

Section 5: Crime and Gangs in Sydney—The Ethnic Dimension

Ethnicity and gangs

Youth gangs in western societies like Australia are not solely related to immigrant youth. The razor gangs in Australia in the first part of the twentieth century were white, reflecting the composition of Australian society at the time. In the post war period, the gangs of Mods and Rockers and the biker gangs—such as the Hells Angels—of British, American and Australian society, depicted in Hollywood fashion by Marlon Brando's *The Wild One*, were predominantly white working class gangs. However, as immigration changed the character of Australian society in the years after World War 2 (Collins 1991)—as it did in British and American society as well—so, too, did the character of youth gangs change. The impact of immigration in introducing increasing cultural diversity to western society has been reflected in the increasing cultural diversity of youth gangs.

In the introduction to the preceding section of this report, we noted the long list of immigrant groups involved in gangs in the USA: Sicilian Mafia, African-Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Cuban, Colombian, Mexican, Dominican, Russian, Israeli, Palestinian, Syrian, Turkish, Lebanese, Iraqi, Iranian, Pakistani, Indian, Burmese, Albanian, Polish, Gypsy, Bulgarian and Czech. Of course, immigrant or ethnic crime gangs are not the sole preserve of American society but exist in all countries that have immigrant populations, which is all the countries of the western world today, including Australia. Most countries in Europe have increasing, and increasingly diversified, immigrant populations since the collapse of the Berlin wall in the late 1980s, particularly in major cities (Castles and Miller, 1998; Martinello and Piquard, 2002). In the Netherlands, for example, the Dutch intelligence service, *Centrale Recherche Informatiedienst* (CRI) breaks down organized crime groups into three groups: traditional organized crime (Italian Mafia and Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese crime syndicates); drug-specific organized crime (South American cartels, West Indian organized crime, Turkish clans and Indian subcontinent crime syndicates); and foreign gangs involved in any kind of commodity exchange (West African, Russian, Ukrainian and Eastern European conglomerates (Carter, 1997: 138–9).

Clearly, immigrant gangs are a reality in all societies where permanent or temporary immigration is a feature, and that, in today's globalised world, means all countries. Since Australia is the western country with most immigrants (Collins, forthcoming) criminal gangs, including youth gangs, will have first or second generation immigrants in them. But recognising this does not really tell us much. We do not know how prevalent these gangs are; whether they are organized on strict ethnic lines or cross ethnic boundaries and, if so, which ethnic groups; whether youth gangs are linked into adult organised crime gangs, and if so how; and, finally, whether what is identified as a phenomenon of youth gangs are really just friendship groups and not crime gangs at all. In this section we explore, in more detail,

perceptions of the link between gangs and ethnicity and explore, again in more detail, the notion of ethnic youth gangs in Sydney.

Ethnicity and organised criminal gangs in Sydney

The public discourse on ethnic gangs has been very pervasive in all types of Sydney media since late 1998 (Collins *et al.*, 2000: 30–54). Television news programs, radio talk back shows and newspapers such as the mass circulation *Daily Telegraph* have been giving the issue of ethnic crime and ethnic gangs repeated headline coverage. Moreover, this coverage has directly linked ethnic crime and ethnic gangs to specific ethnic or regional groupings of immigrants: Lebanese and immigrants of Middle Eastern appearance in Bankstown and Canterbury and Asians in Cabramatta (to the media the heroin capital of Sydney) have come in for particular attention.

We asked both youth and adults about the ethnicity of organised crime in the area. Figure 5.1 sets out the adult responses to this question, while Figure 5.2 sets out the youth responses. In both cases, the ‘usual suspects’ included combinations of Asian background; those from the Middle East, particularly Lebanese; and Pacific Islanders. These, at times, were mentioned by region; others were mentioned by country.

Figure 5.1: Cultural Background of Organised Crime—Adults

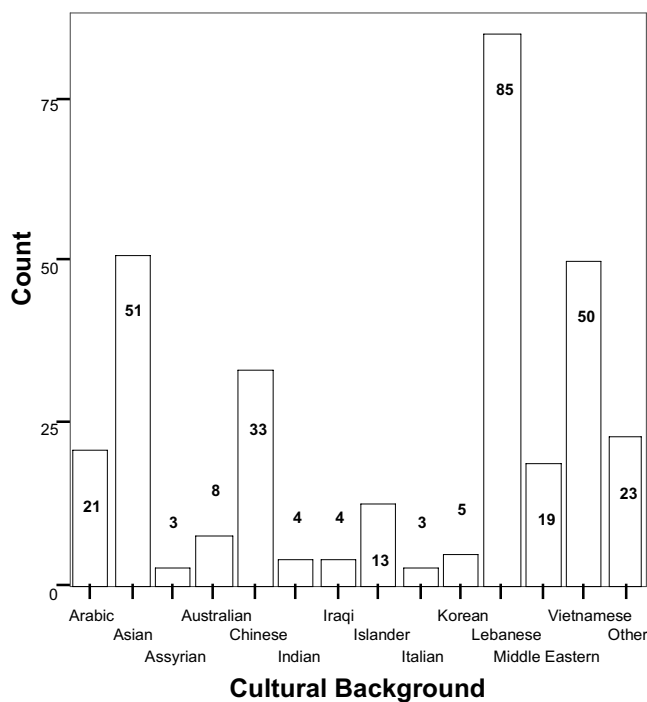
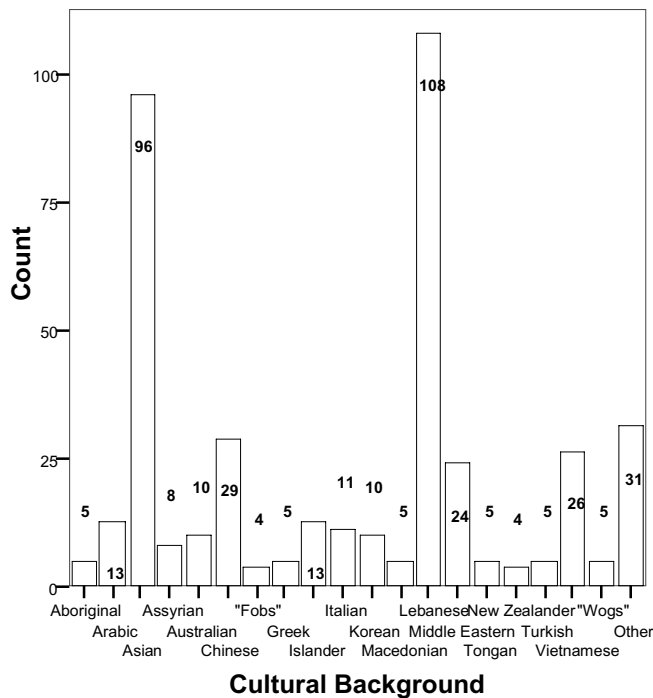


Figure 5.2: Cultural Background of Organised Crime—Youth



Ethnicity of youth gangs in Sydney

The recent public discourse on youth crime in Sydney has constantly reaffirmed the idea that a definite link exists between ethnicity and youth crime (Collins *et al.*, 2000; Poynting, 2000). For this reason, it would be very surprising if the adults and youth surveyed in South Western Sydney did not also make the same association, particularly given that the streets of South Western Sydney have been the visual background to much of this ‘crime reporting’. As Figure 5.3 shows, most youth surveyed thought that youth gangs came from particular cultural backgrounds, while adults were more likely to reject the association. In either case, views were fairly evenly split.

Table 5.1 breaks these responses down into the different LGAs in which our fieldwork was conducted. This shows that between half and two thirds of respondents in these Sydney LGAs did associate youth gangs with particular cultural groups. We expected that responses to questions about the association of youth gangs with particular cultural groups to be highest in the LGAs where the media has most publicised ethnic crime as occurring, that is, Bankstown, Canterbury and Fairfield. Canterbury, as expected, is the LGA where most respondents (66.7%) associate youth gangs with particular cultural groups but respondents in the Bankstown LGA, the site of Edward Lee’s stabbing and of sustained police activity on the streets targeting Middle Eastern youth, were second to Liverpool respondents in being least likely to associate youth gangs with particular cultural groups.

Figure 5.3: Are Youth Gangs from Particular Cultural Backgrounds?

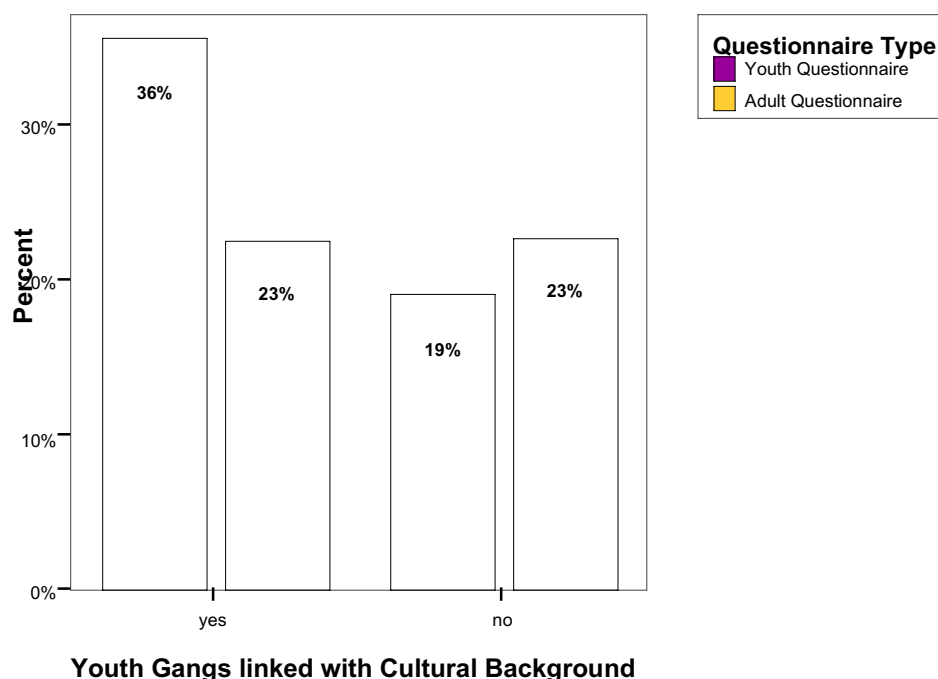


Table 5.1: Are Youth Gangs from Particular Cultural Backgrounds? (by LGA)

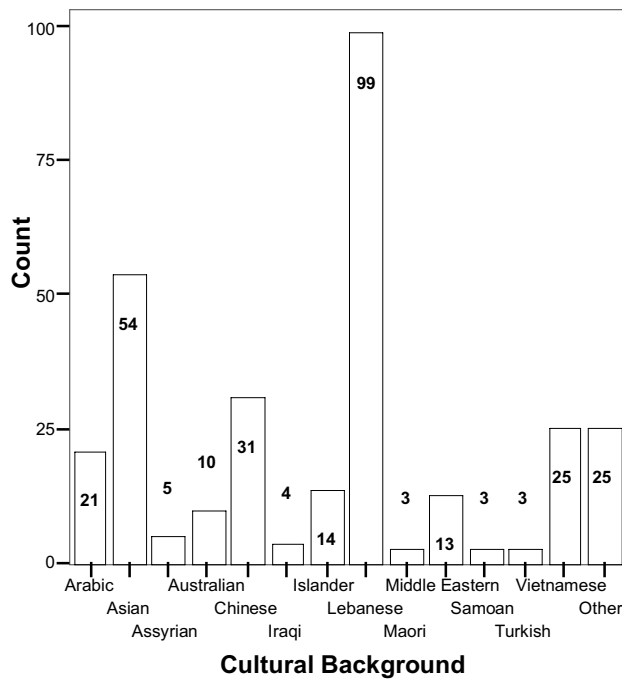
Youth gangs linked with cultural background	Local Government Area							
	Auburn	Banks-town	Canter-bury	Fair-field	Hurst-ville	Liver-pool	Rock-dale	Total
Yes	62.2	52.0	66.7	53.1	65.6	49.5	58.3	58.0
No	37.8	48.0	33.3	46.9	34.4	50.5	41.7	42.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

*Figures expressed as percentages

When asked to identify which ethnic groups were 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. Of course, these beliefs and attitudes don't come out of thin air. It would be surprising if years of media concentration on ethnic crime (Collins *et al.*, 2000) had not helped construct this identikit image of organised criminals among immigrant adults and youth in the Sydney area.

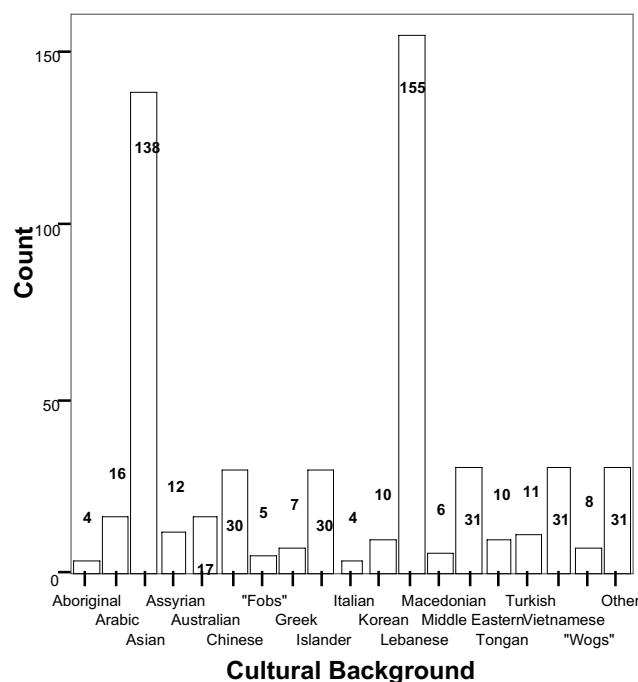
We asked adults if there was a link between ethnicity and youth gangs. As Figure 5.4 shows, about half of the adult respondents thought that there was a link, mentioning many combinations of Lebanese and others from the Middle East; Asian, including specifically Chinese and Vietnamese, Pacific Islanders, Samoans and Maoris.

Figure 5.4: Perceived Cultural Background of Youth Gangs—Adults



We also asked youth about the cultural background of youth gangs in the Sydney area. As Figure 5.5 shows, the most frequent responses identified were Lebanese (155 responses), Middle Eastern (31), and Arabic (14). The other two groups most often mentioned were from Asia—Asian (136), Chinese (30), Korean (10) and Vietnamese (31)—or the Pacific Islands—Pacific Islanders (30), Tongan (10). Only 17 youth thought that youth gangs were of Australian cultural background.

Figure 5.5: Perceived Cultural Backgrounds of Youth Gangs—Youth



Youth gangs or friendship groups of youth?

One of the dimensions of a moral panic about crime in Sydney is the over-eagerness to identify youth gangs in general, and ethnic youth gangs in particular, as the perpetrators of most crime. Whenever youth are involved in anti-social behaviour, or whenever they gather in public places, the perceptions of the media and many of the public cast them in this light.

Writing on Vietnamese criminal gangs in the USA, Sanz and Silverman (1997: 223) argue that there is an important distinction between what they call casual gangs, mobile gangs and senior criminals:

Casual gangs are composed of neighbourhood youths bound together by a common ethnic and cultural background and past experience, including shared refugee camp stays and negative experiences as newly arrived immigrants. Their relationships are further cemented by rejection, joblessness and lack of family ties... their criminal acts are limited to their home communities. These typically include sporadic, unsophisticated criminal endeavours such as petty burglaries, shoplifting or 'snatch and grab' retail thefts. Further, as a result of exposure to violence and rejection and the lack of appropriate socialization, these youths engage in indiscriminate acts of violence during the commission of crimes (emphasis in original).

It is also possible that in the moral panic about youth crime in Sydney, groups of youth are being identified as gangs when they are really just mates or friendship groups who happen to be hanging about in a public place. In order to explore this complex and important issue further, we asked youth if they belonged to a group that hangs out together in the streets or in public places and, if so, did they consider youth who hang out in shopping malls or in movie foyers to be youth gangs? We will take each question in turn.

As Table 5.2 shows, about one half of the youth we surveyed did hang out in groups in the streets or in public places, while the other half did not. This finding doesn't vary by gender. Two important conclusions emerge. First, many youth do 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 that of male youth.

Table 5.2: Do You Belong to a Group that Hangs Around in Streets or Public Places? (%)

	Males	Females	Total
Yes (Nos.)	118	96	214
Yes (%)	48.6%	48.2%	48.4%
No (Nos.)	125	103	228
No (%)	51.4%	51.8%	51.6%
Total Nos	243	199	442

Table 5.3: Do You Belong to a Group that Hangs Around in Streets or Public Places?
(% by LGA)

Local Government Area	Yes	Yes %	No
Auburn	19	31%	42
Bankstown	26	37%	45
North Shore	14	58%	10
Canterbury	12	31%	27
Fairfield	28	66%	14
Hurstville	31	53%	27
Liverpool	40	59%	28
Rockdale	28	52%	26
Miscellaneous	16	59%	11
Total	214	48%	230

When broken down by LGA, as Table 5.3 shows, more youth in Fairfield, Liverpool, the North Shore, Hurstville and Rockdale hang out in public places with their friends that do youth surveyed in Auburn, Bankstown and Canterbury. This finding suggests that it is not only in Western or South Western Sydney that the issue of youth in public spaces is important. Moreover, less youth hang out in the publicly identified youth gang areas of Bankstown and Canterbury than in other Sydney LGAs. We also asked youth where it was in their local areas that they hung out together in public spaces. The results of this question are shown in Figure 5.6.

Figure 5.6: Where Sydney Youth Hang Out Together with their Friends

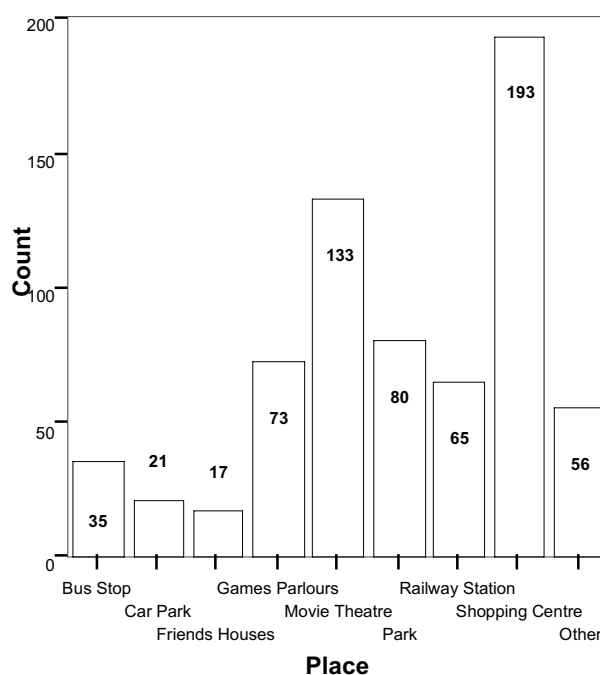
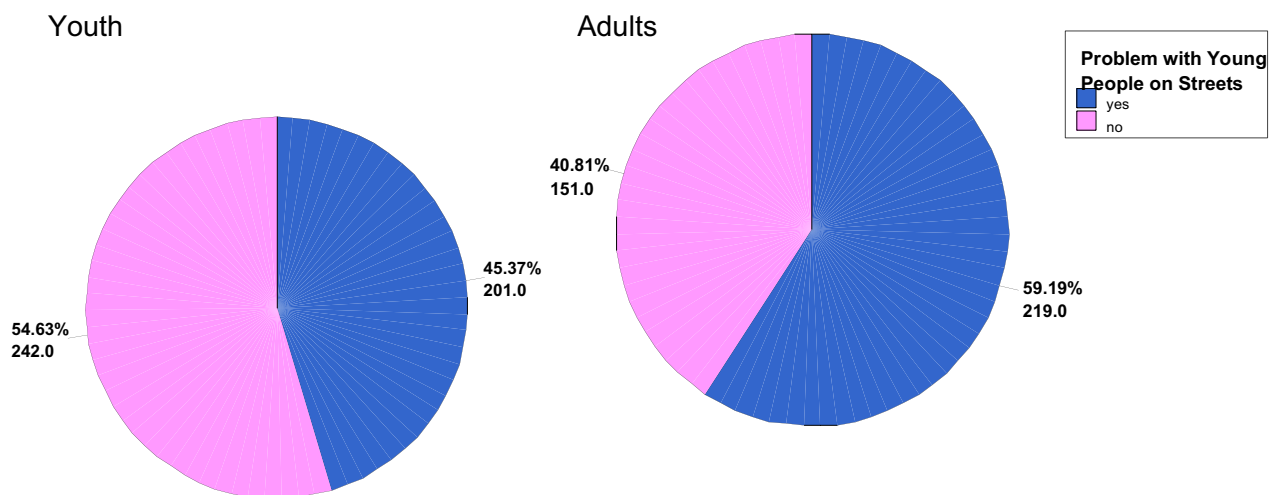


Figure 5.6 shows that the shopping centre was clearly the most common public space where youth gathered with their friends; followed by the movie theatres and amusement centres. These results are not surprising, given the enormous effort put into attracting the youth dollar by shops, movie companies and computer games companies. This highlights the contradiction between the commodification of youth culture and the often inadequate planning and provision for youth to participate in the sites of this commodification, particularly the shopping mall and shopping centres. The next in the list are public parks and transport nodes, the railway station, bus stops and car parks. The importance of public parks for youth highlights the need for Local government to provide public space for youth to hang out with their friends. Once again, given the fact that most youth do not own, or are too young to drive private cars, reliance on public transport is part of the youth condition in Sydney and a natural place for youth to gravitate in groups if they hang out in groups.

Sydney’s youth culture leads many youth, although not all, to hang out in public with their friends. This perfectly normal adolescent behaviour can bring them into conflict with older people in the community who often share, unwillingly, the same public spaces. The clash between the use of public space by young people and adults who live in the area is clear from Figure 5.7. The graphic represents responses to the question: ‘Is there a problem with young people hanging around on the streets of your local area?’

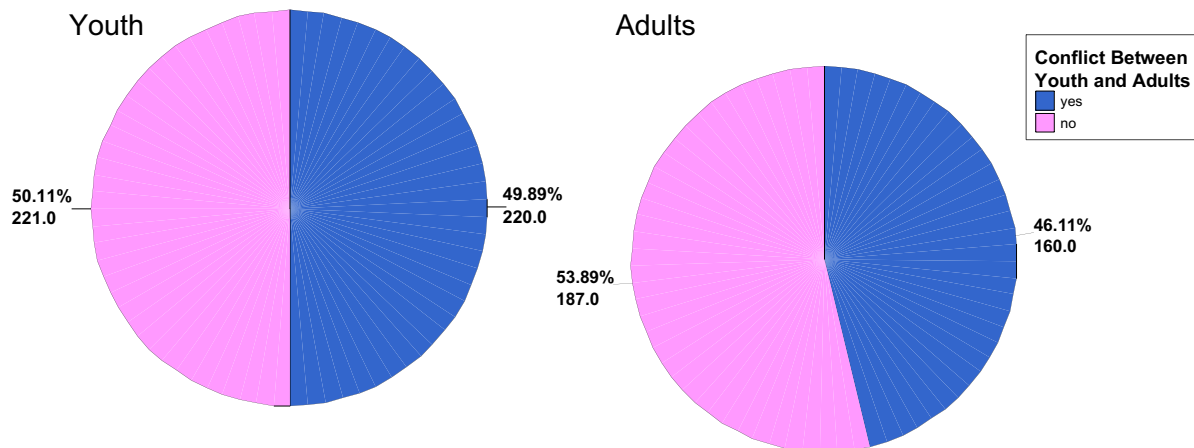
It is not surprising that the majority (60%) of adults surveyed thought that there was a problem with young people hanging around on the streets of their local area, while the majority of youth (55%) disagreed. Nevertheless, in both cases the majorities are slim, an indication that a large number of both youth and adults disagree with a youth/adult divide in the city of Sydney.

Figure 5.7: Is there a Problem with Young People Hanging Around on Streets?



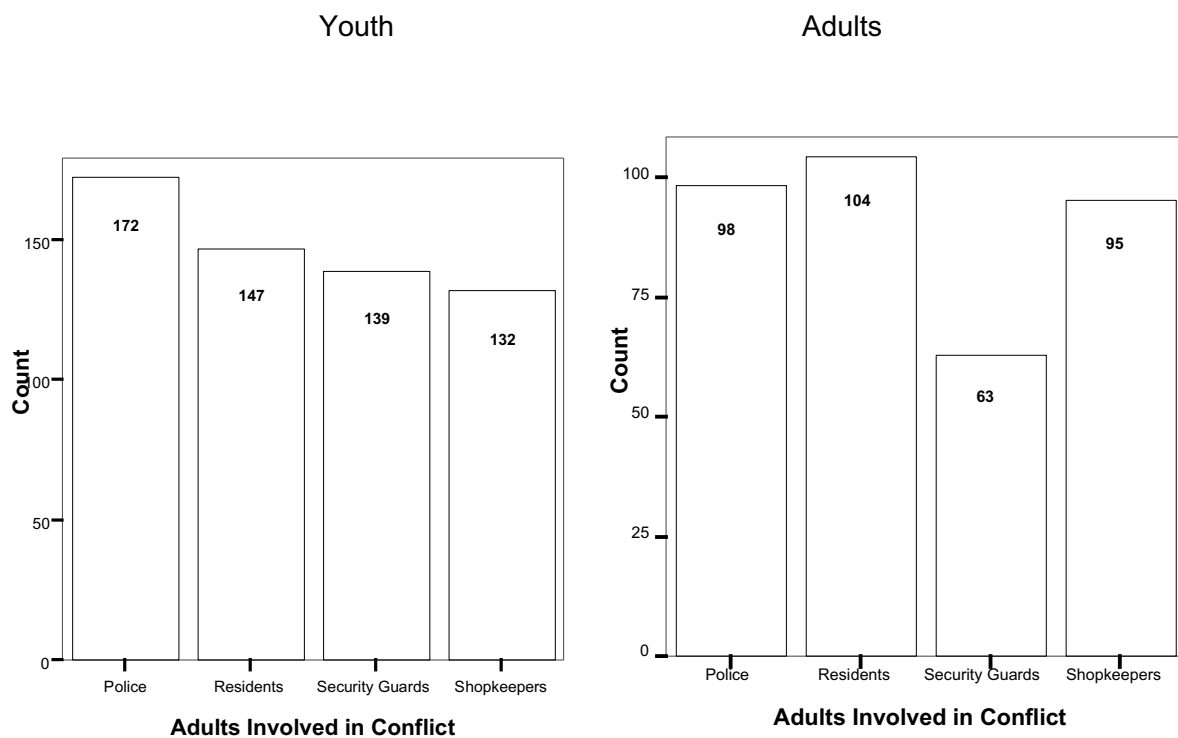
Tensions between youth and adults in Sydney are illustrated in Figure 5.8. We asked adults and youth if there was a conflict between youth and adults in their local area. Perhaps surprisingly, more youth (50%) than adults (46%) thought that there was a problem with young people on Sydney’s streets. This finding points to the tension between youth and adults with respect to use of public space.

Figure 5.8: Is there Conflict Between Youth and Adults?



To break down this issue further, we asked just what type of adult is having conflict with youth. This data is presented in Figure 5.9.

Figure 5.9: Who is the Conflict Between Youth and Adults Between



For adults most of the conflict is between youth and adult residents, followed by police and youth, shopkeepers and youth and security guards and youth. The emphasis on shopkeepers and youth points to the shopping precinct as a critical space for conflict with Sydney’s youth, adults and other authorities. 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. This highlights a critical issue and that is the privatisation of public space in the forms of shopping centres and shopping malls and the desire of both youth and adults to make use of these areas. It is interesting to note that youth rate conflict between youth and security guards as much more frequent and important (139 responses) than do adults (63 responses). This response focuses our attention to the need for policy initiatives to respond to the rights of youth for public space to be shared in Sydney’s municipalities, including space around shopping precincts and shopping malls.

We were also interested to see if youth in Sydney thought that young people who hang out in public in groups should be equated with youth gangs. The youth we surveyed did not think so. As Figure 5.10 shows, only 10% of youth who answered the question said yes to: ‘Is a group a gang?’ This highlights one of the key difficulties with the current discourse on ethnicity, youth and crime in Sydney today: the need to be more precise with the use of terms like ‘ethnic’, ‘middle eastern appearance’, and ‘gangs’.

Figure 5.10: Do You Consider your Group to be a Gang?—Youth

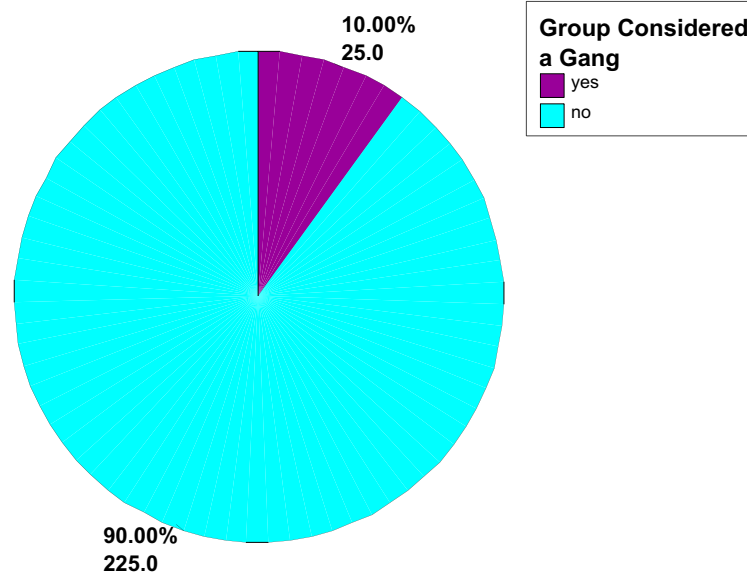
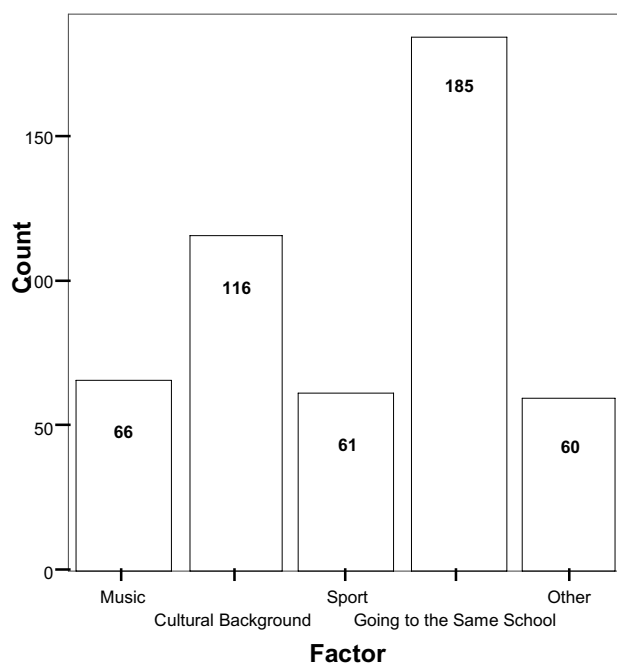


Figure 5.11: The Major Factors that Bring the Group Together—Youth



We also asked what is it that forms the basis of the social groupings in which youth participate. While ethnic background was clearly one of the common denominators of the youth groups surveyed, it was not as important as going to the same school together. Friendships based on music, sport, and other social and education activities were also mentioned, as illustrated in Figure 5.11.

Conflict between ethnic groups

Ethnic conflict has often been directly associated with ethnic diversity. Over the past decades, images of ethnic diversity have mostly been followed by images of ethnic conflict: Rwanda, Bosnia, England... the list is very long. Commentators, such as historian Geoffrey Blainey, argued in the 1980s that we would see ethnic conflict in the ‘front-line’ suburbs of ethnic diversity in the western suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney (Blainey, 1984; Collins, 1985). In the Sydney survey we asked the youth and adults we surveyed if there was conflict between ethnic groups of young people. The results are shown in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4: Is There Conflict Between Ethnic Groups of Young People? (%)

	Youth	Adults	Total
Yes (Nos.)	247	119	366
Yes (%)	58.3%	36.4%	48.7%
No (Nos.)	177	208	385
No (%)	41.7%	63.6%	51.3%
Total Nos	424	327	751

Overall, the answers to this question were split roughly in half: 48.7% responded that yes, they did think that there was conflict between ethnic groups, while 51.3% said no to this question. While the majority of youth (58.3%) thought that there was conflict between ethnic groups, only one third of adults (36.4%) agreed. This age or generational difference in attitudes about ethnic youth conflict is more significant than gender differences, although as Table 5.5 shows more males (55.1%) thought that there was ethnic conflict between groups than did females (48.6%).

Table 5.5: Is There Conflict Between Ethnic Groups of Young People? (%)

	Males	Females	Total
Yes (Nos.)	220	164	364
Yes (%)	55.1%	42.5%	48.6%
No (Nos.)	163	222	385
No (%)	44.9%	57.5%	51.4%
Total Nos	363	386	749

We also asked our respondents who thought that there was an ethnic conflict between groups of youth to name these groups. Those youth who answered ‘yes’ identified those ethnic groups involved in conflict thus: Lebanese, those from the Middle East, Pacific Islanders, Australians and Indians. The adults who thought there was ethnic based youth conflict nominated Asian, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Pacific Islanders, and Tongan youth.