



## Research and Statistics Division

The Nature of Canadian Urban Gangs  
and their Use of Firearms: A Review of  
the Literature and Police Survey





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*The views expressed in this report are those of the authors  
and do not necessarily represent the views  
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## Executive Summary

**T**he issue of firearm violence in major urban centers, particularly Toronto, has received considerable public and media attention in recent months due to several high-profile cases. There is speculation that much of the Toronto violence may be related to urban gangs. Although research literature on the nature of urban gangs exists, there is a need to synthesize the body of literature and examine the issue from a Canadian perspective. The purpose of this project is threefold; to bring together all available studies on Canadian urban gangs, both qualitative and quantitative; to produce a police-based profile of Canadian urban gangs with particular attention paid to firearm use in six Canadian cities (Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Regina and Halifax) and to describe a sample of police-initiated or police-implemented programs that deal with urban gang members and their use of guns.

Questions pertaining to the nature of urban gangs and police initiated programs were drafted into a survey format and sent to police officials in the six cities. Responses to the police survey and information from published research sources, were combined for the content of this report.

### **Canadian Studies Involving Urban Gangs**

Each of the studies reviewed for this project remarked on the paucity of research on Canadian urban gangs. However, there were sufficient studies to provide information in this area. The studies reviewed pointed to the lack of consensus on the definitions for different types of gangs and each study employed a slightly different definition for street or urban gang, but contained a central theme involving multiple individuals and criminal activity. Most studies called for a universal definition for the different types of gangs.

### **Gang Member Demographics**

Males were over-represented in urban gangs and females are either absent or marginally represented and this seems to hold true across the country. The police survey respondents confirmed this finding.

The bulk of the research suggests urban gangs are made up of young adults and adolescents. The police survey responses confirmed that the majority of urban gang members tend to be relatively young, with average ages of approximately 18, and an age range from 11 to 50 years.

In terms of ethnicity, the research and the survey responses suggest that ethnicity may not be as great a contributing factor to urban gang membership as is neighbourhood. However, it appears that various ethnic groups are over-represented in some neighbourhoods and this might contribute to specific ethnic representation of some gangs.

### **Activities**

The research suggests that over one half of the gang members engaged in some type of antisocial activity such as fighting, stealing, vandalism, or drug use before joining a gang, and that nearly all members commit criminal offences after joining. Property offences; particularly break and enter, and auto theft were common offences and most studies cited heavy involvement in violent crimes such as assault, robbery, and home invasion. Collectively, the most prominent offences were drug-related offences, such as production, importation or trafficking of illegal drugs. The survey respondents reported similar gang activities but also included fraud operations and homicide.

Both the research and the survey results indicated that some of the urban gangs appeared to operate independently, some seemed to work within short or long term contractual relationships with organized

crime groups or criminal biker gangs, and others were described as a street level presence of organized crime groups. The principal relationships between the urban gangs and crime groups seemed centered on the distribution and sale of drugs, the protection of territory, and enforcement. The research proposed that by using urban gangs to achieve their aims, organized crime groups can maintain a distance and be somewhat insulated from direct detection.

### **Use of firearms**

One of the studies reported on the regional differences in urban gang use of firearms in assaultive crimes. More than half of the jurisdictions surveyed in the study reported that the use of firearms by gang members in assaultive crimes was non-existent or very rare. Approximately one in ten jurisdictions reported that firearm use in these types of offences was frequent, with the highest frequency in Alberta.

Based on survey responses, some general comparative statements were made about the firearms confiscated by the police in relation to gang activity. Firearms-related violence in Vancouver and the lower mainland of British Columbia is comparable to that of any other major centre in Canada including the greater Toronto area. Of the Western provinces, the lowest incidence of illegal firearms use was in Regina. Halifax police reported that they had not seen firearms used in the commission of offences by urban gang members.

### **Police Programs**

Research has indicated that the most effective method of countering urban gang activity is in prevention programs, and all cities surveyed were responding to that need. Each of the six jurisdictions surveyed were active in police operations to deal with urban gangs. Five of these were also active in establishing programs designed to prevent youth from joining gangs by providing education and alternative action services, and one city was in the process of initiating such programs.



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# 1. Introduction

The issue of firearm violence in major urban centers, particularly Toronto, has received considerable public and media attention recently due to several high-profile cases. There is speculation by some that much of the Toronto violence is gang-related. As a result of events in Toronto and concerns from other Canadian cities, it was determined that a literature review examining gangs in Canadian cities would be appropriate. While there is literature examining the use of weapons, and specifically firearms, within gangs, there is a need to synthesize the body of literature and examine the issue from a Canadian perspective. As such, the following literature review focuses on the nature of urban gangs and their use of weapons, with a particular focus on firearms.

## 1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this project is threefold; to bring together all available studies on Canadian urban gangs, both qualitative and quantitative; to produce a police-based profile of Canadian urban gangs with particular attention paid to firearm use in six Canadian cities (Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Regina and Halifax); and to describe police-initiated or police-implemented programs that deal with urban gang members and their use of guns.

## 1.2 Research Methods

Information used in this report was gathered from published research sources, responses to a survey designed for police, and telephone interviews with police personnel in the six cities. The Internet literature search accessed various search engines using the search words and terms *urban gangs*, *street gangs*, *youth gangs*, and combinations of these words with *weapons*, *guns*, *police programmes* (*programs*) and *control*. Variations of these terms were also entered with *Vancouver*, *Regina*, *Winnipeg*, *Toronto*, *Montreal*, and *Halifax*. Pertinent references were recorded, and the materials were obtained through university and government libraries and by request through police departments.

Questions pertaining to the nature of urban gangs and police-initiated programs were drafted into a survey format (see appendix A). An introduction was added to explain the purpose of the project and to supply the respondent with contact information for the researcher and Department of Justice personnel. The introduction also informed respondents that the survey could be completed by fax, email, or by telephone.

For each of the six cities, the telephone number for the office of the Chief of Police was obtained through the Internet or directory assistance. The researcher spoke with the assistants to the Chief, explained the purpose of the project, and obtained contact email addresses. An email outlining the project was sent to each office with the survey attached.

For each city, survey results were analyzed and summarized. A draft was sent back to the appropriate police contact for verification of facts. Once verified, the results were incorporated into the report.

## 1.3 Limitations

Each of the studies reviewed for this project remarked on the paucity of research on Canadian urban gangs. While importing American theory and experience with gangs to the Canadian context may seem

logical, it is inadvisable for several reasons. The Astwood (2004) report points out that Canada's population in 2002 was 11% of that of the United States and that the proportion of individuals involved in gangs in Canada is less than 1% of those involved in gangs in the United States. Thus, the data from two countries are not comparable samples.

Moreover, Mackenzie and Johnson (2003) noted that bulk of American gang research focuses on certain groups, specifically African Americans and Latino/Hispanic populations, while little research examines Aboriginal gangs. But in Canada, particularly in the Prairie provinces, Aboriginals comprise a large proportion of urban gang membership (Criminal Intelligence Service Canada, 2004).

Furthermore, Canadian laws and criminal court processes are different from those in the United States, and these legal differences could affect the applicability of American models. However, Kelly and Caputo (2005) pose that Canada is experiencing a phenomena similar to that of the American gang situation, suggesting there are issues with gang migration, gang violence, trans-national gangs, and recruitment of gangs within the prison system. Nonetheless, there are clear differences between the two countries.



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## 2. Canadian Studies on Urban Gangs

This section introduces the studies reviewed and includes the definition of urban gangs used in each study. It should be noted that some studies and police departments use the term “street gang” synonymously with “urban gang”. These two terms will be used interchangeably throughout this report.

### 2.1 Definitions

Hebert, Hamel and Savoie (1997) conducted a comprehensive review of Canadian and American literature on six gang-based topics, including the definition of a urban gang, and illustrated six different types of gangs. The three less structured types of gangs are copycat gangs, territorial gangs, and delinquent groups, all of which generally do not engage in violence. The three other organized gang groups include violent gangs with ideological goals, street gangs, and criminal organizations.

*Violent gangs with ideological goals* tend to have political or religious agendas and engage in violent activities to attain their goals, such as satanic rituals. Skinheads are an example of this type of group. These gangs may have a highly developed hierarchy, and can be part of larger organizations. They identify themselves with specific clothing and through cultural, religious or political biases but are not generally concerned about territorial control. These groups may engage in serious crimes including group violence (e.g., assault or homicide) for the purpose of asserting their beliefs.

*Street gangs* are usually comprised of adolescents and young adults who commit various forms of criminal acts. The level of organization tends to vary between gangs, and may have links to adult criminal organizations. They tend to be highly territorial, operating for economic reasons and are primarily involved in drug trafficking. Street gangs may also commit high levels of violence.

*Criminal organizations* tend to be small groups with stable and sophisticated operations, with the goal of financial gain. Interests are usually highly diversified. Some of these groups may have elaborate rules and generally do not seek attention. They are highly concerned with territorial control, they may use intimidation and violence to promote or protect their interests, and they can even go as far as to eliminate competitors through violent acts.

The Greater Vancouver gang study (Gordon & Foley, 1998) was a project designed to serve four purposes: to develop profile data on known gang members; to test the validity of classifications and definitions from earlier studies; to identify reasons for joining and leaving gangs; and to examine characteristics of gangs from the perspectives of gang members and agents who work with gang members (e.g., probation officers).

Gordon and Foley (1998) defined a typology of groups prior to collecting data. These types were youth movements, youth groups, criminal groups, wannabe groups, street gangs, and criminal business organizations. The first two groups (youth movements, youth groups) were not considered gangs and were not the focus of the study.

*Criminal Groups:* Small clusters of friends who band together, usually for a short period of time (no more than one year) to commit crime primarily for financial gain. They can

be composed of young people and/or adults and may be mistakenly, or carelessly, referred to as a gang.

*Wannabe Groups:* 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. A wannabe group will be highly visible and its members will boast about their “gang” involvement because they want to be seen by others as gang members.

*Street Gangs:* groups of young people and young adults who band together to form a semi-structured organization primarily to engage in planned and profitable criminal behaviour or organized violence against rival street gangs.

*Criminal Business Organizations:* organized groups that exhibit a formal structure and a high degree of sophistication. These groups are comprised primarily of adults, including older adults. They engage in criminal activity, primarily for economic reasons, and almost invariably maintain a low profile, which is a key characteristic distinguishing them from street gangs (Gordon and Foley, 1998, p. v).

The Astwood Strategy survey was the first research effort in which Canadian police departments were surveyed about the extent and characteristics of youth gang problems in Canada. The term “youth gang” was defined as

...a group of youth or young adults in the respondent's jurisdiction, under the age of 21, that the respondent or other responsible persons in their agency or community were willing to identify or classify as a gang. As part of this definition, we asked respondents to *exclude* motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, and other exclusively adult gangs (Astwood, 2004, p. 1).

Mellor, MacRaw, and Pauls (2005) undertook a study with three objectives: to develop a multidimensional conceptual framework for youth involvement in gangs in the Canadian context; to identify programs and services relevant to youth gangs in Canada; and to categorize program initiatives based on their level of prevention. Information was obtained through literature reviews and key informants in government departments, police departments, and non-governmental organizations. Mellor, MacRaw and Pauls (2005) proposed a multidimensional model of gang activities, gang organization, and motivation to join gangs, as well as recruitment, and exit strategies. The model focused on five different types of gangs/groups:

*Type A – Group of Friends:* These members are not antisocial, and are therefore not included in this report.

*Type B – Spontaneous Criminal Activity Group/Gangs:* these groups can be large and social in nature. Members are generally prosocial, and the criminal activity that does occur is spontaneous or situation-motivated, such as shoplifting, theft, bullying, swarming, and gratuitous violence. Emphasis tends to be on maintaining a highly visible profile and mystique. These groups were reported to be fluid, with no permanent leadership or hierarchy. Individuals could be members of multiple groups/gangs without negative consequences. There was little evidence that they have any connection to organized crime groups. Weapon use appeared to be limited but can include knives, bats, homemade weapons, and handguns. In addition to being a fashion statement, members



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may join for other reasons: protection from others, belief that gang membership is “normal”, gaining a sense of belonging and recognition, and a lack of legitimate alternative activities or associations. Recruitment is usually based within existing social networks where friends come together, and in other cases protection is offered. Members tend to leave the group/gang as they mature or change their peer group.

*Type C – Purposive Group/Gangs:* these groups/gangs usually form for the main purpose of committing a specific offence. Size is dependent on the purpose of the formation. Crimes include property offences, home invasion, drug trafficking, procurement, extortion, robbery, hate crimes, and vigilante-type assaults. These gangs can emerge for a specific purpose from existing gangs and may disappear after the offence or activity is completed. These gangs tend to be more structured than Type B groups, with a small, male-dominated membership and few if any links to criminal business organizations. Members may join to fulfill survival or emotional needs, engage in thrill-seeking, alleviate boredom, or take part in retribution. Recruitment can be done within existing social groups which tend to be short-lived, but police intervention by arrest or diversion can result in the group dissolving.

*Type D – Youth Street Gangs:* youth street gangs are typically organized to carry out money-making criminal activity or organized violence against other gangs. Members can be identified through gang-specific clothing, tattoos, or jewellery and mark their territory with gang graffiti. Activities tend to be planned and organized. Youth street gangs have been known to commit a wide array of crimes including sexual and non-sexual harassment, vehicle theft, drug trafficking, weapons procurement, prostitution, intimidation, extortion, robbery, assault, and homicide. These gangs usually have a hierarchy and may or may not have connections to organized crime groups. They tend to have moderate levels of leadership and a code of conduct is often imposed. There can also be affiliate members associated with these gangs who are not fully initiated and are not aware of all operations but may receive protection and have access to drugs and weapons. The core members generally have full membership status and offer complete loyalty and devotion to the gang. Because their focus is to further the gang's interests, they usually have significant influence on other members. Some of the motivations for joining this type of gang include money, power, protection, a lack of legitimate alternatives, and social acceptance. Recruitment can be done by friends or family, or by taking in disenfranchised youth. Some members are coerced to join while in prison. Initiations are usually directed by the leaders and may involve committing certain offences, being beaten, or for females, having intercourse with all male members. Some gangs may even require proof of criminality. These gangs are typically the most difficult to leave but members may have the opportunity of being “beaten out” which involves a severe assault. Those who choose to leave usually require multifaceted exit strategies with help from the police, community groups, and family.

*Type E – Structured Criminal Organizations:* these organizations tend to be highly structured and sophisticated business operations that may operate internationally. To maintain a low profile and distance from criminal acts, these groups tend to use street-level groups to carry out many aspects of the business. They have been known to use children under 12 to spy, commit break and enter, act as couriers, and to engage in child pornography. Youth in these organizations generally have a low ranking.

In a more recent undertaking, Kelly and Caputo (2005) surveyed police departments to determine the nature of urban gangs and to examine their links to organized crime groups. Although the *Criminal Code*

defines organized crime, it does not define types of gangs. As a result, definitions of urban gangs vary between jurisdictions. Kelly and Caputo (2005) proposed that in addition to the need for a universal definition of street gangs, Canada also needs to define the linkages between types of organized crime groups. Specifically, how can Canadian police determine whether a street gang is a true “street gang” or a street-level presence of an organized crime group. The researchers also proposed that criminal activity should be understood in the broader social context in which it occurs.

When Kelly and Caputo asked police how they determined whether criminal activity was gang related, most respondents reported these common indicators:

[A] reliable source of information that an individual is a member of a gang; the individual has been observed associating with known gang members; the individual acknowledges gang membership; the individual has been involved in gang-related crime; there is a court ruling that the individual is a gang member; and the individual uses gang markers, such as gang colours, paraphernalia and tattoos. In fact, one of the most common techniques used for identifying activity as being street gang related was the presence of gang colours, tattoos, dress, and graffiti. (Kelly & Caputo, 2005, p. 23).

Respondents also reported tracking the money from drug sales to determine whether the street gang was retaining it as profit or funnelling it away to another group. Monitoring changes in the criminal activities of known gang members was another indicator. For example, increased violent crimes, increased involvement in drug trafficking, and decreased involvement in other types of crime, such as property offences and suggested that the changing relationship may warrant further inspection.

## 2.2 Demographics

The research reviewed for the current report included studies that were limited to specific populations, such as youth, adult federal offenders, males, or females. Therefore, the summary of information might not reflect the actual demographic representation of urban gang members.

### 2.2.1 Gender

Three of the studies were specific to males only (Craig et al., 2002; Nafehk, 2002; Nafehk & Stys, 2004), one study had an exclusively female sample (Mackenzie & Johnson, 2003) and the other involved mixed gender samples. Of the mixed gender studies, females made up a small part of the participant group, from 3% (Gordon & Foley, 1998) to 32% (Hamel et al., 1998). According to police respondents in the Astwood survey (2004), the percentage of females in gangs ranged from 0% (Nova Scotia) to 12% (British Columbia), with a national average of 6%.

### 2.2.2 Age

Several of the publications reviewed included individuals of different ages as part of the nature of the study (i.e., youth gang studies did not include older adults, and federal inmate studies excluded youth). The longitudinal study by Craig et al., (2002) involved 76 boys who became gang members by the age of 13 or 14. Two other studies included older individuals under the definition of “youth”. Hamel et al. (1998) extended the age range in their sample of current and former street gang members, resulting in a mean age of 18 years (age range 14 to 25 years). Respondents from the Astwood (2004) Canadian police survey were asked to estimate the number of youth gang members within five age groups. Results from individual locations varied, yielding a national average of 10% below the age of 16 years; 39% between 16 and 18; 37% between 19 and 21, and 14% over 21. Not specific to youth, the Vancouver study by





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Gordon and Foley (1998) found that the mean age of the 35 street gang members in the sample was 18 years (age range was not reported).

### 2.2.3 Ethnicity

Nafekh (2002) explored the characteristics of Aboriginal federal inmates who were gang members while Craig et al. (2002) limited their sample boys who spoke French as their first language and had parents who were born in Quebec. Other studies described a variety of ethnic demographics. Thirty-eight percent of the Montreal youth in Hamel et al.'s (1998) study had Canadian-born parents, 19% had a Haitian background, 16% had a Latin American background, and the others were from a variety of backgrounds. In the Vancouver study (Gordon & Foley, 1998), the largest group was comprised of Asian gang members (45%), followed by Caucasian (20%), Aboriginal (14%), Middle Eastern (8%), Indo-Canadian (5%), African Canadian (3%) and Hispanic (2%).

The ethnic variation of gang composition has also been seen on a national level. The Astwood (2004) police survey reported on the composition of gang members across Canada: African-Canadian (25%), First Nations (22%), Caucasian (18%), Asian (12%), East Indian (14%), Latino/Hispanic (6%), and Middle Eastern (3%). British Columbia had the highest proportion of Asian members (37%). Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba had the highest representation of First Nations members (96%, 58%, and 58% respectively). Ontario had the greatest percentage of East Indian members (21%). Ontario also reported a high proportion of African Canadian members (36%), as did Quebec (51%) and Nova Scotia (48%). Nova Scotia had a high proportion of Caucasian members (47%). The respondents also indicated that 36% of the youth gangs had members of two or more ethnic/racial groups, averaging from less than 1% in Nova Scotia to 46% in British Columbia.

Finally, examining ethnic composition in federal inmate gang members, Nafekh and Stys (2004) reported that there were 916 identified urban gang affiliates in prison between 1996 and 2003, of which 37% were African-Canadian, 29% were Caucasian, 20% were Aboriginal, 3% were Asian, and 11% were from other backgrounds.

## 2.3 Reasons for Joining a Street Gang

Several of the studies reviewed suggested reasons why youth join gangs. In their study of Montreal youth gangs, Hamel et al. (1998) found that males and females were recruited differently. Girls were usually recruited in a systematic way by finding a vulnerable girl, offering protection and friendship, and then trapping her. It was less clear if the majority of males joined of their own volition or if they were coerced as well. Several of the studies stated that many gang members came from abusive backgrounds and low socio-economic neighbourhoods. Gang membership can offer these individuals a sense of belonging, with the gang often becoming a surrogate family. For some, gang activities provided the means to acquire material possessions and a sense of power. The lifestyle has also been glamorized, particularly by the entertainment industry.

## 2.4 Gang Activities

Several of the studies indicated that urban gang members tend to engage in graffiti or “tagging”. The stylized and symbolic images are spray-painted on buildings, bridges, or other structures. It appears that the intent is to announce the gang’s presence, mark territory, and cause fear in the community. Tagging is generally done by relatively newly established gangs and not the more established gangs whose members see it as a guide for police.

Not surprisingly, compared to youth who do not become gang members, those who become involved in gangs generally engage in more delinquent behaviour, with the highest involvement in fighting, stealing, vandalism, and drug use (Craig et al., 2002). Results from Hamel et al.'s (1998) study indicated that 68% of the youth in their sample had already committed some type of delinquent act prior to joining a gang, and 83% felt that their gang committed violent acts. Police respondents in the Astwood (2004) survey ranked criminal activities by degree of youth gang involvement in Canada. Assault was first (72%), followed by drug trafficking (70%), burglary/break and enter (68%), vandalism/graffiti/tagging (64%), intimidation/extortion (56%) and auto theft/exportation (47%). In their Montreal youth gang study, Hamel et al. (1998) reported that females usually provide an income for the gang through exotic dancing, escorting, or prostitution, and acting as drug couriers.

Including youth and adults from all types of gangs in their gang member probation sample, Gordon and Foley (1998) reported that 38% percent of all gang members had a current conviction for violence (not specified), 35% for property offences, 9% for drug related offences, and 3% for weapons related offences. Furthermore, 34% of the sample had a prior conviction for a violent offence. Offence details for different types of gangs were also combined in two federal inmate studies. In a female sample (Mackenzie & Johnson, 2003), gang members were more likely than a matched sample of non-gang member inmates to have committed assault or robbery, but less likely to have committed murder. In a sample of Aboriginal inmates who were gang members, Nafekh (2002) found that the gang members were more likely to be convicted for robbery, assault, and weapons related offences than a matched sample of non-gang affiliated Aboriginal inmates, but less likely to be convicted of sexual assault. Nafekh and Stys (2004) found in another study of federal inmates that street gang members were most likely to have been convicted of robbery, drug offences, homicide, sexual assault and weapons related offences. Additionally, the street gang members were more likely than other types of gang affiliates to have convictions for violent offences.

## 2.5 Use of Weapons by Gangs

In addition to reporting statistics on weapons related offences, two of the studies reviewed included weapons use as a distinct variable. Hamel et al., (1998) reported that the number of weapons used by urban gangs has increased over time as well as the number of deadly weapons. They suggested that previously, gang responses to minor transgressions were limited to fist fights, whereas now, responses can be with weapons. The Astwood (2004) survey respondents reported the frequency of firearm use in the commission of assaultive crimes: 46% responded "not at all"; 24% responded "rarely"; 19% responded "sometimes"; and 11% responded "often". In the "often" category, the provincial breakdown of responses ranged from 0% (British Columbia and Nova Scotia) to 67% (Alberta).

## 2.6 Ties to Organized Crime Groups

Hamel et al. (1998) suggested that crime committed by the more organized youth gangs is not very different from that of organized crime groups; however, street gangs appear to engage in different activity across time without a long-term specialization. Police respondents in Kelly and Caputo's (2005) survey indicated that a major activity of street gangs is to provide distribution networks for the drug trade, control territory, and to collect debts. Other studies reported that much of the violence committed by street gangs is done in relation to the drug business, such as fighting between competitors or raids on the competition, robberies, and property offences to raise capital to purchase drugs. Although some street gangs run their own independent operations, such as the marijuana grow operations owned and managed by street gangs in British Columbia, or fraud operations (credit and debit cards) and prostitution rings



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managed by street gangs in Quebec. Many street gangs appear to have ties to organized crime groups. The nature of the ties can vary from temporary contractual relationships, to a permanent integration, with the gang acting as a street level presence of the particular crime group. By using street gangs to achieve their aims, organized crime groups can maintain a distance and be somewhat insulated from direct detection.

According to the Astwood (2004) survey, police in Ontario reported that 38% of gang-related drug trafficking and 15% each of the weapons possession and auto theft/exportation offences were committed in collaboration with organized crime groups. In British Columbia, organized crime was involved in 42% of the drug trafficking, 33% of the intimidation/extortion, and 33% of the prostitution offences committed by youth gang members. In Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba combined, organized crime gangs were involved in 42% of the drug trafficking, 32% of all assaults, and 32% of vandalism/graffiti/tagging offences. Forty-four of the survey respondents indicated that youth gangs in their jurisdictions had established subordinate or affiliate relationships with organized crime groups. The most prevalent of these were Aboriginal/Native Canadian gangs (40%), Asian gangs (22%), and outlaw motorcycle gangs (22%).

Depending on the definition used for “street gang”, their activities can range from antisocial although not technically illegal acts, to the most serious of crimes. As youth gang members mature, they tend to either dispense with gang association, or become more entrenched by joining larger or more dangerous gangs. A commonality between all of the studies reviewed, is the propensity for street gangs to be involved with drugs, and the violence that permeates that involvement.

### 3. Results of the Police Survey

Police are often asked to describe characteristics of the “average gang”, or cite statistics in regard to the “national trend” on some aspect of gang activities, such as firearms use. The problem with these types of questions is that there is no country-wide “average” or “trend”. Gang characteristics and activities are very region and city specific. To make matters even more complicated, within a city, the diversity of gangs prevents us from capturing single measures of central tendencies.

Some of the police departments surveyed could not provide responses for the number of urban gangs, or the estimated number of members. Particularly in the larger jurisdictions as these values change on a daily basis.

The surveys that were sent to the police provided the following definition of “urban gangs/street gangs”:

Individuals within an urban area who formally or informally affiliate themselves with a particular common group and express themselves as members by antisocial behaviour through the commission of offences. It does not include organised crime gangs.

The information provided here is summarized from police responses to the survey and is intended to provide a general snapshot of the nature of urban gangs and their activities. Much of this information is common between cities, although there are regionally unique features as well. One of the common features between the urban gangs in the six cities is that the primary focus of activity involves drugs. Crimes committed for drug-related reasons include property offences, robbery, assault, and homicide. However, this is not to infer that all of these offences committed throughout the country are attributable to urban gangs.

#### 3.1 Vancouver

Although there has been organized crime and urban gang activity across the city, Vancouver has two main areas that have major problems with gangs: the Eastside where more drug offences tend to occur, and the downtown core, where the more serious violence is typically perpetrated. Despite these concentrations, it appears that the urban gangs of Vancouver are not territorial, but rather identify themselves along ethnic and crime specialization lines rather than geographic boundaries. Specifically, more than one gang may operate in the same geographical location but possibly due to the type of crimes being committed or the ethnic groups they belong to, disputes over territory are not common.

The majority of the urban gangs in Vancouver can be identified by ethnic composition. Predominantly, these are Asian, Indo (East Indian), and Native Canadian (Aboriginal) gangs. Of the Asian urban gangs in operation, the majority are linked to organized crime. Gang members are exclusively male and range in age from approximately 12 years to adulthood. Urban gang activity has ranged from simple mischief and drug distribution, to assaults and less common, homicide. Criminal activity, including violence is focused on economic gain (i.e., is business related). The main criminal activities of the Asian urban gangs tend to be the production of drugs, drug distribution, and trafficking.

The Indo gangs of Vancouver are exclusively male. Gang membership appears to be tied to an antisocial expression of caste or clan, meaning that these gangs can be subdivided by Indo-ethnic origins. Of the



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different ethnic categories of urban gangs in Vancouver, the Indo gangs appear to engage in violent crime more frequently than the other urban gangs particularly in regard to shootings. Offences, insults, and disrespect toward an Indo gang can elicit a violent response in retaliation, and can result in violence between gangs. Typical offences committed by these gangs are drug distribution, fraud and assault. While criminal activity involves economic gain, the predominance of violent crime is committed between Indo gangs of different cultural backgrounds.

Membership in Native Canadian urban gangs is predominately made up of youth who have moved away from reservations. These youth tend to have had difficulty in establishing pro-social associations and seem to have found kinship among gang members. Males tend to have the larger representation, with relatively fewer female members. It appears that the majority of Native gangs might be more dynamic and less organized than some of the other ethnic-exclusive gangs, as members tend to relocate more frequently. These gangs can be responsible for a wide range of offences that include property crimes and assault. Most notable among their activities is the recruitment of adolescent Aboriginal females into prostitution.

There appear to be few exclusively Caucasian urban gangs in the Vancouver area. Caucasians who are involved in urban gangs tend to be part of other, more ethnically diverse gangs. One principle street gang, the United Nations, has members who come from various ethnic backgrounds. It was reported that they operate for economic reasons only, specializing in the importation and exportation of drugs and illegal firearms but members have been associated with a range of offences including mischief, property offences, and violent offences including assaults and homicide. Generally, the violent offences tend to be committed against other gang members, and can be directly related to competition in the business of illegal exportation. This gang is likely the most organized of the Vancouver urban gangs even though it formed less than two years ago (around 2004). It appears that this gang holds high status and even has its own clothing line with its name prominently displayed on garments.

Generally, Vancouver urban gang members tend to carry knives but not guns. However, they seem to have access to guns and appear to use them, typically for retaliation and intimidation. Police interviews suggest there were comparatively few incidents of gang violence involving firearms, but this may be changing: Once guns were introduced into the subculture by the criminal element, most urban gangs appear to have adjusted to the change in order to keep abreast of competitive gangs.

Based on research from other jurisdictions and a comprehensive review of their own policy, practice and past results, the Vancouver police department is in the process of redesigning their approach to dealing with gangs and guns in the community. The current strategic planning involves enhanced intelligence gathering and communication; examining best practice models of targeting the environment, the person, and the behaviour; and a thorough review of programs and operations in other jurisdictions. Among the specific strategic actions stemming from the plan are recommendations for specialized intelligence staff (e.g., gun investigators); methods to ensure consistent and informed processing of offenders through the justice system; engaging the community particularly in regard to gang membership exit strategies; and to examine the impact of changes in public policy.

As part of their review, the Vancouver police have pulled offence data from the last ten years and identified specific offences involving gang members. These data will be used as benchmarks to assess the effects of new programs and operations.

## 3.2 Regina

According to the Regina Police, there are five urban gangs operating within the city of Regina. These are the Native Syndicate, Indian Posse, Crips, Saskatchewan Warriors, and Redd Alert. The largest, the Native Syndicate is made up of approximately 200 members, ranging in age from 17 to 35 years. There are approximately 10 to 20 females, and all members are of Aboriginal decent. The next largest is the Indian Posse, which is comprised of approximately 75 males and a few females, exclusively Aboriginal ranging from 17 to 35 years of age. The Crips is made up of approximately 50 members, including about a dozen females, with an age range of 12 to 17 years, and are also all of Aboriginal decent.

There is an additional street gang that appears sporadically in Regina called the Crazy Dragons. This group is linked to Asian organized crime groups although the membership is predominately Caucasian. When active in the city, this gang uses violence and intimidation in attempts to gain an exclusive market for the street level distribution of drugs. Through intelligence and targeted efforts, Regina police have been able to prevent this gang from establishing itself in the community.

The largest concentration of urban gangs is within low socioeconomic/high unemployment areas of the city which are predominately Aboriginal neighbourhoods. Drug trafficking and the violence surrounding control of territory seems to be ongoing. Intimidation of victims and witnesses has become a serious problem. In the last two years, police have investigated one gang-related homicide and several gang-related attempted murders involving firearms as well as several drive-by shootings. These incidents were thought to be related to drug activities. Police have also seized body armour on several occasions in the past two years.

Despite the disputes over territory, certain gangs have been known to cooperate on short-term joint criminal ventures such as drug trafficking. There appears to be no relationship between the urban gangs and outlaw motorcycle gangs, but there is evidence to suggest that some of the urban gangs have links to Asian organized crime groups and other organized crime groups, particularly in terms of drug supplies.

As in other Canadian cities, the Regina urban gangs seem to have found financial gain in criminal activity and power in numbers, which supports intimidation and violence. The offences committed by gang members range from property offences, to drug trafficking, to assaults with weapons and homicide. It is estimated that approximately 60% of the members carry some type of weapon (knives, brass knuckles). Although the majority of urban gang members do not carry firearms in their day to day lives, there have been some incidents where individuals who appear to have a gang affiliation have been found in possession of firearms. In Saskatchewan sawed-off shot guns and rifles are the firearms of choice. These firearms are readily available and are very difficult to trace as the majority are unregistered. However, there is some evidence to indicate that Regina urban gangs also have access to handguns.

Urban gang issues in Regina began to surface in 1996. Since 1998, the Regina Police Service has targeted gang leaders, a project that has resulted in multiple convictions and incarcerations. This ongoing process is thought to have contributed to the inability of any one gang maintaining predominance within the city.

In addition to their work within a dedicated Gang Unit and resources provided through the Cultural Relations Units and School Resource officers, the Regina Police service in partnership with community agencies, Saskatchewan Corrections and Public Safety and Saskatchewan Learning, are developing an initiative aimed at gang prevention/intervention in Regina's inner city. The primary goal is to educate the public to help prevent the development of gang connections; encourage vulnerable youth to access appropriate services, and to support safety and exit strategies. The initiative is in two phases: Phase one



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involves a review of gang-related publications and focus groups with service providers, school teachers and administrators, youth who are gang members and those who are at risk of gang membership, and families/caregivers. The information gathered will be used in the production of two videos with the purpose of sharing the findings with the wider community. Phase two involves designing, developing and disseminating a comprehensive education and communications package tailored to each target population.

Support materials will be presented to youth in grades four to six through the school system and supplementary materials will be offered to parents and professionals. Phase one is scheduled for completion in October 2006 and phase two is scheduled for completion in March 2007. It is expected that the comprehensive assessment of the specific needs and recommendations of the community and the youth involved in street gangs will aid in implementation of the appropriate strategies that will be most beneficial.

### 3.3 Winnipeg

The number of urban gangs in the Winnipeg area has fluctuated; however, there are three principle gangs currently operating. These are the Manitoba Warriors, the Indian Posse, and the Duce. The members of these gangs are exclusively Aboriginal and predominately male. There are multiple splinter groups, gangs associated with one of the three and at least one splinter group that is exclusively female. There is also one urban gang that is comprised of members from various ethnic backgrounds called the Mad Cow gang. The number of individuals involved in Winnipeg's urban gangs cannot be estimated. This is due to the tendency to move in and out of gangs, and high mobility between different jurisdictions.

While the overall number involved in urban gangs in Winnipeg is difficult to assess, general characteristics can be provided. There appears to be a wide age range of members in Winnipeg urban gangs; from as young as 11 years old to 50 or older. Most members tend to originate from low socioeconomic areas of the city, or move to these areas from outside the jurisdiction. New members are usually unsupervised and socially disadvantaged youth recruited from the city core. For these youth, gang membership may offer approval, acceptance, status, and protection. Members of the older, more established gangs often wear gang colours and can have gang-specific tattoos on their chest, neck or arms.

As seen in other Canadian cities, the urban gangs in Winnipeg may be responsible for a wide range of crime from property offences to drug trafficking, home invasions and homicide. "Tagging" is common as members mark their territory with gang-specific graffiti. There is ongoing competition between different gangs over territory, which can erupt into gang fights including stabbings and shootings. It is suspected that the newer gangs may be responsible for a substantial number of property offences, home invasions, and assaults. These younger gang members appear to have an attitude of self-entitlement and feel justified in their actions. The older urban gangs are more organized and tend to engage more in the importation and distribution of drugs. In terms of weapons, it was reported that many individuals carry a weapon, usually a knife, and although few carry firearms in their day to day activities, members appear to have access to firearms.

The Winnipeg police service has a Cultural Diversity program that builds partnerships between ethnic groups and the police services which aids in dealing with urban gangs. Given the high number of Aboriginal youth among the street gang members in Winnipeg, and that these youth often arrive in the city from reserves, the Cultural Diversity program extends beyond the City of Winnipeg to outlying areas. A full-time dedicated Aboriginal liaison officer travels out to the reserves and establishes relationships with community partners and individuals. The officer gives presentations to youth on career and life choices. The pros and cons of gangs and alternatives to joining gangs are discussed from the point of view of the youth, the family, the community, and the police.

These presentations include material on gang awareness and mentoring programs that are available through the police and community services. Working as part of a team with schools and community groups, the liaison officer encourages youth to be proactive and consider the positive and negative aspects of their choices.

### 3.4 Toronto

In addition to traditional intelligence methods, the Toronto police monitor gang activity by using a computerized data base that was specifically designed to store information on individuals associated with gangs. The data base is updated as new information becomes available, and search functions permit easy access to individual or group reports. It includes data concerning known gang members and affiliates, defined by meeting two of the seven criteria for gang involvement, as well as individuals who are considered “at risk” of becoming a member or affiliate, defined by meeting only one criterion. The criteria for gang involvement are:

1. direct/indirect involvement in gang activity;
2. self-admission;
3. information from a reliable source;
4. observed association with known members;
5. symbolic gang identifiers;
6. a court finding; or
7. physical evidence.

At the time of the survey (Spring 2006), 83 street gangs were recorded in the Toronto police database. However, due to the fluid nature of street gangs, many of which lack structure/organization seen in other organized crime groups, it is difficult to accurately determine the exact number of street gangs at any given time. Furthermore, two of the most violent gangs have recently been disrupted because their leaders are incarcerated and awaiting trial after being arrested in police gang-targeted projects.

There were over 3,000 individuals recorded in the gang data base, but a number of these, (approximately 50%) were classified as “at risk” individuals, not gang members or affiliates. In urban gangs, the number of members and associates ranged from just a few individuals to approximately 100. Less than ten percent of these individuals were female.

There were less than ten youth under the age of 15, and less than 50 youth who were under 16 in the data base. Most urban gang members and affiliates were in their early 20s and there were several over 40 years of age. In terms of ethnic composition, the commonality within many urban gangs was more neighbourhood-based than ethnically-based. In several cases, the gang name referred to the community or a specific street. In other cases, members live outside of the city itself, but continued to operate within the city and surrounding area. A current trend involves Toronto area street gang members traveling on a day to day basis to smaller cities and towns to sell drugs. Gang members appear to prefer relatively close-by “university towns” such as Kingston or Waterloo.

Some of the urban gangs have members who identify themselves by wearing certain colours, clothing, or symbolic markings. They might engage in tagging in order to announce their presence in an area both as a statement of bravado and to warn other urban gangs to stay away. Other urban gangs, particularly the more well-established, tend not to advertise their presence by tagging but might wear symbolic jewellery or tattoos.





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Generally, urban gangs are territorial and gang wars are not uncommon. However, urban gangs who compete over territory have been seen to collaborate from time to time, but this cooperation is often short lived. Attempts to eliminate competitors or settle differences can involve shootings. The basis for the shootings often involves “turf” disrespect or drug activity. This is also true for the majority of other crimes committed by urban gangs that can include property offences, drug distribution/trafficking, robberies, home invasions, assaults, and homicides. The principle drugs involved are cocaine, crack cocaine, and marijuana.

In terms of weapons, members generally have access to knives and home made weapons and many carry these. It seems that few members carry firearms unless there is a planned use, but most members appear to have access to firearms. These include automatic and semi-automatic handguns. It was reported that a portion of these weapons are taken from home burglaries and others are attained from more organized criminal groups.

The Toronto Police have invested in multiple programs to deal with prevention and intervention. In addition to interactive school and community presentations, the department is highly active in direct intervention programs. One of these programs is called “Troop”, in which youth who are aged 12 to 18 are paired with an officer and go on a nature retreat trip. This provides positive role-modeling as well as fostering pro-social relationships. A new program that will began in 2006 involves youth who are identified as at-risk for gang membership or affiliation. One hundred of these youth will be hired during the summer by the department and will work with the police on a variety of tasks. It is expected that this program will reinforce pro-social development and give the youth the benefits of working in the community while earning money. These programs are designed to work with the individual. One measure of success will be when that individual is no longer at risk of becoming a street gang member or affiliate.

In addition to targeting individuals, at risk communities also receive special attention. A new prevention and intervention program is the Toronto Antiviolence Intervention Strategy (TAVIS). Three teams of eighteen police officers are directly involved in this program. Police intelligence will identify a specific community and a patrol of these specialized officers create a highly visible presence in that community. It is expected that urban gang activity in these areas will be reduced.

In November of 2005, the Toronto police participated in a gun amnesty program. The firearms that were surrendered through the program were mostly older weapons from private owners and had not been used in crime. However, they represent a reduction in the number of guns that could be made available to criminals by theft.

### 3.5 Montreal

In Montreal, there are approximately 25 known street gangs with an estimated membership of 1,250. Approximately 80% of urban gang members attend school. By keeping a presence in the schools, these gangs have an opportunity to recruit new members and monitor recruiting attempts by other gangs. The recruiting methods can be subtle and include demonstrating the material wealth associated with urban gang membership (e.g., wearing high fashion clothing or jewellery, carrying expensive technology, or inviting youth to indulgent parties) thereby creating interest and desire. Being a student also allows convenient and legitimate access to populations of youth who may also be targeted for drug sales.

Most of the Montreal street gangs are made up of Haitian and Jamaican youth, and there are recent indications that Latino groups may also be forming. Other groups are of mixed ethnic backgrounds. These gangs tend to be territorial but some have been know to cooperate on a short term basis for a criminal

venture. It appears that ethnicity itself is not a major factor in street gang formation, but rather common neighbourhoods, backgrounds of poverty and social exclusion seem to be more relevant.

Recruiting can be done in several ways, including what is essentially advertising on the Internet. Some urban gangs have their own web sites with technology and marketing tools that can rival those of legitimate organizations. There have also been links between some urban gangs and popular music. Posters and CD covers display very provocative images clearly tied to gang life. The marketing campaign can effectively portray urban gang membership as cool, glamorous and financially rewarding.

Some urban gang members wear specific colours associated with a particular gang, others have tattoos unique to certain gangs, while many use hand signals or code of some kind.

Street gang members have committed a variety of offences, including property offences, drug trafficking and importation, fraud, robberies, assaults with weapons, and homicide. The main type of crime is the importation of drugs which involve cocaine, crack cocaine and marijuana. But there is an indication that chemicals are also being imported for the creation of psychotropic drugs. Some members carry knives or machetes, but most of the fatalities involving street gang members have been caused by shootings. Despite the fatalities, there does not appear to be large numbers of guns in the streets. Firearms that have been seized include handguns and sawed off shotguns. These street gang members do not appear to compete over having the latest or most impressive firearms. It was reported that the majority of firearms used appear to have been obtained by purchasing illegal imports from Aboriginal reservations or by importing directly from the United States. Some firearms have been traced back to burglaries of gun stores or private homes.

Urban gangs in Montreal have been actively involved with outlaw motorcycle gangs, traditional organized crime groups and Asian crime organizations. These street gangs can be involved with two or all three of these groups simultaneously in different criminal ventures. Examples of the types of offences include drug distribution and the procurement of new prostitutes for the sex trade. As seen in other cities, street gangs in Montreal appear to be coming more organized, more structured and sophisticated in business operations especially in relation to marketing and technology.

The Montreal Police service sees urban gangs as not just a police problem, but a community problem. They take a systemic approach to all facets within urban gang programs. Members from all departments are represented on a gang committee that has established a four-prong strategy to deal with urban gangs. Based on empirical research from Montreal and from other cities, this strategy involves criminal activity repression; street gang prevention; effective communication within the police department and between police and the community; and on-going internal research. Each department has a plan of action that is based on the four-pronged strategy, and these plans are assessed quantitatively or qualitatively. For example, surveying members of the community about their feeling of safety before and after a program has been established is one method of assessing the effect of programs.

An example of one of Montreal's prevention programs is outreach support for parents. Operating in Haitian communities and in partnership with the local churches, police present information programs to parents. Recognizing that parents may not be able to access presentations during weekdays, these programs are scheduled for weekends. The material includes information on how to recognize signs of street gang activity in one's own child, where intervention and support are offered, and how to access these services. In addition to informing parents, these meetings foster communication within the community and between its members and the police.



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### 3.6 Halifax

Compared to other cities in Canada, Halifax reported that it has only recently begun experiencing problems with urban gangs. The gangs in this area appear to have started on a small scale but the nature and violence of the offences they are involved seems to have increased. Five urban gangs have been identified by police in Halifax. Three of the gangs, the Northend Dartmouth Gang, Murda Squad, and Woodside Gang, were more prevalent, G-Lock, and Gaston Road to a lesser extent. There were five additional smaller groups with less cohesion. The membership is typically made up of individuals who live in lower income neighbourhoods, or public housing communities. Children as young as 12 years old have been identified as members of the street gangs or smaller groups, and approximately 40% of the members attend school.

The Northend Dartmouth Gang has between 10 and 15 members identified, with numerous associates. The members are generally African-Canadian males and tend to range in age from 16 to 28. These gang members wear specific colours, usually bandanas and tee shirts. They tend to be involved in more serious offences such as break and entering, motor vehicle thefts, thefts/possession of stolen property, drugs possession and trafficking, prostitution and more violent types of offences such as robbery, threats, sexual assault, and assault.

The Murda Squad has between 10 and 15 identified members and numerous associates. While the gender make-up is mostly male, there are some female members. Members tend to be either African-Canadian or Caucasian. They often wear specific coloured bandanas and tee shirts or sweatshirts. They also tend to use hand signs for communication. It is believed that prospective members must endure a group assault as part of initiation test. If the initiate does not “squeal” he is admitted to the gang. Offences typically committed by this gang include mischief, theft, robbery, weapons offences, trafficking, threats, and assault.

The Woodside gang emerged in 2002, and currently has less than ten identified members, with numerous associates. The members are male and appear to range in age from 14 to 18 years and tend to be either African-Canadian or Caucasian. They do not wear any type of clothing that would identify them as belonging to a gang. These youth are involved in various serious offences including break and enter, auto thefts, street level and commercial robberies, weapons offences and assaults. The offences can be violent, using such weapons as sticks, bats, hammers, and knives. One of the street gangs has ties to a larger more organized criminal group and some members are involved in procurement and street-level drug distribution.

These gangs tend to use intimidation by threatening and harassing victims and seem to have instilled fear within the community. Victims tend to be reluctant to testify for fear of retribution. Knives are most commonly seen and while gang members have made threats in reference to guns and shootings, guns have not been seen.

## 4. Summary

### Firearm Use

Some general comparative statements can be made about the firearms confiscated by the police in relation to gang activity. Firearms-related violence in Vancouver and the lower mainland of British Columbia is comparable to that of any other major centre in Canada including the greater Toronto area. Of the Western provinces, the lowest incidence of illegal firearms use is in Regina. As stated above, Halifax police have not seen firearms used in the commission of offences by street gang members.

The type of firearms used by street gangs also varies regionally. In Vancouver, high quality firearms such as semi-automatic pistols seem to be the firearms of choice. They are easily concealed and have high capacity ammunition magazines. The gang members typically possess these firearms for self protection from other gang members as well as for use in carrying out criminal activities that they are involved in such as robberies, intimidation and extortion. The type of firearm carried can also be viewed as a status symbol. In Saskatchewan and Manitoba, sawed off shot guns and rifles seem to be the firearms of choice. These firearms are readily available and are very difficult to trace as the majority are unregistered.

### Definitions

One of the main issues when looking at gangs and its various synonyms is in relation to the definition. There are multiple terms used when referring to gangs.

While there is no legislated definition for gangs in Canada, section 467.1 the *Criminal Code* does define a criminal organization as

- 467.1(1) “criminal organization” means a group, however organized that
- (a) is composed of three or more persons in or outside Canada; and
  - (b) has as one of its main purposes or main activities the facilitation or commission of one or more serious offences that, if committed, would likely result in the direct or indirect receipt of a material benefit, including financial benefit, by the group or any of the persons who constitute the group.

It does not include a group of persons that forms randomly for the immediate commission of a single offence.

Several of the police departments surveyed used a common definition for “gang” that had been drafted in a joint meeting of Police Chiefs in 2005.

Three or more persons, formerly or informally organized, engaged in a pattern of criminal behaviour creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation within any community, who may have a common name or identifying sign or symbol which may constitute a criminal organization as defined in the *Criminal Code* of Canada.



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Whereas Halifax Police department used the following similar definition:

A gang is an organized group of three or more individuals, who rely on group intimidation, violence and criminal acts to gain power and recognition and/or control of certain areas of unlawful activity.

The Winnipeg Police used an alternate definition:

A groups of individuals consorting together to engage in unlawful activity.

To determine whether or not an individual is a member of a urban gang, there was near consensus between the Police departments. An individual is deemed to be a gang member or affiliate if a number of the following criteria are met:

1. There is information from a reliable source (e.g., inside gang member/rival gang member, legitimate community resources, i.e. schools, business, citizen).
2. Police information is provided as a result of observed association with other known gang members (i.e. surveillance).
3. The individual admits to gang membership.
4. There is involvement (direct/indirect) in gang-motivated crime.
5. Previous court findings identify that person as gang member.
6. The person has or participates in common and/or symbolic gang identifiers such as gang paraphernalia (tattoos, weapons, poems, clothing) and induction rituals.

### **Police-based programs**

A common finding of all police departments in the survey was the positive response to school and community requests for information and support on gang-related matters. In addition, one of the more typical actions across all cities is that the police hold internal meetings on a fairly regular basis for education, information sharing and strategy considerations. Regional and country-wide conferences with the provincial and national divisions of the Criminal Intelligence Service also provide a forum for input and education. While none of the police departments included in this survey reported programs to deal with gang members specifically, many have special units devoted to gangs, and they do engage with community partners do deal with the problem of gangs. Many have prevention and intervention programs in place. A listing of all these programs is beyond the scope of this report, however certain programs were included here to offer examples of the type of anti-gang work in which police are involved.

Vancouver police were in the process of re-evaluating all facets of their gang-related programs from an empirical “what works” perspective, with quantifiable and comparable results. Regina police have initiated a multi-dimensional, multi-modal model to identify the best strategies to implement in their community. The police in Winnipeg have been reaching out to the community and particularly youth at risk with a comprehensive integrated community format. Toronto police implemented a unique opportunity for youth at risk to provide them with pro-social interactions, reinforce positive values, and give them a chance to earn an income from pro-social work. Montreal police offer parents in at-risk communities information and support in how to deal with their children who are, or who are suspected of being, urban gang members. Finally, Halifax police are currently examining the best methods of program delivery that would meet the needs of their community. While these highlighted programs may not be unique to each city, they represent a sample of police initiatives to prevent and deal with urban gangs.

### **Overall**

The research studies detailed in this report use various definitions for urban gangs. There was also variation between the definitions used by the respondents of this survey. All of the various definitions did

have two concepts in common: “group” and “crime”. Whether a universal definition to allow for direct comparisons is a viable option is beyond the scope of this report but should be considered in future research initiatives.

Both the research presented here and the demographics reported through the surveys illustrated the age ranges, particularly the youthfulness of street gang members. The focus of police prevention/intervention programs on youth was common to all cities.

The research also portrayed the diversity of ethnic group representation in urban gangs across Canada. For cities with over-representations of particular ethnic groups in urban gangs, tailoring anti-gang programs to those specific groups would better meet the needs of these individuals. Programs, such those in Winnipeg where police programs reach out to Aboriginal and other cultures, are crucial to understanding the particular needs of different ethnic groups, and taking steps to develop community-specific interventions.

High rates of drug-related and violent offending were found in many of the studies and these same indices were also reported by the police respondents. Whether importing cocaine or the chemical precursors for illegal drugs, running marijuana grow operations, distributing drugs to dealers, or selling on the street, it is clear that drug activities are a primary focus of street gang activity and much of the violence committed by street gang members is in relation to drug activities. The research indicates that participation in such activities progresses with age and that prevention is the best investment to reduce crime. Many of the street gang members learn early in life, that illegal activity although risky, can be profitable. By providing a supportive opportunity to youth at risk, programs such as the Toronto Police hiring project offer youth pro-social experiences and rewards for pro-social behaviour.

A consistent finding in the research is that gangs often provide a surrogate family for its members. This was also reported by the police who participated in the current survey. As one way of helping families in Montreal, the police have initiated a program to assist families with not only information, but also direct support. By delivering this program in areas of high need, and in a way that adapts to parents' schedules, the police are demonstrating that they are not only law enforcers, but community partners as well.

The published literature and the current survey report little street gang activity in Halifax when compared to other areas of the country. Nonetheless, Halifax police have taken the initiative to research programs in other cities, and are developing their own regionally-specific action.



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## 5. Conclusion

Overall, there are many similarities between the characteristics of urban gangs illustrated in the Canadian research literature, and as reported by the police. However, there appear to be region-specific differentiation across Canada that includes variations in ethnic group representation, type of criminal activity, and use of firearms. Such localization might signal the need for more city-specific research throughout Canada as the only available published literature on urban gangs was found for Vancouver and Montreal.

It would also be beneficial to develop a universal definition of “street gang” or “urban gang”, and other types of gangs. The definition should include not only descriptions of the group but also specify the type of activity in which the groups engage, specifically criminal activity. The establishment of such universal definitions would permit direct comparisons between jurisdictions both nationally and internationally, as well as across time, and help to better illustrate the ties between street gangs and organized crime groups. A further consideration to evaluate the effectiveness of programs is the application of quantitative or qualitative outcome measures or similar pre-post evaluations to programs that are implemented. Such a standardization of results could potentially permit the comparison of programs and indicate the most effective investment of resources.

Finally, the dedication and resourcefulness of the police departments in implementing their current programs should be recognized. The police departments surveyed for this report reached beyond the traditional police work of intelligence gathering and enforcement to forge alliances with community partners in combating the community problem of urban gangs.

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## Appendix A

### **Urban Gangs and Weapon Use: A Survey of Six Cities**

**T**his survey was designed by Toni Hemmati, researcher, contracted by the Department of Justice Canada. It is intended to represent a snapshot of the urban gangs within your department's jurisdiction. Vancouver, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, and Halifax police departments will be asked to participate in the survey. Results will be presented in an overall report to provide the context of urban gangs in Canada with an emphasis on the use of weapons and firearms in particular. The entire report will focus on the nature of Canadian urban gangs and their use of weapons, with a particular focus on firearms, and operational projects designed to deal with these issues. Your department will be sent a copy of the full report after its acceptance. Any member of your organization may contact Toni Hemmati at any time for more information, or Nicole Crutcher of the Department of Justice Canada for verification.

Researcher: Toni Hemmati

Department of Justice Canada contact:  
Nicole Crutcher, Senior Research Officer  
Research and Statistics Division  
(613) 957-7093  
[Nicole.Crutcher@justice.gc.ca](mailto:Nicole.Crutcher@justice.gc.ca)

This survey can be completed electronically, saved and sent. Responses will automatically create space and do not need to be formatted. If the survey will be completed by hand, more room will be necessary for each question - please add room before printing. Please return the completed survey either electronically to the researcher or by fax to the attention of Nicole Crutcher (613) 941-1845 by February 17<sup>th</sup> if possible. Thank you very much for your participation.

**Name of person completing the survey:**

Designation:

Contact information:

Phone:

Email:

Please complete the following survey based on the most recent information available. In some cases, estimates must be used. If using an estimate, please indicate this with an asterisk (\*) or “est.” beside the response. Some questions might not apply to your city - if that is the case, please mark them “N/A”. Please add any additional information you feel might offer a more comprehensive snapshot of the subject material.

The term “urban gangs” is defined as individuals within an urban area who formally or informally affiliate themselves with a particular common group and express themselves as members by antisocial behaviour through the commission of offences. It does not include organised crime gangs. “Urban gangs” will be used interchangeably with “street gangs”. Ethnicity refers to racial background if known, e.g., Caucasian, Aboriginal, African-Canadian, East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean), West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Pakistani, Indian) or Other (please specify). The term “weapons use” refers to any illegal activity involving weapons of any kind.



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## Urban Gangs

### 1.0.0 Membership demographics

- 1.0.1 How many urban gangs are known to be within your city?
- 1.0.2. What are the names of these gangs? Please list the largest or most prevalent first.
- 1.0.3. Please describe each of the **three largest or most prevalent gangs**, including the estimates number of members, the age range, gender and ethnicity of the members.
- 1.0.4. Considering **all gangs in your area** please describe these groups characteristics: Number of members, age range, gender and ethnicity.
- 1.0.5. Approximately what percentage of the membership attends school?
- 1.0.6. Approximately what percentage of the membership is gainfully employed?

### 1.1.0 Gang Rationale and Identification

- 1.1.1. What are some examples of a gang's mandate/mission/reason for existing?
- 1.1.2. What visual identifiers do gang member use, please describe?
  - a) Colours
  - b) Tattoos
  - c) Piercings
  - d) Scars
  - e) Other
- 1.2.3. Do members use other means of gang identification, if so, please describe?

### 1.2.0 Criminal activity

- 1.2.1. Do any of these street gangs specialize in certain types of offences? If so please list.
- 1.2.2. Approximately what percentage of the membership carry weapons?
- 1.2.3. Approximately what percentage of the membership has access to firearms?
- 1.2.4. Approximately what percentage of the membership is known to carry firearms?
- 1.2.5. Considering all crime in your city, approximately what percentage is attributable to urban gang members?
- 1.2.6. Considering all violent crime in your city, approximately what percentage is attributable to urban gang members?

- 1.2.7. Do any of the street gangs within your city have occasional contact with more established criminal gangs? If so, please describe.
- 1.2.8. Do any of the street gangs within your city have an affiliation with a more established criminal gang? If so, please describe.
- 1.2.9. Are the urban gangs territorial (i.e., more predominant in some parts of the city)?
- 1.2.10. Has there recently been criminal activity in regard to territory? If so, please describe.
- 1.2.11. Please comment on the prevalence of gangs in your city.
- 1.2.12. Has there been a change in composition and prevalence of gangs over the last five years? Please describe.
- 1.2.13. Is there any other descriptive information you can offer on the nature of the urban gangs within your city?

### **1.3.0 Operational projects dealing with urban gang activity**

- 1.3.1 In 2004 or 2005, has your police department initiated or been involved in any type of program to deal with urban gang activity in the community? If so, please describe this program briefly.

The researcher would like to contact you regarding more information on the research background and evaluation methods used regarding this program.

## **Weapons Use**

### **2.0.0 Statistics on offences involving illegal use of weapons.**

- 2.0.1. How prevalent is the use of firearms by urban gangs?
- 2.0.2. How do street gang members acquire firearms?
- 2.0.3. For what reasons do the members use the guns?
- 2.0.4. In 2004 or 2005, has your police department initiated or been involved in any type of program to deal with illegal firearms possession and or use in the community? (For example, cash for guns or gun amnesty). If so, please describe this program briefly.

The researcher would like to contact you regarding more information on the research background and evaluation methods used regarding this program.