



OJJDP FACT SHEET

Shay Bilchik, Administrator February 2000 #01

Vietnamese Youth Gang Involvement

by Phelan A. Wyrick

The city of Westminster in Orange County, CA, has completed a study funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) that examined factors related to gang involvement by Vietnamese American youth. It is one of only a few systematic quantitative studies on this topic. This Fact Sheet summarizes findings from the study's final report, *Cultural Explanations for Vietnamese Youth Involvement in Street Gangs*.

Westminster has a population of 86,000. Approximately 25 percent of the residents are Asians; most are Vietnamese refugees who live in or near an area known as Little Saigon. City law enforcement officials attribute as much as 17 percent of all juvenile delinquency and 48 percent of all Asian delinquency in Westminster to gang-involved Asian youth.

Researchers interviewed both gang- and nongang-involved male Vietnamese youth between ages 11 and 19. A parent of each youth was also interviewed separately. A total of 233 parent-child pairs were interviewed in either English or Vietnamese, according to each person's preference. All participants lived in or near Little Saigon. By interviewing both gang and nongang youth, researchers were able to examine factors that distinguished the two groups.

Defining Gang Involvement

Because there is no consensus on a specific definition of gang involvement, researchers used two independent definitions to differentiate between gang and nongang youth. The first definition, which is more traditional, categorizes a youth as gang involved if he admits to being involved in a gang or is identified as a gang member by a criminal justice agency (e.g., on a police crime report). The second definition, called social centrality, classifies a youth as gang involved if he identifies at least one gang member among his peers who provides core social support. This definition is broader than most. However, it has the possible advantage of identifying youth in the early stages of gang involvement or who are gang involved but do not readily identify themselves as gang members and have not been identified as such by law enforcement.

Of the 233 youth in the study, 29 (12 percent) were classified as gang involved using the traditional definition and 83 (36 percent) were classified as gang involved using the social centrality definition. Three out of four youth classified as gang involved

under the traditional definition also fell under the social centrality definition. Across seven categories of offending, youth identified as gang involved under both definitions reported higher levels of delinquency than did nongang-involved youth. However, youth identified under the social centrality definition reported lower levels of delinquency than did the group identified under the traditional definition.

Hypothesis Testing

With the help of focus groups composed of experts in Vietnamese culture and experts in youth gangs, researchers developed hypotheses concerning both cultural and noncultural aspects of the etiology of youth gang involvement. They tested three cultural and five noncultural hypotheses using both the traditional and social centrality definitions of gang involvement as dependent variables. Cultural hypotheses generally focused on cultural identity issues and the acquisition, acceptance, and rejection of Vietnamese and American cultural identities. For example, one cultural hypothesis suggests that youth with low Vietnamese identities and low American identities are more likely to become involved in gangs than youth with strong identities in either culture. One of the noncultural hypotheses suggests that youth who perceive that joining a gang has greater benefits than costs will become involved with gangs.

Predictors of Vietnamese Youth Gang Involvement

Analyses of these and other hypotheses indicated that noncultural explanations are more predictive of gang involvement than cultural explanations. Contrary to popular belief, the study found that Vietnamese youth who reject their Asian identity and find it difficult to adopt an American identity are not more likely than other Vietnamese youth to become involved with gangs. The belief that gang involvement is a way for a youth to obtain an identity when it is difficult to obtain it through family and social environment was also not supported by the results of this study. In fact, none of the cultural or noncultural hypotheses were fully supported. Instead, researchers identified two main factors that predict Vietnamese youth gang involvement: progang attitudes and exposure to gangs in the neighborhood. Four predictors were

found to influence the development of progang attitudes: negative school attitude, family conflict, poor social integration (i.e., a generalized sense of alienation), and perceived benefits of gang membership.

These findings suggest that while services focusing solely on cultural identity issues may have benefits, they will not be effective in preventing or reducing gang involvement by Vietnamese youth. Instead, services should focus on improving youth attitudes about school, reducing feelings of alienation, and modifying perceptions that gangs are beneficial to their members. Furthermore, services will prevent gang involvement if they address family conflict and provide some buffer against the influence of neighborhood gangs.

For Further Information

The final report, *Cultural Explanations for Vietnamese Youth Involvement in Street Gangs* (prepared under OJJDP grant number 95-JD-FX-0014), is available online (ojjdp.ncjrs.org/pubs/gang.html#180955) from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse:

Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse
800-638-8736; 301-519-5212 (fax)
askncjrs@ncjrs.org (e-mail)
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