



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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“Indians Wear Red”: Aboriginal Street Gangs in Winnipeg

They were kids when they started. Teenagers locked up in the youth detention centre, watching movies about American street gangs. Soon they realized that if they stood up for each other, and worked together, it was easier to survive. They said, “Hey, maybe we should form a gang, just like in the movies.” Soon they had a name and insignias. “What colour should our rags be?” That’s obvious, one said: “Indians wear red!”

Once they were a gang, they weren’t pushed around as much. They resisted. They had power. It felt good. Little else had felt good in their lives.

Aboriginal street gangs have grown in the racialized and colonized space that is Winnipeg’s North End. The Main Street Rattlers were first, in the early 1980s. Supplied by a biker gang, the Rattlers were assigned a part of north Main Street to deal drugs. The Indian Posse emerged soon after, followed by a host of others—Manitoba Warriors, Native Syndicate, and today many smaller crews.

Why did these Aboriginal street gangs form?

A full answer requires going back in time. In a myriad of ways — healthy and independent communities pushed off their traditional lands; children forcibly removed from their families and confined in residential schools, for example — Aboriginal families have been undermined. Much of this was part of a conscious and deliberate colonial strategy. Many suffered lasting damage. People were traumatized. The trauma trails produce all

manner of issues — including street gangs. We reap what we sow. Growing up in the harsh poverty of Winnipeg’s North End, in many cases left to fend for themselves from a young age, Aboriginal youngsters fight to survive. Joining a street gang can be seen as a form of resistance — a refusal to accept the endless racism, the racialized poverty with all its indignities.

We interviewed senior members of Aboriginal street gangs over a three-year period. It was a deeply emotional and frequently troubling experience. These men have done some terrible things. Yet most are smart and started their lives full of potential. Born white, in suburban Winnipeg, they would have been teachers, carpenters, architects or business managers. Born Aboriginal, in the colonized space that is Winnipeg’s North End, their “normal” was something quite different.

All became involved with petty crime and then increasingly serious crimes from a surprisingly young age—10, 11 or 12 years. In many cases they had to, in order to survive, to eat. Soon they joined forces with other youngsters in similar circumstances. This happened on the streets, and in lock-ups. Street gangs were formed. Illegal activities — especially the trade in illegal drugs — became their livelihood. They dealt drugs at an age when most kids are in elementary school. Some became very

there is an alternative.

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skilled — entrepreneurial, business-like, able to manage people and money and seize new profit-making opportunities. They have been frequently imprisoned, but it's no big deal — it's part of their “normal,” part of the cost of doing business. Many youngsters aspire to being locked up. It gives them “street cred.” It's a way of moving up in the street gang hierarchy. It's no deterrent.

Where does involvement in the street gang lead?

It ends badly for most gang members. The life — the danger, stress, lack of security, and violence that is an integral part of the street gang's business strategy — takes its toll. By their 30s and 40s they're done — broke, no education, a long rap sheet, no connections with mainstream society, and no means of making a living other than crime. They go full circle, ending where they started—poor, in the racialized and colonized space of Winnipeg's North End, reviled and excluded by mainstream society, just as they were when they were kids.

These men are the product of the colonialism that is a central part of Canada's history. They are a product of the deeply entrenched, racialized poverty of Winnipeg's inner city. They are angry, and who could blame them? Yet their justifiable anger, their resistance to the hand that life has dealt them, produces only more grief, for themselves and their communities.

How do we respond? We spend token amounts on isolated, short-lived anti-gang programs. Some programs save this man, or that man, from a life of crime. But for each person who finds a way forward, many more youngsters join a street gang, enticed by the money and prestige they believe will follow. For some, this does happen. For a while. But soon they're locked up—we continue as a society to act on the misplaced belief that locking youngsters up will solve the problems—and within

a decade or two most are worn out, ground down, wasted. The glory and the money are short-lived; the damage goes on. As one said: “I don't know anybody in this lifestyle that's actually succeeded.... I don't know any retired drug dealers that have money.... There is no dental, there is no pension, there's nothing.”

What should we do?

There is no simple or quick solution. The roots of this problem have grown in our midst for decades. No “program” with two-year funding will suffice. Based on our multiple interviews with street gang members, women who have been part of their lives, and elders whose wisdom is deep, we believe the solution requires a different path. It requires listening to Aboriginal people, acknowledging what has been done to them, understanding the consequences of that damage and of the racialized poverty in which so many now live, and following their advice about how to move forward — in a way that includes all of us.

We can choose to take these steps. Or we can continue down the ill-advised path we are now on. As a society, it's our responsibility to make the right choice.

Elizabeth Comack, Lawrence Deane, Larry Morrisette and Jim Silver are the authors of *Indians Wear Red: Colonialism, Resistance and Aboriginal Street Gangs*, published by Fernwood Publishing and due to be launched at McNally Robinson books, Thursday September 26 at 7:00 pm.

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