

Targeting youth gangs at a grassroots level

The term 'youth gang' can refer to a group organised around illegal activity or a more benign group of youths who pass the time together. Although often seen as negative by others, gangs can provide positive experiences for some young people, giving support, security, opportunity for status, group identification and excitement, which they may not be getting otherwise. However, the general public and the local community may experience and fear real or perceived 'gang' activities such as street fighting, drug dealing and use, and violence in general.

A recent review of Australian and international literature on youth gangs documented the most effective anti gang strategies (White 2007) and found that responses to gang behaviours can generally be divided into two types: coercive and developmental. Coercive approaches primarily focus on sanctions and law enforcement responses and are often criticised by researchers as being too narrow and unable to address the underlying causes of the behaviour. A United States evaluation found that the most effective law enforcement responses to gangs are community collaboration (information exchange or gang awareness education); crime prevention activities (modification of environments and opportunities) and suppression tactics (e.g. street sweeps). Developmental approaches focus on enhancing opportunities for young people, through activities that reflect their needs, and are the preferred approach in the literature, particularly community-based strategies. This is due to many gangs having solid ties to their communities, which may support them.

Based on the review it is suggested that anti-gang responses strategies should:

- be based on local conditions and youth group formations
- avoid stereotypes
- be proactive
- avoid knee-jerk reactions and instead focus on problem solving
- cater for social differences within communities
- involve consultation and participation of the young people targeted
- invest in people, as this is the best way to obtain social rewards
- create social spaces that are welcoming and safe
- emphasise social inclusion, not exclusion
- ensure media reporting of youth, particularly of ethnic minorities, is balanced and fair
- profile current local youth activities and services, set priorities among needs and gain consensus on the best approach (White 2007)

These activities should not stand alone, and can be more effective with other community development responses, including the provision of social services and the mobilisation of community resources.

Reference

White R 2007. *Anti-gang strategies and interventions*. Perth: Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth