It's not just a big-city issue'
Gang expert Michael Chettleburgh on Winnipeg's growing gang problem
Marlo Campbell

A Canadian expert on street gangs says Winnipeg is a hotbed of activity - and he predicts the problem is going to get worse before it gets better.

Michael Chettleburgh has consulted with Canadian law enforcement agencies since the 1990s. He also researched and wrote the 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs (the first national study of its kind) and its 2005 follow-up.

In his recently released book, Young Thugs, Chettleburgh breaks down the current situation in Canada. He estimates that between 14,000 and 15,000 men under the age of 28 are now gang-involved, with an equal number of girls and women affiliated through boyfriends and spouses.

Almost 100 Winnipeggers came out to hear him speak at a public forum Feb. 6.

Higher per capita than Toronto

Street gangs and their activities - drug sales, prostitution and fraud - are not just a big-city issue, he says. In fact, with as many as 3,000 street gang members currently active in Winnipeg, our city has a higher per capita density than Toronto.

"The biggest problems in the country right now are Regina, Saskatoon and Winnipeg," Chettleburgh says.

Not coincidentally, these cities have large urban Aboriginal populations (Winnipeg's is the largest in the country). Aboriginals and other visible minorities make up about 82 per cent of Canada's street gangs, and Chettleburgh pulls no punches when it comes to the continued marginalization of First Nations people, referring to the deplorable living conditions endured by many Aboriginals in urban centres as "Canada's dirty little secret."

Socio-economic factors drive street gang formation, he says. Poverty, lack of affordable housing, unsafe communities, addictions, the financial lure of the drug trade, family breakdown and limited recreational opportunities all play a part in a young person's decision to join a gang.

Gang membership will double

"For them, street gangs are a family - they're protection, they're affiliation; they give them something that they're not getting elsewhere in their lives," he says.

As the number of street gang members is now projected to double in the next 10 years, Canada is at a crossroads, Chettleburgh says.

To successfully contain the problem, he advocates a 16-point plan that combines suppression and prevention.

"Police suppression is important, as long as it's being targeted towards taking out the 20 per cent or so of gang members - of any gang - that are responsible for most of the violence and the drama that you see on the street," he says.

"At the same time, you've got to be dealing with the root causes of why kids are joining gangs in the first place. You can't do one without the other."
Interestingly, Chettleburgh also supports the legalization of marijuana, arguing that it would reduce some of the incentive for young men to join gangs - what he refers to as "starving gangs of their oxygen."

Communities must respond

Ultimately, parents and communities need to teach young people how to resist peer pressure and resolve conflict, and as a first step, Chettleburgh recommends heavy investment in this area.

"I would focus on kids age six to 12, and offer them intensive life skills development programs backed by ample sports recreation programs that are run by pro-social, trained youth workers," he says.

"As important as police are, they're not going to solve the problem entirely... The community has created the problem; the community has to fix this problem, too."