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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention



**RESEARCH
SUMMARY**

Gang Suppression
and Intervention:
Problem and Response

Research Summary

A Publication of the
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) was established by the President and Congress through the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Act of 1974, Public Law 93-415, as amended. Located within the Office of Justice Programs of the U.S. Department of Justice, OJJDP's goal is to provide national leadership in addressing the issues of juvenile delinquency and improving juvenile justice.

OJJDP sponsors a broad array of research, program, and training initiatives to improve the juvenile justice system as a whole, as well as to benefit individual youth-serving agencies. These initiatives are carried out by seven components within OJJDP, described below.

Research and Program Development Division develops knowledge on national trends in juvenile delinquency; supports a program for data collection and information sharing that incorporates elements of statistical and systems development; identifies how delinquency develops and the best methods for its prevention, intervention, and treatment; and analyzes practices and trends in the juvenile justice system.

Training and Technical Assistance Division provides juvenile justice training and technical assistance to Federal, State, and local governments; law enforcement, judiciary, and corrections personnel; and private agencies, educational institutions, and community organizations.

Special Emphasis Division provides discretionary funds to public and private agencies, organizations, and individuals to replicate tested approaches to delinquency prevention, treatment, and control in such pertinent areas as chronic juvenile offenders, community-based sanctions, and the disproportionate representation of minorities in the juvenile justice system.

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OJJDP provides leadership, direction, and resources to the juvenile justice community to help prevent and control delinquency throughout the country.

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Gang Suppression and Intervention: Problem and Response

Research Summary

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Foreword

Youth gangs and the problems associated with them were once thought to concern a relatively small number of major metropolitan areas whose gang troubles go back to the days of *West Side Story*.

No longer. As the challenge posed by gangs extends to a greater number of cities and to communities of more modest proportions, the need for comprehensive community efforts to address emerging and chronic gang problems intensifies.

Dr. Irving Spergel and his colleagues at the University of Chicago have conducted the first comprehensive national survey of organized agency and community group responses to gang problems in the United States. Their study is the only national assessment of efforts to combat gangs.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) is funding a multi-site demonstration of the Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Program. The program uses the model developed by Dr. Spergel and his colleagues. An independent evaluation will also be funded. OJJDP's National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Program is establishing a National Gang Assessment Resource Center and will provide technical assistance and training services to program sites across the country.

This Summary presents the results of the study team's assessment of youth gang problems and responses across the United States. It demonstrates the need for effective gang suppression and intervention programs. We believe this assessment will help local juvenile justice and law enforcement agencies achieve these goals.

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Preface

This summary integrates the findings of seven data collection and research phases conducted in the initial assessment of the National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Program. The three primary reports are:

1. *Gang Suppression and Intervention: An Assessment.*
2. *Survey of Youth Gang Problems and Programs in 45 Cities and 6 Sites.*
3. *Community and Institutional Responses to the Youth Gang Problem: Case Studies Based on Field Visits and Other Materials.*

In view of the complexity of the youth gang problem, to prepare more effectively for prototype development, technical assistance and training, and implementation, four additional reports were developed:

4. *Report of the Law Enforcement Youth Gang Symposium.*
5. *Law Enforcement Definitional Conference — Transcript.*
6. *The Youth Gang Problem: Perceptions of Former Youth Gang Influentials. Transcripts of Two Symposia.*
7. *Client Evaluation of Youth Gang Services.*

The purpose of the initial assessment is to determine the scope of the youth gang problem, to review the response, and to examine promising approaches for combating the gang problem.

For availability/ordering information for the reports listed above, as well as other youth gang reports and products, contact the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse at 800-638-8736.

Scope of the problem

Because research has been limited and because researchers have no real consensus on the definition of a gang or gang incident, the scope and seriousness of the youth gang problem are not reliably known. Law enforcement and media reports suggest that criminal youth gangs are active in nearly every State, including Alaska and Hawaii, as well as in Puerto Rico and other territories. Youth gangs exist in large, mid-size, and small communities and in suburban areas. They may be present in one city but absent or less active in another seemingly similar community. Gangs operate in city, county, State, and Federal detention and corrections facilities. They operate in the vicinity of many schools, generally carrying out their activities near rather than within schools.

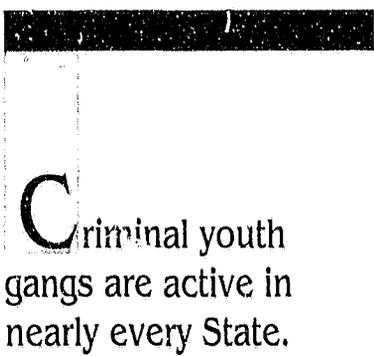
Youth gangs and gang incidents are defined in different ways in different communities. Researchers who conducted a survey of 45 cities and 6 sites found that the most frequently mentioned elements of a definition include certain group or organizational characteristics, such as symbols and a range of criminal activities, particularly violence and drug use and sales. Of 35 discrete cities and jurisdictions with organized programs to combat emerging and chronic gang problems, law enforcement officials estimated that the United States has some 1,439 gangs and 120,636 gang members. African Americans (54.6 percent) and Hispanics (32.6 percent), mainly Mexican Americans, were the major racial/ethnic groups in the gang populations reported by law enforcement officials.

Two-thirds of the law enforcement respondents in our survey perceived gangs as affiliated across neighborhoods, cities, or States. They stated that 75 percent of youth gang members had prior police records and that 11.3 percent of FBI index crimes in their jurisdictions were committed by youth gang members. However, the gang problem is not limited to juveniles; adults were reported to be involved in 45.6 percent of youth gang incidents.

Although gang members with arrest records were responsible for a disproportionate amount of violent crime, the proportion of total violent crime committed by gang members is still estimated to be fairly low. However, statistics on violent crimes committed by gang members depended in large measure on the local definitions of gang incidents.

Key aspects of youth gang behavior are its prevalence in violent crimes, such as homicide and aggravated assault, and its concentration in certain types of neighborhoods. Gang homicides, using a broad and inclusive definition, such as that used in Los Angeles, have ranged between 25 and 30 percent of all of the city's homicides in recent years. In a city with a more restrictive definition of gang incidents, such as Chicago, the average is about 10 percent.

The close relationship of gangs, violence, and a significant crime problem are most evident, however, when the criminal records of youth gang members are compared with those youths who are not in gangs. Youth gang membership is associated with significantly higher levels of delinquency and index crimes. The rate of violent offenses for gang members is three times as high as for nongang delinquents. Even gang members without delinquency records have higher adjusted frequencies of hidden delinquency than do nongang youth with



Criminal youth gangs are active in nearly every State.

Gangs have different types of members: core members, fringe members, and "wannabees."

delinquent records. Gang membership appears to prolong the extent and seriousness of criminal careers.

Recent evidence shows that a growing proportion of gang youth use and sell drugs. Currently, some youth gangs (more cliques within gangs or former gang members) are heavily engaged in street sales of drugs, and are involved in some mid-level drug distribution. However, the growth of drug dealing by gang and former gang members is insufficient to account for the greatly increased sale and use of drugs in many inner-city communities.

Although individual gang members may be involved in violent activities that are related to drug use or sale, the existence of a causal relationship between gang-related violence and drug use and sale is unclear. Tough competition for drug markets may increase the likelihood of gang conflict, but most gang homicides still appear to grow out of traditional turf wars.

Law enforcement officials who view drug trafficking to be a primary purpose of the gangs said in the survey that trafficking is more characteristic of black than Hispanic gangs. When drug dealing is regarded as a primary purpose of the youth gang, a higher percentage of index crime in the community is attributed to gangs. Gangs that are affiliated across neighborhoods, cities, or States were also viewed as more likely to be connected with adult criminal organizations.

Such gangs are regarded as likely to be engaged in both street and higher level drug trafficking, such as transporting drugs across jurisdictions. Nevertheless, it is likely that drug selling or trafficking opportunities have more to do with the development of a serious criminal youth gang problem, than the presence of youth gangs has a significant influence on the general drug problem.

Characteristics of gang structure

Although gangs appear to be more highly structured than delinquent groups, they may still be regarded as loosely organized. Some gangs base their membership on age and others on geographic area, such as neighborhoods. Some gangs are part of larger structures and alliances known as "nations." Estimates of gang size range from four or five members to thousands in a gang or gang conglomerate. Analysts often disagree on the size of gangs, in part because their studies are conducted at different times and different locations.

Gangs have different types of members: core members—including gang leaders, associates or regulars, peripheral or fringe members, and "wannabees" or recruits. The core may be regarded as an inner clique that determines the basic nature and level of gang activity. The extent to which gang members maintain long-term roles and specific positions is not clear. For example, some members join for a short period. A youth may switch membership from one gang to another for various reasons. In general, core members are more involved in delinquent or criminal activities than fringe members.

In recent decades, the age range of gang members appears to have expanded, particularly at the upper end. Members remain in gangs longer to pursue economic gain through increasingly serious criminal acts. Extreme gang violence is concentrated in the older teen and young adult age range. The average age of the arrested gang offender is 17 or 18. The average age of the gang homicide offender is 19 or 20 and the victim a year or two older, at least in cities with large, chronic gang problems.

The evidence is overwhelming that males are almost exclusively responsible for gang-related crime, particularly violent offenses. About 5 percent or fewer of reported gang crime appears to be committed by females. Male gang members are estimated to outnumber females by 20 to 1; however, half or more of the youth or street gangs may have female auxiliaries or affiliates. Some gangs are composed of both genders, but a very small number are unaffiliated female gangs.

Females are likely to join gangs at a younger age and leave earlier. Female involvement in gangs is less substantial than male involvement; young women's criminal behavior is related—directly or indirectly—to that of the dominant male pattern. Contrary to myth, female gang members are more likely to play a positive role, tempering the behavior of male gang members rather than inciting male gang members to violent or criminal activity.

Gang socialization processes vary by age, context, and situation, including access to alternative roles. Reasons for joining gangs include a need or wish for recognition, status, safety or security, power, excitement, and new experience. Youth raised under conditions of social deprivation are particularly drawn to gangs. Many youth view joining a gang as normal and respectable, even when the consequence is a series of delinquent and violent acts. Gang affiliation may constitute part of an expected socialization process in certain communities when they are viewed as embodying such values as honor, loyalty, and fellowship. The gang is seen as an extension of the family and as contributing to the development of the clan. For some youth, joining a gang may result from a process of rational calculation in which the objectives are the achievement of security or gaining financial benefits. For some youth, gangs may provide sanction, contacts, and experience that will lead to adult criminal pursuits.

Social contexts

Rapid urban population change, community disintegration, increasing poverty (relative and absolute), and social isolation contribute to institutional failures and the consequent development of youth gangs. The interplay of social disorganization and lack of access to legitimate resources, in particular, figure in the development of seriously deviant groups. Families, schools, politics, organized crime, and prisons impact gang patterns.



Gang socialization varies by age, context, and situation.

Gang membership may be traditional among certain inner-city families.

Family

Family disorganization, such as single-parent families or conflict between parents, does not as such predict gang membership. A variety of other variables must accompany a weak family structure to produce a gang problem youth, including aggressive need dispositions at critical social development stages and the availability of a peer group that does not fully support family and school. Thus, although youth gang membership may not be explicitly acceptable, it may be traditional among certain inner-city families. The extent to which some families condone or implicitly approve participation in the gang may be a contributing factor, particularly if the youth contributes to the family financially.

Schools

A youth gang member is likely to be a youth who has done poorly in school and has little identification with school staff. He does not like school and uses school more for gang-related than academic or social learning purposes. Few schools directly address gang-related problems or factors that precipitate gang membership. By and large, gang violence does not erupt in schools, although gang recruitment and especially planning of gang activities may occur on school grounds and may be carried out after school is dismissed.

Not all schools in areas of low-income or even high gang crime are touched by gang development or gang crime. Some schools—perhaps because of stronger leadership and more stable and concerned learning environments—do a better job of sustaining student interest and achievement. Consequently, these schools have lower rates of gang problems.

Politics

A symbiotic relationship develops between politicians and gangs in certain low-income communities, particularly those in the process of considerable demographic or political change. Political aspirants who have a weak base of support and who are short of manpower sometimes call on youth gang members to perform a variety of tasks needed to compete in local politics. These tasks include obtaining signatures on petitions, putting up or tearing down election posters, browbeating voters, and getting voters out to the polling place.

Gangs are used by a variety of organizations at times of urban or organizational disorder to try to control disruption or the outbreak of a riot, and thus to stabilize volatile community situations. Gangs and gang members have received income, acceptance, status, and occasionally a limited degree of influence for their services.

Organized crime

Violent and criminal subcultures probably became more integrated in the 1980's than they were in the 1950's or 1960's, as newer minority groups entered organized crime. Greater competition among nascent criminal organizations, the relative increase in numbers of older youth and adults in gangs, and

the expanded street-level drug market probably further contributed to the integration of violence and criminal gain activity.

Several observers suggest a close relationship between youth gang members and adults involved in organized crime. Adult criminals may follow the street reputations of youngsters and gradually draw young gang members into criminal networks. Many youth gangs and cliques within gangs may become subunits of organized crime for purposes of drug distribution, car theft, extortion, and burglary.

Prisons

Prison gangs and street gangs are interdependent. The prison or training school may be regarded both as facilitating and responding to gang problems. In most States, prison gangs are outgrowths of street gangs, but evidence indicates that gangs formed in prison may emigrate to the streets. Incarceration, although generally a short-term response to a specific crime, has led to increased gang cohesion and membership recruitment in many institutions, and it may indirectly worsen the problem in the streets. Development of gangs in prisons is attributed in part to certain officials who give recognition to gangs as organizations and who try to work with them to maintain institutional control.

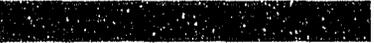
Emerging and chronic gang problems

Visits to various cities experiencing youth gang problems and to intervention programs that show promise enabled researchers to delineate more sharply some differences between emerging and chronic youth gang problems. The beginnings of youth gang problems, particularly since 1980, seem to have certain similarities in different cities.

Youth are observed congregating (hanging out) at certain locations within low-income communities. These small and amorphous groups have lines of membership that are unclear. Distinctive features of the traditional youth gang—gang names, colors, signs, symbols, graffiti, turf, and particular criminal patterns, such as intimidation, gang assaults, and drive-by shootings are not well developed. The distinction between an ad hoc delinquent group and a better organized youth gang is not easily made at this time.

With the passage of time, sometimes a brief period, characteristic youth gang behavior surfaces. Youth gangs clash. They commit property crime, especially vandalism and graffiti, in and around schools and at hangouts. Burglary, car theft, and narcotics use become more clearly associated with particular individuals or cliques. Tensions between increasingly organized youth groups result in stepped-up recruitment of members.

Assaults are more frequent at shopping and recreation centers, sporting events, and other spots favored by youth. Some of the violence results in stabbings, shootings, and homicides. Fear and concern permeate certain sectors of the community and the media pay greater attention. The youth gang problem



Prison gangs and street gangs are interdependent.

Most new gangs are not franchises.

crystallizes as it assumes crisis proportions and as police, politicians, schools, and other agencies and community groups take more action.

Leaders in cities with emerging gang problem cities may assert at first that the problem is imported from outside, from gangs in other cities. Indeed, gang leaders have arrest records in other cities. However, it is usually clear that most new youth gangs are not franchises nor developed as part of a calculated expansion for status or economic gain purposes.

Instead, the emigration of gangs to communities that had been free of them appears to result from the movement of low-income families out of inner cities into communities with improved housing, employment opportunities, and a better life for their children. Youth in these families may have been gang members or prone to gang membership. As newcomers, these youth may seek the status and the protection of gang membership in the new community, often at school, in part because indigenous youth often are hostile to newcomers.

Some community leaders in these cities argue that local youth with or without the presence of outsiders were ready to participate in gangs because of deteriorating family, school, social, and economic conditions. A later stage in the emergence of youth gangs is the development of a serious drug trade problem, often involving crack cocaine. A gang's involvement usually occurs within 2 or 3 years after a city discovers that it has a youth gang problem. Traditional youth gang patterns become muted or almost disappear. The relationship of youth gang members to drug trafficking and other more organized criminal activities grows more difficult to detect.

The situation may be even more complex in cities with chronic problems, such as violence, turf protection, gang symbols, and recruitment. In cities where gangs are established, cycles of organized gang activity, including retaliatory killings, are followed by periods of relative tranquility as older, more serious offenders are imprisoned. In time, the offenders return to their gangs and some resume patterns of gang violence or they may stimulate the development of new gangs and recruit younger gang members. Succeeding generations of youth create different patterns of gang-related deviance. For instance, drug use, vandalism, and satanism may become popular.

But in due course, youth absorbed in these activities may shift and integrate into traditional forms of youth gang violence. Drug trafficking and other adult criminal patterns are most readily developed in areas of chronic poverty and in minority ghettos or enclaves. The adult criminal systems in these areas serve to reinforce youth gang patterns, probably more indirectly than directly. Youth gangs serve as a basis for recruitment and even a potential infrastructure for the development of adult criminal enterprises.

Strategic responses

Five basic strategies have evolved in dealing with youth gangs: (1) neighborhood mobilization; (2) social intervention, especially youth outreach and work with street gangs; (3) provision for social and economic opportunities, such as special school and job programs; (4) gang suppression and incarceration; (5) and an organizational development strategy, such as police gang and specialized probation units. Since these strategies are often mixed, it is useful to incorporate them into two general organizational approaches: a traditional, limited bureaucratic or unidimensional professional approach and an evolving rational, comprehensive, community-centered approach.

The neighborhood mobilization approach to the delinquent group or gang, which evolved in the 1920's and 1930's, was an early attempt to bind together local citizens, social institutions, and the criminal justice system together in a variety of informal, and later, formal ways. Neighborhood adults and youth agencies often worked to socialize youth in general and did not specifically target delinquent or gang youth. These efforts led to the development of the social intervention approach—a more sophisticated outreach to street gangs in the 1940's and 1950's.

Adherents of this approach viewed youth gangs as a relatively normal phenomena in socially deprived communities, and believed that youth gang members could be redirected through social intervention steps, such as counseling, recreation, group work, and social service referrals. A variety of research evaluations indicate that this approach as such does not reduce delinquent activity and that it in fact may contribute to increased cohesion and criminalization of the gang.

An opportunities provision approach developed in the 1960's, but did not specifically target the youth gang problem. Great concern with rising rates of delinquency, unemployment, and school failure of inner-city youth in the late 1950's led to a series of large scale resource infusions and in the 1960's to innovative programs designed to change institutional structures and reduce poverty. Although programs such as Head Start and Job Corps appeared to have had a positive effect on reducing delinquency, it is not clear to what extent these programs addressed the youth gang problem. In fact, evidence indicated a rise in the scope and seriousness of the gang problem in several cities in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

A new strategy, suppression, appears to have emerged in the 1970's and 1980's and remains prevalent today. The dominance of a suppression strategy can be related to several factors: the decline of local community and youth outreach efforts, at least with respect to the youth gang problem; the insufficiency of opportunity provision approaches to target or modify gang structures; the changing structure of a labor market that can no longer adequately absorb unskilled and poorly educated older youth gang members; and the consequent increased criminalization and sophistication of youth gangs.

These factors have resulted in the reliance on a law enforcement-dominated suppression approach. Youth gangs are increasingly viewed as dangerous and

A new strategy of suppression emerged in the 1970's and 1980's and remains prevalent today.

The mission of prosecutors is conviction of gang offenders.

evil, a collecting place for sociopaths that most social institutions could not rehabilitate. Community protection has become a key goal. Vigorous law enforcement was required. Gang members, especially leaders and serious offenders, are increasingly arrested, prosecuted, and removed from the community to serve long prison sentences.

Institutional responses

Police

Law enforcement agencies have pursued an increasingly sophisticated suppression approach to youth gangs, including surveillance, stakeouts, aggressive patrol and arrest, followup investigations, intelligence gathering, coupled with some prevention and community relations activities. Police have created complex data and information systems and improved coordination among law enforcement.

However, no systematic evaluation of varied police approaches has been conducted. Although it is possible that relying solely on suppression may stop gang violence in smaller cities or those with emerging gang problems (usually accompanied by an increase in gang-related drug trafficking), researchers have discovered little evidence that relying primarily on suppression has reduced the gang problem in large cities such as Los Angeles.

Some police departments have developed community-oriented strategies, with considerable attention to community collaboration, social intervention, and even opportunity enhancement. Some police officers assigned to the gang problem have directly provided counseling, job development and referral, and tutoring, and have engaged in extensive community relations and development activities. In some cities where these more complex approaches have been tried, some evidence shows a decline in the youth gang problem. But again, it is not clear whether the decline was due to changed police strategies or alternate but unrelated structural changes in the community environment, such as more legitimate jobs becoming available or greater access to income producing drug trafficking.

Prosecution

The primary mission of prosecutors is successful prosecution, conviction, and incarceration of gang offenders. Prosecutors have focused on serious gang offenders in vertical prosecution arrangements in which a single prosecutor follows a case through from start to finish. As a result, the rate of conviction and incarceration has increased. Researchers argue that the gang prosecutor's approach has become more specialized and somewhat more community oriented with an increased understanding of gang norms and behaviors and the community factors that influence them.

At the same time, the vertical prosecution approach can be broadened to include preventive and social intervention strategies, particularly for younger offenders.

These may include community development activities and social service referrals. Constitutional questions need to be resolved as State law and gang prosecutors increasingly define gangs as criminal organizations, putting gang members at special risk of arrest and enhanced sentencing.

Judiciary

The court has directed little attention to special approaches for dealing with juvenile or youth gang offenders. Instead, the judiciary emphasized a get-tough strategy, and more often removal of the serious juvenile gang offender from the jurisdiction of the juvenile and family court. However, some judges try to use the court as a basis for a community-oriented approach in which a variety of community, school, family, and justice system organizations concentrate efforts to address the special needs of the youth gang member. Although many judges pursue a broad social rehabilitation or protective approach with respect to abused and neglected children and minor offenders, little consideration is given to adapting such an approach for juvenile gang offenders.

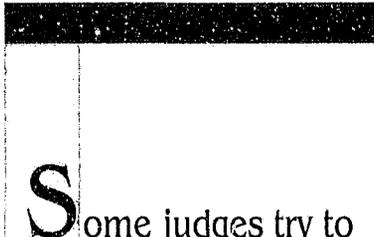
Probation/parole

Most probation departments and parole units have not given special attention to the gang problem, particularly through special units and procedural arrangements. However, innovative approaches have been developed, for example, in Los Angeles, San Jose, San Diego, and Orange County in California. The specialized programs emphasize suppression in collaboration with law enforcement, and to a lesser extent close coordination with community-based youth service agencies. These programs may involve vertical case management and intensive supervision.

A few probation and parole units have experimented with combinations of individual and group counseling, remedial education and alternative school arrangements, employment training, job placement, and residential care. An integrated outreach crisis intervention youth service program combined efforts with a discrete probation unit and a variety of community groups associated with a reduction of the youth gang problem in Philadelphia in the 1970's and 1980's. The Gang Violence Reduction Program of East Los Angeles, part of the California Youth Authority, uses former gang members and a strong community involvement strategy, which was also reported to be successful.

Corrections

Traditional suppression still predominates in most prisons, including swift reaction to and forceful prevention of gang activities via special lockup arrangements, and the movement of gang leaders from one prison or prison system to another. A comprehensive community-based approach is more likely to be developed in a youth correctional institution. This approach provides for close coordination with a variety of law enforcement and community-based agencies, better communication between correctional officers, and inmates.



Some judges try to use the court as a basis for a community-oriented approach.

Schools may be the best resource for gang prevention.

It increases institutional social opportunities for positive inmate development and change, including employment training and work programs. Evidence for the beginning of a more comprehensive and promising long-term approach exists in some of the programs of the California Youth Authority and in the Ethan Allen School for Boys in the Division of Corrections, Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services.

Schools

Public schools, especially middle schools, are potentially the best community resource for the prevention of and early intervention into youth gang problems. The peak recruitment period for gang members is probably between 5th and 8th grade, when youth are doing poorly in class and are in danger of dropping out. Most schools, overwhelmed by other concerns, tend to ignore or deny the problem.

When circumstances force schools to recognize the presence of youth gang problems in and around schools, their first reaction is to beef up police, school security. Probation and youth service agencies may be invited to develop gang prevention programs in the schools. Otherwise school programs receive little restructuring, including the targeting of high-risk gang youth for special supervision and remedial education.

Sometimes probation officers have established in schools special outreach programs that involve parent education, family counseling, and referral. Special antigang curriculums for children in the early elementary grades are usually taught by representatives of outside agencies. Although evidence suggests that these curricular efforts are successful in changing attitudes of youth about gangs, it is not clear that behavior of youth who are already gang members is also changed. A variety of school antidrug programs, with some attention to gang issues, is being tested in California, Oregon, and elsewhere.

Community organizations

Ad hoc, sometimes ephemeral local community efforts have developed in recent years to deal specifically with the youth gang problem. Some of these efforts are variations of more general citizen crime control and prevention programs. Whether limited citizen participation can be effective is questionable where the risks of intimidation by gang members are high.

Nevertheless, a variety of proactive and militant local citizen groups have formed to deal with the problem, sometimes with the aid and supervision of the local police. Such groups patrol streets, supervise social events, and monitor students in school buildings. Some of the groups have taken on a vigilante character and do not shrink from interrupting drug deals, holding offenders until the police are called, and even shooting at gang members on occasion.

In an earlier period, some resident groups attempted to mediate gang disputes when youth gang activity was a little less lethal and criminalized because of the involvement of fewer adults and the absence of drug trafficking. Mothers'

groups were active in preventing gang conflict in Philadelphia. A number of cities have similar groups somewhat analogous to the Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

Their members provide mutual support for parents whose children are victims of gang violence. They lecture in the schools, advocate stricter gun control, and pressure police and other agencies to focus greater attention on the gang problem. Although it is doubtful that such groups alone can make a decisive difference, evidence—in Philadelphia and East Los Angeles—indicates that local community groups can make a positive difference. To do so, they require close coordination with schools, police, churches, and youth agencies.

Employment

Although evidence indicates that gang youth prefer decent paying jobs to gang life, training and employment programs have not adequately targeted gang youth. Most policymakers and practitioners familiar with the problem believe that part-time and full-time jobs would be effective in pulling youth away from gangs and socializing them to conventional careers. However, youth gang members generally lack the vocational skills and appropriate social attitudes and habits to hold jobs.

A variety of social support, remedial education, and supervision strategies appear to be required to make job and training programs directed to gang youth successful. Some local projects, combining business and public sector interests and resources, have been promising. Examples include the San Jose Youth Conservation Corps experiment closely connected with the Juvenile Court, and a somewhat similar project recently initiated in Dane County, Wisconsin.

A long running program in El Monte, California, involved police and the Boys' Club, along with business and industry in extensive job development and placement efforts directed to gang youth and their families. These projects involve intensive efforts to prepare and sustain gang youth on the job. Recent U.S. Labor Department efforts to create comprehensive community-based job training and placement programs targeted to a variety of socially deprived youth, including gang youth, may also prove to be promising.

Policies and procedures

A survey covering 45 cities and 6 sites, mainly correctional institutions with organized programs, examined policies and procedures employed by agencies and community groups to deal with the youth gang problem. The 254 experienced and knowledgeable policymakers and administrators contacted included police, prosecutors, judges, probation, parole, corrections officers, school personnel, youth agency and social service staff, grassroots representatives, and community planners.

A variety of criminal justice and community-based organizations currently respond to the youth gang problem; nevertheless, law enforcement is still the

Evidence indicates that gang youth would prefer decent paying jobs to gang life.

Law enforcement is the dominant response to the youth gang problem.

dominant response. The structure of the police response differs from that of other agencies. Police departments are usually larger in size and can allocate more resources to the problem. An explicit, formal, and increasingly specialized approach tends to characterize law enforcement programs, including specially organized gang units, written policies, special training, and increasingly sophisticated data collection systems.

However, police are less likely to have interdepartmental or external program advisory structures than other agencies; still, the police tend to participate extensively in communitywide coordinating or task force efforts. In those jurisdictions where promising approaches exist, organizations have special policy and training arrangements that addressed the gang problem.

Internal agency arrangements across units, related to policies, procedures, and coordinating mechanisms, are reasonably well interrelated. However, a negative relationship exists between the presence of a special gang unit or program in an agency and the external advisory program structures for that unit or program.

Possibly when an organization has made a special commitment to dealing with the youth gang problem, it does not want anyone from outside of the agency examining its policies and procedures or advising what they should be. However, this attitude may prevent effective outcomes, as indicated below.

In general, the presence of special programs, units, policies, and activities directed to the youth gang problem is associated (statistically) with a worsening gang problem. Agencies are especially responsive, when gangs infiltrate neighborhoods or cities, and when youth gangs are perceived to be affiliated with adult criminal organizations. Generally, no specific policy or program arrangements appear to be related to a decrease in the youth gang problem over time, with one exception.

Survey data indicate that a significant relationship exists between a lowering of the gang problem and the presence of an external advisory structure (but not internal agency coordination mechanisms or interagency task force or communitywide coordination arrangements). The existence of such structures was significantly correlated with a variety of indicators of a reduced youth gang problem.

The indicators include lower numbers of gangs and fewer gang members, smaller gang size, lower percent of gang incidents involving adults, and lower percent of gang members in the community with police records. However, an external program advisory structure is not associated with a reduction in the more serious or criminal aspects of the gang problem, including reduced presence of outside gangs, adult involvement in youth gangs, or drug trafficking.

Analysts are not certain how to interpret this single set of statistically significant findings. Possibly the presence of an external program advisory group causes a high degree of participation and accountability in the formation and implementation of community and interagency antigang programs. Internal coordination

within agency or communitywide coordination may not signify as strong a commitment to community mobilization as programs that are held accountable for their performance.

Promising approaches

Participants from 14 cities or jurisdictions at a recent law enforcement conference were asked to describe their involvement with other agencies or community groups to address gang activity and to assess the results of these efforts. Two principal approaches to gang intervention were evident in the discussions: suppression and cooperation with community-based support programs.

Suppression

A strong targeted law enforcement presence was seen as essential to the department's mission of stemming violence. Targeting high-incidence areas and deploying the same officers to those areas for an extended period of time was considered essential. Effective suppression was based on gathering and organizing intelligence information on youth gangs and their members. Law enforcement officers were specifically trained and experienced to recognize gang problems in particular parts of the city. The police also were able to communicate with gang members in a positive way. Several departments worked closely with vertical prosecution units in their county district attorney's office.

Police departments ensured that judges were aware of the gang affiliations of defendants before sentencing. These efforts resulted in large numbers of gang members being imprisoned. In at least three cities, targeted suppression, in combination with other justice and community interventions, caused a reduction in gang violence. One large city department described its policy on gangs as follows: Three units are spread throughout the city and are in operation 7 days a week. Each unit has tactical and crime specialist officers.

The tactical officers, in uniform or plain clothes, are given directed missions on a day-to-day basis. The gang crime specialists do more investigative followup of crimes. They write gang histories and prepare cases for trial. A monthly report is prepared based on statistics on type of crime, location of crime and district of occurrence. The gang crime unit works closely to assist the district commander with information on gangs and to supplement the commander's personnel in a given situation.

The gang unit uses the central records division to determine whether a person arrested is on probation or parole. If so, the proper authority is notified. The unit notifies the corrections department when a leader or core gang member is being set up. In turn, the prison authorities are expected to notify the gang unit when a high ranking gang member returns to the community or a potential gang problem may occur with that person's release.



Strong, targeted law enforcement is needed to stem violence.

Both suppression and social intervention programs are needed to stop gang violence.

Support programs

A variety of community-based programs were thought to diminish the hold of gangs on their members or to lessen the chance that young people would join a gang. The police in some cities were directly involved in these efforts. These included:

- In-school antigang education programs that alert grade school youth to the consequences of gang membership and encourage their participation in positive alternative activities.
- Social agency crisis intervention teams to mediate disagreements between gangs. These teams work closely with police or probation officers to identify potential trouble spots, prevent gang retaliations, or resolve gang problems without violence.
- Alternative education programs to teach young people basic skills, which they may not have mastered while in school, and to prepare them for a GED or, where possible, higher education.
- Vocational training and job placement for gang members supported their efforts to hold jobs.
- Pairing of gang members with local businessmen (some of whom belonged to gangs at one time). These businessmen provide support and guidance as well as a positive role model to the gang member to channel energies into positive activities.
- Parent education classes and other programs that promote the family as a strong unit capable of providing young people with emotional support and supervision as well as clothing, food, and shelter.
- Instruction to school personnel, community residents, agency staff members, as well as criminal justice personnel and others on gang activities and their impact, signs and symbols, and the way to counter gang influence.

Although none of these approaches has been systematically evaluated, participants argued that both suppression and social intervention programs were needed to stop gang violence, draw members away from the gang, and provide them with alternatives to gangs. The age of gang members, degree of gang organization, and commitment to criminal activities should determine the appropriate mix of these strategies. Busing children to schools out of neighborhoods that had gang structures and traditions partially mitigated the problem, but this tactic could also spread the gang problem.

Gang cohesion generally was reduced and children were less committed to gangs. Participants felt that gangs were not the responsibility of one or two community institutions. All social institutions and community groups—police, courts, corrections, social service agencies, schools, parents, citizens—must work in concert to combat the rise and spread of gangs in their communities. The Philadelphia representative stressed the importance of total community involvement by all key actors in successful efforts to deal with the gang problem.

Effectiveness of intervention

This survey of 254 respondents in 45 communities and 6 sites described which strategies they believe hold the most promise in reducing the youth gang problem. The survey empirically elaborated the historical development of these five basic strategies into their current practice. It identified the components of these strategies across the agencies and community groups contacted.

They included, for example, grassroots participation and interagency networking as key to community mobilization; focus on individual youth behavioral and value change in social intervention; special focus on improved education, employment training, and job placement efforts targeted to gang youth in the opportunities provision strategy; arrest, incarceration, and close monitoring and supervision as characteristic of suppression across criminal justice agencies; and the presence of special gang units and programs as typical of an organizational development strategy.

Agencies in each of the cities employed these strategies in various combinations. A classification of primary strategies indicated that suppression was most frequently employed (44.0 percent), followed by social intervention (31.5 percent), organizational development (10.9 percent), community organization (8.9 percent), and opportunities provision (4.8 percent). Prosecutors and judges were most committed to the use of a suppression strategy.

Social agencies and grassroots organizations were most committed to the use of social intervention strategies. Chronic gang problem cities emphasized a broad range of approaches, combining community organization and suppression with social intervention strategies. Emerging gang problem cities were divided in their approaches; some focused primarily on community organization and organizational development, while others focused on suppression.

Based on cross-sectional survey data, analysts attempted to determine whether different strategies, policies, structures, and procedures lead to a perceived (and actual) reduction in gang crime. Only 23.1 percent of the police and 10.4 percent of nonpolice respondents believed that there had been an improvement in their communities' gang situation between 1980 and 1987. In only 17 of 45 cities or jurisdictions was there evidence of any level of improvement in the gang situation. In an independent external validity check of perceptions of improved gang problem situations, these perceptions were found to be associated with significantly fewer numbers of gangs, gang members, size of gangs, and a decline in the percent of total index crime attributed to youth gangs.

Analysts reported a lower incidence of serious gang crime, including drug selling. No evidence suggested that improvement was necessarily more likely to occur in large or small, chronic or emerging gang problem cities. Researchers found that no special policy or procedural development was associated with any of the perceived characteristics of an improved gang situation, with the exception of the presence of an external advisory group to a program.

On the other hand, respondents' ratings of how effective their agency or local interagency or task force efforts had been were far higher than their ratings of



Social agencies and grassroots groups are most committed to social intervention.

Over 40 percent of respondents see their agencies as very effective in dealing with gangs.

an improved gang problem situation. More than 40 percent of respondents saw their agencies as very effective in dealing with youth gangs.

Nevertheless, the three perceptual ratings—improved situation, agency effectiveness, and interagency effectiveness—were significantly intercorrelated. Consequently, a general effectiveness score was constructed and used as a basis for ranking cities on whether or not the gang problem had been successfully addressed. These rankings became a major basis for the selection of cities and institutions for field visits to inquire about which programs and approaches might be promising and could serve as models for other cities and institutions.

Aggregate analysis

At this point, the analysis shifted from a mainly individual respondent level to an aggregate, or citywide respondent aggregated, level analysis. Survey personnel were particularly interested in whether approaches dealing with the problem might be more effective in one type of city than in another. First, they had to make sure that they had classified the cities reasonably well. In a series of discriminant analyses, they determined systematically that chronic problem cities were larger and characterized by greater proportions of Hispanic gang members. Emerging gang problem cities were more likely to be smaller and had higher proportions of black gang members.

Respondents in the smaller cities were more closely interconnected in networks of interagency and community group relationships. Programs in chronic problem cities were more likely to be characterized by social intervention and opportunity provision as primary strategies. Programs in emerging cities were more likely to exhibit community organization as a primary strategy.

The final step in the search for promising approaches was to construct causal models using multiple regression analyses. First, in chronic gang problem cities, survey personnel used the variable of a perceived improved gang situation as the dependent or outcome measure—probably the most valid of the three component measures of general effectiveness. As a result, they found in a probit regression analysis that the interaction of the strategies of community organization and opportunities provision was the single strongest predictor. It accounted for 40.2 percent of the variation in the dependent variable, perceived improvement in the gang situation.

The second significant predictor was the proportion of local respondents networking with each other in a city to address the youth gang problem. Together, these two predictors or independent variables accounted for almost 60 percent of the variance. Survey personnel were unable, however, using this procedure, to find variables or factors that predicted success in the emerging gang problem cities.

They turned next to use of the general effectiveness score as the dependent variable for measure of success. For the chronic gang problem cities, they achieved an extremely potent set of predictors. The two primary strategies

of intervention—community organization and opportunities provision—combined with a consensus on the definition of gang incident in a community, accounted for 69 percent of the variance. The fourth variable that entered the regression equation was the proportion of agencies with an external advisory group.

Together, these four variables accounted for 82 percent of the variance in the general effectiveness score in chronic gang problem cities. The model for predicting general effectiveness in emerging gang problem cities was not as robust. Only community organization as a primary strategy contributed to an explanation of 31 percent of the variance in the outcome variable.

This survey of 45 cities and 6 sites concluded with the recommendation that future policy and research emphasize the testing of strategies of opportunities provision, particularly improved educational, training, and job opportunities, for gang members and gang-prone youth. Strategies of suppression and social intervention were common to all of the cities in the survey, and the survey team viewed them as essential for dealing with the youth gang problem effectively. However, success was more likely when community organization and opportunities provision strategies were also present and emphasized.

Recommended responses

Field visits to five city or county jurisdictions and one correctional institution suggested certain common elements associated with reducing the youth gang problem for significant periods of time. These elements included clear and forthright, if not early, recognition of a youth gang problem. Proactive leadership by representatives of significant criminal justice and community-based agencies helped mobilize political and community interests. This mobilization created both formal and informal networks of criminal justice and other personnel involved with the problem.

Additionally, those in principal roles developed a consensus on a definition of the problem (e.g., gang, gang incident), specific targets of agency and inter-agency effort, and on reciprocal interrelated strategies. Operationally this meant, especially in chronic gang problem areas, that a multi-disciplinary approach evolved. As a result, strategies of suppression, social intervention, organizational development, and especially social opportunities were mobilized in some collective fashion on a community basis.

Finally, it appeared that a successful approach had to be guided, not only by concern for safeguarding the community against youth gang depredations, but for providing support and supervision to present and potential gang members in a way that contributed to their personal development.

In contacts with agencies and community organizations—mainly during field visits—a brief survey of youth gang members and former members sought to determine what services they received, how helpful these services were in reducing gang crime, and under what conditions members left the gang. This was a quick survey of a small, nonrandom availability sample of programs and



A successful approach safeguards the community while supporting present and potential gang members.

No relationship was found between receiving services and leaving the gang.

youth (n=124). A variety of selection factors may have affected the results, however. Thus caution needs to be exercised in use of these findings. Their main value is as a basis for developing hypotheses for more systematic testing later.

Almost half the respondents (47.6 percent) declared they were former gang members; 29.8 percent of the respondents said they presently were gang members; 16.9 percent of the respondents said they had never been gang members. About a fifth of the respondents were female. The majority were Hispanic (66.1 percent), mainly Mexican-American, and 29.1 percent of the respondents were black.

For all respondents the most commonly reported service or activity provided by the particular program was recreation and sports. This set of activities was also declared as most helpful of all the 22 options listed. The second most helpful service reported was job placement. Hispanics reported receiving fewer services than blacks but rated helpfulness of service higher. However, there was more difference by program site than by race or ethnicity.

When differences among groups were examined, a significantly larger proportion of blacks than Hispanics were found to be former gang members; although in fact, blacks were slightly younger (19.7 years) than Hispanics (20.5 years). Blacks were more likely to report leaving the gang because of arrests and fear of violence; Hispanics were more likely to report leaving the gang for reasons of drug use and drug dealing.

No relationship was found between receiving services, helpfulness of services, and leaving the gang. In a logistic regression analysis the most important variable explaining why a youth left the gang, after controlling for race or ethnicity, site, and other factors, is simply getting older. Other important reasons checked off were "being arrested" and "tired of violence." However, age was the only variable that entered the regression equation, accounting for 23 percent of variance.

Gang leaders' perspectives

Analysts thought it important to assess the problems of gangs and how to deal with them based on the views of those who had experienced gang life and who had succeeded in surviving and moving beyond this involvement to productive and legitimate careers.

Two conferences were conducted involving a small number of adults in their twenties and thirties who had been major figures in violent and criminal youth gangs in Hispanic (mainly Puerto Rican) and African-American low-income areas of Chicago. The symposia addressed a variety of questions including views about leaving the gang, gang control and prevention policies and programs, and what needed to be done to strengthen these efforts. Opinions as to the nature of the youth gang problem and what was required to deal with it seemed to differ between the black and Hispanic communities.

Youth gang membership seemed to be more total and continuous in the black than in the Hispanic community. Although gang membership seemed to be more culturally defined in the Hispanic barrio community, it was nonetheless considered to be a part of growing up. Seemingly, Hispanics had earlier points and more manageable ways to leave the gang. In the black community, youth gang membership, although not necessarily more violent, was a critical and pervasive element of survival. The youth gang seemed to supplement a more basic institutional void in the black ghetto, providing essential controls and opportunities that were not so substantially lacking in the Hispanic low-income communities.

Drug use and drug selling appeared to be prevalent in both gang communities. However, these activities were practiced more as a means of psychological escape and economic survival for the black gang member as compared with recreation, and even transition out of the gang for the Hispanics. Nevertheless, drug trafficking was an important way of earning money to survive for both gang and nongang youth and adults in both black and Hispanic low-income communities.

Several factors motivated youth to leave the gang: (1) growing up and getting smarter, (2) fear of injury for oneself and others, (3) a prison experience, (4) a girl friend or marriage, (5) a job, (6) drug dealing, (7) concern for youth and community welfare, (8) interest in politics, (9) religious experience, and (10) the assistance and interest of a helping adult. Opportunities for leaving the youth gang for legitimate life styles seemed to be more available to Hispanic gang youth. On the other hand, the gang seemed to continue to provide discipline and support, as well as economic, social and political resources that could not be obtained readily through other institutions by older black gang youth and adults.

In some cases, the transition out of the youth gang was accompanied by a complete break with gang peers or leaving the neighborhood. In most cases, it meant simply desisting from gang violence and criminality, but not restricting relationships with former gang buddies. A stronger tie to the gang culture, even for former gang leaders, existed in the black community because of the power and influence the gang still represented relative to other local institutions. Nevertheless, for both African-American and Hispanic (Puerto Rican) young adults in the two symposia, the youth gang was regarded as more negative than positive.

Ways of dealing with the youth gang problem or of preventing youth from joining gangs were viewed somewhat differently by the two groups. For the former Hispanic gang influentials, improved services and especially more positive attitudes and practices by agency personnel, especially the police, were judged important.

Although some of these views were echoed by the African-American group, a more substantial community and societal effort was believed necessary. A massive infusion, not only of economic, but of spiritual and intellectual resources was thought to be needed. Equitable or fair treatment of minority groups, especially male youth by the larger, dominant community, increased opportunities, better local citizen and parental discipline or social control, and stronger



For most, leaving the youth gang merely meant not participating in violence and crime.

A comprehensive approach should be adopted in chronic gang problem cities.

mobilization of local community groups and agencies were seen as important by both groups.

Policy and program recommendations

Based on this extensive assessment process, the following recommendations were made.

1. **Definition.** The definition of a youth gang should be restricted to youth groups engaged in serious violence and crime, and whose primary purpose for existence is symbolic or communal rather than economic gain. Organizations existing for drug trafficking or criminal gain as such should not be considered youth gangs, although distinctions are not easy to determine. A gang incident should be any illegal act that arises out of gang motivation, gang function, or gang-related circumstances, in which the sole fact of being a gang member should not be sufficient to label the event as a gang incident. A youth should not be labelled a gang member unless sufficient and reliable evidence exists. Appropriate procedures, especially by schools, police, and courts, should be required to maintain the confidentiality of gang member records. Records should be frequently updated and purged about 3 years from the date of the entry of the individual's last gang-related incident.

2. **Targeting gang youth.** Youth who give clear indication of gang involvement should be the primary targets of comprehensive gang control and early intervention programs. Analysts assume that a small number of youth can be targeted for special remedial education and supervisory attention. The tendency to identify youth-at-risk without clear criteria and reliable evidence of potential gang membership should be avoided.

3. **Chronic cities.** A special comprehensive approach should be adopted in chronic gang problem cities. Leadership of such an effort should be assigned to an official agency, such as probation or a special unit in the mayor's office. All criminal justice agencies, including police, probation, parole, judiciary, prosecution, and corrections should be associated with the new authority, supported by key voluntary agencies, schools, business and industry, and local community groups. Multiple strategies including social intervention and suppression, but with emphasis on social opportunities and community mobilization, should guide the development of program activities and the roles of various personnel. Although priority should be given to remedial education and employment training programs for juveniles and adolescent gang members, older youth gang adolescents should also be targeted. Employment training and a job development structure should be established as part of the authority concerned with needs of these older youth. The youth gang problem, as it affects older and younger youth, needs to be attacked in an organic fashion, reflecting the interrelationship and interdependence of younger and older youth in the gang.

4. **Emerging cities.** In emerging, and in some instances chronic, gang problem cities or contexts, a local educational administrative unit based within the school should take responsibility for the development of special early

intervention programs. This unit should collaborate closely with law enforcement, family or juvenile court, as well as social agencies and community groups, to target youth gang members at an early stage of development of the problem. These programs should be directed to social education and social control of gang youth. Special attention should be given to youth who between 11 and 15 years of age are beginning to take on gang roles and are already engaged in law-violating behaviors. Moreover, efforts should be made to improve the academic performance and social adjustment of such youth and to provide them and their parents with outreach counseling, referral, and opportunity provision programs. General antigang crime curricula, crisis intervention, and school-community advisory groups should be established directly by the special school unit for the development and implementation of early, school-based, gang control programs.



Early intervention programs should be directed toward social education and social control of gang youth.

- Researchers
- Planners
- Policymakers



More detailed information about this study and issues surrounding youth gangs is available through the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse.

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