

## Conclusion

In this report we have presented the results of a survey of 380 adults and 445 youth into many aspects of the relationship between youth, ethnicity and crime in Sydney. This is the first phase of a three-phase research project that has the financial backing of the Australian Research Council, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (now DIMIA) and twenty-five industry partners. The research project emerged out of the heat generated in the Sydney media about the issue of ethnic crime in Sydney in general, and ethnic youth gangs in particular. The survey was designed to get responses from those at the very heart of this debate: immigrant adult and youth in South Western Sydney. Most of those surveyed were first or second generation immigrants from a non-English speaking background, with a control sample of third or later generation Australians and immigrants from an English speaking background. The survey was conducted in a number of Local Government Areas (LGAs) in South Western Sydney: Hurstville, Canterbury, Bankstown, Fairfield, Rockdale, Liverpool and Auburn—with a control drawn from North Shore LGAs.

A number of important findings have emerged from this survey. First, there is clear evidence that there is widespread concern about crime, or fear of crime, among Sydney's NESB youth and adults. Many people surveyed attribute crime in Sydney to organised crime gangs and youth gangs. To about half of those we surveyed, these gangs are associated with particular ethnic groups, particularly Asian, Middle-Eastern and Pacific Islander immigrants. It is not clear from our research how much of this fear of crime and the linking of crime to specific ethnic groups is a product of personal experience of crime *per se* or of reflected 'experiences' read about in what has become a very vocal and persistent media coverage; a coverage that has now been loudly broadcasting this link between crime and ethnicity in Sydney for the past three and a half years.

We also know that many NESB Sydney-siders feel most unsafe on public transport and at places like railway stations, bus stations and car parks. Sydney's youngest and oldest NESB immigrant populations living in the South Western Sydney suburbs are much more likely to rely on public transport. Yet we found that most of those people who live in the suburbs of South Western Sydney that have been portrayed by the Sydney media as the heart of ethnic crime actually *feel very safe* living in these suburbs. This finding supports our view that much of the fear about crime in Sydney is, itself, a product of a media beat-up compounded by the political opportunism of state politicians on all sides of the political spectrum.

This is not to say that immigrant youth do not commit crimes, or that ethnic youth and criminal gangs do not exist. In fact, our data on the self-reporting of crime by ethnic youth confirms that they do, as does the recent police arrests of Middle Eastern immigrants involved in criminal gangs of organized car stealers in Sydney during the last few months. Rather, the most important point is that the fear of ethnic youth crime in Sydney appears to be far out of proportion to the realities of the scale of ethnic youth crime in existence. While some immigrant youth do engage in criminal behaviour, this is probably a transitory stage for many

youth of all ethnic backgrounds in Sydney today. From earlier research (Collins *et al.*, 2000) we have established that only a minority of youth in Sydney appear to be the perpetrators of serious crime, and only a minority continue this criminality into adult life. Perhaps acceptance of the normality of youth crime might help dissolve some of the moral panic and fear of crime in our society.

The Sydney survey also reveals that most of the NESB youth interviewed hang out in public spaces together, and that most of these youth do not consider these friendship groups to be 'gangs'. This leads us to the view that the fear of youth gangs in Sydney is being exaggerated by media coverage. This is not to deny that there are youth gangs in Sydney and that some of them do have their basis in ethnic solidarity. However, the media moral panic about ethnic youth gangs appears to be out of step with the reality and, once again, is a major contributing factor in the vast insecurity and fear of crime that pervades Sydney today.

This survey does confirm strongly that youth are as much the *victims* of crime as they are its perpetrators. As such, they are deserving of our sympathy, help and understanding rather than just our blame and suspicion. Youth of all ethnic backgrounds have a right to access Sydney's public spaces, yet they do not appear to be well served by urban planners and municipal and state authorities in terms of the provision of safe public space, particularly at night and at public transport nodes. Moreover, there is an apparent tension between youth and the owners of shopping malls and others who commodify public space. Once again, youth have a right to—and will—access these private commercial venues, even though their layout and design often fails to come to grips with this important aspect of social design for Sydney's commercial spaces.

Police actions and response to crime and police handling of youth and criminal gangs are clearly controversial issues among the adults and youth surveyed. Not surprisingly, NESB youth are less supportive of police actions than are adults. However, even here there seems to be a split within the youth and the adults surveyed about how they view police responses to crime in Sydney.

Fundamentally, the question remains: is this high concern about crime by those living in Sydney's South Western suburbs based on their experiences of crime, or some media and political construction of crime which have continually stamped these ethnic groups as criminal and the regions that they live in as the "crime precincts" of Sydney?

What we do know is that fear of crime is disproportionate to experiences of actual crime. We also know that it is only a minority of youth of Asian, Middle-Eastern and Pacific Islander background who are involved in youth and criminal gangs, and that youth and criminal gangs are not the preserve of youth of Asian, Middle-Eastern and Pacific Islander background. The great danger of the current moral panic about ethnic crime in Sydney is that the criminality of a *few* begins to be portrayed as a criminality of a *culture*. This leads to the negative stereotyping of many of Sydney's diverse immigrant cultures. It also leads to the possibility that we respond to, analyze and portray ethnic youth crime in Sydney in a very different way to that response we have to crime committed by youth of the majority Anglo-Celtic

background. This process leads inevitably to the *racialisation* of the youth crime problem in Sydney. If this is the case—and there is strong evidence in Sydney that this has been the case for the past four years—then we put at risk an accurate understanding of the nature, extent and dynamics of the crime issue in Sydney and also put at risk the ability of policy responses to deal adequately with the issue. Even more alarmingly, if we continue to reinforce the racialisation of the youth crime issue in the discourses, policies and practices of Sydney’s media, police and governments, the social cohesion of one of the world’s most cosmopolitan cities is put in jeopardy.

Problems of youth crime are clearly complex, with this survey just touching the surface of many complex issues. We hope that in the second and third stages of our research (to be completed later this year), which deal with more in-depth qualitative study of these important issues and with an assessment of policy responses to youth, crime and ethnicity, we can progress further in our understanding of, and response to this controversial issue. The issue of ethnic youth crime in Sydney today is an important litmus test for ethnic community relations, for state and local government politics and for policing: errors made in this sensitive and important area can have long run implications to the managing of cultural diversity in this most multicultural of cities and nations.