

*Patched: The History of Gangs in New Zealand*

By Jarrod Gilbert.

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Reviewed by John Buttle

Gangs hold a legendary status in New Zealand. At times romantically perceived as freedom seeking rebels, but more likely to be framed as organized criminals that are a threat to the respectability of society. The public and the criminal justice system perceive gangs through the lenses of pop culture and news media, which seeks to maintain an almost consistent state of moral panic regarding the existence of gangs. At a cursory glance it becomes obvious that criminality is over-exaggerated and the role of the gangs in New Zealand society is more complex than is normally depicted. Jarrod Gilbert's book *Patched* goes a considerable way towards dispelling the myths associated with gangs, and provides a perspective that is closer to the actual reality.

With only eight universities, most academic books focused on New Zealand issues need to also accommodate a public audience in order to break even. It is also the case that knowledge useful to social policy such as this should never be written only for the academy. It is not an easy task to balance the needs of differing readerships, but thankfully *Patched* achieves this undertaking in an admirable fashion. The writing is clear and concise, theory is explained but avoids turgid language the citation of appropriate evidence does not interrupt the flow of the text and the book is arranged in a way that is easy to read. This is a book that will inform academics, the public, criminal justice stakeholders, and policy makers.

Interestingly, *Patched* provides a social political account of gangs in New Zealand but not in the form of a laborious description of every aspect of gang history. Instead, the author selects pivotal points in history as case studies to map the development of gangs, while situating these events within political and social context of the day. The text starts by covering the 'milk bar cowboys' of the 1950s and the formation of the Hells Angels in the 1960s that significantly influenced the stability and longevity of subsequent gangs that developed similar rules and structures. The text then considers the rise of patched street gangs and the early gang wars over territory and questions of how gangs became socially embedded in New Zealand culture by the early 1980s. This is followed by investigation of the more profit driven gangs of the 1990s, who made money from legitimate and illicit means. Finally, the book turns to the beginnings of the decline of the patched gangs and the rise of the LA style street gang. Perhaps the most significant thing that this book brings to the policy table, centers on dispelling the myth of the criminal gang. The author explains that gangs can move in and out of criminality and that while there may be members of gangs involved in criminal activity there will also be a number of gang members that are not. Gangs can also become part of local communities and a positive influence. This situates gang members as citizens rather than as folk devils. Notably, there is a warning against the more draconian policies leveled against gangs, such as prolonged oppressive policing and the removal of legitimate means for gang members to earn a living. Gangs' are seen as communities that offer mutual support to their members. Gangs form and strengthen internal values in situations that produce hardship for their members. So the lesson to be learned by policy makers is for the need to reduce hardship, not exacerbate it.

All academic works have shortcomings and *Patched* is no exception. The strength of this work is its use of ethnography that allows the author to become embedded within gang culture over a period of ten years. However, there is no discussion of how embedded the author became. To truly experience the gang life and gain trust of all members of the gang it is likely that the author would need to become a prospect and eventually a patched member of

a gang. Where the analysis of all gangs is concerned being embedded to that extent would be impossible. While I do not doubt the author's ability to gain the trust of a numerous members of various gangs, it is probable, given the exclusivity of gangs, that a lot of members would be unwilling to take part in the study. I cannot help but wonder what *Patched* would read like in the ideal setting where these other views were expressed. However, the author's use of differing sources to triangulate information is likely adequate for substantiating the claims made by the book. The reader must also consider that this is a history of the gangs in New Zealand and participants may have been more likely to feel at ease informing about the past but more uncomfortable where the contemporary situation is concerned. This raises the possibility that the book will be less valid in its modern day assertions; uncomfortable participants are less likely to provide accurate information.

There is a feel of the author playing the intrepid ethnographer by focusing on the dangers and the exposure to criminality involved in gang research. In doing so the author risks propagating the myth of the rebellious criminal gang, which is something that all criminologists should try to avoid. That said, there are times when it is what people erroneously believe about a subject that leads them to read a more informed literature. So if playing to the mythical beliefs about gang's sells this book to a public enamored with the pop culture depictions of gang life like that provided by the *The Sons of Anarchy*, then so be it. Spreading a little reality in a society that is constantly fed on sensationalist media representations can do no harm.

Despite slight reservations about the method, and there always are, Jarrod Gilbert's contribution to the understanding of gangs in New Zealand is considerable. Furthermore, this work will also contribute to the international literature regarding the gang phenomena. My hope is that this book will go some way to alleviating the rather myopic view that gangs represent all that is wrong with New Zealand society, when they are fairly inconsequential.