

# Executive Summary

## About the research

In this report we have presented the results of a survey of 380 adults and 445 youth into many of the complex aspects of the relationship between youth, ethnicity and crime in Sydney. This is the first phase of a three-phase research project that has been undertaken with the financial backing of the Australian Research Council, the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs and twenty-five industry partners, including nine Sydney municipal councils.

## About the survey

The survey of 825 people (380 were adults and 445 were youth) was conducted in 2001 after a pilot survey in late 2000 in the Canterbury Local Government Area (LGA). The survey was conducted in a number of LGAs in South Western Sydney: Hurstville, Canterbury, Bankstown, Fairfield, Rockdale, Liverpool and Auburn. Some of these areas—particularly the Canterbury, Bankstown and Fairfield LGAs—have been at the centre of the ethnic crime debate in Sydney in recent years. In addition, we interviewed a number of people (24 adults and 10 youth) from Sydney’s North Shore LGAs for a point of comparison.

Over eighty percent of those surveyed were first or second generation immigrants from twenty-one NESB birthplace groups. The largest of these were born in Lebanon (64) and Vietnam (70). Other birthplace groups with large numbers are: Greece (28), Macedonia (36), Egypt (23) and China (29). Over half of the youth surveyed (241) were born in Australia. We also included a “control” sample of 63 adults who were third or later generation Australian born, while 72 youth surveyed had an Australian-born mother and 70 youth had an Australian-born father

Other than English, the most frequent languages spoken at home by the adult sample in Sydney are Arabic, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Greek and Macedonian. English is spoken at home by half of our youth sample, while the others mainly speak Arabic, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Greek and Macedonian at home.

## Survey results

### Fear of crime

One of the strong conclusions to emerge from the Sydney survey is that concern about crime and about safety is very widespread in the community. Nearly three quarters (72%) of our adult respondents—and two thirds of our youth respondents—thought that crime had been on the increase in Sydney.

Most (63%) of the adults surveyed in Sydney were *very concerned* about crime, with another 25% *concerned*. Only 12 per cent of those adults surveyed were *mildly concerned* or *not concerned at all* about crime. In contrast, only a minority of youth (21%) reported that they were *very concerned* about crime, with another 41% *concerned*. One in three youth surveyed (31%) were only *mildly concerned*, while 7% were *not concerned at all* about crime.

Respondents living in Canterbury were most likely (54.3%) to be very concerned about crime, followed by Rockdale (49.5%) and Fairfield (49%). In contrast, 40.7% of those surveyed in Hurstville; 37.7% in Bankstown; 30.5% in Liverpool; and only 25.3% of those surveyed in Auburn were very concerned about crime.

There is an important gender dimension about fear or concern of crime. Nearly one half (45.4%) of females surveyed were *very concerned* about crime, compared to about one third (34.4%) of males.

Violent assault was thought to be the crime that was perceived as the biggest social problem, and hence perhaps the most feared, by those respondents living in Canterbury, Bankstown, Fairfield and Auburn.

For youth, violent assault, burglary and street theft were identified as being the greatest social problem emerging from crime. Only 10% of the youth surveyed were concerned about the social impact of drugs and the criminal activity that surrounds the drug culture. In contrast, the social problems related to drugs were top of the list of social concern for adults: 41% of adults reported that drugs were the biggest social problem.

## Victims of crime

Victim self-reporting gives some insights into the dynamics of crime in Sydney, since other crime statistics really just report on the tip of the iceberg. We found that *there is a very big inconsistency between fear of crime and the actual incidence of crime*. The main results here are:

- For adults, burglary (experienced by 43% of the adults surveyed) and car theft (32%) are the crimes of which most of the adults surveyed in Sydney had been victims. This was followed by street theft (12%), violent assault (10%) and sexual assault (2%).
- For youth, burglary (experienced by 32% of the youth surveyed) and car theft (20%) are also the most common crimes of which youth have been victims. Youth also reported a significantly higher incidence than adults of being victims of violent assaults (17%), sexual assault (7%) and street theft (14%), with the incidence of sexual assault much higher for young women.
- These findings indicate that whilst youth are often portrayed as perpetrators of crime, they are also the victims of it.

## Experiences in committing youth crime

Self-reporting of crime gives another insight into the situation of crime in Sydney. We asked the youth we surveyed about the crimes they had committed and about their knowledge of the crime committed by their friends. *The Sydney survey revealed that it is only a minority of youth who have committed crimes and that male youth are twice as likely as female youth to have been involved in criminal activity.* The key results are:

- Overall one in three youth surveyed reported that they had committed a crime (no time period was specified in the question), but only 15.4% of the female youth had been involved in criminal activity.
- A higher proportion of youth who lived in the Bankstown (33%), the North Shore (29%), Liverpool (28%), Rockdale (28%) and Auburn (27%) reported a criminal past than youth who lived in the Canterbury, Fairfield and Hurstville LGAs. Fairfield was the LGA with the lowest rate of self-reported youth criminality.

## Most Sydney people feel safe where they live

*Sydney is not an unsafe place to live in, according to our respondents.* Overall, two in every three people surveyed (71.7%) reported that they felt safe in their own area. Local streets in Sydney were found to be very safe: only two adults and 21 youth were concerned for their safety on local streets. This finding seems inconsistent with earlier findings about fear of crime. It appears that that the sensationalist media coverage of crime in South Western Sydney suburbs has led to an exaggeration of the concern for crime in the minds of Sydney-siders. Males in Sydney feel safer living in their suburbs (77.7%) than do females (65%), with youth generally feeling safer in their local area than adults.

## Where Sydney-siders feel unsafe

The unsafe places in Sydney are mostly public transport nodes at night: the railway station, the car park and the bus stop. Parks and recreation areas were also felt to be dangerous at night. Two out of every three Sydney-siders felt safe using public transport only during the day: only three out of every ten surveyed felt safe using public transport at any time, with youth feeling safer on public transport than adults. While only 12% of youth felt unsafe in the local shopping center, 30% of adults did.

## Attitudes to organised crime

The majority—two in every three people surveyed—thought that there were organised criminal gangs in their local area. There appears to be no significant age, generational or gender aspect to this finding. Remarkably, the Fairfield LGA—where Cabramatta is located and the place attached to much of the media moral panic about ethnic gangs in Sydney—had the most people who did *not* think that there was organised crime in the area. When asked to identify the types of crime in which organised gangs are involved, adults and youth agreed that these were mainly centred around drugs, car and street theft, burglary and violent assault. When asked about the ethnicity of organised crime in their area, the ‘usual suspects’ of Asian,

Middle Eastern—particularly Lebanese—and Pacific Islander background were most often mentioned.

### Attitudes about youth gangs

Two out of three (64%) adults agreed that there was a problem with youth gangs. Youth seem more ambivalent on this issue, with 55% agreeing that there was a problem with youth gangs in the Sydney area and 45% disagreeing. While three out of four respondents in the Canterbury and Bankstown LGAs thought that there were youth gangs in their area, only one in two respondents living in Rockdale, Liverpool and Hurstville thought so. Auburn and Fairfield lay in the middle of these two extremes.

Although there has been an increase in the reporting by the Sydney media of strong links between criminal gangs and ethnicity it was surprising, therefore, to find that the majority (although slight) of both youth and adults surveyed responded that they did not think that criminal groups were from particular cultural backgrounds. More people in the Canterbury LGA (55%) associated youth gangs with particular cultural backgrounds than respondents in any other Sydney LGA, but people in the Bankstown LGA were the least likely (38%) to associate youth gangs with particular cultural background. When asked to identify the ethnic groups involved in criminal activity, both youth and adults identified, in various combinations, Asian, Middle Eastern and Pacific Islander immigrants as those associated with organised crime.

### Youth gangs or friendship groups of youth?

About one half of the youth we surveyed reported that they did hang out with groups of friends in the streets or in public places. This finding doesn't vary by gender. Only 10% of youth who answered the question, however, said yes to: 'Is a group a gang?' When broken down by LGA, more youth in Fairfield, Liverpool, the North Shore, Hurstville and Rockdale hang out in public places with their friends than do youth surveyed in Auburn, Bankstown and Canterbury.

Three important conclusions emerge. First, youth gather together in public spaces or in the street as a normal part of their social activity. Second, hanging out in public spaces with your friends is as much a part of female youth behaviour as it is of male youth. Third, maybe we are seeing youth gangs where they do not exist, propelled perhaps by constant media headlines about youth gangs in Sydney.

We also asked youth where it was in their local areas that they hung out together in public spaces. The shopping centre was clearly the most common public space where youth gathered with their friends, followed by the movie theatres and amusement centres. The next in the list are public parks and transport nodes, the railway station, bus stops and car parks.

## Conflict with youth in Sydney

We asked adults and youth if there was a conflict between youth and adults in their local area. Perhaps surprisingly, more youth (50%) than adults (46%) thought that there was a problem with young people on Sydney's streets. This finding points to the tension existing between youth and adults with respect to the use of public space. For youth respondents, conflict between police and youth is ranked highest, while conflict between youth and adult residents, shopkeepers and security guards is ranked fairly similarly.

## Conflict between ethnic groups

We asked the youth and adults we surveyed if there was conflict between ethnic groups of young people. While the majority of youth (58.3%) thought that there was conflict between ethnic groups, only one third of adults (36.4%) agreed.

We also asked our respondents who thought that there was an ethnic conflict between groups of youth to name these groups. The youth identified Lebanese youth, and those from the Middle East, Pacific Islands, Australia and India as being in conflict. Adults who thought there was ethnic based youth conflict nominated Asian, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Pacific Islanders, and Tongan youth.

## Police responses to crime

Two out of every three adults (59%) adults surveyed thought that the Police were handling organised crime 'very well' or 'well'. On the other hand, 41% thought that the police handled crime poorly or very poorly. However, youth were not as positive as adults about police: six out of every ten youth surveyed (59.1%) rated police handling of organized crime in their area as poor or very poor.

When asked about police handling of youth gangs, adults were more likely to rate police handling of youth gangs as 'well' or 'very well' (56%) than were youth (36%). The LGAs where over 50% of respondents rated police handling of youth gangs as 'very well' or 'well' are Rockdale (53.7%), Canterbury (52%) and Fairfield (53.2%). Police rated lowest on the youth gang front in Auburn, Bankstown and Liverpool.

When asked how well they thought police were handling young people in Sydney, two out of three adult responded 'very good' or 'good'. Young people were not so enthusiastic, with over half (55%) of youth rating police handling of youth in general as poor or very poor.

When considering these results by LGA, a pattern emerges similar to other questions about police action: they were ranked highest in Canterbury, Rockdale and Hurstville and lowest in Auburn, Bankstown and Liverpool.

Adults surveyed agreed overwhelmingly (86.4%) with the proposition that police should be tougher on youth gangs. It is interesting that three out of four youth surveyed (75.5%) also agreed to this proposition. This highlights the need to view youth as the *victims* of youth crime, in general, and youth gangs, in particular, not just as the perpetrators of crime.

## Police relations with Sydney youth

We wanted to investigate the relations between police and youth from ethnic minorities. We asked if those surveyed thought that police picked on some groups of young people and, if so, asked them to identify these groups. Two in every three youth surveyed (62.8%) believed that police picked on groups of young people. When asked to identify these groups who Police allegedly picked on, immigrants from Asia ('Asians'), the Middle East and Lebanon were most often mentioned, with Pacific Islanders also mentioned.

There is a spatial dimension to this question. Two in three people who live in the Auburn, Fairfield and Rockdale LGAs believe that police do pick on youth from particular backgrounds, as do more than half of those who live in the Bankstown, Hurstville and Canterbury LGAs. In contrast, only one third of the respondents living in Liverpool thought that this was so.