Doing Gangs Research

Introduction

The concept of ‘gang’ is highly contentious and controversial. This is a mantra that will be repeated throughout this book. The ambiguities surrounding what a gang is and what gangs do are precisely why the term is both powerful and predictable in public discourses of disorder and danger. Gangs connote predatory and violent action, usually by groups of young men. The concept encapsulates notions of aggression, viciousness, chains of brotherhood forged in combat, and codes of obedience and behaviour that discipline individuals to the group’s norms and values. Yet, simultaneously, the idea of gangs has a certain appeal, based on images and portrayals that emphasise shared purpose, strong group bonds, explosions of excitement and adrenaline, and financial and social gratification in the here-and-now. Even the fictionalised accounts of gangs embody these aspects of uncertainty and complexity when it comes to their good and their bad features.

Much of the present-day concern with the gangs question stems from negative media treatment of young people, which more often than not is framed in terms of the threat posed by gangs. This is reinforced politically by populist accusations that youth gangs are a major social evil today. Branding certain young people ‘gangs’ has allowed for widespread vilification of particular groups of street-present young people and created political space for the imposition of draconian forms of social control over their behaviour and, indeed, their very presence in the public domain. Moreover, exceptional and dramatic events, such as the English riots of 2011 and the Cronulla riots of 2008, provide platforms for the exposition of a form of ‘gangs talk’ that reduces complex social problems to simple answers and solutions. Gangs are easy to blame [1].

R. White, *Youth Gangs, Violence and Social Respect*  
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Within the academy, division exists between two schools of thought. On the one hand, there are those who argue that ‘gangs’ are basically a social construction, mainly born out of moral panic, and that to label someone or a group in this way misconstrues their lived realities and provides only a negative picture of who they really are and what they really do. On the other hand, there are those who claim that gangs are ‘real’, that they do engage in harmful criminal activity, and that policy and policing responses need to be developed to counter street-level thuggery and criminality of this kind. As with the commonsense notions of ‘gang’, however, the answer is far more complicated than either a hardcore ‘realist’ or ‘social constructionist’ position may imply [2].

Social problems, such as those purported to be associated with the presence of youth gangs, are constructed through a combination of material and cultural factors. There are things going on in the lives of these young people that demand our attention. The study of ‘gangs’ is the study of real, existing problems. However, while the problems may be ‘real’, the definition, magnitude, impact, risk and origins of youth gangs are open to interpretation and dispute.

One task of this book is to unpack the multiple realities of youth gangs in Australia, in order to both affirm substantive problems and dilemmas experienced by many young people today, and deny the reduction of these to individual choice and specific types of youth social formation. The foundations of the book have been built on direct conversations with young people over many years, and in many different places and settings. They have also drawn upon the study and experiences of researchers on young people in places other than Australia. First-hand accounts and a broad range of analytical literature thus constitute the core materials upon which the present narrative has been constructed.

**Studying youth gangs**

Doing gangs research involves a number of complex ethical, conceptual, procedural and methodological issues [3]. At the very beginning of such research, for instance, there are significant problems stemming from the use of particular types of gangs research methodologies. This is illustrated in current debates in the US over the development and use of gang databases [4]. A crucial point made in the debates is that certain types of legislated data collection end up being too inclusive and stigmatising of young people. The question of research definition of