

Australian Multicultural Foundation

Ethnic Youth Gangs in Australia
Do They Exist?

Report No. 1
Vietnamese Young People

by
Rob White
Santina Perrone
Carmel Guerra
Rosario Lampugnani

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About the Authors

Rob White is an Associate Professor in Sociology/Law at the University of Tasmania (on secondment from Criminology at the University of Melbourne). He has written extensively in the areas of youth studies, criminology and social policy.

Santina Perrone is a Research Analyst with the Australian Institute of Criminology where she is currently working in the areas of workplace violence, and crime against business. During the period of the present study, she was a lecturer and researcher in the Department of Criminology at the University of Melbourne.

Carmel Guerra is the Coordinator of the Ethnic Youth Issues Network of Victoria. She has been involved in youth affairs for a number of years, with a particular interest in multiculturalism and anti-racist youth work.

Rosario Lampugnani works in the Department of Immigration, and was previously a Senior Researcher with the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research. He has had a long-standing interest in sociological research relating to migrant experiences, multiculturalism and immigration issues.

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Part 1:

Background to the Research

1.1 Introduction

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

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

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

i. Ethnic Minority Youth

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

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

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

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

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

While media and police concern over 'ethnic youth gangs' has appeared to be on the rise, there has in fact been very little empirical information regarding the actual activities of ethnic minority young people (but see Guerra & White, 1995; Pe-Pua, 1996). Specifically, little is known about the *demographic characteristics* of the ethnic minority people in question – for example, their ages, gender composition, level of education, employment status, socio-economic background and migration experiences. Nor do we know much about what they do with their time, and where they spend it. This is particularly the case with respect to young women of ethnic minority background.

Even less is known about those ethnic minority young people allegedly involved in drug-related activities and other kinds of offending behaviour. Concern has been raised regarding state responsibilities to collect relevant data on these issues (see Cunneen, 1994), but to date there has been a dearth of systematic statistical material regarding welfare, criminal justice and employment trends in relation to these young people. Within the criminal justice sphere specifically, there has, however, been some movement toward analysis of the nature and extent of ethnic minority youth offending (Easteal, 1997), to examine sentencing disparities in relation to the ethnicity of juvenile offenders (Gallagher & Poletti, 1998) and to consider the special requirements of ethnic minority offenders held in detention (NSW Ombudsman, 1996). However, much more study and conceptual work is needed if we are to appreciate fully the place of ethnic minority youth in the criminal justice system, and the reasons for their involvement with this system.

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

ii. Diverse Assumptions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2 The Study

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

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

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

i. Aims of Research

The *aims of the research* were:

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

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

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

ii. Methods of Research

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.3 The Notion of Youth Gangs

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

i. Criminal Youth Gangs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ii. ‘Gang’ Characteristics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

iii. Youth Formations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

iv. Youth in Groups

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.4 Research Contribution

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

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

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

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

Part 2:
Vietnamese Young People

2.1 Social History

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

i. Migration

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ii. Settlement Patterns

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

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

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

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

iii. Demographic Profile

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

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

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

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

iv. Labour Market Participation

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.2 Profile of Youth Interviewed

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1:
Type of Accommodation Upon Arrival in Australia

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

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

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

Table 2:
Who the Young People Live With

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.3 Sources of Income

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

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

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

Table 3:
Types of Unpaid Work Undertaken by Young People

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

N=11

Not Applicable = 9 (45%)

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

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

Table 4:
Sources of Income for Young People Interviewed

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

N=20

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

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

Table 5:
Ways in Which Young People Spend Their Money

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

N=18

Missing Responses = 2 (10%)

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

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

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

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

N=20

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

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

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

N=20

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

N=20

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

2.4 Youth Gangs

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

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

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

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

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

N=20

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 10:
Characteristics by Which Young People Defined Gangs

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

N=20

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

N=20

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

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

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

N=20

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

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

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

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

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

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

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

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

N=19
Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

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

2.5 Problems & Solutions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

N=19
Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

N=15
Missing Responses = 1 (5%)
Not Applicable = 4 (20%)

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

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

Table 17:
Importance of Family to Young People Interviewed

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

N=19
Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

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

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

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

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

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

N=18
Missing Responses = 2 (10%)

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

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

N=18
Missing Responses = 2 (10%)

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

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

N=18
Missing Responses = 2 (10%)

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

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

Table 20:
Young People's Perceptions of What the Government Can Do About Gangs

Type of action	Response to each category		
	Number	Percent (respondents)	Percent (responses)
Education/training	1	5.6	3.4
Employ outreach workers	4	22.2	13.8
Provide free hang out places for young people	6	33.3	20.7
Not close schools	2	11.1	6.9
Provide more jobs	7	38.9	24.1
Providing more funding/services for young people	2	11.1	6.9
Support/listen to them	1	5.6	3.4
Can't do much	3	16.7	10.3
Don't know	3	16.7	10.3
Total	29		100.0

N=18
Missing Responses = 2 (10%)

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

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

2.6 Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.7 Recommendations

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

i. Canadian Gangs and Ethnicity

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

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

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

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

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

It is further recommended that there be additional programming for immigrants aimed at assisting individuals to find rewarding employment, especially young adult males who are at risk of drifting into criminal activity.

ii. Public Spaces and Ethnicity in Australia

The most sustained analysis of how young ethnic minority people actually use public space – which has obvious implications regarding gang-related perceptions and activities – has been a study undertaken in four local government areas in Sydney (Pe-Pua, 1996). A wide range of issues relating to the lives of 100 street-frequenting non-English speaking background young people were investigated. The discussions and interviews covered topics such as family issues, housing and accommodation issues, social and recreational needs, financial needs, employment issues, educational and training issues, physical and mental health, legal issues and youth services.

With respect to the specific issue of public space use, the study found that (Pe-Pua, 1996: 115):

The activities associated with street-frequenting ranged from illegal activities to fun activities, socialising, fighting or stirring up trouble, smoking and others. The reasons for street-frequenting were boredom, family-related, for economic or moral support, because of the freedom it provides, and others. The perceived benefits were: widening one's social network; having fun; learning experience; freedom and a sense of power; escape from problems; economic gains, and others. The perceived disadvantages were related to problems with the police; a negative image or bad treatment received from others, especially adults; getting into trouble or being involved in fights; health or drug and alcohol problems; lack of adequate shelter or food; financial worries; emotional burden; and general safety.

On the basis of the study's findings, a number of recommendations were put forward, some of which are relevant to the present study. These include (Pe-Pua, 1996):

- that different strategies for disseminating information on the background and needs of street-frequenting young people be undertaken, to be targeted at different groups
- that the culture or practice of service provision (e.g., police, youth and community, health) be changed to have a more effective ethnic minority youth focus, while maintaining a high level of customer service and professionalism
- that youth services incorporate a mobile outreach and street-based service delivery model to access street-frequenting young people
- that a multi-skilled, multi-purpose type of structure for a youth centre be set up
- that more street workers be hired, or street and outreach work be strongly encouraged as part of youth work, provided adequate funding support and human resources are made available
- that the recreational needs of these young people be addressed by making alternative forms of recreation available

Pe-Pua (1996) concludes that the key to providing for the needs of ethnic minority street-frequenting young people are education and employment opportunities. Changes to existing services would be a step in the right direction, and assist in developing further these opportunities.

iii. Recommendations Arising from the Present Study

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

Table 21:
What Young People Felt Would Make Them Happier

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

N=19

Missing Responses = 1 (5%)

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

- It is essential to undertake a *mapping of existing community services and contemporary settlement policies* in order to better determine what does or does not exist specifically for young people in specific geographical areas, and to assess the possibilities for further development of appropriate support agencies and services.
- Attention must be directed at providing *quality educational facilities and services* for the young people, particularly those which are based upon a multicultural curriculum and atmosphere, where students are provided with adequate individual and group support, and where anti-racist strategies and practices are applied across the whole school population.
- Strategic action is needed in the area of *youth unemployment* and in the creation of jobs for particularly disadvantaged groups and communities, especially since there is increasing evidence that certain neighbourhoods are likely to become ghettoised if sustained intervention on these matters is not undertaken.
- The levels and types of *income support* for young people needs to be increased and made relevant to the real needs, living costs and spending patterns of young people, as well as taking into account their contributions to the household income.

- *Family support structures* are needed, and appropriate forums devised for greater *community engagement* with and involving the young people directly, insofar as what happens to young people is very much a social phenomenon and implies collective solutions to complex problems.
- The adoption of appropriate *community policing practices*, and establishment of protocols for positive and constructive interaction between ethnic minority youth and police/ security guards, is essential in restoring social peace and dampening negative relations on the street.
- The media and politicians need to have adequate information sources and/or pressure placed upon them to report events and situations accurately, and to respond to specific groups in a non-racialised manner, highlighting the necessity both for the active presence of *independent bodies* such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, and for governments to take the lead in *promoting reconciliation* and anti-racist ideals.

If we, as a society, are to tackle the issues surrounding 'youth gangs', then, as a society, we must also recognise our responsibilities in creating the conditions which generate the perceptions of, fear of, and negative responses to such phenomena. The young people involved are not 'bad' people – but, they are dealing with circumstances not of their making, which do have serious long term consequences if appropriate and positive strategic action is not taken. The time to take such action is now.

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