

# Section 1: Introduction

## Youth, ethnicity and crime in Sydney

As the incidence of crime amongst youth is a major problem facing contemporary Australian society, an in-depth research study into youth crime in Australia's largest city, Sydney, would necessarily be of particular relevance. Apart from this, research in Sydney can yield an even more interesting dimension. For Sydney is, in fact, one of the world's most culturally-diverse global cities with over one half of the city's people from first or second generation immigrant backgrounds. So if, as recent media headlines have proclaimed, there is also a clear link between youth, ethnicity and crime, it will be manifestly apparent here.

Media headlines in particular, and media analyses in general, thrive on playing to the public's prejudices. For this reason the idea that there is an indisputably clear connection between youth, ethnicity and crime has become a major tenet of media faith and, hence, is widely accepted by public opinion. Even the Premier Bob Carr and former Police Commissioner Peter Ryan have based public statements upon this certainty. This connection is, however, by no means a proven one. Even though the headlines have blatantly labelled "Lebanese gangs" as the perpetrators of a number of murders and glibly asserted that they are the prime suspects in the shooting up of a suburban police station in Sydney's South Western Suburbs of Lakemba and Bankstown the link is by no means as clear-cut as these stories suggest (Collins, Noble, Poynting and Tabar, 2000). In fact, the linkages so simplistically formulated in this equation are far more complicated than media assertions claim. The research project that has provided the evidence contained in this report has been designed to uncover this complexity and give a far more balanced picture than has been available so far. Is there really a higher incidence of crime among youth of a non-English-speaking background (NESB) and, if so, what role does cultural difference play in such youth crime? Are there really ethnic gangs operating unchecked in these suburbs as the media, the Police Commissioner and the Premier of NSW have suggested? Should we be concentrating on individual or group cultural features of the criminal, or on broader structural aspects of society as a whole—such as the correlation between youth crime and the persistently high rates of youth unemployment in Sydney? These are just some of the questions we individually found ourselves asking as the headlines regularly blitzed out their accusations.

To undertake the very necessary intensive research into these questions we formed an interdisciplinary, inter-university team in our capacity as social scientists with expertise in matters related to Australian ethnic diversity. The team included Jock Collins, a political economist and sociologist from the University of Technology, Sydney; sociologists Greg Noble and Scott Poynting from the School of Cultural Inquiry, University of Western Sydney; and Paul Tabar, a sociologist and anthropologist teaching at the Notre Dame University of Beirut.

## Funding the project

To fund the extensive research necessary, the team found 26 industry partners who agreed to contribute either cash or in-kind resources for the project, which was called *Youth, Ethnicity and Crime in Sydney*. These partners included the Councils from a number of local government areas (LGAs); community based organisations; businesses; and State and Federal Government agencies—see Appendix A. From this large and diverse group of industry partners the team was able to achieve cash and in kind support totalling \$136,688. In addition the team successfully applied for funding from the Australian Research Council's SPIRT scheme, receiving a further \$142,234. The total budget for the *Youth, Ethnicity and Crime in Sydney* study over two years was \$281,922.

The three phases necessary to achieve this research project were clearly identifiable. The first of these involved a survey of immigrant youth and adults, male and female, from most of the nine Local Government Areas in Sydney (LGAs) that were partners in this research project. Canterbury was initially used to pilot the questionnaires and then research was undertaken in other parts of Sydney. This report presents the major findings of Phase 1 and points towards policy and future research implications. Phase 2 of the project will involve in-depth interviews with youth, parents, and other key players, with the aim of fleshing out the social nuances and detail that cannot emerge from quantitative questionnaire methodologies. Phase 3 will critically evaluate policies and initiatives responding to issues of youth crime and safety, including the use of public space across municipalities. In this two-year research project, therefore, we are aiming to understand the complex and often-contradictory issues related to youth, ethnicity and crime. We do this because we are genuinely interested, as social scientists, to make a contribution to this extremely important issue and, for this reason, our research is only in part undertaken to quell an obvious level of intellectual curiosity. Our research will also enable us to give clearer insights to policy makers about the directions they should be taking in relation to this problem.

## The methodology

The survey was conducted mainly in Hurstville, Bankstown, Fairfield, Rockdale, Liverpool, Auburn, and Bankstown LGAs in 2001 after a pilot survey in late 2000 in the Canterbury LGA. A control sample was also taken of people living in north shore LGAs. It was finalised before September 11 2001. The survey was designed to get 80% of respondents from a non-English speaking background, about half adults and half youth, half male and half female. Adults from 21 different birthplace groups were surveyed, as were youth from 24 different birthplace groups. A control sample of about 20% of third or later generation Australians and immigrant from and English-speaking background was also included. A snowballing or networking methodology was used rather than a random sample. Most of the interviews with adults were conducted in languages other than English. This was in order to tap the views of immigrant Sydneysiders who are at the centre of this ethnic crime storm yet whose voices go unnoticed in most English-based opinion poll and other surveying.

