



# **Aboriginal Women and Gangs**

## **An Issue Paper**

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## **Background**

Statistics Canada reports that the Aboriginal population in many urban centres either doubled or tripled between 1981 and 2001.<sup>1</sup> This ongoing migration of Aboriginal people to urban centres combined with the large proportion of youth in the Aboriginal population means that there is a larger segment of Aboriginal youth living in urban centers than ever before.

This change in population distribution has created an increasing focus on issues affecting Aboriginal youth, especially youth in urban areas. Some of this focus is associated with positive changes, such as the increase in school attendance rates among Aboriginal youths aged 15 to 24.<sup>2</sup> Other areas of focus are in areas perceived as more challenging, such as the increase in visibility of Aboriginal gangs, which draw a portion of their membership from Aboriginal youth.

There are a number of reasons why Aboriginal youth or adults would choose to affiliate themselves with organized groups generally referred to as 'gangs'. The Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations reported on the various factors that promote gang membership in its report "*Alter-Natives to Non-Violence Report: Aboriginal Youth Gangs*". It must be remembered that the experiences of the Aboriginal youth or adults who join gangs are too commonly rooted in personal experiences of colonialism, poverty, and discrimination, all of which affect the relationship of the individual to the community and to others.

For some youth, an aboriginal gang may provide them with an alternate 'family'. This may be especially attractive to youth who have experienced family dysfunction related to the residential school experiences of themselves or their parents, substance abuse, or poverty. Youth who are disassociated from their family and community because of their experiences with the Child Protection Agencies may also choose to join Aboriginal gangs for the sense of membership and belonging that they have not experienced previously through their family. Youth who are involved with gangs report that they feel disconnected from their family, their community, and the school system.<sup>3</sup> Youth who have been involved with child protection agencies may also be completely isolated from their culture, traditions, language and community, as the result of being removed from these at an early age. Gangs may offer these youth a sense of belonging, recognition and self-esteem as they are establishing their personal identity and networks.

Gang membership may be valued for its perceived utility in reducing poverty, offering safety or protection, or lessening boredom. Other factors that are associated with the decision to join an Aboriginal gang include experiencing a lack of opportunity in one's home community, having lower levels of education,

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada (2005) *The Daily: Aboriginal people living in metropolitan areas*

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada (2005) *The Daily: Aboriginal people living in metropolitan areas*

<sup>3</sup> Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (2003) *Alter-Natives to Non-Violence Report*

experiencing physical or sexual abuse, or experiencing discrimination or institutional racism.<sup>4</sup>

Many individuals connect with Aboriginal gangs in correctional institutions. When these individuals are released from the institution, they may recruit new members for the gang in their home community, which may be either on or off reserve. Other individuals are recruited into gangs by their relatives or by friends, especially if they live in urban environments. There is a growing interest in the movement of members between urban centres and First Nations communities, and the role they play in increased gang membership.<sup>5</sup>

Gangs conduct initiation rites for new members. These initiation activities can include:

- Committing a specific or specified crime
- Having a family connection to the gang
- Enduring an intense beating.

Initiation activities specifically aimed at young women include being “banged-in” in which a young woman has sex with multiple members of the gang to become a member herself.

Youth who belong to Aboriginal gangs, or who are perceived to belong to gangs, may experience increased systemic discrimination and other negative consequences. Gang membership is associated with lower school participation and lower levels of completed education, which negatively affects future employment, education and income. Youth who are perceived to belong to Aboriginal gangs may face increasingly aggressive ‘law and order’ initiatives from Canadian justice systems. Youth who belong to gangs may also experience increased exposure to criminal or illegal activities, as well as an increased risk of personal harm from other individuals, due to their membership or perceived membership.

### **Current Conditions**

There is disagreement over the size of gangs and their memberships well as over how active gangs are on a day to day basis in urban centres, in part due to changes in membership and the movement of individuals between cities and communities on a regular basis. The primary Aboriginal gangs in Canada include the Indian Posse, Redd Alerts, Warriors and Native Syndicate. There are also a number of smaller gangs that are active in different communities.

Gang activity is expected to increase along with the growing Aboriginal population, especially if the systemic discrimination, social and economic problems faced by urban Aboriginal youth and adults are not addressed.

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, Michael, “Aboriginal Street gangs in Winnipeg.” Alberta Sweetgrass, October, 1996

<sup>5</sup> Lund, Susan, “Report on Aboriginal Youth Gangs, CBC Radio, November 24-25, 1999

## Recommendations

1. The links between incarceration and induction into gangs requires further research and subsequent policy development and action. The over representation of Aboriginal people in the correctional system indicates that this may be a key place where gang affiliations are formed.
2. Research should be conducted into the issues that are specific to Aboriginal gangs, and, in particular, the unique experience of girls and women in Aboriginal gangs. The roles and activities of girls and women linked to their gang membership appear to be different from that of boys and men. The experiences of youth in all-female gangs should also be investigated, as well as how their experiences differ from youth in mixed gender gangs.
3. More research is required to confirm best practices and methods for NAOs and Aboriginal service providers who are working with Aboriginal gangs and at-risk youth.
4. A strategic approach to minimize the growth and impact of gangs in First Nations communities and urban centres, as well as to minimize the continued recruitment of Aboriginal youth into gangs must be developed. Key elements of this approach could include:
  - Prevention strategies for youth in urban centres to increase school attendance and completion connect youth to social and cultural activities reduce safety concerns, and address issues associated with youth disengagement from family and culture. Programs associated with developing and maintaining a healthy and balanced lifestyle should be emphasized;
  - Community mobilization strategies that increase awareness about gang membership and youth violence, as well as offer activities that address youth issues and increase the connection of youth to their culture, traditions, language and community;
  - Strategies and partnerships that lessen aggressive or punitive criminal justice system responses to youth gang membership and increase the awareness of systemic factors associated with gang membership; and
  - Coordinated approaches to policy development among government, NAOs and First Nations communities to address causal factors, including poverty, systemic discrimination, family dysfunction and associated health and wellness issues.