What we know

- Children of gang-involved parents are at greater risk of child abuse, neglect and witnessing violence between their parents.
- Almost a quarter of children of gang-involved parents are known to the youth justice system in New Zealand.
- Children of gang-involved parents are more likely to join a gang and often describe a sense of fatalism about their own gang involvement.
- It is likely that children growing up in a gang-involved family are more exposed to family risk factors known to be associated with poor life outcomes.

What works or is promising

- Comprehensive approaches that acknowledge the broader socio-economic context of the communities in which gangs form and develop are most likely to work.
- Evaluations of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Comprehensive Gang Model, developed in the United States, showed that when the model is well implemented it helps reduce both youth gang violence and drug-related offences.
- Parenting and mentoring interventions targeting parents of youth gang members and youth at risk of joining a gang are increasingly being used to deal with youth gang membership and offending. Parenting programmes may be less effective where the parents are associated with gangs themselves.
- Approaches to dealing with Māori gangs are more likely to be effective if they actively engage whānau. Three community-based initiatives using this approach appear promising.

What doesn’t work

- Single-faceted approaches (eg, focused on one of prevention, intervention or suppression) are not effective for tackling gang issues. Suppression (eg, policing, legislation, incarceration) has been found to be largely ineffective.

What we don’t know

- We know little about the direct impacts, particularly the long-term impacts, of growing up in a gang-related household on children’s health, education and employment outcomes and criminality in adulthood.
- Based on the current evidence we cannot say there is a causal association between having a gang-involved parent and negative life outcomes for children.
- A large proportion of gang members are in prison at any given time. A Superu What Works paper, Improving outcomes for children with a parent in prison suggests there may be negative impacts associated with having a parent in prison. We know little about the impacts on children of having their gang-involved parent (usually father) in prison.
Introduction

Government has identified children of gang-involved parents as a vulnerable group and aims to increase support

The New Zealand Government has a policy focus on supporting the most vulnerable children. Recently the children of gang-involved parents have been identified as one such vulnerable group of children. For example, The Treasury defines children in families with gang connections as a priority group in their work on developing ways to improve government support for those most troubled and at-risk children and families with multiple complex problems.

In 2014, a whole-of-government action plan to reduce the harms caused by New Zealand adult gangs and transnational crime groups (subsequently referred to as the gangs action plan) was announced. Reducing the social harm to families and children connected with gangs is a key focus of the gangs action plan.

The plan comprises a range of prevention and law enforcement initiatives, information sharing across government to provide a more comprehensive understanding of gangs, and a stronger legislative toolkit. Previously the response to adult gangs has emphasised criminal offending rather than social harm, with individual agencies dealing with specific issues in isolation.

In introducing the gangs action plan, the Cabinet paper notes that successful programmes in other countries such as the United States are comprehensive and multi-agency, with a focus on preventing social harm as well as reducing criminal offending.

Defining gangs and assessing their impacts

There is little reliable quantitative information on gang membership

There is little reliable quantitative information available on gang membership due to problems with defining ‘gangs’ and fluctuating membership. The lack of engagement with government agencies by families with gang connections also means there is little administrative data available.

The New Zealand Police estimate there are 32 New Zealand adult gangs, comprising approximately 4,000 known patched members and prospects (0.1 percent of the population aged 17 and over). According to the New Zealand Police, organised crime in New Zealand can be grouped into: ethnic gangs of New Zealand origin, outlaw motorcycle gangs and transnational crime groups. Indigenous ethnic gangs, however, comprise the large majority of gang membership. It is important to note that while the various gang types may share common attributes, the concept of gangs is not a homogenous one. Each gang, and even chapters within gangs, have their own unique culture.

For the purposes of this paper, however, the focus is on gangs in a collective sense in terms of impacts on children from having gang-involved parents.
Gangs are typically hierarchical and their membership structure usually comprises a president, a treasurer, a sergeant-at-arms, members and prospects. Others connected with gangs such as associates, affiliates, honorary members and ‘hangers-on’ may also be included in statistics about gangs and included in the gang population.

We don’t know how many children have gang-involved parents

Families with gang associations have been identified by policymakers as a ‘hard-to-reach’ or under-served group in New Zealand. As such it is difficult to determine the exact size of the ‘hidden population’ of children who live in these families and who commonly have little engagement in the mainstream economy or with social and health services.

Collating quantitative information on gang membership and criminal offending is challenging

New Zealand adult gang membership is fluid, with individuals moving into, out of and between gangs on a frequent basis. For this reason, recording gang membership and gathering comprehensive quantitative data present continuing challenges. Gang membership has been identified as a significant contributing factor for persistent involvement in crime. The Cabinet paper on the gangs action plan presented information on a small number of gang members, prospects and individuals who had an identified connection with New Zealand adult gangs. It noted that in the first quarter of 2014, these individuals were responsible for 25 percent of homicide charges, 34 percent of class A/B drug offences, 36 percent of kidnapping and abduction offences, 25 percent of aggravated robbery / robbery offences, and 26 percent of grievous assault offences.

The Cabinet paper also noted that although overall crime was trending downwards, serious offending by New Zealand adult gang members increased by 15 percent in 2013 and almost half of the serious offences committed by gang members and prospects over their lifetime were family-violence related.

Many children of gang-involved parents have a parent in prison

The proportion of gang members and affiliates in New Zealand’s prison population has grown. The 2003 Department of Corrections census of prison inmates showed that gang members and affiliates accounted for 11.5 percent of the sentenced inmates. Over two thirds of those inmates belonged to either the Mongrel Mob or Black Power gangs. As of April 2013, gang members and affiliates comprised over 30 percent of inmates, with over 10 percent of the prison population belonging to the Mongrel Mob. Forty-six percent of prisoners under the age of 19 have gang affiliations.

Approximately 7,000 children were dependents of gang member parents receiving benefits.

---

Affiliates are loosely defined as people connected to gangs in some way, and as such their inclusion in the statistics inflates the figures relating to gangs and the prison population.
How family risk factors influence child outcomes

Children grow up within families, and family factors clearly have a large impact on children’s outcomes, both positive and negative. A recent literature review summarising research on risk factors for negative outcomes for children and adolescents found that most risk factors are in the family domain\(^\text{(10)}\). These risk factors include family income and poverty, living situations and material deprivation, lower socioeconomic status, family structure and breakdown, low parental educational attainment, low parental interest in education, poor parent-child relationships, and parental mental health problems\(^\text{(10)}\). While having a gang-involved parent wasn’t explicitly identified in the literature as a risk factor, a small number of studies suggest that growing up in a gang-involved family may affect children and increase their exposure to other known risk factors. Further research is needed in this area.

Family factors and family dysfunction may influence gang membership

As evident by the gangs action plan, social policy in New Zealand is increasingly concerned with reducing cycles of intergenerational involvement in gangs and criminal offending. This implies a focus beyond the individual gang member to one that includes the wider family context and how family factors influence gang membership and offending, particularly among young people, including those with gang-involved parents.

Similarly, United Kingdom policies link troubled families (families experiencing multiple problems) with families with gang involvement\(^\text{(10)}\). The family, and family dysfunction, are viewed as central to youth criminality. Two examples of this linkage are the ‘troubled families’ programme which includes those involved in youth crime or anti-social behaviour, and the Ending Gang and Youth Violence: A Cross Government Report which identifies reduced criminality and violence as key outcomes in work with troubled families\(^\text{(11)}\).

The literature suggests that family factors are a major influence on gang membership\(^\text{(12)(13)}\). A commonly held view in the gang membership literature is that children from dysfunctional or troubled families join gangs to fill a void and become part of a surrogate family that gives them a sense of belonging, identity, status and protection\(^\text{1}\). Indeed, there is a large body of research that suggests a range of family factors, including poor home socialisation, lack of parental control and weak familial ties, fatherlessness and lack of male role models, parental alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, and multigenerational gang membership and familial criminality push young people into gang culture\(^\text{2}\). However, the role of the family or family dysfunction as a major category of risk factors in encouraging gang membership and criminality is a widely debated and contentious topic in the literature\(^\text{3}\).

An emphasis on family dysfunction as a risk factor, while clearly important, often fails to contextualise family processes within broader social processes. For example, structural factors, such as employment opportunities, community facilities, social services and housing, are all important in shaping the resources available to parents and subsequently their parenting practices\(^\text{3}\). The research in this area highlights the complexity of gang formation and membership which involves an intricate interplay between family, environmental and individual influences\(^\text{4}\). A criticism levelled at approaches that overemphasise family dysfunction and parental responsibility is that they “place the conceptual emphasis at the micro level of parent-child relations and individual personality” rather than looking to structural explanations and solutions\(^\text{5}\)(p. 22).

Family factors can influence gang members to leave the gang life

As noted above, the family can be a major influence in encouraging gang involvement. Conversely, families can also reduce the appeal of gang membership. Research on why individuals leave gangs has identified a set of factors that may push or pull individuals out of gang involvement. Push factors reduce the appeal of persisting in that social environment, and as such are said to ‘push’ the individual away from the gang. In contrast, pull factors are alternative circumstances or situations that can move people toward new pathways\(^\text{6}\).

Research suggests that increased family commitments due to the birth of a child may be a ‘pull’ factor that encourages gang members to leave the gang life\(^\text{7}\). A United States study involving interviews with 91 gang members found that fatherhood led to a change in outlook and priorities for gang members. Often it was a turning point and motivated a desire to move away from gang involvement\(^\text{7}\). Two New Zealand studies also found that changes in responsibilities (e.g., having children or grandchildren) and concern about the negative impact of violence and abuse on their families were important triggers for gang members to start questioning gang life and their involvement. Many decided that they wanted a better life for their children or grandchildren\(^\text{8}\)(p.8).
Having gang-involved parents appears to impact on children

There is only a small body of research on the collateral impacts of gang membership on the families and children of gang members. In part this is due to difficulties in accessing this group by researchers as well as a previous lack of policy focus on these children. It is also important to acknowledge that a major problem for researchers in this area is disentangling the independent impacts of having gang-involved parents from other factors that may adversely affect children in these families.

While the studies and findings discussed below suggest an association between having gang-involved parents and some adverse outcomes, it is difficult based on the current evidence to assume a causal association. We do not know whether having gang-involved parents increases risk for children or whether other disadvantages account for the association.

We also know little about the long-term implications for children of growing up in a gang family. Some longitudinal research in the United States has investigated the long-term consequences of gang membership in adolescence in relation to criminal behaviour, educational and occupational attainment and mental health in adulthood[19]. The findings show that adolescent gang membership has significant consequences in adulthood. Gang-involved youth have a greater likelihood of committing crime, going to jail, and selling drugs later in life. They are also less likely to complete high school, more likely to be on welfare, have poor health and drug abuse issues in adulthood[19]. Further research is needed to determine whether there are similar long-term implications for children with gang-related parents.

Children of gang-involved parents are at risk of child abuse and neglect

Family violence in a gang context has been highlighted as an issue that needs greater attention and the evidence suggests that abuse of women and children living in gangs is often more frequent, brutal and extreme[20][21]. It has been acknowledged that violence towards women and children within the Mongrel Mob is a significant problem[20].

Recent statistics suggest that the children of gang families are at higher risk than other children of child abuse and neglect.

In addition to the immediate health effects, childhood maltreatment has longer-term impacts on children’s cognitive development and on their physical and mental health resulting in the need for greater medical care throughout life[22].

Approximately

5,900 children can be linked to adult gang members via a parent-child type relationship in the Child, Youth and Family computer system.

60% of these children had a substantiated finding of abuse or neglect by Child, Youth and Family. Moreover, multiple substantiated findings of abuse or neglect of these children were common[7].
Children of gang-involved parents are more likely to be exposed to violence between their parents

Research suggests that women associated with gangs experience high levels of sexual violence, including coercive sexual practices, unprotected sex with multiple partners and rape. A recent review of the literature, including some New Zealand studies, show that these women are at greater risk of intimate partner violence, dating violence and relationship abuse. The tendency of gangs to conform to rigid and traditional gender roles and a social structure based on power and violence contribute to this increased risk.

Qualitative research in New Zealand paints a disturbing picture of women’s roles in motorcycle and ethnic gangs and the lives of these women and their children. Most New Zealand gangs are a masculine domain and women play a marginal and traditional role, typically excluded from membership and decision-making. The women interviewed spoke of their powerlessness and vulnerability. They also reported high levels of violence and abuse (physical and sexual) perpetrated by their partners and other gang members, and children often witnessed the violence towards their mothers. Concern about the effects of gang life on the children, particularly children’s exposure to violence and abuse, was often the major prompt behind women’s decisions to leave gang life.

Witnessing violence between parents can have adverse effects on the children, particularly with regard to poor mental health outcomes. Research suggests that exposure to violence between parents can shape children’s beliefs about and acceptance of violence, increase their risk for conduct and anxiety disorders and make them more likely to engage in risky, violent behaviour, including gang violence.

In New Zealand, findings from the longitudinal Christchurch Health and Development Study show that even after controlling for other family disadvantages, childhood exposure to father-initiated violence is associated with increased risks for conduct disorder, anxiety disorders and juvenile crime. Interparental violence initiated by the mother was associated with increased rates of alcohol abuse.

Children of gang-involved parents may be at risk of falling out of mainstream education

A qualitative study examining the educational histories and pathways of alternative education (AE) students in New Zealand found that nearly a third of the 41 at-risk AE students interviewed have experienced life in or around gangs; and several grew up in gang households where one or both parents/caregivers were gang members (as well as their wider whānau in some instances). Some students highlighted the stigma of having a family member involved in gangs, and felt that teachers and school management treated them differently because of this.

The findings of this study suggest that familial and other links to gangs may impact students’ educational experiences and outcomes. Further research could explore this in more detail.

Almost a quarter of children of gang members are known to the youth justice system

Recent statistics suggest that children of gang-involved parents may be more likely to come to the attention of the youth justice system. Ministry of Social Development administrative data shows that of the nearly 3,400 children of New Zealand gang members who were aged at least 10 years old, 23 percent were known to the Youth Justice service arm of Child, Youth and Family following referral for a Youth Justice Family Group Conference.

Children of gang-involved parents are more likely to join a gang

A potential negative impact on children of having a gang-involved parent is increased risk of joining a gang and entering a pathway to criminality. In New Zealand the strong presence of familial intergenerational links in ethnic gangs has been noted in the literature.

The international research suggests that having family members involved in gangs or criminal behaviour is a risk factor for juvenile delinquency and encourages gang membership. Some research has found that a common motivation for joining gangs is having family members already in the gang, and becoming involved may simply be the next obvious step when associating with existing gang-involved friends and family.

---

\[a\] Alternative education students are ‘at risk’ students, aged 13 -16, who have been truanting for more than two school terms or who have been excluded from school. These students receive an alternative form of education in community AE centres.
An interview study of gang members in the United States found that tradition plays an important role in multigenerational gangs, particularly among Hispanics. Many of the gang members interviewed said that their families had a long history of gang involvement that included older brothers, and in a considerable number of cases, fathers and grandfathers. Thirty-two percent of the Los Angeles fathers interviewed said that they had been members of the same gang to which their children now belonged, while 11 percent reported that four generations of their family had membership in the same gang. In another United States study, 79 percent of the 48 gang-involved females interviewed had at least one other family member involved in gangs, and 60 percent had more than one. Families' positive attitudes towards gangs have been identified as a factor that can encourage young people to also become involved in gangs, thus promoting intergenerational gang membership.

Children describe realities of growing up in gang-related families

Qualitative studies on children's experiences of growing up in gang-related families are important for understanding the children's unique and unfiltered experiences of their world. In recent years, researchers have adopted more participatory research approaches with children and young people to better “understand the social world from the viewpoint of the child living in it.” While based on small samples, the two New Zealand studies discussed below, both of which involved interviews with children with familial links to gangs, reveal some interesting themes in children's experiences.

Children describe a sense of fatalism about being a part of a gang lifestyle

The Office of the Children’s Commissioner carried out a study exploring children and young people's views and experiences of poverty. Many of the children interviewed had either grown up in, or joined a gang and described their experiences. Those born into gangs highlighted the fact that gangs are their natural family or whānau and they have no choice in being involved in this lifestyle. They also commented on how difficult it is to leave the gang lifestyle as this often means cutting ties with their families. Similarly, in another study, young people described how difficult it is to avoid becoming involved in a gang lifestyle because their experiences had normalised gang life and culture and most of their whānau were connected to the gang. Some of these young people with generational connections to gangs werefatalistic about their future and felt they had no choice in their own gang involvement when they got older.

An interview study of women associated with gangs confirmed the children and young people's views, by revealing their concerns about their children being exposed to gang role models and values that normalised violence. Some women commented that the children are often at gang houses and are being trained and tested by gang members to conform to gang culture in preparation for future membership. The children are being taught that they are outsiders and don't fit into society. Some expressed concern that the cycle of violence is beginning to repeat itself through the children.

In contrast, some young people said that exposure to their parents' gang experiences had deterred them from becoming involved in gangs. In other words, growing up in a gang-connected family does not necessarily predict young people's involvement in gangs. In some cases students said that their parents actively protected them by keeping them separate from gang activities or associates, or discouraging them from becoming involved in gangs.

My Self – My Poverty Story

I come from a big family of TEN
Our life revolved around DRUGS, ALCOHOL, MONEY, GANGS, VIOLENCE and ABUSE.

Throughout our lives all we could depend on was each other.
Mum was an alcoholic and was rarely home, and then only to recover from a night’s drinks.
If dad wasn’t at home he was either in jail, at work or down at the Mongrel Mob pad.

I reckon you don’t have to be poor to live the life of poverty.
We were impoverished by a lack of emotional support, love and security

(Anonymous)

Children describe some positive aspects of being involved in gangs

Some young people spoke of the positive aspects of their involvement in gangs, such as feeling accepted, enjoying themselves and not living in poverty. They also acknowledged the costs involved, including difficulties leaving later if they decided to do something else.
Few strategies and interventions specifically address issues for families of gang members

The literature search revealed little evidence on adult gang members and their family relationships, particularly in relation to their children. Similarly, little research was found on interventions with gang families, specifically those focused on addressing the needs of, or reducing the harms to children with gang-involved parents. Family-focused interventions are increasingly advocated in the literature, but these are largely aimed at helping parents prevent their children from joining youth gangs. In the case of families where the parents are in a gang, such programmes may not be effective.

Interventions show little evidence of effectiveness

It is important to highlight that gang-related programmes are rarely rigorously evaluated. It is difficult to know, with any certainty what works and what doesn’t work. Often evaluations in this area lack comparison groups, are based on small samples and lack a focus on long-term outcomes. The New Zealand evaluations described in this paper typically focus on programme implementation rather than measuring clearly defined outcomes. In view of this, we do not attempt to ‘rate’ the effectiveness of programmes but rather provide a qualitative summary of any evidence to support the effectiveness of the programmes.

General approaches to dealing with gang issues

Historically, interventions for dealing with gangs and gang offending fall into three main categories: prevention, intervention and suppression[36].

Prevention approaches aim to discourage young people from joining gangs by providing programmes that could improve their situation, such as early childhood education, school-based programmes, after-school programmes and youth clubs.

For children growing up in loyal gang families, however, prevention programmes may be ineffective:

These parents may purposely train their children to become part of the gang, perhaps beginning by merely attending gang gatherings, becoming known, and participating in petty gang acts...The parents of these children may have introduced them into the gang formally or may have informally modelled the lifestyle in a manner that socialized their children to join without direct solicitation[37].

Similarly, a qualitative study in the United Kingdom found that gang involvement of a parent was a substantial barrier to engaging parents in parenting interventions for families of young gang members[32].

Intervention programmes work directly with gang members and associates to encourage them to move away from gangs and crime. They focus on providing education and work opportunities, and counselling and health services[36]. For example, New Zealand intervention approaches have included government work schemes for gangs introduced in the early 1980s which involved providing government funds to various gang collectives for work-related activities. It is uncertain whether these schemes were effective in reducing gang membership and offending and controversy over how the money was used in some instances led to the schemes being discontinued in 1987[38].

Suppression involves policing and legislation and has been the most commonly used approach for dealing with gangs, both in New Zealand and internationally. Suppression approaches view gangs as a police problem rather than one for social agencies to address.

The literature suggests that single-faceted approaches are unlikely to be effective in dealing with gang issues. Suppression in particular has been criticised as largely ineffective in reducing involvement in gangs and offending[3].

In 2008, the Ministry of Social Development noted that:

A sole suppression strategy is costly...and gains are short-term. Suppression has proven the least successful of all interventions and can have a negative impact as members convert stigmatisation into a symbol of status. Further...a reliance on the Police as public commentators on gang issues can be problematic, as many have narrow views of gangs and criminality, which may then be perpetuated through the media leading to simplified notions about how best to respond[39 p.38].

Black Power member Denis O’Reilly similarly notes: “You have got to have an integrated response. But if the only weapon you have is a hammer then everything looks like a nail”[40]. Moreover, suppressing and imprisoning gang members can exacerbate the problem by providing gangs the opportunity to recruit new members in prisons, dominate prison culture and run criminal activities within prisons such as contraband trading[3]. Prisons are a major recruiting ground for the largest ethnic gang in New Zealand – the Mongrel Mob – and a Mob chapter was formed in Auckland Maximum Security Prison in the late 1970s[41].
Comprehensive multi-faceted approaches are most likely to be effective

Based on their review of the research on gang interventions, New Zealand researchers conclude that multi-faceted strategies, acknowledging the idea that gangs are not the problem but a symptom of wider social issues, are most likely to be successful. In discussing the historical origins of gangs in New Zealand, Jarrod Gilbert notes that gang membership has been closely linked to adverse social and economic conditions and "as long as New Zealand has communities faced with poor education, overcrowded housing, unemployment, family abuse and poverty, the country will always have gangs". Similarly, others have argued for more comprehensive strategies that acknowledge the broader socio-economic context of the communities in which gangs form and develop.

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.

As noted earlier, the gangs action plan is moving toward a comprehensive multi-agency approach to tackling gang issues. The OJJDP (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention) Comprehensive Gang Model in the United States, while specifically addressing the issue of youth gang violence and offending, provides an example of a comprehensive approach to dealing with gang issues.

OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model

A United States national survey of law enforcement and social service agencies aimed to determine what strategies communities were using to deal with youth gang problems. The results of this survey led to the expansion of the three strategies outlined above (prevention, intervention and suppression). The findings formed the basis for developing the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model which revolves around five core strategies: community mobilisation, providing opportunities, social intervention, suppression, and organisational change and development. The model identifies the following five strategies that need to be implemented in any comprehensive plan attempting to address gang issues.

Community mobilisation

- Involves community members, including former gang members, community groups and agencies, and coordinating and targeting services to more effectively meet the needs of gang members. This strategy focuses on cooperation across agencies and aims for better coordination of existing services.

Providing opportunities

- Involves the development of various education, training and employment programmes for gang-involved youth in order to increase job and educational opportunities for young people, thereby addressing a fundamental cause of gang formation and gang membership.

Social intervention

- Involves outreach by various groups (eg, youth agencies, schools, community groups, police and other criminal justice organisations) to engage gang members and their families and connect them with services.

Suppression

- Involves control techniques (eg, arrests, prosecution and imprisonment) and close supervision or monitoring of gang members by criminal justice and community-based agencies.

Organisational change and development

- Involves developing and implementing policies and processes that make the best use of existing and potential resources, both within and across agencies.

OJJDP evaluated the implementation of the model at several sites across the United States and found that when the model was well implemented it helped local communities to develop services and strategies that help reduce both gang violence and drug-related offences. However, implementation difficulties at some sites, such as selecting a lead agency that failed to perform, problems with the steering committee, or problems getting key agencies in the community to work together, led to less favourable outcomes.

Family-focused interventions

Recently, researchers in the United Kingdom have proposed family-focused interventions as potentially useful for tackling gang membership in youth. This is not surprising given the evidence that family factors, such as lack of family cohesion and lack of parental supervision, are risk factors for gang membership. An important consideration in using family-focused programmes, specifically those targeting parents of young people involved in gangs, is that parents may not necessarily hold negative perceptions of gangs and may be associated with gangs themselves.
Multisystemic Therapy reduces offending among youth offenders

Multisystemic Therapy (MST) is an example of a well-established family-focused approach for dealing with youth gang membership and offending. It involves providing an intensive and individualised programme of therapy and support for the young person and family in their own community. MST has been evaluated internationally and in New Zealand, and studies have found that it significantly reduces offending among youth offenders.

The evidence for mentoring programmes for young people at risk of gang membership is mixed

Mentoring programmes are widely employed as a means of addressing youth gang membership, particularly in the United Kingdom and United States, despite mixed support for their effectiveness in this context. An evaluation of a recent mentoring scheme in the United Kingdom for younger siblings of gang members perceived to be at greater risk of gang membership, found that participants and their parents were generally positive about the programme and the relationships that developed between mentees and mentors.

The study also highlighted some important concerns around implementation, such as the potential for participating youth to be stigmatised once they are identified as having an older sibling in a gang and labelled as a potential gang member, and the sustainability of any impacts from the programme. Many parents expressed concern about 'what happens next' for their children. The researchers concluded that mentoring programmes as a way of dealing with gang membership should be approached cautiously, particularly when used in isolation from other measures.

The history and context of Māori gangs

In New Zealand, Māori gangs comprise the majority of adult gang membership and tend to attract the most attention, including negative social perceptions. In order to develop culturally appropriate interventions it is important to understand the specific issues relating to Māori gangs including the historical context in which they evolved.

The intergenerational impacts of colonisation have been discussed in the literature as part of the context in which Māori gangs evolved. For example, Māori gangs emerged during a period of large-scale Māori urbanisation which, in many cases, led to a weakening of traditional whānau links:

Around 1975 and 1977 what we were beginning to see was the emergence of gangs like Black Power, Mongrel Mob and Headhunters...These gang members were the children of those Māori who came from the rural areas to the cities in the early 1960s. They were the product of the breakdown of the whānau links in those early years (Evidence by Connie Hanna, Waitangi Tribunal Report Wai 414, 1998).

Another factor contributing to the development of Māori gangs was growing cultural alienation. Ex Mongrel Mob member, Tuhoe Isaac describes his sense of cultural alienation within the gang:

Being Māori meant nothing to us even though the majority of us were Māori; the only culture worth anything to us was Mob culture.

The patch replaced all ethnic or cultural dimensions. You never spoke the reo, or performed a hongi within the confines of the gang or the gang pad in my time. All that “Māori stuff” was to be left on the marae or wherever it was normally lived out.

Whānau approach key to engage Māori gangs

In New Zealand, Māori gangs are increasingly viewed as whānau groupings. This highlights the need for strategies that engage with gangs to be based on an understanding of Māori gangs as whānau.

Two types of whānau are described in the literature – ‘whakapapa whānau’, that is whānau based on kinship and ‘kaupapa whānau’ or whānau brought together for a particular purpose (eg, kōhanga reo). These are not mutually exclusive: whakapapa whānau often share common goals or purpose and kaupapa whānau may or may not include kinship relationships.

Over the years, the construct of Māori gangs has shifted from a group engaged in criminal activity, and who happened to be whānau, to today’s scenario, in which gangs are comprised of interconnected whānau, (or a whakapapa whānau in their own right), some of whom actively engage in criminal activity.

In a presentation to the Palmerston North Youth Centre Network in 2014, Sir Mason Durie noted that in terms of wellbeing, whānau can appear along a continuum from a state of ‘mauri ora’, in which whānau can ‘flourish’ – to a state of ‘mauri noho’, in which whānau can ‘languish’. In a state of ‘mauri ora’, whānau are spiritually robust, culturally engaged, energetic, and able to participate in activities and events. They have emotional vitality, positive thinking,
and sustainable and rewarding relationships with people and the environment. In a state of ‘mauri noho’ whānau experience cultural and spiritual alienation, negative emotions, knowledge gaps, chronic pain, listlessness, negative relationships and isolation\(^{(50)}\). A key focus of this approach is identifying how to help whānau move from a state of maori noho to a state of maori ora.

Applying this model to gangs involves working with gang whānau to explore maori ora and maori noho, identify protective factors, and potential catalysts for maori ora. Potential benefits to this approach are that it avoids demonising all members of the gang community; it adopts a strengths-based approach; it identifies those within the gang community who may be change agents; and it engages the gang in legitimate activities within the community\(^{(51)}\).

A whānau-centred approach views children/tamariki in the context of their whānau and not in isolation. In other words any strategies to improve outcomes for tamariki of gang members must actively engage with whānau to address issues relating to the children\(^{(52)}\).

Three New Zealand community-based initiatives using a whānau development approach were identified in the literature. The programmes, described here, have not been systematically evaluated but there is some evidence of positive outcomes and they may be promising for addressing issues for children of gang-involved parents. More rigorous evaluation is needed in order to determine what and how specific components of these programmes work towards producing desired outcomes.

**Te Ara Tika**

Te Ara Tika O Te Whānau (Te Ara Tika), funded by the JR McKenzie Trust, was established in 2005 by members of the Notorious chapter of the Mongrel Mob\(^{(52)}\). Te Ara Tika aimed to reduce offending and intergenerational patterns of offending and improve outcomes for whānau. This approach was premised on the beliefs that change needs to come from within the group and that whānau should design and deliver their own initiatives. The major prompt for the development of Te Ara Tika was concern within the chapter about the future of their children.

Te Ara Tika identified a high level of need within the Notorious community and set some key objectives for their work, including: improving the members’ physical and mental health; whānau outcomes such as better parenting, preventing family violence, and encouraging children to stay in school; improved employment outcomes; and preventing alcohol and substance abuse.

According to Te Ara Tika:

The health, education, employment and health outcomes for whānau of Notorious chapter of the Mongrel Mob are poor and as whānau, they are generally excluded or marginalised in mainstream society.

Government agencies and services are often not comfortable engaging with these whānau and have preconceived ideas about their interest in positive outcomes for their children. Similarly, these whānau have often had negative experiences or lifestyles that make them less able or willing to engage with services. They often don’t even realise what is available. The children are then affected and the cycle of deprivation, alienation and exclusion becomes intergenerational and self-perpetuating. A different approach is needed – more of the same is not going to make the difference with these whānau\(^{(53}p.3\).}

Specific initiatives to achieve these objectives include: mediation to reduce gang violence, Whānau Ora initiatives, a communicable diseases prevention programme, initiatives to increase employment opportunities, a methamphetamine rehabilitation programme with the Salvation Army, and working with Wesley Community Action to organise outdoor activities for youth.

A process evaluation of Te Ara Tika’s work involved observations of activities as well as workshops and meetings with Te Ara Tika staff and members of the Notorious chapter and their whānau\(^{(52)}\). The evaluation concluded that Te Ara Tika’s work was progressing well but would need to overcome some challenges, including improving public perception and acceptance. Expanding support within the chapter, particularly among young people, and within the wider Māori community were also highlighted as areas to improve.

While the evaluation did not focus on outcomes, there was positive feedback on Te Ara Tika’s work, including some members of the chapter reporting that they had stayed out of prison and were less likely to be in trouble with the Police than previously. The rehabilitation courses offered were well regarded and participants expressed enthusiasm about the possibilities of a new direction in their lives. A greater focus on family and children was also evident. Further evaluation of this initiative would be useful for identifying the long-term impacts and which aspects of the initiative were effective in achieving specific outcomes.
Kia Whakakotahi – The Taita Project
Kia Whakakotahi – The Taita Project was set up in response to increasing concern at Taita College about disciplinary issues with Māori students at the school. Half of all Māori students at the college were from gang-associated families. Māori students accounted for about 40 percent of all students but were involved in 85 percent of disciplinary cases often involving violence and drug use. The project focused on whānau rather than targeting individual students, and introduced a range of activities to increase the involvement of gang families in school life.

While the intervention has not been evaluated, Prison Fellowship who implemented the programme in 2006 cited a number of positive outcomes two years later, including fewer exclusions and expulsions, students no longer wearing gang colours to school, no graffiti on school premises, increased whānau involvement in proactive activities at the school (eg, marching on White Ribbon Day), increased whānau participation at school meetings, and increases in student participation at the school.

Rangatahi Initiative – Wesley Community Action
The Rangatahi Initiative is a partnership between Wesley Community Action and the community it serves. It has operated for several years in 'hard-to-reach' communities with the aim of improving physical and emotional/mental health outcomes. A key goal is helping whānau become more independent. The target group for the initiative is mostly affiliated to Black Power and the programme workers (Rangatahi Kaimahi) are respected and credible leaders also from within the target community. The initiative involves several key interlinked approaches: crisis management, practical help and building links, empowerment, modelling, strategic work and specific projects.

The initiative was evaluated in 2012 and a further review of impacts was carried out in 2014. The 2014 review was largely positive about the initiative and its impacts. The review identified a change in participants’ values and attitudes about the importance of family (eg, a greater interest in spending time with their families, doing family-focused activities, and for men “less interest in being the hard man”). Parents were also more interested in being involved in their children’s schooling. The review noted more participation by whānau in organised sports and activities thus providing an opportunity for families to participate together in positive activities. Another positive impact related to supporting whānau members to increase their support networks and foster links with government and other agencies. Whānau members were found to be more confident in their dealings with agencies and had expanded their social networks outside their own groups through participating in sports and other clubs.

There is little evidence on child outcomes associated with having gang-involved parents and a lack of evaluations for initiatives

Children of gang-involved parents are considered at risk of negative social outcomes. At present we cannot conclude, based on the research, that having a gang-involved parent is an independent risk factor. However, it is likely that children growing up in a gang-involved family are exposed to known risk factors. The literature suggests that having a gang-involved parent may place children at greater risk for child abuse and neglect, exposure to violence between parents, falling out of mainstream education, entering the youth justice system and joining a gang themselves.

Further research is needed to increase our understanding of the risk factors for children associated with growing up in a gang household as well as the long-term implications. We also need to develop evidence-based initiatives for this group of children aimed at improving outcomes for them, as well as outcome evaluations of existing initiatives.
References


35. Egan-Bitran, M. 'This is how I see it' Children, young people and young adults' views and experiences of poverty. Wellington: Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2010.


40. Vance, A. Building a circle of trust. Dominion Post. 8 February 2014.


Note 1: Method

The databases used for the literature search included EBSCO Discovery, Index NZ, ProQuest Psych Journals, Gale, Web of Science, Google Scholar.

The keywords used in the literature search comprised various combinations of the following: Gang, gang members, children, parents, fathers, families, intergenerational, intervention, programme, risk factors, outcomes, disadvantage, child abuse and neglect.

The review was not a systematic review of original sources. Where available the review sought to include existing literature/evidence reviews, especially systematic reviews and meta-analyses. However, the search process identified few such studies and therefore individual pieces of primary research were also included.

Internet searches supplemented the database searches to obtain published and unpublished papers, research reports, and organisational documents.
Our purpose

To increase the use of evidence by people across the social sector so that they can make better decisions – about funding, policies or services – to improve the lives of New Zealanders, New Zealand’s communities, families and whānau.

What we do

We work across the wider social sector to:

- **promote** informed debate on the key social issues for New Zealand, its families and whānau, and increase awareness about what works
- **grow** the quality, relevance and quantity of the evidence base in priority areas
- **facilitate** the use of evidence by sharing it and supporting its use in decision-making.

For more information about the work of Superu contact enquiries@superu.govt.nz

Superu  Level 7, 110 Featherston Street  P: 04 917 7040  
PO Box 2839, Wellington 6140  W: superu.govt.nz  
Families Commission  Kāmihana ā Whānau

The Families Commission operates under the name Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (Superu)

Related Superu publications:

  
  www.superu.govt.nz

- What Works: Effective parenting programmes (March 2015)
  
- What Works: Parenting programmes effective with whānau (May 2015)
  
- What Works: Improving outcomes for children with a parent in prison (June 2015)