

National Crime Task Force Assessment on Youth Gangs

By Darla Wynne and David Sward

Introduction

This paper's focus will be on youth gangs and not the more organized adult gangs.

What is a "Gang?"

- "Street gangs seem aimless; Skinheads and bikers are focused, always planning. Street gang members get into any and every kind of trouble. It's cafeteria-style crime - a little of this, a touch of that, two attempts at something else. Skins and bikers prefer narrower ranges of trouble."¹
- A gang is "A group of persons working to unlawful or antisocial ends; especially: a band of antisocial adolescents."²
- "The FBI defines a gang as "A criminal enterprise having an organizational structure, acting as a continuing criminal conspiracy, which employs violence and any other criminal activity to sustain the enterprise."³
- "'Criminal street gang' means three or more persons having a common identifying sign or symbol or an identifiable leadership who continuously or regularly associate in the commission of criminal activities."⁴
- "'Criminal street gang' means a formal or informal ongoing organization, association, or group that has as one of its primary activities the commission of criminal or delinquent acts, and that consists of three or more persons who have a common name or common identifying signs, colors, or symbols and have two or more members who, individually or collectively, engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal street gang activity."⁵

As can be seen by these definitions, there are as many definitions as there are gangs. This in itself has been a major roadblock in calculating the exact level of gang participation and activity.

How Serious is the Gang Problem?

"In the 1970s only 201 American cities reported having gangs but by 1998 a total of 1,487 communities reported the presence of gangs."⁶ That's an increase of 640% in about 25 years.

The most recent survey conducted by the National Youth Gang Center estimates the number of youth gangs in the United States to be 21,500, with 731,500 gang members.⁷

¹ Klein, M. W., *The American Street Gang: Its Nature, Prevalence, and Control*, p. 22., New York, NY, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 1995.

² Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993, p.479

³ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Kids Crime Prevention Page, www.fbi.gov, 2002

⁴ Texas Penal Code, Title 11 Organized Crime, Chapter 71, Organized Crime, Texas Sec. 71.01., Paragraph (D)

⁵ Chapter 8, Title 16, Code Of Laws Of South Carolina, Section 1, Chapter 8, Title 16, Section 16-8-530,

⁶ Miller, W. B., *The Growth of Youth Gang Problems in the United States: 1970-1998*, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Washington, D.C., April, 2001.

Youth street gangs are usually loosely organized, have little crime specialization, their memberships are short term. They will have only short-term goals if they have any at all, their scope of power is usually no more than the local neighborhood, there will be a level of infighting amongst the members and their leaders. Initiations are usually informal as is the leadership.

A sense of belonging seems to be the driving force on the emotional side and drugs sales are the driving force on the financial side when dealing with youth street gangs.

Scope

Gangs cross all nationality boundaries. Both in membership and in ethnically focused gangs. These gangs range from the 'neighborhood bully bunch' to the newer and much more violent Eastern Asian, and African gangs. Membership in these youth gangs will flux with the teenage population as the teenagers grow out of the fascination of gang membership and move on to building their lives, or are jailed or killed.

Gangs are no longer a problem limited to major city centers their influence has contaminated the surrounding suburban areas and spread to rural communities. The 2002 National Youth Gang Survey estimates that there were approximately 731,500 gang members and 21,500 gangs in the United States in 2002.⁸

Gangs can range on a scale of violence from simple party groups to homicides and bank robberies. Although very few have any connections to International Terrorist groups. "There are those that are identified with domestic terrorist groups, most were white-supremacist groups, including the following:

- Aryan Resistance
- Neo-Confederates
- Hammerskins
- Neo-Nazi
- Ku Klux Klan
- National Socialist Movement
- Militia groups
- Skinheads
- National Alliance
- Soldiers of Aryan Culture"⁹

By reviewing the tables and graphs at the end of this paper you will be able to get a better perspective for the level of gang participation in violent crime and drugs.

Reality Check

"Before you can begin to find solutions to your own situation, you must understand it. How many gangs and gang members are there? What kinds of gangs are present? Do you have an emerging or chronic gang problem? . . . To gather this information, you must establish cooperative relations among schools, police, and community organizations."¹⁰

Next you will need to find out the type of gangs that you are faced with such as, Delinquent Youth Gangs, Traditional Turf-Based Gangs, Gain-Oriented Gangs, Violent/Hate

⁷ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, "Web of Deceit," "Identity Theft," The Journal :Department of Justice, Highlights of the 2002 National Youth Gang Survey, Washington, DC (April 2004).

⁸ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, Highlights of the 2002 National Youth Gang Survey, Washington, DC (April 2004).

⁹ 2005 National Gang Threat Assessment, National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations, Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice.

¹⁰ Office of the Texas Attorney General, <http://www.oag.state.tx.us/criminal/gangs.shtml>.

Gangs. There will be a need to have this information when the time comes too approach the gangs. The incorrect approach will only produce negative results.

How can we keep our kids from joining a gang?

First there must be an assessment of the risk factors that the youth in your neighborhood might be exposed to.

- Rebelliousness
- Friends who engage in gang behavior
- Favorable attitudes toward gang behavior
- Early initiation of gang behavior
- Family history of high-risk behavior
- Family management problems
- Family conflict
- Parental attitudes and involvement in gang behavior
- Early and persistent antisocial behavior
- Academic failure beginning in elementary school
- Low commitment to school
- Availability of drugs
- Community laws and norms favorable toward drug use
- Transition and mobility
- Low neighborhood attachment and community disorganization
- Extreme economic and social deprivation¹¹

Once these have been assessed the process of eliminating or reducing the effect of these factors can begin. Not all of the programs were/are successful such as the "Chicago Youth Development Project, (Caplan et al., 1967; Gold and Mattick 1974; Mattick and Caplan, 1962)", the "Chicago Community Action Program (Woodlawn Organization)(Spiegel, 1972; Spiegel et al., 1969.)", and "Gang Resistance Education and Training Program (G.R.E.A.T.), (Palumbo and Ferguson, 1995",)¹² all of these programs had little or no effect on attitudes and gang resistance.

But there are those programs that have a good and ongoing success rate. These programs include:

- "The Beethoven Project", (Short, 1996) a head start type program for mothers and there infants.¹³
- "The Neutral Zone" (Thurman et. Al., 1996), a safe zone for children to play in without fear of gang interference.¹⁴
- "PASSPORT" (Arnette and Walsleben, 1998), This program provides safe routes to and from school. Where parent volunteers stand in front of their homes and "just watch" during specified hours.¹⁵
- "Gang Resistance Is Paramount (G.R.I.P.)", (Arnette and Walsleben, 1998), This school based program in a long term follow up showed that 96% of more than 3,000 participants were not identified in police records as gang members.¹⁶
- "Comin' Up," a Boys & Girls club program in Ft. Worth, TX. The FBI criminal activity data shows that there was a significant decrease in violence in the area's that the program was implemented.¹⁷

¹¹ [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#), Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, National Center for the Advancement of Prevention, Washington, D.C.

¹² *Selected Gang Program Evaluations 1936-99*, Adapted from Loeber and Farrington, 1998., Youth Gang Programs and Strategies, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

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- “Violence-Free Zones” a NCNE developed grassroots program. This program being taken from the “House of Umoja” program model.¹⁸
- “Teens on Target” (TNT), a program of emergency room intervention administered by the Youth Alive! , a nonprofit agency in Oakland, CA. Is one of the most successful programs, having won the California Peace Prize.¹⁹

These examples are but a small sample of the programs that are being used throughout the country from the big city to the most rural areas of America. Stopping gang membership, intervention, and suppression is a goal that can be accomplished with the strong backs of those who believe in the future of our youth. And with the changes in attitudes in the minds of our youth, a change in the level of gang violence, drug use, and the tears from the survivors of the violence will subside.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Year of Gang Problem Onset, by Population Size, 1996 Survey							
Percentage of Jurisdictions Reporting Onset of Gang Problems							
Population Size	Before 1981	1981-85	1986-90	1991-92	1993-94	1995-96	All Periods
250,000 or more (n=86)	21	14	38	12	11	5	100
100,000-249,999 (n=155)	14	12	43	16	13	3	100
50,000-99,999 (n=279)	9	7	38	22	18	7	100
25,000-49,999 (n=382)	4	5	30	24	29	8	100
10,000-24,999 (n=123)	2	2	20	21	42	13	100
Less than 10,000 (n=96)	4	2	18	13	42	22	100

Note: Percentages within each population size category may not total 100 because of rounding.

Table 1.

Level of Street Gang Involvement in Distribution of Drugs (Percentage by Region)

	Northeast	South	Midwest	West	Total
Street Sales					
High	39.2	24.3	29.5	39.2	31.6
Moderate	21.6	28.9	22.7	34.3	28.6
Low	17.6	23.1	27.3	16.1	21.1
None/Unknown	21.6	23.7	20.5	10.5	18.7
Wholesale					
High	15.7	14.5	22.7	20.3	18
Moderate	25.5	19.7	20.5	24.5	22
Low	25.5	32.4	31.8	28.7	30.3
None/Unknown	33.3	33.5	25	26.6	29.7

Table 2



