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# The Youth Gangs, Drugs, and Violence Connection



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*The proliferation of youth gangs since 1980 has fueled the public's fear and magnified possible misconceptions about youth gangs. To address the mounting concern about youth gangs, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Youth Gang Series delves into many of the key issues related to youth gangs. The series considers issues such as gang migration, gang growth, female involvement with gangs, homicide, drugs and violence, and the needs of communities and youth who live in the presence of youth gangs.*

The popular image of youth gangs ties them directly to drugs and violent crime (Klein, 1995).<sup>1</sup> How interrelated are youth gangs, drugs, and violent crime? Is drug trafficking a main activity of youth gangs? Is drug trafficking a main cause of violence in youth gangs or only a correlate? Are there other important sources of gang violence? Before this OJJDP Bulletin addresses these questions, a brief historical overview of gang drug use, trafficking, and violent crime is provided. Studies of drug-trafficking operations are then reviewed to provide a better understanding of how illegal drug sales typically are controlled and managed. The Bulletin concludes with a detailed review of studies of the gangs, drugs, and violence connection and an examination of other sources of gang violence.

## Historical Overview of Gang Drug Use and Trafficking

The predominant image of youth gangs is consistent with a California study of adult (also referred to as criminal) gang members conducted by Skolnick and colleagues (1988) a decade ago. These researchers contended that the two major

<sup>1</sup> Youth gangs are considered to consist of adolescents and young adults from the ages of 12 to 24. Unfortunately, there is no commonly accepted parameter of either the age range or proportion of individuals below a certain age (i.e., a youth) that can be used to differentiate youth gangs from adult gangs. This makes definitive conclusions from the research difficult and exacerbates the difference between research findings and real world experiences of practitioners concerned with the prevention of gang involvement and the suppression of gang activity. The term "youth gang" is commonly used interchangeably with "street gang," referring to neighborhood or street-based youth groups that are substantially made up of individuals under the age of 24. "Street gangs" may include both youth gangs and adult criminal organizations. Motorcycle gangs, prison gangs, racial supremacists, and other hate groups are excluded. Miller's definition of a youth gang is applicable to this review: "A youth gang is a self-formed association of peers, united by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership and internal organization, who act collectively or as individuals to achieve specific purposes, including the conduct of illegal activity and control of a particular territory, facility, or enterprise" (Miller, 1992:21). Unless otherwise noted, the term "gangs" refers to youth gangs.

## From the Administrator

The 1980's saw an increase in youth gang violence and the rise of the crack cocaine epidemic. The public linked these two developments, often with implications of cause and effect. Conventional wisdom, however, is not always reliable. Viewed through the lens of public perception rather than that of scientific knowledge, the relationships among youth gangs, drugs, and violence are more often talked about than understood. In *The Youth Gangs, Drugs, and Violence Connection*, James Howell and Scott Decker add to our understanding of the interrelationships of these factors and address relevant questions such as the following:

"Is drug trafficking a main activity of youth gangs?"

"Is drug trafficking a major cause of violence in youth gangs?"

"Are there other important sources of youth gang violence?"

The authors make critical distinctions between drug gangs and street gangs that further enhance our understanding of the gang phenomenon, as does their exploration of the connections between youth gangs and adult criminal organizations and the role of firearms in gang violence.

It is my hope that in describing the relationships among youth gangs, drugs, and violence, this Bulletin will help communities begin to address these problems more effectively.

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Administrator

Los Angeles gangs, the Crips and Bloods, had become entrepreneurial and were expanding their drug-trafficking operations to markets in other cities; where drug markets appeared, so did violent crime. Although this research did not address the order of occurrences and the overlap of adult gang violence and street drug sales, youth gangs are still characterized mainly by public perceptions conveyed in the California studies and by popular media images rather than by scientific knowledge (Decker and Kempf, 1991; Hunzeker, 1993; Jackson, 1997; Johnson, 1989; Miller, 1990).

Little mention is made of gang drug use and trafficking in gang studies published before the 1960's and 1970's (Klein, 1971; Short and Strodbeck, 1965; Spergel, 1964). By all accounts, gang involvement in drug use and trafficking was either very limited or unnoticed before the 1960's (Wilkinson and Fagan, 1996). Moore (1991) described heroin and some barbiturate use among Los Angeles gang members in the 1940's, mostly after they left gangs. In the 1950's and into the 1960's, youth gang members displayed ambivalence about gang member drug use and trafficking (Spergel, 1995). Some gangs of that era used—or at least tolerated—marijuana. Heroin-using cliques were common in East Los Angeles gangs by the middle of the 1950's (Bullington, 1977). Other gang cliques, the partying members of gangs, began to use barbiturates (Moore, 1978). Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) typology of youth gangs put drug users in a "retreatist" subculture of addicts (withdrawing from active involvement in the gang). Even in the 1970's, drug use did not appear to be a dominant form of illegal activity among gang members, either as a proportion of their own arrests or in comparison with arrested nongang youth (Miller, 1992).

In his historical account of gangs, Spergel (1995) noted that in some instances drug-abusing members, particularly those who used heroin, were forced out of gangs in the 1950's and 1960's (and also in the 1990's) because they could not be relied on in fights with other gangs. Gangs have also been reported to drive drug traffickers out of the neighborhood (Short and Strodbeck, 1965, Spergel, 1964). A few studies point to marijuana use in the 1960's and 1970's (Klein, 1971; Short and Strodbeck, 1965) and to the fact that the drug market had "increasingly drawn in gang members as participants in drug distribution networks" (Miller, 1992:144). By the late 1970's,

older African-American adult gang members in Chicago were reported to be significantly involved in drug dealing (Spergel, 1995).

Early gang studies do not tie violence to drug trafficking because gangs evidenced little involvement in drug sales. The first major gang study (Thrasher, 1927) described the drug dealing of Chicago's Chinese tongs, but gang violence mainly consisted of fighting. An account of early 20th century east coast adult gangs linked gang violence to territorial fights among organized crime groups that used teenagers in "numbers running" and as lookouts in gambling and bootlegging operations (Sante, 1991). Except for occasional fighting, violent crime by youth gangs was relatively rare until the latter part of this century (Miller, Geertz, and Cutter, 1962).

### Growing Involvement in Drugs and Violent Crime

The early to mid-1980's saw rapid growth in the use of cocaine as crack became the drug of choice in the inner cities (Fagan, 1996; Fagan and Chin, 1990; Klein and Maxson, 1994). Trend data that would indicate whether gang members were responsible for the increased prevalence of cocaine use during this period are not available. However, several studies document considerable youth and adult gang involvement in the drug trade after the cocaine epidemic began around 1985.<sup>2</sup> The Chicago Vice Lords, a large and violent criminal street gang (Dawley, 1992; Keiser, 1969; Spergel, 1995), grew during this era, providing one example that suggests gangs and crack sales emerged concurrently.

Research conducted in the 1980's and 1990's has documented extensive youth and adult gang member involvement in drug use and generally higher levels of use compared with nongang members.<sup>3</sup>

However, gang members do not all use drugs or do not use them extensively

<sup>2</sup> See Anderson, 1990; Block and Block, 1993; Decker and Van Winkle, 1994, 1996; Hagedorn, 1991, 1994a, 1994b; Maxson, Gordon, and Klein, 1985; Padilla, 1992; Perkins, 1987; Reiner, 1992; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Sanders, 1994; Skolnick, 1989; Taylor, 1989, 1990; Venkatesh, 1996; Waldorf, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> These studies include Battin and colleagues (in press), Bjerregaard and Smith (1993), Curry and Spergel (1992), Esbensen and Huizinga (1993), Esbensen and colleagues (1993), Fagan (1989), Hagedorn (1988, 1994a, 1994b), Hill, Howell, and Hawkins (1996), Long (1990), Thornberry and colleagues (1993), Vigil (1988), and Waldorf (1993).



(Chin, 1990; Chin and Fagan, 1990; Fagan, 1989). Studies also show differences in the extent of drug use. For example, Hill, Howell, and Hawkins (1996) found that gang membership was related to increased marijuana use but not crack cocaine use (except among youth who were in the gang for only 1 year). Huff (1996) reported gangs that used large amounts of all kinds of drugs. Fagan (1989) found variations in drug use among different gangs and several other studies found predominantly drug-trafficking youth gangs.<sup>4</sup>

For the most part, the findings of the studies outlined in the previous paragraph apply only to males. Some cities, such as Detroit (Taylor, 1993) and San Francisco (Lauderback, Hansen, and Waldorf, 1992), found an increasing number of females involved in gang drug trafficking and violent crime, but the consensus is that female involvement in these behaviors has not increased commensurately with the increase among males (Chesney-Lind, 1993; Maxson, 1995; Moore and Hagedorn, 1996).

Why has youth gang involvement in drug trafficking increased in the past decade? Fagan (1993) suggested two reasons: (1) the dramatic expansion of cocaine markets in the 1980's, accompanied by sharp price reductions, and (2) socioeconomic

<sup>4</sup> See also Decker and Van Winkle, 1994; Hagedorn, 1994a, 1994b; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Sanders, 1994; Taylor, 1989; Venkatesh, 1996; Waldorf, 1993.

changes in American society that disrupted traditional social controls (Curry and Spergel, 1988).<sup>5</sup>

Fagan (1996; see also Hagedorn, 1988; Wilson, 1996) identified the process by which this disruption of social controls occurred in the employment arena. The decline in manufacturing jobs in the 1970's and the development of technological and service industries led to economic restructuring in many cities. New jobs were created, but they were in the suburbs, leaving unqualified minorities in the inner cities. Dramatic increases in unemployment resulted, especially among minority males, and high unemployment rates were mainly concentrated in specific geographic areas. Drug markets provided "work" for displaced workers, and the growing popularity of crack cocaine opened new opportunities for youth to make money. Traditional pathways from gang life (jobs, marriage, starting a family) were constricted by the changed economy, prolonging gang involvement and making drug trafficking more attractive. The decline of meaningful lifetime employment prospects weakened the stabilizing influences and traditional forms of informal social controls and strengthened gang influence as a dominant informal control and socialization force. Fagan reasoned that these conditions facilitated the transformation of youth groups into loosely structured gangs. As the size and stakes of the cocaine economy grew, violence increasingly came to be used in the regulatory process. "Work and social interactions were now organized around these criminal activities, enforced and regulated increasingly by violence" (Fagan, 1996:64).

## The Current Image of Youth Gangs

Because the growth in youth gang violence coincided with the crack cocaine epidemic, the two developments were generally perceived to be interrelated.<sup>6</sup> This same conclusion was reached in assessments conducted at all governmental levels, suggesting that youth gangs were instrumental in the increase in crack cocaine sales and that their involvement in drug trafficking resulted in a growth in youth violence.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Others agree (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Fagan, 1996; Hagedorn, 1988; Klein, 1995; Moore, 1985, 1988; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Spergel, 1995; Vigil, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> See Inciardi, 1986; Inciardi and Potttieger, 1991; Klein, 1995; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Klein, Maxson, and Cunningham, 1991; Moore, 1990.

Skolnick and his colleagues provided an image of drug trafficking that the media magnified and stereotyped (Klein, 1995). Based on interviews with prison inmates, police, and correctional officials, they described entrepreneurial criminal gangs (Bloods and Crips) that emerged out of African-American "cultural" (neighborhood) youth gangs in Los Angeles and Northern California (Skolnick, 1989, 1990, 1991; Skolnick et al., 1988). Skolnick and his colleagues contended that these new criminal gangs were organized for and actively involved in street drug sales. The Bloods and Crips increasingly looked like criminal gangs designed for the sale of drugs. They enjoyed the benefits of being able to deal cocaine in the neighborhoods they controlled, without intrusion by competitors. They had a territorial monopoly, backed by force. Driven by escalating violence in Los Angeles, declining drug prices, and intensified law enforcement, the California gangs sought out new markets for crack cocaine in other cities.

It was not until the early 1990's that a national study of street gang migration was conducted (Maxson, Woods, and Klein, 1996). In *Gang Members on the Move*, gang migration is defined as the movement of gang members from one city to another, which could include temporary relocation (e.g., visits to relatives, short trips to sell drugs) and longer stays (Maxson, 1998b). The study found street gang migration to be very limited. Nevertheless, in about one-third of the cities that did experience substantial gang migration, drug market expansion and pursuit of other criminal activities were the primary motivations, suggesting that drug gangs may be more involved in migration. Most of the gang migration, however, was regional, within about 100 miles of the city of origin. A number of local studies of individual gangs questioned their ties to larger gangs such as the Crips and Bloods in distant cities (Decker and Van Winkle, 1994).<sup>8</sup>

In the meantime, police and investigatory agencies reported criminal gang drug-trafficking links across the country. A U.S. Congress study (General Accounting Office, 1989) concluded that during the latter part of the 1980's, the Crips and Bloods gained control of 30 percent

<sup>7</sup> See California Council on Criminal Justice, 1989; Clark, 1991; Drug Enforcement Administration, 1988; General Accounting Office, 1989; Hayeslip, 1989; McKinney, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> See also Hagedorn, 1988; Huff, 1989; Rosenbaum and Grant, 1983; Zevitz and Takata, 1992.

of the crack cocaine market in the United States. Another Federal agency, the Drug Enforcement Administration (1988), reported links between these Los Angeles street gangs and drug sales in 46 States. Police and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) officials reported that by the late 1980's, the Los Angeles Bloods and Crips had migrated to 45 other cities and set up crack cocaine trafficking operations (Skolnick, 1989).

Shortly after Skolnick's studies were released, the Los Angeles County District Attorney made a comprehensive assessment of Los Angeles youth gangs (Reiner, 1992). His office concluded that "gang members are heavy drug users and even heavier drug sellers [than nongang youth], yet drugs and gangs are not two halves of the same phenomenon. *Though they threaten many of the same neighborhoods, and involve some of the same people, gangs and drugs must be treated as separate evils*" [emphasis added] (Reiner, 1992:5). District Attorney Reiner's office estimated that more than 70 percent of gang members in Los Angeles used drugs and that the incidence of drug sales among gang members was seven times higher than among nongang youth. The study concluded, however, that most gang members were not drug dealers, in any meaningful sense of the word; only 1 in 7 gang members was estimated to sell drugs as often as 12 times a year. Reiner's office also concluded that "most L.A. gangs are not being transformed into organized drug distribution rings. Many individual gang members (and former members) are involved with drugs, but drugs remain peripheral to the purposes and activities of the gang" (Reiner, 1992:5).

As more information on youth gang activities has become available, investigatory agencies have made more precise assessments of gang drug trafficking. The National Drug Intelligence Center's (NDIC's) Street Gang Symposium, held in Johnstown, PA, November 2-3, 1994, focused on the Bloods and Crips. Symposium participants concluded that some well-organized street gangs are engaged in interstate drug trafficking, but for the most part, a gang's drug-trafficking connections are indirectly expanded when members relocate to different areas. NDIC concluded that most street gangs are involved in drug trafficking to some extent, generally in a street-level distribution network, both individually and in small groups.

Reports of youth gang involvement in drug trafficking stimulated a major debate about the capacity of such gangs to manage drug sales operations. The two main camps in this debate are best represented by Skolnick and his colleagues and Sanchez-Jankowski on the one hand and Klein and his colleagues and Decker and Van Winkle on the other.<sup>9</sup> The former described gangs as formal-rational organizations with an established leadership structure, roles, rules, and control over members, such that gangs are quite capable of organizing and managing top-level drug-trafficking operations. The latter described gangs as loosely confederated groups that generally lack cohesion and would be incapable of organizing and managing drug-trafficking operations.

The California-based image of a close connection among gangs, drugs, and violent crime has been buttressed by a number of studies. Although neither of them appears to be a bona fide youth gang, Williams' (1989) "cocaine kids" and Padilla's (1992) drug-dealing Puerto Rican gang in Chicago (Klein, 1995) epitomize the economic opportunities the new drug markets provided—and the surrounding violence. Venkatesh (1996) reported that the illicit drug economy transformed gang violence in Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes from gang wars to drug wars. Taylor (1990) described how the Detroit economy and the drug market turned "scavenger" gangs of the 1950's to 1970's into "corporate" gangs involved in illegal money-making ventures in an interstate network. He interviewed a retired Detroit police official who described the city's gang drug problem this way:

It's like feudal China, there are pockets of entrenched drug operations all over the city. . . . You have warlords over little areas that control their little fiefdoms. There are young people acting as contractors for the warlords. . . . Kids and adults see the warlords spreading money and fame. They want some of that money. Soon as we put away one bunch, another one takes its place. Then you got professional people, like lawyers, giving these punks their service. Dope has made these characters think they're rich and powerful (Taylor, 1990:114).

Thus, studies have produced conflicting images of youth gang involvement in drug trafficking. In part, these different

images stem from the lack of a clear distinction between youth gangs and adult criminal drug-trafficking organizations.

## Street Gangs Versus Drug Gangs

Klein (1995) suggested that to provide a better understanding of violence related to drug marketing, a distinction needs to be made between street-level drug distribution and high-level control of drug distribution networks. He distinguished drug gangs from street gangs, which he contended are not the same.

Unfortunately, youth gang studies have not revealed much about management and control of drug-trafficking operations versus street-level distribution systems. Most studies of youth gangs that are involved in drug trafficking describe their involvement in street-level distribution only. A notable exception is Moore's (1978) description of the Happy Valley gang in Los Angeles, which maintained strong connections with Mexican barbiturate manufacturers who created "designer" barbiturates to their order, which the gang sold. The entire Happy Valley gang was involved, not just individual members.<sup>10</sup>

Information on the prevalence of youth drug gangs has only recently become available. In Klein's (1995) interviews with 261 police officers (mostly gang specialists) in U.S. cities (with a population of more than 100,000) in which law enforcement agencies said they had a gang problem, 16 percent reported drug gangs. In another law enforcement survey in 201 cities, Klein and Maxson (1996) found that "specialty drug gangs" comprised only 9 percent of all gangs. Nevertheless, the membership of such gangs may be very large, and thus they may be responsible for a significant proportion of drug sales and violence in some cities.

Huff (1996) assessed the extent to which Cleveland gang members believed that gangs controlled drug-trafficking operations. Only 10 percent believed such control to be the case. About 10 to 14 percent believed gangs had some control over the organization and management of drug sales along with other organizations, such as foreign groups and organized crime. More than two-thirds of the gang members believed other organizations controlled drug trafficking.

What happens to the profits of drug sales is another key indicator of the extent to which gang drug distribution is directly connected to high-level drug organizations. In the gangs Decker and Van Winkle (1996) studied, the profits from drug sales were retained by the gang members and usually were spent on typical teenage purchases. Most studies show that profits are either kept by the individual or accumulated by the gang for parties and other social events (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1994a; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991).

To what extent are adult criminal organizations involved in the drug market and violent crime? A few studies and investigative reports of crack cocaine and heroin trafficking provide a thumbnail sketch of the high-level organization of the drug trade. The relationship between drugs and violence is widely accepted in adult criminal organizations such as drug cartels and prison gangs; in some instances, however, it is difficult to distinguish these adult criminal organizations from youth gangs.<sup>11</sup>

The Office of National Drug Control Policy's (ONDCP's) *Pulse Check Reports* (ONDCP, 1995a, 1995b, 1996) describe high-level drug distribution organizations that are not youth gangs. The typical organizational structure uses franchise operators to control an area and delegates street-level sales to others. Only a few of ONDCP's ethnographers report that cocaine sellers are organized in youth gangs.

Moore (1990) contends that many of the adult criminal organizations that control drug trafficking existed before the crack cocaine epidemic. Others were formed in the 1980's to service the growing crack cocaine market (Curtis, 1992; Fagan, 1996; Johnson, Hamid, and Sanabria, 1990; Taylor, 1989, 1990). There is evidence that when crack cocaine was first introduced, a great deal of violence ensued (Taylor, 1989). Violence associated with crack cocaine was linked to organizational competition for market share and profits; protection of drug-trafficking territory; regulation of employees in the new selling organizations; the urge among habitual users for money to buy crack; its liquid value among the poor; and, for a small group, its psychoactive effects (Fagan, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> See Skolnick, 1989, 1990; Skolnick et al., 1988; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Klein and Maxson, 1994; Klein, Maxson, and Cunningham, 1991; and Decker and Van Winkle, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Other examples of drug-trafficking youth gangs are described by Fagan (1989), Hagedorn (1994a, 1994b, in press), Sanchez-Jankowski (1991), and Sanders (1994).

<sup>11</sup> See Fagan and Chin, 1990; General Accounting Office, 1989, 1996; Jackson and McBride, 1985; Moore, 1990; Reiner, 1992; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Taylor, 1989. Klein (1995) and Spergel (1995) provide excellent discussions of this issue.

## The Connection Between Youth Gangs and Adult Criminal Organizations

A classic issue in gang research concerns a possible connection between youth gangs and adult criminal organizations (Thrasher, 1927). Taylor (1990) illustrated the transformation of a scavenger gang to a territorial gang, then to a corporate criminal gang with the case of the “42 Gang” in Chicago. It was considered the best “farm team” Chicago’s Capone mob ever had. Some of the youth in it graduated into the lower ranks of the Capone mob. Spergel (1995) suggested that there is some indication that particular street-gang cliques have been integrated into some criminal organizations, but Fagan (1996) contended that this does not appear to be a predominant pattern. Fagan argued that available evidence suggests that this transition involves individual, talented young gang members, not groups.<sup>12</sup>

The connection between youth gangs and adult criminal organizations appears far more important in the case of adult prison gangs. Prison gang members are more violent than nongang inmates; they account for a disproportionate amount of prison violence and they often control drug trafficking and other criminal enterprises in prisons (Jackson and McBride, 1985; Ralph et al., 1996). Having been confined in a juvenile correctional facility is a strong predictor of adult prison gang membership (Ralph et al., 1996). Prison criminal gang members, in turn, contribute to the growth of youth gangs. Involvement of ex-convicts in youth gangs extends the life of the gangs and increases their level of violent crime, in part because of the ex-convicts’ increased proclivity to violence following imprisonment and the visibility and history they contribute to youth gangs (Moore, 1978; Vigil and Long, 1990). In some cities, prison gangs rather than youth gangs dominate local drug markets (Hagedorn, in press; Moore, 1996; Valdez, 1997).

## Studies of the Youth Gangs, Drugs, and Violence Connection

The relationship between drugs, drug trafficking, and violent crime is the subject of much debate and research (see De La Rosa, Lambert, and Gropper, 1990, for



an exhaustive review). Goldstein (1985) suggested three possible relationships: (1) the “pharmacological” effects of the drug on the user can induce violent behavior; (2) the high cost of drug use often impels users to commit “economic compulsive” violent crime to support continued drug use (e.g., robbery for the purpose of securing money to buy drugs); and (3) “systemic” violence is a common feature of the drug-distribution system, including protection or expansion of the drug distribution market share, retaliation against market participants who violate the rules that govern transactions, or maintenance of the drug-trafficking organization.

Collins (1990) summarized the research evidence supporting each of the three types of drug violence Goldstein suggested. First, there is virtually no evidence of the pharmacological effects of drugs (excluding, perhaps, alcohol) on violence. Second, there is considerable evidence of a relationship between drug use and economic compulsive violence. Third, although research is scarce on “systemic” (drug distribution) violence, this form appears to be the most predominant. “Drug distribution system violence tends to occur (at least most visibly) in areas that: are socially disorganized, that is, in which formal and informal social control is absent or ineffective; have traditionally high rates of interpersonal violence; and are economically disadvantaged” (Collins, 1990:266). Collins noted that the Goldstein typology has its limitations, mainly because there are other important sources of violence. This is an especially important point with respect to the gang context. A review of these other sources is divided into two parts: gang homicide and the causes and correlates of youth gang violence.

## Youth Gang Homicide and Drug Trafficking

Although youth gang homicides are characterized by periodic spurts and declines, they have been increasing nation-

wide and evidence an overall growth trend in certain cities (Maxson, 1998a). These spurts are explained largely by “turf” disputes between warring gangs (Block and Block, 1993; Block and Christakos, 1995; Block et al., 1996). The spurts are not citywide—they occur in specific neighborhoods and involve particular youth gangs in escalating incidents of provocation, retaliation, and revenge. The annual number of homicides involving Chicago street gangs increased almost fivefold between 1987 and 1994 (Block et al., 1996). Youth and adult gang-related homicides in Los Angeles County more than doubled from 1987 to 1992, then dropped in 1993 and 1994 (Maxson, 1998a).

To what extent is the large volume of and increase in gang homicides caused by drug trafficking? This popular assumption is tied to the image of youth gangs as entrepreneurial drug-trafficking operations that began to spread across the country during the crack cocaine epidemic.

Klein and his colleagues were the first researchers to test the popular assumption of a strong relationship between youth and adult gang drug trafficking and homicide. In a series of Los Angeles studies, they found that the connection between gang-related homicides and drug trafficking is not strong.<sup>13</sup> This relationship has also been found to be weak in several other studies in Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and St. Louis (see Howell, in press[a] for a review of this research).

There are exceptions to this general conclusion. Some ongoing drug market wars account for a significant number of homicides (Block et al., 1996). Block and her colleagues also noted an indirect relationship among homicides, drug trafficking, and street gang activity. Many of the street gang-related homicides might not occur without the existence of drug markets, which routinely bring members of opposing gangs into contact with one another. How can the increase in gang-related homicides over the past decade be explained?

**The role of firearms in gang violence.** The presence of firearms significantly increases the likelihood of murder. The routine use of guns in gang conflict is a fairly recent development, having occurred in the past decade (Miller, 1992). Recent studies show that firearms are now prevalent in youth gangs (Bjerregard and Lizotte, 1995;

<sup>12</sup> Fagan’s argument is similar to Hagedorn (1991, 1994a, 1994b), Klein (1995), and Moore (1990, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> See Klein and Maxson, 1985; Klein, Maxson, and Cunningham, 1988, 1991; Maxson, 1995, 1998a.



Howell, 1998; Lizotte et al., 1994). There also is evidence that the impact of drug selling on illegal gun carrying is greater than the impact of gang membership and that drug selling increases with age. Thus, "unlike the diminished role of gangs, drug selling grows as the subjects get older and this enhances hidden gun carrying" (Lizotte et al., 1997:388). A strong association is found between illegal gun use and gang membership and between illicit drug sales and illegal gun use (Decker, 1996; Decker, Pennell, and Caldwell, 1997; Sanders, 1994; Sheley and Wright, 1993, 1995).

Using data gathered from interviews in 1995 with arrested juveniles in the Drug Use Forecasting (DUF) study, Decker and colleagues (1997) found that gang members are much more likely than other juveniles to carry guns most or all of the time (31 percent versus 20 percent). Percentages of arrestees who reported using a gun to commit a crime, were higher among adolescents who sold drugs (42 percent) or belonged to a gang (50 percent) than among other juveniles (33 percent). One-third of gang members said it was okay to shoot someone who disrespected them. These findings confirm the importance of gun ownership and use among gang members.

In a 3-year field study of active youth gang members in St. Louis, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) reported that 81 percent owned guns. The mean number of guns owned was more than four. Two-thirds of gang members had used their guns at least once. The most common use was in gang fights; infrequent use was reported in drive-bys, defense against attacks by strangers, and other incidents. Only four members mentioned a drug-related motive. In each of these incidents, the gang members used their guns to prevent a drug customer from robbing them.

Decker (1996) contended that gang interactions, mainly the threat a rival gang presents, help to explain the increasing sophistication of weapons used by gang

members. The Blocks showed that most of the increase in Chicago street gang homicides is attributable to an increase in more lethal weapons, not an increase in assaults (Block and Block, 1993; Howell, in press [a]; Hutson et al., 1995; Zimring, 1996). Rosenfeld and Decker (1996:200) found that the St. Louis youth (under age 24) homicide problem "is largely a gun homicide problem."

## Causes and Correlates of Youth Gang Violence

Some studies support the notion that youth and adult gang involvement in drug trafficking has led to more violent crime.<sup>14</sup> Other studies suggest that the connection between youth and adult gang drug sales and violence is indirect or weak.<sup>15</sup> Some of these studies that shed light on the gangs, drugs, and violence connection are reviewed below.

Huff (1996) studied two samples of Cleveland adolescents: currently or formerly active youth gang members and a second group of youth who had not joined gangs but were deemed similarly at risk of delinquency. Major Cleveland gangs were well represented in the sample. Gang youth were significantly more involved in marijuana and cocaine drug sales and in more serious and violent crimes than nongang adolescents. Gang members were far more likely to sell high-profit drugs and to sell drugs more frequently than nongang adolescents. Huff asked both groups about the source of the drugs they sold. Gangs were not the primary source for either group. A majority of both gang and nongang youth said "others" controlled drug supplies. Gang sellers were far more likely than nongang sellers to go out of State for their supply.

In a unique aspect of this study, police gang experts identified 83 gang members who were leaders in 1986. Huff (1996) compiled their arrest histories from 1980 to 1994. The overwhelming majority of arrests (which averaged 10 per leader) began at or near the time of their initial gang involvement. Most of the arrests (37 percent) were

<sup>14</sup> See Hagedorn, 1996; Padilla, 1992; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Sanders, 1994; Short, 1996; Skolnick 1989, 1990, 1991; Skolnick et al., 1988; Taylor, 1989, 1990; Venkatesh, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> See Block and Block, 1993; Chin, 1990, 1995, 1996; Decker, Pennell, and Caldwell, 1997; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Fagan, 1989; Huff, 1989, 1996; Klein, Maxson, and Cunningham, 1991; MacLeod, 1987; Maxson, 1995; Maxson and Klein, 1996; Moore, 1990, 1991; Waldorf and Lauderback, 1993.

for violent crimes, 29 percent for property crimes, 18 percent for drug offenses, and 6 percent for weapons offenses.

In his investigation of possible crime progression, Huff (1996) determined the year in which gang leaders' arrests for property, drug, and violent offenses peaked. Peaks for all three offenses clustered within less than 2 years. His discovery that violent crime arrests peaked about 3 months before drug offenses led Huff (1996:99) to suggest that this might be evidence of "a close connection between drug trafficking and violence that is often associated with conflict over 'turf.'"

Venkatesh's (1996) ethnography of gangs in Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes described one of the worst cases of gang drug trafficking and violence. His study documented the transformation of gangs in this low-income public housing development from turf gangs to drug gangs and the escalation of gang violence with the advent of crack cocaine. In the 1960's and 1970's, these gangs fought over pride or turf in hand-to-hand conflicts, sometimes using zip guns (homemade, single-shot pistols). Their violence was controlled largely by tenant networks. When crack cocaine was introduced in the 1980's, a notable escalation in gang violence occurred. Several gangs controlled drug-trafficking turfs in one or more buildings in the housing development. Previously contained fights then burst into the open, endangering residents in gang-related crossfire. In 1992, several children, all innocent bystanders, were shot and killed. Neither police nor tenant organizations were able to contain the gang violence. Rival gangs continued fighting. Eventually, community leaders, youth workers, and tenants were able to effect a truce that Venkatesh predicted would not last.

Hagedorn (1991, in press) found that few (mostly adult) Milwaukee gang members were involved in cocaine sales in 1987. But by 1991, 75 percent of them were reported as having been involved in cocaine trafficking. Adult gang members said that one-half or more of the dope houses in gang neighborhoods were run by gangs (Hagedorn, 1994b). He estimated that about one-quarter of all homicides and from one-third to one-half of all adult gang violence in which gang members were involved or which they witnessed were drug related (Hagedorn, 1996).

In one of the most detailed studies of the gangs, drugs, and violence

connections, Decker and Van Winkle (1994, 1996) found that the St. Louis gangs to which youth belonged, mostly local Crips and Bloods, were extensively involved in drug trafficking, especially cocaine. Members of these gangs fought often, generally using guns. Ammunition, drugs, and guns were sometimes obtained from gangs in Los Angeles and Detroit. Rival gangs often fought over drug customer turf. Decker and Van Winkle found, however, that gang violence has many other sources related to everyday gang social processes.<sup>16</sup> They saw three main sources of violence among St. Louis gang members (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). First, violence is a part of everyday life in their neighborhoods and families. Second, conflict differentiates gangs from other delinquent groups. Third, violence is an endemic part of their status as individuals and as gang members. In St. Louis gangs, "members are expected to always be ready to commit violence, to participate in violent acts, and to have engaged in some sort of violence in their initiation" into the gang (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996:173).

Decker (1996) offered a more detailed explanation of the origin and spurt pattern of gang violence that Block (1993) discovered. He used Loftin's (1984) "contagion" concept and the notion that gang cohesion grows in proportion to the perceived threat represented by rival gangs (Klein, 1971). Loftin argued that three conditions must be present if contagion is to occur: a spatial concentration of assaultive violence, a reciprocal nature to assaultive violence (see Miller, 1958), and escalations in assaultive violence. Decker (1996) explained how the threat of attack by another group ignites the gang, increases cohesion, and produces deadly consequences. Most gang violence, he argued, is retaliatory, a response to violence—real or perceived—against the gang. Spurts of gang violence appear to follow predictable patterns, in a sequence that is initially motivated by the perceived threat that another gang poses, then instigated by a precipitating event, followed by escalation of activity, a violent event, rapid deescalation, and finally, retaliation.

### Long-Term Studies of Adolescent Samples

Most of the studies reviewed thus far focus on specific gangs or individual gang members, capturing the significance of

their experiences. A different view of the connection between gang drug trafficking and violence is obtained by studying large representative samples of adolescents over a long period of time. OJJDP's Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency, which studied large adolescent samples in the emerging gang cities of Denver, CO, and Rochester, NY, has produced a number of important findings on the gangs, drugs, and violence connection. Although these studies were not designed specifically to examine youth gangs, they permit comparisons between gang and nongang members in larger samples.

Each of these studies addresses the extent to which gang membership facilitates drug trafficking. Similar patterns were observed in both cities. In Rochester, Thornberry and his colleagues (1993) found that gang members were involved in three to five times as many drug sales as nongang youth in sequential time periods. In Denver, gang members reported nearly seven times as many drug sales as nongang youth (Huizinga, 1997). In another study, supported by OJJDP and several other agencies and organizations, Seattle gang members reported involvement in 10 times as many drug sales as nongang youth (Hill, Howell, and Hawkins, 1996). In Seattle (Hill et al., 1996) and in Rochester (Bjerregaard and Lizotte, 1995), drug use and trafficking rates still remained high after individuals left the gang, indicating that gang influence on drug trafficking extends beyond the period of gang membership. Gang members in all three study sites reported from three to seven times as many serious and violent delinquent acts as nongang youth (Howell, 1998).

A key question is, Does gang involvement in drug trafficking cause subsequent violent crime? The Seattle gang studies have examined this issue. Despite a high prevalence of Seattle gang member involvement in drug trafficking, accelerated adolescent involvement in drug trafficking after joining a gang, and strong evidence that gang involvement prolongs drug trafficking (Hill, Howell, and Hawkins, 1996; Hill et al., 1996), an analysis shows that gang member involvement in drug trafficking at age 16 does not predict assaultive violence at age 18 but does predict drug trafficking at age 18 (Howell et al., 1996). Surprisingly (given this finding), the study also showed that drug trafficking at age 16 predicts significantly more assaultive violence and handgun possession at age 18 among nongang youth.<sup>17</sup>

In Denver, Esbensen and Huizinga (1993:571) reported that drug sales "were not driving" street offending. Both violent (gang fighting, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) and nonviolent offenses (burglary, theft, fencing stolen goods) composed the "street offending" measure. Although Rochester analyses showed an association between gang drug trafficking and violent offenses (Thornberry et al., 1993), neither the strength of the relationship nor the temporal order of the two behaviors has yet been examined. Several other studies of either gang or nongang samples have shown an association between adolescent drug trafficking and violence.<sup>18</sup>

These findings make a persuasive case that drug trafficking is strongly associated with other serious and violent crimes but not necessarily that drug trafficking by gang members *causes* more frequent violent offending. In Pittsburgh—the third site in OJJDP's Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency—a study of nongang youth suggested that drug use, serious theft, and violence precede drug selling (Van Kammen, Maguin, and Loeber, 1994). Van Kammen and her colleagues also found that sales of illicit drugs started significantly later in adolescence than the other three behaviors. Initiation of drug selling was strongly related to previous involvement in multiple types of delinquency. The authors concluded that "the present study indicated a temporal sequence between the delinquent behaviors and the onset of drug dealing. This does not mean that the relationship is causal. Instead, it is likely that drug dealing and serious forms of delinquency are expressions of similar antisocial tendencies. Whether the same etiological factors apply to each still remains to be demonstrated" (Van Kammen, Maguin, and Loeber, 1994:240).

Although a causal relationship between gang drug trafficking and violence has not yet been demonstrated in the above studies, it is important to remember that, in the main, the findings this Bulletin reviews

<sup>16</sup> See also Anderson, 1994; Block and Block, 1993; Chin, 1996; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Horowitz, 1983; Kennedy, Piehl, and Braga, 1996; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991.

<sup>17</sup> The researchers selected drug selling at age 16 and violence and other outcomes at age 18 in part because the average ages for joining a gang are 14 to 15 in Seattle. Thus, it was anticipated that gang membership and involvement in gang-related drug trafficking would be very prevalent by age 16. Measuring violence at age 18 would allow time for gang drug trafficking to cause violence—if that were the case.

<sup>18</sup> See Altschuler and Brounstein, 1991; Dembo et al., 1993; Padilla, 1992; Van Kammen and Loeber, 1994; Williams, 1989.

come from two sources: gang studies in emerging gang cities and nongang samples. A key question is the extent to which gang membership facilitates gun use in drug trafficking—possibly resulting in higher levels of violence—in the same way that the gang facilitates overall violent offending. This may hold true in two cases; gang member drug trafficking may indirectly contribute to more violent encounters with other gangs involving guns when (1) drug trafficking exacerbates the need for guns and (2) the perceived threat of violence from rival groups increases. Resolution of this connection requires further examination.

## Summary

Empirical support for the popular image of youth gangs as promulgated by Skolnick and his colleagues in the California studies is limited. There is little evidence of gang migration for the explicit purpose of setting up drug-trafficking operations in distant locations. Youth gangs sometimes obtain guns, drugs, and ammunition from gangs in other cities. Some gangs expand their operations to other markets. These fit the stereotype conveyed by the media and investigatory agencies. Yet there does not appear to be a large number of youth gangs that fit the stereotype. Moreover, interstate drug trafficking appears to be mainly the province of adult criminal organizations.

Youth gang members actively engage in drug use, drug trafficking, and violent crime. In other words, these problems overlap considerably. Gang members are more likely than nongang youth to be involved in drug trafficking and violence. Gang involvement appears to promote individual participation in violence, drug use, and drug trafficking and perhaps prolong gang member involvement in drug sales. Although drug trafficking is strongly associated with other serious and violent crimes, gang member involvement in drug sales does not necessarily result in more frequent violent offenses.

Most gang members have engaged in illegal activities, generally including violence, before they join gangs. Many have guns. Thus, gangs recruit or attract potentially or already violent individuals, and involvement in violent activities increases during periods of gang membership, even among those who enter the gang with a history of violent crime. The evidence to date suggests that gang participation, drug trafficking, and violence occur together.

Some youth gangs are actively involved in street-level drug trafficking. With some notable exceptions, they do not appear to control drug-trafficking operations. Large, adult criminal gangs that traffic in drugs and drug-selling cliques within gangs do exist, and they are responsible for a great deal of violence. Most of their violence may be directly or indirectly related to drug trafficking.

A distinction should be made between youth gangs and adult criminal organizations that existed before the crack cocaine epidemic or were created to profit from crack. Overall, adult criminal organizations appear to be responsible for a large percentage of the violence related to drug trafficking, particularly the most violent crimes such as homicide, assault, and robbery. However, some younger youth gangs may evolve into drug-trafficking operations as they grow older or take on older members. This appears to be more common in cities with a longer tradition of gang activities than in emerging gang problem cities, and this trend may be fueled by deteriorating economic conditions in inner-city areas.

Although common sense suggests a link between gangs, drugs, and violence (Hagedorn, in press), which is strongly promoted in media representations of youth gangs (Klein, 1995), such a link is questioned in longitudinal data on adolescents that examine the causal connections among these variables. However, these connections may be stronger in adult gangs (see Hagedorn, in press) and adult criminal organizations, including in a few areas experiencing a chronic youth gang problem.

Most gang violence is endemic to gang life, separate from drug trafficking because of several reasons. Violence is a part of the everyday life of gang members, even when they are apart from the gang; it is in their neighborhoods and within families. Second, conflict differentiates gangs from other law-violating youth groups. Third, violence is an expected part of their individual status and roles as gang members.

For the most part, the growth in youth gang homicides appears to be independent of the increase in gang drug trafficking. Youth gang drug wars represent a notable exception. The absence of a strong causal connection between gang drug trafficking and homicide suggests that gang involvement and drug trafficking are separate risk factors for homicide rather than interre-

lated factors (Meehan and O'Carroll, 1992). Maxson (1998a) calls for careful analysis of the specific characteristics of gang homicides in different cities and communities so that solutions can be crafted that are appropriate for the local gang homicide problem.

Once communities gain insight into the sources of gang violence, they will see opportunities for intervening in the patterns, or spurts, of gang violence that occur (Decker, 1996). Communities that engage in this process can learn about interventions other communities are using, such as Chicago's "Little Village" Gang Violence Reduction Project and OJJDP's Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression demonstration model, which is being implemented in five sites: Mesa, AZ; Tucson, AZ; Riverside, CA; Bloomington, IL; and San Antonio, TX (Thornberry and Burch, 1997).

Gang violence has been exacerbated by the ready availability and use of firearms, especially more lethal guns, coupled with frequent use of automobiles in attacks on other gangs. However, the role of firearms in gang-related violence is not well understood. The extent to which gang firearm possession and use is causally related to gang functions versus drug trafficking is unclear.

## Policy and Program Implications

As a matter of policy, youth gang drug trafficking needs to be addressed separately from adult criminal drug-trafficking organizations. These distinctly different problems require unique solutions. Youth gang drug trafficking coexists with other gang crimes, mainly intergang turf conflicts and interpersonal violence, that are unrelated or only tangential to drug trafficking. Violence in adult criminal drug-trafficking organizations, cartels, and syndicates appears to be connected much more directly to the drug-trafficking enterprise. Reducing drug trafficking in youth gangs is not likely to have a significant impact on violent youth gang crime (except in the case of particular drug gangs), whereas successful reduction of drug trafficking in adult criminal organizations is likely to produce a significant reduction in violent crime.

## Breaking the Cycle

Before communities can begin to craft a response, an assessment of the local gang problem needs to take place. It is important that communities have an

accurate understanding of and agree on which types of gang problems they are experiencing. In order to conduct a thorough assessment, communities should look at community perceptions and available data. Data from law enforcement sources such as local gang and general crime data are critical to the assessment. Other data should be collected from probation officers, schools, community-based youth agencies, prosecutors, community residents, and gang and nongang youth. In essence, the nature of the drug and violence problem and its relationship to the gang problem should be determined and special attention should be placed on where—and on whom—prevention, intervention, and suppression efforts should be focused. Although not primarily designed to be an assessment but rather a broad training approach, OJJDP's Gang and Drug POLICY training program brings together community leaders to systematically assess the nature and extent of the community gang and drug problem.

Successfully breaking up youth gang drug operations may require different approaches depending on the type of gang. Because youth gangs generally are involved only in street-level distribution, the proceeds of which typically are used for personal consumption, providing legitimate ways of earning money may prove effective with their members. Suppression approaches may be more effective with drug gangs.

Programs are needed to break the cycle of gang members moving from detention and corrections to prisons to communities. Research and program development are needed in several areas. Better screening and risk classification of gang members in juvenile and adult correctional facilities are imperative. This would help protect the public by giving correctional staff reliable information to classify gang offenders at the appropriate level of risk and to match juvenile offenders with gang treatment programs available in correctional facilities. Effective programs are needed in these facilities to prevent gang formation, membership, and victimization and also to break up drug operations inside prisons. There also needs to be an end to the recycling of adult gang members into gang-infested communities once they leave prison. Ex-convicts need marketable job skills and gainful employment opportunities to avoid the lucrative drug market. Breaking this cycle becomes all the more important as States are imprisoning younger and younger offenders, who will

be returning to the streets at a younger age than is the case today. Making effective drug treatment programs available, along with legitimate job opportunities, would also help break the cycle.

Preventing adolescents from joining gangs should be a top priority. One place to begin is preventing youth from dropping out of school. Discouraging children and young adolescents from joining gangs is particularly important because of the lure of the illicit economy and the drug kingpin lifestyle, which the media sensationalizes. Opportunities for success and access to them must be provided. At the same time, a community's social control of pre-gang and gang groups needs to be increased. Communities' comprehensive, coordinated approaches should include measures to increase social control of youth by strengthening social institutions and emphasizing the roles that residents, parents, youth workers, and community leaders play in supervising adolescents. Community businesses can play a key role by providing legitimate work opportunities. Focused prevention is the best way to ensure adequate resource allocation and to have the greatest impact.

Existing gun interdiction efforts can be enhanced and new ones implemented as part of a coordinated effort to reduce gang violence. A user-reduction strategy buttressed by collaboration between police and probation officers, as in Boston's Youth Violence Strike Force (Kennedy, Piehl, and Braga, 1996), is one way of removing guns from the streets and the possession of gang members.<sup>19</sup> The case for removing illegal firearms from the possession of gang members is unequivocal. Guns are vital tools for resolving gang conflicts. A reduction in gang-related homicides will follow, even without a reduction in drug trafficking.

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<sup>19</sup> For more information on this and other gang prevention and control approaches, see Howell (in press [b]).

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