THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT IMPACTS OF ORGANIZED CRIME ON YOUTH, AS OFFENDERS AND VICTIMS

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While organized crime has an impact on youth that is both broad and direct, frequently it has a more substantial impact as a consequence of its indirect effects that are noted particularly at the community level. This report explores the impact of both traditional and non-traditional organized criminal activities on youth. It also discusses the effect of organized crime on public perception, vulnerable youth populations, and police resource allocation including both supply and demand reduction measures.

The research on organized crime in this context is limited in a number of areas. Further research on the impact of organized crime on youth, for example, should include issues related to public perception and the collection of appropriate data. An ethnographic approach could also help expand our understanding of some of the impacts. Policy regarding internal (police) and external (public) communication of the local impact of organized crime should be examined, as well as that related to data entry, police resource allocation, and the issue of supply and demand reduction.

Introduction

In 1998, Samuel Porteus completed the most recent assessment of the impact of organized criminal activity in Canada. His study, for the Solicitor General of Canada, outlined a variety of possible impacts organized crime can have on society as a whole. It did not, however, focus on specific segments of the population which may be affected. The impacts of this criminal activity on youth specifically have not yet been assessed in Canada. Presently, much rhetoric links organized criminal groups to youth as offenders, and not necessarily as victims.

The purpose of this report was to demonstrate a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the impact of organized crime on youth, both as offenders and victims. However, this task is currently impossible, given the limited studies available on this topic.

Instead, the majority of this paper will focus on the existing literature that examines the direct and indirect impacts of organized crime on youth, both locally and internationally. It will also discuss the difficulties in examining organized crime, including the lack of a consensus on its definition. Many of the traditional activities
of organized crime will be highlighted, since each is unique and often has a shared impact on youth. While all youth are a vulnerable segment of our population, some segments of the youth population may be more vulnerable to organized crime than others. Therefore, this paper will focus on young children, Aboriginal youth, visible minority youth, and differences according to gender.

This review will not only examine circumstances as they relate to Canada. September 11 taught us to think beyond the local or national experience in order to capture a complete picture of the realities that may eventually affect us. Working for a police organization has not limited the perspective reflected in this paper. In fact, this particular organization has listed organized crime, terrorism and youth among its priorities, demonstrating that a link is required between the priorities.

Finally, this report will examine public and police perceptions of organized crime. Understanding pressures on police agencies, their structures, and various trends in enforcement will help to understand where police focus their energies and allocate resources.

The Current State of Research on Organized Crime and Youth

The overall difficulties in researching and defining organized crime

Organized crime has been an element of civilization for hundreds, if not thousands of years. According to historian and the author; Michael Woodiwiss (2001),

Organized crime . . . is as old as the first systems of law and government and as international as trade. Piracy, banditry, forgery, fraud, and trading in stolen or illegal goods and services are all ancient preoccupations that often involved the active participation of landowners, merchants and government officials.

Organized crime is hardly a new phenomenon, but people have a distorted impression of it, due in part to vague definitions of its activities. We experienced this with the pre–1945 conceptions of Nazi Germany. Some of that same rhetoric has helped to shape the current public perception and support for vigorous political efforts to counter terrorism.

In shaping a definition, Woodiwiss states that “organized crime is systematic criminal activity for money or power,” and says that the American idea of organized crime is limited to a definition of activities that relate to gangsterism, Mafia and Mafia-type organizations (Woodiwiss 2001).

This narrow US-led definition has influenced the perception of organized crime as being mafioso-type, a product of “. . . some directing genius in human form” (Porteus 1998). In fact, a recent study demonstrates this point well. It shows that only 350 of the more than 5,000 criminal groups in Russia meet the US and Western understanding of organized crime. Between 12 to 20 of these were major cartels (Luneev 2000).

This doesn’t mean that we should not define organized crime, and thus limit its