



OJJDP

Shay Bilchik, Administrator

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Youth Gang Drug Trafficking



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The proliferation of youth gangs since 1980 has fueled the public's fear and magnified possible misconceptions about youth gangs. To address the mounting concern about youth gangs, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Youth Gang Series delves into many of the key issues related to youth gangs. The series considers issues such as gang migration, gang growth, female involvement with gangs, homicide, drugs and violence, and the needs of communities and youth who live in the presence of youth gangs.

Nationally representative data on the extent and nature of youth gang involvement in drug trafficking, as perceived by law enforcement agencies, are available for the first time. Based on results from the 1996 Youth Gang Survey, this Bulletin provides baseline data and analysis on the epidemiology of youth gang drug trafficking, including age, sex, and race/ethnicity of involved gang members; the relative extent of the problem in urban, suburban, and rural areas; and the involvement of youth gangs in other crimes.

This Bulletin specifically examines several issues related to youth gang drug trafficking (see Howell and Decker, 1999; Klein, 1995; Klein, Maxson, and Cunningham, 1991; Moore, 1990). Some researchers contend that many youth gangs were

transformed into drug trafficking operations during the crack cocaine epidemic in the latter part of the 1980's. Others contend that the extent of youth gang involvement in drug trafficking is unclear (for a review of this literature, see Howell and Decker, 1999). The present analysis will address the involvement of youth gangs and gang members in drug trafficking. However, the connection between youth gang drug trafficking and other crimes remains unclear. According to popular perception, youth gangs are directly involved with drug sales, and drug sales inevitably lead to other crimes. While several gang studies have found a weak causal relationship between youth gang involvement in drug sales and violent crime, other studies have shown the transformation of youth gang wars into drug wars. From existing studies, it has been difficult to distinguish traditional youth gangs from drug gangs. National data relevant to these and other issues are now available for the first time.

Responses to the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey (Moore and Terrett, 1998; National Youth Gang Center, 1999a), conducted by the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC), were analyzed for this Bulletin. The survey gathered data from law enforcement agencies on two measures of youth gang drug trafficking: gang member

From the Administrator

The combination of gangs and drugs has loomed for years as a particularly threatening aspect of the gang problem. Until quite recently, however, we lacked the data necessary for a clear understanding of the nature and complexity of youth gangs and their involvement with drug trafficking.

Using the results of the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey of law enforcement agencies, this Bulletin analyzes the participation of youth gang members in drug sales and the role of gangs in drug distribution. Although the authors found widespread drug trafficking among youth gangs, they report that serious involvement seems concentrated in a small number of areas and is overwhelmingly connected to young adult, rather than juvenile, gang members. Thus, jurisdictions should first assess the particular problem they confront in order to target their efforts to combat both gang and drug violence more effectively.

Youth Gang Drug Trafficking provides a thoughtful analysis of extensive youth drug trafficking data and identifies areas for further research. The Bulletin also discusses the policy implications of these findings for communities struggling to curb the negative impact of youth gangs in their midst.

Shay Bilchik
Administrator

involvement in drug sales and gang control of drug distribution. "Distribution" implies organizational management and control, as opposed to individual involvement in selling drugs directly to individual buyers. Unfortunately, the wording of the survey question on gang control of drug distribution may not have elicited responses that distinguished between street-level control of drug sales to individual buyers and organizational control of drug distribution by gangs. The 1997 National Youth Gang Survey asked respondents to report on the distribution of drugs for the purpose of generating profits for the gang. Analysis of these data is under way. Nevertheless, the 1996 survey provides information on the age, gender, and race/ethnicity of youth gang members and on the demographic characteristics of responding jurisdictions. The survey data also permit an examination of the interrelationship of youth gangs, drug trafficking, and other crime involvement.

Law enforcement agencies continue to be the best and most widely used source of national information available on gangs. However, this source has some important limitations (Curry, Ball, and Decker, 1996; Maxson, 1992; Maxson, 1998). First, many agencies do not collect gang data in a standardized manner. Automated gang databases are becoming more common, but they are typically used for gathering criminal intelligence rather than recording gang crime. Local law enforcement databases are designed to track and support apprehension of individual gang members—not to compile gang crime statistics. Second, law enforcement agencies are sometimes affected and constrained by political considerations (e.g., when they are pressured politically to pursue certain types of crimes), and a gang problem may tend to be either denied or exaggerated (Huff, 1989). Third, agencies and individuals within agencies often have different definitions of what constitutes a gang or a gang incident, and perceptions of the problem vary with the expertise and experience of the observer. Varying definitions of youth gangs continue to complicate analysis of comparative gang data. Fourth, police normally investigate crimes, not gangs. Compiling national gang data through surveys of law enforcement agencies involves asking the agencies "to provide . . . a service they may not routinely provide for local assessment and policy making" (Curry, Ball, and Decker, 1996, p. 33).

Survey Methods

The Sample

The 1996 National Youth Gang Survey was sent to a sample of 3,024 police and sheriff's departments in October 1997. It consisted of a 14-item questionnaire that elicited information on gang-related drug activity and other aspects of youth gangs (National Youth Gang Center, 1999a). This sample included four subsamples:

- ◆ All police departments serving cities with populations greater than 25,000.
- ◆ A randomly selected sample of police departments serving cities with populations between 2,500 and 25,000.
- ◆ All "suburban county" police and sheriff's departments.
- ◆ A randomly selected sample of "rural county" police and sheriff's departments.¹

Nonrespondents ($n=1,512$) received followup calls beginning 2 months after the survey was mailed. After the followup calls, the response rate increased from 50 percent to 87 percent of the 3,024 jurisdictions that received the survey. Response rates for the above subsamples varied, but not significantly. Large cities and suburban counties had the highest response rate (88 percent), followed by small cities and rural counties (86 percent). In a few cases, respondents elected not to respond to one or more survey questions. In such cases, the agency was excluded from the analysis for the affected question(s). A total of 1,385 respondents (53 percent of the respondents who returned survey forms) reported gang problems. Among these, 1,005 agencies responded to the question regarding gang member involvement in drug sales, and 1,139 responded to the question regarding gang control of drug distribution. These responses were analyzed for this Bulletin.

Measures

The 1996 National Youth Gang Survey placed limited restrictions on local jurisdictions' definitions of a "youth gang." For the purposes of the survey, a "youth gang" was defined as "a group of youths or young adults in your jurisdiction that you or other responsible persons in your agency or community are willing to identify or classify as a 'gang.'"² Respondents

¹ See National Youth Gang Center (1999a) for detailed information on sample selection, survey methodology, and results of analyses to date (see also Moore and Terrett, 1998, for a summary of results).

² In the remainder of this Bulletin, unless otherwise noted, the term "gang" refers to youth gangs.

were asked to exclude motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, and other exclusively adult gangs.

Respondents were asked two questions regarding gang involvement with drugs. The first open-ended question³ asked, "In your jurisdiction, what percent of drug sales do you estimate involve gang members?" The second question was "What proportion of drug distribution do you estimate gangs control or manage in your jurisdiction?" Respondents were asked to choose the answer "that fits best" among the following options: "all of it," "more than half," "less than half," "less than one-fourth," "none," or "do not know."

Information on the age of gang members was obtained by a single question: "Considering all the members of the gangs you are reporting on, what is your estimate of the percentage who are: under age 15, 15–17, 18–24, over 24, do not know?" Only responses that totaled 100 percent were used in this and the gender and race/ethnicity questions described below.

Information on the sex of gang members was obtained by a single question: "What is the percentage of all of the members of the gangs you are reporting on who are: male, female, do not know?"

Information on the racial/ethnic identity of gang members was obtained by a single question: "For your jurisdiction, what percentage of all gang members do you estimate are: African American/black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Caucasian/white, or other (please identify)?"

Responses to these questions regarding age, sex, and race/ethnicity of gang members were used in the analyses for this Bulletin. Moore and Terrett (1998) and the National Youth Gang Center (1999a) have used responses to one question in the survey (asking for the number of gang members in respondents' respective jurisdictions) as a base for calculating the absolute percentage of gang members falling into age, gender, and race/ethnicity categories.⁴

Information on gang member involvement in criminal activity (other than

³ Unless response categories are noted, questions that follow were open ended.

⁴ Thus, weighted counts could be used in the analyses for this Bulletin pertaining to age, gender, and race/ethnicity. This procedure was not deemed appropriate for this Bulletin because this analysis focuses on significant differences in gang characteristics in different jurisdictions given various levels of involvement in drug activity, rather than on generating prevalence data. Moreover, use of weighted estimates would be misleading for analysis of covariation between variables.

drug sales and control of drug distribution) was obtained using the following question: "Please indicate the degree to which gang members are estimated to have engaged in the following offenses in your jurisdiction in 1996." The listed offenses were aggravated assault, robbery, larceny/theft, burglary/breaking and entering, and motor vehicle theft. Survey recipients were provided four response categories: high, medium, low, and not involved. No attempt was made to elicit the number of offenses for which gang members were arrested in 1996 because such data generally are not available (see Curry, 1996).

Two questions were used to determine the year of onset of gang problems in particular jurisdictions. First, respondents were asked, "Have you had gang problems in your jurisdiction prior to 1996?" Those respondents who answered "yes" to this question were asked, "In approximately what year did gangs begin to pose a problem in your jurisdiction?"

Findings

This section summarizes analyses that were conducted for this Bulletin. Readers are reminded that "drug trafficking" refers to gang member involvement in drug sales and gang control of drug distribution. A report, *Youth Gangs, Drugs, and Crime: Results From the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey*, which includes all tables and statistical tests (Howell and Gleason, 1998), is available from the National Youth Gang Center (for contact information, see "For Further Information" on page 10). Readers are referred to the full report for statistical significance tests. In this Bulletin, the term "significant" is used to describe relationships between variables at or above the 0.05 level of statistical significance. Virtually every correlation and proportional difference examined in the reported analyses is statistically significant at or above the 0.001 level. Observations involving small numbers of respondents are so noted by footnotes.

Drug Sales

On average, respondents estimated that 43 percent of the drug sales in their jurisdiction involved gang members. Rather than using the average response, it was determined that more meaningful observations could be made by aggregating responses into groups and referring to the percentage of all responses within each group for analyses in this Bulletin. Gang member involvement

in drug sales was divided into three response ranges: low (0–33 percent), medium (34–66 percent), and high (67–100 percent).⁵ This classification of responses revealed that 47 percent of all drug sales involved gang members at a low level, 26 percent at a medium level, and 27 percent at a high level. While the average for the entire response range (0–100 percent) was 43 percent, this division shows that the preponderance of responses fell into the low range (33 percent or less).⁶

In another part of the survey, respondents were asked if they included "drug gangs" in their responses to a question regarding whether they had active gangs (National Youth Gang Center, 1999a).⁷ More than half (57 percent) of the respondents who said they had active gangs included drug gangs in the scope of their youth gang definition.⁸ Because youth gangs are difficult to define, consensus is difficult to reach. Whether or not respondents included drug gangs in their youth gang definition greatly affected the distribution of responses on gang member involvement in drug sales.⁹ Respondents who included drug gangs in their youth gang definition reported a much larger proportion of drug sales involving gang members than did respondents who did not include drug gangs in their definition. In jurisdictions that did not include drug gangs in their definition, two-thirds of the respondents said that as much as 33 percent of their drug sales involved gang members. In

contrast, in jurisdictions that included drug gangs, two-thirds of the respondents said that as much as 70 percent of their drug sales involved gang members.

Drug Distribution

Respondents indicated that gangs did not control or manage most of the drug distribution in their jurisdictions. More than two-thirds of the respondents reported gang control of drug distribution at none to less than half; nearly half (47 percent) of the respondents said that gangs "control or manage" less than one-fourth of all drug distribution in their localities.¹⁰ In contrast, less than one-third of respondents said gangs controlled more than half of the drug distribution in their jurisdictions.

Again, the inclusion of drug gangs in respondents' definitions of youth gangs greatly affected the distribution of responses on gang control of drug distribution. Only 12 percent of the respondents in jurisdictions that did not include drug gangs said gangs controlled or managed more than half of the drug distribution. In contrast, in jurisdictions that included drug gangs, 41 percent of the respondents said gangs controlled or managed more than half (or all) of the drug distribution. Thus, the effect of including drug gangs in respondents' youth gang definition skewed responses toward a higher level of gang control of drug distribution.

Demographic Factors

Gender. Females represented a smaller proportion of gang members in jurisdictions that reported gang member involvement in drug sales and gang control of drug distribution. Although they were only slightly less prevalent in jurisdictions that reported high levels of gang member involvement in drug sales, they were significantly less likely to be members of gangs that controlled drug distribution. In the 12 jurisdictions¹¹ that reported gang control of all of the drug distribution and also reported the gender of gang members, females represented only 6 percent of gang members,

⁵ Respondents who said "do not know" or whose estimates totaled more than or less than 100 percent were excluded from all analyses.

⁶ In an analysis not included in this Bulletin, the spectrum of responses (0–100 percent) was divided into those that were above and those that were below the midpoint (that is, 50 percent of all drug sales). As a result, 54 percent of all responses fell below the midpoint, 34 percent fell above it, and the remaining 12 percent of responses were exactly 50 percent. An examination of the polar (lowest and highest) quadrants showed that in the lowest quadrant, 40 percent of the respondents estimated that gang members were involved in one-fourth or less of all drug sales. In the highest quadrant, 23 percent of all respondents estimated that gang members were involved in three-fourths or more of all drug sales. Thus, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of all respondents fell into the extreme quadrants.

⁷ See page 8 of this Bulletin for characteristics that distinguish bona fide gangs from drug gangs according to Klein (1995, p. 132).

⁸ Jurisdictions that included drug gangs in their responses were included in all analyses for this Bulletin.

⁹ The authors are grateful to David Curry, University of Missouri-St. Louis, for suggesting this line of analysis.

¹⁰ This estimate might have been lower if respondents had been asked to make a distinction between street-level and organizational control of drug distribution.

¹¹ Readers are cautioned that this observation involves a small number of respondents.

compared with a national average of 11 percent (National Youth Gang Center, 1999a).¹² Conversely, in jurisdictions that reported no gang control of drug distribution, females represented almost 15 percent of gang members.

Age. Regardless of the extent of gang member involvement in drug sales, respondents estimated that the largest

proportion of their gang members were juveniles (ages 15 to 17) (see table 1).¹³ However, the prevalence of gang members age 18 and older increased in jurisdictions in which the level of gang member involvement in drug sales was “moderate” or “high.” There tended to be fewer gang members ages 15 to 17 in these jurisdictions.

A more distinct age-related pattern was observed with respect to gang-controlled drug distribution (see table 2). Respondents who said gangs controlled none of the drug distribution estimated that 79 percent of their gang members were juveniles (age 17 or younger). In contrast, in the 12 jurisdictions that reported gang control of all drug distribution and also reported the age of gang members,¹⁴ respondents estimated that 42 percent of their gang members were juveniles and that 58 percent were young adults (age 18 and older). Thus, on average, the prevalence of young adult gang members increased significantly as gang control of drug distribution increased.

The average age of gang members also was affected by population characteristics in jurisdictions that responded to the two questions about drug trafficking. In the largest jurisdictions (those with populations of 250,000 or more), gangs consisted of approximately equal proportions of juveniles and young adults. Two age-related trends were observed in smaller jurisdictions. The percentage of juvenile gang members increased significantly, while the percentage of young adult gang members decreased significantly as population size decreased.

In sum, age varied more significantly with gang control of drug distribution than with gang member involvement in drug sales. Older gang members appear to be much more involved in drug distribution than with drug sales. A significant age shift was also observed with respect to population size. Gang members age 18 and older were significantly more involved in both the sale and distribution of drugs in larger jurisdictions.

Race/Ethnicity. Table 3 shows that Caucasian and Hispanic gang members were significantly more prevalent in jurisdictions with low levels of gang member involvement in drug sales (0–33 percent) and that African American gang members were significantly more prevalent in jurisdictions with high levels of gang member involvement in drug sales (67–100 percent).¹⁵ At the low level of drug sales, 23 percent of gang members were African

¹² Readers should recall that the average percentage—not a percentage of the total number of gang members—is used in this analysis. Females represented 10 percent of the total number of gang members reported by all respondents (National Youth Gang Center, 1999a).

¹³ The average percentage, rather than a percentage of the total number of gang members, is used in this analysis. Of the total number of gang members reported by all respondents, 16 percent were estimated to be under age 15, 34 percent ages 15 to 17 years old, 37 percent ages 18 to 24, and 13 percent over age 24 (National Youth Gang Center, 1999a).

Table 1: Level of Gang Member Involvement in Drug Sales, by Age of Gang Members (Unweighted*)

Level of Involvement	Age			
	Under 15	15–17	18–24	Over 24
67–100% (n=232)	20%	43%	30%	7%
34–66% (n=217)	20	44	30	6
0–33% (n=407)	23	47	26	4
0–100% (n=856)	21	45	28	5

Notes: The percentages within each level of involvement may not equal 100 percent due to rounding; *n*=the number of observations.

* The averages reported in this table do not account for the number of gang members reported in each jurisdiction.

Table 2: Level of Gang Control of Drug Distribution, by Age of Gang Members (Unweighted*)

Level of Control	Age			
	Under 15	15–17	18–24	Over 24
All (n=12†)	10%	32%	47%	11%
More than half (n=279)	19	42	31	8
Less than half (n=220)	23	43	29	5
Less than one-fourth (n=401)	21	49	26	4
None (n=58)	31	48	19	1
Overall average‡ (n=970)	21	46	28	5

Notes: The percentages within each level of involvement may not equal 100 percent due to rounding; *n*=the number of observations.

* The averages reported in this table do not account for the number of gang members reported in each jurisdiction.

† Caution should be exercised in interpreting these data because fewer than 20 observations were available for estimation. Twelve jurisdictions that said gangs control all of the drug distribution also provided information on the age of gang members.

‡ These averages were derived from the estimates of respondents who responded to the questions regarding drug distribution.

¹⁴ Readers are cautioned that this observation involves a small number of respondents.

¹⁵ The average percentage—not a percentage of the total number of gang members—is used in this analysis. Hispanics represented 44 percent of the total number of gang members reported by all respondents; African Americans, 35 percent; Caucasians, 14 percent; Asians, 5 percent; and others, 2 percent (National Youth Gang Center, 1999a).

American, 34 percent were Hispanic, and 34 percent were Caucasian. In contrast, at the high level of drug sales, 50 percent of gang members were African American, 24 percent were Hispanic, and 22 percent were Caucasian.

African American gang members were most prevalent in jurisdictions reporting high levels of gang control of drug distribution (see table 4). Their proportion increased from 18 percent in jurisdictions reporting no gang control of drug distribution to 59 percent in the 14 jurisdictions reporting gang control of all drug distribution and also reporting the race/ethnicity of gang members.¹⁶ Other racial/ethnic groups were significantly more prevalent in jurisdictions reporting a low degree of gang control of drug distribution. For example, in jurisdictions reporting gang control of less than one-fourth of drug distribution, 36 percent of gang members were Caucasian, and in jurisdictions reporting gang control of all drug distribution, only 18 percent were Caucasian. The same pattern was evident for Hispanics and Asians.

In sum, the greater the prevalence of African American gang members in the jurisdiction, the larger the proportion of drug sales accounted for by gang members and the greater the extent of gang control of drug distribution. The opposite pattern was observed for all other racial/ethnic groups, except for “others,”¹⁷ whose prevalence did not change significantly.

The Drug Trafficking Context

Population Size. Gang involvement in drug trafficking (member sales and gang control of drug distribution) was spread throughout various population categories, but gangs were estimated to control slightly more of the drug distribution in large cities than in suburban areas, small cities, towns, and rural counties. The prevalence of gang member involvement in drug sales was approximately equal in suburban areas, small cities, towns, rural counties, and the largest cities, and none of the differences among population categories were statistically significant for either type of drug trafficking.

¹⁶ Readers are cautioned that this observation involves a small number of respondents.

¹⁷ Nationally, only 2 percent of gang members were identified as belonging to “other” racial/ethnic groups. This category primarily consisted of American Indian (45 percent), Polynesian (27 percent), Middle Eastern (8 percent), and Haitian (5 percent) gang members (National Youth Gang Center, 1999a).

Table 3: Level of Gang Member Involvement in Drug Sales, by Race/Ethnicity of Gang Members (Unweighted*)

Level of Involvement	Race/Ethnicity				
	African American	Hispanic	Caucasian	Asian	Other
67–100% (n=250)	50%	24%	22%	3%	1%
34–66% (n=235)	38	26	28	6	2
0–33% (n=427)	23	34	34	7	2
0–100% (n=912)	34	29	29	6	2

Notes: The percentages within each level of involvement may not equal 100 percent due to rounding; *n*=the number of observations.

* The averages reported in this table do not account for the number of gang members reported in each jurisdiction.

Table 4: Level of Gang Control of Drug Distribution, by Race/Ethnicity of Gang Members (Unweighted*)

Level of Control	Race/Ethnicity				
	African American	Hispanic	Caucasian	Asian	Other
All (n=14†)	59%	19%	18%	4%	1%
More than half (n=287)	50	24	21	4	1
Less than half (n=235)	35	29	28	5	3
Less than one-fourth (n=423)	22	32	36	7	2
None (n=61)	18	30	43	8	0
Total/Average‡ (n=1,020)	33	29	30	6	2

Notes: The percentages within each level of involvement may not equal 100 percent due to rounding; *n*=the number of observations.

* The averages reported in this table do not account for the number of gang members reported in each jurisdiction.

† Caution should be exercised in interpreting these data because fewer than 20 observations were available for estimation. Fourteen jurisdictions that said gangs control all of the drug distribution also provided information on the race/ethnicity of gang members.

‡ These averages were derived from the estimates of respondents who responded to the question regarding drug distribution.

Gang member involvement in drug sales and gang control of drug distribution were substantial in small cities, towns, and rural counties with populations under 25,000. Nearly one-third of respondents in these jurisdictions said gang members accounted for two-thirds or more of all drug sales. Nearly one-fourth of respondents in these areas said gangs controlled more than one-half of the drug distribution. Overall, population is not a factor in the presence or absence of drug trafficking;

gang drug trafficking occurs in populations of all sizes.

Geographical Region. Both gang member involvement in drug sales and gang control of drug distribution varied significantly across the four major geographic regions.¹⁸ The average proportions of drug sales estimated to involve gang members were as follows: Northeast,

¹⁸ Uniform Crime Reports regions, as defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

41 percent; Midwest, 47 percent; South, 45 percent; and West, 38 percent. Gang control of drug distribution was significantly lower in the Northeast (10 percent) than in the other three regions: Midwest, 29 percent; South, 35 percent; and West, 25 percent.

The prevalence of particular racial/ethnic groups also varied significantly among the four geographic regions on both drug trafficking measures. With respect to drug sales, the greatest magnitude of variation was reported for Hispanics. While they represented 58 percent of the gang members in the West, they represented only 17 percent of gang members in the Midwest. Thus, Hispanics were greatly overrepresented in the West. In contrast with their national average within gangs (34 percent), African Americans were overrepresented in the Midwest (36 percent) and South (49 percent) regions and greatly underrepresented in the West (12 percent). Compared with their national average (29 percent), Caucasians were somewhat overrepresented in the Northeast (31 percent) and Midwest (38 percent) and underrepresented in the West (19 percent). Almost identical patterns were observed for gang control of drug distribution.

Year of gang problem onset. The onset year of gang problems in jurisdictions significantly affected both drug sales and control of drug distribution by gangs (see table 5). In general, larger propor-

Table 5: Period of Gang Problem Onset, by Average Percentage of Drug Sales Involving Gang Members (Unweighted*)

Period of Onset	Average Percentage of Drug Sales
Before 1980 (n=69)	45%
1981-85 (n=60)	48
1986-90 (n=278)	47
1991-92 (n=162)	43
1993-94 (n=220)	41
1995-96 (n=52)	35
Average Percentage (n=841)	44

Note: n=the number of observations.
* The averages reported in this table do not account for the number of gang members reported in each jurisdiction.

tions of drug sales were attributed to gang members in "older" gang localities than in "newer" ones. However, gang members were not as extensively involved in drug sales in the oldest gang jurisdictions (in which gang problems began before 1980) as in jurisdictions in which onset occurred between 1981 and 1990. Jurisdictions reporting onset between 1981 and 1985 show the highest level of gang member involvement in drug sales. Jurisdictions in which gang problems emerged after 1985 show lower levels of gang member involvement in drug sales, and these levels decrease in each subsequent time period of onset through 1995-96. Thus, gang members in "newer" gang problem jurisdictions were much less likely than those in "older" gang problem jurisdictions to be involved in drug sales.

Onset year had an even stronger effect on gang control of drug distribution (see table 6).¹⁹ The peak gang problem onset period for gang control of drug distribution was 1981 to 1985, after which gang control of distribution declined in each subsequent time period for gang problem onset through 1995-96. The average percentages shown in table 6 indicate that gangs control significantly less of the drug distribution in "newer" gang problem jurisdictions than in "older" ones.

The Drug Sales-Distribution Connection

The overlap between gang member involvement in drug sales and gang control of drug distribution was significant, as expected. In the 15 jurisdictions that reported gang control of all drug distribution, every respondent reported that gang members were responsible for two-thirds or more of all drug sales. Conversely, when the reported percentage of drug sales involving gang members dropped to one-third or less, 80 percent of respondents said gangs controlled less than one-fourth of the drug distribution. In other words, if gang members are involved in either drug sales or drug distribution, then they (or gangs in their jurisdiction) are likely to be involved in both activities. Similarly, in jurisdictions in which gang members

¹⁹ Table 6 was constructed using a formula that converted responses to the drug distribution question into interval responses from 0 to 100 percent (1, all, 100 percent; 2, more than half, 75 percent; 3, less than half, 37.5 percent; 4, less than one-fourth, 12.5 percent; and 5, none, 0).

Table 6: Period of Gang Problem Onset, by Average Percentage of Drug Distribution Controlled/Managed by Gangs (Unweighted*)

Period of Onset	Degree of Drug Distribution
Before 1980 (n=76)	44%
1981-85 (n=63)	47
1986-90 (n=314)	42
1991-92 (n=185)	34
1993-94 (n=235)	32
1995-96 (n=73)	24
Average Percentage (n=946)	37

Note: n=the number of observations.
* The averages reported in this table do not account for the number of gang members reported in each jurisdiction.

are not actively involved in drug sales, gangs tend not to be actively involved in control of drug distribution.

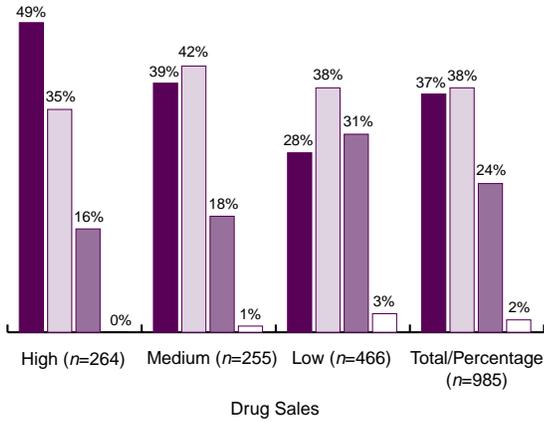
The Gang, Drugs, and Crime Connection

Drug trafficking and criminal involvement. In another analysis (National Youth Gang Center, 1999a, pp. 34-35), gang members tended to be involved in larceny/theft, followed by aggravated assault, motor vehicle theft, and burglary, in that order. Gang members were not reported to be extensively involved in robbery; almost half of the respondents reported "low" degrees of gang member involvement in this offense.

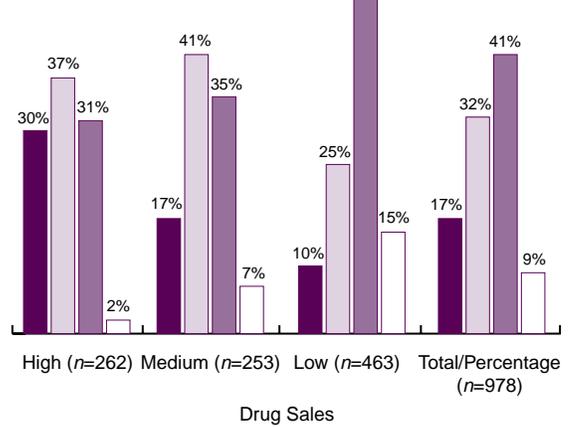
Figure 1 shows the degree to which gang members were reported to be involved in specific criminal offenses given their level of involvement in drug sales. The five measured offenses were aggravated assault, robbery, larceny/theft, burglary/breaking and entering, and motor vehicle theft. The bar graphs show the degree to which gang members were reported to be involved in the five offenses at four levels (high, medium, low, and not involved) for each of three categories representing the proportion of drug sales involving gang members (high, medium, and low). For example, figure 1 shows that in jurisdictions in which gang member involvement in drug sales was estimated to be "high," 49 percent of gang

Figure 1: Level of Gang Member Involvement in Drug Sales, by Level of Gang Member Involvement in Related Offenses (Unweighted*)

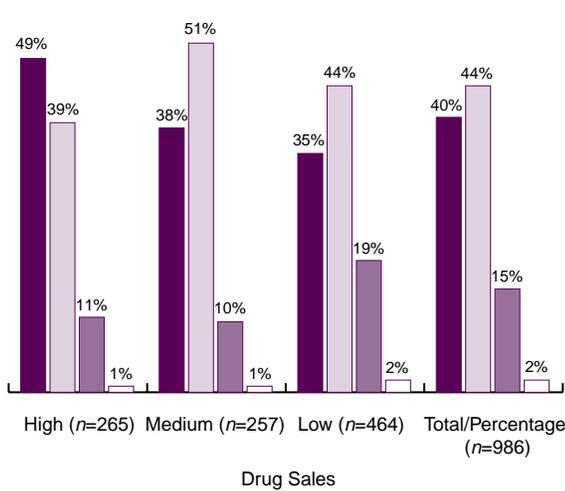
Aggravated Assault



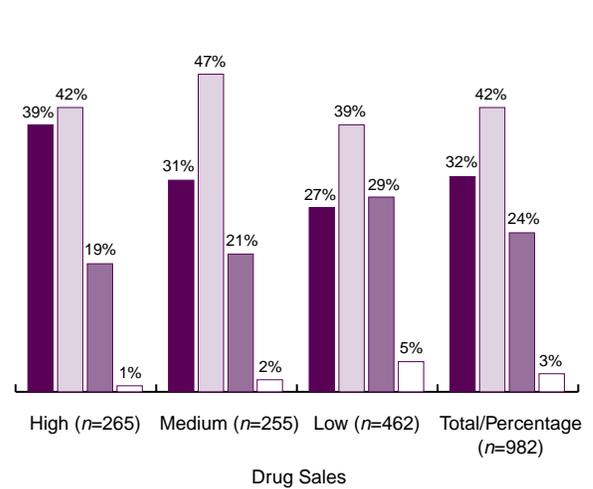
Robbery



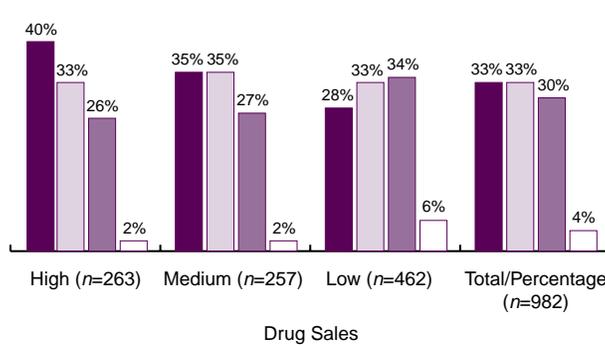
Larceny/Theft



Burglary/Breaking and Entering



Motor Vehicle Theft



Notes: These bar graphs show the percentages of gang members involved in criminal offenses at high, medium, and low levels when involvement in drug sales is at high, medium, and low levels. *n*=the number of observations. "High"=67–100 percent; "Medium"=34–66 percent; "Low"=0–33 percent.

* The averages reported in this table do not account for the number of gang members reported in each jurisdiction.

Legend: High Medium Low Not Involved

members were involved in aggravated assault to a “high” degree, 35 percent to a “medium” degree, and 16 percent to a “low” degree.

A similar pattern was evident for the remaining four offenses. As gang member involvement in drug sales increased, the degree of gang member involvement in robbery, larceny/theft, burglary/breaking and entering, and motor vehicle theft increased significantly at the high level of criminal involvement. In jurisdictions reporting a high level of gang member involvement in drug sales, an average of 49 percent of all gang members were estimated to be involved to a high degree in aggravated assault and larceny/theft. In the same jurisdictions, 40 percent of gang members were estimated to be involved to a high degree in motor vehicle theft, 39 percent in burglary/breaking and entering, and 30 percent in robbery. Similar crime patterns were observed for jurisdictions reporting a high degree of gang control of drug distribution.

The overlapping percentages in figure 1 do not clearly reveal how changes in each measure—drug trafficking and involvement in other crimes—are affected by changes in the other. Separate analyses for gang member drug sales and gang control of drug distribution (reported in Howell and Gleason, 1998) showed significant correlations between the two measures of drug trafficking and other crimes. The correlation was strongest for robbery, followed by aggravated assault, then other offenses. Howell and Gleason’s analysis also showed very high correlations between various crimes other than drug trafficking. In fact, the strongest correlations were between robbery and aggravated assault, followed by robbery and motor vehicle theft, then robbery and either drug sales or drug distribution (in all jurisdictions that responded to the drug trafficking questions).²⁰

When gang members are involved in one form of criminal activity, they are likely to be involved in other types of crimes. As Klein (1995) observed, involvement in “cafeteria-style” (widely varied)

crime is typical in youth gangs. Studies of gang members within large adolescent samples show that gang members engage in a wide variety of offenses besides drug trafficking,²¹ including drug and alcohol use, public disorder, property damage, theft, extortion, robbery, carrying illegal guns, and many other general acts of delinquency. Fighting with other gangs is also common. Gang members in an 11-city survey of middle school students said that the most characteristic feature of their gang was fighting with other gangs (Esbensen, Deschenes, and Winfree, in press). Multivariate analyses²² of the relationships between gang member involvement in drug trafficking and criminal offenses will be required, because other variables, such as intergang conflicts, may be influencing gang involvement in criminal offenses.

Program Implications

Although gang member involvement in drug sales is spread across all population categories, it accounts for a substantial proportion of the drug sales in less than one-fourth of all jurisdictions reporting youth gang problems in the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey. Youth gang control of drug distribution affects about one-third of gang problem jurisdictions. Drug gangs may be more prevalent in these localities, which would increase the proportion of involved gangs. Active control of drug distribution by youth gangs appears to be more prevalent in heavily populated jurisdictions in which young adults (age 18 and older) are more prevalent among youth gang members (see tables 1 and 2).

It appears that a relatively small number of jurisdictions have serious youth gang drug trafficking problems. Klein’s (1995) national survey of law enforcement agencies produced a similar finding. In Klein’s interviews with gang experts in police departments in 261 “notable gang cities,” only 14 percent reported a major role of youth gangs in drug distribution, and distinct drug gangs were reported in 16 percent of the cities (1995, p. 36). In most of these cities, the drug gangs did not represent the majority of the gangs. Overall, 72 percent of the cities “reported the gang-

crack connection to be moderate, weak, or nonexistent.”

There is some evidence that the most affected jurisdictions are cities in which gang problems first emerged in the early 1980’s. Cities with newer youth gang problems are much less likely to have youth gangs that control drug trafficking enterprises. Each jurisdiction needs to assess the youth gang problem carefully to determine whether or not drug trafficking is a major cause for concern. A thorough assessment should consider at least the specific characteristics of the gangs, the sex and ages of gang members, the crimes gangs commit and the victims of their crimes, and the localities or areas they affect. No assumptions should be made about youth gang problems in a particular community before an assessment is performed.

As a first step, jurisdictions experiencing youth gang problems should attempt to distinguish between bona fide youth gangs and drug gangs. In some localities, the latter appear to account for much of the drug trafficking that law enforcement agencies attribute to youth gangs. This distinction has important implications for interventions, particularly law enforcement investigation and interdiction tactics. Drug gangs, also called “crack” gangs, grew out of the narcotics trade—not out of youth gangs (Klein, 1995; Moore, 1990). Klein and Maxson’s (1996) law enforcement survey in 201 cities found that “specialty drug gangs” constituted only 9 percent of all gangs. Nevertheless, these drug gangs may be responsible for a significant proportion of drug sales and violence in some cities. Although the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey did not ask respondents to report the existence or number of drug gangs, their inclusion in gang definitions makes a significant difference in law enforcement estimates of gang involvement in drug trafficking. Unfortunately, researchers “do not know enough . . . to attempt to differentiate between drug gangs and the broad array of groups that comprise street gangs” (Klein, 1995, p. 130). However, Klein (table 7) suggests several common differences between (youth) street gangs and drug gangs that—as a starting point—can help jurisdictions differentiate between the two and develop appropriate responses for both (see Klein, 1995, p. 132).

Successfully breaking up youth gang drug operations may require different approaches, depending on the type of gang

²⁰ Analysis of the data using Goodman and Kruskal’s gamma to measure associations between each of the two drug trafficking measures and other crimes (Howell and Gleason, 1998) found that all were statistically significant. The pairs with the strongest association were gang control of drug distribution and robbery, followed by gang member drug sales and robbery. The association between aggravated assault and either drug trafficking measure was next in strength.

²¹ See Thornberry (1998) for a summary of four major studies.

²² Multivariate techniques of analysis examine which variables account for most of the variance when other factors are taken into account.

Table 7: Common Differences Between Street Gangs and Drug Gangs

Street Gangs	Drug Gangs
Various (“cafeteria-style”) crimes.	Crime focused on drug business.
Larger groups.	Smaller groups.
Less cohesive organization.	More cohesive organization.
Ill-defined roles for members.	Market-defined roles for members.
Code of loyalty.	Requirement of loyalty.
Residential territories.	Sales market territories.
Members may sell drugs.	Members do sell drugs.
Controlled by intergang rivalries.	Controlled by competition.
Younger, on average, but wider age range.	Older, on average, but narrower age range.

Source: Adapted from Klein (1995), p. 132.

(Howell and Decker, 1999). Because youth gangs generally are involved only in street-level drug distribution, the proceeds of which typically are used for personal consumption, providing legitimate ways of earning money may be an effective intervention strategy. Suppression approaches (formal and informal social control procedures) may be more effective with drug gangs (see the Bureau of Justice Assistance’s 1997 prototype for police suppression of drug gangs).

Several youth gang programs hold promise for reducing drug trafficking. OJJDP’s Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Program model (also known as the Spergel model), currently being tested in five demonstration sites (Bloomington, IN; Mesa and Tucson, AZ; Riverside, CA; and San Antonio, TX), appears to be a promising broad approach to combating a wide range of gang crimes, including drug trafficking (for descriptions of these programs, see Burch and Kane, 1999). Preliminary data from this initiative suggest a reduction of drug use and selling among targeted gang youth. An early pilot of the comprehensive model, Chicago’s Gang Violence Reduction Program, which targeted two of the city’s most violent gangs, showed overall effectiveness, including reduction of drug selling among program clients when a combination of sanctions and coordinated services were delivered to them (Spergel and Grossman, 1997). The Tri-Agency Resource Gang Enforcement Team (TARGET) integrates and coordinates

the work of the Westminster Police Department, the Orange County, CA, District Attorney, and the Orange County Probation Department in removing gang leadership and the most chronic recidivists from the community (Capizzi, Cook, and Schumacher, 1995; Kent et al., in press). The JUDGE (Jurisdictions United for Drug Gang Enforcement) program in San Diego, CA, is an example of multiagency coordination of investigations, prosecutions, and sanctions of violent members of drug-trafficking gangs (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997). Another multiagency strategy, Boston’s enforcement, intervention, and prevention initiative (Kennedy, 1997; Kennedy et al., 1996), targets the city’s most dangerous gang and drug offenders using a variety of enforcement-oriented strategies.

Programs that provide alternatives to gang life for active gang members also hold promise for reducing involvement in drug sales. Many gang members would give up drug selling for reasonable wages (Huff, 1998). Two inner-city gang programs that provide such job opportunities for gang members appear particularly promising in this regard: the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprises (1999) Violence-Free Zone initiatives, and the Los Angeles Homeboy Industries and Jobs for a Future (Gaouette, 1997). Many other programs that provide alternatives to gang involvement can also help reduce gang member drug trafficking, such as the Boys and Girls Clubs’ Targeted Outreach program (see Howell, in press, for detailed information on this and other

promising approaches). School-based antigang curriculums, such as Gang Resistance Education and Training, (G.R.E.A.T.) appear promising for preventing gang involvement (Esbensen and Osgood, 1999), but other interventions may be needed to prevent adolescent involvement in drug selling. Preventing early initiation into drug use is a promising avenue, because early onset of drug use is a major risk factor for gang membership (Hill et al., 1999), and drug use is a precursor to drug trafficking (Van Kammen, Maguin, and Loeber, 1994).

Selected interventions should be community specific and based on thorough assessments of gang crimes. As Block and Block (1993, p. 9) caution, “A program to reduce gang involvement in drugs in a community in which gang members are most concerned with defense of turf has little chance of success.” The most promising comprehensive models for dealing with bona fide youth gangs are built on collaboration among all sectors of the community and the juvenile justice system (Burch and Chemers, 1997; Howell, in press).

The criminal activities of youth gangs have important program and policy implications. Data from the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey support earlier studies that show the criminal versatility of youth gangs (Klein, 1995, p. 68; Miller, 1992; Thornberry, 1998). Drug trafficking is only one of many types of crimes committed by youth gangs. Thus, it is not surprising that drug crimes are highly correlated with robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft. Although gang member involvement in drug sales and gang control of drug distribution were strongly correlated with gang member involvement in all of the other five measured criminal offenses, the survey results did not suggest a particular pattern of criminal activity. The data suggest that gang drug trafficking may take place concurrently with other criminal activities, rather than cause other crimes. Further research on this relationship is needed.

In their review of the gangs, drugs, and violence connection, Howell and Decker (1999) concluded that most youth gang violence is not related to drug trafficking. Decker and Van Winkle (1994) concluded that most violent crimes committed by youth gangs are related to intergang and interpersonal conflicts. The analyses reported in this Bulletin support Howell and Decker’s conclusion. Youth gang interventions should be designed to prevent and reduce all types of criminality—not just drug crimes.

Conclusion

Youth gang involvement in drug sales and distribution is widespread, cutting across all demographic sectors, particularly age, race/ethnicity, geographic region, and population categories. However, according to law enforcement agency responses to the 1998 National Youth Gang Survey, extensive gang involvement in drug trafficking appears to be concentrated in a relatively small number of jurisdictions.

Every jurisdiction experiencing a gang problem needs to assess its specific problem before deciding on a response.²³ A different community response likely will be needed for different types of gangs involved in drug trafficking. Adult criminal organizations that control drug distribution systems and drug gangs are susceptible to suppression strategies (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997). Youth gangs may be less tractable because they are embedded in the social and cultural fabric of communities and integrally related to the adolescent developmental period. They require a more comprehensive response that combines prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies (Burch and Chemers, 1997).

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²³ For an assessment process that can be adapted for any size jurisdiction, see National Youth Gang Center, 1999b.

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