



OJJDP FACT SHEET

Shay Bilchik, Administrator

March 1999 #97

Highlights of the 1997 National Youth Gang Survey

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Background

The 1997 National Youth Gang Survey is the third annual survey conducted by the National Youth Gang Center. The 1996 survey sample was designed to be statistically representative of the entire country, resulting in an extensive national picture (Moore and Terrett, 1998). The 1997 survey utilized the same sample as that used for the 1996 survey, permitting comparative and trend analysis.

Survey Sample

Despite limitations in quality and uniformity, data furnished by law enforcement agencies continue to be the best available resource for gauging the extent of youth gangs and their activities. The 1996 and 1997 samples each consisted of more than 3,000 local law enforcement agencies and included:

- ◆ A total of 1,216 police departments serving cities with populations of more than 25,000 (large cities).
- ◆ A total of 662 suburban-county police and sheriffs' departments (suburban counties) (FBI, 1995).
- ◆ A randomly selected representative sample ($n=397$) of police departments serving cities with populations between 2,500 and 25,000 (small cities).
- ◆ A randomly selected representative sample ($n=743$) of rural-county police and sheriffs' departments (rural counties) (FBI, 1995).

Definition

A youth gang was defined as "a group of youths in (the respondent's) jurisdiction that (the respondent) or other responsible persons in (the respondent's) agency are willing to identify or classify as a 'gang.'" Motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, and exclusively adult gangs were excluded from the survey.

Survey Results

Of the 3,018 survey recipients, 2,766 responded (a 92-percent response rate). The number of jurisdictions that reported youth gang activity dropped from 1996 to 1997, but the decrease was negligible: 51 percent in 1997 compared with 53 percent in 1996. The largest decrease (2 percent) in the percentage of jurisdictions reporting active youth gangs appeared in large cities; within that category, the most notable decrease (5 percent) was in cities with populations ranging from 25,000 to 49,999. In the four major regions of the United States (Midwest, Northeast, South, and West), gang activity continued to be most prevalent (74 percent) in jurisdictions in the West. From these data, it was estimated that 4,712 U.S. cities and counties experienced gang activity in 1997, down slightly from 4,824 in 1996. There were an estimated 30,500 gangs and 816,000 gang members in 1997, compared with an estimated 31,000 gangs and 846,000 gang members in 1996. While there was an overall decline in the prevalence of gangs and gang members from 1996 to 1997, the number of gang members rose in small cities and rural counties.

Despite the slight decrease in gang activity from 1996 to 1997, most respondents (45 percent) felt that the gang problem in their jurisdictions in 1997 was "staying about the same," 35 percent indicated it was "getting worse," and 20 percent felt it was "getting better." In contrast, most respondents (49 percent) to the 1995 survey (National Youth Gang Center, 1997) believed that their problem was "getting worse," 41 percent said it was "staying about the same," and 10 percent reported it was "getting better."

Gang involvement in drug distribution and sales has been much debated in recent years (Howell and Decker, 1999). Respondents to the 1997 survey estimated that 42 percent of their youth gangs were involved in the street sale of drugs and 33 percent were involved in drug distribution for the specific purpose of generating profits for the gang. Respondents also said that gang members

were responsible for 33 percent of crack cocaine sales, 32 percent of marijuana sales, 16 percent of powder cocaine sales, 12 percent of methamphetamine sales, and 9 percent of heroin sales.

Survey recipients were asked to indicate the degree to which gang members had engaged in the following offenses in their jurisdictions: aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, motor vehicle theft, and larceny/theft. A high degree of gang member involvement was most often reported by respondents for aggravated assault and larceny/theft (28 percent), followed by motor vehicle theft (27 percent), burglary (26 percent), and robbery (13 percent). The estimated degree of involvement in criminal activity by gang members was less in 1997 than in 1996 for all crimes included in the survey. Decreases in the proportion of respondents who reported a high degree of involvement in criminal activity by gang members from 1996 to 1997 were as follows: larceny/theft, 10 percent; aggravated assault, 5 percent; burglary, 4 percent; motor vehicle theft, 3 percent; and robbery, 2 percent. These reported decreases are consistent with the national downturn in both adult and juvenile violent crime arrests from 1994 to 1997 reported by the U.S. Department of Justice (FBI, 1998; Snyder, 1998).

Most respondents (89 percent) indicated that some gang members had migrated to their jurisdictions and, on average, estimated that 23 percent of their gang members were migrants. Respondents overwhelmingly cited social factors (e.g., moves with families, to find legitimate job opportunities, to join relatives, or to join friends) as reasons why gang members migrated to their jurisdictions.

Sixty-six percent of respondents indicated that their agencies had some type of specialized unit to address gang problems. Large cities were the most likely (77 percent) to have a specialized unit and rural counties were the least likely (34 percent).

Conclusions

Gang activity continued to affect a large number of cities and counties throughout the country in 1997. However, there was a slight reduction in the number of jurisdictions reporting active youth gangs compared with 1996. While the estimated number of gangs and gang members in the Nation decreased slightly, the number of gang members in small cities and rural counties increased. Most respondents in 1997 perceived their gang problem was "staying about the same," while most respondents in 1995 felt that it was "getting worse." The degree of gang member involvement in criminal activity also fell compared with 1996.

For Further Information

An indepth analysis of the survey data will be reported in the *1997 National Youth Gang Survey*, to be published later in 1999. For additional information about youth gangs, call the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (JJC), 800-638-8736.

Funded by and operating under the auspices of OJJDP, the National Youth Gang Center is a component of OJJDP's Comprehensive Response to America's Youth Gang Problem. For further information about the Center, visit its Web site at www.iir.com/nygc.

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The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

FS-9997

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