



“Streets of menace”: Constructing and deconstructing youth “gangs” in two Australian cities

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Abstract

This paper explores the symbolic and instrumental impacts associated with labelling particular groups of young people as perpetrators of organised “gang” activity. Using case studies from two Australian cities, we point primarily to the constitutive and damaging nature of much media and public discourse about youth gang crime and show how young offenders’ disadvantage and disenfranchisement is rendered largely invisible or immaterial to understanding the causes and solutions to such problems. In an era of “fake news”, social media “echo chambers”, civil conflict, mass international migration/forced diasporas, as well as the reassertion of strong sovereign borders, we ask: how might one de-escalate the “monstering” of young people whose identity (and presence and place in society) is known primarily, if not exclusively, through the “noise” and visibility of their offending?

Key words

Young people; violence; de-escalation; gang discourse

Resumen

Este artículo explora los efectos simbólicos e instrumentales relacionados con etiquetar grupos concretos de jóvenes como autores de actividad organizada de bandas. Utilizando estudios de caso de dos ciudades australianas, apuntamos principalmente a la naturaleza constitutiva y perniciosa de gran parte de los discursos mediáticos y públicos sobre delincuencia de bandas juveniles, y mostramos cómo la desventaja y la

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privación de derechos de los jóvenes delincuentes se invisibilizan o se desmaterializan a la hora de entender las causas y las soluciones a dichos problemas. En una época de noticias falsas, "ecocámaras" de las redes sociales, conflicto social, migración masiva internacional y diásporas forzosas, así como en la reasignación de fuertes fronteras soberanas, nos preguntamos cómo se puede desescalar la "monsterización" de jóvenes cuya identidad (y presencia y lugar en la sociedad) es conocida, sobre todo, si no exclusivamente, por el "ruido" y la visibilización de sus delitos.

Palabras clave

Jóvenes; violencia; desescalar; discurso de bandas

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1. Introduction

Public and media discourse about youth crime regularly takes on a racialised tone in parts of Australia (White 1996, Perrone and White 2000, Poynting 2001, Collins and Reid 2009, Cunneen 2018). However, there are spikes in the discourse that see it fast tracked into the headlines with particular groups of young people held responsible for a disproportionately large amount of crime (White 1996, Perrone and White 2000). This is accompanied by popular explanations for offending – drawing on racialised discourses of blame – to justify increased police surveillance, longer custodial sentences, and further vilification (White 2004, Poynting 2006, Windle 2008). For the most part, this response operates in the absence of a more complex counter narrative which seeks to unpick young people's histories of marginalisation, fear of state authorities, and experiences of violence and harm (Collins and Reid 2009, Cunneen 2018). In this paper, we examine two such spikes and deconstruct their populist narratives to expose the more complex, counter narratives.

The article begins by discussing the "Gang of 49", a media-generated label given to a group of young (predominantly) Aboriginal males alleged to have been committing crimes around the city of Adelaide, in the state of South Australia from the early 2000s. We then turn the discussion to the "Apex Gang", a group of Sudanese young people allegedly responsible for a range of serious offences around the city of Melbourne, in the state of Victoria, since the mid-2010s. While the contexts and backgrounds of these groups differ significantly, their treatment in media, public and political discourse, alongside the intensification of the crimes attributed to them, is strikingly similar. Moreover, the negative attention visited upon the groups appears to have had the effect of intensifying the criminal behaviours attributed to them (Pratt 2006, Nolan *et al.* 2011, Coventry *et al.* 2014). The article then considers the importance of counter narratives in de-escalating youth crime, drawing on two examples including the most recent Victorian State election (at the time of writing) and the Yunga Nungas: Future Leaders Initiative in South Australia. We conclude by suggesting a new narrative and approach that better recognises that the lived reality of offending behaviour may provide a more effective starting point for de-escalating, preventing and responding to youth crime.

2. The Gang of 49

The term "gang of 49" was an explicitly media generated label first used by the newspaper Adelaide Advertiser to describe 49 mostly Aboriginal young people suspected to have involvement in crime in the Adelaide area. The label was subsequently taken up by other media commentators, "shock-jocks", and mainstream television news – as eloquently outlined in ABC's 2007 *Hungry Beast* program. The story of offending by this so-called "Gang of 49" can be told in accordance with at least two narratives. The first and most popular narrative is one built around a gang of asocial Aboriginal youths who "terrorized Adelaide citizens" (Williamson 2009) with a brazen series of motor vehicle thefts, home invasions, armed robberies, ram raids, car jackings and the torching of vehicles. Media outlets labelled these young people as "a gang of thugs" (Watkins and Kennett 2011), and as "uncontrollable... out there causing havoc in the community and inciting fear" (Williamson 2009). As a blatant affront to law and order, the offending by this gang left no room for a more conciliatory style of policing or a social welfarist

approach. Instead, a specialised police taskforce was constituted in 2003 (Operation Mandrake) with the specific remit of targeting those who engaged in, or looked likely to engage in, crimes which fitted the hallmarks of the group's modus operandi (Cappo 2007).

The group grew quickly to more than 80 members, of which approximately 15% were of non-Aboriginal background (Goldsmith and Halsey 2013). Few commentators – whether through the media, politicians or police – sought to recognise or remind the public that the high percentage of Aboriginal offenders in the group meant that the problem *was not* (or *is not*) about Aboriginality or inherent deficits within Aboriginal families. Instead, the offending was described as fundamentally Aboriginal in origin and an example of what happens when Aboriginal families fail to properly care about their children – their schooling, nutrition, peer networks, and so forth (see Rodrigues *et al.* 2009, Williamson 2009, Littlely 2011). On that count, it was “proper” not only to arrest and incarcerate Aboriginal children (aged in most instances in their mid-teens), but to also target the families of such offenders (Goldsmith and Halsey 2013). The long arm of the law was thereby extended into the lives of “bad” parents, and, as a corollary, into the streets of “bad” suburbs (Rodrigues *et al.* 2009). The reward for this was projected to be “safer streets” through the systematic removal of the “menacing” elements of society (Williamson 2009).

Consistently, Aboriginal young people in South Australia receive the lion's share of media, police, youth justice, and criminal justice attention. Specifically, and illustrative of the prolific nature of the offending, between January 2003 and June 2009, 13 Aboriginal young people amassed 1,216 findings of guilt (for illegal use of a motor vehicle, serious criminal trespass, receiving goods and unlawful possession, robbery, among others). This equated to one third of all findings of guilt across the 80+ group members (Goldsmith and Halsey 2013, 1162). Starkly, these 13 youths (aged from 17 to 24 years in 2009) had collectively served more than 15,000 days in custody to that point, and had an average age of onset of 14 years or under (with the lowest just 11 years old) (Goldsmith and Halsey 2013). Although the media reported only on the serious and sometimes life-threatening nature of the offending (see Rodrigues *et al.* 2009, AdelaideNow 2012, Heggen 2016), *the majority of all offending actually fell into one broad category: offences against a court or court order* (n=1,229 findings of guilt from 2003 to 2009). Most prominent here was breach of bail (n=717) and breach of recognisance, probation, or bond with regard to the Children's Court (n=291) (Goldsmith and Halsey 2013). Charges were most frequently laid for offences such as failing to reside at a particular place of residence, for not obeying a curfew, for not attending criminogenic needs-related programs, and for disobeying a directive not to contact known associates (which more often than not meant one's own family members). As these statistics suggest, the dynamics of this situation were much more complex than the media's depiction of a group of “evil... criminal gang gunmen terrorising innocent people across Adelaide” (Stewart *et al.* 2009).

Around the height of the problem, the Detective Superintendent overseeing Operation Mandrake remarked that particular members of the gang were “responsible for ‘the worst and most dangerous’ crime spree he had seen in 42 years of police work” (cited in

Stewart *et al.* 2009). The South Australian Attorney General (cited in Kelton 2009) additionally remarked:

We need to keep them away from society as long as we can. We are dealing with an evil phenomenon, criminal gang gunmen who go around hitting soft targets and terrorising workers, engaging in home invasion and putting their crimes on Facebook and who are proud of it. These people need to be behind bars – not entertained with rehabilitation programs.

With hundreds of arrests over a seven-year period, the South Australian Department of Premier and Cabinet decided much more needed to be done to quell the threat posed by the Gang of 49, and, less explicitly, dangerous Aboriginal youth. A key response centred on the engagement of the services of David Kennedy (John Jay College, New York), an architect of the *Boston Gun Project* which sought to reduce gun violence using a combination of network analysis tools, community capacity building, and swift and certain punishment for those who continue to commit gun crime (Braga *et al.* 2000). Kennedy met with various groups (including police, offenders and politicians) and visited the suburbs where much of the gang activity took place. His somewhat predictable solution was to engage the “pulling levers” approach using a combination of sticks and carrots to halt the offending (Kennedy 1998). The stick would be threat of *certain* and long-term imprisonment for continued criminal activity, alongside denunciation of the offending by “moral” leaders within the Aboriginal community. The carrot would be assistance from various social service providers and family members to leave the life of crime.¹

As with other examples of the pulling levers approach, it was proposed that the strategy should be announced at a “call-in” involving – in the one location – all offenders, their families, Aboriginal elders, police, victims and service providers. In a Durkheimian resetting of the conscience collective, the call-in would be the turning point enabling desistance from crime for those who want it, *or* lengthy prison terms for those who fail to desist. Kennedy claimed this approach had worked in Boston and Cincinnati in relation to gun violence with offenders who were primarily black or Hispanic (Braga *et al.* 2000, Braga 2012, Braga and Weisburd 2012). It was therefore (only) logical that it would work on a section of the Aboriginal community in Adelaide.

For a multitude of reasons, the approach did not work. As a starting point, the pulling levers approach failed to address the realities of the offending which primarily fell into far less serious territory than was commonly imagined or depicted by the mainstream media. Furthermore, the “call-in” never eventuated. Aboriginal leaders wanted the

¹ Information relayed here stems from first-hand observations by Halsey while a consultant (with Goldsmith) to the South Australian government concerning how best to reduce serious repeat offending by Operation Mandrake POIs (this contractual work spanned mid-2008 to end 2010). Fieldwork included fortnightly working group meetings, two half day “lock-ins” with the Mandrake Taskforce, site visits to areas where offences occurred and suburbs where POIs resided, conversations with Aboriginal Elders as well as social/youth workers, and conversations/semi-structured recorded interviews with POIs and family members (the majority of which were completed from 2004 under the auspices of Halsey’s previous research projects. Analysis of SAPOL and youth justice/correctional data also formed part of the work. A report on the drivers of Mandrake type offending and how it might be prevented was submitted in January 2010 to the Nendi Working Group (established by the SA Attorney General’s Department). The contents of that report remain confidential. However, permission to draw on select aspects – including the approach to data collection – was granted in subsequent years (see Goldsmith and Halsey 2013).

offending to cease, but they could not risk attending such a meeting where their young people might be further shamed and where family members, as highly marginalised and under-resourced citizens, would be expected to do most, if not all, of the heavy lifting on the prevention front. Families were also resistant based on recurring experiences of betrayal and mistrust in the machinery of government and police (Goldsmith and Halsey 2013). Finally, the cultural differences between the Adelaide Aboriginal population and the black or Hispanic population in Boston and Cincinnati are too numerous to mention – with, in addition, the US drawing extensively on various religious leaders and their moral messaging in the context of call-ins in that jurisdiction (something mostly if not wholly absent in the South Australian context). Nonetheless, Australian governments have a long history of assuming international “experts” on crime policy can be brought in to solve intractable local problems replete with their own genealogies and cultural specificities.

3. The Apex Gang

We now turn to the “Apex gang”, as another example of a media confected crime gang. In early 2015, in the city of Melbourne (located in the state of Victoria), a media panic over so-called African or Sudanese gangs emerged almost instantaneously (Windle 2008, Coventry *et al.* 2014, Benier *et al.* 2018). Key to this panic, as is often the case, was naming and vilifying a group – the “folk devils” to draw on Cohen’s (1973) much-used characterisation. The “Apex gang” attracted the attention of police and the media following street-based conflict with another group of youths – all of which was widely televised (see Davey 2016, A Current Affair 2017). Members of this group were subsequently linked to a string of car-jackings, assaults and burglaries (Wilson 2018). Despite police, expert commentators, and so-called “gang” members themselves denying the existence of the “gangs” – and instead noting the emergence of an unstructured group of young people from a diverse range of ethnic and racial backgrounds – the name Apex gradually came to represent a broader crime threat that drew on xenophobic discourses that extended to border protection, anti-immigration fears, and a fear of terrorism (Wright 2007, Nunn 2010, Wahlquist 2018). The “Apex gang” also came to negatively “stand in for the Sudanese-Australian community as a whole” (Wilson 2018), thereby creating an (accepted) racialised system of reporting on a particular style of offending, as though it was committed solely by a particular racial group.

A sense of escalation in the activities of Apex occurred in March 2016 at the Moomba celebrations (a family-orientated festival held in the Melbourne CBD). There, people reported groups of young African men “picking fights” with festival attendees. These activities culminated in police using pepper spray to disperse a group of men and boys allegedly connected to Apex (see Davey 2016). Again, fears about the “Apex gang” intensified. Tellingly, the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police commented that the heavy police presence prompted the group to “escalate their violence” (cited in Davey 2016); a rare acknowledgement that policing practices can sometimes increase, rather than quell a particular threat. A year later, police made 53 arrests at the Moomba festival and again used pepper spray to suppress violence. While the focus was again quickly directed on to the so-called “Apex gang”, 14 arrests were actually for being drunk in public (Hunt 2017) and police were careful to point out that the offenders came from all

parts of Melbourne and that the offences were *not* gang or race related. Shortly after, the Deputy Commissioner announced that the “Apex gang” were no longer active and reiterated that it was never a predominantly ethnic group (cited in Wilson 2018).

In December 2017, however, a series of incidents reignited the “African crime wave” discourse. This included a brawl at a McDonalds franchise involving some 60 youths of “African appearance”, the trashing of an Airbnb property by a group of youths of “African appearance” who tagged the property with the statement “Menace to Society”, and the alleged assault of a police officer by a group of African youths after he made a shoplifting arrest (Wilson 2018). The incidents dominated news coverage, led by the Rupert Murdoch News Corp owned tabloid, the *Herald Sun* and the Australian edition of the *Daily Mail*. Both outlets presented the brawl in simplified populist and racialised terms. Although police leaders consistently rejected the notion of a “gang” problem, the political economy of events saw key Australian politicians enter the discussion. Australia’s then Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, blamed Victorian Labor Premier, Daniel Andrews, for the police’s failure to tackle the “gang problem” (cited in Remeikis 2018). Victorian-based conservative Greg Hunt MP stated that African gang crime was “out of control”, while populist Federal immigration minister Peter Dutton told radio 2GB (cited in Karp 2018):

People are scared to go out to restaurants of a nighttime because they’re followed home by these gangs, home invasion and cars are stolen... [Politicians] need to call it for what it is – of course it’s African gang violence.

Dutton also called for the federal government to “weed out” and deport wrongdoers, extending the blame to the African community, arguing that “if people are not prepared to integrate by sending their children to school and preventing them wandering the streets at night committing offences, they don’t belong in Australian society” (cited in Karp 2018). This conflation of border protection and control, national sovereignty, xenophobia, and “law and order” proved a potent brew. Anti-immigration comments flooded web-based media articles and even Victoria Police’s Facebook page. The discourse also saw the (re) emergence of far-right groups such as the United Patriots Front, whose “Reclaim Australia” rallies moved from a focus on Muslims and the building of mosques in 2015, to targeting African crime gangs (Colangelo 2019). These groups also infiltrated online crime groups “trolling the left” and pressuring conservative politicians and police to “admit” there were indeed African gangs. This was coupled with more mainstream psychological discourses that constructed these young people as damaged, arguments about the incapacity of Africans to integrate, and blame apportioned to parents and community leaders (Windle 2008, Losoncz 2011, Benier *et al.* 2018, Palmer *et al.* 2020). All of this fed and gave fuel to the negative media and political discourses (Benier *et al.* 2018). Coupled with an imminent State election, it was not surprising such narratives had broader divisive outcomes. In particular, fear of crime in Victoria was reported to be on the rise, making crime the most pressing problem for Victorians (IPSOS 2018). This is despite research by Lee *et al.* (2020) finding that fear of crime is also related to the type and depth of questions asked of the public, and that only small percentages of Victorians are fearful. Specifically, the more nuanced the questions about crime, the less worried Victorians appeared to be (certainly less fearful than politicians and media would have us believe).

African born youth are over-represented as offenders in Victorian crime statistics, but not vastly. Indeed, only 1% of alleged offenders are Sudanese-born (Crime Statistic Agency – CSA – 2019). The vast majority (67%) of offenders in Victoria are Australian born adults. Although much of the panic around African gangs focused on crimes like aggravated burglary, only 4.8% of such crimes were in fact committed by this demographic (CSA 2019). While again this is an over-representation, it is hardly evidence of an ethnic youth crime wave. And while fluctuations around specific offences committed by young people is complex, in the year ending 31 March 2019, youth offending sat at a rate of 3,088.4 incidents per 100,000 population, a decrease of 34.9% from the year ending 31 March 2010 (CSA 2019). So the panic about youth crime took place within a decade, where such crime had fallen significantly.

What is clear from the brief overview of these two “gangs” is that the media attention and socio-political discourse about dangerous African and Aboriginal youth, did not result in less offending. Rather, it “escalated” tensions and increased the level and intensity of confrontation (Benier *et al.* 2018). In the Melbourne context, this somewhat confected panic produced at least one Apex “gang” – actually the name of a street in a suburb where a large Sudanese population reside – which young Sudanese men could then relate to and draw a sense of affiliation from. In Adelaide, it gave a group of disparate young (and older) people a label to “live up to”. As one “gang” member described in an interview,² “If that’s what you call us, then that’s what we are. If you call us animals, then we’ll act like animals. If you call us the Gang of 49, then we’ll be the Gang of 49” (Leroy). In this sense, and especially for those who occupy the extreme socio-economic and cultural margins of society, any attention appeared better than no attention at all. To quote Oscar Wilde (1891/1993, 2), “there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about”.

4. Counter-narratives

Despite the rampant populism of the narrative around the ‘Apex gang’, there is also some space for optimism. In the 2018 state election, the opposition – going in hardest on a divisive platform of racialising crime and blaming the Sudanese community – was convincingly defeated, resulting in some of the “heat” being taken out of the debate. Indeed, the returned Labor government invested significantly in crime prevention (see Victoria State Government 2020) and recently acknowledged the unsustainability of tougher penalties and building more correctional centres. While there is more work to be done in supporting Victorian youth at risk, including those from African backgrounds, this appears to have de-escalated the situation somewhat and provided the space for a more nuanced narrative to emerge.

As we noted above, Victorians’ fear of crime may not have been as great as many in the mainstream press and politics assumed. Indeed, research suggests that a range of protective factors including community collective efficacy, community cohesion, the generally progressive nature of Victorian culture, as well as an acceptance of

² Excerpts are drawn from interviews conducted by Halsey for the project *Generations Through Prison* (funded by the Australian Research Council FT120100284). Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of participants. For a comprehensive account of the approach and recruitment processes, see Halsey and de Vel-Palumbo (2020, 13–29).

multiculturalism, were all able to dull the fear campaigns, such that the electorate ultimately saw fit to reject the “law and order” alternative and the racialisation of crime (Lee *et al.* 2020). Indeed, Lee and colleagues (2020) found that while people thought there may be crime problems elsewhere in the state or across Australia, the fact that they were not experiencing these themselves, coupled with positive perceptions of their community, mitigated against worrying about the youth crime “problem”. While these beliefs were by no means universal, this does seem to indicate that strong communities themselves can serve to de-escalate youth crime panics, and indeed reduce the amplification and ongoing effects of such panics.

In the context of the Gang of 49, another narrative has also more recently emerged concerning the offending by members and those “at risk” of becoming offenders. Part of this emerged from police willingness to explore a more nuanced social reading of the situation and an acknowledgement that they cannot, in the words of former Victorian Assistant Police Commissioner, Ken Lay, “arrest your way out” (Dmytryshchak 2017). This narrative acknowledged that the prolific offending was a socially and economically constituted issue, not a biological or psychological defect of particular families and their children. The problem, in fact, had its genesis in the forced fragmentation of Aboriginal families through past policies (including and especially, the Stolen Generation) and in the idea that the responsabilisation of young people (expecting them to grow up or become conventional citizens through their own means) is counter-productive to long-term community cohesion. It involved, as other scholars have detailed in similar contexts, stories of intergenerational trauma, of social and cultural upheaval, of ostracisation from key sites of social control and advancement (chiefly, schools), and of children having to fend for themselves (in terms of food, clothing, and shelter) prior to turning 10 (see Cappo 2007, Armytage and Ogloff 2017, Australian Child Rights Taskforce – ACRT – 2018, Malvaso *et al.* 2018, Clancey *et al.* 2020). These stories were regularly present among the youth, but rarely told by the popular media, and therefore rarely filtered through to the general populace. One significant exception was the ABC TV’s, *Hungry Beast*, which exposed the myths of the 150 or so media articles that appeared across Australia throughout 2007 and 2009 about the gang³.

5. De-escalation as a new narrative

A new narrative around youth offending requires a sophisticated and revised way of thinking about young people and the causes of crime, as well as the iatrogenic effects of some kinds of policing and of government policy. In addition, a new narrative should take stock of the intergenerational nature of the problem and the peculiar nature of the prison as providing a nurturing environment and type of homecoming for many of these young people (Halsey and Deegan 2015, Halsey and de Vel-Palumbo 2020). Instead of viewing the youth crime as carefully planned and instigated – the work of organised criminal “gangs” – it would recognise that much offending by this group is highly opportunistic and stems from unstructured lives with little meaning beyond the camaraderie generated through offending in company. In other words, these are otherwise “normal” young people, but young people who have little experience of what it means to live a conventional life, let alone how to bridge the gap between what they

³ The program was later nominated for a prestigious Walkley award and an Australian Film Industry award.

excel at (prolific offending) and where they ideally wish to be (Halsey and Deegan 2015). As one young person caught up in the “Gang of 49” activities commented:

Chad: [T]hat’s what they were always saying, it’s all organised crime... And nothing’s really planned. It’s a spur-of-the-moment thing. ... ‘Have we got any money?’ ‘Oh, we’ll do this’. ‘No worries. Let’s go’... It’s not like I planned anything, sitting there and doing, you know... legwork and map work and all that... We would just be driving somewhere, see something, bang, bump into it, we’ll do it... Just grab it and go.

Interviewer: And was it to get money or was it to get alcohol, was it to get drugs?

Chad: Yeah... Have fun, you know, have drugs, alcohol, clothes, shoes... look good, you know... Always cruising along in style, got money, cash... cruising with the boys, see who’s got the best car or whatever, flashiest car.

To interrupt and de-escalate this offending behaviour, it would take concerted, nuanced and coordinated efforts. Any initiative or intervention would need to work simultaneously on each young person’s self-concept (building toward a replacement self) and their life-skills (building toward pro-social functioning) (Giordano *et al.* 2002). In short, it requires balancing the complex machinations of primary, secondary and tertiary forms of desistance from crime (Halsey and Deegan 2015).

The new narrative would also permit something that runs counterintuitive to much of the thinking around crime prevention. It would require an NA (Narcotics Anonymous) or AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) style approach that actively promotes young people (ex-prolific offenders) working together in a group to support each other’s efforts to desist. So often, though, the system does not permit such associations. As Chad went onto state:

Chad: I’ll do my best to stay out... and then hopefully when dad gets out... then we’ll be there together...

Interviewer: [But even though] you’re father and son... the Parole Board [will likely say] you’re not allowed to associate with other parolees. So will you have to... challenge that or get that amended? ...

Chad: That’s what I’ll try to get amended. But... I’ll [also] say, ‘I don’t care what you say... That’s my dad... I’m here to... help him... We’re here to help each other stay out of trouble and youse want to try to keep us away from each other ‘cause we’re parolees’. Like... I can’t do that... I can’t turn a blind eye and think that he’s a stranger or something... [T]hey’ve got stupid... conditions in place where... it can be, like, your dad or your first cousin or something, ‘No, can’t hang around them – you’re parolees’. How about thinking [that when we are] on the outside, ‘Oh, that’s cousins. We’ll let them, you know, yarn [together]’.

Instead of viewing family from a deficit perspective – as a risk factor for further offending largely based on something approaching Andrews and Bonta’s (2010) “Risk-Need-Responsivity” (RNR) approach,⁴ the new approach would view family (even ex-prisoners) as a source for strengthening de-escalation of, and desistance from, crime. In fact, the family would be central to de-escalating crime among the cohort. Their ideas would form part of a co-designed approach for engaging young people in productive ways. The family, and the communities where they reside, would be part and parcel of

⁴ Amongst the “central eight” criminogenic risk factors, dysfunctional or criminogenic family relationships is identified as a key factor associated with criminal behaviour. See also Andrews and Dowden 2006.

the solution, rather than demonised as the origin of problems. This is not to say that the families of young offenders would not need assistance on various fronts, but they would not be marginalised. They would be shown some institutional respect – from police, courts and corrections, and youth justice. Children would be treated as a resource for generating new pathways out of crime – an approach more akin to Haines and Case’s (2015) “Children First, Offenders Second” (CFOS) framework of positive youth justice.

This, in effect, is what the *Yunga Nungas: Future Leaders Initiative* purports to do. Commencing in mid-2017, this approach has provided “an intensive response for Aboriginal young people with complex needs involved in the youth justice system”. Working with the support of the Metropolitan Aboriginal Youth and Family Services, “the young people co-design the program based on their needs, interests and future aspirations” (Department of Human Services – DHS – 2018). Such co-design draws on resources that include dialogue with peers and their support, engagement with Aboriginal cultural practices, acknowledge of the importance of intergenerational cultural transmission. Specifically, the structured program aims to build young people’s: (1) culture and identity; (2) social and emotional wellbeing; (3) family supports; (4) health and fitness; (5) numeracy and literacy; and (6) employment and work readiness skills (DHS 2018). As the South Australian Department of Human Services (2018) explains:

As a group, the young people are supported to build and repair relationships, problem solve and play an active role in challenging their offending behaviours and supporting one another to make positive change. Supported by the Mums and Grannies group, the young people and their families have shared ownership of the group and their achievements.

This is an initiative that had, from its inception, strong support from police and the youth justice system. Several changes in key police personnel responsible for liaising with *Yunga Nungas* staff, have, though, seen periodic reversions to more conventional styles of dealing with the young people involved in the initiative. Beyond this, *Yunga Nungas* remains committed to the principle of “retroflexive reformation” (LeBel 2007) – the idea that people in the process of desisting (in this case, from serious offending) can draw strength and key lessons from the life course (including the setbacks) of others. Preliminary results indicate a marked drop in the number and seriousness of police contacts for this group of young people following their participation (DHS 2018).⁵ It is, arguably, one of the few co-desistance models currently unfolding around Australia, and is a fairly novel example of a de-escalation tactic that is making considerable headway into what has long been an intractable series of problems (see Halsey and Mizzi 2021).

In short, narratives of criminality that served to label the “Gang of 49” as criminals out of control significantly amplified and escalated the crime problem. It reinforced a form of “othering” that cast the group as “monstrous” outsiders and in some cases beyond help and only worthy of severe sanctions. However, deconstructing the label not only reveals a counternarrative, it highlights the fact that many elements of these young peoples lives that were cast as criminogenic are actually key resources that are integral to de-escalation. As Case and Hains (2015, 158) have noted “the prescriptive and coercive

⁵ At the time of writing, *Yunga Nungas* is the subject of an evaluation led by Halsey.

nature of neoliberal youth justice policies and practices contradicts the goal of facilitating children's positive engagement with youth justice processes". Rather, child friendly and appropriate programs require legitimate partnerships, co-planning, and self-assessment of needs, strength and potentials. They also require responses nested in a thorough understanding of the social-ecological context in which both offending and desistance are possible; "relationships with their immediate environment of family, friends, school and neighbourhood and the wider socio-cultural, political-economic context" (Johns *et al.* 2017, 6). "Future leaders" cannot easily emerge from those labelled as outsiders, conversely, as the counter narrative suggests, they are likely to emerge from processes deeply rooted in community, support, social cohesion, and a deep empowered interrogation of where they came from.

6. Conclusion

In the context of this special issue collection, the case studies in this article highlight the broader structural and cultural contexts of escalation and de-escalation of crime and violence by distinct groups of young people. The two groups, though, are very much tied conceptually together through the series of harms wrought by concerted political and media labelling. The punitive discourses promulgated by the media, as well as sustained "law and order" rhetoric from various political circles, only worked to intensify these harms.

While we believe the narratives constitute more than a moral panic, there are certainly elements of this reflected within the discourse. However, an assessment of "panic" needs to intersect not only with the economic, structural, cultural and racial contexts of the offending conduct, but also the seductions and pleasures of crime that exist in the face of marginalisation for these groups (Flynn *et al.* 2016). The panic also has to be seen in the context of the kind of communities in which the youth crime discourse occurs. While it might hardly seem worth repeating, community cohesion itself may be the most effective way of combating both youth crime, and the discourses that serve to amplify or inflame it. As we have suggested above, a new narrative and approach that better recognises the lived reality of offending behaviour, such as the Yunga Nungas program, may provide a more effective starting point for de-escalating, preventing and responding to youth crime.

Perhaps it is appropriate to give the final word to one of the young people at the centre of the so-called gang phenomenon. Here, he speaks not of desiring a life based on mayhem and doing harm but of wanting a conventional life. More than this, he points to the collective nature of the struggle ahead of him and others in similar circumstances. This, in short, is someone who is *of* society, not outside it, and requires political, media and social supports to enable a practical approach to turn highly marginalised lives around.

Leroy: Sometimes I'd stay up for weeks on end [and do crime].

Interviewer: And... what was the aim of it all?

Leroy: Surviving.

Interviewer: ... [T]ell me what you mean by that?

Leroy: Well, I look... at the government and them people, like the Prime Minister... the cops and all that. They will never understand. We are in two different worlds... The way they earn money to survive, to take care of their families, and look after their kids and all that, it's different to the way we do it. When we do it, we get arrested for it... [W]e're doing it the way we know, the way we were brought up, and the way we were shown... Fair enough, it's the wrong thing, and we get into trouble for that. We get locked up for that. But that's all we know... [The authorities] just expect us to get to that [other] world when there's no bridge in the middle [from my world to your world]. [And] if you try... you're just going to fall down, aren't you, because there's nothing there to support you. There's nothing there to help you get over to that world. They just say, 'There it is, get over there'.

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