Chapter 50
Youth Gangs and Youth Violence in Australia

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ABSTRACT
This chapter provides an introduction and overview of issues pertaining to youth gangs and youth violence in Australia. The first part features the voices of young people from around Australia describing their experiences of youth gang violence. The second part provides a broad overview of biological, psychological and social factors that together shape the propensities for young people, and young men in particular, to join gangs and to engage in youth violence. The final part of the chapter provides more detailed exposition of two gang members, ‘Mohammad’ and ‘Tan’, and the everyday complexities of their lives. The chapter concludes by noting that the gang does not have to be seen as an overwhelming influence in the lives of young people, and that their activities and behaviours are more diverse, and include positive elements, than generally given credit in mainstream youth gangs research and analysis.

INTRODUCTION
Gangs connote predatory and violent action, usually by groups of young men. The concept encapsulates notions of aggression, viciousness, chains of brotherhood forged in combat, and codes of obedience and behaviour that discipline individuals to the group’s norms and values. Gangs ‘do bad’, and violence is the clearest expression of this.

Gang members engage in violence on a regular basis. In this respect, each gang member can be seen to ‘be bad’ insofar as they partake in what are generally viewed as anti-social behaviour and activities. The implication is that there are basic character flaws and moral fissures that allow particular individuals to do things that many of their peers do not.

This chapter explores the lived realities of gang violence in an Australian context and the theoretical explanations for ‘doing bad’ and ‘being bad’. In doing so, it draws largely upon a recent book, Youth Gangs, Violence and Social Respect, which is the first book dedicated to the systematic study of Australian youth gangs (White, 2013). It begins with stories by gang members about engaging in violent acts, and

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the feelings and dynamics accompanying such acts. The chapter then examines biological, psychological and social explanations as to why some young people engage in such violence. At the conclusion of this, the chapter changes tack – away from generalisations about groups and members of groups, to the personal stories of two gang members in Sydney.

The heart of the chapter’s discussions revolve around how best to categorise people and experiences in ways that provide accurate and sensitive portrayals of social life, something that is part of an ongoing conundrum for youth gangs research. The third part of the chapter highlights how ‘stories’ are crucial to interpreting what is going on in regards to specific gangs and gang members. To do this, it uses two brief vignettes to examine the life experiences of gang members ‘Tan’ and ‘Mohammad’ (not their real names) to illustrate the importance of biographical portraits to the social analysis of gangs. Social identity has a series of interconnected objective and subjective features that taken together combine to create multiple and varied identities. The fluidity of this has important implications for understanding gang members and for gang interventions.

Methodology and Approach

The research upon which this chapter is based was undertaken over a decade and a half, and involved a series of diverse and discrete projects. The present work thus incorporates insights from a specific study of youth gangs in Melbourne in the late 1990s (see White et al., 1999), findings derived from a national study of youth gangs in Australia in the mid-2000s (White, 2006), and the results of a high school questionnaire administered to over 700 students in Perth schools in the early 2000s (White & Mason, 2006).

The first two initiatives involved face-to-face interviews with young people; one targeting street present young people from various ethnic backgrounds (Vietnamese, Turkish, Pacific Islander, Somalian, Latin American, and Anglo-Australian); the other involving up to 50 interviews in each capital city with young people who self-identified as being gang members. The interview schedule and research process was devised by the chief investigator (for elaboration on the doing of this kind of national and collaborative research see White, 2011). Most of the interviews were carried out by youth and community workers specially chosen for the task because of their knowledge of the local area and their pre-existing relationships with local young people. The Perth survey questionnaire was constructed by the lead researcher in collaboration with Western Australian crime prevention and education officials, and administered via local schools in that city (see White & Mason, 2006). The national study included interviews with Indigenous young people, although Indigenous young people were not pre-selected as such. The focus across the studies was on discerning which individuals and groups are associated with gangs, the nature and extent of their engagement in gang-related behaviour, and the day-to-day experiences of those young people who identify with youth gang membership in the Australian context.

The observations contained herein reflect these various research endeavours undertaken at different times and in different places around the country with different groups of young people. In the light of this background, the chapter argues that when it comes to youth gangs, there is no set conceptual recipe or trait analysis that can adequately capture the flow and dynamics of everyday life. In social studies of this kind, we tend to find what we look for, ‘youth gangs’ and ‘violent young men’, as if these exist in themselves outside of other aspects of young people’s lives. However, as this chapter demonstrates, a different cut of the data, a different methodological emphasis – from the group to the individual, from the gang-related activity to the totality of mundane day-to-day activities – reveals far more complicated pictures of how these young people actually live their lives.