

**THE LINKAGES BETWEEN STREET GANGS AND ORGANIZED CRIME:
THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE¹**

BY

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ABSTRACT:

The growing presence of street gangs in Canada is raising the concern of law enforcement officials across the country. In particular, the relationship between street gangs and organized crime groups is increasingly being seen as a cause for concern. Canada is experiencing many of the phenomena identified by American researchers studying gang activity in that country. Gang migration, the proliferation of street gangs, increased gang violence, the appearance of trans-national gangs and the recruitment of street gang members in the prison system are all occurring in Canada. While primarily still an urban problem, street gangs in some regions have begun to penetrate rural areas with typically negative consequences. This study revealed that street gangs can be linked to organized crime groups in a number of ways. However, some respondents noted that street gangs can also be independent criminal enterprises in their own right. These street gangs employ sophisticated methods and engage in complex criminal activities. The respondents indicated that these types of street gangs should be identified and treated as organized crime groups.

Introduction:

Over the past decade, law enforcement officials and policy makers have become increasingly concerned about the growing impact of organized crime in Canada. This includes the activities of traditional organized crime groups (e.g., the Mafia), as well as the presence of emergent organized crime groups such as Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs (OMGs), and the development of more geographically limited gangs within various regions of the country. Canadian law enforcement officials report an increase in gang rivalry characterised by mounting gang violence and increases in gun-related assaults and homicides. The reported increase in gang activity including gang-related violence is raising questions about what is contributing to these activities. Two particular areas of concern are the nature of street gangs in the Canada and their links to organized crime groups.

This paper presents the results of an exploratory study of street gang activity in Canada. It is based on in-depth interviews with key police experts from across the country. Information was sought on how police agencies define street gangs, the nature and extent of street gang activity in the respondent's jurisdiction and the linkages that may exist between street gangs and organized crime groups. The implications of these findings are considered in light of the ongoing concern with street gang activity and organized crime in Canada.

Definitions Of Street Gangs:

An initial concern in this study was considering the definition of a street gang and how it could be differentiated from other criminal groups. This distinction is particularly important since there is a lack of consensus on what can be considered street gangs, youth gangs and organized crime. No widely accepted definitions exist for these concepts in the literature or among law enforcement officials. There is a criminal code definition² of organized crime but it is extremely broad and is not useful for distinguishing among the different types of 'group crime'.

While distinctions among different types of organized criminal groups are important, there is some concern among Canadian officials that we must also consider linkages among different types of organized crime groups. Thus, it is necessary to determine whether emergent street gangs are best viewed as street gangs in their own right or as the street-level presence of organized crime groups. We review research from other jurisdictions on the linkages between street gangs and other criminal groups in order to shed some light on these definitional issues.

We begin with a consideration of how gangs have been defined in the literature. In the 1960s, Yablonsky described gangs as " 'near-groups' or collections of individuals who remain in a state of partial organization over a fairly long period of time. They are better organized than a mob, but lack the stable internal structure that typifies most organized social and criminal groups (Quinn and Downs 1993a: 3)." Such groups are primarily expressive in nature and their members look to the gang as a source of identity and/or social status. While this definition provides an important starting point, by the 1990s, the key feature for defining gangs had become their involvement in illegal activity (see for example, Knox, 1994). However, the presence of criminal behaviour has proven to be insufficient as the basis for defining a gang. Groups that are not gangs also engage in criminal activity so that this distinction has limited utility.

The attempt to distinguish between criminal groups and gangs then focussed on a number of other criteria including: the group's level of organization, the nature and role of group leadership, and the use of violence in the group's activities (Curry and Spergel, 1988). The groups we currently define as gangs are increasingly involved in more organized and criminally focused behaviour. In addition, researchers have found that there has been an increase in violence and in gang sophistication, and that both of these developments are linked to the expanded involvement of gangs in the drug trade (Quinn and Downs 1993b).

The increasing operational sophistication of gangs is important because research

suggests that it impacts on the behaviour of gangs at all levels (Quinn and Downs, 1993: 31). Indeed, there is some suggestion that the distinction between street level gangs and organized crime groups is increasingly being blurred. In the Canadian context, this has been the case with OMGs that have evolved from street level gangs into organized crime groups in their own right. Both street gangs and organized crime groups, however, are engaged in criminal activities and often within the same geographical area (territory or turf). This places additional emphasis on the question of the linkages between these criminal groups as well as those between local criminal enterprises and their national and international counterparts.

STREET GANGS IN CONTEXT:

Current research in the American context suggests that street gangs are linked to other criminal groups in three primary ways (Maxson 1993; Fong and Vogel 1994; Maxson and Klein 1996; Stevens 1997; Zaitzow and Houston 1999). First, they may be linked to prison-based gangs. Second, they may be connected to gangs in other locations through gang migration. Third, they may be linked to organized crime groups. We examine each of these potential linkages below.

(1) Linkages Between Prison Gangs and Street Gangs

American researchers have found a number of linkages between members of prison gangs and street gangs (Fong and Vogel 1994; Stevens 1997; Zaitzow and Houston 1999). These linkages include:

- (i) the recruiting of street gang members to prison gangs;
- (ii) paroled inmates becoming involved in street gangs after involvement with prison gangs while incarcerated;
- (iii) street gangs that are active both on the street and in prison; and
- (iv) gang leaders directing gang activity on the outside from inside prison.

This research indicates that involvement with gangs may begin either on the street or while in prison. Street gang involvement often translates, in custody, into involvement in prison gangs. These prison gangs may be distinct from street gangs or may be affiliated with them. Individuals recruited to prison gangs may continue their gang involvement after they are released. Prisons are of particular interest to law enforcement officials because they represent sites of recruitment for street gangs.

(2) Linkages Between Locations – Gang Migration

In the early 1990s, gang migration emerged as a concern for law enforcement and policy makers in the United States (Maxson 1993). Maxson (1993) connects gang migration to increased levels of gang activity, violence and drug distribution. Gang migration is defined as “the dispersion of a gang from one city to another (Maxson 1993: 1).” While this term captures the essence of the dispersion of gang activity, it is somewhat ambiguous. As Maxson (1993) notes, migration may be temporary (involving several months residence

or 'flying' visits to new locations) or it may involve residence relocation. Further, migration may be local, national and international. Gangs may be dispersed within the same city (Maxson 1993) or, as Hehny (1998) has noted, involve long distance movement such as occurred in the case of the NETA gang moving from Puerto Rico to the Eastern coast of the United States. Similarly, Joseph (1999) reports Jamaican Posse members fleeing police from Jamaica to the United States and beginning gang activity there.

Gang migration raises concerns about recruitment, especially youth recruitment, to the newly located gang. Migration also raises concerns about the impact of the infiltration of gangs into new territories including the potential for increased violence and the expansion of the drug trade that may result. In addition, there are questions about what draws gangs to new areas. Just as migration theorists have considered 'push' and 'pull' factors, we need to consider what attracts (pulls) gangs to new areas and what may be pushing them out of their former territory.

(3) Linkages Between Organized Crime and Street Gangs:

Finally, some research suggests that linkages exist between organized crime groups and street gangs, and between different street gangs. The literature notes that loose ties may exist between gangs (Maxson and Klein 1996). These ties require an increase in organizational sophistication that may impact on how gangs behave (Quinn and Downs, 1993a,b). In addition, functional relationships between organized crime groups and street gangs may reflect some of the changes witnessed in the conventional economy between larger corporations and smaller businesses. For example, street gangs may provide a ready-made street-level distribution network for larger, organized crime groups. Using street gangs for street level activity also provides organized crime groups with a degree of distance and separation from these street-level criminal activities. By using street gangs, organized crime groups can employ street level tactics including violence while avoiding direct participation in this type of activity. In this way, organized crime groups can achieve the results they desire such as controlling the illicit trade in an area, collecting on unpaid debts or getting rid of the competition, while being insulated from any potential negative consequences.

The possible linkages between organized crime groups and street gangs can be summarized as follows. Street gangs can:

- (1) serve as a source of recruits by organized crime groups*
- (2) be used for criminal socialization by organized crime groups.*
- (3) assist organized crime groups in organizational development*
- (4) gather street level information for organized crime groups*
- (5) be used for security purposes by organized crime groups*
- (6) be pivotal in trafficking drugs for organized crime groups, and*
- (7) assist organized crime groups in other illegal activities*

The discussion above suggests a number of important conceptual linkages for our

study of street gangs. In addition to the crucial definitional issues already addressed, it is clear that the criminal activity engaged in by the groups in question has to be understood as reflecting the broader social context in which they occur. Thus, in the early decades of the last century, prohibition gave rise to bootlegging and an opportunity for the growth and development of traditional organized crime groups. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the drug trade has similarly opened up lucrative illicit markets to OMGs and street gangs.

At the same time, the developments brought about by globalization have resulted in significant changes in traditional business practices. Greater flexibility, niche marketing, just-in-time production and contracting out have altered the face of the corporate world. These developments in the conventional economy have provided an interesting example for organized crime groups. The behaviour and illegal practices of older, more established traditional organized crime groups have mirrored the developments in the conventional economy in many ways. They have shown greater flexibility in their criminal operations, pursuing various criminal opportunities based on information technology such as bankcard fraud and identity theft. As well, they have shown a willingness to engage in global partnerships with other organized crime groups for mutual benefit. As, Porteous (1998:4) notes, "there is increasing evidence that some of the more familiar OC [Organised Crime] groups and many so-called "emerging" OC groups stubbornly refuse to confine their behaviour to any "standard" list of OC activities or to adhere to any "prescribed" organizational structure."

Research Design and Methodology:

An exploratory study was undertaken to examine the nature and extent of street gang activity in Canada and any linkages that exist between these groups and other criminal groups, the nature and extent of these linkages, and evidence related to the existence of these linkages. Knowledgeable informants were consulted to gain an initial understanding of these questions. In using the expertise, insights and experience of these individuals, the study sought to explore the perceptions of key informants from different jurisdictions around the country on the issues of concern. The selective identification of key informants is a recognized method for ensuring that the range of existing experiences will be captured (Palys 1997:139).

The development of an interview guide for exploratory research, where the aim is to develop an initial understanding of a phenomenon, requires a number of stages (Palys 1997: 78-9). It is important to use existing research, other information, and the insights of key informants to develop an appreciation of what questions should be asked. This allows the development of a more focused set of questions for the data collection phase. This type of research is ideally suited to exploring the nature and extent of criminal activities within a jurisdiction. Thus, police reports on the frequency of criminal behaviour and on the traits of particular gangs within their jurisdictions are quite helpful in developing a picture of the nature and extent of certain types of criminal activity (Quinn and Downs 1993b: 32).

The interview guide developed for this study included questions exploring the

following areas: demographic information, number of years in street gang/organized crime policing, years in current posting, specialized training related to the investigation of street gang/organized crime problems, definitions of what constitutes a street gang and what constitutes an organized crime group, the nature and extent of street gang and organized crime activity in their jurisdictions, and the ties that exist between street gangs and organized crime groups.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

Study Participants

Invitations to participate in this study were extended to 15 police officers that were identified by key informants as being highly knowledgeable in this area. Ten (10) of these police officers responded and in depth telephone interviews were completed with nine (9) of them. The tenth police officer agreed to be interviewed but indicated that there was no street gang activity in his jurisdiction and as a result, this interview was not completed. Of the remaining subjects, one had been transferred, one was unable to provide an interview due to time constraints and three did not respond to our invitation.

The participants included: one detective, four detective sergeants, two detective constables, one sergeant, one constable and one unit commander. Seven of the respondents were in intelligence units. This included a head of a Criminal Intelligence Unit, an Integrated Intelligence Unit member, a Strategic Intelligence Analyst, an Intelligence Unit Bureau Manager, and an Officer in Charge of an Intelligence and Enforcement Unit. Two of the respondents were in charge of Gang Units and one served on a Joint Forces Operation. The respondents had been in their current postings from 1½ to 7 years. In addition, the officers with the least amount of time working specifically on street gangs had also served in units that provided them some experience in dealing with street gang activity. For example, one respondent had previously worked in an organized crime unit for seven years while another was in a major crimes unit for eight years.

The Nature and Extent of Street Gang Activity:

There are no official statistics on gang activity in the Canadian context. Indeed, there are no formal classification categories used by police agencies that allow criminal activity to be identified as gang related. The respondents noted that this situation makes it difficult to document and track gang activity. Currently work is being carried out by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics to add a new organized crime variable to the Uniform Crime Report2 (UCR2). The new UCR2 is due to be released in 2005. As a result of the lack of existing official statistics in this area, assessing the nature and extent of gang activity in Canada has to rely at the moment on information provided by key informants.

The respondents indicated that they were monitoring street gang activity in their jurisdictions. Seven reported the presence of active street gangs while the remaining two

officers indicated that they were monitoring prison gangs to determine if they were being re-established on the streets. Respondents in six of the seven jurisdictions with street gang activity reported that street gangs were considered a high or very high priority. In the seventh, the law enforcement agency in question was a provincial police agency. While street gangs were viewed as a high priority in particular urban locations, they were not seen as a high priority across the province, especially in the rural and semi-rural areas.

The respondents were asked how police officers in their jurisdictions identified activity as being street gang related. Most noted that they used standard criteria such as: reliable source 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. All of the jurisdictions with street gang activity noted the presence of such visible gang symbols.

A variety of other factors were mentioned with respect to identifying activity as being street gang related. For example, the leadership structure and longevity of the groups involved were seen as important variables. Several respondents also noted that the age of those involved in street level crime was used to distinguish between youth gang and street gang activity. In some jurisdictions, police officers considered changes in criminal activity (e.g. a decrease in break and enters and an increase in drug trafficking) as a possible indicator of street gang involvement. The respondents also reported tracking the movement of the money derived from the drug trade in an attempt to determine whether the activity was street gang or organized crime related. This involved identifying whether the illicit gains were derived for the sole benefit of those directly involved or if there were linkages between the street-level criminals and larger, more sophisticated organized crime groups.

Using these criteria, and keeping in mind the limitations related to data collection processes, the respondents were able to comment on the nature of the criminal activities associated with street gangs in their jurisdictions. For example, street gang involvement in drug trafficking was reported by all of the respondents reporting street gang activity in their jurisdictions. Other criminal activity associated with street gangs included various types of fraud, debt collection (from drugs, gambling and loan shark operations), prostitution, assaults, inter-gang violence (e.g. drive-by shootings), and weapons smuggling.

In addition to noting the types of activities street gangs were involved in, the respondents also indicated that street gang activity had changed over the past two to three years. Seven of the respondents indicated that they had witnessed an increase in violent crime involving street gang members including violence related to inter-gang conflict. One respondent mentioned that a street gang had shifted from lower level thefts and robberies, to much more lucrative drug trafficking operations involving a 'dial a dealer' modus operandi as a result of its involvement with an OMG. While a lucrative street-level drug trade often

leads to the emergence of new street gangs in an area, the increased income related to drug trafficking is also linked to an increase in inter-gang rivalry including violent 'turf wars' over the control of the drug trade.

The respondents noted that as street gangs become more organized, there is a greater likelihood that they will become involved in more sophisticated crimes that generate larger sums of money. For example, one respondent stated that in his jurisdiction, some street gangs were turning to credit card and other card frauds since the potential gains from these types of crimes are high while the possibilities of getting caught are low.

Street gangs currently operating in Canada were described as being on a continuum that ranges from loosely organized groups involved in low level crimes at one end, to highly organized groups involved in complex and sophisticated criminal activity at the other. Several respondents noted that as street gangs become better organized and more sophisticated in their criminal pursuits, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish them from organized crime groups.

Linkages Between Street Gangs and Organized Crime Groups:

The respondents were asked if linkages existed between street gangs and organized crime groups in their jurisdictions, and if so, how they knew this to be the case. They were also asked about the nature of these linkages. In all seven jurisdictions where there was street gang activity, the respondents indicated that street gangs were linked to organized crime groups. In the two jurisdictions with no active street gangs, there were links between local criminals and organized crime groups.

Identifying linkages between street gangs and organized crime groups involved a variety of police investigation techniques. At the street-level, police record changes in the criminal activities of known gang members. Such changes were a key indicator that triggers intelligence gathering by the police. The respondents noted the importance of the following activities for identifying the linkages between street gangs and organized crime groups: an increase in violent crime perpetrated by known street gang members; the increased involvement of known street gang members in drug trafficking; less involvement by these individuals in other types of criminal activity (e.g. car thefts, robbery).

Additional clues to changes in activity that might be indicative of involvement with organized crime groups included increased income from criminal activity. The respondents suggested that increased wealth at the street-level is often visible in the conspicuous consumption of those involved. This conspicuous consumption provides clues that something has changed and leads to closer surveillance by the police. Information is gathered on who is on the street, what they are doing and what their connections are to other criminal elements in the area including organized crime groups.

Using the criteria described above, the respondents from all of the jurisdictions reporting street gang activity indicated that there were links between street gangs and organized crime groups. The two respondents that reported no street gang activity noted the existence of organized crime groups and stated that these groups had connections with

street-level criminals in their jurisdictions. These connections were loosely organized around family ties and involved the distribution of drugs. In the remaining jurisdictions, the links between organized crime groups and street gangs varied in terms of the nature of the activities they engaged in and in the nature of the ties between them.

Involvement in Illicit Drugs – Dealing and Distribution:

In all seven jurisdictions, street gangs provided distribution networks for the drug trade and were engaged in the collection of drug debts. Drug distribution and enforcement are important sources of income for street gangs. In some areas, organized crime groups used street gangs to ensure their control over the drug trade and other illegal activity in a particular ‘territory’. This often involved the use of violence as a way of intimidating or eliminating competitors. In some areas, street gangs are also used to collect drug debts and to provide a range of intimidation and violent services for local organized crime groups.

The respondents reported that the nature of the ties between street gangs and organized crime groups varies. In some instances, street gang members may work for organized crime groups as part of an informal drug distribution network. In others, they may act as ‘puppet clubs’ for organized crime groups. These clubs are connected directly to the organized crime groups and are expected to remain loyal to them. Where ties are loose, the connections between street gangs and organized crime groups are fluid. When one street gang is disrupted by violence or arrests, organized crime groups quickly recruit a new street gang or street-level criminals to distribute drugs for them.

Drug distribution networks have been likened to franchise operations in legitimate businesses. While local street gangs are responsible for street-level distribution, debt collection and protecting local markets, organized crime groups are involved in higher level importation activities that provide street gangs with a supply of ‘products’ to sell. Street gangs are visible criminal enterprises. They represent the front lines of the drug trade and their activities provide organized crime groups with a degree of insulation from the potentially negative consequences of involvement in street-level criminal activities including the use of violence. Street-level criminals who are more visible to the police, vulnerable to arrest but who know little about the connections to organized crime groups are unable to implicate them for being involved in the drug trade.

The respondents suggested that street gangs occupy a niche in the crime hierarchy in Canada. They are typically not able or willing to challenge the dominance of organized crime groups. As noted above, street gangs were reported as existing along a continuum from loosely organized and involved in low-level criminality, to highly organized and involved in sophisticated crimes. The linkages that exist between street gangs and organized crime groups depend on a variety of factors. In some cases, there is little or no relationship between street gangs and organized crime groups. In others, street gangs are functional extensions of organized crime groups.

Gang Migration and Other Geographic Linkages:

Geographic linkages between street gangs also emerged as an issue during the interviews. For example, three respondents reported that Asian gangs have moved from Vancouver to the Prairie Provinces. In British Columbia there are concerns about connections between international organized crime groups and the recruitment of street-level criminals from similar ethnic communities into street gangs (primarily for the purpose of drug distribution). Some Aboriginal gangs (e.g. the Posse, Manitoba Warriors) have established chapters in North-eastern Ontario and are now present in all three Prairie Provinces. There is evidence that street gangs in the Toronto area have migrated north from both the United States and internationally from places such as Jamaica. In Quebec, street gangs have loosely connected cells that operate relatively independently and are highly mobile. These cells have operated in various locations both within the province and in jurisdictions outside of the province. While single cells of the gang may come and go, the larger collective continues to thrive. Geographic linkages are made most strongly in the case of Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs (OMGs). However, all of the respondents noted that OMGs are closer to organized crime than street gangs and that OMGs have been successful in establishing their presence across the country.

Linkages between Prison Gangs and Street Gangs:

Four of the respondents voiced their concerns about the connections between prison gangs and street gangs. All four noted the presence of gangs within prisons in their jurisdictions. Individuals involved in these prison gangs who are released from prison are being watched to determine whether their gang involvement persists or if they join other gangs. For two respondents, no such connections had yet developed. The third respondent indicated that the individuals released from prison were taking street gang activity with them to rural areas, recruiting local youth and returning to gang activity in urban centres. The fourth respondent stated that prison connections were serving as a training ground assisting street gang members in learning the skills and contacts necessary for running credit card and debit card scams. Prison gangs remain a concern for investigative units given the increase in street gang activity in Canada over the past decade and the linkages between prison gangs and street gangs reported in jurisdictions such as the United States.

Street Gangs As Independent Criminal Enterprises:

As was noted above, while street gangs can be linked to organized crime groups, they also engage in criminal activities on their own. For example, one western respondent noted that local street gangs provided services for hire to organized crime groups but also had their own marijuana 'grow operations' and participated in raids on the grow operations of rival street gangs. Similarly, in Quebec, gangs are involved in the drug trade and enforcement for organized crime groups, and are engaged in fraud (credit and debit cards) and prostitution on their own. In the Toronto area, street gangs do not rely on traditional organized crime groups to supply them with contraband but are importing drugs and illegal firearms themselves.

The involvement of street gangs in organized criminal activities on their own as well as with organized crime groups raised questions about whether we should distinguish between street gangs and organized crime groups. While street gangs are treated as distinct from organized crime groups, some respondents argued that this distinction should not be made. They stressed that street gangs should be considered as organized crime on the basis of their involvement with organized crime groups as well as their own involvement in criminal activities.

CONCLUSION:

The growing presence of street gangs in Canada is raising the concern of law enforcement officials across the country. In particular, the relationship between street gangs and organized crime groups is increasingly being seen as a cause for concern. We are experiencing many of the phenomena identified by American researchers studying gang activity in that country. Gang migration, the proliferation of street gangs, increased gang violence, the appearance of trans-national gangs and the recruitment of street gang members in the prison system are all occurring in Canada. While primarily still an urban problem, street gangs in some regions have begun to penetrate rural areas with typically negative consequences. The respondents in this study indicated that there is a great deal of concern regarding street gangs among law enforcement officials across the country.

This study revealed that street gangs can be linked to organized crime groups in a number of ways. However, some respondents noted that street gangs can also be independent criminal enterprises in their own right. These street gangs employ sophisticated methods and are involved in complex crimes. The respondents argued that these street gangs should be treated as organized crime groups.

The American experience provides some important insights into how Canadian authorities might respond to these concerns. However, significant differences exist between the two jurisdictions. Further research is required to provide detailed information on the Canadian situation to help guide policy and practice. The current study has attempted to contribute in this area by providing some preliminary information and raising a number of questions for future research. This work could include the development of new tools for identifying street gang related crimes. This would provide the basis for a better understanding of the nature and extent of this phenomenon. Additionally, a more detailed examination is required of the relationships that exist between street gangs and other street-level criminals, and between street gangs and organized crime groups. This information would have important implications for the response of criminal justice authorities to the criminal activity of street gangs.

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²- **In Section 467.1 (1) The following definitions apply in this Act. "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 a financial benefit, by the group or by 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.