

Toward an understanding of Aotearoa New Zealand's adult gang environment

A report from the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor,
Kaitohutihu Mātanga Pūtaiao Matua ki te Pirimia

Key messages



June 2023

This document may be copied provided that the source is acknowledged. This report and others by the Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor are available at pmcsa.nz.

June 2023 Version 2



**Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor
Kaitohutohu Mātanga Pūtaiao Matua ki te Pirimia**

Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor

The University of Auckland

Private Bag 92019

Victoria Street West

Auckland 1142

Aotearoa New Zealand

Email info@pmcsa.ac.nz | **Web** pmcsa.nz

Instagram [@nz_chief_science_advisor](https://www.instagram.com/nz_chief_science_advisor) | **Twitter** [@ChiefSciAdvisor](https://twitter.com/ChiefSciAdvisor)

FOREWORD

This report is about human beings, many of whom had limited choice about whether they joined a gang or not. Given the structural forces at play that limit the life trajectories of too many, for some, gang membership was inevitable from the outset.

The report was requested by Prime Minister Ardern in 2022, to support a policy agenda to reduce gang harm in our communities. It provides a select review of the international and local evidence on gangs, drawing on academic literature, government documents, and meetings with stakeholders and those with lived experience of gangs.

The report does not offer quick solutions, nor does it recommend specific policy advice. Rather it is our hope that this report will move the conversation forward on what the evidence says, and doesn't say, about gangs in Aotearoa New Zealand. This report is not intended to exclude those who are gang affected or gang affiliated but to better understand their world, so we might reduce rather than widen the gulf between gang communities and mainstream communities.

There are no quick fixes. Reducing gang harm will require addressing underlying societal issues which have been well documented but unsolved: inequity, intergenerational trauma, housing, family violence, etc, all of which serve to narrow the choices of those in our society who experience complex and inter-connected stressors. Protective factors that reduce the chance of a young person being involved in a gang include strong ties to family, school, and community. Investing in these young people to enable them to enjoy these protective factors offers the most hope of diminishing gang harm in the long term.

There are some intervention points that are under-explored in the vast majority of literature and previous conversations on the topic. Women and children in and around the gang world can be supported to reduce harm. Best practice in prisons that supports positive pathways on release can be made standard practice, but we acknowledge this is challenging to implement. The systemic operational challenges that prevent remand prisoners from accessing therapeutic and harm reduction services can be re-examined. A focus on the criminal and anti-social behaviours within and beyond gangs, rather than the gangs per se, might improve chances of success.

Developing and implementing public health policies on family harm, youth offending, drug harm reduction, as well as trauma-informed frameworks at a community level, are needed if we are really to change things. And doing so necessitates the inclusion of additional voices alongside law enforcement to address gang-associated harms. A public health approach does not come at the expense of enforcement. However, we can't and won't arrest ourselves out of the "gang problem".

We hope that this report supports policy makers and decision makers to move past the 'tough-on-crime vs soft-on-crime' rhetoric, and focus on being smart on crime, protecting our communities from harm and providing real and lasting change for Aotearoa New Zealand.



Emma Brown
Senior Research and
Policy Analyst



Juliet Gerrard
Prime Minister's Chief
Science Advisor



Ian Lambie
Chief Science Advisor to
the Justice sector



Tracey McIntosh
Chief Science Advisor to
Ministry of Social
Development

Professor Tracey McIntosh MNZM

Tracey is Ngāi Tūhoe and is Professor of Indigenous Studies. Her recent research focuses on incarceration (particularly of Māori and Indigenous peoples), gang whānau issues and issues pertaining to poverty, inequality and social justice.

Professor Ian Lambie ONZM

Ian is Professor in Clinical Psychology at Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland, where he teaches clinical, forensic, child and adolescent psychology. His specialist clinical and research interests are in child and adolescent mental health, childhood trauma and youth justice.

Professor Dame Juliet Gerrard DNZM, FRSNZ HonFRSC

Juliet has held the position of Chief Science Advisor since July 2018. She has advised the Prime Minister on a broad range of subjects, including advice from the expert panel on cannabis, which she co-chaired alongside Tracey McIntosh.

Dr Emma Brown (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Maru, Ngāti Pūkenga, Ngāi Te Rangi)

Emma is a Senior Research and Policy Analyst working for the Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor.

Additional information about the authors can be found on the PMCSA website (pmcsa.nz)

CONTENTS

Foreword	i
Contents	iii
Acknowledgements	1
Glossary of reo Māori terms	3
Report overview	4
High-level conclusions	5
Key messages.....	6
Concluding comments	13

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the many researchers, stakeholders, and officials who generously contributed their time and energy to the report. Your contributions helped to shape the report and we are thankful for the valuable insights that you shared.

- Adi Melenaite Lausi'i - *Affirming Works*
- Annah Stretton, Rebecca Skilton, and programme graduates and participants – *RAW*
- *Bay of Plenty Police – Gang Harm Reduction Team, Māori Responsiveness Manager*
- *Bay of Plenty Youth Development Trust*
- Dr Ben Fletcher - *Growing Up in New Zealand*
- Ben Hannifin - *Oranga Tamariki*
- Charles Mulipola - *Affirming Works*
- *Counties Manukau Gang Engagement Team*
- David Alty - *Waikeria Prison*
- Professor Darrin Hodgetts - *Massey University|Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa*
- David Hanna - *Wesley Community Action*
- Denis O'Reilly - *Community advocate*
- *Eastern Bay of Plenty – Police Prevention Manager, Area Commander*
- Fa'afete Taito - *Abuse in Care Royal Commission of Inquiry*
- *Gang Harm Insights Centre (GHIC)*
- *He Pou Oranga Whaiora*
- Israela McFadyen - *New Zealand Police Intelligence*
- Jade Morgan - *Te Hōkai Mānea Tipuna*
- Dr James (Buddy) Howell - *National Gang Centre (USA)*
- Dr Jarrod Gilbert - *University of Canterbury|Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha*
- Tā Kim Workman - *Criminal justice advocate*
- Lindon Pullan - *Ara Poutama Aotearoa|Corrections*
- *Maatua Whāngai*
- *Manaaki Ora – Nurse practitioner and AOD specialist*
- Mark Evans and team - *NZ Police*
- Associate Professor Mark Lauchs - *Queensland University of Technology*
- Matapuna Special Treatment Unit - *Christchurch Men's Prison*
- Gisa Dr Moses Ma'alo Faleolo - *Victoria University of Wellington|Te Herenga Waka*
- Dr Natalie Thorburn - *Womens Refuge*
- Associate Professor Mohi Rua - *The University of Auckland|Waipapa Taumata Rau*
- *NZ Police - Waitematā District*
- *Partnerships and Harm Prevention (PHP) Group*
- Dr Pita King - *Massey University|Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa*
- *Resilience to Organised Crime in Communities (ROCC) Senior Advisor Bay of Plenty*
- Poutoa Papali'i - *Salvation Army & Better Blokes*
- Associate Professor Sarah-Jane Paine - *Growing Up in New Zealand*
- Simon Robertson - *NZ Police*
- Stacey Shortall - *Mothers Project*
- *Social Wellbeing Agency*
- *South Auckland Social Wellbeing Board team*
- *Te Ahi Mauri*
- *Te Aranui Youth Trust*
- *Te Tuinga Whānau*
- Tricia Walsh - *Lived experience*
- Tuhi Leef - *Genesis Youth Trust*
- *Tūhoe Hauora*
- Turei Marshall - *Genesis Youth Trust*
- *Western Bay of Plenty – Police Prevention Manager*

We would also like to recognise disruptions to our intended engagements in light of the extreme weather events. Planned visits to community organisations in Northland and the Hawkes Bay were not carried out due to the North Island flooding event and Cyclone Gabrielle.

We also thank our peer reviewers. Your time, and contributions, have helped to refine the work significantly. We acknowledge that some peer reviewers would have had us make greater changes to the report. Not all comments could be incorporated, and the views expressed are those of the authors, informed by the many and varied commentaries received.

- Associate Professor Julia Ioane - *Massey University | Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa*
- Dr Darren Walton - *Crows Nest Research*
- Dr Armon Tamatea (Rongowhakāta, Te Aitanga-A-Māhaki) - *The University of Waikato | Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*
- Dr Michael Roguski - *Kaitiaki Research*
- Professor Simon Harding – *Director of the National Centre for Gang Research, University of West London*
- Eugene Ryder (Ngāti Kahu, Ngāti Awa, Tūwharetoa ki Kawerau) - *Community advocate*

GLOSSARY OF REO MĀORI TERMS

We note that some words can have multiple meanings. Translations are taken from the Māori Dictionary, based on their use in the report.

Word	Definition
Kaiāwhina	Helper, assistant, contributor, counsel, advocate
Kaupapa	Topic, policy, matter for discussion
Mana Motuhake	Separate identity, autonomy, self-government, self-determination, independence, sovereignty, authority
Mirimiri	To rub, massage
Papakāinga	Original home, home base, village, communal Māori land
Rongoā	Remedy, medicine, treatment
Romiromi	To massage
Tikanga	Correct procedure, convention, protocol – the customary system of values and practices that have developed over time and are deeply embedded in the social context

REPORT OVERVIEW

This summary report pulls out key messages from our full report *'Toward an understanding of Aotearoa New Zealand's adult gang environment.'* The full report provides a fully referenced select review of the academic literature and grey literature, enriched by stakeholder engagement and conversations with those with lived experience, and was written to meet our Terms of Reference. It does not provide a comprehensive review of New Zealand Government activities. Further, while we have done our best to engage with various voices in the community, we recognise that drawing from academic and grey literature sources privileges the voice of the state throughout this report. We present an overview of some of the key themes that are relevant to gang members and gang communities. Many of the highlighted themes are themselves complex issues for which this report does not provide an in depth understanding.

This short report presents an overview of high-level messages distilled from the full report. We draw particular attention to women, children, and young people. This cohort are largely absent from the gang literature yet are very much present within gang environments and communities. It is a disservice that their experiences are largely unrecognised.

We also highlight knowledge gaps that became apparent throughout the report writing process. Much of the national understanding of gangs is informed by data that is widely contested for its accuracy. While we recognise that data presents a range of issues for multiple agencies, we highlight the need for useful data to inform effective, evidence-based decision making.

HIGH-LEVEL CONCLUSIONS

- A stronger focus on prevention and early intervention will slow the flow of young people into gangs and alleviate pressure on multiple systems (justice, health, corrections) in the long-term. Beyond targeted programmes, prevention can include poverty reduction, opportunities provision, access to healthcare, etc. Outcomes (i.e., changed behaviours, improved social outcomes etc) will be difficult to measure and attribute to specific interventions. Setting expectations appropriately is important.
- A focus on social harms and harmful behaviours (for example violence reduction or addiction services) will likely improve chances of success. This enables a health approach, rather than taking a strictly law-and-order approach. There is also a need to recognise the concentration and proliferation of social hazards in socioeconomic disadvantaged communities. For example, the presence of alcohol and gambling outlets, and the absence of healthy affordable food and early childhood centres.
- There are different types of gangs however data collection across agencies differs and few distinguish the type of gang with which an individual is affiliated. The lack of distinction limits the extent to which we can understand unique gang harms, and risks those in decision-making positions attempting to address multiple complex issues with narrow approaches.
- Our gang population is unique with some gangs adopting sophisticated business structures while some of our oldest gang communities are made up of actual whānau with shared whakapapa connections. The international literature might help to support a better understanding of the former but does not adequately capture the complex intergenerational nature of the latter.
- The experiences of women in gang environments presents a significant research gap. It is a disservice to our women who experience complex needs that their experiences are poorly understood. Supporting these women presents opportunities to reduce harm.
- Suppression, control, and enforcement approaches serve a purpose, and we know that these mechanisms are already in use, but they are not the sole answer. The evidence indicates that interventions such as 'scared-straight' or boot camp approaches are ineffective. And a 'zero-tolerance' style of policing builds distrust in the communities that police are tasked to serve. It creates alienation and dislocation from communities and risks fuelling gang membership and increasing gang dislocation and isolation.
- Due to systemic operational challenges, delivery of services to the remand prison population is challenging. However, our remand population are staying in prison for longer periods of time and have limited access to services. Work to address the present challenges might allow for those who recognise they need support to access it sooner, reducing the risk of reconnecting with criminal activity.
- For service providers, the dedication of resources to the administration that comes with evaluation can be burdensome. Yet, without consistent approaches to evaluation we are in the dark about what works and what doesn't.
- There is a need to improve data collection, working in partnership with gang communities to support trusted relationships and to establish a shared sense of ownership of key issues that are to be addressed.
- There is a need for innovative, culturally informed, and methodically tested evaluations to support decision makers in allocating funding and resources most effectively.
- The literature describes risk factors that influence gang joining across domains such as community, peer groups, school, family, and individual levels. While risk factors are useful, they are viewed by some as problematic as they do not account for historical processes and policies that are responsible for socioeconomic and structural drivers of persistent and intergenerational disadvantage. These are well known contributors to the formation of some of our early gangs.

KEY MESSAGES

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF GANGS

This report canvases the literature on gangs to establish an understanding of the harms that occur by, to, and within gang communities. A life-course approach has been adopted to understand the pull factors that draw people, particularly children and young people, toward gangs, and the outcomes that might be observed for gang connected individuals, and the wider community within which they exist. We have also considered protective factors and to some extent the social and community conditions that facilitate push and pull factors. Beyond the literature, the report draws on government reports and datasets. Importantly, narratives of those with lived experiences were sought out, and the experiences of organisations that work alongside gang communities (some of which were resourced to provide evidence-based evaluations and others that shared case studies).*

We note that the experiences of women and children that exist within gang communities are seldom represented within literature and conversations on gangs. This is a missed opportunity and a massive oversight. We strongly believe that it is important to hear from those in gangs and those in their orbit. Consequently, we engaged with a range of organisations that work alongside gang whānau as well as men and women with lived experiences who were willing to share with us.

Global and local themes need to be considered

While NZ has its own specific context that surrounds our gang populations, there are global themes that can describe our experience of gangs to some extent. The research identifies various factors that influence gang membership that span the broad domains of community conditions, schooling, peer groups, family factors and individual characteristics. Various risk factors, housed within these domains, might influence an individual to join a gang, including economic deprivation and parental disengagement or disorganisation.

The international literature tends to describe gang involvement as a transient life stage for young people. While that may be the case for some of our gang population, it is very common to find gang membership that has persisted well into adult years in NZ. In some instances, older gang members will have been gang associated from a young age and likely have children and grandchildren raised within the gang context. However, intergenerational gang relationships do not necessarily equate to participation within organised criminal networks or any criminal activity whatsoever. It is important to recognise that longevity of gang membership and being born into a gang whānau are separate, if related, issues. For many, gang membership is simply whānau.

There are unique aspects of NZ's gang populations. NZ's colonial history is highlighted as a starting point for our Māori gang membership. The 'urban drift' and the mass movements of Māori away from their papakāinga to the urban centres are significant. These events facilitated the flow of disenfranchised Māori into gangs. The immigration Dawn Raids in the 1970s had a significant influence over the flow of young Pacific peoples into

* We have attempted to canvas a broad range of stakeholders, guided by the expertise and networks of the Chief Science Advisors (CSAs) for Justice and Ministry of Social Development (MSD), but this project was not resourced for comprehensive engagement.

gangs. We note that the intervention of the state and/or faith-based organisations has played a role in the formation of youth gangs in previous decades (and some might argue, that continues to this day).[†]

‘Gang’ is a highly contested term

The rhetoric that surrounds gangs in NZ is wide-ranging. There is often little distinction made in the public discourse between youth offending (like the recent spate of ram raids), youth gangs, adult gangs, and organised criminal networks. The lack of distinction risks those in decision-making positions attempting to address multiple complex issues with a single approach that is not ‘fit for purpose’ – namely it does not meet the needs of those it aims to serve. There is also a flow-on effect where any delinquent or anti-social behaviour is conveyed as ‘gang activity’ and sentinel events influence government policy more strongly than what the evidence says works.

Gangs perform a function for their members

Gangs may be seen as not good for society, but they fulfil a purpose for their members. If they didn’t, they simply would not exist.

While the literature distinguishes various cohorts that fall under the catch-all term ‘gangs,’ we know that a significant portion of our gang population are a cohort with complex histories of intergenerational family violence, trauma, poverty, and neglect. These gang communities are described by some researchers as inhabiting the margins of society and have historically formed in resistance to the society that has rejected them. In this sense, gangs have a function, providing a sense of whānau and community for those who may have been rejected from other environments. In some cases, the relationship is one of actual whānau with whakapapa links.

Anecdotally we have also heard that a newer type of gang is emerging with a slightly different set of priorities and values. Throughout the engagement process we heard that these gangs arise out of different social conditions and place a higher value on capitalist-type values, appearance, and materialism.

Describing and addressing gang associated harms is complicated

While gang members and gang communities are not necessarily anti-social, gang environments serve as a concentration zone for individuals that pose a higher risk for exhibiting anti-social behaviour. When considering harms *by* gang members, themes of family violence, intimate partner violence, drug, or alcohol abuse and criminal offending emerge. While these elements exist in all communities, they are often overrepresented in gang-affected communities and even more so within gang-affiliated families.

The data indicates that gang members commit crimes more frequently than other offenders, are overrepresented in NZ’s prison population, and are more likely to reoffend upon release from prison. Data from the GHIC suggests that individuals on the NGL have on average 38 convictions. Yet, gang members are also frequently recorded as victims of harm, tend to live in our most deprived communities, are disproportionately represented in the receipt of benefit income and have poorer health outcomes.

Adding a layer of complexity to this is the consideration that many of the harms described are not unique to gangs or gang members. And enforcement measures that focus purely on gang affiliation have their

[†] That state intervention played a role in the formation of some of our earliest gang communities is a significant issue and we acknowledge the efforts of the Abuse in Care Royal Commission of Inquiry for capturing the stories of the many survivors of our state care institutions.

limitations. In that sense, focussed interventions to target organised crime and harmful behaviours, may prove to be a more worthwhile investment than customised measures to ‘crack down on gangs’ *per se*.[‡]

Addressing gang associated harms will require a robust, multi-pronged approach

Efforts to address gang harms can take various forms such as prevention, intervention (including early intervention), desistance, or suppression. While prevention might focus on programmes to keep young people out of gangs in the first place, intervention approaches might work alongside gang members, their whānau, or young people deemed ‘at-risk,’ to address harmful behaviours and to potentially minimise the transmission of intergenerational gang membership. Gang desistance tends to focus on supporting an individual’s behavioural change and eventual gang exit and suppression approaches generally refer to legislative and law enforcement efforts to address the criminal aspects of gang harms.[§] There is a place for all types of approach, which have different timeframes. While suppression approaches might provide immediate improvement on specific issues, it is unlikely to bring about any long-term behavioural changes and may even contribute to perpetuating cycles of harm. Prevention and intervention approaches when delivered effectively can promote behavioural changes and desistance from criminal behaviours in the long term. Such changes do not happen quickly and can require significant resources to support individuals, whānau, and community to change, with downstream benefits hard to attribute to specific interventions. While this report does not address our obligations under Te Tiriti we recognise that it is important that initiatives developed to address harmful behaviours are considered in light of these obligations.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Some children are born into gang whānau

We heard through various engagements that adult gang members want better life outcomes for their children than they had themselves, which provides an opportunity for intervention. However, we recognise that being born to a gang whānau has a significant impact on a young person’s lived experience and worldview. We know that children who have a parent or primary caregiver incarcerated are more at risk of experiencing poverty, social deprivation, and engaging in criminal behaviours themselves. It is difficult to obtain reasonable data that speaks to the numbers of children and young people in gang environments, and it is not clear from the limited data available the extent to which children born into gang whānau will remain in a gang themselves.

Youth gangs are not the same as adult gangs

Youth gangs are different to adult gangs, and only a small proportion of people involved with youth gangs go on to become adult gang prospects or members. And much of the crime associated with youth gangs is opportunistic in nature. While the GHIC maintain oversight of the National Gang List, youth gangs often do not fulfil the complete definitional criteria for their members to be included. As such, there is an absence of data on youth gang numbers. Further, youth gang membership can fluctuate rapidly which would make oversight of membership figures resource intensive.

[‡] Recent survey data collected for the Justice sector Long-term Insight Briefing amongst a nationally representative sample (N= 1,318) of the New Zealand public indicates a perception that the amount of crime has increased and, that crime involving gangs is a major contributor to this. While addressing social harms through targeted interventions might be most effective, this may not meet the social appetite to ‘crack down’ on gangs.

[§] Throughout the engagement process we heard that desistance approaches that focus solely on an individual are not as effective as they could be, and that interventions to facilitate change must consider the wider community network.

It is important to highlight here incorrect recording and subsequent labelling could have a deleterious impact on the lives of young people. The practice of photographing youth, for example, has already resulted in widespread concern. Intervention will need to be youth and child centred.

What we know about young people who are gang affiliated

The Social Wellbeing Agency (SWA) reported on a sample of 2,000 young people (early 20s) identified by the Department of Corrections (Corrections) as gang members. Across their lifetime, the cohort were more likely than the population average to have had contact with Oranga Tamariki (OT), experienced an OT investigation, and to have been placed in state care. Almost one third of the cohort had had contact with truancy services and approximately one quarter had experienced alternative education. Most left school by age 17** with little or no educational attainment. The cohort were more likely than the population average to experience an admission to the hospital emergency department, make Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) injury claims and require specialist mental health services. Enrolment with primary health organisations, and visits to a general practitioner dropped off rapidly after individuals reached 17 years. The entire cohort of young people had contact with Police and were reported as offenders one or more times throughout their lives. More than half were also victims of crime.

Strategies for the prevention of youth gang involvement are similar to those for youth crime prevention

We did not see evidence that the current patterns of child and youth offending we observe, including ram raids, are driven by involvement in youth gangs. That aside, strategies for prevention of youth gang involvement are similar to those for youth crime prevention. We know it is easier and cheaper to prevent young people from offending in the first place than it is to try and rehabilitate them at a later stage. Environments that offer alternative, prosocial pathways for young people are essential.

We know from the literature that young people may choose to leave a gang as they naturally mature. Factors such as getting a job, having children, developing prosocial networks, or experiencing levels of violence that they are not willing to tolerate, have all been documented as factors influencing young people to leave gang environments. As such, avenues to employment for former gang members are an important part of the gang exit pathway.

Reducing the flow of young people into the prison pipeline is essential

The 'prison pipeline' describes the conceptual pathway from an individual's first encounter with the criminal-justice system to eventual incarceration. While recently published data suggests that prisons do not necessarily act as the gang recruitment ground we have assumed they are, recruitment to gangs can occur during earlier points of contact with the justice system (for example, while serving community service hours). In that case, working to intervene as early as possible to keep young people from offending and out of the prison pipeline would provide vast benefits and in NZ we can and should do much better in this space.

Among cohorts of children who offended, the integrated data infrastructure (IDI) data highlights abuse, reports of concern to OT, out-of-home placement, exclusion from school and indicators of social deprivation. And we know that for most children who offend, the offending behaviour continues into adolescence with increasing frequency. These reports of interaction with the state prior to a child offending represent missed opportunities. We know that focussing on the wellbeing of babies and children and keeping them from offending in the first place is one of the most effective tools we have to prevent crime.

** While the young people SWA reported on had all left school by age 17, we recognise that it is not uncommon to see young people leaving school, or being excluded from school, well before 17.

Reports from the Abuse in Care Royal Commission of Inquiry highlight how children and young people who were taken into state residential facilities were more likely to end up in prison. The findings highlight how young people were recruited to gangs while housed in state facilities. For many, especially tamariki Māori, their pathway into the prison pipeline was facilitated by the state.

WOMEN

There is a dearth of research on women in gang environments

The experiences of women in gang environments are not extensively canvassed in the literature. Yet women do exist within gang communities. We recognise that gangs are not a monolith and that the internal cultures and practices within gang communities vary from gang-to-gang, region-to-region, and chapter-to-chapter. Just as the internal gang culture varies, so too will the experiences of women within these gang environments. It is a disservice to these women that their experiences remain largely unseen. It is also recognised that women in gang communities often act as change makers. This underscores the importance of understanding the many roles they hold.

Women are active in gang environments

There are no women recorded on the NGL. This is a definitional issue. While women in gang environments may wear gang logos on items of clothing, and anecdotally participate in gang-related criminal activity, to the best of our knowledge there is no *official* record to indicate women wearing gang patches. That is not to say no woman has ever worn a patch. We are aware that a small number of women have been patched into gang membership in the past. The relationship between women and gangs, whether patched or not, is complex.

The mixed experiences of women

In the process of writing this report, we engaged with organisations that work with women, and with women that have lived experience within gang environments. We heard that within some gang communities, women experienced protection, provision, whānau, and a deep sense of belonging. Some, having been born into gang whānau, have never known any other reality and identify as, for example, ‘born Mongrel’ or ‘Black Power.’ There were also stories of harm. We heard stories of parental disengagement, family violence, intimate partner violence, incarceration, unemployment, under-education, and substance abuse.

Organisations that support women

We heard from a range of organisations that provide services for women. These services included life skills support, health services, legal assistance, crisis response and reintegration support. In many cases programmes filled whatever gaps women identified. While the services for gang affiliated women were not necessarily unique, some service providers noted that access to gang affiliated women was often heavily dependent on permission from the men in their lives. In that respect, service provision for incarcerated women, some of whom are gang connected, presented a rare opportunity to interact with gang affiliated women without some of the gate keeping behaviours of gang men.

We heard that for service provision to be most effective, it needs to be delivered within the safety of a trusted relationship with the women and her whānau. This can be a time-intensive process but anecdotally in the absence of an established literature, achieves the best outcomes. Importantly, we also recognise that wāhine in gang environments are not just recipients of services. At times, they also render services within their own communities, forming networks of support to meet community needs.

Lived experience

We were privileged to sit with and hear from women with lived experiences in gang environments. In some instances, women had left their gang network. Others had chosen to remain. These decisions were never black and white. For example, being born into a gang whānau made decisions around leaving complicated, as did having children to a gang member where connection to a gang remained in order for children to have an ongoing relationship with their father.

For those with lived experiences within the justice system, we heard about various practical barriers that women experienced. For example, the inclusion of check boxes on many applications requiring an individual to declare their criminal history presents a limiting barrier for many women trying to access jobs and accommodation away from gangs. Further, we heard how access to services within Corrections is limited. In some instances, women could identify services that they felt would support them to achieve better life outcomes yet were restricted to participating in courses specific to the offence for which they were charged. These barriers are not specific to women and are acute for remand prisoners.

KNOWLEDGE GAPS

Gang specific data can be contentious

How 'gangs' are defined has flow on effects to data collection. This has further implications on the downstream data sharing and analysis between agencies. Collecting data on 'gang affiliates' is difficult and presents the risk of labelling individuals that have limited choice over their affiliation to a gang member or community.

Gangs are 'hard-to-reach' communities

Gang communities have been described as hard-to-reach for some agencies, which casts uncertainty over the completeness of any data that is reported. Data that is available, such as the NGL, is frequently contested. While factors that lead to an individual's inclusion are relatively straightforward, removal from the NGL is not so easy. For this reason, the NGL is not intended to be used as an accurate census of gang membership.

The labelling of hard-to-reach is described by some as being a convenient excuse to consider people 'too hard to deal with.' We heard through the engagement process that it is not the gang communities that are hard-to-reach, rather it is state agencies that are hard-to-reach. Gang communities and gang members are easy enough to reach within their own peer networks. Either way, complex communication between those with needs and providers who can support those needs presents a barrier for effective intervention and support.

Data is contested, but still useful.

While metrics such as the NGL are frequently contested, that does not make the data entirely unhelpful. We know that gangs can cause harms to our communities. There is room to understand the extent of that harm further. Understanding the relative harm caused by gang affiliated individuals, and their wider networks would be useful for developing appropriate intervention strategies. Further, understanding a person's historic interactions with Police might highlight where earlier targeted interventions might produce more beneficial outcomes.

Evaluation is essential

Prevention and intervention programmes (including early intervention) that work to minimise harmful behaviours and promote better outcomes within whānau and communities could benefit from data that describe programme outcomes. We heard from various community level organisations that evaluation presented a complex issue. For many service providers, ongoing funding was dependent on the ability to

produce evaluations describing outcomes and benefits. Yet, resourcing to carry out evaluation was not always easily available, nor was evaluation easy to carry out. Further, we heard of perverse outcomes where reporting requirements narrowed service provision to meet narrow metrics, when broader provisions may have been more successful. Where an organisation partners with an individual and their whānau to support their needs in a customised way to enable them to attain better health and wellbeing outcomes, the broad range of outcomes can be difficult to capture in a standardised reporting framework. As individuals do not exist in complete isolation from whānau or community, reporting solely on an individual basis, excluding the needs of the wider family and community, makes these reporting metrics of limited value. There is a need to invest in innovative, culturally informed, and methodically tested evaluations. This will support making cost-effective policy decisions and will ensure that whānau experiencing complex and inter-connected stressors are receiving the most effective support. Development of appropriate interventions should be done in partnership with the communities and organisations in question.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Gangs represent a complex segment of society. They are not monolithic and there is a need to recognise different types of gangs and corresponding behaviours. While there is a broad literature base to help understand reasons for gang existence and driving forces for membership, the harms experienced by, to, and within gang cohorts are not unique to gangs. In that sense, interventions to address harmful behaviours would likely provide greater social benefit than targeting gangs alone.

We know that the harms experienced by, to and within gang communities are vast, and that addressing these harms presents its own complexity. Prominent themes that emerged from the research included the social harms of poverty, marginalisation, and discrimination. There is a recognition that family violence, criminal offending (including violent offending and participation in the methamphetamine trade), and the recruitment of new members perpetuate ongoing cycles of harm. These harms are not exhaustive, however they emerged as prominent themes both in the literature and throughout the engagement process.

Early intervention delivered within trusting, respectful relationships and that incorporates the wider whānau will help to support sustained change. We know that taking action with children and young people (up to 25 years) for the purposes of developmental crime prevention can make a significant difference in life course outcomes. And specific to NZ, interventions must be culturally informed and adapted. We can do much better here.

We know that, for some, gangs are a highly political issue. And we recognise that there are strongly held views within our communities on the best mechanisms to address gang harms. Addressing the harms associated with gang membership will not be quick. Short term suppression interventions might provide immediate outcomes, but medium- to long-term intervention and prevention strategies are required to build the society that we want in the long term. Addressing gang related harms cannot be left purely to Police. Multi-agency collaboration is essential, and it is equally important that interventions to facilitate behavioural change in gang communities are informed by the communities themselves.