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# RESEARCH FOCUS ON YOUTH

New York State Division For Youth  
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## GANGS AND DRUGS IN NEW YORK STATE

### Part I: Study Methods and Overview of Findings

#### INTRODUCTION

Reports of organized criminality among youth go back hundreds of years. Nevertheless, objective data regarding the prevalence (amount, kind and location) of "gang" activity exists mostly where it has been officially recognized as a problem. Sometimes data are gathered because of the frequency and/or notoriety of activity with obvious gang overtones. Sometimes other purposes are served by playing up or down what appear to be gang activities. Such manipulation is facilitated by the absence of either a universally accepted definition of "youth gang" or any standard criteria for such a definition.

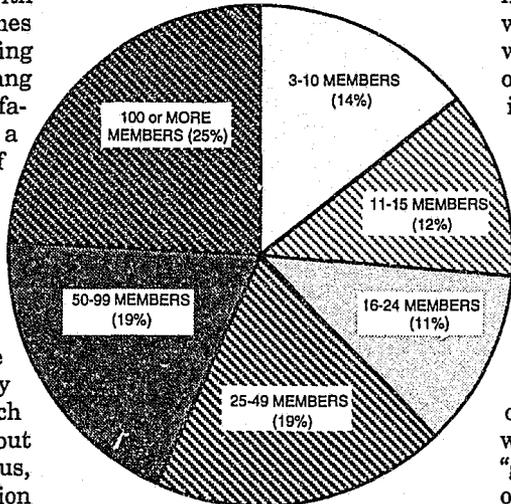
In New York, as elsewhere, most prevalence information comes from local law enforcement organizations. When information about gang activity comes from the youth themselves, it is invariably restricted to a particular gang. Such data provide in-depth information, but have limited geographic scope. Thus, comprehensive prevalence information on gang activity is currently dependent on incomplete composites of data gathered using different definitions and methods.

Without universal, or at least reproducible definitions, it is impossible to know the magnitude of the problem, the kind of threat posed by youth gangs or even where such threats are concentrated. Yet, these fundamental facts are necessary for determining how much of our resources should be devoted to the problem, as well as how these resources should be allocated.

In order to better understand the current gang situation in New York, the Division for Youth applied for and was awarded a two-year federal grant to study youth gangs, with special

emphasis on their involvement with illegal drugs. This study sought to describe the prevalence, geographic distribution and characteristics of "youth gangs" throughout New York State. This aspect of the project is covered in this issue of *Research Focus On Youth*.

Size Distribution of 832 Antisocial Youth Groups



Additionally, this study sought to specify the amount and kind of drug-related activity engaged in by these groups and aimed at developing an empirically-based classification for categorizing antisocial youth groups. Such a taxonomy would facilitate updating and clarifying the definition of what are conventionally referred to as gangs. This aspect of the study will be discussed in the next issue of *RFY*.

#### STUDY METHODS

**Antisocial youth groups.** The essence of the term "youth gang," as used in most current and past research, describes a group of youth acting in concert to commit criminal offenses. In

developing a comprehensive taxonomy of youth groups that includes any aggregation of young people who might qualify as a gang, the concept of Antisocial Youth Group (AYG) was developed and operationally defined as three or more youth who, in concert with one another, engage in criminal behavior. This intentionally broad definition undoubtedly includes groups which have been excluded in other work on "gangs" that has concentrated on the more highly organized and visible groups. The definition used here increases the likelihood that the data collected will encompass the full range of "gang" activity.

**Court-placed youth as key informants.** One method of collecting data about issues not widely known in the general population (e.g., youth group activity) is to interview knowledgeable "key informants." Most key informant studies on gangs use school or police officials who, though knowledgeable, view "gangs" from the perspective of agents of control. Studies that have used youth as key informants have concentrated on a few previously identified groups. In this study, we used incarcerated, court-placed youth as our key informants in the belief that, because of their high-risk for AYG involvement, youth in DFY facilities across the State constitute a knowledgeable population about such activities.

This informant pool may have yielded data about the more criminal youth groups and, therefore, underrepresented milder forms of antisocial activities. It should also be kept in mind that since the interviews were conducted in 1992, our findings cannot reflect groups that have only recently emerged in communities throughout the State. This lag is fur-

ther exacerbated by the fact that respondents had been incarcerated for about nine months prior to interview, so their information, at best, was somewhat dated.

**Sampling to maximize information per contact.** Simple random sampling, even within this high-risk population, would likely yield many youth with no AYG knowledge. Furthermore, any sample accurately representing the DFY population would limit geographic coverage to those areas of the State with large youth populations or high DFY utilization rates. Yet, any departure from random sampling necessarily diminishes the utility of study findings for estimating true (rather than minimal) AYG prevalence in New York. Nevertheless, it was decided that four inter-related, non-random subsamples would better achieve study goals within the constraints posed by the resources available.

The first of the subsamples was aimed at minimizing interviews with youth who knew nothing about AYGs. It consists of youth believed by DFY child care workers to be knowledgeable about gangs. This "worker-nominated" sample was the starting point for all other sampling. Youth successfully interviewed from this worker sample were asked to nominate other youth in DFY they believed to be knowledgeable about gangs. These nominees made up the "youth-nominated" sample. Together, the worker and youth subsamples provide the "index" respondents for the study (the pool from which all other sampling was developed).

To evaluate the validity of the data collected from the index subsamples, a "corroboration" sample of youth was drawn at random from the same zip codes as the index informants. These youth were contacted regarding the groups in their zip codes reported by the index respondents. These corroboration interviews revealed relatively high inter-respondent reliability for group identification and responses to specific questions.

Finally, in order to penetrate geographic areas not well represented in the DFY population, a "penetration sample" was randomly drawn from counties in which no AYGs had yet been identified. Thus, youth contacted in the worker, youth, corroboration and penetration subsamples are the source of the data used in the study.

**Data-gathering.** Data were gathered in three stages. First, participation by each youth was solicited using

a written and oral explanation of the study. Second, for those agreeing to participate, the interviewer used a screening instrument (asking for the name, location and size of any youth groups known to the respondent) to determine their appropriateness for an interview. Index respondents who could name no groups were not interviewed. Those who named groups were interviewed about the group they felt they were most knowledgeable about. Corroboration sample informants were interviewed only if they named a group previously identified in their zip code. Penetration sample participants were interviewed only if they named a group located in their home county.

The 45-minute interview consisted of a structured questionnaire designed to provide guidance and data-recording assistance to the interviewer, without constraining either the order of the questions or the response categories. The instrument facilitated obtaining the maximum information in whatever way seemed most appropriate and recording the information in as standard a way as possible without sacrificing validity. To aid in coding the interview, permission was sought to tape record the session. These recordings also allowed monitoring of the interview process without the presence of additional staff.

The interview was designed to characterize AYGs on the basis of their activities (kind, frequency, location, planning, number participating, involvement of other groups, use of weapons and drugs), member characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity and received benefits of membership), group organization (leadership, possessions, rules, meetings and branches), recruiting practices (how youth join and leave the group, anticipated benefits and initiation) and territorial considerations/relations with other groups (turf location, boundaries, control, competition from, and relations with, other groups).

For drug-related activities, respondents were asked about the kind of drugs involved, specific activities (use, transport, sale, etc.) and other aspects of trafficking. The interviewer also sought information about the respondent's membership in the group, how long s/he had known of the group and how the group members thought their community perceived them.

**Protection of respondents.** At best, obtaining informed consent from incarcerated youth is problematic. To obtain truly voluntary participation, the study's focus on groups rather than

respondents' involvement in them was explained. Confidentiality and immunity were promised, as was the fact that neither participation nor refusal would affect a youth's privileges or length of stay.

The risk to informants of reprisals by gang members, sympathizers or nominees was limited by never telling nominees who nominated them or even that they were nominated by another youth. In addition, access to interview data was restricted, and staff were instructed on confidentiality maintenance techniques.

**Identifying individual AYGs.** A major task in this research was determining whether a group named by a respondent differed from groups already identified. This was usually accomplished by comparing the turf of the new group with that of groups with similar names or initials. When name and location failed to distinguish groups, other group characteristics, such as size or specific turf boundaries, if available, were examined. Groups which could not be definitively distinguished were considered the same group. Hence, given the definition, the number of unique groups identified likely constitutes an undercount of AYGs in New York.

## FINDINGS

**Response.** In all, 524 youth were contacted for participation between January and November, 1992. Table 1 shows both the subsample composition of these potential respondents and their level of participation.

**Table 1: Youth Contacted for Study by Subsample and Response**

Category	Number	Percent	Cum. Pct
Total Youth Contacted	524	100%	
<b>SUB-SAMPLE</b>			
Worker nominees	228	44%	44%
Youth nominees	113	22%	65%
Corroboration sample	138	26%	91%
Penetration sample	45	9%	100%
<b>RESPONSE</b>			
Refused	47	9%	9%
Volunteered	477	91%	100%
Knew no groups	28	5%	6%
Screened only*	75	14%	16%
Interviewed	374	71%	100%

\*Corroboration sample youth unable to corroborate any AYGs, but who knew about other groups, and penetration sample youth who named only groups outside their home counties.

Since 91 percent of the youth contacted agreed to participate (47 refused outright) and only five percent (28) failed to name any AYGs, it is reasonable to conclude that contacted

youth were both comfortable participating and knowledgeable about the subject. Another 75 youth (14% of all contacts) were screened, but not interviewed. These youth were either drawn in the corroboration sample and could not corroborate any groups in their zip code, or were drawn in the penetrance sample and could name no groups in their home county.

A total of 374 youth (71% of the 524 contacted) were interviewed. Of the 421 eligible (374 interviewees + 47 refusals), 89 percent were interviewed.

**AYGs identified.** Table 2 shows the degree of corroboration and the level of information obtained on the 1,111 unique AYGs identified. It should be remembered that despite the broad definition used, this number is only a lower limit of the true number of groups in New York. Within this minimal number, the reason only 23 percent of the groups were identified by more than one respondent is that corroboration sampling was curtailed due to the unexpected number of index nominees who were knowledgeable about AYGs. In order to reserve enough resources to insure reasonable geographic coverage in the penetrance sample, corroboration as well as index sampling had to be stopped long before lists of potential respondents were exhausted. Thus, the low rate of corroboration is deceiving, especially since it was largely successful in terms of group identification.

**Table 2: Corroboration Level of Identified Antisocial Youth Groups**

Category	Number	Percent	Cum. Pct
Total Groups Identified	1,111	100%	100%
<b>CORROBORATION LEVEL</b>			
Corroborated Groups:	252	23%	
2 or more interviews	66	6%	6%
2+ screens & 1 interv.	53	5%	11%
2+ screens only	133	12%	23%
Uncorroborated groups:	859	77%	
One interview only	189	17%	40%
One screen only	670	60%	100%
<b>LEVEL OF INFORMATION</b>			
Interview data:	308	28%	6%
Member interview	183	17%	17%
Non-member interview	125	11%	28%
Screen data only	803	72%	100%

For 72 percent of the AYGs identified, only screen data were collected. Thus, most of the analyses are based on data for the 308 groups on which interview data were collected. When more than one interview for a group was available, the most valid interview was used to represent the group. This decision was based on a validity

score composed of the following factors: interviewer judgment of respondent's knowledge and honesty; amount of missing data; length of time respondent knew group; cooperativeness (allowed taping of interview); inconsistency of responses; and respondent membership in group.

**Respondent characteristics.** Table 3 shows the "typical" characteristics of the respondents to the 308 interviews selected on the basis of this validity score. As used here, "typical"

**Table 3: "Typical" Characteristics of Respondent for Group (N=308)**

RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTIC	VALUE
Lives In group's turf	84%
Male	83%
Adjudicated as a Juvenile Delinquent	69%
African-American	67%
Nominated in worker sample	60%
Is a member of the reported group	57%
Screened need for substance abuse services	54%
Placed with DFY for a violent crime	50%
Average age of respondent at interview	16.0
Average validity of responses (range: -19 to +17)	5.2
Average years known of group or been a member	4.2
Average years a group member (non-member=0)	2.4

refers to what characterizes the majority of the respondents, i.e., categories containing at least half the respondents. Table 3 also shows the average responses for continuously-measured characteristics. Notable here is that over half the respondents claim to be members of the group on which they are reporting, 84 percent live in the reported group's home turf and the time youth have either been a member or known about the group averages more than four years.

It is clear from this that the sampling methods used in this research were successful in yielding key informants with direct knowledge of the groups on which they reported. Furthermore, this relatively long contact time suggests that the current conception that modern gangs are transitory phenomena is not entirely accurate. Since our informants have had an average of four years of contact, a significant proportion of the groups must be more than short-lived associations.

**Activities of the "typical" AYG.** Our findings suggest that AYGs vary extensively on many characteristics. This variability will be explored more fully in the next issue of *RFY*. It is, nonetheless, instructive to examine

what the majority of the groups have in common.

Except where noted, the statistics in Table 4 are based on the most valid interview for the 308 groups on which interview data were gathered. Table 4 shows either the typical value for continuously-measured variables or the percent of groups in any category on a variable which describes at least half of the groups. Thus, characteristics which did not describe a majority of the groups are ignored; for example,

stealing, which is an activity of only 38 percent of the groups. Such variables will be examined in the next *RFY*.

Again, despite the liberal definition of "gang" used in this study (three or more youth engaging in criminal behavior together), a review of the ACTIVITIES section of Table 4 reveals that the majority of the AYGs engage in non-trivial activities with a

frequency and in numbers suggesting that most groups meet and, perhaps, surpass the criminal potential of traditional youth gangs. For example, almost ninety percent of the groups engage in violence to protect their members. They claim to do this an average of more than once a week with 15-30 youth involved in each event.

Such traditional gang activities, including violence to protect turf (engaged in by almost two in three groups), are too often viewed as having little consequence for the wider community. Yet, in addition to such inter-gang activities, the majority of the groups also engage in a variety of activities where the victims are not gang members. These include robbery or extortion, wilding (sprees of random violence) and marijuana and cocaine trafficking. Even more ominous is that, for more than eight in ten groups, activities usually involve weapons and, for over half the groups, youth are under the influence of alcohol or other drugs during these activities. Furthermore, three-quarters of the groups engage in most of their activities outside their neighborhoods, while almost ninety percent act outside their neighborhoods at least occasionally.

**AYG structure and culture.** This study provides conflicting evidence regarding the assertion that modern youth gangs are transitory and poorly organized. First, the three-member minimum for AYG status notwithstanding, the average group has over 85 members with half the groups having more than 30 members. Given their relatively large sizes, it is unlikely that the majority of these groups could rely on rudimentary organizational patterns or exist for only brief periods of time.

There is little doubt AYGs are less organized and have a wider variety of organizational structures than either traditional youth gangs or adult agencies engaged in such paramili-

tary and commercial activities. Nevertheless, almost nine in ten AYGs had some sort of leadership and for almost two in three there is role differentiation among members.

As seen in Table 4, over three quarters of the groups have rules, such as the limitation of membership to certain kinds of youth. Further signs of group integrity are the presence of identifying characteristics (e.g., unique dress), initiations and group ownership. Although only four in ten groups hold "regular" meetings, those that do, average 11 meetings per month. Over half the groups usually meet in the same public place.

On the other hand, contrary to notions of traditional gangs, in almost

seventy percent of the groups, members are free to quit without retribution. Thus, while the "typical" AYG does not have a titled, multi-level leadership structure or traditional unique identifying "colors," their structure and cultural norms provide them with sufficient organizational integrity to mobilize sizable numbers of youth for the purpose of engaging in significant criminal activities on a regular basis.

**Social context.** Table 4 shows that six in ten groups on which interview data were collected are in the five boroughs of New York City. However, regardless of location, the typical AYG has other groups in its immediate vicinity with which it associates. While some of these associations are adversarial

**TABLE 4: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE "TYPICAL" AYG\***

GROUP CHARACTERISTIC		Typical Value or Percent of Groups	GROUP CHARACTERISTIC		Typical Value or Percent of Groups
<b>STRUCTURE</b>			<b>ACTIVITIES- Continued</b>		
Number of Members	All Identified Groups (N= 832**)		Average (Median)	Violence to protect turf	36.4 (20.0)
	Average (Median)	85.7 (35.0)	Number of Members involved in Group Activity	Trafficking	32.1 (19.5)
Most Valid Interviews (N= 288**)	Most frequent (66 groups)	20	Most Activities a Group Engages in:	Violence to protect members	30.5 (15.0)
	Average (Median)	86.4 (29.5)		Wilding	27.6 (15.0)
Most frequent (33 groups)	20	Vandalizing		25.3 (10.0)	
Average (median) number of meetings per month	11.0 (4.0)	Robbery/Extortion		16.9 (8.0)	
Meetings	Don't hold regular meetings	62%		Stealing	15.7 (5.0)
Other	Meet in same public place	51%	Other Aspects	Involve weapons	82%
	Group has some sort of leadership	88%		Do not involve other groups	75%
	Differential member power or privilege	64%		Take place outside neighborhood	75%
	Own something as a group	60%		Are not planned	59%
Group has no branches	58%		Don't involve most members	57%	
<b>RULES &amp; CUSTOMS</b>				Involve members using drugs	52%
Certain kinds of people excluded		86%		Drug activities present problems	95%
	Members may participate differentially	83%		Group does things outside of turf	88%
	Group has rules	78%		Group pays cash for drugs	55%
	Members can quit group	66%		Non-member individuals get drugs after deals	54%
	Has group identifier of some kind	62%	<b>SOCIAL CONTEXT</b>		
	Group has an initiation	52%	Turf	Group claims turf	81%
	Rules are taught by modeling	50%		Group controls turf	67%
		Claims bounded turf		64%	
<b>ACTIVITIES</b>				Turf is in NYC	60%
Non-Drug	Violence to protect members	89%	See community wanting group to go away	66%	
	Violence to protect turf	64%		Other Factors	Group associates with other groups
	Robbery/Extortion	61%	Group goes anywhere it pleases		55%
	Wilding	55%	Other groups in home area		55%
Drug	Any drug involvement	83%	<b>MEMBER CHARACTERISTICS</b>		
	Marijuana involved	73%	Gender	Boy members only	56%
	Group uses drugs	70%	Ethnicity	Some or all members African-American	90%
	Cocaine (any type) involved	60%		Members of more than one ethnicity	67%
	Group sells drugs	60%		Some or all members Latino	63%
	Group packages drugs	50%	Age	Age of typical member is 15-17	72%
Average (Median) Times Per Month (None=0)	Trafficking	15.7 (30.0)		Age of youngest member is 13-15	68%
	Robbery/Extortion	6.8 (1.0)		Age of oldest member is less than 21	51%
Violence to protect members	Wilding	5.9 (0)		Average (median) age of oldest member	22.6 (20.0)
	Stealing	4.7 (0)	Average (median) age of typical member	15.9 (16.0)	
Violence to protect turf	Stealing	4.7 (0)	Average (median) age of youngest member	13.6 (14.0)	
	Vandalizing	2.7 (0)	Other	Members live near each other	72%
		Members get money from group		52%	

\* Averages are shown for all continuously measured characteristics. Only those categorical characteristics in which one category accounted for at least half the responses are shown.

\*\* N of cases excludes responses of "many," "lots," or "don't know."



**Member characteristics.** Table 4 shows that the typical AYG is composed of African-American and Latino males. Not surprisingly, only six percent of the AYGs were exclusively female. In contrast to classic ethnically homogeneous gangs, two in three AYGs had multi-ethnic membership. This, and the fact that seventy percent of group members live near each other, suggests that residential proximity is more important than ethnicity in explaining AYG membership.

The typical age of AYG members is 16. Members of the typical AYG stay members because of the money the group provides them, although their reasons for joining in the first place were more diffuse. This economic tie to youth gangs has traditionally been subordinated to more psychological motivations for gang membership.

**Geographic distribution of AYGs.** The 1,111 AYGs identified in the screens were found in 46 of the 62 counties in the State (see maps on page 5). Two-thirds of the groups (66%) were in New York City. The reader is again cautioned against generalizing from these numbers which are based on a non-random, non-exhaustive sample of incarcerated youth. It is likely that a more extensive penitentiary sample would have yielded AYGs in more counties and decreased the percent of groups found in New York City. What is certain from these findings and illustrated with the maps, is that AYG activity is neither confined to large cities nor a regionally isolated phenomenon in only part of the State.

## SUMMARY

This publication reports the methods used in, and an overview of, findings from a two-year study of youth gangs in New York State. By utilizing youth placed with DFY as key informants, the study combined the breadth of coverage characteristic of key informant studies with the depth of information about gangs available only from youth for whom gangs are an important feature of their everyday environment. This strategy yielded results supporting the following generalizations about AYGs:

- **groups are ubiquitous, variously organized and not transitory, although individual membership is not tightly controlled;**
- **groups engage in a variety of violent activities using lethal weaponry;**
- **drugs are an integral part of gang life; they are both a source of member income and readily available for personal use.**

Given these characteristics and the fact that the vast majority of DFY youth were knowledgeable about AYGs, it is fair to say that youth gang activity plays a greater role in juvenile delinquency than the focus of current intervention programs might suggest.

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The next *Research Focus on Youth* will concentrate on the differences between AYGs, rather than their similarities. Subsets of groups engaged in different activities and with different characteristics will be compared and contrasted. The results of our efforts to cluster AYGs into a meaningful and useful typology will be presented.

More specific information regarding the role of drugs (kind, use and trafficking features) in the life of antisocial youth groups will also be provided.



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