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**VIOLENCE  
BY YOUTH GANGS AND  
YOUTH GROUPS IN MAJOR  
AMERICAN CITIES**

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**SUMMARY REPORT**

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**National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention  
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**VIOLENCE  
BY YOUTH GANGS AND  
YOUTH GROUPS IN MAJOR  
AMERICAN CITIES**

**SUMMARY REPORT**

This summary is based on a report by:

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NCJRS

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# FOREWORD

Many crime analysts in recent years have tended to overlook the problem of youth gang violence in our major cities. They shared the popular view that gangs were a problem of the 1950's but no longer.

Now, in the first nationwide study ever undertaken of the nature and extent of gang violence, Walter B. Miller reports that gangs in many cases have continued to be a problem for the last 20 years and in other cases have changed in their patterns -- such as increased use of guns, less formalized organizational structure, and greater activity in the schools -- previously considered "neutral turf."

How could there have been such a misreading of the national situation? According to Miller, the problem lies in the lack of any systematic method for gathering the right information.

Miller's study concentrated primarily on the eight largest U.S. cities. He finds gang violence levels high in: New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, Philadelphia and San Francisco. From available data, he estimates the youth gang population in these cities as ranging from 760 gangs and 28,500 members to 2,700 gangs and 81,500 members. Statistics kept by these cities show 525 gang-related murders in the three-year period from 1972 through 1974, or an equivalent of 25 percent of all juvenile homicides in the cities. Miller believes these figures may "represent substantial undercounts" because of the different definitions in use in the cities for classifying gang-related homicides.

In making these determinations, Miller relied on the judgments of criminal justice and social service personnel in the cities rather than undertaking an independent survey of gang members.

Miller already is expanding this study under a new grant from the National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. This second study will focus on additional cities and also will attempt to find, among other things, some explanations for the serious gang violence so prevalent today.

Milton Luger  
Assistant Administrator  
Office of Juvenile Justice and  
Delinquency Prevention

## SUMMARY

Few Americans ever bought the romantic notion that big city youth gangs were composed of harmless, appealing youngsters who had stepped out of West Side Story. They understood the truth to be more threatening than that. Yet it's probably fair to say that most Americans today regard gangs as a problem of the 1950's, a happening whose vestiges are represented in the 1970's by small knots of teenagers congregating on street corners in the slums. The kids may cause a little trouble now and then but it's nothing that police and juvenile workers can't easily control.

That perception, according to a new study, is as flawed as the rejected romantic portrayal. Gangs are not only back -- but it appears that in many cases they never left.

Not content only to claim the street as their "turf," some youth gangs have shifted part of their operations to schools, where they have taken "control" of cafeterias, playgrounds, and hallways -- shaking down students for permission to use them and terrorizing teachers and administrators.

The move to the schools is one change in the habits and style of youth gangs of the mid-1970's. Another is the increased use of guns. A third is a tendency to spend less time and energy fighting each other in favor of preying on innocents. The result, says the author of the study, is that youth gangs in America today are more

lethal than ever before, are terrorizing greater numbers of people, and in general constitute a national crime problem of the first magnitude. At the same time, the gangs are not easily succumbing to attempts at suppressing them.

"...efforts by local communities to cope with gang crime have, by and large, failed conspicuously," writes Harvard's Walter B. Miller. "Many urban communities are gripped with a sense of hopelessness that anything can be done to curb the unremitting menace of the gangs."

Miller is a Research Fellow at Harvard Law School's Center for Criminal Justice. His year-long investigation took him to 12 of the Nation's largest cities. His study concentrated on the six cities which Miller ascertained faced the most severe youth gang problems--New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Detroit, and San Francisco. His grant was supported by the National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the research and evaluation arm of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in LEAA.

Stated in its broadest terms, Miller's goal was to determine the state of youth gangs in the mid-1970's, to compare them to their predecessors of 10 and 20 years ago in their operating techniques, their social characteristics and the danger and problem they posed to their communities. He was also interested in how gangs were perceived by outsiders. Among Miller's findings:

- From available data he estimates the youth gang population in the six cities as ranging from 760 gangs and 28,500 members to 2,700 gangs and 81,500 members. He describes the high side as "probably still conservative."

- Gang violence today is more lethal than during any previous period and the major reason appears to lie in the "extraordinary increase in the availability and use" of guns by gang members.

- Gangs can be found in elementary, junior and senior high schools and are generating levels of terror that reach frightening proportions. "There is no point in trying to exaggerate the situation," said a source familiar with gang activity in Philadelphia schools. "The truth by itself is devastating."

- Gang makeup by age, social position, and economic class remains much the same as it was in the 1950's. And despite claims that female criminality in recent years has become more prevalent and violent, urban youth gang activity continues to be "a predominantly male enterprise." Gangs exhibit a decidedly traditional attitude toward the roles females play. Girls carry weapons for boys, serve as auxiliaries, and frequently offer their impugned honor as justification for a rumble between gangs.

- The criminal justice establishment, including its academic members, and the media have generally failed to gauge the national dimensions of the youth gang problem. They have often misread trends in gang activity, with the result that the country has been lulled into thinking gangs are not a major problem; in actuality they constitute "a crime problem of the utmost seriousness."

#### Failure of Perception

Miller blames this failure of perception on the "peculiarly erratic, oblique, and misleading" way in which information on gangs has been acquired. Too much attention, he maintains, has been paid to the media's reports on gang activity, particularly those of the New York City media. The press there, he says, portrayed gangs during the 1950's as groups of black-jacketed youths roaming the city streets. "They bore romantic names such as Sharks and Jets, engaged one another periodically in planned rumbles which required courage of the participants ('heart') but were not particularly dangerous to the general public...."

During the 1960's gangs seemed to have virtually disappeared. Conventional thinking had them dissolving under the weight of law enforcement measures by police,

rehabilitation programs by social workers, and debilitating effects of drugs. What spirit had not been sapped was transferred to political activism. For close to a decade New Yorkers read or heard little of gangs.

Then, in the Spring of 1971, gangs reappeared. They were discovered in the South Bronx and soon had spread to other parts of the city. They were more lethal and heavily armed than their predecessors, allowed themselves to be incited and directed by "violence hardened older men," and turned more toward victimizing innocent citizens rather than each other. In keeping with their new, deadly image, they adopted such names as Savage Skulls and Black Assassins. No lovable kids from West Side Story were these.

Many criminal justice professionals and members of the media viewed the New York developments as evidence of a sudden and somewhat mysterious re-emergence of youth gangs. The revival theory fit the conviction that had been held for the previous 10 years, namely that gangs were a thing of the past. And that, says Miller, is where they went wrong.

Whatever the accuracy of the New York portrayal, what the professionals overlooked was that the United States contained other cities, and that conditions in those cities were not necessarily the same as in New York. For example, notes Miller, in 1967, when New York was in the middle of its "no gang" period, the Mayor's office in Chicago was reporting 150 gang-related homicides -- "probably the highest annual figure ever recorded for an American city." In the barrios of Los Angeles, meanwhile, gang members during the 1960's went on killing each other just as they had in the 1950's. In Philadelphia, police-reported gang killings started to climb in 1965. By 1968 the governor of Pennsylvania felt compelled to order the State Crime Commission to study the burgeoning problem of youth gang violence. In short, while the social scientists, journalists, and national law enforcement experts had relegated youth gangs to history, youth gangs themselves were thriving.

"How could so blatant a misreading of the overall national situation have occurred?" Miller asks. "The answer is simple. There was not at the time nor is there at present, any agency, in or out of government, that takes as a major responsibility the gathering of information as to gangs and gang activities on a nationwide basis."

Without such an objective source of information, Miller goes on, there was no way to evaluate the "often sensationalized" claims of the media that the country was undergoing a new wave of gang violence. It was in part to fill this information gap that Miller undertook his LEAA-supported study.

#### First Nationwide Survey

Miller visited 12 cities, contacted 61 public and private agencies and interviewed 148 people. He spent hours talking to juvenile and youth gang specialists connected with the police, social agencies, the courts, correction systems, and probation departments.

Because he has found youth gang members themselves to be unreliable as the major source of information, Miller relied largely on secondary sources. He spoke with juvenile and gang specialists in police departments and municipal, county, and private agencies and with probation, judicial, and corrections personnel. At times he had to use press reports of uneven quality. He warns that some of the data he has amassed from government sources must be considered in light of the potential bias on the part of those supplying the data. Municipal agencies, for example, often have a political or bureaucratic interest in exaggerating or underestimating the extent of gang violence. However, the use of a variety of sources of information (interviews, newspaper accounts, and official documents) served to compensate to a considerable degree for the possible inadequacies of any single source.

The limitations, says Miller, were inherent in the nature of the subject; i.e., despite their visibility, gangs usually conceal many of their most significant activities. Much of what gang members do can be brought to the surface only by those outsiders who have won their trust and who maintain close and continued contact with them. There were also limitations on time and resources available. Nevertheless and notwithstanding the qualifications, Miller asserts:

"So far as is known, the present study represents the first attempt to compile a national-level picture of youth gang and youth group problems, based on direct site visits to gang locales."

Miller plans to circulate the report and solicit reactions from the agencies and individuals he dealt with, as well as some authorities who were not interviewed. Their comments will help form a second study, which LEAA is also financing. That effort is attempting to find, among other things, explanations of serious youth gang violence.

#### A Serious Problem

In the meantime, Miller has tabulated a set of first-time statistics and collected verbal assessments from men and women in the field who have dealt with youth gangs. The findings and conclusions he draws from his evidence are at times startling, even frightening. They also seem likely to generate controversy among those who define what major crime problems face American society. Miller claims that most criminal justice professionals have given youth gang problems short shrift. He cites three major federally supported crime studies since 1967 and notes that only one, that of the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice, allocated a separate chapter or paper on the subject. Youth gangs were barely mentioned by the other two commissions, The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence and The National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals.

"While varying in the nature and degree of attention devoted to youth gangs," writes Miller, "all three conveyed a similar message. Youth gangs are not now or should not become a major object of concern in their own right; youth gang violence is not a major crime problem in the United States; what gang violence does exist can fairly readily be diverted into 'constructive' channels, primarily through provision of services by community-based agencies."

Miller says one of the purposes of his study was to test the validity of that position. As he acknowledges, his conclusions "diverge radically" from those of the Federal commissions. He writes:

"Youth gang violence in the United States in the mid-1970's appears as a crime problem of the utmost seriousness. Hundreds of gangs and thousands of gang members frequent the streets, buildings, and public facilities of major cities; whole communities are terrorized by the intensity and ubiquity of gang violence; many urban schools are in effect in a state of occupation by gangs, with teachers and students exploited and intimidated; violent crime by gang members is in some cities equivalent to as much as one-third of all violent crime by juveniles...."

The sheer lethality of today's youth gangs comes through with terrifying vividness in the statistics that Miller has compiled on gang-related homicides in five of the target cities. (Data on Detroit were unavailable.) Miller concedes that some cities are exceedingly loose in defining a gang-connected homicide. Los Angeles, for example, includes in that category virtually any murder committed by an individual who happens to be a member of a gang--a youth gang as well as possibly adult groups such as motorcycle gangs and van clubs. Chicago police, on the other hand, classify a killing as gang-related only if it stems directly from a gang fight. Thus the retaliatory shooting of a lone gang member by a passing car-full of rival gang members would not be listed as a "youth-gang homicide," according to Miller.

Given the balancing factors, the inconsistency of definition does not seem critical and does not soften the

impact of the gang-related murder statistics: 525 for a three-year period from 1972 through 1974, or an equivalent of 25 percent of all juvenile homicides for those cities. The three largest cities, adds Miller, recorded about 13,000 gang member arrests in a single year, with about half of those linked to violent crimes. To make matters worse, Miller claims some of the gang crime figures "may represent substantial undercounts."

"It is probable," concludes Miller, "that violence perpetrated by members of youth gangs in major cities is at present more lethal than at any time in history." From the evidence he has assembled, says Miller, the violence that gang members direct against one another and against the general public is without precedent. "It is not unlikely," he says in summary, "that contemporary youth gangs pose a greater threat to public order, and greater danger to the safety of the citizenry, than at any time during the past."

Miller attributes the growth in gang violence largely to one factor: the gun.

"Probably the single most significant development affecting gang-member violence during the present period is an extraordinary increase in the availability and use of firearms to effect violent crimes. This development is in all likelihood the major reason behind the increasingly lethal nature of gang violence."

Miller also found that gang members had gone upwardly mobile in their choice of guns. Home-made zip guns of the type popularized in the 1950's were employed by a few younger gang members, Miller was told, "but several informants said that such crude weaponry was held in contempt by most gang members." Even Saturday Night Specials were not particularly popular (only in San Francisco were they regarded as a major gang weapon). Instead, the majority of hand guns used were of the quality used by police, such as the Smith and Wesson .38.

Arrest records provided Miller with a "very rough notion" of how prevalent guns were in the world of youth

gangs. Between 1972 and 1974, for example, New York police reported approximately 1,500 arrests of gang members for possession of dangerous weapons, a charge which he notes almost always relates to possession of firearms. Chicago, meanwhile, recorded 700 gang-member arrests for "possession of firearms" in 1974, the same year that Los Angeles recorded 1,100 gang-member arrests for "assault with a deadly weapon" and 115 more for "shooting at inhabited dwellings."

An authority interviewed by Miller in Los Angeles characterized the status that guns had achieved in his community:

"In this city a gang is judged by the number and quality of weapons they have; the most heavily armed gang is the most feared; for our gangs, firepower is the name of the game."

#### Gangs in the Schools

What is perhaps most disturbing about Miller's discoveries is that gangs have carried their violence--or their fearsome reputation for it--into the public schools. School systems have strengthened security measures but violence still occurs. Victims of gang attacks include other gang members, students who are not gang members, and teachers.

"In all four of the largest cities," reports Miller, "respondents provided vivid accounts of gangs prowling the school corridors in search of possible rivals, and preventing orderly movement through the hallways. All four cities report open gang fights occurring in the hallways--in some cases with considerable frequency. The shooting and killing of teachers by gang members was reported for Chicago and Philadelphia, and of non-gang students in Chicago and Los Angeles. Shootings and other assaults were also reported to have occurred in school cafeterias, auditoriums, and other internal locations."

Teachers in many schools, according to Miller, were so terrorized (and sometimes actually attacked) by gang

members that they were afraid to report illegal activities to police or testify at court proceedings. The violence and intimidation practiced by gangs has led to what Miller calls the "territorialization" of many schools.

"To a degree never before reported," he writes, "gang members have 'territorialized' the school buildings and their environments--making claims of 'ownership' of particular classrooms, gyms, cafeterias, sports facilities and the like--in some cases applying ownership claims to the entire school. As "owners of school facilities, gang members have assumed the right to collect 'fees' from other students for a variety of 'privileges'--students going to school at all, passing through hallways, using gym facilities and, perhaps most common--that of 'protection'--the privilege of not being assaulted by gang members while in school."

Philadelphia, says Miller, was forced to close the cafeterias in several major high schools because gangs had claimed the right to control access and seating arrangements.

In many instances, adds Miller, school administrations have simply been overpowered by gangs and stand virtually helpless before them. In New York, one respondent told Miller, some of the semi-autonomous school districts created by the city's partial decentralization program had 'sold out' to the gangs, "granting them the privilege of recruiting members among the student body in return for promises to refrain from violence."

School principals and other administrators who once were hesitant to ask for help in coping with gangs--for fear that it would reflect on their managerial abilities--have now reversed their policy of concealment and some even exaggerate their problems in an effort to obtain assistance, according to Miller.

Why gangs have switched from the streets to the schools is one of the explanatory avenues that Miller will pursue in his second study. But he offers one tentative reason that he feels is worthy of further exploration. During

the past decade, he notes, school systems have been under pressure to "hold" the maximum number of adolescents in schools. Many of the methods used in the past to keep problem youngsters out of school are no longer available.

#### Some Misconceptions

One of the more intriguing aspects of Miller's study was his comparison of gangs of the 1970's with those of the past. He took note of certain assumptions held today and set out to test their validity. Among his discoveries:

CLAIM. Gangs are moving out of inner city slums and into middle class suburbs. FINDING. By and large the "primary locus" of gang activity remains the slum sections of a city. What has happened in some metropolitan areas is that the slums and ghettos have moved out of the center city to the "outer city," to ring cities, or to formerly working class and middle class neighborhoods in the suburbs.

CLAIM. The age span of gang members is spreading; six-and seven-year-olds are engaging in violent gang activity while men in their twenties and thirties are playing a much larger role in gangs. FINDING. While there may have been some expansion in both directions, preliminary indications are that they are not substantial and that the predominant age range still lies somewhere between 12 and 21.

CLAIM. Females are more deeply involved in gangs and they are filling more active, violent roles. FINDING. Despite stories of serious criminal behavior by females today, arrest and other data as well as assessments by local authorities indicate that the part played by girls in the gangs of the 1970's does not differ significantly from that of the past. Most respondents felt females did not represent a particularly important element of gang problems.

Miller found that ethnicity was still the substance holding members of the same gang together but he also discovered changes in which ethnic groups were forming the

most gangs. Black and Hispanic gangs had overtaken gangs made up of white youths from blue collar families. A familiar American pattern is being played out. Those groups that have most recently migrated to the city are filling the ranks of youth gangs. (Miller has observed exceptions: in Los Angeles some "gang barrios" go back three or more generations; in northwest Chicago boys of Italian ancestry belong to the same gangs to which their fathers or even their grandfathers belonged.)

The newest and most surprising ethnic development that Miller discovered among gangs was the increase in the number of youths from Asian backgrounds.

"Accepted doctrine for many years has been that oriental youth pose negligible problems in juvenile delinquency or gang activity; this accepted tenet has been seriously undermined by events of the 1970's--not only by the violent activities of the newly-immigrated 'Hong Kong Chinese' but by the development in several cities of gangs of Filipinos, Japanese, and other Asian groups. The estimated number of Asian gangs is now almost equal to that of white gangs and may exceed their number in the near future," Miller writes.

Another change has taken place in the realm of inter-gang warfare. Miller found that gangs tend to engage less in the traditional large scale "rumble" in favor of "forays" by small armed and often motorized bands. Gang members are still the principal victims of gang violence but Miller spotted what he judges to be a trend toward increased victimization of adults and children.

#### A New Wave of Violence?

Serving as the crux of Miller's study has been the question he formulated and attempted to answer. Are American cities undergoing a "new wave" of gang violence? After tracing the history of youth gangs in his six target cities and examining the material he collected on gang activities in the mid-1970's, his answer is "a qualified yes."

Using 1970 as a base, Miller says the "new wave" characterization certainly fits New York, Los Angeles, and Detroit. "The 'wave' is present but less new in Chicago and Philadelphia, which have experienced serious gang problems for all or most of the past decade," he adds. San Francisco, Miller found, had experienced an increase of gang activity only in Asian neighborhoods, but he detected a few signs of a possible resurgence in black sections, which had seen a decline in youth gangs.

Miller proceeds gingerly in predicting what the future holds for American youth gangs. He notes the "rather poor track record" researchers have compiled in charting future crime trends and adds that forecasting behavior of youth and its sub-cultures is particularly vexing. Miller bases his predictions on extrapolations as well as opinions he solicited from the experts who took part in his survey.

The majority of those queried in Chicago, Detroit, and San Francisco told Miller they thought gang problems would worsen in their cities during the next few years. In New York, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles most respondents predicted that gang crime would hold at current levels or improve. Miller says that except for Los Angeles, where conditions appear to be worsening, those predictions conform to his extrapolations.

Part of the reason for Miller's forecast was his discovery that demographic projections don't hold much encouragement for an easing of gang violence. National population forecasts these days dwell on the ending of the baby boom, an event which will lead to a decrease in the size of the teen-age population. Miller points out that while this may be true for the United States at large and for the middle class, it does not hold for minority group youngsters growing up in big cities, the youngsters who make up the primary recruitment pool for youth gangs.

"Rather than decreases," writes Miller, "projections suggest rather sizable increases in the size of this population--a population which currently manifests the highest potential for involvement in violent and predatory crime."

In view of the evidence, Miller concludes that "the general outlook appears to be one of continuing high rates of gang crime in most of the largest cities, with probable increases in some and decreases in others averaging out to a continuing high all-city level."

Miller acknowledges circumstances could emerge (such as "massive" infusions of Federal money to deal with youth gangs or "massive" jailings by police of youth gang members) that would alter this outlook. But he sees the probability of this happening as low and therefore "the likelihood that gang problems will continue to beset major cities during the next few years appears high."

What can be done about youth gangs will be explored in Miller's second study. For now he believes it will suffice to address ourselves to another question: "How serious are problems posed by youth gangs and youth groups today, and what priority should be granted gang problems among a multitude of current crime problems?" His answer:

"...the materials presented in this report appear amply to support the conclusion that youth gang violence is more lethal than ever before, that the security of a wider sector of the citizenry is threatened by gangs to a greater degree than ever before, and that violence and other illegal activities by members of youth gangs and groups in the United States in the mid-1970's represents a crime problem of the first magnitude which shows little prospect of early abatement."

## A HISTORY OF SIX CITIES

In attempting to ascertain the seriousness of youth gang problems today, Walter Miller found it necessary to trace the history of gangs in his six target cities. What follows is Miller's "highly condensed" version of the full histories he prepared, covering the decade from 1965 to 1975:

NEW YORK. Apparently experienced a lull in gang violence between 1965 and '71, then a rapid rise in the numbers of gangs and gang crimes up to 1973. Since that year the numbers of reported gangs, gang members and gang-member arrests have remained consistent and at a high level, but the number of gang-related killings appears to have dropped off markedly.

CHICAGO. Experienced the rise and fall of a number of well-publicized "supergangs" between 1965 and '73, with a peak of gang killings in 1969, and a proliferation of smaller, more traditional gangs and rising gang-member arrest rates in subsequent years.

LOS ANGELES. Traditional Hispanic gangs posed problems between 1965 and '71, primarily in established Hispanic communities. After an apparent lull in black gang activity, black gangs began to proliferate around 1972, and contributed the bulk of rapidly rising numbers of gang killings which at present have reached record high levels.

PHILADELPHIA. Problems with violent gangs, mostly black, began to intensify near the beginning of the ten year period, with police reporting an average of about 40 gang-related killings each year for the six middle years of the decade. During the past two years the numbers of gang-related killings have diminished, but the present number of gangs and gang members remains at the high level maintained during the past five years.

DETROIT. Reported a decline in a well-developed earlier gang situation during the earlier years of the decade, experienced growth of a small number of larger gangs between 1968 and '73, and a proliferation of smaller gangs, mostly black, between that year and the present. Gang-related killings currently stand at record levels.

SAN FRANCISCO. Also saw a decline in a previous development of black gangs early in the decade, accompanied by the establishment of a small number of highly criminal Chinese gangs. Between 1971 and '74 there was an increase in the numbers of relatively small Asian gangs, particularly Filipino, and an increase in lethal incidents involving the Chinese gangs. Between 1973 and the present there has apparently been a decline in the violence of Chinese gangs, accompanied by a possible resurgence of black gangs, particularly in the school context.

**END**

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