like, they do crime.'*

Gangs were also defined in terms of a propensity to engage in fights, and to use more extreme forms of violence.

S12: *'A gang is people that wanna have fights with other people, but a group of friends means just play around – basketball.'*

S17: *'Yeah, of course. Well, a gang's you know, different. Group of young people, they might be just you know, they're friends, they having fun you know, they're not doing something illegal. They would be going just maybe to the movies, having fun. But the gangs, they go and rob, hurt people, drugs and other stuff.'*

S5: *'The gangs are the groups who attack people and the groups are just the people – friends go together.'*

S14: *'A gang is a group of kids hang around each other and do bad stuff like drugs and*

*alcohol and bash other kids.'*

*S20: 'Young people are friendly, gangs are violent.'*

*S20: 'I think the gang is a group of people and they fight another group of gang and have knives -something like that- to kill people or to hurt people.'*

While the Somalian young people had a conception of what 'gangs' were in abstract or theoretical terms, there was less certainty when it came to identifying gangs in their own local areas. For example, in response to a question on types of gangs in their area, the biggest response was that there were simply 'just groups of friends'.

Later, when asked about how the young people felt about gangs in their local area, the responses were most interesting, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9:  
How Young People Felt about Gangs in Their Local Area

	Assessment	Response to each category	
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Don't like them	4	21.1	21.1
There are no gangs	11	57.9	57.9
Don't know	2	10.5	10.5
Other	2	10.5	10.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

Whether or not there were gangs was partly a matter of how the young people defined gangs and gang-related behaviour. Not all groups were seen as gangs. And not every young person who engaged in illegal activity or crime was considered a gang member. As one young person expressed it: *'Well, we've got some teenagers, they hang around and you know, they smoke and they do drugs. So, I don't know if they're a gang'* (S16).

Membership in 'gangs' tended to be seen in terms of specific institutional sites (such as schools), or in relation to specific types of activity (such as responding to racism), or in relation to specific groups of other young people (such as 'Asians').

Gangs were seen to share common interests. But these 'common interests' were variable, ranging from excitement and protection, to gaining social respect. They also appeared to be contextual, in the sense of being tied to particular situations and circumstances. For example, the young people were asked about racism as a reason for gang formation.

*S5: 'It's possible, because they might feel needed, or they might feel hope or protection between the friends or the gang.'*

*S6: 'Probably some Asians or other colour people you know, attack you, and that would cause you to have gangs and create more violence.'*

*S11: 'You see some people calling you "Asian that" and "Black this," so you want to get them. They called you that, so you argue with them, so fights start; you're gonna get your friends and all that.'*

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S12: 'Because some white people might be saying "Oh, we hate black people." They join a gang of whites so they can get all black people.'

S13: 'If you feel that you're not equal in one society, you join a gang – a group of your own people, rather than a minority...another race.'

S16: 'It could be racism. It could be that they don't have, like I said, a good family upbringing. They don't have maybe places they can turn to if they're in need, so they find security in gangs.'

One of the messages which came through in the interviews with the Somalian young people was that very few of the interviewees had had much direct contact with 'gangs' or gang-related behaviour. For example, few respondents had a clear idea as to why some young people might be more likely to join a gang than others. Similarly, they really did not know why young men, and young women, might join a gang.

The young people were aware of other groups of people in public places such as shopping centres and the streets. Whether or not these groups constituted 'gangs', however, was somewhat contentious. When asked about what kinds of activities gangs get involved in, the emphasis was on certain types of illegal behaviour. This is shown in Table 10.

Table 10:  
Young People's Perceptions of the Kinds of Activities  
Gangs get Involved In

Kinds of activities	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Fighting	2	10.0	4.5
Having fun	1	5.0	2.3
Drug dealing	7	35.0	15.9
Stealing/mugging/robbery	13	65.0	29.5
Unspecified illegal	2	10.0	4.5
Vandalism/graffiti	1	5.0	2.3
Drinking/drug use	4	20.0	9.1
Sport	3	15.0	6.8
Don't know	4	20.0	9.1
Other	7	35.0	15.9
Total	44		100.0
N=20			

These activities were generally seen as providing gang members with a sense of excitement and of being 'tough'. Whether or not they were exclusive to gang members is, of course, highly debatable.

One aspect of street life that the Somalian young people were very conscious of, but not necessarily directed engaged in, was fighting. This involved different groups of young people, usually Anglo Australian youth pitched against other ethnic groups ('*Mostly Vietnamese against Australians*'), or particular ethnic minority groups in conflict with other ethnic minority groups ('*I've seen Somalian with Vietnamese fighting in groups with knives*'). These fights were perceived

to often involve weapons, such as knives, guns, baseball bats and the like. However, the use of weapons was always tied to ‘gang fights’ and ‘only in emergency and in self defence’, rather than for other purposes (such as crime).

The main reason cited for the street fighting was ‘racism’. This was sometimes linked to ‘talking smart’ or trying to establish one’s area as their ‘territory’.

S4: *‘That’s the way they trick us, because they (Asians) call us “Black bastards” and whenever they call us black, then we’ll fight them back because we’re black.’*

S10: *‘Some are black, some are white, some are yellow, and the culture is different.’*

S12: *‘Racism by Australians, (who) don’t want Chinese or Vietnamese to be here.’*

S13: *‘Through prejudice, or discrimination or racism.’*

S15: *‘Because they do drugs, and because of racism.’*

The status of groups in the public domains of the street is somewhat ambiguous, especially given that certain types of provocation leads to certain types of violent group behaviour.

Similar sorts of conflicts and problems were also identified in relation to the school. Here certain groups of young people were clearly identified as being troublesome for the other students. As one young person put it: *‘The gangs at school – always fighting. They have a problem, they take it to school all the time. They’re fighting for the group and the teachers always have a problem. They can’t play together basketball, they can’t do nothing (like) study together’* (S15).

The specific problems identified with the activities of some young people within a school setting are shown in Table 11.

Table 11:  
Young People’s Perceptions of How Gangs are a Problem in School

Type of problem	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Scare/pick on students	5	25.0	18.5
Start fights	7	35.0	25.9
Bad influence	5	25.0	18.5
Problematic for teachers	2	10.0	7.4
Deal drugs	3	15.0	11.1
Don’t know	2	10.0	7.4
Other	3	15.0	11.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

In discussion, the young people identified ‘drugs’ and ‘fighting’ as among the most disturbing aspects of gang-type behaviour in the school.

S1: *‘They deal drugs and they don’t listen to the teachers.’*

S2: *‘They bring drugs into school, weapons and knives and fighting. Coming a group of them (into the school) and bashing us.’*

S3: *'Because they fight with others.'*

S6: *'They come to school uninvited and terrorise other students.'*

S8: *'They smoke, they bring drugs into school.'*

S11: *'They cause trouble. They don't fight one on one, they fight as a group. More groups come down, they carry knives around.'*

S16 : *'I think more and more they're becoming a problem, yeah. Because people form these little groups – in gangs, and they maybe neglect their studies and what their gang thinks is probably more important than their academics.'*

S17: *'They might hassle the girls at school. Yeah, they might you know, they do a lot of things: hassle the girls, use drugs, you know, break things at school: the windows, the doors, you know, damage the school's property.'*

It is interesting to note here that when asked about the good things about being a gang member, a number of interviewees referred to 'protection'. One young person commented: *'If you have a fight-on, or someone calls you a racist name, teases your colour, the gangs can help you, because racism is not allowed'* (S12). It appears that some groups, or 'gangs', therefore emerge out of the perceived or real threats by other young people. In this regard, *'The good thing is that you know you are protected; you have other kids to protect you'* (S14).

However, whether a 'gang' forms out of the need for mutual protection, or because it is related to criminal activity of some kind, the perception and presence of gangs implies a number of negative things as well. For example, the Somalian young people spoke about how it can create a bad reputation for the young people in the community, and how it can make the person a target for, and enemy of, other gangs. It would also propel young people into committing illegal acts, as well as mean more likely contact with the police.

If young people were not in gangs, it was believed that they would have a better life and engage in more productive pursuits. They would spend more time at home and with their family. They would do better in school and work environments. They would be wasting less time.

## **2.5 Problems & Solutions**

The Somalian young people were asked a series of questions regarding their activities and where and what they do with their time. About half of them said that there was insufficient activities for young people in their neighbourhoods, and one mentioned that there was sufficient to do depending upon money. Most of the young people thought there should be more sporting facilities, recreational and leisure activities, and support and skill providing activities.

The young people spent most of their time at home, at their friends' places or at school. Schooling and sport, as well as visiting with friends, were the main daytime activities. At night, the overwhelming response was to stay home or go to a friend's house. The reasons why Somalian young people felt restricted in where they go provides some insight into the home-based nature of many of their activities. These are shown in Table 12.

Table 12:  
The Reasons why Young People Felt Restricted in Where They Can Go

Types of Restrictions	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Racism	2	16.7	14.3
Age	1	8.3	7.1
Safety concerns	6	50.0	42.9
Religious/cultural	5	41.7	35.7
Total	14		100.0

N=12

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

Not Applicable = 7 (35%)

S2: *'Because you know if you go there, something might happen to you, or you might get in trouble, so you would know that you wouldn't cross that line.'*

S5: *'Because you might not feel comfortable if you go some places where different peoples are. They might treat you differently.'*

S11: *'It's too violent, too dangerous.'*

S12: *'Because there might be some places that I might not go, like where bad people hang around.'*

S13: *'Yes, because of my religion, I'm restricted in the places I go, and my own beliefs. I wouldn't go to these places.'*

S14: *'Because some places are dangerous.'*

S16: *'In a lot of ways I am. And maybe it's because of the community I come from, things like that: religion, community, colour; things like that.'*

S17: *'Yeah, religion, the culture you know. Yeah, you might have a bad reputation you know, if you go somewhere like that (a nightclub), so we don't want a bad name.'*

S18: *'Yeah, sometimes I think. At school, we can't like go swimming, because we can't wear the bathers...so we can't go swimming.'*

In addition to concerns stemming from fears about personal safety, religious prescriptions, gender-based preferences, and various cultural and social differences, there may be another factor which could affect what the young people do outside the parental home as well. This relates to the trouble experienced by groups of young people when they do venture on to the street and into shopping areas.

Table 13:  
Young People's Perceptions of the Trouble that  
Groups Experience on the Streets

Types of Trouble	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Police harassment	9	47.4	37.5
Fighting	4	21.1	16.7
Trouble with shopkeepers	1	5.3	4.2
Public disapproval	2	10.5	8.3
Don't know	6	31.6	25.0
Other	2	10.5	8.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

*S7: 'If someone saw you in a group, they might think you are a gang or something, then you always have someone wishing you bad things and you always have trouble. If the police think you're a gang, then there's trouble.'*

*S11: 'If you hang out on the streets, anything can happen. Trouble starts, cops would be hassling you 'cos you're groups.'*

*S12: 'Sometimes, when something happens, the police will even, may pick on you when you walk on the street.'*

*S13: 'Discrimination from other people, because if you're hanging out on the streets, it's a sign of trouble to police; that's how you're discriminated or stereotyped.'*

*S16: 'A lot of discrimination. People on the streets aren't respected. People escape – like watch out for them. So they're discriminated by police, and just general members of the community.'*

While the young people highlighted 'police harassment' as the key problem groups experience on the streets, it is notable that only 6 of them had had direct contact with the police. Of these 6 people, the group was evenly split over the nature of that contact was generally bad or good. For those who had no problems with the police contact, the overall impression was that they had been treated well when stopped by the police. Alternatively, others felt that they had been unduly hassled or threatened, or been subjected to some kind of racism, at the hands of police officers.

Similar findings were found in relation to contact with security guards. Again, the small number (7) who had had direct contact with security guards had mixed feelings and experiences. On the positive side, security guards had made some feel more secure by their presence:

*'A good experience with security guard – I'm now living here (in a) flat in Fitzroy. They have a security and always, sometimes I want to go down maybe milkbar, whatever, everything at night, they walk me down always to watch me – see what time I go, what time I come back, and looking after me. First week when I moved this flat, I noticed them. They talked to me and gave me the telephone number for security; 24 hours. They care for me, always*

*asking me 'If you have a problem, just call straight away this number.' The security guards, they're the best to care for me' (S15)*

On the negative side, one person was to comment:

*'It's been bad, same as the police. At the commission houses, where the flats are, we're always hanging around on that corner, just talking, and they just came up to us and said "you're not supposed to be sitting here. Go somewhere else." Before that, other kids from other ethnic – white people and other kids- they just pick us on colour' (S2)*

The general impression of harassment and negative relations has to be tempered, therefore, by acknowledgement of relatively little direct contact between the young people and police and security guards. It also has to be put in the context of very mixed reactions to this contact, depending upon the individual and the circumstances.

Ambivalent feelings toward authority figures was also evident in the young people's responses to a question about what the police can do about gangs. These are shown in Table 14.

Table 14:  
Young People's Perceptions of What Police Can Do about Gangs

Type of Action	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Get to know them/talk to them	4	20.0	17.4
Maintain a presence	1	5.0	4.3
Stop hassling them	2	10.0	8.7
Prosecute/put them in gaol	5	25.0	21.7
Can't do much	2	10.0	8.7
Don't know	3	15.0	13.0
Other	6	30.0	26.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

In discussion, the young people said that they wished the police could be less discriminating toward gang members and be more civil toward them. However, they also wanted active intervention, to stop the more extreme elements from continuing to disrupt community life.

In general, however, the biggest response to youth gangs was to give them greater degrees of support, help and direction. In other words, the young people tended to favour a positive, developmental form of intervention, to one relying mainly on coercion and the full weight of the criminal justice system. As one young person observed: *'Talk to them, give them advice, tell them what to do. Young people, they don't know what's right and wrong, so if some young people are telling them gangs is good, if no-one told them gangs (are) bad, they wouldn't stop' (S4)*. Even when direct criminal justice intervention was called for, this was intertwined with a developmental perspective, as indicated in the following comment: *'They should be arrested and we should look after them for a while until they change their behaviour' (S6)*. The emphasis, therefore, was on education and teaching young gang members about more positive ways to behave.

When asked about the specific ways in which schools, social services and migrant services might be able to intervene to deal with gangs, the responses were basically the same as above (aside from the many who responded that they did not know what could be done). That is, the main strategies mentioned were to provide gang members direction and positive activities in which to engage, to offer assistance with money and education, and to offer a wider range of services and facilities. In the case of schools, some young people also talked about expelling or separating off the troublemakers from the rest of the student body.

The importance of healthy social connections was also reflected in the young people's appraisal of the importance of family and friends. When asked what made them feel happy, the young people referred to their relationships with others: their family and friends. Money and having nice things was only mentioned once. The young people uniformly saw their family as of great importance in their lives. They saw the family as the central source of support, love, friendship and strength, and of basic 'blood' connection. Very few of the young people were experiencing family problems, and the kinds of problems that were mentioned were fairly 'normal', as in the case of occasional arguments. When they needed help, it was parents, friends and other relatives who were the main people who were approached for advice and assistance.

In terms of their longer term plans and aspirations, the young people spoke about making money, having a job and successful career, doing well at school and, given their social history and personal background, enhancing world peace.

Regardless of generally good educational participation and performance, and strong family relationships, the young people were nevertheless finding it difficult to take full advantage of their opportunities. This is demonstrated in their responses to questions about which agencies have assisted them, and why. Few of the young people (3) had sought help from school, welfare agencies and the police. Where assistance was provided it tended to be information and support. On the other hand, a majority (12) had received help from a government department. Money was the key support received in all cases, with a couple of people also mentioning training programmes and assistance with looking for work.

The young people were very committed to the notion of enrolling in tertiary education, and in finding paid work. Toward these ends, they were prepared to study hard, and to work hard. They had very definite ideals of where they wanted to be in five years time. And they were prepared to do the things which would best maximise their chances of reaching their personal goals.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This study has been based upon interviews with 20 young people drawn from the Somalian community in Melbourne. The young people interviewed had all experienced the disruptions and adjustments of immigration. In this case, the migration process was heavily shaped by both conditions of war, and famine, in their country of origin, and the different language and culture of their country of destination.

The young people had generally strong ties to their parents and families. Most spoke Somali at home, and all were Muslims and identified strongly with their religion.

Almost all of the Somalian young people were engaged in some type of schooling or education, and moreover, were expressly thankful for, and committed to, education generally.

The majority of the young people and their families were experiencing considerable hardship. Most of the parents were reliant upon state benefits of some kind, as well as a majority of the young people directly at some time or another.

On the specific issue of gangs, the study revealed three major types of group identity and formation:

- Groups that were defined on the basis of *common traits or characteristics* (such as language, religion, culture, appearance) which broadly distinguished some groups-in-general from other groups-in-general (e.g., Somalian, Vietnamese)
- Groups within these broader categories, which were defined in terms of *particular cultural and recreational preferences* (such as choice of music, style of dress), and which therefore denoted differences within the Somalian youth population as a whole
- Groups that were defined on the basis of engagement in *legal or illegal behaviour*, the latter usually being seen, not simply as individual acts of crime, but as collective acts of violence or criminality (such as fighting)

The young people had relatively little direct experience of 'gangs' as such. However, some had been involved in fights with other ethnic minority youth, and most were conscious of various kinds of racism in their lives.

A central aspect of the study is that a major source of conflict on the streets, and in the schools, appeared to be related to racist name-calling and related harassment. It is notable that many of the young people felt restricted in where they could go, at certain times of the day, because they did not feel safe. In many cases, this was directly linked to racism.

Where direct threats or violence did occur, the indication was that the young people would support and protect each other. They also understood that the reason why some young people might join a gang was due to the apparent protection offered by such a youth formation.

All in all, this group of young people were remarkably law-abiding and committed to mainstream institutions, such as education. They had suffered enormous hardships in their country of origin, and as part of the migration and re-settlement process. Yet, they still maintained a generally optimistic and healthy outlook on their social relationships and future prospects.

This translated into a positive and developmental approach to how best to deal with youth gangs. Such youth formations were seen to be due to lack of opportunities, difficulties in family situations, bad peer influences and not enough adult guidance. Where coercive force or social segregation was called for (e.g., use of criminal justice measures), these were generally framed in terms of allowing for a more concentrated effort on the part of the state to assist the young gang members.

## **2.7 Recommendations**

### *i. Canadian Gangs and Ethnicity*

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

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

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

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

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

It is further recommended that there 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 this study relate to the nature of inter-ethnic relations involving ethnic minority groups, as well as Anglo Australian young people; and the impact of racism and/or the threat of violence on young people's use of public spaces and educational institutions.

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

- 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
- *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
- It is essential that young people in general be provided with *education in cross-cultural issues* in order that the backgrounds, cultures and patterns of life pertaining to specific ethnic groups be better understood by all concerned
- Attention must also be directed at the provision of *anti-racist education*, so that issues of discrimination, prejudice and unequal power relations be analysed and discussed in an enlightened, informative and empathetic manner
- Following the example of the City of Adelaide (see White, 1998: 47), there should be developed at the local, regional and state levels a series of *youth reconciliation projects*, that will promote the diversity of cultures among young people, aim to reduce violence between them, and give young people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds the practical opportunity to get to know each other at a personal and group level
- Concerted action is needed on the specific issue of school bullying 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

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

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**Ethnic Youth Gangs in Australia**  
***Do They Exist?***

Report No. 5  
**Latin American Young People**

by  
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# **Part 1:**

# **Background to the Research**

## **1.1 Introduction**

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

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

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

### *i. Ethnic Minority Youth*

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

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

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

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

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

While media and police concern over 'ethnic youth gangs' has appeared to be on the rise, there has in fact been very little empirical information regarding the actual activities of ethnic minority young people (but see Guerra & White, 1995; Pe-Pua, 1996). Specifically, little is known about the *demographic characteristics* of the ethnic minority people in question – for example, their ages, gender composition, level of education, employment status, 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, however, been some movement toward analysis of the nature and extent of ethnic minority youth offending (Easteal, 1997), to examine sentencing disparities in relation to the ethnicity of juvenile offenders (Gallagher & Poletti, 1998) and to consider the special requirements of ethnic minority offenders held in detention (NSW Ombudsman, 1996). However, much more study and conceptual work is needed if we are to appreciate fully the place of ethnic minority youth in the criminal justice system, and the reasons for their involvement with this system.

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

#### *ii. Diverse Assumptions*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **1.2 The Study**

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

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

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

*i. Aims of Research*

The *aims of the research* were:

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

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

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

**ii. Methods of Research**

The *research methodology* adopted for the study consisted of:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **1.3 The Notion of Youth Gangs**

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

#### *i. Criminal Youth Gangs*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*ii. 'Gang' Characteristics*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *iii. Youth Formations*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### *iv. Youth in Groups*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **1.4 Research Contribution**

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

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

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

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

**Part 2:**  
**Latin American Young People**

## 2.1 Social History

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

### *i. Migration*

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

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

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

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

### *ii. Settlement Patterns*

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

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

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

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

*iii. Demographic Profile*

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

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

*iv. Labour Market Participation*

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

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

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

## **2.2 Profile of Youth Interviewed**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1:  
Type of Accommodation Upon Arrival in Australia

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

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

Table 2:  
Who the Young People Live With

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

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

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

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

## 2.3 Sources of Income

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

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

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

Table 3:  
Types of Unpaid Work Undertaken for Favours by Young People

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

N= 10  
Missing Responses = 1 (5%)  
Not Applicable = 9 (45%)

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

Table 4:  
Sources of Income for Young People Interviewed

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

N=19  
Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

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

Table 5:  
Ways in Which Young People Spend Their Money

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

N=20

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

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

Source of Income	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Unemployment/DSS benefits	5	25.0	13.9
Austudy	2	10.0	5.6
Family	4	20.0	11.1
Work	9	45.0	25.0
Casual/part time jobs	16	80.0	44.4
Total	36		100.0

N=20

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

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

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

N=20

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

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

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

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

N=20

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

## 2.4 Youth Gangs

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

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

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

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

N=20

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

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

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

N=17

Not Applicable = 3 (15%)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 11:  
Characteristics by Which Young People Defined Gangs

Attributes	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Violent	6	30.0	23.1
Drug users	1	5.0	3.8
Do illegal activities	14	70.0	53.8
Just a group of friends	2	10.0	7.7
Other	3	15.0	11.5
Total	26		100.0
N=20			

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

N= 14  
Not Applicable = 6 (30%)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

N=19

Missing Responses = 1(5%)

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

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

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

LA5: ‘Yes, because everyone calls ‘em “Niggers”, “Abos”, “Kooris”, “Skips”, “Wogs”.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

N=20

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

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

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

N=14  
Missing = 1 (5%)  
Not Applicable = 5 (25%)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Types of trouble	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Police harassment	15	75.0	48.4
Fighting	6	30.0	19.4
Trouble with parents	1	5.0	3.2
Trouble with shopkeepers	2	10.0	6.5
Public disapproval	3	15.0	9.7
Don't know	1	5.0	3.2
Other	3	15.0	9.7
Total	31		100.0
N=20			

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Types of groups	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Anglo against other Ethnic	6	30.0	28.6
One Ethnic against ‘different’ Ethnic	3	15.0	14.3
Ethnic amongst ‘similar’ Ethnic	3	15.0	14.3
Ethnic within Ethnic	1	5.0	4.8
No particular/many different combinations	2	10.0	9.5
Another specific combination	1	5.0	4.8
Not based on Ethnicity	1	5.0	4.8
Don’t know	4	20.0	19.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **2.5 Problems & Solutions**

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

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

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

LA3: *'I think many gangs, you know, they're always put in a bad way, but 'specially with the Latin American groups you know, even if you're just a group you know, 'specially the television. The television shows Latin Americans, you know, 'specially American television*

*shows Latin Americans as all of them being members of gangs you know, dealing drugs. But maybe here (in Australia) it isn't the same, but because they show too much American TV and in America they generalise too much and they say the Columbians do this and the El Salvadorians do this – they generalise thinking that in here they do the same thing. You know, American television uses Latin American too much and they always give them bad reputation.'*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **2.6 Conclusion**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **2.7 Recommendations**

### *i. Canadian Gangs and Ethnicity*

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

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

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

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

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

It is further recommended that there 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 this study pertain to the nature of inter-ethnic relations involving ethnic minority groups, as well as Anglo Australian young people; and the impact of violence or the threat of violence on young people's use of public spaces and educational institutions.

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

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

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

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**Australian Multicultural Foundation**

**Ethnic Youth Gangs in Australia**  
***Do They Exist?***

Report No. 6  
**Anglo Australian Young People**

by  
Rob White  
Santina Perrone  
Carmel Guerra  
Rosario Lampugnani

**1999**

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# **Part 1:**

# **Background to the Research**

## **1.1 Introduction**

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

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

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

### *i. Ethnic Minority Youth*

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

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

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

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

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

While media and police concern over 'ethnic youth gangs' has appeared to be on the rise, there has in fact been very little empirical information regarding the actual activities of ethnic minority young people (but see Guerra & White, 1995; Pe-Pua, 1996). Specifically, little is known about the *demographic characteristics* of the ethnic minority people in question – for example, their ages, gender composition, level of education, employment status, 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, however, been some movement toward analysis of the nature and extent of ethnic minority youth offending (Easteal, 1997), to examine sentencing disparities in relation to the ethnicity of juvenile offenders (Gallagher & Poletti, 1998) and to consider the special requirements of ethnic minority offenders held in detention (NSW Ombudsman, 1996). However, much more study and conceptual work is needed if we are to appreciate fully the place of ethnic minority youth in the criminal justice system, and the reasons for their involvement with this system.

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

*ii. Diverse Assumptions*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **1.2 The Study**

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

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

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

*i. Aims of Research*

The *aims of the research* were:

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

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

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

**ii. Methods of Research**

The *research methodology* adopted for the study consisted of:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **1.3 The Notion of Youth Gangs**

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

#### *i. Criminal Youth Gangs*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*ii. 'Gang' Characteristics*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *iii. Youth Formations*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### *iv. Youth in Groups*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **1.4 Research Contribution**

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

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

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

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

**Part 2:**  
**Anglo Australian Young People**

## **2.1 Social History**

The dominant group in Australia – numerically, socially, politically and economically – is the Anglo Australian (see Jamrozik, Boland & Urquhart, 1995). Anglo Australians comprise some two-thirds of the total population (Jupp, 1995). From the days of the first fleet to today, British settlers have dominated the institutional structures and cultural mainstream of Australian society.

In specific terms, Anglo Australians can be described as comprising people of British or Irish descent, and whose first language is that of English. The largest component of the Australian population is made up of people who have descended from mixtures of the English, Scottish and Irish settlers of the past. The category Anglo Australian also includes first generation migrants from the British Isles and selected English-speaking countries.

In terms of new settlers, the dominant trend has been for the largest category of migrants to come from the United Kingdom. This has been the case over the past two hundred years, and spans the time from the convict era, to the establishment of the 'White Australia' policy at the beginning of this century, through to the post-1975 period when government immigration policy was opened up to include non-Europeans on a non-discriminatory basis.

The major proportion of migrants to Australia has been from English-speaking origins. The main countries of origin, after the United Kingdom, have been New Zealand, Ireland, South Africa, the United States, Papua New Guinea and Canada. In the case of Papua New Guinea, it is notable that a majority of settlers from this country are of Australian or European origin (Jupp, 1995). Generally speaking, in most of these cases, the bulk of the migrants have European ancestry (one notable exception being New Zealand, where a sizeable number of Maori and other Polynesian people have immigrated to Australia as well as Europeans). Even where other languages may be used in the country of origin (as in South Africa), the majority of migrants from these countries use English as their home language (Jupp, 1995).

Whether established or newly arrived, Anglo Australians have a privileged position in Australian society relative to other ethnic and migrant groups, and in relation to indigenous people. It has been argued that 'what it is to be Australian is still determined by the British or English connection. To this day immigrants are categorised into those of English-speaking-background (ESBs) and those of non-English-speaking background (NESBs), with different attitudes and different legal conditions applied to each group' (Jamrozik, Boland & Urquhart, 1995: 40).

The genesis of the present study lies in this distinction between the Anglo Australian majority and the diverse ethnic minority groups which together make up the country's population. Much of the media treatment of youth gangs has emphasised the ethnicity of the targeted young people. One implication of this is that young Anglo Australian people do not engage in gang-related behaviour, form into similar types of youth groups, or participate on the margins of legal activities.

Aside from perhaps the Irish, there has rarely, at least this century, been sustained 'moral panics' concerning Anglo Australian young people which have specifically referred to their ethnicity as the key or prime characteristic of the group. When concern has been expressed about 'youth gangs' comprised of Anglo Australian young people, the tendency has been to focus on subcultural differences (e.g., the Bodgies and Widgies of the 1950s) or particular

activities (e.g., graffiti gangs in the 1980s), rather than ethnicity.

The concern of the present report was to speak with Anglo Australian young people about their perceptions of, and involvements with, youth gangs. This research was undertaken in order to compare the experiences of young people from the dominant social group with their ethnic minority counterparts.

The young people who were interviewed live in or close to the municipality of Knox. This part of Melbourne lies some 25 kilometres east of the Central Business District, and is a primarily residential area with a large number of new housing developments. In 1991, approximately one-quarter of the population in this area was born overseas, of which 14 per cent were from a non-English speaking country (ABS, 1991). The area is relatively affluent when annual household income is compared to the Melbourne statistical division average (ABS, 1986).

Over the years some public concern has been expressed over the use by and congregation of young people at the Knox City District Shopping Centre. The notion of 'youth gangs' being present, and that they are a problem, has occasionally gained media and local political attention.

## **2.2 Profile of Youth Interviewed**

Twenty young people were interviewed in relation to the question of youth gangs. All of the young people were born in Australia, and all of them described themselves as being 'Australian'. In terms of ethnic identification, they referred to themselves as 'Anglo Celtic'.

The sample group comprised 9 young women and 11 young men. The ages of the group ranged from 13 to 23. A majority (9) were aged 15-16, there were 5 young people under 15 years, and 6 were 17 years old or over.

Half of the young people had no formal religious affiliation. The other half were Christians, and were comprised of 4 who were Catholics, and 6 who were members of a Protestant denomination.

The young people came from stable family backgrounds. Most (16) lived with two parents. Of the others, 1 lived with their mother, 1 lived with friends, and 2 lived with their partner. The language spoken at home, and with their peers, was English.

Half of the sample had lived in the same place for more than 10 years. Only 3 had lived in their present location for less than 1 year. The majority of the young people lived in a house, while 2 lived in flats. Of those who had moved residence, the main reasons for moving were to go to a better neighbourhood or to a better house.

Some indication of the socio-economic background of the young people was provided by a series of questions on the type of income sources and paid work of their parents. A majority (14) of the young people's mothers were engaged in paid employment. They were mainly concentrated in the service, retail and clerical sectors. Three of the mothers were in receipt of some kind of state benefit (such as unemployment benefit).

19 out of the 20 fathers were currently in paid employment. The occupations included work in the service sector, retail industry, trades and various professional areas (such as computer

programming, musician, artist). The young people thus came from households where one or both parents were in paid employment.

The young people were presently attending school, or had finished high school. Of those who had completed school, several had gone on to further education of some kind, including university and TAFE. The young people saw school as a key place to catch up with friends, and generally enjoyed the educational experience. The main criticism of schooling was 'homework'.

From this profile, it can be seen that by and large the young people came from financially secure backgrounds, and had relatively few problems in either the family or educational spheres.

## 2.3 Sources of Income

The economic situation of the young people was ascertained by asking a number of questions relating to sources of income and employment experiences. At the time of interview, 10 of the young people were in some kind of paid employment. Almost all of these jobs were part-time or casual, with only 1 person holding a full-time job. Given the age profile and educational participation of the sample group, this is not surprising. Most were employed in the service and retail sectors. Notably, 6 out of the 10 young people in paid employment were paid 'cash-in-hand'.

Only 6 of the young people had never had a job. Many of the jobs were temporary in nature, and either the job finished or the young people had to leave the job due to outside pressures, such as schooling. However, 5 of the young people had held jobs for 1 year or more. The majority of young people felt that they had been treated fairly in their jobs.

Most (17) of the young people said that they performed unpaid work at home for their family or friends. This mainly consisted of domestic chores, activities such as gardening or mowing the lawn, and 1 person mentioned childcare.

The income sources identified for young people in the area included parents, work and casual or part-time jobs. This pattern was reflected in the income sources for the young people themselves, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1:  
Sources of Income for Young People Interviewed

Sources of Income	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Austudy	2	10.0	7.4
Family	13	65.0	48.1
Work	2	10.0	7.4
Casual/part time job	9	45.0	33.3
Other	1	5.0	3.7
Total	27		100.0

N=20

If the young people were experiencing money problems they would invariably go to their parents for assistance. Only a few mentioned going to friends, and that depended upon what they needed the money for.

The young people were also aware of a number of short-term jobs that could be undertaken for 'quick' money. These included babysitting, factory work, fruit picking, cleaning, gardening, doing chores, lawn mowing and office work.

Table 2 presents information on how the young people spent their money. As can be seen, the largest expense was related to entertainment.

Table 2:  
Ways in Which Young People Spent their Money

Ways in which money is spent	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Rent	3	15.0	7.1
Food/bills	6	30.0	14.3
Entertainment	15	75.0	35.7
Travel	2	10.0	4.8
Clothes	7	35.0	16.7
Family	1	5.0	2.4
Save	3	15.0	7.1
books/school	1	5.0	2.4
Other	4	20.0	9.5
Total	42		100.0

N=20

The fact that relatively few responses referred to household related expenses is indicative of the relative affluence of the young people's families. Instead, the main expense is associated with leisure and entertainment, which is in itself not surprising given the commercial nature of most activities of this nature in contemporary society.

The young Anglo Australian people were also asked what kinds of illegal activities they thought young people in their area might engage in if they wished to supplement their income. Their responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3:  
Interviewees' Perceptions of the Types of Illegal Activity  
In Which Young People Engage for Money

Types of illegal activity	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Drug dealing	15	75.0	39.5
Burglary/robbery	3	15.0	7.9
Shoplifting/sale of stolen goods	6	30.0	15.8
Theft (other than shoplifting)	9	45.0	23.7
Mugging/jumping	1	5.0	2.6
Cheating the DSS	1	5.0	2.6
Other	3	15.0	7.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

As can be seen, the key areas of illegal activity identified by the young people are drug dealing, and property crime of some kind (i.e., theft, shopstealing, burglary). The main reason given for such activity was 'need money'. Another major explanation provided was peer pressure and the 'need to be cool'. The interrelationship of different factors was also recognised in the discussions. For example, one young person commented: *'Number of reasons... Could be like, the younger kids are probably – they've got nothing else to do. Could be family problems at home or something, so they're out on the street just doing whatever they think that they can do. Or, others get involved in drugs or whatever, so they need the money. I've heard of a number of cases where people have robbed houses just to get a quick fix or something like that'* (AA7).

The sample group was also asked about illegal activity that was engaged in, but not for the purposes of money. The two major responses here were 'vandalism/graffiti', and 'drug/alcohol use'. Why young people would engage in such behaviour was explained in terms of showing off, fun and excitement, peer pressure and problems at home.

A link was made between this kind of activity and group behaviour: *'I think just for fun. I think also a lot is done by groups of people, or gangs, and it can come from just dares or it's just the established behaviour of the gang and if your identity is tied up with being part of a gang, even though you might not feel comfortable doing it, I think people still do it anyway, because if they don't do it, then the gang won't allow them in, in terms of being part of a gang. And the whole thing about being kicked out of a gang might be a horrible thing if their whole sense of belonging is tied up with the gang'* (AA9).

Different types of motivation for the same sorts of acts were also acknowledged, particularly in regards to graffiti. As one young person observed: *'Graffiti, people do it because they see it as being an art – the ones who actually make it look half decent. The other ones who just scribble are the ones who just get into it because they wanna be like everyone else'* (AA17).

## 2.4 Youth Gangs

A series of questions were put to the young people about the nature and activities of 'youth gangs' in their neighbourhood. We started by asking them where young people hung out in the local area. The major place mentioned was the shopping centre. Other responses included recreation and sporting facilities, amusement centres, train stations and bus stops, and the street outside of shops. All of the young people said that they generally hang around in groups. When asked where they spent most of their time, the young people referred to shopping centres, home and to their friend's places. Most of their time, however, was spent at home or at a friend's house.

The main things which young people's *groups in general* were seen to have in common were the same interests and activities, and similar dress and style preferences. Musical tastes and attendance at the same school were also cited.

The differences between *groups on the street* engendered a different kind of response. This is shown in Table 4.

Table 4:  
Young People's Perceptions of the Main Differences  
Between the Groups Which Hang Out on the Streets

Group differences	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Ethnicity	1	5.0	3.7
Clothes/style	3	15.0	11.1
Leisure activities	8	40.0	29.6
Fun groups vs troublemakers/criminals	5	15.0	18.5
No difference	8	40.0	29.6
Other	2	10.0	7.4
Total	27		100.0

N=20

While there is once again acknowledgement of differences based on leisure and dress preferences, there is also a heightened sense of difference based upon 'fun groups' and 'troublemakers'.

There was some recognition as well of ethnic differences. In later discussions the young people were to comment that there were a number of ethnic differences in the activities of young people generally. These were seen in terms of religious and cultural activities (such as praying and religious affiliations), recreational choices (such as soccer compared with Aussie rules football), and non-Anglo Australian young people spending more time with their families than Anglo Australian young people.

Alternatively, some young people did not feel that there were any great differences amongst their peers based upon ethnicity. This uniformity was occasionally presented as part of a process of assimilation into the (Anglo) Australian way of life. As one young person put it:

*'Depends how 'Aussified' they are. Aussified's a person that maybe comes from another country, but they've assimilated into our society. They've grown up with us sort of thing, so they've adopted our ways. They don't have any cultural identity as such' (AA8).*

It is worth commenting on the fact that a significant proportion of responses also indicated that there were 'no differences' between the groups on the street. This suggests that group activity may be somewhat fluid – for example, the troublemaker of today, could be the funmaker of tomorrow. It could also imply that the differences between the groups on the street were perceived mainly in terms of friendship networks, rather than more fundamental social differences.

An interesting observation was also made concerning the gendered nature of group formation: *'I don't see too many boys with girls on a friendly basis. I went shopping yesterday, mainly I saw girls with girls, mainly just two of them usually, sometimes three. And I see guys with guys and then I see boyfriends and girlfriends walking around. I didn't see too many groups, as in mixed groups – boys and girls' (AA8).* In fact, most of the young people thought there were significant gender differences in the activities of young men and young women. These would also impact upon who hung around with whom, and why. For instance, the young women were seen to be more interested in shopping and clothes, the young men in 'sporty stuff' and more active pursuits in the public domain.

The Anglo Australian young people were asked about how they defined 'gangs', and what the differences between gangs and groups were. Their descriptions of the basic features of gangs are shown in Table 5.

Table 5:  
The Characteristics by Which the Young People Defined Gangs

Attributes	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Organised/rules	2	10.0	6.9
Dress/style	1	5.0	3.4
Carry weapons	1	5.0	3.4
Violent	9	45.0	31.0
Drug users	2	10.0	6.9
Do illegal activities	7	35.0	24.1
Just a group of friends	4	20.0	13.8
Other	3	15.0	10.3
Total	29		100.0
N=20			

There was some ambiguity regarding how best to distinguish 'gangs' and 'groups'. In the discussions, 18 of the young people said there were gangs in the area. However, what constituted a 'gang' was not always clear. This is indicated in Table 6.

Table 6:  
Young People's Perceptions of Types of Gangs in the Area

Types of Gangs	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Troublemakers	8	44.4	36.4
Drug dealers	2	11.1	9.1
Just group of friends	5	27.8	22.7
Ethnic group	4	22.2	18.2
Don't know	2	11.1	9.1
Other	1	5.6	4.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N= 18

Not Applicable = 2 (10%)

Sometimes a 'gang' was defined mainly in terms of simply hanging around together, and the nature of the bonding between different members of the group.

AA12: 'A group of people that are all after the one thing. Perhaps they've got the same role model, that sort of hang around together and they're all in together for, you know, – you know, the musketeers idea.'

AA7: 'I think a gang are a different sort of group, because they probably move around all together and do things all together. They'd be a closer knit group. A group of young people, like you're in that group, but you'd have other friends elsewhere and stuff. But the gangs is more like these are your friends and these are your only sort of friends as well that you can really trust.'

AA9: 'I think a group of young people, the identity is not so much tied up with the culture of the gang, or the group they're with. They hang around more so because they've got the [same interests] and there's no strong behavioural identity of that group of friends. I suppose smaller groups, they have like, a strict you know, who's in it, who's out kind of thing, whereas in larger groups, there's no definite who's in, who's out. Whereas gangs, it's a more definite you're in, you're out kind of thing; a stricter kind of code of behaviour, or just the culture of the group.'

According to other interviewees, the main characteristics of gangs are that they engage in violent, criminal and illegal behaviour. The focus here is on what particular groups actually do, rather than with the composition of the group itself.

AA8: 'A gang hangs out only with each other, maybe for support. Some do drugs and drink alcohol.'

AA2: 'A gang probably – they go and do illegal stuff or something and they'd be tough, beat up people.'

AA6: 'I think gangs are groups that are generally fairly violent. They like to pick fights and be tough, steal a lot and that sort of stuff. A group just hang around for some fun with their mates, instead of being on their own.'

AA3: 'I think a gang's more violent compared to just a group.'

AA12: *'Depending on what they're doing. If it's just a group of young people just hanging around type of thing, it's different than, like, a gang of people on the prowl to do something. But, depending on what they're doing I suppose.'*

Another defining characteristic of gangs was ethnicity, including Anglo Australian. Distinctions here are generally based not so much on what people do, but their physical appearance and cultural identification.

AA4: *'...I think gangs are mixed up with different nationalities – Asians, Italians, Australians – and they go around. They do cause a bit of trouble now and then. They have big fights with other gangs that are in the area.'*

AA16: *'(The) Knox gang. They're usually Asian people and they all carry knives and they've got their girls that hang around them. Do something to one of them, like the whole gang just goes after you. All the guys are Asians and all the girls are Australians.'*

When asked what members of gangs had in common, however, most responses alluded to the sharing of similar interests. Ethnicity, use of drugs, engagement in fighting and so on did not feature prominently. The main emphasis was on subcultural style and leisure preferences, rather than crime or violent behaviour. As one young person commented: *'I suppose music; the sort of style of their music. Probably the genre of music. It may be their mode of transport, like if they're skaters, they all have a skateboard. I suppose also maybe just their type of dress, the type of things they like to do, like common interests, or things that are defined by the group that the group does. I suppose all the things would tie up into defining who the group is and depending on how strict the gang is, the identity its members want'* (AA9). The idea of gangs, in this sense, is basically wrapped around certain types of identity formation linked to pop music culture and street culture.

The specific reasons why some young people might join gangs included family problems, lack of support and guidance, a dislike of school and being easily influenced. Young women were seen to be a part of gangs mainly due to relationships they have with young male members of gangs.

The general reasons put forward as to why young people join gangs are shown in Table 7.

Table 7:  
Interviewees' Perceptions of Why Young People Join Gangs

Common attributes Of gang members	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Problems at home	5	25.0	17.9
Protection	6	30.0	21.4
Support/replacing family	7	35.0	25.0
Respect/power	4	20.0	14.3
Rebellion/showing off	2	10.0	7.1
Other	4	20.0	14.3
Total	28		100.0

N= 20

The idea that gang membership provides a sense of community and social belonging was a strong theme in the discussions. So too, was the idea of gaining a measure of security and safety.

AA7: *'They're looking for something; need that security and to be trusted by other people. Just to be in that sort of group and feel that you belong to something.'*

AA9: *'To find a sense of belonging. I think a lot of people who join gangs wouldn't have a real family structure. Whereas traditionally, a sense of belonging would start from the family base, this identity would be created within the family. And sadly, these days, it's no longer the case. I think young people crave a sense of belonging – to be part of something, to be accepted for who they are, and from that, who are they, where they fit, where they're going, who are they. I think a gang can provide that, but with choosing attention to do it.'*

AA12: *'I think probably it's a sort of, not a self-esteem thing, but it's you're safe, you're in a group, you're not on our own, you've got friends. You can say "I've got heaps of mates now I'm in this gang, blah, blah, blah." Maybe it's a security thing.'*

AA15: *'I don't know really, just probably social status, just so they can say "Yeah, I'm in a gang", or to be part of a group. Maybe if they have low self esteem or something like that.'*

The young Anglo Australian people were asked whether racism was a reason for gang membership and formation. Interestingly, racism was never seen in terms of the victimisation or group identity of the Anglo Australians themselves. They are the dominant social group, and it was generally assumed that their culture and language are the standard by which other groups are to be judged. There was an implied homogeneity amongst the Anglo Australian population, especially in contrast to the Other (in this case, young people from minority backgrounds).

Racism was perceived solely as something which pertains to the ethnic minorities. Where Anglo Australian young people are implicated in racist reasons for gang formation, it is as instigators, rather than as victims. Simultaneously, the ethnic basis for group membership was also seen as evidence of 'racism' (in a sense) insofar as young people from similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds were seen to be consciously excluding themselves from the dominant Anglo Australian society.

In explaining gang formation, then, racism was considered important in relation to specific groups of young people. There were two categories of young people who were singled out for particular attention. The first was 'Asians':

AA3: *'If society's horrible to these Asian people, they may all want to sort of stick together and then they can stop being hurt as much as if they're surrounded by other people who bring them problems.'*

AA9: *'I think it can work both ways, like the whole thing with Asian gangs – not so much a racist thing, but just because they're all the same race. I think a lot of people join gangs because they are racist against other cultures.'*

AA17: *'For some – some Asian gangs, 'cos they feel that they're hard done by. I reckon white people often do give them a hard time for no reason at all. But the white people themselves are only concerned about, I suppose, the way they act towards us. We say that we were here first and they don't come and speak our language, and hang around in their clans and all the rest of it.'*

The other group mentioned was 'blacks':

*AA11: 'Sometimes blacks gang up on other people because they say white people used to be really bad to them.'*

*AA20: 'Because I know that (racism is a reason). I know...that a lot of blacks get teased around here and they just fight to have back up by other people, so you know, they're all together.'*

There was a feeling that 'Asians' and 'Africans' hung around together for mutual support, and because they wanted to be part of a group that shared similar backgrounds and interests.

The nature of gang activities, as perceived by the Anglo Australian young people, is indicated in Table 8.

Table 8:  
Young People's Perceptions of the Kinds of Activities  
in Which Gangs get Involved

Kinds of Activities	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Fighting	7	35.0	14.9
Having fun	2	10.0	4.3
Drug dealing	6	30.0	12.8
Stealing/mugging/robbery	12	60.0	25.5
Vandalism/graffiti	4	20.0	8.5
Drinking/drug use	12	60.0	25.5
Sport	2	10.0	4.3
Other	2	10.0	4.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>		<b>100.0</b>

N=20

These perceptions of gang-related behaviour are consistent with earlier discussions which saw youth gangs as being identified 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).

Gangs were associated with street fighting. In this context, there was a perception that gang members used weapons, such as knives, but they would only do so during gang fights and only for self defence. The perceptions of the respondents regarding which groups get involved in fights with which other groups is shown in Table 9.

Table 9:  
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	7	35.0	33.3
One ethnic against 'different' Ethnic	1	5.0	4.8
No particular/many different combinations	4	20.0	19.0
Another specific combination	1	5.0	4.8
Not based on Ethnicity	5	25.0	23.8
Don't know	3	15.0	14.3
Total	21		100.0

N=20

As seen in this table, the main groups involved in street level conflict tend to be perceived as the 'Anglos' against ethnic minority groups such as the 'Asians'. The main reasons for these fights were struggles over territory, acting or talking smart, and racism.

When asked whether or not gangs were a problem in school, most of the respondents said that this was not the case at their school. A key reason which was mentioned by several young people was that their particular school was not especially 'multicultural'. As one young person expressed it: *'Not in this school I don't think. In some other schools, where there's more racism (it's a problem). There's not that many Asian people, or Italians, or Greeks actually in this school. In bigger schools, where there's plenty of people who have bad attitudes towards these racial groups, they'd be more of a problem'* (AA3). Other young people attended private schools and saw this as a key factor in why gangs were not a problem.

While 'gangs' as such were not seen as a problem, several of the young people did refer to the problem of bullying. However, this was generally seen as a matter of one-on-one type of interaction, sometimes involving a group of young people who target particular individuals, rather than as antagonism between groups. Intimidating behaviour consisted of teasing, and in some instances, physical aggression.

In general, the Anglo Australian young people we interviewed did not view gangs as a major problem or issue for them personally. They could see why and how conflict might occur between different groups of young people. They could understand why some young people might engage in criminal activity and illegal behaviour. But for the most part, they themselves were fairly insulated from the economic and social factors which might propel others to join street gangs and school-based gangs. The advantages of a relatively privileged background were recognised by the young Anglo Australian people, and were reflected to some extent in their prescriptions regarding what could be done to address the youth gang issue.

## 2.5 Problems & Solutions

The young people were somewhat critical of media portrayals of youth gangs. Most felt that such portrayals were biased and exaggerated. Several commented on how the media tend to pick on 'Asians' in their coverage of youth activities.

The general impression, however, is that the media was not really discussing the Anglo Australian young people at all. Their criticisms were more in the vein of how the media portrayed the activity of *other* groups of young people, and that there were problems with this. The media image of gangs was not seen as particularly relevant to them, as Anglo Australian young people.

The dominant social position of the young Anglo Australian people was reflected not only in the lack of identification with the negative media portrayals, but, as well, in the somewhat patronising comments made about those young people who were caught in the media gaze. For example, one young person was to comment: *'I think they can be a bit unfair sometimes. Just 'cos they're of an ethnic background, doesn't mean that everyone's the same. They might say "Asian gangs" – well, not all Asians are bad. They give Asians a bad name. But some of them are fine'* (AA6). The idea that 'some of them are fine' implicitly makes a distinction between the dominant 'US' group and the subordinate 'THEM' group, while indirectly reinforcing the notion that deviancy is closer to the norm for the latter group, although exceptions are possible.

The relatively privileged status and position of these particular Anglo Australian young people was evident in other ways as well. For example, most felt that there were sufficient activities available for young people in their area. Some expressed a desire for more recreation and sporting facilities, and a youth centre, and one commented that they wished some of the activities would be cheaper and not cost as much money.

Most of the young people spent their time at home or at a friend's place. Going to movies and attending amusement centres were important forms of 'going out'. A number also liked to simply hang out with their friends in places such as shopping centres. When they got bored, they tended to watch television, go to the movies, listen to music or talk with their friends. None referred to engaging in drug use or illegal activities when they were bored or looking for excitement.

The young people felt that their family was crucial in terms of giving support and providing strength and help. Nevertheless, 14 of the young people said that they were experiencing family problems. However, the main type of 'problem' identified was arguments. When experiencing problems of this nature, the young people tended to rely on parents or friends to sort things out, rather than to go to outside agencies. A majority of the young people knew where to receive advice and information, from school counsellors and welfare services such as phone helplines, if they need to do so.

The young people felt restricted in what they could do and where they could go. This was seen as mainly due to safety concerns, parental decisions, income and availability of transport. The perceptions held by parents regarding safety and street activity (such as fighting) influenced what the young people were allowed to do or not.

When asked about the trouble that groups might experience on the street, the young people

referred to things such as trouble with shopkeepers, police harassment and security harassment. This was linked to wider community perceptions regarding gangs, and the fact that groups of young people were generally seen as disruptive. As one young person commented: *'Any group that tend to hang out where they're not wanted, like I know one time we went to Knox City and we were – there's been a lot of problems with gangs hanging around there – and there was a group of about 20 of us, but we were jut all sitting around in the food court area, but they told us to leave, like, 'cos they didn't want large numbers of the community'*.

Yet, when asked specific questions about their contact with authority figures in public places, there did not appear to be a particularly negative relationship between these young people and these figures. For instance, 12 of the young people had had contact with the police, mainly on the street. According to the Anglo Australian young people, this contact was generally good. They said that they were treated well when stopped, and were helped when a victim crime. Only 1 young person felt that they had been treated generally badly.

Similar responses were given in relation to contact with security guards. This mainly occurred in shopping centres. Here the young people said they were treated OK by the security guards when stopped, they were helped and protected by the security guards, and they were friends with them. They negative experiences related to being hassled and told to move on. But overall, there was a generally positive relationship between the young people and private security guards.

In general, the response of the Anglo Australian young people to the gang issue was to offer the gang members greater support, help and direction. As one young person put it: *'I think young people (should be given) a sense of identity and belonging, so these groups (youth groups) can be good ways of, sort of a circuit breaker for young people feeling they have to belong to a gang to find a sense of identity and belonging – it can be a circuit breaker as opposed to violence'* (AA9). Some mentioned leaving them alone, others the taking of active steps to disband such formations.

Most of the young people also referred to passive and active methods of policing as one means to prevent gang-related behaviour and activity. This is indicated in Table 10.

Table 10:  
Young People's Perceptions of What Police Can Do about Gangs

Type of Action	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Get more information/accurate facts	1	5.0	3.6
Get to know them/talk to them	3	15.0	10.7
Maintain a presence	11	55.0	39.3
Stop hassling them	1	5.0	3.6
Contain/stop them	2	10.0	7.1
Prosecute/put them in gaol	4	20.0	14.3
Can't do much	4	20.0	14.3
Don't know	2	10.0	7.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>		<b>100.0</b>
N=20			

In discussion, the young people placed emphasis on surveillance ('just keep an eye on them') and active intervention ('move them on') as measures to prevent youth gangs from engaging in violence and other anti-social activity.

In a more constructive or positive vein, other young people spoke about the need for police to establish better communication with the young gang members:

AA5: *'Give them the time of day. Trust what they're saying. Don't always judge them.'*

AA12: *'I don't know. Have a better sort of rapport with them, not so much that, you know, the gangs are the baddies, the police are the goodies. To respect them for what they do and all that sort of stuff, because then they'll get respect back obviously.'*

Given the apparent lack of gang activity in their schools, the young people felt that not much was needed on the part of schools beyond that of teaching young people the consequences and alternatives to gang life.

Social services were seen as possible avenues for helping gang members through provision of support and guidance, and help with work and education and money. Interestingly, 10 of the young people felt that migrant services could be beneficial by providing support groups for ethnic minority youth. The specific content of such services was oriented toward easing the adjustment of recent migrants into the Australian social setting.

AA2: *'Just teach them that there's people here, there's you, there's your people, and they just have to come together.'*

AA3: *'Teach more racial tolerance, so that people aren't being racist to start with.'*

AA5: *'They should probably introduce them to people, like to their own sort, and Australians, so that they're not left hanging around with just their own sort of people.'*

AA6: *'Maybe, if the people are in it because of being part of racism and stuff, maybe they'd be able to try and give them confidence in themselves. But once they've made up their mind, there's not a great deal you can do to change it.'*

AA7: *'I think that might be, like, 'cos they haven't fully adjusted to living in Australia.'*

AA8: *'Maybe the ethnic people that join gangs are wanting to cling to their cultural identity and they feel uncomfortable with our country so that's maybe why they turn to gangs, so they can sort out who they are. I think counselling intimidates a lot of people. They think "Oh, I'm going to see a counsellor, there must be something wrong with me", so you've gotta counsel them in a way they think is not counselling.'*

AA9: *'I suppose especially for new arrivals, it's pretty daunting going to a new country with a totally different culture. If there were Asian groups set up to make the transition easier.'*

As these comments imply, the main focus for 'adjustment' and change lies with the ethnic minority young people, rather than with the Anglo Australian young people. There is little recognition that positive social change is associated with modifying their behaviour, their attitudes, and their relationships, as part of the process.

Broadly speaking, however, there is nevertheless an acknowledgement of the difficulties of transition for young people who have migrated to Australia from another country and culture. This was also reflected in comments that what government can do about gangs is to provide more jobs for young people, and more funding and services for young people.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This study has been based upon interviews with 20 young people from an Anglo Australian background. The young people lived in stable home and residential environments. They lived in households which were financially secure, and in most cases both parents were in paid employment. The young people were members of the dominant ethnic grouping in Australia, and this was reflected in their perceptions of and attitudes towards non-Anglo Australians.

In general, these young people had reasonable access to social and recreational facilities. They had few problems with authority figures, whether in the school or on the streets. They hung around in groups, most of which formed on the basis of shared interests, musical preferences, neighbourhood ties and recreational activities. The main basis for group membership was friendship and social connection.

While few of these young people were in gangs, and few had had contact with gangs in either school or outside school activities, they did make a number of observations regarding gangs and gang-related behaviour which are worthy of note:

- It was acknowledged that most young people take part in groups of some kind, and that in general such groups were formed on the basis of *personal interests and tastes*, which they could share with like-minded young people
- Distinctions were made between *different groups on the street*, according to such criteria as troublesome/fun, ethnicity and gender, although a number of the young people also insisted that essentially there was no fundamental difference between the various group formations
- Gangs constituted a subset of street groups, and were defined primarily in terms of *violence*, engagement in *criminal acts* such as property crime, and *illegal social activity* such as drug use. They were also identified on the basis of *ethnic minority status*.

A strong feature of the discussions was the idea that gang formation was closely tied to both socio-economic background (e.g., financial resources and family support), and to ethnic background (e.g., visible minorities). As such, given the relatively privileged economic position and social status of the young people who were interviewed, it is hardly surprising that they did not frame the 'gang issue' in terms of Anglo Australian young people.

There was a clear, and complex, relationship between gang formation and racism. Racism was seen as a reason for the establishment of certain types of gangs, mainly so that people from ethnic minority backgrounds could protect themselves from verbal and physical assaults of a racist nature. Rather than simply combining for fun and to share similar interests, then, the rationale behind some types of group membership was protection.

Racism was also construed to mean the close group identification of young people from similar ethnic, national and cultural backgrounds, in ways which affirmed the young person's membership of one section of society (but, in the eyes of the respondents, not another). Ethnic identification was thus conflated with the idea of 'racism'. That is, group formation based upon mutual understanding and shared experiences was seen to actively exclude and include people on the basis of 'race' or 'ethnicity'. From the perspective of the dominant group – the Anglo Australian young people – this was seen as a problem, even though the

processes of exclusion, and emphases on 'difference', from the dominant group constitute major reasons for this social phenomenon.

Racism was also seen to be a vital ingredient in why conflicts occurred between different groups of young people on the street. Social differences are manifest in particular physical and cultural traits and characteristics. Street conflicts between particular 'ethnic' groups (such as 'Asians', and 'Anglo Australians') are thus perhaps more visible and defined (in the sense of recognisable group affiliation) than otherwise may be the case in intra-group conflicts.

The young people in this study were relatively unaffected by the phenomenon of youth gangs. However, they were conscious of their existence. In their view, dealing with gangs requires a multi-faceted approach. It should, for example, incorporate allocation of greater societal resources to 'disadvantaged' young people, as well as involve various styles of passive and active policing of street-present young people. A crucial omission in the discussions was the relationship to, and responsibilities of, the wider Anglo Australian community with regard to these questions.

## **2.7 Recommendations**

### *i. Canadian Gangs and Ethnicity*

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

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

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

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

- Education about Canada and the Canadian way of life prior to leaving the country of origin
- Opportunities to discuss Canada and the Canadian way of life, and the probable impact on the family unit, before leaving the country of origin
- Access to adequate settlement services immediately upon arrival, and for an extended period thereafter
- ESL [English as Second Language] classes for adults that are free and available during the day, in the evenings and at weekends
- ESL classes for children that are free and available outside regular classroom time
- Access to community kitchens and similar programmes that address the problem of family isolation

- Programmes specifically designed for immigrants from war zones to help reduce the long term effects of exposure to violence
- Access to 'buddy' systems whereby support can be provided for individuals and families during their first few years of life in Canada

It is further recommended that there 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 this study pertain to the nature of inter-ethnic relations involving ethnic minority groups and Anglo Australian young people.

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

- It is essential that young people in general be provided with *specific education in cross-cultural issues* in order that the backgrounds, cultures and patterns of life pertaining to specific ethnic groups be better understood by all concerned
- Attention must also be directed at the provision of *anti-racist education*, so that issues of discrimination, prejudice and unequal power relations be analysed and discussed in an enlightened, informative and empathetic manner
- Following the example of the City of Adelaide (see White, 1998: 47), there should be developed at the local, regional and state levels a series of *youth reconciliation projects*, that will promote the diversity of cultures among young people, aim to reduce violence between them, and give young people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds the practical opportunity to get to know each other at a personal and group level
- 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
- 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.

In the case of Anglo Australian young people, the challenge is to engage them in dialogue about the constitution and composition of Australian society, and to foster a 'multicultural' view of what it is to be Australian. Racism is about relationships, social assumptions, personal and institutional actions, and stereotypes. Conciliation is about diminishing the distance between 'them' and 'us'. It is about finding ways to forge new relationships – based upon mutual respect, personal dignity, and social solidarity.

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