



# Defining Street Gangs

### BUILDING A SAFE AND RESILIENT CANADA

Many different definitions of “gang” and “street gang” are in use. Differences can hinder gang suppression and prevention activities. A proposed, common ground definition is nearly identical to the “criminal organization” definition in the *Criminal Code of Canada*.

There is a lack of consensus among academics, law enforcement agencies, government policy-makers, not-for profit or program delivery groups, and criminal intelligence analysts with respect to defining street gangs and gang-related activity. This lack of consensus has led to difficulties with documenting the prevalence of gangs, as well as with understanding the nature of the relationship between gang membership and violent behaviour.

The primary purpose of this report was to discuss the difficulties related to the identification of gang members and gang-related crimes in Canada, and provide an overview of how gangs have been previously defined by academic researchers, law enforcement agencies and government policy-makers. The potential advantages of developing a common gang definition of street gangs was also discussed, and a potential new gang definition was proposed, along with a revised system for classifying different types of gangs.

The various criteria used to define street gangs have included: (1) age (e.g., members must be adolescents or young adults); (2) the existence of a group name; (3) distinctive group symbols or defining insignia; (4) control of a specific territory or turf; (5) group organization; (6) number of members; (7) durability or stability; (8) formal or informal gang rules; (9) initiation rituals for new gang members; (10) street orientation; (11) regular and/or continuous group involvement in crime, violence or delinquency; and (12) common ethnic or racial background.

Definitional issues have also had a negative impact on gang suppression and prevention activities. It is impossible, for example, to determine if a program developed in one region would work in another region if these regions have conflicting gang definitions. Indeed, competing gang definitions may explain why some enforcement and prevention strategies found to be effective in one location fail to produce positive results in other regions. The author asserts that a standard gang definition would help policy-makers determine the relative effectiveness of various law enforcement and gang prevention programs operating within different jurisdictions.

Other potential advantages of developing a common gang definition of street gangs include: (1) enabling accurate national, provincial and municipal estimates of gang activity; (2) improving the ability to make regional comparisons; (3) helping document the risk-factors associated with gang activity within specific jurisdictions; (4) helping document the amount of funding needed to tackle gang problems within specific jurisdictions; (5) enabling law enforcement officials from different jurisdictions to communicate in the same “language;” and (6) improving the quality of gang investigations that involve police services from different regions.

The Eurogang consortium, unlike its North American counterparts, has already reached a consensus regarding a definition of a gang. This definition makes a distinction between “gang definers” and “gang descriptors.” Taking the lead from the Eurogang example, this paper proposed the following gang definition: “A gang is a group of three or more individuals that has existed for at least one month and engages in criminal activity on a regular basis. Gang-related crime can be conducted within the group context or by individual

gang members in isolation -- as long as such criminal activity, directly or indirectly, benefits the gang." Such a definition still allows distinction between gang definers (e.g., three or more members, in existence for at least one month, involvement in criminal activity) and gang descriptors (e.g., insignia, colours, tattoos). This definition helps identify different types of gangs and distinguishes between transient gangs that exist for only short periods of time and more permanent gangs with a long history. This definition would also allow for the classification of gangs according to number of members. The proposed definition is consistent with the *Criminal Code of Canada* definition of a criminal organization, in terms of both number of members and that serious crime of financial benefit is a main purpose of the group.

The author also proposed a gang classification system. Level one gangs are proposed as being characterized by fluid, transient friendship groups, usually based on a common neighbourhood and/or cultural identity, and largely spontaneous criminal activity. A level two gang is a group that has existed for a significant period of time (e.g., a year or more), and which engages in mostly planned and deliberate criminal activities, but has a largely informal leadership structure. Level three gangs have also existed for a year or more, but have a hierarchical organizational structure with easily identified leaders and followers, and aim at controlling one or more illicit activities within a certain geographic area. Finally, level four gangs consist of established criminal organizations having a long, stable history and a sophisticated organizational structure with easily identified leaders. They are entrenched in both the licit and illicit economies, and often use lower level gangs to perform some of the more risky criminal activities.

Finally, the author concluded the paper by suggesting that establishing a standard gang definition and classification system could potentially enhance both the understanding of gangs and the development of strategies for preventing and reducing gang behaviour. The report noted that creating a common gang definition and classification system would require the efforts of a dedicated group of gang experts, including government and police officials, academics and

community members.

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