



# National Institute of Justice

## Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

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# Criminal Behavior of Gang Members and At-Risk Youths

*Summary of a presentation by C. Ronald Huff, Ohio State University*

During the past decade, the problem of gang-related crime has become a significant policy issue in the United States. According to recent estimates, more than 16,000 gangs are active in this country, with at least half a million members who commit more than 600,000 crimes each year. Two recent studies conducted by researchers at Ohio State University were designed to address three critical questions:

- What is the nature and magnitude of self-reported criminal behavior among youth gang members?
- What is the nature and magnitude of such behavior among at-risk youths—those who are not yet gang members?
- What is the effect of gang membership on criminal behavior?

To answer these questions, the National Institute of Justice funded research in three communities—Aurora, Colorado; Denver, Colorado; and Broward County, Florida—and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) funded research in Cleveland, Ohio. Also, as part of the OJJDP grant, researchers in Columbus, Ohio, tracked leaders of youth gangs to determine what happens to gang leaders over time.

## Gang membership leads to criminal behavior

The Colorado-Florida and Cleveland studies obtained self-reported data through one-time confidential interviews. In each community, researchers interviewed 50 gang members and 50 youths who were at risk of becoming gang members, developing as close a

demographic match between the two groups as possible. They selected interviewees through referrals from local youth-serving organizations, rather than from police databases of arrestees. Questions focused on criminal and noncriminal activities of the youths and their peers.

The data on criminal activity showed differences between the behavior of gang members and at-risk youths. For example, individual gang members in both studies reported that they had stolen cars (Colorado-Florida, 58.3 percent; Cleveland, 44.7 percent); aggregate rates for auto theft—reflecting statements that members of their gang had stolen cars—were much higher (Colorado-Florida, 93.6 percent; Cleveland, 82.6). Auto theft rates among at-risk youths were markedly lower (Colorado-Florida, 12.5 percent; Cleveland, 4.1 percent). The researchers found similar contrasts when looking at violent crimes. About 40 percent of gang members in the Cleveland sample said they had participated in a drive-by shooting, compared with 2 percent of at-risk youths. In the Colorado-Florida study, 64.2 percent of gang members said that members of their gang had committed homicide, whereas 6.5 percent of at-risk youths said that their friends had done so.

Although both gang members and at-risk youths admitted significant involvement with guns, gang members were far likelier to own guns, and the guns they owned were larger caliber. More than 90 percent of gang members in both studies reported that their peers had carried concealed weapons; more than 80 percent reported that members of their gang had carried guns to school. In contrast, about one-half of at-risk youths in both studies had friends who had carried a concealed

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weapon; about one-third of at-risk youths said their friends had carried guns to school.

In both studies, gang members were more involved with selling drugs (Colorado-Florida, 76.9 percent; Cleveland, 72.3 percent) than were at-risk youths (Colorado-Florida, 6.4 percent; Cleveland, 9.1 percent). When asked what level of legitimate wages would induce them to stop selling drugs, about one-quarter of the young people in both studies cited an amount little higher than that earned in fast-food restaurants; approximately half of the interviewees, both gang members and at-risk youths, said they had held jobs in the past year.

## Gang leaders engage in more serious criminal behavior

The second component of the Ohio study focused on the criminal activity of identified gang leaders in Columbus. The researchers analyzed the arrest records of 83 gang leaders in the years 1980 to 1994. Membership of 78 of these leaders was distributed among five gangs; the rest belonged to other gangs.

During these 15 years, the 83 gang leaders accumulated 834 arrests, 37 percent of which were for violent crimes (ranging from domestic violence to murder). Property crimes and drug-related offenses also figured prominently. The researchers identified a clear pattern of arrest charges in each of the five prominent gangs. A gang's peak arrest rate for property crimes occurred about 1.5 years before its peak arrest rate for violent crimes; the peak arrest rate for drug crimes followed about 3 months later. The researchers theorized that violent crimes increased as the gangs began engaging in drug activity and may have been connected to the establishment of the drug trade. The increasingly violent activities took their toll on the gangs: By the end of the period studied, a disproportionate number of the gang leaders had died.

## Steps to prevention and control

These studies identified a close relationship between gang membership and criminal behavior. Gang membership exposed youths to an increased risk of physical violence and death—often including an assaultive initiation ritual—even though most gang members joined for a sense of belonging and security. In contrast, many young people told the researchers that they suffered no

physical reprisal for refusing to join a gang. The research demonstrated that the benefits of resisting a gang far outweigh those of joining. Creative prevention that fosters feelings of belonging in the community as a whole might dissuade many of these youths from joining gangs. Also, since half the young people interviewed had held a job, programs that expand job opportunities in the legitimate economy could induce some to stop selling drugs.

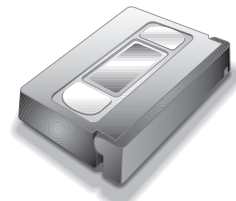
Finally, the Columbus study noted a decline in the arrest rate of gang leaders, which the researchers attributed in part to a reallocation of police resources away from gang activities toward specifically drug-related activities: Drugs and gangs are not synonymous, and the assignment of personnel to drug teams reduced the ability of the police to monitor gang activity.

This summary is based on a presentation at the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) by C. Ronald Huff, Ph.D., Director of the School of Public Policy and Management and the Criminal Justice Research Center at Ohio State University, to an audience of researchers and criminal justice practitioners. The research, for which Dr. Huff was principal investigator, was conducted with NIJ support (grant #91-IJ-CX-K013). Support was also received from the State of Ohio's Office of Criminal Justice Services (grant #91-JJ-C01-0682), with funds from the Federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, administered by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The seminar, *Criminal Behavior of Gang Members*, is available as a 60-minute videotape for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and other countries). Use the order form on the next page to obtain this videotape, NCJ 164725, and any of the others available in NIJ's Research in Progress Seminar Series.

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