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Youth Gangs In North Carolina's Communities

This issue of SystemStats presents the condensed version of a much longer study, *Perceptions of youth crime and youth gangs: A statewide systemic investigation*, which surveyed members of the criminal justice system about their perceptions of today's youth crime and about gangs in the schools and neighborhoods. This issue will focus exclusively on youth gangs in the communities (Yearwood and Hayes, 2000).

What is known about contemporary gangs in North Carolina?

Anecdotal evidence, media accounts, and conversations with criminal justice personnel indicate the presence of gangs in North Carolina. Indeed, Klein (1995) identified the presence of gangs in at least one North Carolina city prior to 1970 with the number of cities reporting a gang presence increasing to 13 by the end of 1992. The National Youth Gang Survey (1997) lists 24 cities and 10 counties which reported active gangs in their respective jurisdictions in 1995.

Only one comprehensive statewide research study has been conducted in this area. Oehme (see reference) surveyed 410 non-randomly selected law enforcement, educational, court and correctional personnel in 1994. Of the 257 survey respondents, which represented 58 cities and 95 counties, 2,772 youth gang members were reported. These members belonged to 127 different gangs that were located in 39 different localities (18 cities, 15 counties, and six correctional facilities). Gangs were reported to exist in both urban and rural areas of the state with the largest perceived number being identified in the cities of Charlotte, Durham, Brevard, and Lumberton and in the unincorporated areas of Mecklenburg, Caldwell, and Durham Counties. Eighty-four non-gang youth groups, with 1,450 members; were also reported and as the researcher notes, these youth groups have the dangerous potential to evolve into formal youth gangs.

The number of reported members per gang ranged from three to 20. The typical municipal youth gang was reported to consist of 16 members while the average size of the typical county youth gang was reported to be slightly larger with 19 members. Demographically, 66.1 percent of the members were black, 24.3 percent were white, 1.6 percent were of Hispanic origin, and the remaining 1.7 percent were of Asian descent.

Oehme (1997) found a significant relationship between these youth gangs and both the level of serious violent crime and drug-related activities. Sixty-one percent of those respondents, who reported the presence of youth gangs in their jurisdictions, described the gangs' involvement in Part I offenses (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, motor vehicle theft, larceny, and burglary) as being either very serious or serious. These agencies also mentioned that when contact with a gang member occurred 67 percent of the cases involved gang members with prior criminal records. Sixty-eight percent of the agencies reported that drug distribution was a primary activity of the gang while 64 percent responded that this drug distribution involved importation from outside the community.

Gangs with larger memberships and more adult members were more likely to be involved in both serious violent crime and drug-related activities. Strong evidence of non-local gang members being involved with drug importation, and the presence of adult gang members possessing common ties to other adult organized crime groups, was discovered and offers limited support for the existence of drug franchising in North Carolina. The study also noted evidence of increasing drug involvement among many street gangs in spite of the fact that these gangs did not possess the typical attributes of a drug gang.

Youth Gangs In North Carolina's Communities

The causative factors of limited social opportunities, dysfunctional family life, and poverty were the most commonly cited explanations for gang formation and persistence. Law enforcement agencies and juvenile court counselors were the most active in terms of responding to the presence of gangs within their respective communities; and the trend was toward suppression activities and strategies as 42.3 percent of the agencies acknowledged engaging in these tactics. All agencies which had active gang programs reported an unusually strong belief that these approaches were highly effective (Oehme, 1997).

The renewed national attention on youth gangs has impacted North Carolina and research is beginning to emerge which examines the state's gangs. However, with the exception of Oehme's (1997) seminal work, this research appears to be more focused on gathering intelligence information which is normally only descriptive in nature. Little systematic work has been conducted which addresses the key and emerging gang issues such as migration and the relationship between drugs and gang violence. Research, which utilizes a uniform or standard definition of gangs, gang members, and gang crime needs to be initiated. This will enable researchers to compare and contrast the state's gangs with each other. Information on the evolution of gangs, and the extent to which their criminal activities vary over time needs to be provided in order to advance our knowledge in this area.

Methods

Survey Instrument

A 73-item questionnaire was compiled based upon the existing gang literature. The questionnaire was subdivided into three sections with part one collecting basic demographic information about the survey respondent. The respondents' positions within their respective agencies, years of criminal justice experience, age and gender were asked in order to produce a basic profile of those practitioners who completed the survey. The second section of the survey dealt with youth crime in general and specifically addressed comparative analyses with youth crime over the past five years. Questions dealing with violent crime,

drug related crime, and firearms-related offenses were included with the respondents being asked to indicate if these offenses have increased, decreased, or remained the same within their jurisdictions, over the past five years. Respondents were also queried about today's typical youthful offender compared to the typical youthful offender of five years ago.

The issue of gangs and their absence or presence and influence within the community was initially addressed in the second section. A four-pronged test was utilized in order to determine the types of gangs within the respondents' respective jurisdictions. Respondents were asked if youth tend to "hang out" in groups, if any of these groups demonstrated a commitment to criminal activity, if these groups acknowledged their collective identity through names, dress, graffiti or other means, and if these groups restricted their activities to certain geographical areas. Affirmative responses to all four questions would serve as an indicator that classic street gangs exist within the respondent's community.

The researchers debated over the issue of imposing a common definition of gangs as opposed to simply asking: "Do you have gangs in your jurisdiction?" Asking this question would allow each respondent to define gangs as they are locally perceived but prevent the possibility of comparing gangs across jurisdictions. Consequently, it was determined to use the four-pronged test, for some survey items, as a common definition of what constitutes a gang in order to permit comparative analyses across jurisdictions, over time, and between differing gangs. Other questions allowed the survey respondent to utilize their own perceived and/or locally-defined definition of what constitutes a gang. Utilizing both approaches would allow the researchers to examine the disparity between the perceptions of gangs and the reality of gangs.

The final section of the survey dealt specifically with the attributes of gangs and gang members. Questions were asked about gang crime and the criminal justice response to the gangs, as well as specific information on individual gangs. Respondents were asked to identify unique gang names, the gang's affiliation, the number of members, the types of criminal activity that the gang predominately commits, and the racial

Youth Gangs In North Carolina's Communities

composition of the gang. Each respondent was asked to delineate information on up to eight different gangs within their community.

When discussing gang typologies, the majority of the existing gang literature tends to define gangs along discrete and dichotomous taxonomies, i.e. gangs are either street, or territorial, gangs or drug gangs. Little discussion has been devoted to those street gangs who also distribute drugs nor to those drug gangs who still retain some "turf," such as an open air drug market. This study sought to organize gangs along a continuum ranging from strictly street gangs, to primarily street gangs who deal drugs, to primarily drug gangs who maintain minimal territory, to purely drug distribution gangs. Consequently specific questions were asked about each gang's drug distribution involvement and the extent to which they maintained "turf." Thus the method allowed the researchers to identify pure street gangs and pure drug gangs, as well as those gangs which fall within the gray areas of the street-drug gang dichotomy.

Finally, the respondents were asked a series of questions in which they were asked to use a seven point Likert type scale to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with questions concerning gang violence, drug sales, gang origins, gang member attributes, and gang migration. These questions were included in order to identify how the gangs have evolved from the time they were first noticed within the community to the present time.

Survey Sample

A total of 1,137 surveys were mailed to various criminal justice professionals throughout the state. Numerous agencies within each county were surveyed in order to increase the reliability and comprehensiveness of the study and also to reduce the likelihood of encountering gang denial which would have been much higher had only one branch of the criminal justice system been surveyed. Of this number, 433 were completed and returned by the respondents. These respondents resided in 94 of the state's 100 counties. This equates to an overall return rate of 38.1 percent.

Surveys were mailed to all of the state's 492 School Resource Officers (SROs) with 171, or 34.8% being returned. Surveys were also mailed to every Sheriff's Office with 36, or 36% being completed. The same was true with the police departments with 389 cities being surveyed and 109, or 28%, responding to the survey. Surveys were distributed to each of the state's 39 Chief Court Counselors of which all 39 were returned for a 100% return rate. Each of the state's 34 Chief Probation Officers were asked to return three completed surveys from their district. Sixty-seven, or 65.7 percent, were returned. Finally, the ten directors of the state's detention centers and the five training school directors were surveyed of which 11, or 73.3 percent, replied.

Youth Gangs in North Carolina

The survey respondents identified a total of 332 distinct gangs in North Carolina with at least 5,143 total members or an average of at least 15.5 (16) members per gang. This average gang size is consistent with Oehme's (1997) prior finding and suggests that individual gangs are not getting larger in terms of their membership. These gangs were located in 62 of the 94 counties (66%) in which a survey response was obtained. Of the 5,143 total gang members 1,183, or 23%, were reported by the SROs which indicates that nearly 1/4 of the reported gang members are still in the classrooms of the state's public school facilities. These gang members, who are still within the schools, were found in 35 (37.2%) of the 94 counties in which at least one survey response was obtained. SROs indicated that these gangs were present in at least 58 of the state's middle and senior high schools.

While direct comparisons with Oehme's 1997 study are not possible due to differing sampling strategies, it is at least informative to note that the number of gangs has risen from 127 gangs, since the early 90s when he collected his data, to the current 332. This represents an increase of 161 percent during the decade. Oehme found 2,772 members whereas the current studied identified 5,143 which represents an increase of 85.5%.

As previously mentioned, a standard definition of what constitutes a gang was adopted in order to permit comparisons between gangs and across counties. The definition was drawn heavily from Klein's (1995) previous work. A four-pronged test was utilized in

Youth Gangs In North Carolina's Communities

order to determine the types of gangs within the respondents' respective jurisdictions. Respondents were asked if youth tend to "hang out" in groups, if any of these groups demonstrated a commitment to criminal activity, if these groups acknowledged their collective identity through names, dress, graffiti or other means, and if these groups restricted their activities to certain geographical areas. Affirmative responses to all four questions would serve as an indicator that classic street gangs exist within the respondent's community.

Applying this four-pronged test greatly diminished the number of self-defined gangs from 332 to only 99. These 99 gangs represent the classic street gang, which maintains a turf, identifies themselves as a gang, and maintains a commitment to criminal activity. These 99 gangs have a total reported membership of 2,003 individuals and are located in 30 (31.9%) of the 94 counties for which at least one survey was returned.

Of these 99 gangs, 52 were reported to be either active in the schools or at least have members who still attend school. These 52 school oriented gangs consisted of at least 471 reported members and are located in 18 different counties.

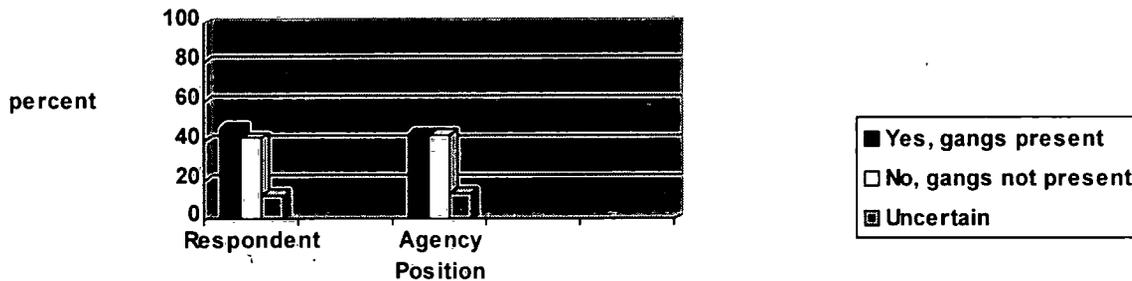
Youth Gangs in the Community

The respondents were asked a series of questions which dealt with the presence, or absence, of gangs in

their respective jurisdictions; the length of time the gangs had existed there, the originating source of the gangs, and the manner in which their agencies responded to the emergence of gangs. Roughly half (46%) of the respondents acknowledged a gang presence in their communities with a slightly lower percentage (41.5%) reporting no knowledge of this activity. Fewer participants reported that they were uncertain about the presence of gangs in their respective communities (12.5%).

The survey participants were also queried about their agency's official position concerning the presence of gangs. Figure 1 depicts a comparison between the respondents' personal knowledge of a gang presence and the agency's official position on gangs. The agency positions closely resembled the respondents' personal knowledge with 43.3 % of the agencies acknowledging a gang presence in their jurisdictions. An equal number of agencies did not report or recognize the existence of gangs in their communities. This suggests that the level of agency denial is not as pronounced in North Carolina as it is in other states or at the national level. Indeed only 6.8 % of the respondents indicated that their agency denied the existence of gangs even though they had been identified as existing in the community.

Figure 1 Respondent versus Official Agency Position on the Recognition of a Gang Presence in the Community



Youth Gangs In North Carolina's Communities

The Evolution of Youth Gangs in the Community

The survey respondents were asked a series of questions in which they were instructed to compare their current youth gangs with the first gangs which were originally identified by their agencies. This enabled a comparative analysis which would provide insightful information on how gangs have evolved in North Carolina over the years. A seven point Likert scale was designed to elicit these responses with the participants being asked to respond along a continuum from "very strongly agree" to "no notable difference" to "very strongly disagree". For the purpose of this analysis these items were collapsed into three response sets – agree, no difference, disagree.

More than half of the respondents (56.2%) indicated that today's youth gangs are not more, or less violent, than when they initially emerged in the community. This finding contradicts current gang research, which suggests that gangs have become more violent over the years due to an increased accessibility to firearms. The study suggests that North Carolina's gangs are no more violent today than in the past. Slightly more officers agreed that gangs were more violent today (27.4%) than disagreed (16.4%).

Similarly, the majority of the respondents reported seeing little change in the extent to which youth gangs have become involved with drug sales. Nearly half (44.6%) noted no change in this behavior over time. More participants did note that gangs are more involved in selling drugs today (39.4%) than the percentage reporting that youth gang involvement in this crime has declined when compared to years past (16.0%).

Over half (51.9%) of those who responded to the survey noted an increase in the extent to which youth gangs have become more involved with possessing handguns. Over one-third (37.7%) reported that this involvement has remained constant with today's youth gangs showing no substantial differences with regard to handgun involvement. Only 10.5 % reported that today's gangs possess handguns, less than when the gangs were initially identified in the community.

When asked about the organizational cohesiveness and structure of today's gangs, 48.4 % noted that the level of organization within the gangs has not changed over time. However, 33.1 % did report that the structure of today's gangs is more organized when compared to gangs of the past.

Responses were nearly identical concerning an increase in the number of female gang members with 46.8 % explaining that there has been little change in the number of female members over time. Roughly one-fourth (24.7%) did note that this has changed since the gangs were first recognized, with more females becoming involved in gangs and their activities.

More than half of the survey participants (55%) responded that they have noticed no change in the gang members' ages. Twenty-seven percent did report that the gang members are not getting older, which implies that they may be getting younger, which is consistent with national trends and gang intelligence data.

Half (50.8%) of those who responded to the survey noted that they did not see any difference in the extent to which youth gangs are having contact with, or forming working associations with, prison and/or adult gangs. However, 32.8 % did agree that today's gangs are having more contact with these other types of criminal gangs and organizations.

The length of time in which the gangs had existed in the community varied from one year to 12 years with the average length of time being 3 years. One quarter of the respondents indicated that gangs had been in their area between 2 to 4 years and less than ten percent indicated a long term (five years or more) gang presence in their communities. Thus it appears that the gang phenomenon, or at least the acknowledgment of gangs, is relatively new for the majority of North Carolina's communities.

Youth Gangs In North Carolina's Communities

The origin, or source from which the state's gangs emerged, parallels the existing gang literature with approximately half of the state's gangs originating completely at the local community level and half of the gangs' origins being a combination of local and extra community sources. Only 5.5 % of the respondents indicated that all of their gangs migrated from other areas either with, or without, possessing ties to existing gangs from outside their jurisdiction. This confirms the presence of gang immigration yet supports the bulk of the existing literature which suggests that gangs are primarily home grown with local youth being less likely to have ties to the bigger and larger gangs of Chicago, Los Angeles and other major metropolitan areas. The issue of super gangs does not seem to apply as strongly in North Carolina as in other states.

The few respondents who did report gang immigration in their areas noted that the gangs who had migrated into the area possessed ties with several of the nation's largest and most dangerous gangs. Affiliations were reported with the Bloods, Crips, Folk Nation, People Nation, Latin Kings, Mexican Mafia, and the Texas Syndicate. While the veracity and reliability of these ties were not questioned, future investigation should be directed at testing the nature and extent of these affiliations.

With the exception of increasing involvement with handguns it appears that today's gangs are roughly identical to those of the past. No significant changes were noted in terms of drug sales, violence, and the organizational and compositional structure of the gangs. This lack of evolutionary growth or change may be due to the fact that the monitoring and tracking of gangs is a relatively recent endeavor. Since the average amount of time that gangs have been identified by those who responded to the survey was only three years, it may be too early to have witnessed any substantial changes in the gangs. Future research and intelligence should be directed at studying these new gangs and tracking the changes that take place within them over time.

Attributes of Youth Gangs in North Carolina's Communities: Age

A considerable amount of variation was found in the ages of those gang members who were reported by the survey participants. Gang member ages ranged from seven to 62 with the average gang member being 15 (15.5) years old. Of the 3,960 gang members who were identified in the community 2,063, or 52.1 %, were 21 years old and younger and 851, or 21.5 %, were juveniles under the age of 16.

Attributes of Youth Gangs in North Carolina's Communities: Race/Ethnicity

Figure 2 (page 7) depicts the gangs' racial composition for those gangs in which the survey respondents were able to provide this information. A third (33.3%) of the reported gangs were comprised of strictly African-Americans, while all-White gangs constituted 23 % of the gangs. Asian gangs accounted for 10.8 %, followed by Latino and Hispanic with 6.5 % each. Consistent with the existing gang literature, North Carolina's gangs are becoming less homogenous with members of different races and ethnic backgrounds belonging to the same gang. These mixed gangs accounted for 25.9% of the total number of gangs reported.

Attributes of Youth Gangs in North Carolina's Communities: Gender

A total of 791 females were reported as being active gang members in at least 37 different gangs across the state. These females account for 20 % of the total number of gang members in the community. The number of females in the gangs ranged from one to 500 with this large number being an all-female gang.

Attributes of Youth Gangs in North Carolina's Communities: Criminal Activities

Figures 3 and 4 (page 7) present the types of criminal activities which are being perpetrated by North Carolina's gangs. The most common types of crime which are attributable to gangs and their members are violent crimes, with 69.9 % of the gangs committing assaults and robberies, property related crimes (65.9 %);

Youth Gangs In North Carolina's Communities

Figure 2 Racial/Ethnic Composition of Gangs in the Community

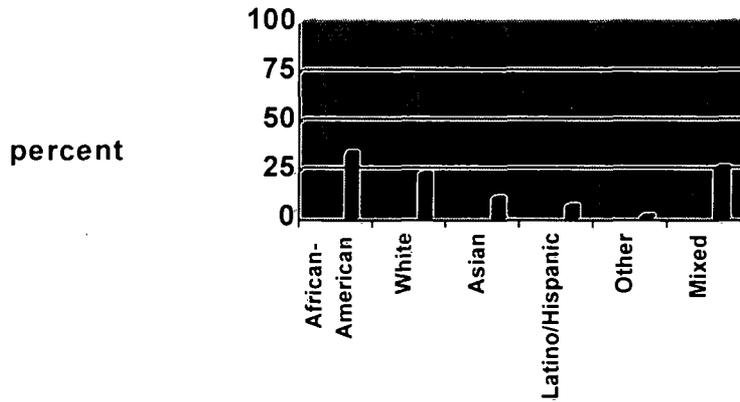


Figure 3 Percent of Gangs Engaging in Violent and Weapon Related Crimes

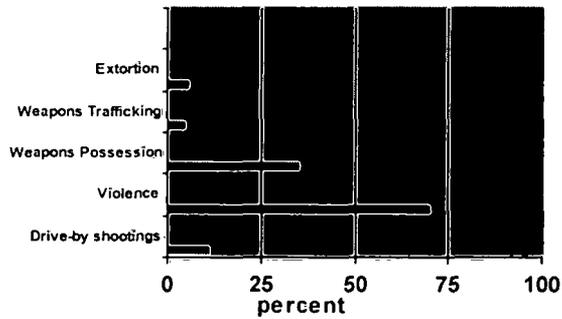
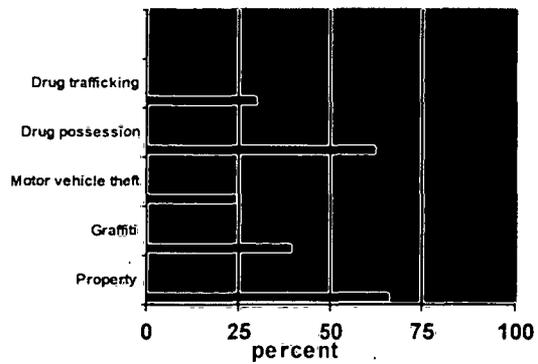


Figure 4 Percent of Gangs Engaging in Property and Drug Related Crimes



Youth Gangs In North Carolina's Communities

and drug possession, with 62.1 % of the gangs being involved with illicit substances. Drive-by shootings have not become as common with the state's gangs rarely engaging in this behavior. Extortion and weapons trafficking were also reported as being relatively rare crimes among the state's gang members.

Recommendations

In order to adequately address the issue of gangs in the communities, state and local policy makers and criminal justice professionals should take a rigorous proactive approach and implement the following recommendations.

- Deny the denial. Agencies must identify and gather intelligence information on groups that are likely to become gangs at a later date in the future. Agencies must acknowledge a gang presence in their community and not ignore the issue. Typically, agencies deny gangs until a serious gang-related crime occurs which brings this issue under public and media scrutiny. It is far easier to acknowledge and address the issue of gangs **before** such an incident occurs than afterwards.
- Lose the "West Side Story" mentality. Agencies must realize that not all gangs are found in poor inner city areas and that not all gangs maintain "turf" or even readily distinguish themselves in some manner. There is no single stereotype which is applicable to all youth gangs. Agencies which look for the stereotypical gang and gang members may only be hitting the tip of the proverbial iceberg.
- Adequately match resources and needs. Agencies should establish procedures and programs which correspond to the level of gang activity in their respective jurisdictions. Some agencies, with a minimal level of gang activity, may only require intelligence information, while agencies with a full blown problem may need to establish inter, or intra, departmental gang task forces.
- Utilize existing technology. Agencies should incorporate the use of the Internet into their gang tracking initiatives as well as use it as a vehicle for sharing information with other agencies. Agencies should utilize digital cameras for photographing gang members and their graffiti. The issue of establishing a statewide gang information database should be revisited and encouraged.
- Program evaluation efforts should be intensified. Research and program evaluations should be conducted which seek to determine the efficacy of existing gang intervention and prevention programs. This work should identify what works and under what conditions these programs have proven to be successful. Exemplary programs should be replicated in other areas.
- Research and intelligence gathering should be conducted for non-traditional youth groups. The current study identified the existence of skinheads, paramilitary organizations and hate-based groups within the state. Efforts should be directed at studying these groups before they become more pervasive in order to be adequately prepared to develop intervention and suppression strategies.
- Monitor gang organizational ties and migration patterns. More work should be aimed at exploring the extent of gang allegiances to other local, state, and national gangs. Gang immigration and emigration patterns should be scrutinized closely in order to prevent the formation of super gangs.
- Collaboration efforts must be intensified. Schools, law enforcement agencies, probation and court counselors' offices must communicate and share information on gangs and gang members. Agencies should avoid becoming protective and territorial with their gang knowledge, information and expertise.

Youth Gangs In North Carolina's Communities

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