

Don't write off all gang members, experts urge

Many join to survive, can be reintegrated into community, conference hears

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Many youths who grow up in areas where gangs rule the streets face a simple, bleak choice: "Either I'm going to be a victim or I'm going to victimize other people."

Although it's tempting to demonize and condemn gang members, many join not for money or power, but for mere self-preservation, says Michael Chettleburgh, an expert on Canadian street gangs and author of *Young Thugs*.

Mr. Chettleburgh explained that most gang members are mere foot soldiers who vary in their propensity for violence and crime, and in their commitment to the gang. Some are better candidates for re-integration into productive society than others.

"We shouldn't treat them all as an undifferentiated, single arch-enemy of society," Mr. Chettleburgh said.

He was speaking at a conference at the Confederation Education Centre on Woodroffe Avenue Thursday that brought some of the foremost authorities on street gangs from across Canada to address a crowd of Ottawa teachers, youth workers, police officers, city representatives and criminal justice officials.

As more is learned about the dynamics of gang membership, the strategies aimed at defeating them must change, Mr. Chettleburgh said. Law enforcement alone cannot solve the problem.

Ottawa police have come to the same conclusion.

"You folks do have one of the finest police services in the country," Mr. Chettleburgh said. "It's not about trying to arrest your way out of the problem, it's about working and developing communities."

Ottawa police put significant resources into cracking down on the more egregious criminal elements of gangs, mainly through its Direct Action Response Team, which targets gang members. But police have focused as much on prevention and intervention as on enforcement, Mr. Chettleburgh said.

That strategy, said Alan Leschied, a psychologist and professor at the University of Western Ontario, must be a model for the rest of the country, given the deteriorating situation in public schools.

A culture of aggression has permeated Canada's schools, putting children at risk of being either victims or perpetrators in an escalating cycle of violence, said Mr. Leschied, who specializes in youth gangs and delivered the keynote address at the conference.

While youth crime has been steady or declined slightly over the past several years, schools have become increasingly violent, despite the efforts of educators, he explained. A recent study from Western Canada found that one-third of school children fear for their personal safety.

"The level of intimidation in our halls is truly amazing," Mr. Leschied said.

Teachers are at the front line of the battle and are key to recognizing the early signs of a student at risk of becoming violent or allying with a street gang.

"You never, ever, ever do not take seriously a young person's expression of violence," he said. "That's part of our lessons from high-profile cases like Taber and Columbine."

Even after a young man or woman sinks into gang life, education can be crucial to bringing them back out.

Jabari Lindsay and Andrew Bacchus have helped develop gang-exit strategies in some of the most troubled neighbourhoods of Toronto for an organization called Breaking the Cycle. Their workshop was all the buzz at Thursday's event.

The pair set up shop in areas where crime and drugs proliferate and try to get gang members to contribute to a lifestyle separate from the gang, and begin setting "pro-social" goals.

The program teaches the basics of leading a productive life: anger management, conflict resolution, socialization, reconnecting with family and exploring job prospects. Even CPR.

But this is not early intervention.

"If you were to look at the rap sheets of some of these kids ..." Mr. Lindsay said, trailing off. "We typically don't say it's a program where we work with at-risk youth. We talk about working with throwaway youth, kids that nobody wants to work with."

The goal is not necessarily to sever all gang ties. Most of their charges joined gangs at an early age to protect themselves after being victimized by other gangs.

"So if I say to them, 'Don't be a part of that gang anymore,' I'm saying, 'Don't talk to your cousin,' " Mr. Lindsay said.

With a little guidance, many embrace the opportunity, withdraw from crime, get steady jobs and rebuild family ties.

But Others are killed before they can complete the program, or are sent back to prison.

Mr. Lindsay recently returned from a vacation to learn that one of his "graduates" had been implicated in a murder while under the influence of older gang members and will likely face a lengthy prison stretch.

The young man had been working a steady job and was proud of his progress, Mr. Lindsay said, fighting back tears.

"He said he's sorry to me for what happened. He said this year has been the best year of his life."

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