

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find a book review of *Young Thugs: Inside the dangerous world of Canadian street gangs*.



Canadian street gangs: How bad, and what to do?

A recent book describes the problem, but does it adequately address causes—and solutions?

Chettleburgh, M. (2007). *Young Thugs: Inside the dangerous world of Canadian street gangs*. Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.

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Should parents be concerned about street gangs in Canada? Michael Chettleburgh thinks so. The self-described criminal justice consultant—who says he himself was a member of a gang in his youth—predicts gang growth in Canada. *Young Thugs: Inside the dangerous world of Canadian street gangs* attempts to inform parents and provide an action plan. But does he succeed?

In 2002 Chettleburgh surveyed police forces across the country about the street gang problem for a federal report—the basis of the book. His survey counted 7000 gang members under the age of 21, about .17 percent of all youth in that age range. [1] About half of those are under the age of 18. When gang members over 21 are added the numbers increase to 11 000 or more.

Though the actual numbers are not overwhelming, especially in comparison to the total population, Chettleburgh cautions parents it's the potential for violence perpetuated by gang members that is cause for concern.

He discusses the lure of the street life: Gangs promise members security, camaraderie, identity, adventure and the opportunity to make cash. Chettleburgh suggests there are many "root causes" but he argues that the chief cause of gang involvement is socio-economic disparity—poverty, in short.

As a result, he devotes considerable energy to describing the connection between the lack of resources for new Canadians and gang involvement. He suggests there are too few ESL programs and too many restrictions preventing new Canadians from obtaining well paying jobs. Certainly, socio-economic issues contribute to gang growth, but he overstates this claim.

For example, he implies that when banks offer low interest rates they are actually perpetuating a materialistic culture in which disadvantaged youth turn to gangs to generate income. Fingering financial institutions for contributing to the gang problem is the kind of tired overstatement that may deter some readers from progressing to the chapters where Chettleburgh demonstrates more depth.

Where Chettleburgh is more engaging is in describing the lure of street gangs. He engages readers in an explanation of the business gangs participate in and presents a gritty but thought provoking chapter on gangs in the prison system. He refutes the notion that media, music and video games push kids to join gangs, and it's likely good to challenge this preconceived stereotype. He also challenges the notion that the American gun culture is responsible for Canadian street gang formation.

In part two, Chettleburgh addresses the role communities can have in confronting gang activity. He advocates for community policing with targeted gang suppression rather than large "gang-sweeps" – where police investigate a gang culminating in sweeping raids and arrests. Supportive of increased preventative measures, Chettleburgh introduces readers to several successful community-based programs targeting at-risk youth that have reduced neighbourhood crime. In the 1990s, the Ottawa Police Youth Centre offered sport leagues, activities and counselling opportunities to upwards of 1100 children and youth. Charges against youth under 18 in the neighbourhood dropped by half.

In the shortest chapter in the book, Chettleburgh argues for the legalization of drugs to knock out the economic footing from under street gangs. He positively salivates at the potential profits from a government regulated and taxed drug trade. Though a popular argument, Chettleburgh provides no evidence of reduced organized crime in countries with relaxed drug laws. And even if ending drug prohibition removed the trade from the hands of street gangs, Chettleburgh admits gangs would find other illegal ventures.

The final chapter of the book addresses the important role families have in preventing their kids from entering gangs. Chettleburgh notes that families provide emotional attachment and social and moral education. While he recognizes fatherlessness as a risk factor, he challenges the emphasis other gang experts place on fatherlessness. Family dynamics are worth more treatment than this book provides.

Sure, Chettleburgh is knowledgeable about street gangs and has worked with police departments and community workers. Readers who disagree with some of his assertions will still appreciate the engaging description of gang operations. But the writing style is jocular, even scrappy. And his own "gang life" was actually his membership in the Ontario Hockey League--he leads the reader along before revealing this detail.

Parents ought to be aware of the grim realities of gang life. Chettleburgh provides that, but his other explanations are up for debate.

Endnotes:

1. This estimated percentage is based on 2006 census population data of 15 to 24 year-olds.