

## Section 4: Ethnicity, Youth and Gangs in Sydney

One of the most controversial issues relating to crime in Sydney today relates to the role of gangs in general, and ethnic gangs in particular. In our book, *Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime* (Collins *et al.*, 2000) we argued that there was a need to investigate the issue of criminal gangs with a degree of complexity that is often missing in media coverage. First, we need to separate what constitutes gangs of organised crime from gangs of youth. Second, we really need to interrogate the issue of youth gangs. Are they just friendship groups of kids hanging out mainly in public spaces who occasionally engage in criminal or anti-social behaviour? Or are they gangs in the sense that they have membership rituals, hierarchal structure of power and patterns of systematic criminal activities? In this section we first inquire into adult and youth perceptions and experience of organised criminals. We then probe further into the controversial issue of youth gangs in the Sydney LGAs, including probing into the ethnicity of youth gangs.

### Criminal gangs

Criminal gangs are part of the history of crime in Australia and other countries (McCorkle and Miethe, 2002; Curry, David and Decker, 1998; Grennan, Britz, Rush and Barker, 2000; Ryan and Rush, 1997). Certainly, gangs have a long history in Australia. The first criminal gangs in Australia were probably the bushrangers, with the Ned Kelly Gang being the most famous. There are many ways to define a criminal gang. Goldstein (1991) offers fourteen different definitions of what constitutes a gang. Grennan *et al.*, 2000: 9–10 offer a consensus view of six key features that comprise a gang: being organized; having identifiable leadership; identifying with a territory; continual association; having a specific purpose; and engaging in illegal activities.

McCorkle and Miethe (2002: 4) report that in the USA during the 1980s, police began to report a sharp rise in gang activity:

Media coverage of gangs exploded. Newspapers, television, and films were suddenly awash with images of gun-toting, drug-dealing, hat-to-back gangstas... as we approach the new millennium we are informed that the gang threat has yet to peak.

Noting the strong link in this media coverage between criminal gangs and male youth raises a number of interesting questions that should be held in mind when considering the issue of ethnic youth gangs and ethnic criminal gangs in Sydney and Australia.

How afraid should the public be of gangs? Do the images and rhetoric surrounding street gangs accurately reflect the nature and extent of the threat? Has the response to gangs been commensurate with the actual threat posed by these bands of young males?

Is it possible that, at least in certain parts of the country, the gang problem has been exaggerated, distorted, and exploited by those seeking to further organizational interests, sell newspapers, attract viewers, and sometimes even advance personal careers? (McCorkle and Miethe, 2002: 5)

Throughout the twentieth century, gangs in Australia and overseas have often been linked to immigrants and to ethnicity. Probably the most well known association relates to the Sicilian Mafia (Grennan *et al.*, 2000: 19–53; Firestone 1997: 71–86) but ethnic gangs have been linked to most immigrant groups. In the USA, this included African-American gangs (Sanders 1994: 139–49); Asian gangs (Davidson 1997: 107–114), including Chinese Gangs, often linked to the Triads (Grennan *et al.*, 2000: 181–218; Sanders, 1994: 154–63), Japanese gangs linked to, but not limited to, the Yakuza (Grennan *et al.*, 2000: 219–245), Vietnamese gangs (Grennan *et al.*, 2000: 246–60), Korean Gangs (Grennan *et al.*, 2000: 261–273), and Filipino gangs (Sanders, 1994: 153–55); Hispanic gangs linked to Cuban, Columbian, Mexican and Dominican organized crime (Grennan *et al.*, 2000: 276–335; Sanders 1994: 125–138); Russian Gangs (Grennan *et al.*, 2000: 336–58); and Israeli Gangs (Grennan *et al.*, 2000: 359–364). In addition, crime has been linked to the following immigrant groups: Palestinian, Syrian, Turkish, Lebanese, Iraqi, Iranian, Pakistani, Indian, Burmese, Albanian, Polish, Gypsy, Bulgarian and Czech (Grennan *et al.*, 2000: 366–412).

The questions raised by McCorkle and Miethe above are important in the Sydney context, where the newspaper headlines have been regularly screaming, in large point type, about ethnic criminal gangs and youth gangs (Collins *et al.*, 2000: 30–54). This is because the issue of the ethnic criminal is often sensationalised by the Australian media, escalating a moral panic that is disproportionate to the problem at hand. This is, of course, a problem not limited to the Australian media. McCorkle and Miethe (2002: 6) argue that in the United States ‘the media’s coverage of gangs... is typically inflammatory and sensationalized, equates gangs with violent crime, and portrays gangs as dominating illegal drug markets’. This leads to a distorted coverage of gangs. The problem is, McCorkle and Miethe (2002: 15) argue, that ‘the exaggeration and distortion that is inherent in claims-making can, under certain conditions, produce a form of social problem known as a moral panic’.

The term moral panic was popularised by Stanley Cohen’s analysis of the response by media, police and the public to the Mods and Rockers youth problems in Britain in the 1960s. Cohen (1980:9) proposed the following definition:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; the ways of coping are evolved or... resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes visible.

This is important, because the issue of ethnic youth crime in Sydney is as much subjective as it is objective. To put it another way, the issue of ethnic youth crime is *socially constructed*. As McCorkle and Miethe (2002: 11) put it:

social problems are what people think are social problems; if they don't see a problem, for all intents and purposes the problem doesn't exist. ...What is thus important is not the actual nature of the condition, but rather what individuals *say* about that condition (original emphasis).

In this section we investigate more closely what the people we surveyed have to *say* about the issue of criminal gangs, youth gangs and the relationship between youth, ethnicity and crime in Sydney. We present how the issue of ethnic crime is constructed in the minds of (mainly) ethnic Sydney youth and adults. However, first we will investigate opinions about organised crime gangs in Sydney, including the relationship of ethnicity to that organised crime. We will then turn our attention more specifically to the matter of youth gangs in Sydney.

## Attitudes about organised crime

Abadinski (1985: 7) defines organised crime as:

A non-ideological enterprise that involves a number of persons in close social interaction, organised on a hierarchical basis for the purpose of securing profit and power by engaging in illegal and legal activities. Positions in the hierarchy and positions involving functional specialisation may be assigned on the basis of kinship or friendship, or rationally assigned according to skill.

Organized crime gangs are engaged in a wide range of illegal activities, including crimes related to drugs, vice, weapons, counterfeiting, theft, money laundering, protection, white-collar crime and people smuggling (Carter 1997: 138).

We asked the adults and youth who we surveyed if they believed that there was organised crime in their local area in Sydney. As Table 4.1 shows, the majority—two in every three people surveyed—thought that that there were organised criminal gangs in their local area. There appears to be no significant age, generational or gender aspect to this finding, unlike many of the other responses to questions in the Sydney survey. For youth respondents, 34% responded that they did believe that there was organised crime in their area, while slightly fewer (28%) disagreed. The interesting aspect of this finding is that despite years of sensational Sydney newspaper headlines about criminal gangs, one in three youth and adults we surveyed did not believe that there was organized crime in their area.

Table 4.1: Do you Believe there is Organised Crime Locally? (numbers and %)

Is there Organised Crime Locally	Youth	Adults	Total
%Yes	62.6	61.2	62
% No	37.4	33.8	38.0
Numbers Yes	276	221	497
Numbers No	165	140	305

When the findings to this question about organized crime are broken down by LGA, as shown in Table 5.2 we get a more complex view of the way organized crime is perceived in the Sydney metropolitan area.

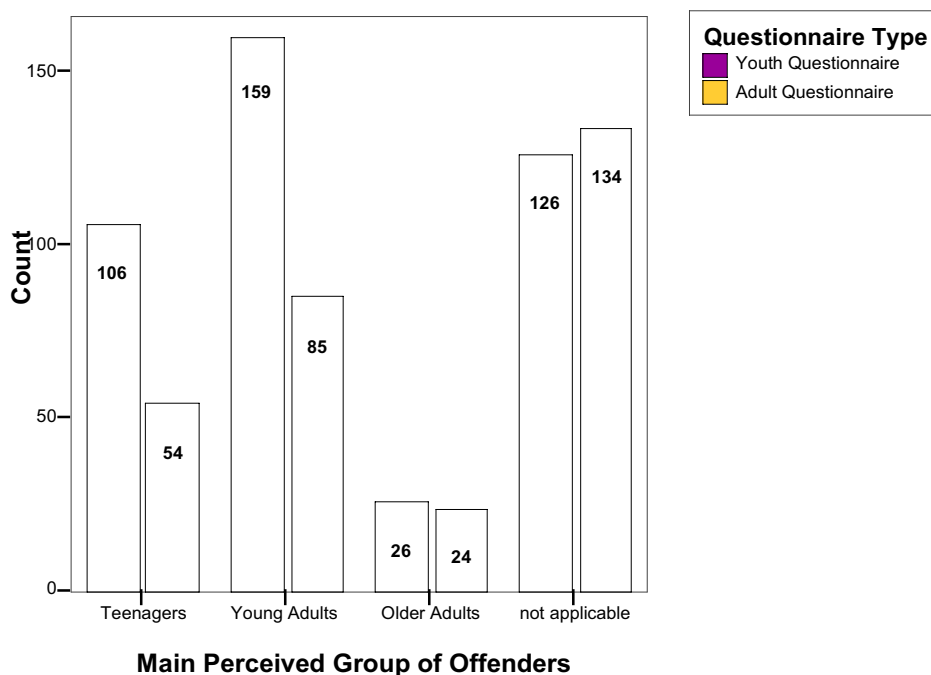
Table 4.2: Do you Believe there is Organised Crime Locally? (by LGA)

Organised Crime in Area	Local Government Area							
	Auburn	Banks-town	Canter-bury	Fair-field	Hurst-ville	Liver-pool	Rock-dale	Total
Yes	69	76	64	60	54	62	58	63
No	31	24	36	40	46	39	42	37
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

\*Figures expressed as percentages and rounded up.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Table 4.2 is that four out of every ten youth and adults surveyed in the Fairfield LGA—where Cabramatta is located and the place attached to much of the media moral panic about ethnic gangs in Sydney (Castillo and Hirst 2000; Dreher 2000)—did *not* think that there was organised crime in the area. Together with Hurstville and Rockdale, Fairfield had the most people who did not think that there was organised crime in the area. Bankstown (three quarters of those surveyed) and Auburn (seven out of every ten) were the LGAs that most respondents thought was an area where organised crime was present. The finding with regard to Bankstown is not surprising, since Bankstown has often been mentioned in media headlines about Lebanese and Middle Eastern crime (de Freitas 2000), and the Bankstown suburb of Punchbowl was where Edward Lee was stabbed to death in October 1998, an event that triggered much of the Sydney ethnic crime debate that followed (Collins *et al.*, 2000: 1).

Figure 4.1: Who are Mainly Responsible for Organised Crime?



There is a strong association in the minds of those surveyed that organised crime is predominantly, although not solely, a source of youth crime in Sydney. When asked ‘ Who are mainly responsible for Organised Crime?’ most adults and youth surveyed agreed that those involved in organised crime in their area were either youth or young adults, as Figure 4.1 shows.

Only a very few of those surveyed—24 adults and 26 youth—thought that older adults were involved in organised criminal gangs.

Table 4.3: Main Perceived Group of those in Organised Crime by Age? (%)

	Youth	Adults	Total
Teenagers	25%	18%	22%
Young Adults	38%	29%	34%
Older adults	6%	8%	7%
Total Numbers	291	163	454

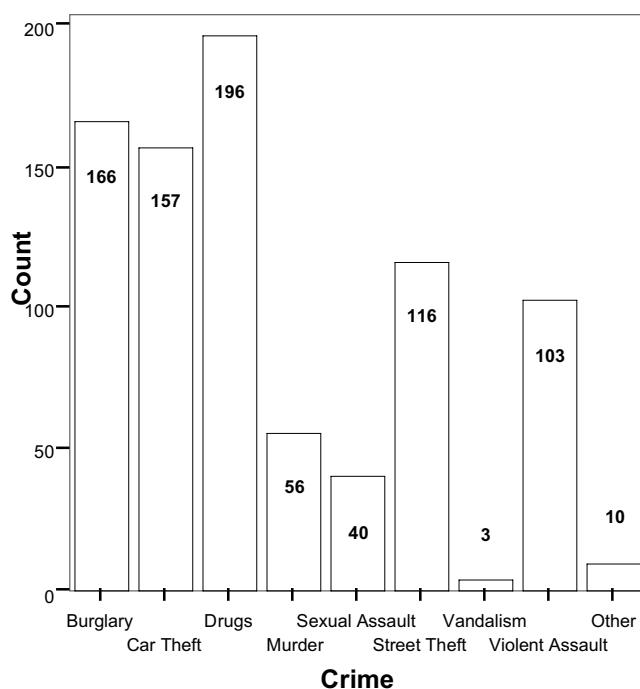
Table 4.3 breaks these results down into age and Table 4.4 into gender. The main findings here are that between one in four, and one in five respondents (22%), thought that teenagers were involved in organised crime.

More youth (one in four) identified teenagers as being involved in organised crime than did adults (18%). Similarly, more males (24%) identified teenagers as being involved in organised crime than did females (21%), although this difference is fairly slight. Many respondents (259) did not answer this question.

Table 4.4: Main Perceived Group of those in Organised Crime by Gender? (%)

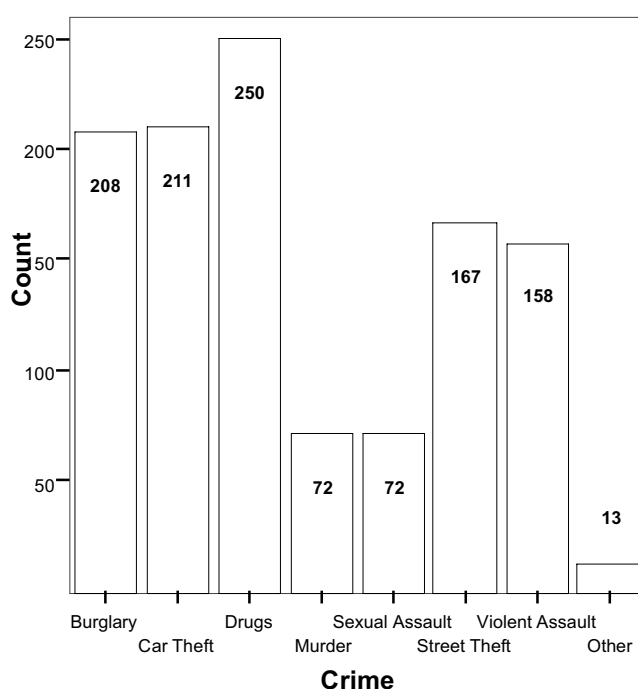
	Males	Females	Total
Teenagers	24%	21%	22.4%
Young Adults	38%	31%	34.2%
Older adults	8%	6%	7.0%
Total Numbers	243	209	451

Figure 4.2: The Type of Crime Organised Crime Groups are Involved In—Adults



When asked to identify the types of crime in which organised gangs are involved, adults (Figure 4.2) and youth (Figure 4.3) agreed that gang committed crimes were mainly centred around drugs, car and street theft, burglary and violent assault, although a few did mention murder. These crimes involve either property theft or drug taking. Perhaps most disturbing is the finding that many—albeit the minority of adults and youth surveyed—associate organised crime with personal violence in the form of violent assault, sexual assault and street theft. Young people were nearly twice as likely to mention sexual assault as adults.

Figure 4.3: The Type of Crime Organised Crime Groups are Involved In—Youth



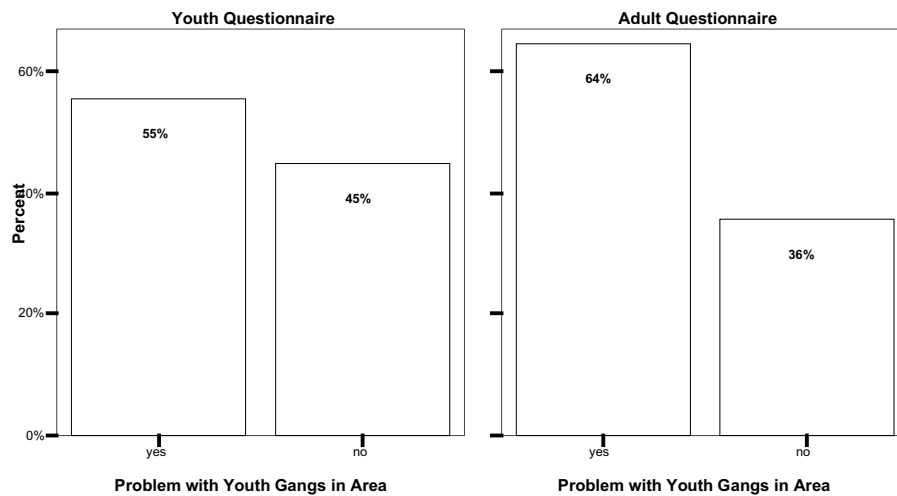
## Youth gangs

The issue of youth gangs in Sydney has been a hot topic for some time. Despite evidence that the number of juveniles in detention in NSW has declined significantly in the past decade (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2001), fear of youth gangs and concern about youth gangs seems to be at an all time high. As Figure 4.4 shows, two out of three (64%) adults agreed that there was a problem with youth gangs in the Sydney area. 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. Table 4.5 breaks this data down for each LGA in our Sydney survey.

Table 4.5: Is there a Problem with Youth Gangs in Area? (by LGA)

Problem with Youth Gangs in the Area	Local Government Area							
	Auburn	Banks-town	Canter-bury	Fair-field	Hurst-ville	Liver-pool	Rock-dale	Total
Yes	68.0	72.7	76.2	58.2	51.9	51.4	48.6	60.7
No	32.0	27.3	23.8	41.8	48.1	48.6	51.4	39.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Figure 4.4: Is there a Problem with Youth Gangs in Area?



We have argued elsewhere (Collins *et al.*, 2000) that we need to be clear when we use terms like ‘youth gangs’ and ‘criminal gangs’. Much of the public dialogue in Sydney during 1999 and 2000 was centred on so-called ‘ethnic gangs’ (Poynting, 2000) but it has long been the case that young people have always wanted to hang out together. We asked them where they and their friends ‘hang out’. Generally groups hang out in a public spaces—this is particularly the case for adolescent males. The shopping mall or shopping centre is by far the most popular place for such groups to hang out (193 responses). The movie theatre follows (133 responses), with the local park (80 responses), game parlours (73 responses) and railway stations (65 responses) the next most popular places for youth to hang out. Clearly these are public spaces and, as such, the sites where conflict between youth and adults are most likely to be manifest .

We were also interested to investigate the social construction of youth gangs through the lens of ethnicity, so we asked our respondents if they thought that these organised criminal groups were from particular cultural backgrounds.

Although there has been an increase in the reporting by Sydney media of strong links between criminal gangs and ethnicity (Collins *et al.*, 2000; Poynting, 2000) this kind of reporting has been going for a long time. It was surprising, therefore, to find that the majority of both youth and adults surveyed responded that they did not think that criminal groups were from particular cultural backgrounds, as Figure 4.5 shows, although the difference is not very marked.

Figure 4.5: Youth Gangs from Particular Cultural Background?

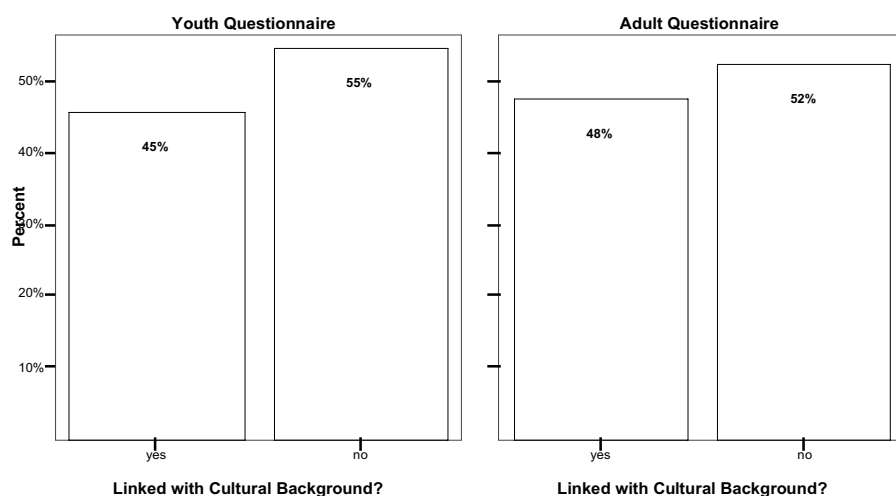


Table 4.6 breaks these answers into the different LGAs from which respondents came. We expected that many of those interviewed in the Bankstown and Canterbury areas would strongly link youth gangs to particular cultural groups, since that is what media headlines had been repeating for years. However, the results only partially fulfilled such expectations. More people in the Canterbury LGA (55%) associated youth gangs with particular cultural backgrounds than respondents in any other Sydney LGA, however, people in the Bankstown LGA were the least likely (38%) to associate youth gangs with particular cultural background.

Table 4.6: Youth Gangs from Particular Cultural Backgrounds? (by LGA)

Youth gang link with Cultural Background	Local Government Area							
	Auburn	Banks-town	Canter-bury	Fair-field	Hurst-ville	Liver-pool	Rock-dale	Total
Yes	42.7	37.5	58.5	44.7	48.4	38.2	52.4	45.8
No	57.3	62.5	41.5	55.3	51.6	61.8	47.6	54.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

\*Figures expressed as percentages

When the gender dimensions of this question are investigated, as shown in Table 4.7, just over half (54.9%) of the female respondents did link youth gangs with particular cultural groups, while nearly two in three (61.4%) of male respondents made this link. However, once again the strongest point to emerge from this question is the large number of respondents who do not link youth gangs to particular cultural backgrounds.

Table 4.7: Youth Gangs from Particular Cultural Backgrounds? (by gender)

Youth Gangs linked with cultural background	Males	Females
Yes %	61.4%	54.9%
No %	38.6%	42%
total of responses	381	408

## Females in gangs

Another interesting question related to youth gangs is the involvement of females. Traditionally, crime and criminal gangs have been seen to be the preserve of males. However, research overseas, particularly in the United States, suggests that female involvement in criminal gangs is increasing. As Curry and Decker (1998: 96) argue for the United States:

There was little interest in female gang members prior to the 1980s, when interest in females in gangs began to grow. In the 1990s interest in gang involvement by females has virtually exploded. An abundance of media stories, in print and on television, and at least one major motion picture are complemented by a growing body of research by journalists as well as social scientists’.

One study of gangs in Denver in the US found that one quarter of gang members were female (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993), while Moore (1991) estimated that one third of gang members she studied in Los Angeles were female.

The landmark study on girls in gangs is by Campbell (1984; 1991). Campbell (1991: 32) argues that females become involved in gangs and illegitimate activities through relationships with male gang members. However, she also argues that gang membership can be liberating for women because it involves them in a sisterhood and provides them with opportunities for self-actualisation and equality that is not otherwise available to them. This notion of the gang being a place for women’s liberation is, of course, controversial and has been challenged. For example, Moore’s (1991: 54) research, also conducted in the United States, concluded that a significant number of male gang members considered female gang members as their sexual possessions and that females supported or engaged in the sexual exploitation of their sister gang members. Moore concluded that females suffer greater long term hardships as a result of their involvement in gangs than did males. This liberation view of women/girls and gangs is also rejected by Joe and Chesney-Lind (1993: 10), who concluded from a study of official records and interviews with male and female juveniles that gang involvement was not an act of rebellion but an attempt ‘of young women to cope with a bleak and harsh present as well as a dismal future’.

Messerschmidt (1997: 70) argues that both boys and girls see gangs as a social structure that they hope will provide what is missing in their lives:

For both boys and girls, joining a youth gang represents an idealized collective solution to the lived experience of class and race powerlessness... In the social context of a

bleak future and the overall violence that surrounds them in the street as well as at home, the youth gang becomes *family* to these girls (emphasis in original).

Reviewing the literature, including the work of Campbell (1991), Messerschmidt (1997: 71) argues that many girls join auxiliary girl gangs that are separate from male gangs and are, in fact, annexes of the male gang whose 'range of possibilities' is, in fact, determined by male gang members. There is even a sexual division of criminal labour within gangs, with male (mainly robbery) and female (mainly prostitution) crimes (Messerschmidt 1997: 74–5).

There has been little research into the intersection of gender and ethnicity in relation to criminal gangs. One insight comes from a Youth Gang Drug Prevention Program established in the USA in the early 1990s. Targeted at 13 year old girls, three projects under this program were designed for African American girls, two for Latina girls and one for Native American girls. Overall, more than half of the girls in the program were African American and over 4% were Latinos, with only 3.3% African American and 2% Asian or White (Curry and Decker, 1998: 172).

Clearly, in youth gang membership, gender and ethnicity intersect with class as important factors shaping their dynamics. As Messerschmidt (1997: 75) put it:

gender, race and class are all salient: girl gang members situationally construct practices that construct their gender, race and class subordinate position and such social action is the mechanism through which a specific race, class, and feminine identity take meaning.

In this way, female gang members are not passive victims of their disadvantage, their gender, or their class but actively construct their class gender and race or ethnic identity through their conduct in joining, and their conduct while participating in, a youth gang:

In the daily life of the youth gang, girls not only participate in the social construction of difference but also engage in practices common to boys. Although there is a whole variety of common practices, most time is spent in such non-delinquent leisure activities as simply 'hanging out' at a favourite spot or attending sporting and social events. In addition, boy and girl gang members partake in such delinquent activities as drinking, taking and selling drugs, committing theft and fighting (Messerschmidt 1997: 76–7).

In this sense, there are liberating aspects of girls participating in gangs, even though males dominate much of what girls can do in gangs. As Messerschmidt (1997: 86) put it:

The gang provides the milieu within which girls can experiment with, and possibly dismantle, the bounds of emphasized femininity. Girl gang members use the race and class resources available to construct gender and, in doing so, challenge notions of gender as merely difference.

In Australia, there has been little research into girls in gangs and certainly none into the intersection of ethnicity, class and gender in youth gangs. In the Sydney survey we asked our respondents if they thought that women or girls were members of youth gangs. As Table 4.8

shows, about one in every two youth and adults surveyed did think that youth gangs involved females. This result is consistent across gender, with female respondents only slightly more likely to reply in the affirmative than male respondents.

Table 4.8: Are Women Members of Youth Gangs? (numbers and %)

	<b>Youth</b>	<b>Adults</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
Yes (numbers)	221	177	180	210
Yes (%)	51%	50.3%	49.2%	52%
No (numbers)	210	89	154	144
No (%)	48.5%	25.3%	40.7%	35.6%

When these results are broken down into LGAs (Table 4.9) it appears that nearly three in four surveyed in Bankstown thought that youth gangs involved females, as did 60% of respondents in Liverpool. In most other LGAs the response was that about half agreed that young women were in youth gangs. Canterbury and the North Shore LGAs stand out as the low riders in response to this question: only one in four responses in Canterbury, and one in three in the North Shore, thought that females were involved in gangs—about one in two

Table 4.9: Are Women Members of Youth Gangs? (by LGA)

<b>Are women members of youth gangs</b>	<b>Local Government Area</b>							
	<b>North Shore</b>	<b>Auburn</b>	<b>Banks-town</b>	<b>Canter-bury</b>	<b>Fair-field</b>	<b>Hurst-ville</b>	<b>Liver-pool</b>	<b>Rock-dale</b>
Yes %	36%	56%	72%	25%	57%	57%	60%	50%
Yes (Numbers)	12	42	72	26	53	71	61	46
Total		100	100	100	100	100	100	100