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Groups and Networks

Introduction

This chapter starts with the recognition that young people in Australia spend a lot of time in the public domains of the street, regardless of social background. However, as construed by the mass media and in the statements of political leaders, youth activity on the streets is in many instances equated with gang behaviour. But do gangs as such really exist in Australia? Are they really the threat to society that media portrayals would have us believe?

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 young people, and especially ethnic-minority youth (see Chapter 1).

How best to categorise people and experiences in ways that provide accurate and sensitive portrayals of social life is part of an ongoing conundrum for social research. This is especially evident in research and scholarship dealing with phenomena such as youth gangs [1]. Diverse social factors and networks bring young men and women together. In the Australian gangs research, it was observed that ethnicity (i.e., a distinct cultural identity) often forms the core of social relationships but then intersects with variables such as geography (e.g., specific locality), age (i.e., mainly teenagers but up to mid-20s), size (i.e., sheer number of people who congregate at any point in time), affiliation (i.e., with people from similar cultural backgrounds) and familiarity (i.e., of one’s immediate neighbours, peers and acquaintances).

Gang formations and gang-related behaviour

Periodic media reports about the perceived proliferation and criminal or anti-social activities of youth gangs have long featured in press stories
about young people in many parts of Australia – from Melbourne to Adelaide, Perth to Sydney. These reports are by no means new. Indeed, the idea of gangs has been associated over a lengthy period of time with various kinds of youth-group formations.

From the mid-eighteenth century to the end of that century, for example, much public concern was directed at the ‘push larrikins’ of Melbourne and Sydney (see Chapter 4). These were groups of young men (the groups were called ‘pushes’) who, through their appearance (e.g., wearing of pointed-toed boots) and behaviour (e.g., getting drunk, getting into fights), became easily identified as threats by the media, the police and the general public. The streets were the meeting places of the pushes and they had their origins in the poverty of their members. The push larrikins were born out of a very unsettled state of society, and they reflected the lack of amusements, recreational outlets, jobs and overall means of livelihood for these young people. Deviancy was grounded in the form of the gang.

By contrast, public consternation about young people in the mid-20th century revolved around the ‘bodgies and widgies’, young working-class men and women who were identifiable by their particular visual styles and leisure concerns [2]. The bodgies and widgies represented a new teenage culture, with an emphasis on fashion (long hair styles for the boys, gabardine skirts for the girls), street presence, dancing, and rock and roll music. From 1950 to 1959, the phenomenon of the bodgies and widgies captured the imagination of the media. These were working-class young people with jobs, and they were engaging in the first stirring of a distinctive teenage consumer-oriented culture. In doing so, they represented a threat to middle-class values and culture, and much of the media condemnation (and distortion) centred on alcohol use, sexual behaviour and family breakdown associated with the bodgies and widgies. Deviancy was linked to a new youth subculture.

Until recently there has been relatively little concerted research into the nature and dynamics of contemporary youth gangs in the Australian context. Much of the knowledge about youth groups, including gangs, has been based upon anecdotal information and popular media imagery derived from elsewhere, including and especially the US. Many disputes have taken place over the existence and magnitude of the alleged gang problem. This has been due mainly to problems in defining what a gang actually is.

The specific features of any particular youth-group formation will vary greatly. As discussed in Chapter 2, if the group sees itself as a gang and