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"GETTING TOUGH"

A Social History of Street Gangs in Winnipeg

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Introduction

In the mid-1990s Winnipeg garnered its media reputation as the "street gang capital of Canada" and the names of Indigenous street gangs — Indian Posse, Manitoba Warriors, Native Syndicate — came to be part of the public discourse and equated with the prevalence of crime, violence, and the illegal drug trade in Winnipeg's inner-city communities.[1] A decade later, street gangs such as African Mafia and Mad Cowz were recruiting refugee youth to work in the city's illegal drug trade.[2] In response, criminal justice strategies have been employed to "get tough" on street gangs, including heightened police surveillance of Winnipeg's inner-city neighbourhoods, crackdowns on drug dealing operations intended to undermine the source of livelihood for the gangs, and the implementation of more punitive legislation, policies, and programs designed to deter gang violence. Despite these suppression strategies, however, street gangs are still present in the city. Police estimate there are 1,500 full gang members and 2,500 associates, and that number has stayed roughly the same over the past three decades.[3]

How and why did these gangs come into being? Why do they persist despite efforts to suppress them? Addressing these questions requires attending to the specific historical and social context in which Winnipeg street gangs emerged and persist. Much of what is known about street gangs in Winnipeg comes from the criminal justice system or media reports that draw from that source, which puts the criminal activities of gang members front and centre.[4] Academic researchers, however, have drawn on the accounts of gang members themselves, enabling a fuller understanding of the social factors that brought the gangs into being and the social and economic conditions that sustain them, including the ways in which "get tough" criminal justice responses (policing and

prisons) have been implicated in the persistence of street gangs. Both these sources of information help to map out a social history of street gangs in Winnipeg. In addition, relevant data on the social and economic conditions in Winnipeg's inner-city communities enable a better appreciation of the broader context in which street gangs exist.

The main conclusion to emerge from this social history is that suppression strategies only work to exacerbate the presence of street gangs, not to eliminate them. Street gangs will continue to be a feature of Winnipeg's landscape so long as we fail to "get tough" on the social and economic conditions — especially the spatially concentrated, racialized poverty that prevails in inner-city communities — that prompt young people to join a gang and feed the demand for the trade in illegal drugs on which the gangs have come to rely.

What is a street gang and who are street gang members?

Much effort has been devoted to defining the "street gang." Variable definitions exist not only among researchers but also law enforcement agencies with some employing more restrictive criteria than others.[5] Law enforcement definitions have special significance since they are used as the basis for criminal justice interventions, including the arrest and correctional security classification of those identified as street gang members.

Criminologist Scot Wortley notes that since it is criminal activity that triggers an interest in street gangs, "criminal behaviour should be included as a necessary criterion for defining a gang."[6] However, using criminal activity as a key criterion for defining a gang raises the issue of what groups should be included. Wortley notes, for instance, that college fraternities meet the standard of most gang definitions in that they involve three or more members, usually have a name, symbols, and initiation rituals, have a clear organizational structure, and are often involved in various criminal activities (illegal drug use, illegal gambling, under-age drinking, etc.). Similarly, corporate criminals — groups of investors who conspire to defraud consumers or investors — could also meet the criteria of most gang definitions. Nevertheless, Wortley proposed a definition of the gang focused on its criminal activity: "A gang is a group of three or more individuals that has existed for at least one month and engages in

criminal activity on a regular basis. Gang-related crime can be conducted within the group context or by individual gang members in isolation — as long as such criminal activity, directly or indirectly, benefits the gang."[7]

The Eurogang Network, a consortium of academic researchers and law enforcement officials, define a gang by distinguishing between "gang definers" (elements that are essential to characterize a group as a gang, such as its durability, street orientation, youthfulness, group identity, and involvement in illegal activity) and "gang descriptors" (elements that help to describe specific characteristics of a group, such as group names, colours or symbols, and tattoos). Having a group identity as being a gang was an important criterion for the network's definition. For them, a street gang is "any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in criminal activity is part of their group identity."[8]

The criminal justice system has tended to include street gangs under the umbrella of criminal organizations. Added to the *Criminal Code* in 1997, Section 467.1(1) defines a criminal organization as "a group, however organized, that (a) is composed of three or more persons in or outside Canada; and (b) has as one of its main purposes or main activities the facilitation or commission of one or more serious offences that, if committed, would likely result in the direct or indirect receipt of a material benefit, including a financial benefit, by the group or by any of the persons who constitute the group." Participating in the activities of a criminal organization or being party to the commission of an indictable offence for the benefit of a criminal organization for which the maximum punishment is imprisonment for five years or more can result in an additional sentence of up to fourteen years imprisonment, to be served consecutively. While the legislation clarifies that "smaller criminal groups, such as street gangs, may not meet the threshold for being considered a criminal organization," they can still be the target of law enforcement action.[9]

Connected to the issue of defining the street gang, identifying who is — and who is not — a gang member is a matter of concern, especially given the criminal justice consequences that can follow. The Winnipeg Police Service (WPS), for instance, has utilized a set of six criteria established by the Criminal Intelligence Service of Canada to identify people as members or associates:

1. Involved in a gang motivated crime (i.e. for the support of, protection of, or enhancement of the gang);

2. Identified as a gang member by a reliable source of information (i.e. police, schools, probation services, known gang members, preventative security file);

3. Observed association with gang members;

4. Acknowledged gang membership;

5. Court rules the subject is a gang member; and/or

6. Common and/or symbolic gang identification or paraphernalia.[10]

A person is considered a gang member by the WPS if they match two of the criteria, an associate if they match one of them.

However, researcher Kathleen Buddle notes that adopting criteria such as "observed association with gang members" means "virtually every assembly of Native youth … could conceivably provide reasonable cause for police questioning."[11] As well, Wortley notes that gang association is a problematic criterion given that "most gang members do not limit their social interactions to other gang members. Indeed, they often have conventional, non-gang friends, school-mates, co-workers, and family members with whom they associate on a frequent basis. Unfortunately, these non-gang individuals are sometimes found guilty by association."[12]

Wearing "common and/or symbolic gang identification or paraphernalia" is also a troublesome criterion since adopting popular styles or colours of clothing can lead to heightened police surveillance. Indigenous men I interviewed in 2008 and 2009 about their encounters with police in Winnipeg talked about how police officers assumed they were gang-involved because of how they dressed. Forty-one-year-old Mark commented: "Like sometimes I used to wear tracksuits and stuff. We'd get pulled over for no reason, thinking we're like Native gang members. And that's bullshit." Peter, in his thirties, said that police would assume he was gang-involved when he wore a white track suit (associated with the Deuce gang) or a red one (Indian Posse). "They would beat you up and they would try to make you rat out where drug houses are and that. It was scary, scary growing up being Native in this neighbourhood."[13]

Police play a role in not only determining who is a gang member, but sometimes in the very construction of a gang. Gordon cites an example of Vancouver police actually coming up with the name of a gang. "The so-called '626 gang' was a group of eight youth and young adults who committed a series of armed robberies of banks, stores, and credit unions

in the Greater Vancouver area over a four-month period in 1992. The group was named the '626 gang' by the police because they consistently used stolen Mazda 626 automobiles to drive to and escape from the scenes of their robberies."[14]

Maxime Aurélien and Ted Rutland's *Out to Defend Ourselves* provides a more compelling example of the role police have played in constructing and fomenting street gangs. As they detail in their book, les Bélangers was a group of Haitian youth in Montreal who came together in the 1980s. What began as a group of friends with a shared interest in playing soccer and basketball became a means of collectively resisting the racist insults and violence that were terrorizing Haitians and other marginalized groups in the city. "They used violence in self-defence, ultimately making white racists pay a price for their actions and, in time, reducing racist attacks against Haitians."[15] However, police action and inaction were responsible for the growth of Haitian gangs in Montreal.

> The police harassed and brutalized the Haitian community, while ignoring the same actions of white racists. The Bélanger gang was formed to provide the kind of protection the police did not. Over time, the police devoted increasing attention to les Bélangers and other Haitian gangs.... Police actions during this period promoted conflicts between gangs in various ways; gave a rebel image to the gangs, which was attractive to marginalized youth; and gradually pushed away youth who were less willing to face police harassment and tilted the composition of the gangs toward those who were. If some Haitian gangs became criminal enterprises, it was partly because police action changed the composition and purpose of the gangs, leaving them more and more under the influence of members who were willing to face the threat of criminalization and punishment because they had chosen a criminal career. The result was a vicious, circular dynamic that persists into the present: the aggressive policing of gangs helps create the criminality to which the police claim to be responding.[16]

In a similar fashion, sociologist Amelia Curran offers an instructive contrast in how the origin of the B Side gang in Winnipeg's West Broadway community was understood by police, versus how it was understood by local residents. According to a police officer she interviewed, B Side was formed by members of an Indigenous family; "there were about seventeen of them over different generations" who banded together at the West Broadway Resource Centre "and they formed B Side."[17] One of the original members of B Side, however, recounted a different origin story:

> So when the cops first started coming around and harassing everybody they started accusing everybody of being gang members and everybody was like, no we're not a gang. We're just a bunch of kids hanging out at the community centre. The community centre tried to explain to them that no this is a community centre. They're supposed to be hanging around. But there was a large group of them, and they'd be sitting on the front steps of the community centre and the cops just started saying they were a gang and gang members.... As they started getting older they started labelling them more and then as soon as they started getting into trouble that's when it really hit the fan, because you have a couple of kids that are ending up in jail for whatever reason, but the cops just started saying it was gang related, they were a gang.... The name B Side was always there as we were always from this side. It was always there but it didn't refer to a gang, it just referred to where we were from. We were on the main strip of Broadway, that's it. But the cops started charging kids as gang members.[18]

As Curran notes, the police account "puts the onus of gang development in the hands of young, racialized people living in the neighbourhood and leaves little room to consider other factors in the development of gangs and gang territories" — including the role police themselves play in fomenting the gang.[19]

While most definitions of the street gang concentrate on the various elements thought to characterize a gang — having a name, colours and insignia, geographical territory or turf, initiation rituals, leadership structure — some researchers also point to the social context in which street gangs originate and thrive. As Jana Grekul and Patti LaBoucane-Benson note, "Gang problems in Toronto are different from those in Winnipeg or Vancouver... While there are similarities in basic causes and processes of gang formation ... the specific form the group takes depends in part on the region of the country in which it is located."[20]

Critical gang studies researchers have taken that insight even further by understanding street gangs as a response to social inequalities. For James Vigil, "The street gang is an outcome of marginalization, that is, the relegation of certain persons or groups to the fringes of society, where social and economic conditions result in powerlessness."[21] Under those impoverished conditions, marginalized youth will resist their social conditions by joining together in street gangs as a means of survival.[22] On that basis, John Hagedorn offers a straightforward definition of gangs: "they are simply groups socialized by the streets or prisons, not conventional institutions."[23] These researchers also pay closer attention to the racialized character of street gang involvement — not by stereotyping

or demonizing racialized youth for their activities, as is often common in media reports,[24] but in terms of systemic inequalities that create the conditions for the emergence and persistence of street gangs.

Critical gang studies scholar David Brotherton also makes the point that "approaching the subject of gangs outside of any historical context is impossible."[25] Yet much contemporary gang research does just that, paying scant attention to processes of individual biographies, the origins of the gang, and the historical trajectory of the community in which they reside.[26] In this framing, the gang becomes a "thing-in-itself," a signifier of danger and disorder, a threat to public safety that merits suppression as a response. Instead, Brotherton maintains that street gangs are "invariably tied to the race, class and gender history of the community." They emerge from "the long-term struggles of a community against marginality and social suffering" and their "organizational, ideological and stylistic characteristics" reflect the histories of a particular community, especially in response to structural forces like colonialism. Further, says Brotherton, gangs are associated with "the specific articulation of the informal economy as well as different forms of community and social control" and are influenced by "the varying interventions of the state over time."[27]

These insights of critical gang studies scholars have relevance for understanding the origins and growth of street gangs in Winnipeg. As Lawrence Deane, Larry Morrissette, Jim Silver, and I note in our book, "*Indians Wear Red*," what particularly distinguishes the street gang scene in Winnipeg is the colonial context in which it is located; the prevalence of Indigenous street gangs in Winnipeg constitutes a form of resistance to colonialism, albeit one that has had negative consequences. Indigenous researcher Nahanni Fontaine makes the point more boldly: "Aboriginal gangs surfaced, developed, and organized in response to the reality and experience of colonization and its perpetual legacy in our daily lives. Aboriginal gangs are the product of our colonized and oppressed space within Canada — a space fraught with inequity, racism, dislocation, marginalization, and cultural and spiritual alienation."[28] Understanding the social history of street gangs in Winnipeg, therefore, requires paying close attention to the ways in which systemic inequalities, particularly those imbedded in colonialism, contribute to the origins and persistence of the gangs.

Pre-1990s Winnipeg

Like other inner-city communities in North America, Winnipeg's inner city has undergone dramatic changes with the advent of globalization, the process by which local and national economies have been more and more integrated into a world-wide capitalist framework.[29] As part of this globalization process, large firms began relocating many industrial jobs that were unionized, paid a living wage, and offered reasonable benefits to low-wage jurisdictions. Those jobs were replaced by "precarious" employment, that is, non-union, low-wage, and part-time work that carries with it neither benefits nor security. And most of these jobs pay wages that cannot support a family.[30] In the 1950s, for instance, fewer than one in 20 of all Canadian jobs were part time. Since the early 1990s, one in five Canadian workers are in part-time jobs.[31] By 2017, 3.5 million Canadians were working part time as their main or only job. The number of temporary workers also grew. In 1998, there were 1.4 million people working temporary jobs. By 2018, that number had increased to 2.1 million. Canadians younger than 25 have been especially at risk of falling into precarious work.[32]

At the same time as shifts were occurring in the labour market, the process of suburbanization that began in the post-World War II era saw large numbers of people who could afford to do so moving away from inner cities to the suburbs. Governments accommodated this expansion by building the necessary infrastructure (roads, bridges, schools) to develop the urban suburbs.[33] In the case of Winnipeg, urban researcher David Hugill notes, "While the city's urban footprint covered roughly 150 square kilometres in 1961, it would more than double in size over the course of the next thirty years."[34] Those left behind in inner-city communities were, for the most part, least financially able to move.

The abandonment of Winnipeg's inner city by the more financially well-off placed downward pressure on housing prices in an area in which housing was already the oldest and in need of repair.[35] In many cases, cheap inner-city housing was acquired by absentee landlords who used it as a "cash cow" while allowing it to deteriorate. Not surprisingly, cheaper housing attracted people with the lowest incomes, thus concentrating poverty in large numbers in the inner-city neighbourhoods.

As a result of these processes of globalization, de-industrialization, and suburbanization, Winnipeg's urban core came to be associated with "economic and infrastructural decline, substandard dwellings, disinvestment, and the racialized communities that had largely been excluded from the spoils of postwar prosperity."[36] Indigenous people increasingly came to make up one of those racialized communities.

As economist John Loxley noted, there were remarkably few Indigenous people living in Winnipeg during the first half of the twentieth century. "In 1901 there appear to have been less than a dozen Indians and only about 700 Métis in the City of 42,340. In 1921 there were 69 Indians counted and by 1951 still only 210 in a city population of 354,000. The Métis were invisible."[37] A 1959 study estimated the Status Indian population of Winnipeg to be 1,200, while Winnipeg's Métis population was estimated at 3,500. "The Métis figures were likely understated, perhaps by as much as 80 percent … but if taken at face value Aboriginal people appear to have represented just over 1 percent of the City's population."[38] According to that 1959 study, "The single most important reason for coming to the City, for both groups, was to find a job."[39] Most of the growth of the Indigenous population in Winnipeg occurred from the late 1950s onward, "and that growth has been rapid." While Indigenous people represented only about 1 percent of Winnipeg's population in 1959, by 1991 they made up 6.9 percent (44,790) of the city's residents.[40]

Urban researcher Owen Toews offers a number of factors to account for this increase in the city's Indigenous population: the abolition of the pass system in 1951, which had restricted First Nations people to reserves; the ongoing theft of Indigenous land through amendments to the *Indian Act* that enabled industrialization and urbanization in the north; ongoing environmental destruction through investments in mining, timber cutting, paper milling, commercial hunting and fishing, and hydro-electric developments; and state encouragement of Indigenous people's migration to urban centres.[41] Hugill makes the important point, however, that "it doesn't make sense to describe this development as 'migration' in the conventional sense." Indigenous peoples had been dispossessed and displaced from their traditional lands, and so in relocating to the city they

were not so much "migrating" as they were "responding to conditions of colonial deprivation and reoccupying lands within their traditional territories."[42]

When Indigenous people began arriving in Winnipeg in larger numbers, many of them came unprepared for urban life, in large part because the reserve and residential school systems had left them without adequate formal educational qualifications.[43] But they also faced other forms of discrimination. As Hugill notes, even though they were restricted to occupying what a 1971 Manitoba Indian Brotherhood housing survey described as some of the "most squalid" housing in the city, "racism against Indigenous people was so widespread that even finding accommodation in 'slum' housing could be a considerable challenge."[44] Racism extended to other aspects of urban living, including efforts to find employment and heightened police surveillance. All the while, City officials were content to explain the difficulties Indigenous people were encountering as their own doing, as their failure to adjust to this new environment, rather than attending to the ways in which their experiences were being "actively shaped by settler colonial processes."[45]

What transpired, therefore, was what urban researcher Jim Silver calls a "spatially concentrated, racialized poverty" in Winnipeg's inner city.[46] Meaningful, well-paid jobs are scarce, housing is frequently inadequate, and opportunities (recreational and otherwise) are limited. As a result, very large numbers of inner-city people have been "raised poor." They have never known anything but poverty and joblessness. This context of spatially concentrated, racialized poverty laid the groundwork for the formation of Indigenous street gangs.

The emergence of street gangs in Winnipeg

Christopher Giles's exploration of the history of street gangs in Winnipeg identified the presence of the short-lived Dew Drop gang in the 1950s.[47] But it was really not until the 1980s that street gangs — made up largely of Indigenous members — began to appear in the city.

The Main Street Rattlers was formed in the early 1980s. According to a woman interviewed by Fontaine for her study of Anishinaabe Ikwe and their gang participation, the Rattlers was born out of Indigenous youth "just hanging out, trying to survive."[48] A small group of some 20 to 25 members, the Rattlers were involved in the drug trade. Supplied by the Hell's Angels who controlled the trade, the Rattlers sold drugs (mainly marijuana) on the Main Street strip. However, the gang was short-lived. Once their leader left the scene the Rattlers disappeared as a street gang.[49]

The real beginning of Indigenous street gangs in Winnipeg came in the late 1980s when Indian Posse (IP) was formed. According to journalist Joe Friesen, IP was started in 1988 by the Wolfe brothers, Richard and Daniel.[50] The brothers grew up in Winnipeg's inner city and were in and out of child welfare custody as their mother, a residential school survivor, battled with an alcohol addiction. Similar to other Indigenous kids in that situation, they ended up spending a lot of time out on the street, fending

for themselves by stealing food.[51] At the ages of 13 and 12, Richard and Daniel joined up with five other young men to form IP.

According to Friesen, the boys came up with the name "Posse" while flipping through the pages of a hip-hop magazine. "Like the hip hop groups that reclaimed the N-word," they chose "Indian" to "express something they held in common: a feeling of poverty, of being looked down upon, and of resentment." As Richard Wolfe told Friesen, "We just wanted to make sure we stuck with each other and watched each other's backs."[52] Their Indigenous identity was also reflected in IP's leadership structure, which was based on the circle, "a symbol of central significance for Indigenous people that represents life, the sun, the nest of a bird, the medicine wheel, among other concepts." A leadership council of five to ten men would make decisions based on consensus, "another concept imported from Indigenous governance models."[53]

During our interviews with IP members for "*Indians Wear Red*," we learned that in 1990 IP "became something." When it was first started up, IP was "all kids. No adults. We were kids then."[54] As one of the members explained:

> It was all little cliques of just guys that were tight, little guys, like four or five guys here, four or five guys there, that were solid bros. They all kind of knew each other still 'cause we all grew up in the Youth Centre. So, you know, then you get out and everybody kind of started hanging out in the street, and in and out [of the detention centre], and everybody got tighter and tighter and the next thing you know it's just one or two of them. The Wolfes, actually they came around and then, you know, first it was just like, "What do you think it is, bro? Do you wear this one or this one, a red rag or a black rag?" "I fuckin' wear a red rag. Fuck. We're Indians. Indians wear red." … And the next thing you know we're in a fuckin' gang.[55]

While IP was started by a small group of kids, it soon morphed into something much larger. Initially focused on breaking into cars to steal the stereos, they moved on to auto theft and robbery, and then to drug dealing. The gang grew in number as well. According to an IP member, Indian Posse became "twenty different fuckin' gangs, twenty different crews, twenty different bosses. That's just in Winnipeg." Violence became its brand. As another man we interviewed said, "IP is the most hated street gang, but they're also the most ruthless."[56]

Another Indigenous street gang, the Manitoba Warriors (MW), emerged in the early 1990s. Ervin Chartrand was an original member of the Warriors. Ervin had been raised by a single mother, who had been in residential school and struggled with alcohol. After his father died

(when Ervin was just six months old), his mother moved her six children to Winnipeg. Like other families growing up poor in Winnipeg's inner city, they struggled to find stability, moving to more than 20 different homes before Ervin turned 18. Following a criminal path, according to Chartrand, was "just the way we grew, the way I grew up. The way my parents were. My mom was an alcoholic living in poverty. It was the only way out."[57]

Ervin's older brother (by four years) had recruited him at the age of ten to sell drugs. In his twenties, Ervin was working at a Winnipeg bar that was connected to the First Nation reserve in Pine Creek, Manitoba. According to Friesen, "The bouncers were given black satin jackets that bore the logo of the Pine Creek minor hockey team, the Warriors. An older guy joined the crew of bouncers and quickly went about organizing them into a gang. … The gang began calling themselves the Manitoba Warriors."[58]

The Warriors were heavily involved with motorcycle gangs, who controlled the drug trade at the time. According to a man we interviewed for "*Indians Wear Red*," "They worked for the bikers, back in the day … That's why they wear the leather vests like the bikers."[59] The Warriors also adopted the bikers' leadership structure, with a president, vice president, sergeant-at-arms, as well as full-patch members and strikers.[60] However, they also adopted symbols that connected with their Indigenous identity. As Métis scholar Robert Henry explains, "the Manitoba Warriors' crest is that of an eight-ray sun with a warrior head in the middle and Indigenous symbolism is woven within the different gang's tattoos through feathers, dream-catchers, and tomahawks."[61]

According to Brian Contois, a former MW president, the Warriors were "founded on a code of ethics aimed at bringing some level of morality, pride, and dignity to a way of life that would otherwise be unattainable." The gang promised its recruits employment, money—and brotherhood.[62] Unlike IP, the Warriors had a policy of not recruiting anyone under 18. However, another gang, the Deuce, composed of younger members, came to be known as the Warriors' "farm team."[63] Deuce members were influenced by American gang movies such as "Colors," and closely mimicked LA gangs in their dress, speech, and mannerisms (such as wearing a bandana around their head and caps perched on top). In the mid-1990s a third gang, The Overlords, began joining forces with MW and most of its leadership patched over to the Warriors.[64]

As IP and the Warriors grew in strength, Native Syndicate (NS) came onto the scene. NS was formed in Stony Mountain Penitentiary in 1993 by prisoners who didn't want to be subject to either IP or the Warriors.[65] "The gang mimics an Italian Mafia family cribbed from *The Godfather*

movie, with a boss and underboss and a consigliere as the three ranking positions."[66] Similar to IP and MW, however, the gang adopted a distinct Indigenous identity. "Its members were almost entirely Indigenous and its iconography and symbols were borrowed from First Nations traditions."[67]

In addition to showcasing their Indigenous identities, these street gangs have been a decidedly male venture. Denied the economic and social capital to accomplish masculinity through more conventionally accepted means (formal education, work in the paid labour market), their members drew on the resources available to them to perform a "street masculinity" that emphasizes physical toughness and violence.[68] At the same time, females have occupied a peripheral role in the Winnipeg street gang scene. In her interviews with Indigenous women and girls, Fontaine found that there were no female gang members or female gangs operating in the city. Rather, females were connected to street gangs by virtue of their relationships with male gang members as "old ladies," "bitches," and "hos." Old ladies are the "women or girls with whom male gang members have some semblance of a committed and loving relationship" and so are accorded a certain status and respect by the gang members. Bitches and hos were lower on the rung of the gender hierarchy. "These women and girls were not looked upon favourably and were always described in pejorative ways."[69]

While the gangs engaged in various forms of criminal activity — assaults, auto thefts, robberies — their main source of income has been the drug trade, which changed in nature over time as different drugs filtered into the illegal market. While the Rattlers sold marijuana in the 1980s, drug dens or shooting galleries that sold powder cocaine (to be sniffed or injected) became prominent in the 1990s. Crack cocaine (a mixture of cocaine and baking soda that is smoked) appeared in the Winnipeg drug trade in the late 1990s, sold in rented houses ("crack shacks") or via crack lines or "dial-a-dealer" operations in which cell phones are used to connect with clients. Crystal methamphetamine (meth) came on the market a few years later. Marijuana, LSD, ecstasy, and prescription drugs (accessible from the many walk-in clinics in Winnipeg's inner city) were also part of the illegal trade.

As we note in "*Indians Wear Red*," the drug trade is a business, and a highly profitable one at that. Much like any other profit-seeking business, it "relies upon a readily available market of consumers, an easily exploitable labour force to sell the product, and the skill and ingenuity of the 'owners' to manage the business to ensure profitability." Violence is "not incidental to but an essential element of" this business. "More than other highly competitive businesses — which can rely on the state

to ensure the conditions for profit-making, such as coercing customers, vendors, and others in the business chain to pay their bills — the illegal drug trade relies on physical violence to secure and maintain its markets."[70]

Henry's exploration of street gangs in Regina and Saskatoon makes similar observations about the drug trade business and the resort to violence, arguing that the violence enacted by street gang members is not random — despite the ways it is reported within public media. To successfully participate in this underground economy, the gangs need to maintain control over a particular territory; "the larger the territory, the greater the income for the gang." Absent the recourse to police and other legal protections, violence is used as a way to protect a gang's investment. As such, "to maintain respect, status, and control of specific territories, Indigenous street gang members have to react in ways that adhere to local codes of street justice in order to maintain their authority."[71] Nevertheless, while invoking the code of the street enables gang members to build both economic and social capital, it also generates police and criminal justice suppression strategies.

Conflicts between the gangs over their drug territories and control of the trade became more in evidence from the 1990s onward, especially with the increasing availability of guns. As one man we interviewed noted, "There's guns, man. Like, everybody you run into now, you can get shot, you know. Like, back in the day where everybody you ran into, you know, maybe they had a knife. You could pick up a stick and fight them. Everybody you run into now could have a gun on them, man."[72]

The criminal justice response

As street gangs became more in evidence in the 1990s, the criminal justice system responded by implementing a variety of suppression strategies aimed at curtailing gang activities.

In 1995, the Winnipeg Police Service[73] began compiling a "gang archive" containing information on suspected gang members, including "information concerning an individual's tattoos, wearing of gang colours, and affiliations with gang members."[74] The database was seen by police not only as a means of monitoring gang activity in the city but also as an effective tool for "putting gang members behind bars." Officers could use evidence from the archive when testifying in court to confirm that certain individuals were members of a criminal gang.[75]

That same year, the WPS set up the Street Gang Unit. According to the unit's head, its mandate was "for high visibility, in-your-face policing." He added: "The unit is project-oriented and raid-oriented. We target an area where we can make an impact."[76] Initially comprised of five officers, the unit was reorganized a few months later, increasing its complement to 15 officers and adopting a "zero-tolerance policy" that involved arresting gang members for "a broken tail-light, a health bylaw" or any other minor infraction. The Street Gang Unit also began setting up sting operations at potential robbery targets (gas bars and convenience stores) to catch street gang members,[77] as well as undercover and surveillance operations to make arrests for alleged drug trafficking and weapons offences.[78] The provincial government also weighed in, funding the "Street Peace and

Gang Youth Line," a crisis line created "to give youths a chance to turn in gang members who pressure them."[79]

In July 1995 two gang-related shootings, which were a rare occurrence up to that point, brought the issue of street gangs more into the public spotlight. One involved the death of 13-year-old Joseph "Beeper" Spence, who was killed after he was mistaken as Indian Posse by members of the Deuce gang, who were in a turf war with IP. One week later, IP retaliated by shooting Eugene Greene, a suspected Deuce member, near the Rossbrook House drop-in centre. Their deaths garnered national media attention, and led to Winnipeg being labelled the "street gang capital of Canada."[80] The following year saw more violence involving gang members, but this time within the walls of the Headingley Correctional Centre.

On the evening of April 25, 1996 guards at the Headingley jail made the decision to conduct a drug search after hearing the Block 1 prisoners "partying in the basement" and believing them to be "up to no good." Many of the men housed in Block 1 were said to be associated with Indian Posse and the Manitoba Warriors. As the prisoners were being moved into the open area where the search was to be conducted, shoving and shouting started. In the midst of the commotion, the prisoners managed to gain control of one of the officer's keys. As the officers quickly retreated, the prisoners made their way to other parts of the jail, including the medical ward and the third-floor cell block housing protective custody prisoners (most of whom were serving sentences for sexual offences), releasing prisoners as they went along. It took prison staff, firefighters, and a dispatch of RCMP officers 24 hours to bring the situation under control. While no lives were lost, one protective custody prisoner lost fingers and another was nearly castrated. Damage to the jail caused by fires set by the prisoners was estimated at $3.5 million.

The Hon. E.N. (Ted) Hughes was tasked with conducting an independent review into the circumstances leading up to the riot.[81] In his report, Hughes maintained that the riot was fundamentally the result of bad management and a "systemic malaise" that had permeated the jail as a result of poor relations between the administration and unionized staff. He cited two factors that were significant in precipitating the negative relations between the workers and management at the prison. One was the introduction in 1991 of a new management system, referred to as "Unit Management," which marked a significant shift away from the traditional model of prison guards as "turnkeys" to one in which they became "correctional officers" involved in the delivery of case management and programs and the provision of dynamic security (facilitated by regular

interactions between correctional officers and prisoners) within the jail. This shift generated considerable tension among the staff, especially for those who had worked at the jail for several years or, in some cases, several decades, creating a working environment that was, according to Hughes, "akin to a horror story."[82] The second factor was the role played by the superintendent, who had limited experience working in the correctional system. In Hughes's opinion the superintendent had little appreciation for the changing culture within the jail, which included the emergence of gangs, the use of illicit drugs, and the presence of a tougher and more defiant prisoner population.

Hughes deemed the decision of correctional officers to proceed with the search of Block 1 on the night of April 25 to be "grossly irresponsible" and "part and parcel of the everyday *hatred, apathy, negativism, and couldn't-care-less attitude* that had taken hold" at the jail.[83] He also located the presence of gangs in the jail within a broader systemic context: "Gang membership offers an attractive and often glittering alternative to many who are poverty stricken, have few if any skills to market on their own, and are caged within a life without hope."[84] His report emphasized that the "real solution" to preventing similar violence in the future lay outside the jail walls: governments at all levels were obligated to address poverty as a root cause of crime, especially as it pertained to the situation of Indigenous peoples.

At the same time that street gangs were being connected to violence occurring both inside and outside prison walls, they were also playing a role in mediating political disputes within the Indigenous community. In May 1996, the Warriors became involved in a political dispute on the Waterhen reserve (now Skownan First Nation), some 300 kilometres northwest of Winnipeg. The dispute was between the First Nation's leadership and a group wanting more transparency of the band's finances. A barrier was set up at the entry to the reserve while band members participated in negotiations with Manitoba Judge Murray Sinclair acting as a conciliator. The Warriors acted as security to prevent police from crossing the barrier. According to Friesen, "What they [the Warriors] did isn't clear but their mere presence in a political dispute set alarm bells ringing. Criminal Intelligence Service Canada warned that this event, in combination with their role in the rebellion at the Headingley prison, indicated that Aboriginal gangs were gaining increased legitimacy in the community."[85]

Indigenous leadership weighs in

In the late 1990s, aware of the growing presence of the gangs, Indigenous leadership reached out to gang members in an effort to mediate the negative impacts they were having on Indigenous communities.

In October 1996, Ovide Mercredi, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, requested a meeting at the Headingley jail with Indian Posse and Manitoba Warriors members. Mercredi reported, "The gang members claimed they had banded together to create a sense of brotherhood or collective security against a world many of them felt had excluded them from basic opportunities to learn and work."[86] Mercredi admitted years later that the gangs were a disastrous development that brought misery and destruction, but that his hope was to encourage the gang members to redirect their energies from criminal activity to combating racism and lifting their people out of poverty.[87]

In January 1997, Assembly of Manitoba Grand Chief Phil Fontaine hired Brian Contois, the 39-year-old leader of the Manitoba Warriors, as a Special Advisor to the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) to help in creating a strategy for deterring Indigenous youth from joining gangs. As Fontaine told the press, "We're not legitimizing gangs, but the fact of the matter is that they exist. And they exist for two main reasons — poverty and discrimination."[88] Contois proposed a plan that involved the purchase of the Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA) building on Hargrave Street for $4 million to convert it into a centre that could provide a

positive environment for Indigenous youth, with job training, employment, education, and outreach programs.

However, two weeks after Contois was enlisted by the AMC, the WPS and the RCMP implemented a joint operation involving 30 officers called "Operation Disarm." Twenty-two Warriors members, including Contois, were arrested on drug trafficking and firearms charges. While police chief David Cassels claimed the operation to be a success, others were more skeptical. Reporter Brian Cole pointed out that the drugs involved in the arrests only amounted to $325 worth of marijuana and suggested that the operation was more of a media ploy used by police to improve their image and embarrass Grand Chief Fontaine and the AMC for hiring Contois.[89] Contois's AMC contract was subsequently terminated when he was sentenced in August 1997 to four-and-a half years for trafficking in marijuana and firearms offences.[90]

Doubling down on criminal justice suppression strategies

Turf wars between the gangs continued to propagate violence in Winnipeg's inner city, affecting the lives of people who were not gang-involved. In July 1996, a young couple, Eric Vargas and Queyen-Vn Raceles, were shot multiple times while sitting in their vehicle at the Chalmers Community Centre parking lot by gang members who were in the vicinity, looking to settle a beef with rival gang members. Vargas died from his injuries. Eighteen-year-old Robert Dmytruk was convicted of second-degree murder for his death and sentenced to 15 years in prison.[91] In December 1997, 22-year-old Jeff Giles, an employee at an Arlington Street grocery store, was killed by a shot-gun blast while trying to foil a gang-related robbery. In 1998, Jason Starr pleaded guilty and was handed a life sentence with no parole for 12 years. The following year 21-year-old Sheri Lamirande and 22-year-old Norman Guimond were found guilty of manslaughter and given life sentences for their role in the crime.[92] These events prompted a doubling down of police suppression strategies aimed at curtailing gang activities, including the illegal trade in drugs. Following on the heels of "Operation Disarm," in November 1998 the Winnipeg

Police Service along with the RCMP launched "Operation Northern Snow."

"Operation Northern Snow" involved a series of raids and arrests of members of the Manitoba Warriors, including its president, William Pangman. More than 150 officers took part in the raids, seizing 16 guns and thousands in cash and leading to more than 45 Manitoba Warrior members and associates facing 142 charges relating to the cocaine trade.[93] All of the accused were denied bail and held in remand custody. Given the large number of co-defendants, a high-security court house was built in an industrial area of Winnipeg. Building this "special court house" generated controversy, in part because "the special location and the unusual courtroom design might prejudice a jury,"[94] but also due to the $3.5 million cost. At one point, there were a dozen prosecutors and more than 30 defence lawyers appearing in the special court house.[95] Nevertheless, the number of defendants to face trial slowly dwindled as the accused pleaded guilty to lesser charges. So, the courthouse was never really put to use except for hearing pre-trial motions.

The *R. v Pangman* case was the first time that arrests had been made under the new organized crime legislation. Bill C-95, introduced by the federal government in 1997, adding Section 467.1 to the *Criminal Code*, was designed to tackle motorcycle gangs in Quebec. However, because *R v Pangman* never actually got to trial, the anti-gang law remained untested. Only two of the original 35 defendants (who were minor players) pleaded guilty to participating in a criminal organization and had extra time added to their jail terms.[96] Ervin Chartrand received a nine-year sentence for cocaine trafficking, the longest sentence of any accused.[97]

The role of prisons in perpetuating the gangs

"Putting gang members behind bars" was a key strategy of the criminal justice system to suppress the street gangs. Vic Toews, who served as Manitoba's Justice Minister from 1997 to 1999, was unapologetic about adopting this tough on crime approach to street gangs, saying, "Whether they are white gangsters or aboriginal gangsters, I make no distinction—I don't want them on the street. I make no apologies about what people sometimes say about our tough line in terms of attacking the gang problem. For the hardened, violent criminal, I say they need to be incarcerated."[98] However, incarcerating gang members turned out to be a strategy that had the opposite outcome: it only encouraged the growth of the gangs.

For one, prison became a major site for recruiting new members. As Buddle has noted, "the most common means of gang expansion is from within the Canadian penal system. When incarcerated, even for a relatively minor charge, Native youth will likely become affiliated with a gang. Generally, inmates will join under duress to avail themselves of the protection gangs provide. When released, former inmates are pressured to serve as a contact person for the gang, sell drugs, and solicit selected community members to join the gang."[99]

For another, doing time became a rite of passage within the gang hierarchy. For IP members, "to reach the gang's highest levels, to get

full-patch status or hold a coveted position on the leadership council, a member had to serve time in a federal penitentiary."[100] Doing time also became a means of gaining status and reputation within the gang. As one younger gang member commented,

> You looked up to all these older guys, you know, they were the ones getting three years, five years, ten years. It was like they had the status. It's what me and my young gang friends wanted.... And they always talked about, you know, "Oh, you got a TV in your cell, you got a game in your cell, you got this in your cell, you know, if you want weed you got weed." Basically, they glorified it.[101]

For gang leaders in particular, doing time had its privileges. One leader had this to say:

> It's like going home. You know, you walk into jail it's — especially somebody like me, you know what I mean, jail is like a fuckin' reunion. You know, my cell's fuckin' made up before I get there. There's canteen in the cell. There's a radio in there. And the bed's made. Everything's done before you get there.... You walk on the range, it's "Hey, man." Everybody's hugging and kissing you. "What's happening." You know?[102]

Correctional policies also played a role in supporting the proliferation of street gangs. According to Henry, "It was policy during the 1990s that federally incarcerated Indigenous street gang members from the Prairie Provinces to be housed within one correctional institution in Manitoba. Justice officials assumed that this would be the best way to handle the growing issue of Indigenous gangs in the prison system, as they could control and minimize the influence of Indigenous gang leaders."[103] However, the larger gangs, such as IP and MW, used this policy to recruit members and expand their power by absorbing smaller gangs.

In the late 1990s, the correctional system changed course and began shipping gang members to prisons across the country as a way to undermine their power. But that strategy backfired as the gangs used it as an opportunity to recruit more members and expand their operations. As one gang leader explained,

> Before guys got shipped out of Stony all over the country, we sat in the hole for fuckin' three months together and did nothing but plotted on the rest of the country, you know what I mean. Here's our chance to get big. Here's our chance to grow. You know, everybody came up with, you know, everybody had their plots and their plans on what they had to do and we went across and did it.[104]

By 2000, 385 gang members were provincially incarcerated in Manitoba and many more were serving time in federal prisons.[105]

Into the next century

In October 1997, the *Winnipeg Free Press* was reporting that "gang membership was beginning to retreat."[106] According to the Street Gang Unit,

> Gang membership has levelled off at about 1,375 after years of exponential growth. The past year has also seen a marked absence of high-profile street crime. While traditional gang activities like auto theft and robberies remain high, they are not increasing anywhere [near] the rate they did in the early 1990s when auto thefts alone shot up nearly 200 percent to the point where there is, on average, one car stolen hourly in Winnipeg.[107]

Despite this optimism, street gangs persisted into the next century — and their numbers increased. In 2000, the Street Gang Unit's database identified 1,548 active gang members and 826 inactive members. Police were tracking 26 different gangs and "about 85 percent of street gang members" were Indigenous. The four primary gangs were IP (with 505 active members in the police database), Deuce (with 502 active and 72 inactive members), Native Syndicate (with 35 active and 19 inactive members), and Manitoba Warriors (with 327 active and 143 inactive members, almost all adults). In company with the growth of street gang numbers, the Winnipeg Police Service's Street Gang Unit had increased its complement from 15 members in the mid-1990s to 40 members by 2000.[108]

Arguably, the persistence of street gangs was in large part because the social conditions that prompted them were becoming ever more dire — not only in terms of the colonial context that prompted the formation of Indigenous street gangs but also the ways in which racialized

poverty was affecting the lives of newcomer youth in Winnipeg's inner city.

While Indian Posse, Manitoba Warriors, and Native Syndicate dominated the Winnipeg street gang scene throughout the 1990s, the number of smaller gangs began to increase in the 2000s. As one of the men we interviewed in 2012 commented, "It's getting to be like L.A., man. One every two blocks, a different gang, now."[109] As other gangs began to emerge in the 2000s, rivalries over turf and control of the drug trade led to more violence in the streets. For instance, the Central gang was formed in 2002 by former members of the Deuce gang after a well-known Deuce member was shot in Winnipeg's West End.[110] Other gangs populated largely by Indigenous members also came onto police radar. The B Side gang emerged in the early 2000s in the West Broadway area of Winnipeg. According to police, the gang focused on trafficking crack cocaine, mainly through "dial-a-dealer" operations.[111] Most Organized Brothers (MOB) came to police attention in the fall of 2006, largely due to their involvement in car thefts. MOB was affiliated for a time with the Manitoba Warriors, who supplied them with drugs. But they soon became rivals with both Manitoba Warriors and Indian Posse over control of the street drug trade, leading to several instances of shootings and reprisals.[112]

In addition to the changing nature of Indigenous-led street gangs, Winnipeg was witnessing the emergence of gangs populated by newcomer and immigrant youth. Mad Cowz emerged in the city's Central Park and West End areas in 2004, where East African newcomer families were being settled.[113] They recruited youth from Winnipeg's refugee and immigrant communities to distribute crack cocaine.

As researcher Matthew Fast notes, the appeal of the gang for young newcomers was strong given the social conditions they found themselves in. Coming from war-affected countries where they witnessed and were victimized by violence, and sometimes participated in violence themselves as child soldiers, refugee youth expected Canada to be a "promised land" that would provide them with a better life.[114] However, being settled in inner-city neighbourhoods already submerged in poverty and crime, encountering troubles adapting to their new surroundings due to language barriers, being placed in a grade at school that matched their age rather than their educational level, experiencing racism when seeking employment, and encountering police harassment on the streets left many refugee youths feeling marginalized and disconnected.

Joining up with other refugee youth who spoke their first language and offered them comradeship and material gain seemed a rational choice,

especially considering the economic hardships their families were facing. As one former gang member told Fast:

> Some were already dealing drugs and making money, having nice shoes, they didn't have to depend on their parents, they'll come to school they got money, ya know? For me, my parents, my Mom didn't give me any allowance cause she didn't have any. So I was like, "man, I want some of this" so I just hung around with them to see what they do, and they told me everything, ya know?[115]

Reuben Garang's report on the integration and settlement of African immigrants and refugees in Winnipeg mirrors Fast's findings: "The reason why many young African immigrants are vulnerable to gang recruitment is rooted in the level of poverty their families and communities are experiencing. Children from poor families in poor neighborhoods are easily trapped by experienced gang recruiters who specialize in illegal activities and know how to lure immigrant youth desperate for basic needs."[116]

Another gang populated by refugee youth, African Mafia, came about in 2005 as a result of a dispute over how Mad Cowz leadership had handled the death of Sirak Okbazion, a 14-year-old Mad Cowz member who was gunned down by a B Side member in August 2004. Sirak had emigrated to Canada in 2000 after fleeing war-torn Eritrea and spending several years in a Kenyan refugee camp.[117] However, according to a former high-ranking member of Mad Cowz, African Mafia started as "African boys sticking together" and wanting to be around someone who's been through what they've been through. "They're told, 'You're going to move to Winnipeg. You're going to go to school and have a future.' But they move to the west side, to Central Park. They barely speak English. There's nothing they can relate to. They walk around like little zombies. It's only a matter of time before they get drawn in."[118]

The two gangs, Mad Cowz and African Mafia, became rivals, fighting for control over the drug trade. In October 2005 bystander Phil Haiart, the 17-year-old son of a Winnipeg surgeon, was killed by African Mafia members who were shooting at Mad Cowz members in the West End. His death dominated the local news, leading to calls to get tougher on gangs. One month later Mayor Sam Katz responded by creating a police task force called "Operation Clean Sweep." Haiart's girlfriend at the time noted, "If this happened to a native kid, there wouldn't have been the same reaction."[119]

With an initial cost of $1.6 million (later bolstered by a $2 million contribution from the provincial government and an additional $3.5

million to the WPS's overtime budget), Operation Clean Sweep involved the deployment of 45 officers, mainly in the city's West End.[120] Described as an "in your face" form of policing, Clean Sweep aimed to "suppress general street level violence and disorder, including but not limited to, gang, drug and prostitution related offences."[121] From November 21 to December 31, 2005 alone, the task force made 592 arrests, conducted 1,330 spot checks, and logged 1,693 beat walking hours. A "Clean Sweep Tip Line" was also set up to collect information from citizens.[122] Its operations were wound down the following spring.[123] In its place, the WPS established the Street Crime Unit (SCU). Similar to Clean Sweep, the SCU's approach involved "strategic, aggressive and intelligence-led policing which is deployed as a visible presence, effecting spot checks and executing warrants."[124]

Once convicted of criminal offences, deportations of several young newcomers followed, ending their hope that Canada would be the "promised land." Some, like Hussein Jilaow, were met with certain death on their arrival back in their home country.[125] Meanwhile, African Mafia members became less visible, no longer wearing clothing adorned with gang logos or other signifiers to avoid detection by police. The gang also splintered into Da Pitbull Army (DPA) and All About Money (ABM).[126]

The gang scene has been fluid. Over time, as different street gangs come into being, struggles for power and turf lead to amalgamations or "patching over." As well, the tendency to single out the better-known gangs creates the impression of large, well-coordinated organizations. Our research for "*Indians Wear Red*," however, showed "what actually appears to exist is a multiplicity of small crews, some affiliated with the big-name gangs and, especially in recent times, many not affiliated. The street gang scene in Winnipeg is fragmented, with many small crews, and even the big gangs are decentralized."[127]

Significantly, the drug scene — on which the gangs rely heavily for their income — is also fluid. While crack cocaine and meth sales continued, more toxic drugs, like fentanyl, were added into the mix. Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid narcotic, began appearing in the Winnipeg drug scene around 2015. One hundred times more potent than morphine, small quantities of fentanyl had the potential to generate huge profits for drug dealers. However, its arrival generated marked increases in drug poisonings since the dealers were using it as an inexpensive filler in other drugs.[128]

As the street gangs proliferated — and the impacts of their drug sales (and the violence that came with it) were being felt in inner-city

communities — the criminal justice system intensified efforts to suppress gang activity.

Doubling down (again) on suppression

Similar to the 1990s, the early 2000s saw a number of criminal justice initiatives being implemented to tackle both organized crime (particularly motorcycle gangs) and street gangs in the province.

The Manitoba Integrated Organized Crime Task Force (MIOCTF) was established in 2003. MIOCTF involved a partnership between Manitoba Justice and the province's law enforcement agencies (RCMP D Division, WPS, and Brandon Police Service), with a mandate to engage in intelligence-based investigations of organized criminal activity in the province. The 2004–05 Manitoba Justice budget allocated $400,000 for the task force.[129] That amount was doubled in 2005–06, with most of the increase spent on operational costs such as undercover investigations.[130]

The focus of the task force was on curbing the illegal drug trade, especially in relation to the involvement of motorcycle gangs in bringing the drugs into the province. Several projects led to arrests and drug seizures, including:

- 2006: Project Defense: police arrested 13 people, including three members of the Hell's Angels, on cocaine trafficking charges.[131]
- 2007: Project Drill involved the arrest of 18 men, nine from Manitoba, including the President of the Manitoba chapter of the Hells Angels, on drug and proceeds of crime charges. More than 250 officers were

involved in the operation, seizing 11 kilograms of cocaine, 2,000 tablets of methamphetamine, eight guns, $70,000 in cash as well as vehicles and other property.[132]

- 2009: Project Divide led to the arrests of 34 members and associates of the Hells Angels and Zig Zag Crew motorcycle gangs on drug trafficking, money laundering, and firearms offences. Some 300 officers were involved in the raids, seizing drugs (cocaine, methamphetamine, and ecstasy) and a shot gun.[133]
- 2011: Project Develop: RCMP East District officers laid 104 charges involving 34 people relating to drug trafficking. Drugs seized included crack cocaine, powder cocaine, marijuana, and synthetic drugs with an estimated street value of $18,000.[134]
- 2011: Project Deplete: police arrested 13 people from Manitoba and Alberta and seized nearly seven kilograms of cocaine, almost half a kilo of crack, more than 9,800 ecstasy tablets, a kilo of MDMA and large quantities of methamphetamine, oxycodone and marijuana.[135]
- 2012: Project Flatlined targeted the Hells Angels and their puppet club, the Redlined. Two Hells Angels associates were convicted in 2013 on drug trafficking, conspiracy, and criminal organization charges for their involvement in a crack cocaine ring operating in Elmwood that had garnered an estimated $1.5M in sales.[136]
- 2014: Project Distress, involving more than 200 officers in five provinces, resulted in 12 arrests of members of the Zig Zag Crew on drugs and weapons charges. The 15-month investigation involved the seizure of six kilograms of cocaine, eight kilograms of methamphetamine, and various amounts of steroids and marijuana as well as $70,000 in cash, guns, and ammunition.[137]
- 2015: Project Diverge resulted in the arrest of four Winnipeggers on charges relating to cocaine and methamphetamine trafficking. Police seized eight kilograms of cocaine, $70,000 in cash, and a prohibited magazine cartridge.[138]
- 2016: Project Derringer, a joint operation of the MIOCTF, led to three arrests on drug trafficking and weapons charges in Brandon and Western Manitoba. Three kilograms of cocaine, one-and-a-half kilograms of methamphetamine, and several weapons were seized.[139]

While the task force concentrated on curbing the supply of illegal drugs by motorcycle gangs, the province also heightened its efforts to

monitor street gang members. Attorney General Gord Mackintosh had announced in May 2000 the establishment of the Criminal Organization High Risk Offender Unit (COHROU). Comprised of specialized prosecutors, probations officers, victim and witness support persons, and administrative support staff, the purpose of the unit was to expedite the arrest, prosecution, and supervision of high-risk offenders, "particularly those involved in gang or organized criminal activity, home invasions and other violent crimes." In addition to tracking gang activity and the sharing of information on organized crime, the unit engaged in intensive supervision through "daily contact, random curfew checks, weekly home visits and random urinalysis of offenders on probation."[140]

A 2015 evaluation of the COHROU program involved 409 individuals admitted over eight years (2001 to 2008). Over half of the participants (56 percent) were Indigenous, most (72 percent) were single, and just over half (54 percent) had Grade 10 or less education. Three out of five were unemployed when admitted to the program. One-third of the participants were listed on the Corrections Officer Management System (COMS) database as having gang affiliation.[141] While only 8.7 percent were charged with a serious violence offence while on COHROU, 61 percent had breached their release conditions (failing to report, curfew violations, etc.). Penalties for those found in breach of their conditions were severe, since they spent an average of 146 days (almost five months) in custody, and close to one in five spent over 10 months incarcerated due to technical violations, suggesting that the program had the effect of extending the net of the criminal justice system.[142]

In 2009 the COHROU and the WPS jointly initiated the Gang Response and Suppression Plan (GRASP). Winnipeg Police Association president Mike Sutherland claimed that "gangs or gang associates commit roughly half of all crime in Winnipeg."[143] However, Sutherland was also quoted as saying the WPS gang database had been out of commission for about a decade. "We had a gang database a number of years ago. That went by the wayside." With the announcement of GRASP, the province was providing funding for a criminal intelligence analyst to conduct the data entry.[144] Meanwhile, the Winnipeg Police Association was calling for more officers to staff the Street Crime Unit, which was tasked with implementing GRASP.[145]

GRASP was part of the provincial government's "Project Restore" program, the goal of which was to quell violent gang activity and to make sure gang members are following court conditions.[146] Project Restore used the approach of the Winnipeg Auto Theft Suppression Strategy (WATSS). Implemented in 2005, WATSS involved intensive

supervision of high-risk youth to ensure they were complying with their release conditions while on bail or probation.[147] During the operation of the strategy there was a 44 percent reduction in motor vehicle thefts in the city from 2007 to 2008.[148] In 2011, Manitoba Justice provided GRASP additional funding for nine more probation staff to increase monitoring from 50 to 100 offenders.[149] And in 2017 the City of Winnipeg signed an agreement to continue supporting the costs of GRASP.[150]

GRASP was initially designed to monitor up to 50 street gang members on probation who had prior histories of violent offending, with the aim of taking a "zero tolerance and immediate response to offending as well as to breaches of probation."[151] Under GRASP, street gang members were subject to a minimum of two curfew checks each week. If a breach of their probation conditions occurred (missing a curfew or court date, using drugs or alcohol, etc.), an expedited process was implemented to have warrants issued. In addition to intensive surveillance and supervision, GRASP participants were able to access programs through the probation office as well as community-based organizations.

A 2013 evaluation of the GRASP program found that participants were much more likely to experience re-arrest when found in violation of their probation, with nearly two-thirds arrested in the first week as compared to 10 percent prior to having been put on GRASP. The evaluation also found that the majority of GRASP participants were Indigenous and had limited education and training, a lack of stable employment, unstable family and living arrangements, and a history of drug and alcohol addictions. Many of the Indigenous participants "had not been introduced to their culture or cultural heritage prior to being in custody."[152] While such supports were made available when they were on probation, "they became difficult to access or unavailable after they are no longer on probation."[153]

In addition to the more intensive monitoring of street gang members via COHROU and GRASP, the WPS engaged in a number of projects directed specifically at street gangs and their involvement in the drug trade. For instance, Project Octopus was a 2009 police investigation into Paa Pii Wak, a halfway house run by the Manitoba Warriors. Paa Pii Wak opened in 2003 and received $270,000 in federal funding annually. Its purpose was to provide an Indigenous treatment and healing centre for homeless people and those referred by the court while their charges were pending. However, police discovered the centre was operating as a Manitoba Warrior clubhouse with "lots of women, lots of drinking and partying going on," according to one police officer.[154] Government funding was cancelled after police laid charges of obstructing justice and drug

possession against four staff members and three residents of the house.[155] As well, in April 2013 the WPS Street Crime Unit concluded two projects: Project Recall and Project Falling Star. Project Recall led to the arrest of 10 members of Mad Cowz on drugs (cocaine) and weapons charges. At the time, Mad Cowz were in conflict with MW over drug turf in the Spence neighbourhood.[156] In Project Falling Star, police targeted members of the Manitoba Warriors, arresting 57 members on drug charges and seizing 824 rocks of crack cocaine, 2.5 ounces of powder cocaine, and $13,500 in cash, as well as firearms and ammunition.[157]

The WPS was also reorganized. In the spring of 2013 the Street Crime Unit was realigned with the Division 40 Organized Crime Division.[158] Six years later, in 2019, members of the Street Crime Unit were reassigned to a new Guns and Gangs Unit within the WPS.[159] The move was part of Manitoba's Guns and Gangs Suppression Strategy, supported by a $2.3 million grant from the federal government. Of that money, $1.3 million was devoted to the WPS's guns and gangs initiatives focused on the identification, arrest, and dismantling of gangs, criminal organizations, or violent crime groups. Some $704,000 was designated for developing a new database of illicit firearm and gang intelligence. Only $20,000 was relegated to supporting gang exiting efforts.[160]

The MIOCTF was dissolved in June 2017. Due to a funding freeze imposed by the Pallister government, the WPS was prompted to reduce its staffing by 15 officers, including six officers delegated to the task force. WPS Chief Danny Smyth indicated that the Street Crime Unit and Organized Crime Unit would continue to target organized crime.[161]

In November 2022, however, Premier Heather Stefanson announced three initiatives as part of the Manitoba Violent Crime Strategy, supported with $34.6 million in the 2023–24 budget and another $17.2 million planned for 2024–25.[162] One initiative was the Manitoba Integrated Violent Offender Apprehension Unit (MIVOAU). Composed of officers from the WPS and RCMP, the unit was tasked with the targeting and enhanced surveillance of "high-risk offenders who have warrants for arrest, who are gang-involved, drug traffickers, illegal gun smugglers, or involved in organized crime."[163] Another was the allocation of more resources to the Criminal Organization High-Risk Offender Unit, including a full-time psychologist, and additional probation officers and community corrections workers. With the new investments, the program was slated to provide supervision for up to 100 additional offenders, doubling its capacity.[164] A third initiative was the Intensive Support and Supervision Program designed to target individuals "who need intensive supervision and support in order to comply with bail conditions and change their

behaviour."[165] According to Justice Minister Cliff Cullen, the new violent crime strategy was intended to "get tough on violent crime and violent criminals." In company with the strategy, the government was lobbying the federal government to reform the *Criminal Code* to make it harder for individuals charged with violent offences to get bail.[166] Plans were also underway to implement an electronic monitoring program.[167]

The Manitoba Integrated Violent Offender Apprehension Unit was launched in May 2023. The Winnipeg component of the unit was staffed with six officers (four detectives, one detective sergeant, and one sergeant).[168] In the first three quarters of 2024, the unit made 264 arrests, conducted 594 warrant checks and knocked on 1,203 doors during their searches, and executed 375 warrants; 84 percent of arrests involved someone who was either on bail, probation, or parole; 27 percent of those arrested were known by police as a gang member or associate.[169] In October 2024 the MIVAOU announced the establishment of a "Manitoba's Most Wanted" website. The website features individuals who have outstanding arrest warrants or are in breach of their release conditions. The public is encouraged to report their whereabouts to police, and "enhanced rewards" are offered by Crime Stoppers for information that leads to an arrest.[170]

In company with increased resources for the MIVOAU, Manitoba's NDP government announced in August 2024 that $2.9 million would be devoted over two years to an electronic monitoring program designed to supervise individuals released on bail.[171] The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, however, raised concerns that increased surveillance could further exacerbate the overrepresentation of First Nations peoples in the justice system. According to Grand Chief Cathy Merrick, addressing the underlying issues that lead people to commit crimes — poverty, addiction, and lack of employment opportunities — "should be the priority, rather than expanding surveillance measures that risk further criminalizing our people." The AMC was calling for alternative approaches, such as "restorative justice, community-based supports, and systemic reform to address the root causes of over-representation and to support the genuine rehabilitation of offenders." [172]

The disappearance of street gangs?

In 2016 the WPS made the decision not to publicize the names of the street gangs that are the subject of criminal justice investigations, ostensibly in the belief that the gangs thrived on media attention. With that decision, street gangs have been "disappeared" in police media reports. For example, a 2020 police investigation into two murders thought to be tied to a dispute between two unnamed gangs led to 11 arrests. One man was charged with attempted murder and firearms offences for a shooting outside a nightclub. Three other men were charged with murder in a second killing. Police also seized five kilograms of cocaine and $190,000 in cash. Seven people were facing charges relating to drug trafficking and participation in a criminal organization.[173] In June 2021 a man was shot and killed in the West Broadway neighbourhood. While police would not confirm whether the death was gang-related, community activist Mitch Bourbonniere told the media that the killing was part of an active war between the B Side gang and the Mad Cowz and likely represented retaliation for a recent incident in which a Mad Cowz member was shot.[174]

Even though street gangs have been disappeared in police media reports, in 2019 Inspector Max Waddell of the WPS Organized Crime Unit told the media that Indian Posse, Manitoba Warriors, Native Syndicate, and Mad Cowz remained entrenched in the city, along with other gangs such as Bloods and Triple M.[175] As well, Bourbonniere commented in a 2021 news report: "Overall things have remained quite consistent over the last three decades. The only thing that has changed is how the different

groups are organized and how they do business, but there's as much activity today as there has been in the last 30 years."[176]

Street gangs have not disappeared from Winnipeg — despite efforts by the criminal justice system to suppress their activities. In large part, their persistence is due to the social and economic conditions that spawn street gang activity.

The real problem: persistent poverty

If income was distributed equally, the total income of a population divided into deciles would show each decile taking home 10 percent of the income earned. That has certainly not been the case in Manitoba, just as in all of Canada and the industrial capitalist world. Economist Ian Hudson's analysis shows income inequality has been substantial in the province and has actually worsened since the late 1970s to the point where the average market income of the lowest decile in 2020 was $4,800 while that of the top decile was $268,800 — or a whopping 56 times higher than the lowest decile.[177] During the COVID pandemic, government transfers like the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) helped to stabilize the incomes of those in the bottom deciles in Manitoba, which otherwise would have fallen dramatically. The average after-tax income of the lowest 10 percent of all income earners increased by $11,000 from 2019 to 2020 — all but $800 came from the federal government. However, "pandemic relief measures were designed to be temporary, and by 2022 income inequality and the incomes of poorer Canadians had returned to their pre-pandemic levels."[178]

Income inequality has profound consequences for those at the bottom of the income distribution scale. As Hudson notes, "Low income means it is difficult to afford a nutritious diet, adequate uncrowded housing, healthy, safer neighbourhoods, and necessary medical care, such as prescriptions and dental work, that are not covered by Canada's public health care system."[179] Unequal societies are also characterized by "higher rates of stress, anxiety, depression, and addiction, which are caused by

people's reduced sense of control over their own lives and an overall decreased level of social coherence and security."[180]

In tandem with worsening income inequality, food insecurity has also intensified in recent years. Harvest Manitoba, a network of 360 food banks and agencies across the province, reported in 2022 that food bank usage had doubled in the previous three years as more and more families were needing access to food support. A quarter of food bank users are people with jobs, but are not earning enough wages to get by. Some four in 10 food bank users (40.1 percent) are Indigenous. And record numbers of children — 15,330 every month — are using food banks in the province.[181]

For decades, Manitoba has had one of the highest rates of child poverty in the country. In 2018, 28.3 percent of Manitoba children were living in poverty compared to 18.2 percent nationally.[182] Lone-parent families, most of which are headed by women, are especially at risk of poverty. In Manitoba, almost two-thirds (63.4 percent) of children in single parent homes were living in poverty in 2018.[183] And Indigenous and racialized children are especially at risk. In 2015, 65 percent of First Nations children on-reserve and 53 percent off-reserve lived in poverty, compared to 17.1 percent of non-Indigenous children in Manitoba; 20.8 percent of racialized children (versus 12.2 percent of non-racialized children) in Manitoba were living in poverty that same year.[184]

Children living in Winnipeg's inner-city communities — where street gangs flourish — are especially susceptible to poverty. In 2021 (when CERB was available) the child poverty rate in Winnipeg's inner city was 30 percent.[185] Clearly, not all young people growing up in poverty will become involved in street gangs — although they still have to contend with the presence of gangs in their community.[186] Nevertheless, these social and economic conditions do make joining a street gang a seemingly rational choice for so many young people living in the inner city.

Thomas's story

In 2015 the late Larry Morrissette and I began meeting with men who were in trouble — caught up in the gang life, dealing with addictions to drugs and alcohol, cycling in and out of jail. Our intention was to learn more about their lives and the challenges they were encountering in trying to realize a good life.[187] Most of the men we met with identified as Indigenous, one of whom was Thomas.[188] His story reflects many of the life challenges experienced by young Indigenous men who become involved in street gangs and who are trying to move out of that life.

Thomas was 22 years old when we met. During our first meeting, he told us about growing up in Winnipeg's North End in a public housing complex with his mom, dad, and two siblings. "At first things started off good," he said, but then his mom and dad "started drinking and shit. They'd drink, abuse drugs. And they'd leave us for weeks on end. It was pretty tough. Like, my sister, she was older than us so she just kind of left me and my little brother to do our own thing."

His parents eventually separated and Thomas and his brother were sent to live with their father in a First Nation community up north, where they remained for two years. "At first it was good 'cause my dad got a job as soon as he got there. But then towards the end he just, yeah, it was just kind of just me and my little brother there. We didn't have electricity or no plumbing or anything out there. I don't know, it was shitty." Thomas was just eight years old at the time. His relatives tried to help him — his auntie taught him how to cook bannock and his uncle taught him how to trap and hunt — but his father had a drinking problem. As Thomas put it, "Shit he'd do to us wasn't right." As one example, his father would leave Thomas and his younger brother alone to fend for themselves.

> I remember him leaving for a week, and me and my little brother, we had a can of those big cans of Heinz tomato ketchup? I remember, fuck, me and my little brother, we were so hungry we made tomato soup out of that and dipped our bannock in there. And, fuck, we lived off of that for like three, four days. I don't know, it was something we shouldn't have did, something we shouldn't had to go through.

Thomas also recalled what happened when his dad finally returned home:

> I remember after that like my dad coming home and I was crying to him, you know, like telling him "We're hungry, we haven't eaten, we're hungry." Him looking at me while he was drunk, he's like, "Oh, you're a man you're not supposed to be crying." And he slapped me and he started slapping me around. I don't know, I just remember 'cause I swore at him to stop. He used to beat me like I was a guy and, fuck, I just, I'd hate it. He would try to do that to my little brother, but like fuck I would, I don't know, as many lickings as I could take for him I would take, you know. But like, I don't know, I didn't like it.

But Thomas also recalled witnessing his father as he experienced his own pain.

> There was one summer that we had to sleep out and it was like a teepee. I remember we slept there for the summer and being up one morning and, like, it was late at night and I remember, like I guess my dad must have thought we were sleeping but he was up by himself and he was just crying and crying and crying. I just kind of felt hopeless. 'Cause I didn't know what he was going to do, how we were, like at the time how things were going, I didn't know how we were going to survive. But we always made it through, I guess.

This childhood experience meant that Thomas "had to grow up young. I had to grow up when I was such a little guy.... I was fucked up living out there with my dad." But he tries not to blame his father for that experience. "'Cause he went through, he's went through residential school and shit and, like, he's been through some messed up things. He tells me about some things, hey. He doesn't tell me everything but, you know, the shit that he had to deal with, the shit that he seen. He's fucked up."

When Thomas was nine his mom convinced his dad to return to the city. "'Cause she seen how we were living out there. She didn't like it one bit." But once back in the city, "the same shit happened when we got back. It was like, they started getting into crack and cocaine and all that. I don't know, it was just messed up."

Thomas and his younger brother were taken into the custody of the child welfare system during that time. "They just bounced us from foster home to foster home." The boys were eventually returned to their parents, but "every time we went back with my parents, you know, it always went back to how things were. So, I started getting involved with gangs and shit."

Thomas sunk deep into the gang life. At one point, the gang went on a month-long binge of drugging and drinking. "Over that period, I got 14 aggravated assaults, causing bodily harm, and one car theft and three attempted murders." Thomas was initially facing an eight-year sentence for all the charges. But his lawyer ordered a Gladue Report, in which "they look back at what you've been through and what's happened to you." Thomas ended up pleading guilty to the three attempted murders and received a sentence of four years in custody at the youth detention centre. He was only 15 years old.

During his time in custody, including a period when he was in lockdown for twenty-three-and-a-half hours a day, Thomas spent his time reading, "whatever I could get my hands on, mostly like the thesauruses, I liked those, and all those encyclopedias." He was "just learning about different shit. 'Cause like in Winnipeg I never knew really much about anything." He also managed to complete Grade 10. But he said that being locked up "was probably the most alone I felt in my whole entire life." While he was incarcerated, his girlfriend gave birth to a daughter. Thomas told us: "I didn't know how to really handle that type of thing. I didn't even want to have a kid. I was a kid myself still." He received visits with his daughter while he was in custody, but few visits from other family members.

Thomas spent two-and-a half years in custody. After his release Thomas said, "I just totally wanted to just change my life. It's shitty, all the things I've been through and all that. That ain't even the half of it, like, just everything that's been happening in my life, that I just had to grow up at a young age and all the stress and everything that I've been through." He was aware of the cycle he was caught in, of getting into trouble and ending up in jail. "Now that I got kids I don't want that cycle to keep going when I got kids. I don't want that for my kids. I'm pretty sure my parents didn't want that for me, either."

One step Thomas took toward changing his life was to leave the gang. Leaving the gang was not difficult for him: "Everything was always that the draw on me was the easy money. And that's all it was. And just feeling accepted. And wanting to be loved. That was basically what it was. And the sense of having people at your back." Yet, he's aware of "the pull" of

the gang, saying, "it's easy to jump back in" because "I go back to what I know, what I'm used to. It's just comfortable." But at the same time, Thomas maintained, "I don't want to spend the rest of my life in jail."

Without the gang to fall back on, Thomas just "sticks to himself." He doesn't have any "positive friends," people who aren't involved in the gang life. But making a change in his life has proven challenging. When we met, Thomas had been trying to find meaningful work, putting in numerous applications for jobs but with no luck. He had found some work with a landscaping company — "back breaking work for shitty pay" — and was hoping to find a carpentry job. He was also without housing, "kind of just sleeping at a friend's house. She lets me crash there every now and then." And his kids had been taken into foster care. "Them being in foster care it just kills me." As he told us, "I want to do good so bad. But at the same time, it's so easy just to fall back and just go with it." We lost contact with Thomas after our second meeting with him. He had been taken into custody again.

Speaking about a group of criminalized women, British criminologist Pat Carlen once commented that the women "set about making their lives within conditions which had certainly not been of their own choosing."[189] Carlen's comment draws attention to the ways in which social conditions can restrict the choices available to individuals. That seemed to be the case for Thomas. Conditions caused by colonialism have clearly given shape to his life. The trauma that Thomas's father experienced in residential school had an intergenerational effect, leaking into Thomas's childhood as well. As Thomas put it, he "had to grow up young." Left to his own devices, he started "getting involved in gangs and shit." But that move led him into conflicts with the law and time spent in custody. While Thomas was able to leave the gang, its pull was still strong, especially given his difficulties in finding meaningful work and housing.

Stories like Thomas's give us a window into the challenges that young Indigenous men encounter in trying to realize a good life. They also showcase the need for social supports that would preclude young men from turning to the gang for what it promises to deliver: "easy money," "feeling accepted," and "wanting to be loved."

"Getting tough" on the root causes of street gangs

In responding to street gangs, Winnipeg and Manitoba governments have spent millions of dollars on bolstering police staffing complements, funding police task forces and undercover operations, and maintaining police data bases designed to track suspected gang members. In addition, substantial monetary and personnel investments have been devoted to adjudicating court cases (and even building a $3.5 million court house), incarcerating gang members, and running criminal justice programs and specialized units to intensify the monitoring and supervision of street gang members. Despite the significant monies and effort being spent, these "get tough" strategies have not worked. Street gangs continue to be a feature of Winnipeg's landscape. Even the police are now skeptical of criminal justice suppression strategies, saying, "We can't arrest our way out of this problem. We need other solutions that are addressing the root causes."[190] Clearly, a dramatically different approach is warranted, one that actually "gets tough" on those root causes: the social and economic conditions that foster the persistence of street gangs.

Community-based organizations in Winnipeg have been intent on addressing the root causes of crime, especially in terms of the impacts of poverty on people's lives. Make Poverty History Manitoba (MPHM), for instance, is a multi-sectoral coalition committed to changing public policy to bring an end to poverty in the province. MPHM has offered a

comprehensive set of recommendations to the Manitoba government for addressing poverty, including:

- **TRC and MMIWG Calls to Action and Justice:** Develop and implement a comprehensive implementation plan, in meaningful partnership with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, to act on the TRC Calls to Action and MMIWG Calls to Justice with a priority on ending poverty among Indigenous peoples in Manitoba.
- **Inclusive, Equitable, and Decent Employment:** Raise the minimum wage to a living wage for all employees, updated annually to account for rising living costs.
- **Housing:** End homelessness and core housing need through a comprehensive strategy that includes protecting and expanding the social housing supply, providing tenants in social housing with access to comprehensive supports, supporting private market renters, and creating training and job opportunities through social housing.
- **Education, Early Learning, and Childcare:** Create an adequately funded school nutrition program in all Manitoba schools to enhance food security and increase access to nutritious foods for children living in poverty, ensure low-income parents and children have access to high quality, free, accessible early learning and child care staffed by well-educated and fairly compensated educators, invest in Adult Literacy and Learning Centres and access to post-secondary education to meet the needs of Indigenous students and second-chance learners in Manitoba.
- **Mental Health:** Increase funding to mental health and harm reduction supports, including Community Health Centres and safe consumption sites.
- **Restorative Justice:** Double the funding available to community-based restorative justice programs and culturally appropriate supports that address the root causes of crime.
- **Youth in Care:** Increase funding to child welfare authorities to replace funding that had been cut in 2019 when the province shifted to a single envelope block funding model, and work with child welfare authorities and Indigenous governments to establish adequate funding levels. Provide youth aging out of care access to a wide variety of supports (assistance with education, training, income support, employment and system navigation) up to at least age 25.

- **Public Transportation:** Provide access to safe and affordable public transportation through monthly bus passes and publicly-owned inter-provincial transit services for rural and northern communities.[191]

As Jim Silver emphasizes, "for poverty to be defeated, much greater public investment is needed, from all levels of government and consistently over a long period of time."[192] Some of that public investment could be realized by shifting from criminal justice suppression strategies to poverty reduction strategies. In 2025, the WPS operating expenditures were projected to rise to $352 million, some $20 million higher than the previous year.[193] Policing takes up over one-quarter of the City of Winnipeg's operating budget, the highest share of any major city in Canada.[194]

Addressing poverty would have a number of consequences for addressing street gangs and the harms they create in Winnipeg's inner-city communities. For one, it would take the oxygen out of the primary source of the gangs' income: the trade in illegal drugs. In order for this business to thrive it relies on a ready supply of customers — more often than not, people who are being ground down by the ravages of poverty and turn to drugs as a way to numb their pain. Removing the impetus for people to turn to drugs would undermine the foundation of the trade. In the process, it would also reduce the interpersonal violence prompted by turf wars as the gangs battle to secure their markets. Primarily, though, "getting tough" on the social and economic conditions that prompt young people to join street gangs would enable marginalized young people (like Thomas) to realize a good life.

At bottom, solutions lie not in criminal justice suppression strategies but in supporting initiatives that address the social and economic conditions that have created and perpetuated street gangs. Doing so will enable the actual disappearance of street gangs.

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