

A COMMUNITY FIGHTS GANGS AND GUNS

Introduction

Focus

The shooting of Asia Saddleback on the Samson Cree Reserve in Hobbema, Alberta, thrust the national spotlight on Aboriginal gangs. This *News in Review* story examines the problems in Hobbema as well as the gang problem across Canada.

Two-year-old Asia Saddleback was eating a bowl of soup at her family's kitchen table when a bullet ripped through the side of her house, striking her in the stomach. Asia was taken by air ambulance to an Edmonton hospital. The bullet hit her kidney and her spine, but the resilient girl survived—despite the fact that doctors were unable to remove the bullet. Within days, two teenage boys, one 15 and one 18, were charged in the drive-by attack. While it was clear the boys didn't intend to shoot Asia, police struggled to find out why they fired on the house in the first place. The incident horrified people living in Hobbema, and soon all of Canada would learn of the serious gang problem in the small Alberta town.

Hobbema, Alberta

Hobbema is a town of about 12 000 people located within a one-hour drive south of Edmonton. It is the home of four First Nations communities, including the Samson Cree reserve where Asia lives with her family. What might come as a surprise to most Canadians is that the RCMP office in Hobbema is arguably the busiest police detachment in all of Canada. They are dealing with a high volume of violent crime brought on by Hobbema's 13 gangs, who are fighting for drug turf in the town. In fact, Hobbema has the highest ratio of gang members in Canada, with 18.75 members for every 1 000 people living in the town (compared with Toronto's 1.15 members for every 1 000 people) (*Toronto Star*, July 20, 2008). Of all calls received by the RCMP, two-thirds of them come from the Samson Cree reserve. How did a town of 12 000 become a gang hub, producing so much violence in such a concentrated area?

Descent Into Chaos

The descent of Hobbema into chaos can be traced to a number of factors: substance abuse, shattered families, poverty, unemployment, and the erosion of Aboriginal traditions to name a few. Couple these socio-economic factors with evidence of systemic racism (much of which was revealed in the now defunct residential school system that openly tried to destroy Aboriginal culture over its 100-year history) and it becomes clear why First Nations communities are in what seems to be a state of perpetual crisis. Hobbema appears to be the current epicentre of this crisis, as an array of troubles have hit the town.

Squandered Cash

One would think that Hobbema would be sitting pretty. Located on prime Alberta oil land, local residents have historically been the beneficiaries of royalty money collected by the federal government and redistributed to each citizen of the town. Instead of saving the money, most residents squandered the cash, going on shopping sprees—with more than a few spending their money on drugs, drinking, and gambling. Despite the fact that oil revenues on the reserve have been steadily declining, Aboriginal youth still manage to receive a large, lump sum royalty payment when they turn 18. Candace Saddleback, Asia's mother, received a cheque for \$234 000 when she turned 18 and she has nothing left to show for it. This is common in Hobbema.

Gang Formation

The royalty cheques are one way that gangs are putting Hobbema's youth under their control. Drug dealers give kids under 18 free drugs for years on condition that they pay for the drugs

Further Research

To learn more about the RCMP, consider a visit to the official Web site at www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca.

when they get their royalty cheque when they turn 18. By the time the dealers come to collect, many of the youth are fully fledged gang members who willingly turn over their mountain of cash. With over half of Hobbema's population under the age of 18, gangs have no shortage of targets on which to set their sights. The gang life inevitably draws the attention of the police, and many of Hobbema's youth find themselves in young offenders' institutions or, after they turn 18, provincial and federal prisons. It is in prison that gang members get their real education. Surrounded by other professional criminals, novices enter incarceration ignorant and leave with skills that will serve them in their later criminal endeavours.

Once released, gang members return to their surrogate families—the gang itself—and Hobbema has no shortage of places for gang members to find a safe haven. With 13 known gangs in the town, many of which are on the Samson Cree reserve, the RCMP have their hands full keeping a lid on the high level of violence brought on by the gangs. Whether it's Redd Alert, the Alberta Warriors, the Indian Posse, or one of the up-and-coming gangs, Hobbema is a community held on the ropes by the two-punch combination of violence and intimidation.

Analysis

1. What shooting incident forced the people of Hobbema to see that they have a serious gang problem?
2. In one or two sentences, describe the gang problem in Hobbema.
3. How did the gangs manage to form in Hobbema? Describe the process.
4. What would you do if you knew you were going to receive a \$200 000 cheque when you turned 18? Do you think you would spend the money wisely?
5. How is the community fighting back? Describe some of their initiatives. Do you think these strategies will work?
6. What can we learn from the Hobbema gang experience?
7. Describe any gang activity of which you are aware in your own community.

Community Activism

In the meantime, the citizens of Hobbema have rallied together in response to the shooting of little Asia Saddleback. Abandoned homes are being torn down to prevent the gangs from turning them into crack houses. Graffiti, one of the main ways that gangs use to mark their turf and communicate their messages, is being painted over almost as soon as it goes up. In the summer of 2008, the RCMP declared a four-month gun amnesty, allowing gang members to turn in their weapons and ammunition without being charged with weapons offences. Despite these measures, Hobbema is still mired in gang violence, with almost daily reports of shots being fired and three gang-related shooting deaths in the summer of 2008.

Conclusion

Hobbema has become the flashpoint for communities rallying to keep gangs from taking over their neighbourhoods. The gangs didn't just show up one day and declare Hobbema to be their own. They established themselves over time, feeding on the general state of decay on the reserves and capitalizing on the oil money that many people were happy to party away. While lessons can be learned from Hobbema, it will be interesting to see if anyone is taking note.

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Video Review

Watch the video and complete the following questions.

1. How many gangs are fighting it out for drug turf in Hobbema, Alberta? _____
2. Describe the shooting incident that sent Hobbema residents into a state of shock and anxiety.

3. What is meant by the expression "collateral damage"?

4. a) Why did Candace Saddleback receive \$234 000 when she turned 18?

b) Reporter Mark Kelley says, "An entire generation was raised on easy money, making them an easy target for trouble." What kind of trouble came to Hobbema both before and after the oil industry royalties?

5. Why did the Indian Posse allegedly burn down a house that the police took over after a drug raid?

6. How are the Samson Cree band working with the police to take back the community from the gangs?

7. Why did Constable Curtis Huculak receive a Medal of Bravery?

8. a) How old was Lawrence Crier when he joined the Indian Posse? _____

b) Why was Crier imprisoned? _____

9. Why do some parents think their children are safer in jail than in Hobbema?

10. What kind of work is the task force that was formed after Asia was shot doing to clean up the community?

11. How is Dennis Green helping Hobbema residents get past their denial of the problems on their reserve?

12. How does Samson Cree Chief Marvin Yellowbird view the gang problem?

13. Why does Travis Oglilvie of the Hobbema gang unit call the gang members "terrorists"? Explain his rationale for labelling them in this way.

14. What is the double meaning behind the expression "it's not your town"? Explain this from the perspective of the gangs and the greater community.

15. What impact, if any, do gangs have on your community?

16. What measures do you think are needed to deal with the growth of gangs across Canada?

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Youth Gangs in Canada

What is a youth gang?

For a group to be considered a gang, experts believe it must meet the following criteria:

- The gang must have a name.
- People outside the gang must regard the gang as a distinct group.
- The gang is known to be involved in delinquent or criminal activity.

The Montreal Police Service goes further. They define a youth gang as: “An organized group of adolescents and/or young adults who rely on group intimidation and violence, and commit criminal acts in order to gain power and recognition and/or control certain areas of unlawful activity” (“Youth gangs in Canada: What do we know?” Public Safety Canada, www.publicsafety.gc.ca).

Important gang facts:

- Youth gangs are often referred to as street gangs.
- Police consider the word *youth* to describe people between the ages of 14 and 30 (however, most youth gang members are between the ages of 16 and 18).
- Youth gangs are often involved in low-level crime combined with a high incidence of violent behaviour.
- Youth gangs are active in every province except Newfoundland, PEI, and New Brunswick. There are no known youth gangs in the territories.
- Highest percentage of police jurisdictions reporting youth gang activity: Ontario, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and British Columbia
- Most youth gang members: Ontario (216 gangs; 3 320 members);

Saskatchewan has the highest proportion of gang members when compared with the provincial population (1 315 members; 1.34 per 1 000 people in the province)

- Number of youth gangs in Canada: 434
- Number of youth gang members: 7 071 (48 per cent of gang members are under 18, and 94 per cent of members are male), making up .02 per cent of the Canadian population
- Most Canadian youth gangs are considered “hybrid” in nature. Canadian gangs tend to be less territorial and ritualistic than their U.S. counterparts. Canadian youth gangs are more likely to have a multi-ethnic membership and come from a variety of socio-economic groups. Aboriginal street gangs are one of the exceptions to this trend.

General composition of Canadian youth gangs:

- African-Canadian/Black – 25 per cent of youth gang members; mostly active in Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia
- Aboriginal/First Nations – 21 per cent of youth gang members; mostly active in Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan
- Caucasian/White – 12 per cent of youth gang members; active across Canada
- Asian – membership numbers unavailable; mostly active in British Columbia.

Sources: RCMP, “Feature focus 2006: Youth gangs and guns” (www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca); Public Safety Canada, “Youth gangs in Canada: What do we know?” (www.publicsafety.gc.ca)

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Aboriginal Gangs

The formation of Aboriginal street gangs has been steadily increasing over the past 30 or so years. Most Aboriginal youth who adopt the gang life come from dysfunctional homes where substance abuse and absentee parenting are the norm. Essentially raising themselves, some Aboriginal youth see the gang life as their only hope if they want to experience any kind of self-worth and personal power within Canadian society. Feeling a sense of disenfranchisement both from their family and greater Canadian society, these youth channel their anger, fear, and loyalty into the gang. With the gang making acceptance conditional on committing criminal acts like theft, assault, and drug dealing, Aboriginal youth assume the gang-member role and become part of their surrogate family—the gang.

Aboriginal street gangs tend to follow the more established U.S. gang model. Whether you are talking about the Indian Posse, Redd Alert, or the Manitoba Warriors, these groups mimic the actions and rituals of the gangs of U.S. cities like Los Angeles. They mark their territory with graffiti and tattoo their bodies with gang symbols that tell the story of their criminal accomplishments. They use certain words and hand signs to communicate messages and to indicate their membership in the gang. They also adopt and wear distinctive clothing that becomes their gang uniform. Many gangs adopt symbols and take on gang-member nicknames. Far from being gang “wannabes,” Aboriginal street-gang members are established criminal groups that are feared by the members of the communities in which they reside.

There are also some distinct characteristics of Aboriginal street gangs. They are homogenous, with an

exclusively First Nations membership. They are involved in low-level criminal activities like drug dealing and theft, with a high propensity for violence, mostly against fellow or rival gang members. While most gangs lure new recruits into their group with rewards and promises, Aboriginal gangs are notorious for “jumping in” a potential recruit, beating the person, sometimes on several different occasions, before admitting them into the gang. This level of internal violence in the recruitment process is somewhat unique to Aboriginal gangs.

Prisons are one of the most important recruiting spots for Aboriginal youth gangs. The incarceration of Aboriginal Canadians is nine times greater than that of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Constituting just two per cent of Canada’s population, Aboriginals make up almost 20 per cent of the prison population (“Report finds evidence of systemic discrimination against Aboriginal inmates in Canada’s prisons,” www.oci-bec.gc.ca). Imprisoned members of the various Aboriginal gangs promise protection to inmates if they join their gang. One gang, Redd Alert, was formed to ward off the aggressive recruiting of the Alberta and Manitoba Warriors in Western prisons. A self-protective entity at first, Redd Alert has become a criminal enterprise, dealing drugs inside prisons and on the streets, and staking its claim to turf in various communities across the prairies (“An investigation into the formation and recruitment processes of Aboriginal gangs in Western Canada,” www.publicsafety.gc.ca). Aboriginal gangs tend to be the foot soldiers of more sophisticated criminal organizations. They sell the drugs brought into the country by the crime syndicates and

steal property for the crime syndicates to export. In essence, they do the dirty work on the streets that feeds the organized-crime cycle in Canada. In the meantime, they reward their members with money and a sense of belonging. While most gang members only stay in the gang for a year or two, the prospects for Aboriginal youth wanting to leave the gang life are grim. Aboriginal communities consistently endure double the unemployment rate of those of non-Aboriginal Canadians. Along with problems finding work, Aboriginal Canadians have been combatting institutional racism that continues to rear

its ugly head across Canada. The effects of these problems can be measured in the disproportionate number of Aboriginals fighting addictions, and the horrifying number of Aboriginal children in foster care. With this level of dysfunction within the community, it is no wonder that so many young men and women are drawn to a lifestyle that gives voice to their anger and allows them to feel like they are part of a group. This is not to excuse gang members; it is simply to demonstrate that the social conditions in which Aboriginals find themselves need to be taken into account when examining this particular social problem.

Inquiry

1. What factors have contributed to the formation of Aboriginal gangs?

2. How are Aboriginal gangs similar to their U.S. counterparts?

3. Describe the process of "jumping in" a gang member.

4. What points does the article make about the Aboriginal incarceration and unemployment rate?

5. How do Aboriginal gangs serve the crime syndicates?

6. What social conditions make it difficult for Aboriginal gang members to leave their gangs?

7. What suggestions can you make to reduce the high incidence of Aboriginal gangs?

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The Pê Sâkâstêw Healing Lodge

Further Research

To learn more about traditional Aboriginal healing methods, visit Turtle Island Native Network at www.turtleisland.org/healing/healing-wellness.htm.

In an effort to address the need for a more culturally specific approach to helping Aboriginal Canadians rehabilitate after becoming involved in criminal behaviour, the Correctional Service of Canada (www.csc-scc.gc.ca) constructed eight healing lodges across the country, including the Pê Sâkâstêw Healing Lodge in Hobbema, Alberta. All of the healing lodges strive to embrace Aboriginal traditions in an effort to allow the inmates to reconnect with their roots and find a way out of the criminal justice system and back into society. The Pê Sâkâstêw Healing Lodge is a 40-bed, minimum-security facility that has been serving Aboriginal inmates since 1997.

Counselors at the Pê Sâkâstêw Healing Lodge find they are teaching many Aboriginal inmates their traditions for the first time. Most inmates arrive without a real knowledge of their social, historical, and spiritual roots. The teaching of traditions takes the form of practical participation in Aboriginal rituals in what has been called the “In Search of Your Warrior” (ISYW) program. Pê Sâkâstêw Program Director Sharon Bell explains the rationale behind the program: “ISYW was created to treat traumatic experiences, to heal the scars of abuse, to get rid of the blinding rage and anger that inmates carry deep inside. Some of them, for example, are suffering from the effect that residential schools have had on their lives or on their parents’—residential schools established by the Canadian government that in the past aimed to assimilate Aboriginal people into white society. The scars from abuse and the loss of identity can have a terrible impact on a human being. That is why some of them strongly feel the need to refocus on themselves, to get back in touch with their real selves, to be able to face the future

with hope.”* So Bell and her staff help inmates to participate in Aboriginal rituals like the cleansing ceremonies known as smudging. In a smudging ceremony, those gathered form a circle. Sweetgrass is burned and carried around the circle. All participants wash themselves in the smoke of the burning grass, drawing the smoke toward them with their hands. After the smudging, inmates take turns holding an eagle’s feather and giving voice to their thoughts and feelings while everyone gathered listens intently. This is just one of 75 healing activities that inmates can take part in at the healing lodge.

There are six units in the Pê Sâkâstêw Healing Lodge. The units are designed to capture some of the main teachings of Aboriginal spirituality. Circular patterns represent influence, unity, and social interaction. If you were to fly over the lodge, each unit is shaped like an eagle, which symbolizes the embracing of life and the effort to ward off evil. The colours used on the outside of each unit represent the all-pervasive presence of the Creator, with red representing the east, yellow representing the south, blue representing the west and white representing the north.

Overall, the Pê Sâkâstêw Healing Lodge provides a unique approach to rehabilitation. It strives to embrace the ideals of Aboriginal spirituality and give the inmates a sense of their own traditions. While people working at the lodge recognize that the program is not a cure for the Aboriginal community’s ills, it does bring hope to a few of the community members who need help the most.

Sources: “Enhancing the role of Aboriginal communities in corrections” by Gina Wilson (csc-scc.gc.ca); * “The ‘In Search of Your Warrior’ Program – Identity at the heart of healing” by Djamila Amellal (csc-scc.gc.ca)

To Consider

1. Why did the Correctional Service of Canada build eight healing lodges across the country?
2. In your own words, describe the “In Search of Your Warrior” program.
3. What is a smudging ceremony? How do you think this type of ceremony can help inmates at the healing lodge?
4. Describe how the physical construction of the healing lodge captures some of the main teaching of Aboriginal spirituality.
5. Do you think the healing lodge idea works? Explain your answer.

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Criminal Organizations in Canada

Often youth street gangs are misidentified by the public and the media. Brian Mellor of the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family (www.ucalgary.ca/~crilf) and a few of his colleagues put together a way of categorizing groups and gangs. Read the categories below and complete the activity that follows.

Group/Gangs

Type A – Group of Friends: Congregate based on interest; no threat to public safety and usually not involved in criminal activity

Type B – Spontaneous Criminal Activity Group/Gang: Formed for social reasons; criminal activity is motivated by certain situations and occurs spontaneously. For example, a group of teens might decide to vandalize a business or bully someone walking down the street. Technically speaking, this group is not a gang.

Type C – Purposive Group/Gang: A group is formed for a specific criminal purpose, like stealing cars or vigilante violence. Sometimes these groups are created by more established gangs to

complete a certain task (like stealing a number of cars or beating up a rival gang member) and are disbanded after meeting their objective. These groups might also form on their own and stay together until they meet their objective.

Type D – Youth Street Gang: This group participates in profit-driven criminal activity. They have gang names, colours, symbols, preferred clothing, and tattoos that openly demonstrate their gang membership. Sometimes, youth street gangs have ties with larger criminal organizations.

Type E – Structured Criminal Organizations: Highly organized and structured groups that pursue criminal activity for the sake of financial gain. These groups are almost always led by adults who know their way around the law. In some instances, these groups will use youth street gangs (if they can gain their co-operation) to help them make money. The sale of illegal drugs is an example of this kind of co-operation.

Source: Brian Mellor et al. *Youth Gangs in Canada*, Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family, 2005

Activity

Form a group of four. Discuss the criteria established by Mellor and his colleagues. Focus on the following ideas:

- Can you identify groups that fit into each category? Use movies and TV shows as examples if you need to. You just want to gain a general idea of how the categories work.
- Are there groups in your community that have been misidentified as youth street gangs? Suggest examples.
- Is there a natural progression from one group to the next? For example, are people in a Type B group more likely to move onto a Type C group? Explain your position.
- What problems do Type B – E groups cause for society? Be specific.
- Why do people join each group? Give reasons to support your answer.
- Of which types of groups have you been a member?
- Which groups attract or repel you? Explain.

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Activity: Why do people join gangs?

Part I: Identifying the structure of a gang

People who join gangs tend to:

- be young and male (94 per cent of gang members are male)
- come from the unemployed or working classes
- come from visible minority groups
- do poorly in school and reject what school has to offer
- feel as if they have no power

Scholars describe this group as the “urban underclass”—a group that was created when the economy shifted from manufacturing to service-oriented activities. For example, many people used to work in factories making things. Many of those jobs have been taken over by developing countries, and now our economy focuses on low-paying service jobs. Many young people looking for work now have to work in low-paying fast-food outlets or retail stores instead of factories and warehouses that pay considerably more money.

Task #1

Provide a potential explanation for each of the points listed above. For example, why do young men join gangs? How does the emergence of an “urban underclass” contribute to the emergence of gangs?

Part II: Identifying the psychological reasons why people join gangs

People join gangs to meet the following needs:

- Status – to feel like they are good at something
- Identity – to develop a sense of who they are
- Belonging – to feel like they belong to something
- Self-esteem – to feel like they are worth something
- Social – to feel connected with others

Task #2

Provide specific ways in which gangs allow members to have each of their psychological needs met. For example, how do gang members feel a greater sense of self-esteem just by being a part of the gang?

Part III: Identifying the fragility of gang life

Scholars believe that gangs are unstable; they have few real goals, members tend to stay for a short period of time, and the leadership structure of the gang is always in jeopardy.

Task #3

Why do you think gangs are so unstable? Provide an answer to this question in five to seven sentences.

