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## Youth gangs – who's generation

Like any parent of a young teenager, I have been disturbed by seemingly more frequent reports of youth gang activity in the city.

But, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easyrider movie and re-watching Quadrophenia, The Who's rock classic about the Mods and Rockers gangs of the 60's, got me to thinking about my own experience of youth gangs. As anyone who has grown up in a reasonable sized city knows, youth gangs are nothing new.

As a 12 year old growing up in working-class Adelaide in the late '60s, all I wanted was silver Vespa with mirrors. Later there were the whispered reports at High School about huge turf-brawls in shopping centre car parks, hanging with my mates in the local park and 'liberating' the occasional gnome on the way, and the duffle coat 'gang' we had for a few months in the winter of '71 before we all moved on to other things (the original *punk hippies* perhaps?).

Like most still do, by my late teens I'd moved off the streets and into cars and then pubs and mates' houses where the antisocial gang behaviour became more anti-self behaviour – partying hard, drinking and drugs.

As a volunteer youth leader, I watched the rise of ethnic gangs in Adelaide's western suburbs in the early '70's while a few years later as a youth worker in the outer-suburban southern suburbs I witnessed firsthand the emergence of surfer gangs and many of their early turf-wars.

Youth gangs have been around since young males of the species first started to challenge older males for power and territory and to impress potential breeding partners by preening themselves, putting on a bit of colour and puffing out their chests.

They have been reported since at least the Middle Ages and ever since, popular writing has been peppered with references to them. *Oliver Twist* by Dickens is, at least at one level, a story of the criminal youth gangs of London in the mid-1800's – the era of Australia's first reported youth gang, Sydney's *Cabbage Tree Hat Mob*.

But the role of youth gangs hasn't been and isn't all criminal. Young people have always sought to band together for identity, connectedness, and security; to create spaces and cultures of their own; and, to push the boundaries of the prevailing order and norms.

Every generation of popular music, film and writing has documented and moved young people to band together and rebel, to establish their own new order. Pushing the boundaries creates new boundaries and drives the evolution of our culture over the ages.

Sometimes they commit crimes, more often they are just plain anti-social. The more testosterone and alcohol-charged, swagger and intimidate and mark-out territory much as adolescent males always have. But most often they are just social gatherings like the small groups of kids we see wandering Stockland or Willows Mall or hanging at the skate park.

They become gangs when they see themselves as such, when we see them as such, and when they are involved in enough illegal activity to attract the attention of the police or the wrath of neighbourhood residents.

While rates of gang participation decrease from the mid to late teens, the severity and regularity of the crimes committed increases with the age of the gang members.

Although there are no police statistics on youth gangs or gang activity in the city, my impression from the public reports is that Townsville's youth gangs are, what the researchers would categorise as, *wannabe gangs* – groupings of mainly boys in their early-to mid adolescence that form to engage in spontaneous social activity and exciting and impulsive criminal activity including violence against others.

While no doubt also having our fair share of small criminal groupings that form to commit crime for profit, Townsville doesn't seem to yet have the full-blown street gangs that we see in Sydney and other larger cities.

Less visible but more permanent than their wannabe cousins, street gangs have structure and organisation, go armed with knives or worse, and commit repeated, planned and usually serious crimes for profit and control of territory.

And, if we don't have them yet, surely it is only a matter of time in our growth as a city before we do. Across the globe, the larger the population and the higher its density, then the bigger, more severe and usually more intractable the youth gang problem.

As Townsville grows, so will the issue – that is, unless we understand the problem and the factors that contribute to it, and plan to minimise its occurrence and impact and address its causes.

We know that the rate and severity of crime and gang activity amongst young people is higher the poorer, the more un-connected and the more dysfunctional their family and community. Affluent suburbs invariably have lower youth crime rates than poor suburbs that

typically have few opportunities, services and amenities, low levels of educational achievement and high intergenerational welfare dependency.

Most literature on the subject agrees that youth gangs and their development are best managed by a combination of coercive and developmental approaches, that policing alone won't work unless we also address the well understood individual, family, peer, school and work, socio-demographic, community and built environment factors that increase the risk of young people participating in crime, gang-based or otherwise.

At its simplest, this means having youth services that reach out to young people where they meet - in their spaces. It also means ensuring that we provide the infrastructure, incentive and 'encouragement' for young people to meet off the streets in well located, designed and well managed venues.

It is interesting for instance that of the seven skate parks in the city, only Riverway and Murray appear to have a regular youth gang problem. The problem isn't skate parks as such, rather it is that some are poorly located and poorly designed. Hopefully the location and design of the new Riverway Skate Park will solve one of those hotspots.

No doubt there are other youth gang and youth crime hotspots around the city. Which leads me to wonder how well are we mapping those hot spots and reviewing them to see what policing, social and, infrastructure changes we can make to minimise the problem?

It makes me wonder too, how well we understand the shifts in our city's youth demographics and whether we have sufficient youth workers and youth services that are well located and appropriately delivered? Do we know what sufficient would be?

Of course these sort of questions need to be asked and answered for a range of groups in the community. But as the median age continues to rise, we just need to ensure that we devote sufficient planning and resources to our young people, just as we no doubt need to plan for the hoards of greying closet Mods who will finally get that Vespa with mirrors they dreamed of as a 12 year old.

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