Chapter 16
The Reorganisation of Gangs in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT
The first decade of the new century has seen significant changes among the gangs of New Zealand. Facing a changing cultural climate in which rebellious young people see membership in traditional ‘patch’-wearing gangs as less desirable, New Zealand’s established gangs have become starved for recruits. Rather than precipitating a straightforward decline in the country’s gang scene, however, what we are seeing is a reorganisation of the gangs. This chapter examines the problems facing the outlaw motorcycle clubs and the patched street gangs, and the numerous and complex nature of the issues facing these groups. It also explores the rise of LA-style street gangs and the similarities and difference that exist between them and New Zealand’s traditional gangs.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1950s, a group of teenaged motorcycle riders, part of a wider youth movement known as ‘milk bar cowboys’, began to mill around outside the Majestic Theatre on Auckland’s central hub, Queen Street. They had met outside dances, at milk bars, and on the side of the road when their motorcycles broke down. At a certain point, one of the young bikers, a builder with some artistic abilities, painted an eagle on the backs of his friends’ leather jackets. The inspiration came directly from the lyrics of the 1955 hit by the band Cheers, ‘Black Denim Trousers and Motorcycle Boots’. The chorus went:

He wore black denim trousers and motorcycle boots
And a leather jacket with an eagle on the back
He had a hopped-up ‘cicle that took off like a gun
That fool was the terror of Highway 101.

Far from being a symbol of exclusive membership, the eagle was really a fashion accessory, and if someone wanted one, they could have one. About ten bikers took up the offer.

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Sometime later, someone suggested that the group of youths should identify themselves as the ‘Auckland Outcasts’, but the name – full of youthful rebellion – was used infrequently. One of those young bikers, recalls: ‘The guy that painted the eagle came up with the name the “Auckland Outcasts”, but it wasn’t really an adopted name. You didn’t go around saying, “I’m an Auckland Outcast.” It was just – we must have thought it was cool or something.’

Like the other milk bar cowboys lining Queen Street, the Auckland Outcasts took great pride in their bikes. Motorcycles were more than just a useful means of getting around; they were used to forge an identity within an image-conscious youth movement. Most of the Outcasts rode high-powered British motorcycles with the more stylish having crash bars, twin mirrors, extra chrome, and large mud flaps that would cover the muffler to increase engine noise. The bikers wore leather jackets with lamb’s-wool lining, old flying boots and American jeans purchased from seamen docking at Auckland’s port. A white scarf was a popular accessory. Surplus from the armed forces offered up New Zealand Air Force and Army greatcoats which the Outcasts draped over their legs while riding, providing the ‘in’ look as well as all-important warmth.

The Outcasts roared down Upper Queen Street at high speed at night, racing one another, giving pillion rides to girls, and often letting their steel-capped hobnail boots drag along the road to create a shower of sparks.

In the late 1950s, there was little to differentiate the Auckland Outcasts from any number of similar clusters of bikers peppered throughout New Zealand. This soon changed. On one Queen Street night in 1960, while hanging outside the Majestic, the Outcasts met a young American named Jim Carrico. The young man, with an accent familiar from US films, spoke with enthusiasm about a group he rode with in California. That seemingly innocuous meeting proved transformative of the entire New Zealand gang scene. The group he spoke of was the Hells Angels.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been significant changes among the gangs of New Zealand. Facing a cultural climate in which rebellious young people see membership in traditional gangs - those that wear ‘back patches’ and were inspired by the Hells Angels – as less desirable and are therefore starving them of recruits. The average age of the older-style groups has increased steadily, leaving them further disconnected from youth who were drawn to the violence and active rebellion that fuelled their past popularity.

A number gangs with long histories have collapsed, while many others are facing problems rejuvenating their numbers with young members, particularly given the arrival of a new form of ‘LA-style’ street gangs (like the Bloods and Crips). Rather than precipitating a straightforward decline in New Zealand’s gang scene, then, what we are seeing is a reorganisation of the gangs.

Based on ten years of ethnographic research of numerous New Zealand gangs over a six year period and formal interviews with more than 50 gang members and those associated with them, this chapter examines the weakening existence of traditional gangs in New Zealand and explore the reasons for this decline, including, changes in laws, the increase in pure methamphetamine use, and the weakening of important internal groups bonds. It with also highlight the rise of LA style street gangs and what the internal culture of these new groups will mean for the gang scene and New Zealand society generally.