

Changing the lens—positive developments from New Zealand

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Introduction

New Zealand is a small country, with 4.4 million people. Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, make up about 15% of the population, with a much younger age structure than the European population¹. There are a variety of gangs in New Zealand, with indigenous ethnic gangs making up the majority in terms of membership. While there has been a growth in the number and visibility of 'youth gangs' over the past decade, these groups are generally part of a wider landscape of families and communities with intergenerational gang membership and high levels of poverty, unemployment, poor educational engagement and poorly resourced neighbourhoods.

International researchers note little reliable empirical data about 'gangs', who belongs to them, and what they do², and New Zealand is no exception³. The lack of quantifiable information arises from the well-recognized problem with defining a 'gang', the rapid change in levels of membership and activity particularly in youth gangs, and the lack of engagement with government agencies by families and

communities associated with gangs - hence, limited administrative data.

Recognition of the intergenerational nature of gang formation and growth in New Zealand, particularly indigenous ethnic gangs, has been important in intervening effectively to reduce violence. This article describes social and historical drivers of gang growth in New Zealand, an approach to intervention and examples of successful mediation and pro-social change.

New Zealand experience

Research suggests that, while gangs are more likely to form during periods of economic growth, gang membership is likely to rise during periods of low economic growth and high unemployment⁴. A number of societal and structural drivers influence gang formation and gang membership. These include:

- structural inequalities: poverty, unemployment, absence of meaningful jobs and social disorganisation⁵;
- barriers to resources (education, health, social services, employment etc)⁶; and
- processes of colonialism.⁷

¹ Statistics New Zealand. National ethnic population projections, [find it here](#).

² Howell J. Youth gang programs and strategies: summary. Washington DC: USA Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. 2000.

³ Gilbert J, Newbold G. Youth Gangs: A review of the literature prepared for the Ministry of Social Development. Wellington: Ministry of Social Development. 2006.

⁴ Marsh E. Insight into Gang Dynamics, Masters Thesis. University of Waikato. 1982.

⁵ Curry G, Thomas R. Community organisation and gang policy response. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 8(4): 357-374. 1992.

⁶ Fagan J. Social Processes of delinquency and drug use among urban gangs. in C. Huff (ed), *Gangs in America*: 183-219. Newbury Park (CA): Sage Publications. 1990.

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Gangs have existed in New Zealand since the colonial period⁸. However, many of today's more established gangs evolved during the early 1950s through to the 1970s, a period of economic growth⁹. The periods of highest gang membership growth in New Zealand were the late 1970s to the early 1980s, and the late 1980s and early 1990s, periods of economic recession. Income inequality rose in New Zealand from the late 1980s so that New Zealand now has one of the highest levels of inequality in the OECD¹⁰.

Gang membership is also influenced by a number of 'individual' risk factors, including:

- gender: gang members are typically male, although research shows significant increases in female gang membership and gang formation¹¹;
- geographical placement: more likely to live in urban contexts;
- ethnicity and class: likely to be member of a racial or ethnic minority or, more generally, from an 'underclass' population¹²; and
- educational attainment: restricted access to quality education, low education attainment.

Gang membership in New Zealand generally reflects these patterns, with the exception that gangs are less of a distinctly urban phenomenon. Provincial areas have some of the highest proportion of gang membership, reflecting a drift back from cities to ancestral lands and areas with a lower cost of living during times of high unemployment.

The 1981 Gang Report undertook a comprehensive review of the causes that lead to the proliferation of gangs in New Zealand and concluded that:

Gang membership was related to urbanisation and the breakdown or lack of extended family care for children. Both parents are often working or there is a solo parent only, and the local community may lack adequate advisory and support services for families. The child senses that the values in society are ones that his parents haven't succeeded at, and often the child's family

⁷ Jackson M. Māori and the Criminal Justice System. Wellington: Department of Justice. 1998.

⁸ Hill R. Policing the Colonial Frontier: The Theory and Practice of Coercive Social and Racial Control in New Zealand 1767-1867, Part One of Two. Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs. 1986.

⁹ Centre for Social Research and Evaluation. Youth gangs in Counties Manukau. Wellington: Ministry of Social Development. 2008. [Find it here.](#)

¹⁰ OECD. Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising. [Find it here.](#)

¹¹ Esbensen F, Winfree L. Race and gender differences between gang and non-gang youth: results from a multisite survey. Justice Quarterly, 15(3): 505-526. 1998.

¹² Curry G, Ball R, Decker S. Estimating the national scope of gang crime from law enforcement data. Washington D.C: National Institute of Justice. 1996.

and neighbourhood background doesn't give access to legitimate channels of success, so that actual or anticipated failure in a conventionally valued area such as education leads to hostility to authority and control, potential for violence, and an exploitative attitude to social relations. A low educational and employment status will lead to low self-esteem¹³.

Intervening to reduce the growth of gangs and gang-related crime

To date, the principal strategy employed by New Zealand Police and, arguably, a number of government agencies, has been 'zero tolerance' and suppression, reinforced by additional police powers to monitor, arrest and separate gang members and higher tariffs in sentencing¹⁴. However, there is a significant body of research to suggest that suppression tactics do not reduce gang offending¹⁵, and there is little evidence of effectiveness in New Zealand

The research also demonstrates that the imprisonment of gang members enables gangs to recruit within prisons, dominate prison culture, dominate the contraband trade within prisons and run criminal activities within the community from prison¹⁶. There is evidence that this happened in New Zealand prisons during the 1980s when the traditional prison culture became dominated by gang prison culture^{17,18}. In summary, much of the current literature has concluded that traditional law enforcement strategies alone will have little effect on reducing, managing, or suppressing gangs¹⁹.

To curb the growth of gangs and reduce associated criminal activity, research supports a multi-modal approach with a strong emphasis on socio-economic drivers, social inclusion and community development in relevant communities, including efforts to reduce the barriers to alternative, pro-social options^{20,21,22,23,24}.

¹³ Comber K. Report of the Committee on Gangs. Wellington 1981.

¹⁴ New Zealand Parliament. Parliamentary Support Research Papers. Young People and Gangs in New Zealand. 2009. [Find it here.](#)

¹⁵ Green J, Pranis K. Gang Wars - The Failure of Enforcement Tactics and the Need for Effective Public Safety Strategies. Justice Policy Institute. 2007. [Find it here.](#)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Meek, J. Paremoremo: New Zealand's Maximum Security Prison. Wellington: Department of Justice. 1986.

¹⁸ Ministerial Committee of Inquiry into the Prison System: Prison Review – Te Ara Hou: The New Way. Ministry of Justice. 1989.

¹⁹ Huff R, McBride W. Gangs and the Police. in Goldstein A, Huff R. The Gang Intervention Handbook: 401-416. Research Press, Champaign, Ill. 1993.

²⁰ Lafontaine T, Ferguson M, Wormith J. Street Gangs: A review of the empirical literature on community and Corrections-based prevention, intervention and suppression strategies. University of Saskatchewan. 2005. [Find it here.](#)

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Reducing youth gangs and youth gang-related crime

Arresting youth and gang related offending requires a multi-dimensional, long term response that promotes social inclusion. This differs from a common response to youth gangs that predominantly focuses on preventing young people joining gangs.

Rather than focus on 'gangs', it is more helpful, in our view, to use the term 'hard to reach' groups and communities. The hard to reach definition is preferred because it describes groups that are socially excluded. Through this social exclusion process, individuals and groups lose some of their rights as citizens, and become disengaged from services, opportunities and responsibilities. The term also recognises that members of these groups are citizens, community members, and have and are part of families. The hard to reach definition allows interventions to tackle issues and behaviours without exacerbating the problem through further marginalisation.

When considering how to intervene with hard to reach youth, it is useful to reflect on four characteristics identified by international research²⁵ that young people need to ensure that they are resilient to adverse conditions and to thrive. The four characteristics are:

- a sense of industry and competency^{26,27} – developing a sense of self belief, confidence in their own abilities through succeeding in engaged activities and obtaining recognition for productivity. This can be achieved through activities such as sports, hobbies, school or employment;
- a feeling of connectedness to others and to society²⁸ – building empathy with others by

knowing that others care for them. This can be achieved by increasing the positive connections with community, government and business networks through pro social activities;

- a sense of control over one's fate in life²⁹ – a person who has a sense of control over their fate in life believes that they can affect their future. This can be achieved through being engaged in interactions in which they can successfully predict the outcomes of their actions; and
- a stable identity³⁰ – the development of a stable identity is associated with positive interpersonal relationships, psychological and behavioural stability, and productive adulthood. This can be achieved by strengthening cultural identity and connectedness.

In New Zealand, this knowledge needs to be applied through an approach to youth that recognises whānau (extended family) as the core unit of Māori society and recognises Māori as a diverse, culturally distinct population who are capable of leading their own solutions.

However, in the absence of a strong connection to culture of origin, and with increasing disconnection from social environments associated with adults, (school, family, community), subcultures emerge. Whether it is gang subculture, street or youth culture, young people and their peers will create their own sense of belonging and identity. The desire to reconnect young people with their culture or 'identity' is often oversimplified, as seen in many programmes that attempt to replace gang or street culture with the dominant or desired culture of adults. However, reconnection is a subtle process and, in our experience, it is not helpful to present stark 'either/or' options. As work is undertaken to re-engage young people, different cultural connections and aspirations can be fostered, allowing links to traditional and pro-social values to develop in a way that resonates with hard to reach young people and their whānau.

The usual community development approaches to working with disadvantaged groups also lend themselves to interventions with hard to reach groups. There are two crucial principles that need to be applied in achieving change with these communities:

- there needs to be leadership within the community that is willing to lead change; and

²¹ United States Department of Justice, Best practices to address community gang problems – OJJDP's Comprehensive Gang Model, June 2008. [Find it here.](#)

²² White R. Police and community responses to youth gangs. Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice. 274. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. 2004.

²³ Aldridge, J et al. Youth gangs in an English city: social exclusion, drugs and violence: Full Research Report ESRC End of Award Report, RES-000-23-0615. Swindon: ESRC. 2007.

²⁴ Workman K. Looking Back-Looking Beyond-Gang Strategies in the Wider Context. Local Government Forum on Gangs. Wellington. 2008. [Find it here.](#)

²⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Understanding youth development: promoting positive pathways of growth. Developed by CSR, Incorporated, for the Family and Youth Services Bureau; Administration on Children, Youth and Families; Administration for Children and Families; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

²⁶ Erikson E. Identity: Youth and Crisis. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. 1968.

²⁷ Erikson E. Childhood and Society. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. 1963.

²⁸ Gottfredson M, Hirschi T. A general theory of adolescent problem behavior. In Ketterlinus R, Lamb M. eds. Adolescent

Problem Behaviors: Issues and Research. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 41-56. 1994.

²⁹ Patterson G, Dishion T. Contributions of families and peers to delinquency. Criminology 23:63-79. 1985.

³⁰ Grotevant H. Adolescent development in family contexts. In Damon W, Eisenberg N. eds. Handbook of Child Psychology. Vol. 3, Social, Emotional and Personality Development. 5th ed. New York: Wiley. 1996.

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- there needs to be some form of structure and organisation within the community around which information can be exchanged.

The challenge with hard to reach groups is penetration, to identify the leadership and capacity for change, and engagement. To achieve this penetration requires the right people. Many programmes work with 'at risk' youth or individuals, but these generally do not engage or achieve sustainable change in the hard to reach groups that are the focus of this article³¹.

Working with indigenous ethnic gangs - principles
The approach that has shown promising results in New Zealand is underpinned by the following principles:

- a focus on the behaviours of individuals/whānau rather than on appearance or affiliation - the delivery of interventions and social services should be focused on changing behaviours rather than focussed on what the recipient(s) looks like or who they are affiliated to³²;
- building on the strengths of youth, their whānau and communities to address negative behaviours and promote positive behaviours;
- removing the labels – there is a propensity to label youth groups as youth gangs without recognising that young people need their peer support as part of a natural youth development process. Labelling theorists³³ argue that labelling can create a self-fulfilling prophecy situation where the young people's behaviours will be influenced by the label;
- recognising that there are opportunities for positive change in all youth, whānau and communities, regardless of how alienated or dysfunctional a young person, whānau or community may be;
- recognition of the diversity of leadership in communities;
- engaging whānau and community – recognition that young people are all part of whānau, and that whānau and community are not passive recipients, but are aspirational. They are capable of designing, developing and delivering their own interventions and services that will factor in their realities;

- people who have common experiences with hard to reach populations are the most appropriate people to design and deliver intervention projects because they can share their experiences of what has led them to make positive life choices³⁴;
- building capability and capacity – recognising youth, whānau and community leaders are often people with instinctive leadership qualities and may need support to develop their formal leadership acumen;
- mobilising whānau and community - changing criminal behaviours effectively requires the young people, whānau and community to accept the need to change; and
- supporting and resourcing youth, whānau and community initiatives, particularly Māori designed, developed and delivered 'bottom-up' initiatives to the stage that they can be robustly evaluated³⁵.

Positive examples

New Zealand has experimented with innovative approaches over the past four decades. The Detached Youth Worker Funding Scheme, established in 1977, arose out of concern for a section of youth who were alienated and not being reached by existing programmes. Evaluations noted positive outcomes for the client groups³⁶, including *"changes in group values and ideas about acceptable behaviour in the projects where the worker was involved with gangs or distinct groups of young people... a noticeable improvement in the way women were treated...and it became important to try and find work"*³⁷.

An initiative set up in response to the findings of the 1981 Gang Report³⁸, was the Group Employment Liaison Scheme (GELS). GELS was an interdepartmental unit supporting a network of 25 field officers - reflecting the fact that unemployment was considered to be a major factor in gang confrontations. A review found GELS to have been highly effective (and cost-effective) in facilitating access to employment and training by groups disadvantaged in the labour market. The benefits went beyond labour market outcomes, with an increased sense of self-worth and self-reliance amongst group members,

³¹ Bocarro J, Witt P. Reaching out/reaching in: The long-term challenges and issues of outreach programs. CYC-ONLINE (75) 2005. [Find it here](#).

³² Green J op cit.

³³ Originating in sociology and criminology, labelling theory (also known as social reaction theory) was developed by sociologist Howard Becker. It focuses on the linguistic tendency of majorities to negatively label minorities or those seen as deviant from norms. The theory is concerned with how the self-identity and behavior of individuals may be determined or influenced by the terms used to describe or classify them, and is associated with the concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy and stereotyping.

³⁴ Spee K. Evaluation Report: Hard to Reach Youth (CART). Wellington: Te Puni Kōkiri. 2011. [Find it here](#).

³⁵ Te Puni Kōkiri. Addressing the Drivers of Crime for Māori. Unpublished. 2009.

³⁶ The Detached Youth Worker Funding Scheme Evaluation Working Party. He Taanga Manawa. An evaluation of the Detached Youth Worker Funding Scheme. Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs. 1990.

³⁷ Department of Internal Affairs. An Evaluation of the Detached Youth Worker Funding Scheme. Occasional Paper on Youth. (11) Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs. 1983

³⁸ Comber K. Op cit.

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increased awareness of cultural identity, and reductions in offending and imprisonment³⁹.

More recent examples include the South Auckland Hard to Reach Youth project⁴⁰ and work in smaller communities following gang-related violence.

South Auckland Hard to Reach Youth Project

Following escalating levels of violence between youth gangs in South Auckland in 2007, including several deaths, the Government funded Consultancy Advocacy and Research Trust (CART), an organization with experience in working with gang communities, to deliver the Hard to Reach Youth project. A multi-agency taskforce worked with 'at risk' youth in this area⁴¹ but the CART project was to penetrate and engage with 'in risk' youth, involved in the violence. CART employed a community worker whose expertise and knowledge of established gangs was seen as crucial in accessing the youth crews, and promoting peaceful resolution to the disputes that were occurring on the streets of South Auckland.

Successful conflict resolution meetings were conducted during the months of September/October 2007, resulting in substantially less violence on the streets of South Auckland (and no further deaths) and an agreement between a number of youth crew leaders that they would communicate directly with each other in the future. The project successfully liaised with 65-80 hard to reach youth and family members and engaged them in activities, over a six month period. This included ten fortnightly workshops, a touch rugby module and cultural learning opportunities⁴².

An independent evaluation noted:

- people who have common experiences with hard to reach populations are the most appropriate people to design and deliver intervention projects because they can share their experiences of what has led them to make positive life choices;
- initiatives that are driven from a need to engage with parts of the community that various agencies are unable to connect with will require innovative and unique responses. Open support from government agencies will assist in breaking down barriers between

projects and communities which will lead to greater, positive impacts;

- projects designed for Māori need to take into account their contexts and needs, and provide opportunities for positive self-governance. The project is a good example of that and youth are involved in all aspects of the project including activity planning and ongoing development;
- although the project was initially designed to focus on hard to reach youth, whānau have become extensively involved in the project. The project encourages whānau involvement and acknowledges the whānau as a source of strength and facilitator for sustainable, positive life changes;
- the project provides an opportunity to be involved in activities which are not focused on negative perceptions of young people or on negative representations of established gang members; and
- the project believes in the youth and treats hard to reach youth gangs as potential contributing members of society. Taking the youth through a process of dream-building and creating a different vision of what their futures can hold, opens their eyes to the positive possibilities⁴³.

A year later, a second evaluation found a marked reduction in violence, arrests and alcohol use in the participating groups and commented:

Much of the initial crisis intervention success surrounding inter-gang violence was attributed to the Community Worker's ability to liaise and mediate between opposing crews. The longer-term cessation of street violence was attributed to [the worker's] strategy of breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions held by the various gangs that acted to fuel inter-gang rivalry, aggression and hate... Empathy development occurred through a number of opportunities created for the young people to interact in positive environments⁴⁴.

However, once the crisis was resolved, funding support was withdrawn for this project and, while some participants had transitioned into pro-social activity including employment, others returned to low level offending.

³⁹ Plunkett P, Hynes J, Crossan D. Review of the Group Employment Liaison Service (GELS): Report of the Review Team. Wellington: Department of Labour. 1986.

⁴⁰ O'Reilly D. Consultancy Advocacy & Research Trust. In: Māori designed, developed, delivered initiatives to reduce Māori offending and re-offending. Wellington: Te Puni Kōkiri. 2011. [Find it here](#).

⁴¹ Auckland Youth Support Network. Improving Outcomes for Young People in Counties Manukau. Plan of Action 2006. Wellington: Ministry of Social Development. 2006. [Find it here](#).

⁴² Spee K. Op cit.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Roguski M. Evaluation Report 2: Hard to Reach Youth (CART). Wellington: Te Puni Kōkiri. 2011. [Find it here](#).

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This approach to intervention, utilising experienced, pro-social leaders from gang communities to engage with hard to reach groups where there are issues affecting community safety and wellbeing has been successfully applied in many other settings in New Zealand⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷. The key to success is the experience and credibility of the mediators, their ability to facilitate dialogue and to engender a sense of hope for a better future for themselves and their families. Having engaged and mobilised hard to reach groups, the challenge has often been to engage government agencies and services. Hard to reach groups are often actively excluded from funding, services and opportunities - to "legitimate channels of success." However, some agencies and organisations, including the philanthropic sector, have provided support for this work⁴⁸⁻⁴⁹.

Often for youth the starting point is recreational activities and training, while with families and communities, health-related initiatives help focus on participatory, practical action. This 'changes the conversation around the dinner table', and begins a process of thinking and action that generates hope, expectations and pro-social participation. There are many examples in New Zealand where this approach is driving promising results⁵⁰⁻⁵¹⁻⁵²⁻⁵³.

Discussion

Youth gangs arise in conditions of exclusion, poverty and poverty of hope. While this article has focussed primarily on indigenous ethnic gangs, we believe that the principles for intervention can be applied more broadly. In particular, the need to understand the social context and drivers of gang formation; the need to focus on behaviours rather than affiliations; and most importantly the need to recognise that leadership, capacity and a potential for positive contribution exists in all hard to reach groups.

The challenge is to tap into that positive potential. To do this, penetration and engagement is critical and pro-social individuals from hard to reach communities are more likely to be successful because they have particular expertise, experience and credibility. The New Zealand experience echoes finding in recent reviews to support the involvement of gangs in solutions and the limitations of using programmes of in-reach where the workers have little connection with the target community⁵⁴⁻⁵⁵.

As professionals in the justice sector, it is challenging to think beyond individuals and the prevailing intervention framework based on sanctions and treatment. However, even the best treatment programmes are unlikely to achieve sustained change if the person returns to the same family and neighbourhood conditions. Relapse is almost inevitable. It is our contention that hard to reach groups can be engaged and mobilised to change, and that this is good use of resources. By mobilising whole communities of hard to reach youth and their families, longer term, intergenerational change is possible. This creates an environment where youth can begin to feel a healthy sense of industry and competency, connectedness, a sense of control over their lives and a strong pro-social identity.

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⁴⁵ Bennett W, Ryder E, Governor M et al. Stories from people working with high needs populations. In Dew K, Matheson A (eds). Understanding health inequalities in Aotearoa New Zealand. Dunedin: University of Otago. 2008.

⁴⁶ O'Reilly D. Op cit.

⁴⁷ The Salvation Army. Notorious whānau continues to fight 'the P'. [Find it here](#).

⁴⁸ J R McKenzie Trust. Annual Report. 2010. Better future for children a motivation for change. p7. [Find it here](#).

⁴⁹ Titus P. Out of their comfort zones: Mongrel Mob and Methodist families strengthen ties. [Touchstone](#). [Find it here](#).

⁵⁰ Spee K. Op Cit.

⁵¹ 2008NZ Drug Foundation. Mob Mumzys moving and Shaking. Matters of Substance. Wellington: NZ Drug Foundation. 2011. [Find it here](#).

⁵² O'Reilly D. Op Cit.

⁵³ J R McKenzie Trust. Wesley Community Action. Making positive connections in 'closed' communities. [Find it here](#).

⁵⁴ See for example, Westmacott R et al. Selected Annotated bibliography: Evaluations of Gang Intervention Programs Correctional Service of Canada. 2005. [Find it here](#); and Canada's publication from the National Crime Prevention Centre: Addressing Youth Gang problems: An overview of programs and practices. [Find it here](#).

⁵⁵ Klein W. Gang cohesiveness, delinquency, and a street-work program. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 6, 135-166. 1969.