



Book Review

Rob White (2016) *Youth Gangs, Violence and Social Respect: Exploring the Nature of Provocations and Punch-ups.* Palgrave MacMillan.

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'Youth gang' is a phrase that strikes fear and trepidation into the hearts of many people in Western countries of the world. This includes Australia where it is bandied around in frenetic discussions in national online and print media. Zero tolerance policing and criminal justice approaches have emerged in various jurisdictions within a climate of heightened fear and insecurity, approaches that further demonise and alienate the young people implicated. This cycle of moral panic about youth gangs, repeated ad nauseam, often damages perceptions about young people generally. The irony is that youthful social groupings we sometimes recognise as gang-related have emerged out of similar circumstances to those above. As Rob White astutely argues in his text *Youth Gangs, Violence and Social Respect: Exploring the Nature of Provocations and Punch-ups*, youth gang formations do not reflect the media-perpetuated idea of motivated and organised groups of young people seeking to perpetrate harm on others.

The book is grounded in interview research with young people involved in youth gang formations across Australia. Precise details of the research projects are not elaborated in the text, but it is clear interviews were conducted during the 1990s and to the mid-2000s with upwards of 200 mostly male young people aged 14-25 years from across every state in Australia. Further, these young people were from diverse cultural backgrounds including Indigenous, Vietnamese, Turkish, Pacific Islander, Somalian, Latin American, and Lebanese. White's analysis shows how youth gangs are more about alienation from mainstream society, absence of familial social bonds, lack of access to material resources and employment, lack of respect, and persistent insecurity in life circumstances.

Youth gangs now cross transnational borders in ways that continue to provide marginalised young people with 'social connection and social belonging' (p. 88). They provide familial-like support for Indigenous young people coming from dispossessed, fractured families; they are 'akin to a clan, a big family, which is bound together by geography' (p. 98). Unfortunately, these support elements are not those typically garnering attention, with media focused instead on portraying these youth formations as 'dangerous, deviant and destructive' (p. 84). White demonstrates that youth gangs provide young people with much-needed social support and protection, an image far removed from what we might extrapolate from popular media. The

book also shows how media-perpetuated stereotypes further demonise ethnically diverse and migrant young people as 'immoral' and 'threatening', leading them to be subject to extensive public racism as a result.

The high level of popular attention on these youth groupings has renewed focus on them in academic research. White's text overviews this research and highlights the at times obsessive positivist focus in this research internationally as it seeks to 'discover' the underlying factors that lead individual young persons towards involvement in youth gangs. Aligning with texts like Goldson (2011), White's book highlights the voices of young people who are involved in gangs. These voices can be sidelined in more positivist approaches, with young people often deemed centrally responsible for the existence of youth gangs, and rehabilitative and preventative programs expunging gang-related activities from the lives of young people through reparative therapies focused on the individual. These approaches can overlook the complexity of young people's lives, and gang rehabilitation unfolds in a web of competing tensions and allegiances, and in a context structured by inequalities that are not addressed.

This is the central significance of White's book. His insights show that involvement in youth gangs is not about individualised problems: it is about social networks, structural conditions, economic circumstances and familial realities. Young people of differing ethnic backgrounds brought together within gangs can receive some protection from racism. Further, involvement in gangs is one way these young people can prove their masculinity to one another and reaffirm their position in the hierarchy of youthful sociality. In a social climate in which politics and government rarely focus on ways to invest in young people to genuinely improve their life conditions and chances, participation in youth gangs provides young people with some welcome relief from the harsh realities of everyday existence in a web of often insurmountable structural inequalities.

One of the core themes of this text is violence. It emerges from disputes with other gang-involved young people, from opportunistic moments with members of the public, from individuals affirming their status and asserting their social respect, and from shoring up their masculine identities. Violence works through masculine working class physicality, demonstrated through and with the body as a vehicle for presenting self to other young people in gang formations. The young people spoke of how violence was directed at them from other gang-involved young people, while simultaneously these gang formations provided protections from violence. White's data articulate times when young people were out in public looking for a fight with someone, happenstance moments not easily classified as premeditated so much as hoped for as a source of excitement. At the same time, young people verbalise their fear of violence from other gang-involved young people, with older members voicing their exhaustion with managing the constant threat of violence. When asked about what things would make him happier, one young male from Canberra replied, 'knowing that I can walk out of my door without getting bashed by somebody I know and stuff' (p. 175). White's work so capably shows that, while gang-related youth formations provide protection to young people, this also runs alongside concern for their personal safety.

The stories of the young people in White's book show beyond doubt that, while youth gang formations are not a huge issue in Australia as yet, they do have the potential to become so if the reasons they exist are not adequately addressed. White's book adeptly elaborates how preventing young people from becoming part of gang formations and providing exit strategies for those already involved in gang formations, must focus on ameliorating the pre-conditions of these gang formations: 'poverty, high levels of youth unemployment, precarious job markets, and ghettoization in our larger cities' (p. 177). Most importantly, preventative and reparative programs need to be culturally appropriate and developed in consultation with the young people they seek to support. For example, White shows how anti-gang programs targeting Indigenous young people are set to fail before they begin because they 'do not reflect, and

respect, family considerations' (p. 92) in a cultural context where the destruction and dislocation of families has devastated the lives of these young people. These programs served only to further perpetuate their 'systematic dispossession' and 'ongoing subjugation' in non-Indigenous policing and criminal justice processes (p. 92). This is even more problematic considering that White's research shows gang-involved male and female Indigenous young people are often engaged in violence, and this is a key factor that sees their long-term exclusion from services seeking to support them (Richards and Renshaw 2013).

Youth Gangs, Violence and Social Respect is an important text for policy makers as well as academics and researchers in the field. Any policing and criminal justice stakeholder serious about combatting the circumstances that lead young people to be involved in gang formations should read this book. It highlights the urgency of addressing the encircling, complex reasons why young people engage in these formations and how they represent some of the most disenfranchised youth of Australia, those with life experiences most difficult to address and whose voices are least heard.

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