Gangs and Youth Subcultures
Contents

Illustrations vii

Acknowledgements ix

1 Gangs in Cross-Cultural Perspective
   Cameron Hazlehurst and Kayleen M. Hazlehurst 1

Europe
2 Post-Modernism and Youth Subcultures in Britain
   in the 1990s
   Roger Burke and Ros Sunley 35

3 German Youth Subcultures: History, Typology
   and Gender-Orientations
   Joachim Kersten 67

4 Criminal Heirs—Organised Crime and Russia’s Youth
   Paddy Rawlinson 95

North America
5 Vietnamese Youth Gangs in the Context of Multiple
   Marginality and the Los Angeles Youth Gang Phenomenon
   James Diego Vigil and Steve Chong Yun 117

6 Navajo Nation Gang Formation and Intervention Initiatives
   Marianne O. Nielsen, James W. Zion, and Julie A. Hailer 141

7 Street Gangs and Criminal Business Organisations:
   A Canadian Perspective
   Robert M. Gordon 165
## Contents

**Australia**

8 Masculinity and Violence: An Ethnographic Exploration of the Bodgies, 1948–1958  
*Judith Bessant and Rob Watts* 189

*Ian Warren and Megan Aumair* 221

**Oceania**

10 ‘Pulling the Teams out of the Dark Room’: The Politicisation of the Mongrel Mob  
*Pahmi Winter* 245

11 Urban Raskolism and Criminal Groups in Papua New Guinea  
*Sinclair Dinnen* 267

**South Africa**

12 Rituals, Rights, and Tradition: Rethinking Youth Programs in South Africa  
*Don Pinnock with Mara Douglas-Hamilton* 307

Index 343

Editors and Contributors 349
Illustrations

Table 3.1 A Typology of Marginalised Youth Groupings in the Context of Youth Crime, Germany 72
Table 3.2 A Typology of Non-marginalised Youth Groupings in the Context of Youth Crime, Germany 74
Table 3.3 Orientations of Neighbourhood Cliques, Hooligans and ‘Skinheads’, Germany 76
Table 6.1 Police Count of Number of Gangs and Frequency of Specific Offences, by Year, Salt River Pima of Arizona 148
Table 6.2 Gang-Related Offences Handled by the Navajo Family Court, 1 April 1992-31 March 1993 151
Table 9.1 Sources of Information about Gang Crime, Melbourne 234
Diagram 12.1 Rites of Passage Trajectories 324
Diagram 12.2 Traditional Components of Self-esteem 327
Diagram 12.3 Rites of Passage Program Orientations 333
Diagram 12.4 Journey of Adventure and Healing 335
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Kayleen M. Hazlehurst and Cameron Hazlehurst
The Editors
1 Gangs in Cross-Cultural Perspective

Cameron Hazlehurst and Kayleen M. Hazlehurst

THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

Nearly four decades ago, the International Criminal Police Organisation (Interpol) and the United Nations General Assembly expressed concern over the worldwide prevalence of juvenile delinquency and gang behaviour. In 1965, after five years of deliberation and planning, Interpol conducted a survey of 32 countries. Defining a gang as a group of four or more young people who engage in anti-social or illegal activities, Interpol concluded that gangs were an urban phenomenon, most common in industrialised countries, especially since the end of the second world war.

Reflecting widespread fears, Interpol reported that many of their respondents related the growth of gangs to post-war urban devastation, homelessness, and ‘lack of family unity’. Police in more affluent nations spoke of aimless young people with excess leisure and money. Gangs were observed to be largely male, often recent migrants into cities. They varied in size, with an average age of fifteen to seventeen. Offences against property predominated. Vandalism was common in prosperous industrialised countries. Offences against persons were frequently sexual. Many jurisdictions had preventive programs—youth clubs, police media campaigns, youth training schemes, and specialised police units. But no country had enacted special legislation providing sanctions against gangs. Delinquency laws were generally felt to be sufficient to cope with gangs (Interpol 1967). If there was a suggestion of complacency in many national responses, it would be difficult in the ensuing decades to remain indifferent either to the reality or to the community fear of gangs and criminally-oriented youth subcultures.

In the following 30 years, experts in many countries observed,
reported, and analysed disturbing phenomena relating to law-violating behaviour by groups of young people. Regrettably, as with so many issues of common interest internationally, much of the official documentation and research in languages other than English has been inaccessible to the majority of scholars who are not poly-lingual. The invaluable bibliographical database of the U.S. Department of Justice’s National Criminal Justice Reference Service has English language abstracts of many non-English publications. But helpful as they are—and our own work has been aided by them—they are for the most part signposts to foreign fields tilled only by indigenous researchers.

In this collection we draw attention to attempts in many countries to understand behaviours which have significant similarities as well as instructive differences. Nowhere until recently has ‘the street gang’ or ‘the youth gang problem’ been a more salient social and political concern than in the United States. Nowhere, to our knowledge, are the nature and activities of juvenile or street gangs studied more extensively and intensively. Nowhere does there seem to be greater or more justified pessimism about the efficacy of society’s response to gangs.

As more American scholars have studied gangs, theories of gang behaviour and character have multiplied. A burgeoning textbook literature attempts to reconcile a range of explanatory constructs: strain and cultural deviance theories, social learning and social development approaches, subcultural and underclass analyses, and so on (Shelden et al. 1997; Miller and Cohen 1996). One conclusion is enunciated by many and denied by none. Whether as objects of social inquiry or targets of welfare programs or law enforcement, gangs remain enigmatic and unyielding. ‘There is no generally accepted explanation of the origins and characteristics of youth gangs’ (Miller 1983: 1676). ‘Because research has been limited and because researchers have no real consensus on the definition of a gang or gang incident, the scope and seriousness of the youth gang problem are not reliably known’ (Spergel et al. 1994: 1). In 1990 Walter B. Miller took as the starting point of his contribution to a major collective volume (Huff 1990) the assumption that the United States had failed to solve its youth gang problem. Miller, a veteran of gang research, asked why. He found answers in the absence of comprehensive, national, gang control strategies; shortcomings in program design, implementation, evaluation, and coordination; inadequate resources; and, most important, ‘a deep-rooted, reluctance to face up to the implications of the social context of gang life’ (Miller 1990: 283). Four years later Daniel J. Monti reminded us that deficiencies in knowledge and understanding remain vitally important.
Researchers like myself are still trying to put together a broad outline of all that gangs do and mean to their members ... it seems that we can do little more than offer poor guesses as to how gangs can be made less threatening (Monti 1994: 131).

Although scholars complain perennially about insufficient funding, research on gangs in the United States is a multi-million dollar industry. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) of the U.S. Department of Justice recently produced a 'Topical Bibliography' of abstracts of 'the most relevant literature on juvenile gangs'. This highly selective bibliography includes 198 items, only one of them more than five years old (OJJDP 1995). The American research effort is underpinned by substantial funding from justice agencies and foundations. Confronted by endemic social dysfunction, American federal, state, and local government authorities, police, educational and welfare officials, spare little expense in their efforts to understand gang phenomena. Studies of every conceivable kind are supported. Justice system data collections are analysed. Surveys of police, of prosecutors, of educators, of health and welfare professionals are commissioned. Gang members and delinquents in and out of jail are interviewed. So too are young people in schools, clubs, and neighbourhood recreational facilities. Ex-gang members, families, friends, and acquaintances are asked to tell what they know. Yet still the experts say they cannot confidently explain the 'astounding proliferation' (Klein 1995: 203; Curry, Ball and Decker 1996) of American street gangs or demonstrate agreement on effective strategies of prevention and suppression.

As gang research multiplies, the ingenious compete with the ingenuous in affirming the innovative design or 'startling new evidence' of their studies. There is an increasing abundance of intensive case studies of specific gangs or localities and of comprehensive reviews of previous research (Conly et al. 1993; Klein 1995b; Spergel 1995). What is undoubtedly neglected in American research, however, is a comparative perspective. The lack of interest in other national experiences is not accidental. The majority of American scholars, justice system officials, and policy makers appear to share the conviction that their gangs and gang problems are unique. As one of the leading authorities, Professor Malcolm W. Klein, put it emphatically in 1991 'The street gang is basically an American product'. Professor Klein distilled his thesis of American 'exceptionalism' in a foreword to the first comprehensive college textbook, An Introduction to Gangs, by George W. Knox:
The United States is not alone in being an industrialised nation, nor in having major urban areas with denotable inner cities, nor in having sizeable minority populations, nor in having failed social policies for the urban poor, nor in relinquishing much responsibility for social control to the criminal justice system. Yet, with very few exceptions, the United States is alone in its development of the urban street gang. Our gangs are like no others in the world—ours are far more prevalent, more permanent in their communities, larger and more complex, and more criminally involved by far (Klein, in Knox 1995: iii).

American uniqueness could perhaps be defended with definitional agility. Curiously, in his latest major work, Klein himself has qualified his argument and tabled an odd assortment of observations and reports from other continents. He identifies ‘analogues to the U.S. pattern’ in Brussels, Mexico City, Port Moresby, and Berlin (Klein 1995b: 213-28) but makes no attempt to interpret ‘the U.S. pattern’ in the light of the analogous phenomena.

Meanwhile a thriving ancillary enterprise in debating the most useful way to define gangs shows no signs of abating. Recent debates about definitions have contributed to a greater conceptual awareness but no consensus among gang researchers (Conly et al. 1993). The state of knowledge—or, more accurately, the state of uncertainty—about gangs in America is distilled in the series of 28 questions which conclude James C. Howell’s review of gang research (Howell 1994). Howell points to a large research agenda beginning with the elementary need to distinguish ‘true gangs from other collective youth groups’ and to differentiate between types of gangs. Is the quest for definitional precision worth pursuing? Ruth Horowitz has argued cogently that there are benefits from the fresh questions and thinking that arise from definitional flexibility:

The search for parameters of what constitutes a gang ... may have important implications for policy-making ... but it is unlikely that social scientists will ever agree to one definition, let alone be able to persuade practitioners and officials of its merits (Horowitz 1990: 47).

Unhappy at leaving the matter there, Richard Ball and David Curry have provided a 20-page conspectus of logical flaws, inconsistencies, and tautologies in gang literature before concluding that they ‘have only tried to clear the ground somewhat’! (Ball and Curry 1995: 241). In clearing the ground, Ball and Curry have warned against ‘conflating correlates with
intrinsic, analytic properties'. The most important correlate they contend, is 'illegal activity'. Others, they say, are adolescent male membership, lower socio-economic status, urban areas, territoriality, violence, and drug dealing (Ball and Curry 1995: 236). There is continuing controversy over the extent to which gangs are responsible for violent crime, homicide, and drug trafficking for example (Shelden et al. 1997: 137-54). But, if a definition emptied of all 'correlates' might satisfy a fastidious sociological theorist, its value to justice professionals would be limited.

Adolescent male membership is incontestably, almost tautologically, a defining element of the juvenile or youth gang. While female gang members, even female gangs, are not unknown (Knox 1995: 340-65; Shelden et al. 1997: 155-77), there is no disputing that many gangs still consist exclusively of males who are best thought of as pre-adults. Moreover, there is much more to be said about the age profiles of gangs in America and elsewhere. Diego Vigil's illuminating accounts of barrio gangs have shown how they may have 'age-graded cliques' as well as older members, 'sages of the street' who remain 'mired in the barrio' (Vigil, in Cummings and Monti 1993: 104-05). John Hagedorn (1988) delineated four main age groupings in Milwaukee gangs. The possibility of making a generalisable distinction between 'youth gangs' and 'young-adult gangs' was suggested by the analysis of Joe and Robinson (1980) in their study of immigrant Chinese youth gangs in Vancouver in the late 1970s. The status advantage enjoyed by those who had greater contact with young-adult gangs resonates with what is known about gang hierarchies elsewhere. The proximity of established older gangs provides role models and career paths. But, as another researcher has found, 'many Asian groups cannot be considered "groups of youngsters" since the age range is greater than adolescence (14-34), and many participants are in their twenties and thirties' (Toy 1992a: 17; Toy 1992b: 657).

Mixed-age membership is not unique to Chicano and Asian gangs. Indeed, George W. Knox goes so far as to argue that the notion of youth gang is out of place in the 'real world of criminal justice' (Knox 1995: 8). One of the most respected veterans of American gang research reported a quarter century after his first investigations that the modal age of gang members had apparently changed from sixteen to 20 (Klein paraphrased in Knox 1995: 58). Klein and his associates no longer restrict their conception of gangs to groups of adolescent youngsters. They argue that the term 'street gang' is now a better descriptor, as 'setting and style' are more defining characteristics than age (Klein 1995b: 21). Perhaps street gang would always have been more appropriate. For, as Ruth Horowitz
cautions, there is no conclusive evidence about the changing age composition of American gangs: 'there may have been older youths who were affiliated with gangs, but no one may have noticed because gang members were defined as "juvenile"' (Horowitz 1990: 44). Definitional exclusion of older offenders who were not recognised as gang members could have unduly shaped Miller's conclusion in 1975 that longitudinal arrest data showed no 'age expansion' (Miller, quoted in Lasley 1992: 436).

More recently, some theorists have contended that the growth of an urban underclass is linked directly with the emergence of post-adolescent gang membership. Ronald Huff's proposition (1992: 33) that the American gang problem 'overwhelmingly involves members of the urban underclass' is undeniable (Jackson 1991). But underclass theorists provide no satisfactory explanation either of the absence of gangs where theory suggests they should be or of the majority of youth who apparently remain immune to the gang-generating conditions in which they live (Miller and Cohen 1996: 15). Attempts to bring greater precision to the phenomenon of aging youth gangs that is supposedly evident in numerous locations and ethnic groups have produced mostly inconclusive or negative results (Lasley 1992). Alicia Rand's exploration of 'Transitional Life Events and Desistance from Delinquency and Crime' suggests the potential of more sophisticated analytical procedures (Rand 1987). But the idea of the 'juvenile gang' or 'youth gang' remains unproblematic in much recent literature (Covey et al. 1992; Shelden et al. 1997).

**ACROSS CULTURES**

The contributors to this volume were unconstrained by rigid definition or disciplinary boundaries. Implicitly, however, all proceed from the premise that it is their orientation to illegal activity which animates our interest in gangs. Gangs are recognised as different from other adolescent (and post-adolescent) groups in the greater frequency of their illegal activities, the leadership and purposeful nature of their offending, and their turf claims (not necessarily related to neighbourhoods) (Huff 1992: 21). There may be advantages in the American context in excluding skinheads, bikers, prison gangs, 'copy-cat' gangs, 'wannabe' groups, and even 'so-called drug gangs' (Klein 1995b: 23) so as to leave a residual category of street gangs. The Chicago researchers Irving Spergel and David Curry make subtle distinctions between 'gang', 'street gang', 'traditional youth
gang’, and ‘posse’ or ‘crew’ (quoted in Shelden et al. 1997: 15). But what we knew of international experiences suggested that it would be inappropriate, certainly premature, to impose an American schema (Stelfox 1996: 4). Thus, neither the American scholars nor those whose research interests are focused on other continents, were explicitly requested to use the United States as a touch-stone. Yet the recent histories reported here from Germany, Russia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and Canada constitute an eloquent commentary on the thesis of American exceptionalism. Klein’s initial emphasis on urban location, prevalence, permanence, size, complexity, and degree of criminality limited the bases for comparison. But, even if his criteria alone are applied, the case for American difference requires considerably more nuance and qualification than it usually receives. It rests more on ignorance of possible comparisons than on a comprehensive examination of comparable phenomena elsewhere.

Apart from isolated, and seemingly randomly acquired, references, the bibliographies of American texts generally provide little guidance to international literature. In a valuable review of ‘Historical Perspectives of Gang Research’ Dale Hardman pointed in 1967 to a number of scholars who had followed the pioneer Frederick Thrasher in believing that ‘ganging is an adolescent phenomenon in all cultures’ (Hardman 1967: 7). Block and Niederhoffer’s comparison of four ‘primitive cultures’ with New York gangs was suggestive but far from definitive (Block and Niederhoffer 1957). And Hardman asked two questions which he concluded were unresolved in the then current scholarly literature: ‘Are some cultures more conducive to ganging than others? If so, why?’ (Hardman 1967: 26). Hardman’s questions have been largely ignored.

It is of course difficult to answer Hardman’s questions unless there is prior agreement on exactly which phenomena are to be examined. When Klein asks ‘Is the American street gang unique?’ we need to be aware that what he calls ‘our pattern’ (Klein 1995b: 214) does not comfortably encompass the ‘new entrepreneurial gangs’ in the United States described by Carl S. Taylor (1990) and Martin Sanchez-Jankowski (1991). Klein’s tests seem contrived so as to exclude from consideration many groupings which other scholars, justice professionals, and group members themselves think of as gangs. They do not envisage an evolving gang morphology even though he himself recognises the recent ‘taggers-to-tagbangers-to-gangs progression’ (Klein 1995b: 211). Klein asks:

- Are they territorial, with gang rivalries?
Gangs and Youth Subcultures

- Do they acknowledge themselves as criminally oriented groups?
- Do they exhibit cafeteria-style crime patterns rather than crime-specific focuses?
- Are their structures moderately cohesive, neither very tight and structured nor quite amorphous?
- Are they the seeming products of current or growing inner-city areas of poverty, alienation, and discrimination; do they display the cultural signs that provide special identification—the attire, tattoos, argot, and overall posture of the street gang? (Klein 1995b: 214).

After a somewhat perfunctory survey of fragmentary information from about 20 countries, Klein concedes that 'other spots have developed their own variants on ganglike structures, and a few ... have given birth to genuine street gangs of the American sort' (ibid: 228). But he evinces no interest in the possibility that understanding of American gangs might be enhanced by international comparison.

There are only scattered examples over the past 30 years of explicit 'cross-cultural' comparative studies. In most cases the comparisons are between the United States and one other country. Thus Baur (1964) compared 'the trend of juvenile offences' in the United States and the Netherlands; in a tribute to the pioneer gang researchers Harry McKay and Clifford Shaw, Weinberg looked at delinquency in Accra and Clinar and Abbott examined two slum communities in Kampala (1976); Campbell and Muncer (1982, 1989), Whitfield (1982) and Campbell et al. (1992) examined American gangs and British sub-cultures; Westermann and Burfeind (1991) provide a fairly comprehensive overview of crime and justice in Japan and the United States; Sarnecki (1986) engaged robustly with American theoretical literature and concluded that 'Swedish gangs cannot be compared to the American either in number, violence or in any other respect'; Wikstrom (1991) broadened the canvas by placing the Swedish experience of 'Urban Crime, Criminals, and Victims' in an Anglo-American comparative perspective.

Irving Spergel's outstanding literature review refers to Japanese, Chinese, Italian, New Zealand, and East European studies and reports and concludes that youth gangs 'apparently are present in both socialist and free-market societies and in both developing and developed countries' (Spergel 1990: 171-3 cf Spergel 1995: 3-6). A notable general survey is Covey, Menard, and Franzese's *Juvenile Gangs* which devotes a 20-page chapter to 'comparative perspectives' and another fourteen pages to 'gangs in western history'. Covey et al., offer useful observations on the
implications of an eclectic assembly of studies from every continent and every decade since the 1940s. They rightly emphasise the difficulties in comparing data compiled on incommensurate bases. Failures to distinguish between youth subcultures, gangs, and other law-violating groups—where such distinctions might have enhanced understanding—are a further admitted compounding factor. Undeterred by these limitations, or by the arbitrary chronological range and geographical locations of the studies they cite, Covey and his colleagues venture ten ‘generalisations’ derived from their cross-national and historical evidence.

The generalisations of Covey et al. (1992: 122-5) are as interesting for what they omit as for what they include. They note characteristics relating to social disorganisation, urbanisation, and industrialisation, gender, age, status and class, internal structure, activities, aetiology, and international impacts. They note an apparent consensus among researchers on the supposedly greater violence of American gangs. (The sole reference here is to a comparison with the Netherlands published in 1964.) What is conspicuously missing in this analysis is any attempt to compare official perceptions and responses to gangs. The sociological differences catalogued by scholars may be less significant for policy makers and law enforcement agencies than the behavioural similarities. A n o t h e r dimension glimpsed in some studies but not pursued is the extent to which gangs can be seen in different times and places as having political motivation and objectives. Covey et al. (1992: 101) acknowledged that in America in the 1960s the ‘Vice Lords’, ‘Black Panthers’, ‘Youth Lords’, and ‘Black Liberation Arm’ ‘provided politically conscious alternatives to traditional gang activity’. A more nuanced account had been given by James F. Short (1975); and Mike Davis (1992: 299) has detailed ‘a radical permutation of Black gang culture’ in the Los Angeles of the early 1970s. Spergel and his associates have commented on the ‘symbiotic relationship’ which has developed in more recent years between politicians and gangs in some low-income American communities. Youth gang members have been assigned tasks in local politics including obtaining signatures for petitions, putting up and tearing down posters, transporting and persuading voters. Gangs have been used in attempts to calm communities on the verge of tumult or riot. ‘Gangs and gang members have received income, acceptance, status, and occasionally a limited degree of influence for their services’ (Spergel et al. 1994: 4). In Chicago in 1994 some gang members actually ran for local office, perhaps foreshadowing a new trend towards political advocacy (Todd R. Clear, in Shelden et al. 1997: xii). All of these modern developments are in fact a replay of what Knox calls ‘the
enduring relationship between politics and gangs’—a relationship prominent in the works of pioneer scholars but subsequently often unnoticed (Knox 1995: 115 and 116-39). Spergel (1995: 124), comparing Japan and the United States, concludes that ‘the dynamics of gang formation and the basic tendency of gangs to relate symbiotically to the political structure are remarkably similar’.

The international evidence of gang politicisation and the role of gangs in political violence and the disturbance of public order is abundant but must be interpreted with caution. The gangsterism associated with certain political organisations must not be confused with the political disguise sometimes adopted by essentially criminal groups. Yakuza syndicates may adopt right-wing political colouration but these are tactical adjustments and mergers not character transformations (Shikita and Tsuchiya 1992: 89; Friedland 1993). Moreover, the line is not always clear between those groups for which micro-territoriality or the accumulation of wealth are primary objectives and those like the Red Brigades, the Tamil Tigers, and the I.R.A. whose acts of murder, hijacking, kidnapping, and theft, have an avowed political goal which may sometimes cloak apolitical criminality (Lavey 1990). Italian researchers, for example, were puzzled in the mid-1970s by a decline in serious violent crime (murder, felonious assault, rape) among juveniles. This unexplained pattern and the relative absence of purposeless gang violence were in marked contrast to the emergent new form of political violence, kidnapping for ransom (Italian Society of Criminology 1977). On the other hand the symbiotic relationship of the Mafia and the Italian political system is now amply documented (Jamieson 1994; Schneider and Schneider 1994).

There are a number of elements in the reported experience of widely separate nations and disparate cultures which suggest that American scholars may have some way to go before they can be sure about what really makes American gangs unique. Consider, for example, the political dimensions in what have been described as ‘social outlawry’ in urban Jamaica and township violence in South Africa. Faye V. Harrison, writing of observations in the late 1970s, cast some violent crime in Jamaica as opposition to ‘the oppression manifest in chronic unemployment, police repression, and partisan victimisation’. The complex relationships between ‘corner’ gangs and political parties—with particular groups switching ‘from non-partisan outlawry to clientelist entanglement’—illustrated, Harrison suggested, a variety of principled forms of resistance to established authorities. A mass emigration of Jamaican criminals to the United States through the 1970s diminished but did not extinguish the political impetus
behind their activities. Jamaican posses, recognised by the early 1990s as the most ruthless and deadly of organised criminal groups in the United States, focused on one major objective: control of street-level distribution of crack/cocaine. To this end they developed relationships with West Coast street gangs, as well as traditional organised crime groups and the Colombian cartels. In the absence of research or justice system data it was difficult to determine whether the profits of posse enterprise crime 'are being used to support political factions in Jamaica, used exclusively for narcotics trafficking, or for both' (Gay and Marquart 1993: 162).

If much modern Jamaican gang activity in the United States has roots in Caribbean political struggles, there is nothing new or unique about links between 'homeland' conflicts and violent clashes in immigrant communities. The Chinese in America are another case in point. Notwithstanding the obtrusive jargon of their Marxist analysis, Takagi and Platt persuasively argued nearly 20 years ago that it was important to distinguish between delinquency and organised political violence in San Francisco's Chinatown. While there was undoubtedly an upsurge in Chinese youth crime in the 1970s, the underlying tensions arising from Kuomintang influence were crucial to an understanding of the wave of murders that seized media attention. Indiscriminate use of the term gang by police and newspapers blurred the distinction between youth characterised by Takagi and Platt as aspiring for a better way of life, and those 'being paid to keep things as they are' (Takagi and Platt 1978).

At about the same time as Jamaican criminals were being interpreted by sociologists and anthropologists in the context of political resistance, similar perceptions were being advanced in New Zealand. As a new Maori political party sprang up in the early 1980s fears were voiced that it might become the political expression of the growing street gang violence in New Zealand's major cities. Matiu Rata, the leader of the Mana Motuhake party, had earlier acknowledged that the gangs were a symptom of 'a general urban crisis which Maori and Island people face'. And one of Rata's principal lieutenants, a senior Maori academic, linked gangs with protest groups as 'manifestations of the stifled desire of the Maori people for self-determination in the suffocating atmosphere of political domination and Pakeha [White] paternalism' (Hazlehurst 1993: 45, 58). But, apart from well-publicised and inconclusive talks with one large gang, Mana Motuhake and the gangs went separate ways. Both gangs and radical political groups made gains in membership and influence without finding much common ground.

The political challenge from New Zealand's indigenous minority has
not been a major threat to stability and public order since the nineteenth
century. Gangs have in some cases provided an ethnic identity for
deculturated youth. Some have become organised criminal enterprises with
international links (Justice and Law Reform Committee 1996). The
rhetoric of social disadvantage can be heard on the lips of gang apologists
and sympathetic liberals. But the gangs have not been radicalised. Nor
have they used political agendas to veil criminality. In South Africa, with
an indigenous population itself fundamentally in conflict, the story is more
complex. Much gang violence in South African township and squatter
camps in the 1980s might have had political inspiration or rationalisation.
The majority of youth were militant participants in township eruptions
(Straker 1992: 21). But, as one acute observer noted in 1989: 'No one's
too sure any more how much politics has to do with the killings ... the
basic reality, beyond and alongside politics and everything else is the gang'
(Johnson 1989: 14-15). In a frightening report foreshadowing future
community disintegration, R.W. Johnson wrote of the area between Durban
and Pietermaritzburg where an estimated 1000 African children lived wild
in the bush. Forced out by squatter-camp gang wars, these homeless
young people were often described as pirates or flocks of wild birds. They
had become 'violence-entrepreneurs, operating protection rackets and
hiring themselves out as fighters in various community conflicts' (ibid: 15).

What would become of these feral youngsters? Johnson speculated that
they would in time develop a leadership structure with 'the emergence of
strong men or, at least, strong children' (ibid). More chillingly he
recounted:

A pharmacist friend told me how, driving through a township to deliver
some medical supplies ... he was cheerfully greeted by a crocodile of
uniformed school children marching unaccountably down the road in
the middle of the school day. Later he found that an intruder into their
school had attempted to rape one of the schoolgirls and, when she had
resisted, had knifed her. Her classmates voted to suspend classes while
they went off to burn the intruder's house down and kill him if they
could. It was while they were on their way to do this errand that they
had encountered my pharmacist friend and shown such good humour
(Johnson 1989: 15).

Four years later, another British scholar described a typical Soweto
weekend of fifteen murders, over 40 armed robberies, and up to 20
reported rapes. These predatory crimes were interspersed with sporadic
'political' assassinations for which payment was based on a quota for the killing of members of rival groups. Like justice reformers in many other parts of the world South Africa’s National Institute for Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation of Offenders (NICPRO) was developing restorative programs aimed at reintegrating offenders into their communities rather than driving them into street gangs (Cooper 1993). Meanwhile, the transition to a democratic regime has been accompanied by a crime wave that has overwhelmed a demoralised and understaffed police force. Private security businesses flourish. Moslem vigilantes seek to reclaim their communities from gangs dealing in drugs, prostitution, robbery, and car-jacking. Senior law officers speak of anarchy in the streets of the nation’s main cities (Beresford 1996).

South African history directs our attention to a question that is all too rarely asked: what is the impact of trans-generational influences on gang formation and maintenance? In this volume, Sinclair Dinnen argues that contemporary urban gangs in Papua New Guinea, exhibit ‘a rich mixture of social traditions’. They are not explicable solely in terms of urbanisation and modernisation since the 1960s. In the South African context, although the precise linkages remain to be discovered, it is hard to believe, for example, that township violence in the 1980s could be adequately explained without reference to gang antecedents in the mining compounds and prisons of earlier decades.

Breckenridge’s demonstration of the role of criminal organisation in buttressing ethnic solidarity among Mpondo mine workers suggests several lines of inquiry. In the first place he notes how the so-called Isitshozi gangs of the 1920s onwards resembled the Zulu-dominated Ninevite gang of an even earlier period. The Ninevites were mostly dead or dispersed. But it is conceivable that those serving long prison terms might have supplied inspiration and leadership to a new generation of offenders. The Isitshozi were themselves for the most part older men in their 30s. But as Breckenridge, following Moodie (1988) and Beinart (1987), shows: ‘the gangs specifically recruited youths known to participate in homosexuality ... Establishing control over the supply of youths within the compounds was probably the gang’s chief priority’. Youths not only performed domestic duties they were instructed to commit burglaries and robberies, and participate in ‘a reign of terror on the paths leading to and from the mines’ (Breckenridge 1990: 60-63). By the late 1930s the small Isitshozi gangs (usually about ten members) were undergoing a transformation as they drifted into the urban underworld and drew recruits from the large numbers of marginalised urban youth. More frequent violence and an
increasingly hierarchical structure in the more youthful contemporary Indlavini groups in the 1950s may have reflected the 'exposure of young Mpondo migrants to Isitshozi organisation and activity' (ibid: 76). Speculative though it may be, Breckenridge's conclusion points to a potentially fruitful research agenda. 'It is perhaps here, amidst the violent control of the compounds, the exhausting mine work routine and the urban underworld, that we should seek an explanation for the so-called traditional hostility between the ethnic segments of the African working class' (ibid: 78).

What is manifest in environments as distant and dissimilar as South Africa and Russia is that the growth and expanding impact of gangs has a direct relationship with the reach, strength, and resolve of law enforcement agencies. In spite of strict censorship and a pervasive internal security and police presence, street violence and delinquency were visible problems in Russia by the mid-1970s. Moscow youth gangs made their own weapons, including long knives and guns. A New York Times correspondent concluded in 1978 that the 'picture emerging is that much Soviet violence, perhaps most of it, is the work of young people aged 14 to 18' (Shipler 1978: 42). By the late 1980s glasnost had led to the replacement of anecdotes and unsubstantiated journalistic estimates with remarkable data. The USSR Crime Statistics and Summaries: 1989 and 1990 contained the astonishing admission that 'the Board of the MVD USSR, as a result of operative activities for 1989, noted that the internal affairs organs on the whole were incapable of maintaining proper order in the country, unable to deliver a decisive blow against extremist and criminal elements'. In some regions it was stated 'the worsening of the criminal situation was related to a great extent to the increased activities of anti-social teenage and youth street gangs'. This was particularly so in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, the Ukraine, in Moscow and many cities of the Volga region (Serio 1992).

Soviet authorities increasingly focused on organised crime in the late 1980s as gang shoot-outs in central Moscow drew attention to the rapid growth of what was officially described as 'group criminality'. Youth group criminality also became a preoccupation of authorities elsewhere who looked for underlying social and economic explanations of growing youth crime (Volobuev and Chebotarev, in Buckwalter 1990: 75-82, 95-9; Pilkington 1994: 141-60, 257-60). With the manifest breakdown of public order in Russia in the 1990s, Marxist explanatory formulas cast in terms of deepening 'contradictions existing in our society' (Borodin 1990: 5 cf Handelman 1994; Vesselinovitch 1996) seemed increasingly threadbare.

In examining the official and scholarly literature from countries with
varying legal and juridical frameworks, it is necessary to be alert to the local particularities of definition, labelling, statistical compilation, and theory. Chinese scholars, for example, have predictably drawn attention to the surge of crime in the special economic zones where trade is more open and the influence of alien 'bourgeois morality' and 'underworld societies from outside the mainland' most marked (Curran and Cook 1993; Bojin 1992: 57). Unsurprisingly, official policy and public opinion have identified 'migrants' or 'blind roamers' converging from the interior on the rapidly growing coastal cities as responsible for threats to public safety. In Guangdong province police claimed that they had smashed 843 gangs in two days during a 'Strike Hard' campaign against 'groups of hoodlum powers' (McGregor 1996). An earlier study of 'Youngsters' Unlawful and Criminal Cliques' found that over 80 percent of the youngsters in a Xanghai juvenile facility were in custody for committing crimes in groups (Zhou and Zia 1988, in Curran and Cook 1993: 306-07). The data is thin, the background information sparse, and the accompanying theory is simplistic. Historic continuities are conveniently overlooked (Epstein 1986). But there is clearly a prima facie case for exploring further the kinds of explanations which point to changing family and community values, in addition to growing temptations, as among the keys to understanding the increasing group criminality of Chinese youth. Nor should we be too quick to dismiss as 'a subjective factor' the 'yearning' for 'respect and love' which has been discerned among young Chinese offenders. 'Those who have lost respect and love need to be respected and loved the most, and the more respect and love for them are the antecedent and preconditions for their recovery' (Lui and Fu 1988, in Curran and Cook 1993: 305).

Absence of love is an undeveloped explanatory category in American studies, although it has an unspoken presence in much that is written about the underclass and 'fatherless' children. Elsewhere the connections are explicitly made. Twenty years ago, father deprivation—as a result of polygamy and large families—was seen as an important cause of delinquency in Iran and Iraq. Recommended modifications to the Iranian and Iraqi family systems, had they been seriously attempted, could scarcely have had as great an impact on youth behaviour as the socio-political revolutions that were to convulse both nations (Lynn 1978). In many so-called 'countries in transition' (United Nations 1995: 17), exemplified by the Russia and South Africa studies in this volume, juvenile delinquency and gang crime have grown dramatically over the past decade and a half (Finckenauer and Kelly 1992). In understanding the social pathologies of
these turbulent environments conventional academic distinctions between
delinquency and gang behaviour, gangs and subcultures, can be useful but
other templates are also needed. As a recent United Nations Expert Group
(1994: 39) noted, what distinguishes gangs in these situations is that they
do not engage primarily in subsistence delinquency. While they may not
be dedicated criminal enterprises, neither are they criminal for survival.
Rather, they are more likely to be afflicted by what a German writer
characterised as the 'murder of the soul', the abandonment of any ideals
other than self-interested materialism (Stelling 1972). Such deracinated
youth in Russia form 'an attractive labour pool' for criminal organisations
operating in a world which 'offers a kind of spiritual satisfaction for the
younger generation' (Handelman 1994: 17).

Where love and respect have gone, fearful admiration might fill the
void. 'No one is going to steal my "rep"' proclaimed a Los Angeles gang
member, recently arrested for the slaying of a rival. Individual
manifestations of 'moral poverty' may not impress some criminologists
although a host of American observers have pointed out the danger of
allowing money and violence to buy dignity, making racketeers and gang
veterans role models for youth (Zoglin 1996; Martens 1990: 113). It no
longer seems a profound perception that the absence of kinship ties
ties 'encourages the formation of adolescent peer groups which fill the social
vacuum between the nuclear family and the community' (Joe and Robinson
1980). Yet policy-makers have so far failed to diminish one of the major
assaults on the nuclear family which is of their own making: the
incarceration of thousands of low-level non-violent drug sellers (Massing
1996; Tonry 1995). After two or three 'fatherless' generations, the
concern is not simply that youth gangs can be surrogate families. In many
cases, young people in gangs need to be understood as victims as well as
offenders. As the line between gangs and organised crime is progressively
blurred, a 'nefarious chain' is forged 'in which seasoned criminals enlist
younger "associates", who in turn recruit still younger ones for proscribed
and hazardous acts' (United Nations Expert Group 1994: 52). The
example of the Neapolitan Nuovo Camorra Organizzata is salutary. Led
by 'men of respect' it recruited many young people to whom it 'furnished
real, proper work and has encouraged a sense of pride; if you're tough you
can have dignity, you can escape your poor background, you can be a
camorrista: you can be somebody' (Ruggiero 1993: 152).

No one should be under any illusions that attempts to extend our
knowledge of these matters will be easy. The pitfalls and dangers of
research into violent group criminal behaviour are obvious. The repertoire
of research strategies includes a range of direct and indirect methods (Hamm 1996). But unique cultural patterns and societies in ferment call for inventiveness as well as courage. We had hoped, for example, that this collection might have included a study of the relationship between youth crime, delinquency, and adult criminal organisations in Japan. Joachim Kersten’s valuable essay on ‘Street Youths, Bosozoku, and Yakuza’ (1993) had delineated the distinctions between youth gangs, Bosozoku (hot-rodgers), and the major ‘corporate’ yakuza. The crucial question of the nature and extent of overlap between the three categories is yet to be adequately explored. And we were unable to identify a scholar with relevant recent expertise to undertake the task. At the end of the 1980s, Japanese authorities published official data indicating that the percentage of ‘Boryokudan’ (gang) members under 30 had declined from 56.1 to 30.4 between 1966 and 1987. The absolute number had fallen from 82,520 to 26,195. While there must be some scepticism about the astonishing precision of these figures (the derivation of which is not disclosed) they were consistent with the conclusion that ‘gangsters are steadily ageing since young people try to stay away from gangs’ (Shikita and Tsuchiya 1992: 91-3). They were also consistent with emerging evidence that some younger gangsters were developing free-lance drug operations giving them independence from established crime lords and making themselves less visible to police surveillance (Hills 1993). Criminological research is an underdeveloped field in Japan (Johnson 1996: 179). There has been little official encouragement for inquiries into the criminal justice system or studies which, by implication, might question its effectiveness and spotlight the inter-dependence of criminal, business, and political interests. Nevertheless what is clear from Kersten’s synthesis of recent research is that cultural explanations of Japan’s low official crime rates are at best problematic. The notion that ‘reintegrative shaming’ is a dominant social response in Japan which inhibits the development of criminal subcultures is plainly in need of careful qualification (Braithwaite 1989: 61-6, 136-7; Becker 1988; Tanioka and Glaser 1991).

Thinking about the nature and evolution of juvenile gangs is slowly coming to terms with the changing environment of organised crime and international criminal networks. The influence of major groups like the Hell’s Angels, Triads, Yakuza, Posses and Yardies, the Colombian cartels, and the Mafia reaches down through a multitude of channels to street-corners and school grounds. Newer eastern European and Russian groups compete for influence. For Italy, Pino Arlacchi (1991) has described a ‘pattern of territorial and sectorial [sic] franchises’ which draw in gangs of
neighbourhood youths as providers of ‘information, logistical support, and specialized personnel’ for the Mafia. In Denmark, where outlaw motorcycle gangs have fought for control of the east European drug market, Hell’s Angels use associates and candidates for ‘dirty work’ (Devlin 1992: 86). Elsewhere they are known to use ‘puppet clubs’ (Campbell 1993: 5).

In the United States, ethnic organised crime groups in particular have the capacity to use immigrant youth as disposable foot-soldiers and small-scale entrepreneurs in narcotics distribution, burglary, and extortion. Long established Chinese and Japanese criminal organisations operate on a multinational scale. They recruit young members and use members of youth gangs to carry out assignments as contract killers, extortionists, and drug peddlers. American law enforcement authorities had not until recently discerned comparable adult organisations among Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Korean immigrant communities (Jan 1993: 38-9). But police and intelligence agencies have very limited capabilities in penetrating ethnic criminal groups. Scholars fare little better (Sanders 1994: 155-63). So little is known about the organisation of Colombian, Vietnamese, Chinese or Cuban criminal enterprises, Martens (1990: 111) concluded, ‘that comparisons and analyses are relatively meaningless’. As late as 1993, it was possible for an American scholar to write that ‘ethnic specific research on gangs is sparse’ (Joe 1993: 20). And a call four years earlier for research into variations in gang behaviour across ethnic lines (Jackson 1989) could be cited with barely a hint of embarrassment that such research was not already well advanced (Joe 1993: 20).

In fact there has been a growing body of research over the last decade devoted to examining Vietnamese, Chinese, Chicano, African-American, Jamaican, Filipino and other ethnically specific law-breaking groups in the United States. But even the best scholarly syntheses conclude with as many questions as answers.

As more is learned about the ever-expanding links between Chinese, Japanese, Jamaican, Sicilian, Vietnamese, Colombian, Calabrian and other criminal organisations which flourish in several continents, research which is directed at trying to explain juvenile gangs by reference exclusively to endogenous socio-economic factors seems increasingly less adequate. The conclusion of Gay and Marquart (1993: 162) is persuasive: ‘more research, in general, is needed on the impact of economic, social, cultural, and political factors in the native country upon the genesis of organised crime groups in the United States’. The standpoint we take embraces this view, but goes further. What is now imperative is an international research strategy that encompasses both a myriad local studies and, as William F.
McDonald (1995: 6) argues, ‘global processes, global units of analysis, and global institutions’.

COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS

Issues which have preoccupied American scholars must inform but not dominate international research agendas. What we can learn from examining trends in many different places should also caution us against complacency. It may be tempting to draw optimistic policy conclusions when official exaggerations or misconceptions are refuted but the temptation must be resisted. Malcolm Klein may have been right to say that the gangs he studied were neither well-organised nor persistent, and that most crime committed in gang territories is not perpetrated by gangs (Klein 1995b). One can almost hear the sigh of relief accompanying the conclusion that ‘little evidence exists to show that traditional L.A. street gangs have deserted their turf focus to operate primarily as drug distribution networks’ (Sullivan and Silverstein 1995: 28). Anxiety is further diminished by the argument that by their very nature, lacking in discipline and organisation and prone to high levels of violence, street gangs are unlikely to evolve into ‘full-fledged organised crime groups’ (ibid.). True as this may be in one place at one time, is it a prudent leap of faith to base criminal justice system responses on such suppositions? While there are, as Marcus Felson suggests, abundant ‘misconceptions’ about gangs, a discussion of ‘crime and everyday life’ which refers only to the misconceptions is surely deficient (Felson 1994).

The scholars who have contributed to this volume have approached both the academic literature and popular perceptions and misconceptions in a variety of ways. One of the leading American researchers Diego Vigil, and his associate Steven Yun, restate Vigil’s influential ‘multiple marginality’ thesis and test its explanation of the origins of gangs against the evidence of the Vietnamese community in California. Subcultural theories are subjected to close scrutiny in several essays. Roger Burke and Ros Sunley place their own recent studies and ‘post-modern’ perspective in a British research tradition stretching over three decades. German and Australian phenomena are presented by Joachim Kersten and Judith Bessant and Rob Watts from similar standpoints, emphasising discourses on masculinity. The richness of their observations demonstrates the inadequacy of taxonomies that distinguish simplistically between ‘delinquent’ subcultures and gangs. These contributions also illustrate the
range of disciplinary backgrounds and theoretical paradigms which have been brought to bear on gangs over the past half century.

In the first half of the twentieth century, for example, there was a good deal of research on gangs and delinquent groups by British psychologists and psychoanalysts (Scott: 1956). From the 1960s onwards sociologically oriented subcultural studies have held the field. In 1996 a report commissioned by the Home Office concluded that, in spite of a decade of violent incidents associated with gangs, there had been little research in the United Kingdom specifically on gangs. The police service have developed no collective view of what a gang is. A survey of fourteen police forces found that in one third of cases force commanders thought that there were gangs in their areas while local units reported that there were none! (Stelfox 1996: 2). Conceptual confusion abounds. The obtrusive subcultures discussed in this volume by Burke and Sunley may in some places be manifest in ganglike groups. The one gang to which Burke and Sunley specifically refer appears to have evolved from a group of football hooligans. Curiously, the British police are agreed that football hooligans (and terrorists) can be excluded from their otherwise very accommodating definition of gangs. Clearly there is much work to be done before we have an adequate picture of the prevalence of groups in Britain resembling either Klein’s street gangs or other criminally oriented enterprises with comparable characteristics.

For Germany, Joachim Kersten takes us a step further with a preliminary analysis which categorises criminal youth groupings across several dimensions. Like Burke and Sunley in Britain, Kersten finds it most instructive to ground a discussion of gangs in Germany in a context of modern subcultural history. Unlike Klein, who says that there are American-style street gangs in Berlin, Kersten believes that there are no groups anywhere in Germany which meet Klein’s gang criteria. Xenophobia and racism are critical impulses associated with German youth violence and an underclass ideal of hegemonic masculinity. Kersten’s attention to what youth actually say is an important reminder of the need to understand the ideas which often serve to legitimate and motivate violent behaviour. Situational analyses must be complemented by accounts of ideologies, however crude or repugnant they may be.

In contrast to American evolutionary models of youth gang formation leading in some cases to more organised activity and links to adult criminal gangs (Taylor 1990), the contemporary Russian scene is described by Paddy Rawlinson as one in which the dominant organised criminal syndicates co-opt youth groups before they develop an autonomous
existence. As in Sicily and other parts of Italy where the Cosa Nostra or Camorra hold sway (Gambetta 1993: 255), some of the more loutish youth gang behaviour is subdued by ruthless adult organisations with more lucrative criminal business operations. But this relatively trivial benefit counts for little in a society whose own leaders acknowledge that organised crime threatens the very existence of the state. Given that some observers had concluded by the early 1990s that in Russia ‘the Mafia is the state’ (Vitaliev 1991; Vaksberg 1991), the Russian outlook is indeed grim (Lloyd 1995).

The picture in South Africa is also bleak—an exemplar of the impact on youth of prolonged racial and ethnic conflict, alienation, and economic dislocation. Michael Cross has shown how three interrelated youth subcultural worlds can be distinguished in South Africa:

- lumpen and unemployed youth delinquent and semidelinquent subcultures; middle-class cultural rebellion and reformist movements; and working-class student and youth resistance culture, activism, and political militancy (Cross 1993: 380).

Cross’s analysis provides a historical basis for understanding current gang activity and the new official efforts at prevention and rehabilitation foreshadowed in this volume by Donald Pinnock and Mara Douglas-Hamilton. The 1970s saw a melding of an emerging street gang culture with youth resistance in schools. In a resurgence of gangsterism in the 1980s, township gangs actually became accomplices of the police in targeting ‘schoolchildren, mainly girls, and student and youth political leaders’ (Cross 1993: 390). Whether modern South African gangs are better thought of as politically reactionary or criminally opportunist, Pinnock insists that we must recognise their role as the locus of essential ritual and adolescent rites of passage. This perception, in varying degrees, is also present in the historical account of Melbourne’s bodgies and widgies by Judith Bessant and Rob Watts and in the work of Marianne Nielsen and her colleagues on the Navajo Nation.

Bessant and Watts have used an innovative form of retrospective ethnography, drawing on the memories of former gang members to reconstruct the texture and meaning of gang lives in the 1950s. Writing of suburban activity in a prosperous Australian city they contend that gang membership was ‘essentially about the construction of situations in which awesome struggle and heroic loyalty were conjoined in violence’. There is a remarkable resonance between this insight and the Navajo Nation
Judicial Branch’s view of what has happened to many Navajo youth who have ‘lost their cultural bearings’. Young Navajo (and some Hopi, Sioux, and Apache) have adopted the baggy clothes, colours, graffiti, tattoos, and street talk of Los Angeles. A Navajo Nation judge reports local youth gang members being paid by established older Albuquerque gangs to undertake violent acts, steal, or destroy property (Judicial Branch of the Navajo Nation 1995: 4). To explain the origins and appeal of gangs among Navajo youth, members of the Judicial Branch have suggested that traditional ‘war way thinking’ has been appropriated and misdirected. ‘War way thinking’ it is argued must be refocused into socially constructive channels.

Until very recently Native American gangs had barely been noticed by either justice authorities or scholars. The sparse literature on American Indian criminality is summarised in Poupart (1995), Silverman (1996), and Armstrong et al. (1996). There was useful data in a report by the Arizona Criminal Justice Commision (1993). But the essay by Nielsen, Zion, and Hailer in this collection is a major step forward in this field. Similarly, as Robert Gordon shows, Canadian criminologists have been slow to investigate or even acknowledge the existence of gangs. But Gordon’s synthesis of recent work by colleagues and students, complemented by his exposition of the findings of the Greater Vancouver Gang Study, provides a benchmark for more comprehensive research. He supplies soundly-based correctives to the exaggerations and misconceptions of the Canadian press.

The propensity of the media to promote moral panics is well known. (Cohen 1972; Kelsey and Young 1982; Zatz 1987; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). However, it is one thing to discount media sensationalism but another to conclude, as Finn-Aage Esbensen (1996: 139) does for the United States, that the ‘current youth gang problem is to a considerable extent a media creation’. As in Gordon’s Vancouver, investigations in Melbourne by Ian Warren and Megan Aumair indicated that gangs in that city were indeed more transient and episodic in their activity than media depictions implied. What is evident from the Australian and Canadian press, and could no doubt be demonstrated elsewhere, is the considerable impact of the media both in disseminating gang imagery and provoking community fears.

In Australia, Canada, and Britain it is possible—though we are inclined to think otherwise—that gang realities are less fearsome than media headlines would suggest. In Papua New Guinea and New Zealand official or academic complacency certainly would be misplaced. In relation to the turbulent Papua New Guinea environment, Sinclair Dinnen describes a
process of gang 'surrender' to authorities which may have potential for expansion if accompanied by provision of employment opportunities. However, there are good grounds for thinking that the most powerful gangs and older criminal elements will not be attracted to the surrender option. In other cases, the surrender may turn out to be merely a tactic preceding a regrouping of gang elements. There is as yet no evidence of improvement in public safety in Papua New Guinea's major urban areas. At the time of writing, the government has again had to impose curfews in the capital city to achieve minimal restraint of gang crime. Port Moresby's prisons are porous. And, the conclusion of another scholar Andrew Strathern (1993: 54) remains deeply troubling: 'Neither landowners nor raskal appear to recognise any superordinate right of the state to control their activities and demands'.

The New Zealand scene, as described by Pahmi Winter, exhibits a quite different gang strategy. Neither surrender (tactical or genuine) nor rejection of state authority characterises the stance of New Zealand's largest ethnic gangs. Both of the two dominant gangs, Black Power and the Mongrel Mob, have sought an accommodation with New Zealand authorities. The pursuit of recognition and legitimacy as agents of government employment and welfare schemes has gone hand in hand with continuing criminal activity on a large scale. Gang leaders and advisers have developed a rhetoric, demeanour, and negotiating style which convinces some observers that a policy of constructive engagement with gangs may lead to a gradual moderation of law-breaking behaviour. Police and many other political and civic figures remain sceptical of the benefits of dialogue and persuasion. For them, the more compelling concerns are accumulating examples of gang violence, links with international organised crime, intimidation of witnesses, police, and justice system professionals. Government departments and agencies continue to strive to reach a common view on how best to deal with gangs which have developed considerable skill in 'working the system'. At the same time, police, who are aware of the growing presence of the Hell's Angels and Bandidos in New Zealand and their links with smaller local gangs, are seen on television urging the public to press their MPs for tougher action.

Readers of these essays will be tantalised by echoes, resonances, and glimpses of comparable and alternative realities. It would be premature in our present state of knowledge to attempt to impose some universal taxonomy, theory of gang growth, or other explanatory framework on the diverse experiences reported here. There is a great deal more to do before we have even the empirical basis for confident theoretical reformulations.
As Klein (1995b: 232) rightly says about the United States: ‘A decent typology of gangs in the 1990s could help us decide how best to approach them for both prevention and control. Know your gangs.’ We need research on many parts of the globe not covered in this collection: much of Africa, south and central America, India, Japan, China, and elsewhere. We need also to draw together disparate theoretical and conceptual approaches to youth subcultures, organised crime, delinquency and ganging (Brake 1985; Esbensen 1996: 133; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1994; Wilson and Howell 1993).

In this volume we make no attempt at a comprehensive examination of gang suppression or prevention strategies. We may note at this stage the courage and optimism displayed by many front-line workers wherever gangs currently prevail. The ambitious restorative justice enterprise in South Africa, described by Don Pinnock and Mara Douglas-Hamilton, shows the potential for culturally relevant, and theoretically informed, preventive and rehabilitative programs. Pinnock blends intimate local knowledge with insights drawn from a wide range of anthropological and criminological inquiry. What he says about the role of ritual processes and rites of passage to adulthood fits well with observations elsewhere about ambiguous masculinities. And there is much international interest in programs of the kind he is fostering. By contrast, allusions by Huff (1992: 35-6) and others to the different consequences of American ‘malignant neglect’ and European social planning appear to bemuse American authorities rather than stimulate fresh lines of investigation or policy innovation.

A comparative project does not entail facile assumptions that advances in understanding can readily be translated into trans-cultural policies and practices. There are many traps for the unwary (Schneider 1994) in what Patricia Steinhoff (1993: 828) has dubbed ‘answers for America research’. In a penetrating review essay on Japanese policing, Steinhoff warns against black box cultural explanations. ‘How and why’, she asks, ‘does a society with extremely low crime rates also support over 3,000 organised crime groups with more than 85,000 members?’ (Steinhoff 1993: 849 cf Head 1995). To understand the role of culture in accounting for this kind of reality, Steinoff insists that there is little value in ‘positing abstract cultural mindsets that systematically polarise societies on the basis of their differences’. The more productive approach is to try to understand the ways in which the ‘everyday institutional context of life’ constrains and is progressively shaped by individual choices in particular societies. Assessments of the role and impact of gangs in diverse social and cultural
environments remind us that time and place make a difference. Gang phenomena need to be understood both in historical and prospective contexts. The policy-maker needs guidance on future possibilities as well as an understanding of the past. We believe that the essays that follow make the case for further, more systematic, comparative study. They certainly provide a choice of promising starting-points in a still under-developed field.

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