

## Gangs – the politics and the policies

It is perhaps tempting fate to encourage a policy debate on gangs in the midst of a tightly-contested election campaign where [they feature prominently](#), but we have before us a [just-published report](#) on gangs from the office of the Prime Minister’s Chief Science Advisor. The report has been drawn up by the Chief Science Advisor to the Justice Sector, Professor Ian Lambie, a clinical psychologist, and Professor Tracey McIntosh, a sociologist, who is Chief Science Advisor to the Ministry of Social Development.

What are the report’s principal findings?

The New Zealand gang landscape has some unique characteristics: while some gangs have adopted sophisticated business structures, older gang communities are more like whānau with shared whakapapa connections.

In other respects, however, gangs in New Zealand have followed international trends with the incursion of industrial-scale drug production and distribution, growing international links (for example, deportees from Australia, migrants with global connections), and the arrival of social media that has produced new dynamics of recruitment and reward.

A minority of members of gangs identified by the police are involved in large-scale, profit-driven criminal activity (mainly drug trafficking). The police have identified around 8,000 gang members. Of these, fewer than 2,000 are classified as being members of gangs that are associated with profit-driven criminal “businesses”.

That said, about a third of prisoners on remand in New Zealand and about the same proportion of convicted prisoners are gang members, and the average gang member on the police list has about 38 convictions (many of which may be relatively minor, such as failing to meet bail conditions, with others being serious, such as for violent offending).

The report points out that about 40% of police response time in general is taken up with domestic violence, and this also features among gang members prominently: nearly three quarters on the police list are involved in family harm and nearly half are themselves victims of violence.

While making a clear distinction between profit-driven outlaw gangs and those that are more visible and marginalised but less criminally-intensive, the report is also at pains to draw a contrast between juvenile networks and adult gangs. The former are more opportunistic and fluid and do not necessarily transition to an adult life of crime or joining adult gangs.

Nevertheless, there is potentially a clear trajectory from youthful crime to adult gang membership. The [Social Wellbeing Agency](#) for example followed 2,000 young people in their early 20s identified as gang members: they were more likely to have contact with Oranga Tamariki, including being subject to an investigation, and to be placed in state care; almost one third had contact with truancy services, a quarter experienced alternative education, and most had left school by age seventeen with little or no educational attainment. Furthermore, ten percent of those at highest risk of offending committed 75% of the recorded crime.

One can see here the barebones of a programme of intervention at key points when these young people have contact with the state, either at Oranga Tamariki, or at school, or with the police, or with the health system (since many have health problems, particularly mental health and injury).

So, what are the answers?

The report identifies “suppression” as a frequent response. [Special legislation aimed at gangs](#) in New Zealand and in Australia, however, has rarely been successful, and has often been used more against non-gang criminals than gang members.

This does not mean that gang members should not be held to the law, as obviously they should be; but special sweeps and legislative interventions rarely remove gangs from the public agenda, except temporarily, and often strengthen their sense of internal solidarity and marginalisation.

“Desistance” (abstaining from crime) and exit are other options, and yet it is hard for gang members to leave the group without recrimination and retribution. Nevertheless, family formation and entering employment are ways in which many “grow out of” an exclusive gang lifestyle.

What remains are policies of prevention and intervention at every stage of the potential trajectory from family dysfunction through failure at school to early delinquency and contact with the justice system, and ultimately to embedded gang membership (with or without heightened criminal activity).

Have any such policies of prevention actually worked? The [Scottish Violence Reduction Unit](#) is cited, with impressive results over nearly a decade. An [American programme](#) was successful in preventing young people from joining gangs, but not in reducing offending. Yet, for anything to work in New Zealand, it has to be appropriately tailored to our particular ethnic mix, history and culture.

The report concludes that while short-term suppression might provide immediate outcomes, only medium- to long-term strategies can work over the long haul. And it cannot be left solely to the police. Multi-agency collaboration is required, and even the gang communities themselves must be involved.

It is sometimes said that the first casualty of war is the truth. In the heat of political campaigning and media attention let us not lose sight of the longer game when it comes to addressing crime.

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