

**THE MEANING OF FAMILY AND HOME FOR YOUNG PASIFIKA PEOPLE
INVOLVED IN GANGS IN THE SUBURBS OF SOUTH AUCKLAND**

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Abstract

This article uses in-depth interviews conducted with 26 Pasifika¹ youth gang members from two South Auckland suburbs to explore how these youth perceive family and home in the context of their role as a gang member. The voices of these youth, obtained in a series of focus group interviews organised according to their gang affiliation, provide us with the opportunity to understand the place and meaning that family and home have in the lives of these young people. The data show that being a member of a family remains a key desire for youth gang members, and that a supportive immediate family takes priority over the gang family. Home to the youth included the streets, neighbourhood and community in which their immediate family and gang family resided. Of interest is that young Pasifika people involved in gangs were not seeking to replace their immediate family or home with a gang family or for a life on the street but extended their meanings of family and home to include the gang and the street.

INTRODUCTION

Demographic Profile of Counties Manukau

Research into the meanings of family and home for young Pasifika people involved in gangs was carried out in the communities of Mangere and Otara in the Counties Manukau area of Auckland, identified by the Ministry of Social Development as a key area of youth gang activity. Counties Manukau has a young age structure, a high proportion of Pasifika peoples and areas of high economic deprivation. At the time of the 2006 Census, 67% of Pasifika peoples (177,933) lived in the Auckland region. Manukau City's Pasifika population was 27.8% compared with 6.9% for New Zealand. The Pasifika populations for Otara and Mangere were 78.9% and 49.18% respectively, and 34.2% of the population of Otara and 28.53% of Mangere were under 15 years of age, compared with 21.5% for New Zealand.²

Counties Manukau has some of the poorest areas in New Zealand. Suburbs such as Mangere and Otara have a higher level of "economic deprivation, poverty, transience, housing overcrowding and employment" compared with the rest of New Zealand (Auckland Youth Support Network 2006:6). Ninety-four per cent of the people in Otara and 78% of the people in Mangere live in some of New Zealand's most deprived (decile 9 and decile 10) areas. The 2006 Census showed that the median income for Otara and Mangere for those aged 15 years and over was \$16,450 and \$21,800 respectively, compared with \$24,200 for Manukau City and \$24,400 for New Zealand. Unemployment for those aged over 15 years of age was 7.1% in Manukau City compared with 5.1% for New Zealand.³

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¹ This is based on the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs' definition of "Pasifika".

² www.stats.govt.nz

³ www.stats.govt.nz

Government Initiatives for Pasifika Youth

A number of government reports and strategies have focused on Pasifika youth development and support. The *Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa* (YSDA) report (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2002) focused on how government and society could support young people aged 12 to 24 years to develop the skills and attitudes to participate positively in society, as these years are seen as critical to human development. The YSDA report noted that healthy relationships among young people with similar experiences or interests are very important for positive development because they allow young people to gain friendship and support, and are a natural setting for talking, negotiating, socialising and exploring future options, as well as providing opportunities for leisure. The report listed common protective factors such as safe, supportive neighbourhoods and a large network of social support from wider family, teachers, school, workplace, church, youth organisations and leaders. Common risk factors were a lack of social support from family, neighbourhood and the wider community; parenting that was overly harsh or that set insufficient boundaries; and problems or disadvantages in the family, including violence, crime and poverty.

The Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs' (2003) consultation with Pasifika youth about their views on identity, prosperity and leadership revealed that these concepts held little meaning for these young people unless they were understood in the context of family. Family was identified as a central organising principle for Pasifika peoples, and New Zealand's youth development policy acknowledges the family as an important arena in youth socialisation. The *Pacific Youth Development Strategy* (Ministry of Social Development 2005) is aimed at delivering a positive life change for, and affirmation of, all Pacific youth in Auckland. In particular, the Auckland sector of the Pacific Youth Development Strategy draws together three elements of a young Pasifika person's life: family, church and the youth themselves.

In 2006 the Families Commission held a series of fono⁴ with Pacific leaders and Pacific community representatives around the country to identify research themes and to gather relevant, meaningful and useful information about the characteristics of, and challenges facing, New Zealand Pacific families now and in the future (Families Commission 2007). One of the major themes identified was Pacific youth and the need to hear the "voice" of Pacific youth (aged 15–25 years), including alienated youth. The fono participants were also concerned about whether the gangs and the street were replacing "family" and what these two factors provided that led to the perception that they were causing an increasing number of young Pasifika people to join gangs.

Improving Outcomes for Young People in Counties Manukau (Auckland Youth Support Network 2006) detailed a plan of action that was a commitment by government and non-government agencies to work together for better outcomes for young people in the Counties Manukau region. The plan of action included a number of activities such as crisis management response, intervening with young offenders, and preventing poor outcomes among at-risk young people. The plan also recognised links with other activities, including mention of the Counties Manukau District "Pacific Peoples' Strategic Plan 2005–2007", which it described as identifying family violence and youth offending as two major areas of concern for Pacific peoples.

⁴ *Fono* – the Samoan word for meeting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Libbey et al. (2002) state that young people who have healthy relationships with their families are less likely to engage in risky health behaviours. Studies by Blum (1998) and Resnick (2000) show that family relationships are fundamental to the positive health and development of young people. In Thai's (2003) study of Vietnamese gangs, many of the Vietnamese families said it was hard for parents to understand why their children had changed after living in America, while the children did not understand why their parents still clung to traditional ways. Researchers (Tunufa'i 2005, Macpherson 2001, Tiatia 1998) have confirmed that young Samoans growing up in New Zealand experience tension between their lifestyles and those of their parents, as well as conflict with the parents' struggle to control their children's choices.

Fa'alau and Jensen's 2006 study of Samoan youth and family relationships in New Zealand revealed that most youth said their families cared about them a lot and reported having close bonds with them. Fa'alau and Jensen's Adolescent Health Survey, which included 30 Samoans aged 13–27 years, showed that many considered their siblings to be their greatest source of support and protection. Most of the students interviewed felt close to their parents most of the time and said that their parents also spent enough time with them, but also commented on "the large amount of control that their parents exerted over them", including control over who their peers were, money, leisure time, cultural values and schooling (Fa'alau and Jensen 2006:21). Thai (2003) believes, however, that parents can help to prevent their children from joining gangs by influencing who their children associate with and who their friends are, as well as being aware of the activities in which their children are involved.

Youth gangs arose as a phenomenon in New Zealand in the 1950s, although the incidence of gangs remained small through the 1960s. At the time, most gang members were *palagi*.⁵ Throughout the 1970s gang membership mainly comprised those adults who had grown up as younger members with the gangs. The main source of information about gangs during this period was the police, though some researchers believe that police information about practices regarded as socially deviant is unreliable (Ferrell 1999, Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn 1999, Monahan 1970). In the 1980s, gangs were composed mainly of adults and membership was long-term. Established gangs became more pronounced in the 1990s in relation to the amphetamine trade, and gangs became more organised.

Ethnic gangs first came to public attention in New Zealand in 1971, when gang members, most of whom were in their early to mid-teens, claimed they had been brutalised by police (Meek 1992). In the 1970s Māori and Pasifika gangs expanded, specifically in depressed rural and urban settings. The increase in Asian migrants in the 1980s saw an increase in Asian gangs in the 1990s. Eggleston's (2000) participant observation study of New Zealand youth gangs found little evidence of a national youth-gang culture, though the author claimed that youth were involved with emerging and established adult gangs. Eggleston's study, which included individual interviews at a youth facility as well as with those gang members who were being observed, noted that youth street gangs of "ethnically homogenous composition" had become common in the cities (p.149).

⁵ The Samoan word for white person.

The New Zealand Police estimate that there are currently approximately 73 youth gangs comprising 600 youth gang members in Counties Manukau, though accurate data on numbers are difficult to obtain.

Thrasher's 1927 study was the first serious academic study of gangs. Based on the cultural and ecological context at the time, Thrasher concluded that gangs were "the spontaneous effort of boys to create a society for themselves where none adequate to their needs exists" (Thrasher 1927:37, cited in Decker and Van Winkle 1996:5). According to Thai (2003), the definition of gang used by police considers four criteria: a name, more than three members who meet regularly, their claiming of territory, and criminal behaviour. Thai says there is a problem in defining gangs because definitions seem to fit the needs and purposes of a particular area or gang and there is no clear distinction between "youth group", "youth gangs" and "organised adult gangs". *From Wannabes to Youth Offenders: Youth Gangs in Counties Manukau – Research Report* (Ministry of Social Development 2008) classified gangs into four groups: wannabes, territorial gang, unaffiliated youth gang and affiliated criminal youth gang. Wannabes were reported by the author to be mistakenly classed as gang members and are highly informal; territorial gangs are more organised, and are characterised by territorial boundaries; unaffiliated youth gang members are not under an adult gang, and engage in criminal activity for their own benefit; and affiliated youth gangs have a relationship with an adult gang and carry out criminal activities on behalf of the adult gang.

Gangs are said to form under conditions of social disorganisation, such as poverty and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, which create social instability (Lane and Meeker 2003, Patillo 1998, Sampson and Groves 1989). The problem is compounded by the presence of low-income immigrant families, where the children become estranged from their parents at the same time as they are rejected by the dominant culture (Phillips 1999). Thai (2003) also uses social disorganisation theory to explain youthful crime in immigrant populations. The author regards this as a relevant theory for this phenomenon because in immigrant communities, he reasons, "solidarity is weakened as the young generation adopts the values of the new community rather than the traditional values of the parents' generation" (p. 50). Most gang research in the US is grounded in social disorganisation theory and, most recently, economic marginalisation theories. The central problem with social disorganisation theory for gang research, according to Zatz and Portillos (2000), is that it "overemphasises family dynamics, focussing on individualized resources and constraints to the exclusion of larger structural concerns" (p. 376).

Several factors referred to as "multiple marginalities" are said to combine to influence gang membership (Ferrell 1999, Steffensmeier and Allan 1989). Society, neighbourhoods, communities and schools break down for minority youth socialised in poor, urban environments, who internalise the values and mores of "the street". Gang membership indicates that society has allowed the development of streets that are poor and anxiety-laden, and from which parents are unable to protect their children (Phillips 1999).

The Ministry of Social Development (2008) report on youth gangs identified a numbers of factors that contribute to poor outcomes for young people. For example, parental disengagement was evident among both employed parents and those parents not in employment, and youth gang members came from families with parents who worked but who held multiple jobs. Thai (2003) also found that adults and organisations blamed the family and home life for the cause of Vietnamese delinquency and youth gangs, but said it was because the parents worked long hours and were not around to supervise their children. The

lack of supervision was said to cause the youth to turn to their peers, and eventually to the gangs.

The Ministry of Social Development report states that often gangs provide youth with a “proxy family unit” that meets the social needs of the youth and provides support (2008:16). The research identified a number of risk and protective factors related to family, peers and community. Protective factors included supportive and caring parents, a secure and stable family, a pro-social peer group, and a pleasant, low-crime neighbourhood. Risk factors included socially isolated parents, parents and siblings who engage in criminal activity, a deviant peer group, and neighbourhood violence. Breakdown of the family, youth violence and gang activity are frequently mentioned issues related to poverty in the urban setting (Reiboldt 2001).

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on research that was carried out with young Pasifika people involved in gangs to find out what family meant for these young people and to identify which individuals or groups are included in their definition of family. Because the concept of family is closely tied up with that of home, the research also investigated where home was and what it meant for young Pacific gang members. From the results, the author attempts to determine whether the family and the home are being replaced by the gang and the street for these youth. Specific themes uncovered during a series of focus group interviews with the gangs include the issue of care and pride in relation to gang members and their families and communities, and the safety, familiarity and resources of the streets.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 26 Pasifika people aged 14–24 years living in the suburbs of Mangere and Otara who were actively involved in gangs at the time of the study. The participants were drawn from four gangs with differing profiles in an effort to provide a greater representation of youth gang membership in the South Auckland area. The CWI gang is an ethnically based gang of mainly Samoan heritage from Mangere. The Twain gang is neighbourhood-based from Mangere East. The Broad Street is a female gang from Otara. The Birdies is a neighbourhood-based gang from Otara.

Two of the three researchers were long-time residents of Mangere and Otara who had access to young Pasifika people involved in gangs and were able to use their personal relationships and networks in the area to recruit participants. The involvement of trusted youth workers from a community youth organisation was a significant part of the success of the meetings between the gangs and the researchers.

The participants were born and/or raised in Mangere or Otara and were still living there. They came from a range of Pacific backgrounds, including Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Niue and the Cook Islands. A small number of the participants were Māori, who were included because of their gang friendship with the participants. The research team, which included the author, collected qualitative data from four semi-structured focus group interviews with each of the gangs. The data were initially analysed under the themes of family and home, which framed the interview questions.

The voices of women in New Zealand gangs are often marginalised because of the media’s focus on the role and activities of the mostly male young people involved in gangs, so the reader is reminded of the female voices that are present in the research.

Qualitative methods are believed to provide an in-depth approach to understanding gangs, and researchers believe that more face-to-face, academically rigorous studies are needed in gang research studies (Venkatesh 1997, Phillips 1999). Eggleston (2000) has argued that research on gangs should avoid the presence of hype – which he sees as a strategy by the younger gang members to build themselves up to an outsider – by using multiple methods to collect data. Interview hype, explains Eggleston, is recognisable and understood by the ethnographer in ways that would not be clear to an interviewer. In the present study, two of the three researchers involved in were born and had grown up in Mangere and Otago and either had been in the gangs or had strong family connections with gangs. The researchers' knowledge of gang relationships and operations as well as their familiarity with the gang members interviewed allowed the researchers to detect the presence of hype in the data and avoid its mis-analysis in the results. The different gangs interviewed by the three researchers enabled a triangulation of the data, and the use of focus groups reduced the element of power that may have existed with individual interviews of gang members.

Qualitative studies done on gangs have tended to focus on the gang members as gang members, with few studies looking at the overall lives of these adolescents, including their families and neighbourhoods (Reiboldt 2001). In New Zealand, research on gangs has looked at youth in general, and studies on Pasifika youth gangs in New Zealand are non-existent. Although there is a small body of recently published research on youth and gangs in the South Auckland area, there is no research on what family and the home mean to Pasifika youth involved in gangs. The data reported here were gathered as part of a larger qualitative research project (Voice⁶) that investigated Pasifika youth in South Auckland, including those who were not involved in gangs and those who had moved out of gang life. This article hopes to increase understanding of the meaning of family and home for young Pasifika people involved in gangs, as well as to add to the literature on Pasifika youth in gangs.

The following questions provided a guide for the interviews on the theme of family:

- What does family mean to you?
- Who do you regard as your family?
- What sort of influence has your family been in your life?
- What do you think your family is most proud of about you?
- What things are you most proud of about your family?

If participants' responses to questions about family did not imply "immediate or blood" family members, the participants were also asked:

- What do you think your immediate family members are most proud of about you?
- What things are you most proud of about your immediate family?

The following questions provided a guide for the interviews on the theme of home:

- Where is home for you?
- Where is your community?
- What other communities have you belonged to?
- What are the things you like about your (current) home/community?
- What are the things you dislike about your (current) home/community?

⁶ The Voice project is a 2008 Families Commission study undertaken to examine what the concepts of family, home, leadership and identity mean for young Pasifika people in South Auckland in relation to their future vision for themselves and their family.

THE GANGS⁷

The CWI gang was started by a group of prisoners in 1994 to protect themselves against bullying from a larger and more notorious gang. Until that time there was no evidence that any gangs in New Zealand had had their origins in prison (Meek 1992). The CWI gang was brought to Otara and now has around 100 members based all over South Auckland. The gang members were originally from the Pacific Islands but their membership now includes any ethnicity.

The Broad Street is a female gang and has been around for about three years. It is connected to a larger gang, the Hurricanes, which was established in the 1970s. The Birdies is a relatively young gang, having been established about five years ago. Its membership is difficult to estimate but is said to be around 200. The gang is based in Otara and its members or affiliates come from the local primary, intermediate and secondary schools. The Birdies is a conglomeration of smaller gangs. The Twain gang was begun in Mangere East more than 10 years ago by a group of cousins. The gang is affiliated with other younger gangs, and youth from any ethnic group are welcome to join the gang.

RESULTS

Emerging Themes

A number of sub-themes emerged from an analysis of the data. Although the semi-structured questions were based on the initial themes of family and home, the following sub-themes resulted from the emphasis given by the participants to their responses in the interviews. The sub-themes of family include: who is family, family concern and pride, and family care. The sub-themes of home are: safe and familiar streets, “having” in the community, and our neighbourhood, our home.

FAMILY

Who is Family?

To many of the participants their families were their parents, brothers, sisters and cousins, as well as the gang members and their partners. Family was also the friends and people with whom they grew up and who meant everything to them. Most of the participants said that their gang family was just as important to them as their immediate or blood family, and they regarded members of the gang like brothers because they were always there for them when they got into trouble.

The CWI gang saw themselves as a family. They believed that they operated like a family in that its members held different roles and had different talents and skills:

“We’ve got a uso⁸ working at the gym ... my brother is a hustler, I work at the Auckland meat processing, so each of us have a role to play and it’s to make money for the families.” (CWI)

⁷ Names of gangs and some profile details have been changed to ensure anonymity.

⁸ Uso – the Samoan word for brother.

For a few of the participants, their blood family was not included in those whom they regarded as family because of how they had been treated by them, and they relied on the gang for the family care they received:

“This family [gang] has rescued me since 1997 and have been there for me. My blood family I don’t stay with them – just not worth it.” (CWI)

Joe and Chesney-Lind (1995) describe the gang as an alternative family. Researchers state that gangs regard themselves as a family, and often when families do not fulfil their parental role, the gang family takes over as a support mechanism (Venkatesh and Levitt 2000, Phillips 1999).

It is important to note that membership in the gangs often includes family members. Zatz and Portillos (2000) believe that gang-family ties are stronger if “family” is contextualised to include the nuclear family, the extended family and close friends. The authors claim that it is common for several members of the extended family to belong to the gang in each generation. Three of the gangs interviewed had members who were brothers, sisters, cousins or uncles:

“The last incident we had was we found out they were our cousins. They live across Petelo’s house. In New Year – that got sorted out without anyone dying – they pulled a shot gun on us. One of us was running with an axe and was having a gun pointing at him [laughter]. I went over and talked to the parents and found out that we were family on our dad’s side – one of us would have died from either side.” (CWI)

Becoming a father may provide a way out of gangs (Reiboldt 2001). Most of the participants said they wanted to have families of their own. One member said that when he was in jail he had dreamt of settling down with his own place and his family while still being able to be with his gang brothers. Now, he says, he has achieved what he once dreamed about, and as in Decker and Van Winkle’s study (1996), most of his fellow gang members saw themselves as settling down to life with a steady partner and children.

Two of the participants were about to become parents and did not expect they would change their social interactions with the gang, saying that they would be with their gang family until they died. Many of the participants agreed:

“I will always have the heart for my hood, even the whole of Otara.” (Broad Street)

Family Concern and Pride

Many of the participants said they were very proud of their families for raising them. Most were proud of their families for being there for them and for supporting them despite any problems they may have caused from being in the gangs. The participants said they believed their own families, both “blood” (immediate) and “hood” (gang), were most proud that they were still alive.

Many of the participants stated that their parents still worried about them:

“Our parents are always telling us, ‘Look after yourselves’, and my old man always saying he can’t sleep, aye. He used to wait until we walk back into the house so he can have a proper sleep – just being a dad.” (CWI)

The gang members were proud of their blood families for accepting them for who they were, even though they made fun of their gang associations:

“They mock us, aye, but they still accept us ... our family, like they make fun, aye, like we have a family reunion and they were saying, who is our sponsor – se o le CWI [laughter].” (CWI)

The participants were also proud of the way their gang families kept an eye on each other, reminded each other of their work commitments, and for the support they gave to each other’s families in times of need:

“I am proud of my family and proud of the boys too, like helping us out and getting someone to go to work ... it’s like, ‘Bro if you don’t, you ain’t gonna live man, like you’re not gonna get money next week’ ... and I am proud of the usos, man, because when we were in Samoa, the bros round up some cash, about a grand, because my dad stayed back as we all went to Samoa for our aunty’s funeral.” (CWI)

The female gang felt that their members understood them better than their immediate families, who they say did not support them when things went badly for them:

“If you get into a fight, your family is not going to back you up. They will say you are stupid for doing that. And if you are in the hood they, like, back you up, they know where we were coming from.” (Broad Street)

One of the members of Broad Street said that her family stopped being proud of her when she joined the gang, and she was now living with the family of a member of her gang family:

“When I was small, an innocent little girl and normal, go to school every day and all those good things that you are involved with your family. But as soon as you meet the hood it was over for the family.” (Broad Street)

Some participants were not proud of the situation within their immediate family that had influenced them into joining a gang, despite acknowledging that the final choice to do so had been theirs:

“I wasn’t proud of my family. I’m just saying that it was my choice. I chose to go that way because of the things I have been through with my family and everything else. It’s just the way I have been brought up.” (Birdies)

None of the youth in Thai’s (2003) study referred to problems with family as a reason for joining the gangs, though the adults interviewed said “family was the most mentioned reason for gang involvement” (p.60). Some of Thai’s youth gang members said they had good relationships with their family.

Family Care

The participants stated that their priority was to keep their family safe. They said that they were committed to protecting their immediate family but also felt that they could turn to their gang family for that same commitment and protection:

"[Family] are in your blood, like you care for them, like if they die, you are gonna fight for them. But the hood they are like 24/7. When you are out on the street, when you need money, you've got it."

The participants noted that if anything "bad" were to happen to either their immediate or gang family, the members would "get together and sort it".

The participants all agreed that if the choice had to be made between their immediate family and their gang family, they would choose their "family family, their blood family", and would "pretty much die for them". This is similar to Decker and Van Winkle's (1996) work, in which the researchers explicitly asked gang members who they would choose between their family and the gang: the overwhelming majority of the participants chose their families. More than half of the youth in Decker and Van Winkle's study said they would not willingly die for a gang member unless they were also family or a very close friend. Similarly, the participants all said they would willingly die for their families:

"Some of the boys, they have family as well, but I mean if you want to choose, you know, you love your family and pretty much die for them." (Birdies)

It was an explicit rule of the CWI gang that the immediate family took priority over the gang family:

"That's our number one rule – your immediate first, we second – always have." (CWI)

Although the gang family was important to them because they were able to connect with the gang in ways that they could not with their own family, the participants agreed that their immediate family was always there for them:

"When there's a shortage you can always turn to mum and dad and they recharge your battery." (Birdies)

With the gang family it was the similarity of their situation that bonded members to the gang:

"It's like a street life connection. It's like a bond we all have and we are all on the same boat, especially from Otara." (Birdies)

"Even the law can't break us." (Birdies)

Although most of the participants agreed that there was little they would want to change about their immediate family, a small number said that they did not always feel welcome with them:

"Yeah, like you just walk in and you get your foot through the door and they like go, "Where the fuck you been?" And it's like, I just came to see how you are, and that's when I will walk out." (Broad Street)

"They just scream and scream and it's like, 'Fuck you, I just waste my time coming to see you, aye'." (Broad Street)

Many of the participants did not associate their immediate family with fun and having a good time because of the rules and boundaries imposed by living with parents and older family

members. As a result, they preferred the atmosphere and interactions of their gang families and spent a lot of time “kicking back”, having fun and getting into fights with their hood family. The participants expressed a preference for hanging out with each other and did not like associating with other gangs. Like the gang members in Ruble and Turner’s (2000) study, the participants enjoyed the time they spent with their friends, particularly their gang friends, and the gang members would rather their friends be fellow gang members:

“We don’t like going to hang out with other crews ... We just like hanging out with ourselves.” (Twain)

The gang members preferred the “ghetto lifestyle” of the gang to the “good lifestyle” of the home because it allowed them to do what they liked:

“You can do what you like, how you like and when you like.” (Broad Street)

For those participants involved in gangs in Reiboldt’s study, this type of “activity and involvement was normal” (2001:236).

Some of the Twain gang participants said that their immediate family supported them more than their gang family, but that having both families was invaluable to them. The members of this gang said that their parents knew each other and frequently socialised together. They explained that they behaved differently depending on where they were and whom they were with:

“When we’re at each other’s homes we don’t act like we’re in Twain. It’s just like family, like talking to our own parents, with respect.” (Twain)

With the immediate family, the members say they go to church, do “home stuff and straight after dinner go back to this family [the gang]” (Twain).

For these Pasifika participants, “family” remained their immediate family in spite of the feelings of angst felt by family members as a result of their involvement in the gangs. The members’ concern for their family and the pride they held for their family indicate that their gang membership did not weaken this familial bond.

HOME

In investigating where home was for young Pasifika people involved in gangs, the participants’ responses offered the opportunity to understand the type of relationships that occurred between the gangs and their family and the gangs and their friends, and to explore the different contexts that existed in the home and in the street. The study did not focus on those youth who had left home to live on the street or who were faced with the prospect of finding food and shelter (Kidd 2003). The study allowed us to determine whether Pasifika youth had given up or wanted to give up the home for life on the street.

Safe and Familiar Streets

Like all the Otara youth we spoke to, home was Otara. They said they felt safe on the streets of Otara:

“Here’s the South side ... can’t be anywhere safer than that.” (Birdies)

The participants enjoyed the security that came from feeling invisible in Otara and expressed the relief they felt when they returned home after travelling outside the suburb:

“It’s like you just can’t wait to get back to Otara. You go out of here, like you just go to Papatoe, and when you get over the bridge, you’re just safe, aye, you’re invisible, just invisible – Otara is my home.” (Birdies)

All the participants saw home as the area in which they, their family – including their gang family – and friends lived. Most of them had been born or were raised in South Auckland and were reluctant to leave the shelter and familiarity of the area. One of the gangs that was based in Mangere because most of its members now lived there would like to return one day to Otahuhu, a neighbouring suburb, because it was where most of the members had grown up and where they had met each other. Their partners and children were the reason they had not yet returned:

“I’d like to go back there, there’s opportunity to go back and live, but my Mrs, cause she’s here for her life and the kids and my lifestyle ... but in consideration for my partner and my beautiful babies I had to relocate and that’s it. My family is first, and if it wasn’t for her I would go back there.” (CWI)

Thai’s (2003) Vietnamese gang members moved from one gang to another, and from state to state, and were mobile. They had friends and family who offered accommodation wherever they travelled and a community leader to help with jobs. However, this fluidity did not appear to loosen the links the gang members formed with each other, and the gang became their adopted family. For the CWI gang, their relocation from Otahuhu to Mangere had made them feel like strangers, and though they preferred to live in Mangere, they still had their friends in Otahuhu and found it unfamiliar in Mangere:

“With us bro is the people, cause you grew up there. But when we were in Otahu we knew everyone, just go there have a feed, jump the fence [laughter]. But like now we don’t know anyone. Like we’re there now like a year and a half and still don’t know anyone – it’s not like Otahu, you can call out ‘uso’ and go have a drink.” (CWI)

One of the gang leaders said that his son was being raised in Botany (a wealthier neighbouring suburb) by the mother, but he did not want to live there himself and continued to live in Mangere. He felt comfortable in Botany because he thought it was safer there and that it was a good place to raise a family. He wished that Mangere East was safer because it was where he would have preferred to raise his family.

“Where I’m staying now in Botany is quite nice, peaceful environment, no rocks through windows and stuff like that. It would make a difference if I raise my kids somewhere else, and it’s not because I don’t want to raise my kids around my friends, of course I do. But it’s like I don’t want to see a rock thrown through the window, aye, and stuff like that.” (Twain)

Others in his gang said they felt safe anywhere, “as long as my friends and family are around” (Twain).

“Having” in the Community

The participants had a high regard for the people who lived in the South Auckland suburbs. They acknowledged the struggle for them to survive, which they say had earned them the respect of the rest of New Zealand:

“Life ain’t easy in Otara or Mangere. Life ain’t easy in South Auckland ... but there are other people ... they have respect for us for being like that.”

Many of the participants said it was difficult growing up and living in communities like Otara and Mangere, and admitted getting food and money from their friends and their friends’ families. Reiboldt (2001:228) observes that “regardless of neighbourhood conditions, family involvement is a critical force in the lives of adolescents.”

“Like most of Otara have been living hard lives, like no money, no food in the cupboards, their parents are getting drunk and stoned and they have nothing. So they take you to other people because their parents are giving them nothing.”
(Broad Street)

Thai (2003) found that the concern in poor neighbourhoods seemed to be more for those living in the neighbourhood than for the area itself. Some of the participants believed that the neighbourhood where they lived caused them to join gangs. The gangs believed that the lack of resources in the area forced people out onto the streets and was a factor in the creation of gangs:

“You don’t have love, you don’t have support, you don’t have things you need – you don’t have anything. Yeah and that pushes everyone to the street, because you have nothing – nothing to live for ... that’s why there are gangs in Otara.”
(CWI)

The gang members knew that there were risks to the activities in which they were involved but they were prepared to take those risks in order to secure some financial means:

“I mean look at where I am now. I am not proud of the system, look at where it leads us – hard times but still gets us paid, but we have to put major work and it’s not legitimate too. The work we put in will get us double digits and 15 years sentence.” (Birdies)

Our Neighbourhood, Our Home

Gang members identify strongly with their neighbourhood and view their gangs as neighbourhood institutions (Zatz and Portillos 2000). Reiboldt (2001:226) claims that some neighbourhoods have such an abundance of gangs that “some streets are virtually off limits”. Street “ownership” by gang members is common, say some researchers (Phillips 1999, Patillo 1998), and a gang member may claim a street as his own territory. Zatz and Portillos’s (2000) research showed that gangs were once closely tied to their community and protected them. Now they believe that the gangs rob people of their security and force people to barricade themselves in their homes because they feel vulnerable. The presence of gangs, say Zatz and Portillos, creates havoc both because of their actions and because of they lure rival gangs into the neighbourhood. Horowitz (1987) acknowledges that even though communities may not approve of gang violence, they understand it.

Although gangs believe that one of their primary responsibilities remains the protection of their community, the protection they offer seems little more than making sure other competing gangs do not intrude or make their presence felt in the neighbourhood.

“I reckon gangs are good for protecting their own environment and own neighbourhood, that’s one good thing with gangs. Like when trouble comes in, always there to try and keep other people out of our area.” (Twain)

The participants were adamant in their belief that they had a right to belong to the streets in their neighbourhood and to claim ownership of these streets despite the threats and rivalry from outside gangs that wanted to expand into their neighbourhood. Gangs are essentially connected to the streets and the communities in which their families live (Reiboldt 2001). The participants were contemptuous of gangs that regarded themselves as “running” Otara because, to them, no one gang “ran” Otara:

“No one runs Otara. The whole community runs Otara. Everyone and anyone runs Otara. Everybody that lives in the neighbourhood runs Otara.” (Broad Street)

The presence of gangs in the neighbourhood provide the opportunity for other youth to join, and the Vietnamese youth in Thai’s (2003) study had initially grown up together as friends and eventually became a gang.

To the participants, home included their own street, the back of each other’s homes and the entire neighbourhood. Most of them lived only a short distance away from each other and liked the friendly nature of their community:

“Everyone knows each other around here, and if you walk down to the shops you don’t worry about being jumped. Everyone is there, yeah safe.” (Twain)

Some participants did not see themselves as belonging to the entire South Auckland region and felt like intruders when they went to those parts of South Auckland they did not know or frequent. They suspected that people from outside felt the same way when they came into their suburbs.

SUMMARY

For the gang members, family meant their immediate or “blood” family. This family took priority over their gang family, especially for those gang members who had children of their own. Family also included those friends who had been of assistance to them throughout their lives. The gangs looked after each other’s families in times of need and there was a strong family feeling for other gang members.

Gang members did not appear to want to give up their immediate family for a gang family – “my real family is like a shadow, they are always there and it makes me happy being with them”. For those members who did not have harmonious or stable relationships with their own immediate family, the gang family provided an alternative family environment. Gang members stated their preference for family, with the gang being an addition to their family, similar to the extended family. For Pasifika youth in gangs it was not unusual for the extended family concept to come into play given that this type of family is very much a part of Pasifika culture (Poland 2007).

The involvement of Pasifika youth in gangs may be an attempt by these youth to get from the gang what they do not get from the family; for example, acceptance of their identity, unconditional support of their lifestyle, and even financial assistance.

Young Pasifika people in gangs expressed a strong desire to remain in their suburbs. Home for many of them included their neighbourhood, their streets, and their suburbs. For these young Pasifika gang members, the street was where they met, made plans and socialised. The street became their main place of interaction, particularly if they were not welcomed in their home. At times, the street became an extension of their home and they considered all the people, especially friends that lived on the same street, as family. If most of their gang members lived in close proximity to them, it was likely that the street became their social habitat and home. There was a blending of the spatial and social boundaries between the home and the street as the home metamorphosed into the street for many gang members, who sometimes claimed ownership of particular streets.

However, despite the street being one of the main characteristics that profiled and identified many gangs, and became the place where they planned and conducted many of their activities, most gang members returned home to be with their families. Although the home had different rules and expectations for them, which, at times, conflicted with the rules and expectations of the street, most wanted a place to which they could return after being on the street or with the gang – “we go home and sleep”.

Our study has shown that family and home – whether discussed by young Pasifika gang members in terms of immediate and gang families, or the street and the community, respectively – remain essential to the contours of life in South Auckland for these Pasifika young people. Pasifika youth in gangs did not indicate a disconnection from family, nor did they suggest a desire to do without a family life that included parents, brothers, sisters and the extended family. These youth did not seem to want to leave their home, whether it is the place where their family resides, the street where their home is located or the neighbourhood where they, their friends and other gang members live. The links to the gang and to gang life do not appear to have weakened the relationship between these youth and their families, except in those circumstances where the family disapproves of their gang involvement, or the relationship between the gang member and the family was initially weak. Indeed, the voices of these Pasifika youth tell us that family and home mean a great deal to them.

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