



# OJJDP FACT SHEET

John J. Wilson, Acting Administrator

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## Highlights of the 1999 National Youth Gang Survey

by Arlen Egley, Jr.

The 1999 National Youth Gang Survey is the fifth annual gang survey conducted since 1995 by the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC). The 1999 survey used the same sample as the surveys done from 1996 through 1998, which consisted of:

- ◆ A total of 1,216 police departments serving cities with populations of 25,000 or more (large cities).
- ◆ A total of 661 suburban county police and sheriff's departments (suburban counties).
- ◆ A randomly selected sample ( $n=398$ ) of police departments serving cities with populations between 2,500 and 24,999 (small cities).
- ◆ A randomly selected sample ( $n=743$ ) of rural county police and sheriff's departments (rural counties).

### Definition

Respondents to the 1999 survey were requested to report information only for youth gangs, 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.'" Motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, and exclusively adult gangs were excluded from the survey.

### Survey Results

Of 3,018 recipients, 2,603 (86 percent) responded to the 1999 survey. Forty-four percent of respondents reported active youth gangs in their jurisdiction in 1999, down 4 percent from 1998. National estimates based on survey results indicate that a total of 3,911 jurisdictions in the United States experienced gang activity in 1999, a 19-percent decline from the high of 4,824 in 1996. Respondents in 66 percent of large cities, 47 percent of suburban counties, 27 percent of small cities, and 18 percent of rural counties reported active youth gangs in 1999. Compared with 1998, these numbers represent a decline of 4 percent for large

cities, 3 percent for suburban counties, 5 percent for small cities, and 3 percent for rural counties.

More than 26,000 gangs were estimated to be active in the United States in 1999, down 9 percent from 1998. Since 1998, the number of gangs has decreased by 11 percent in suburban counties, 19 percent in small cities, and 23 percent in rural counties. Large cities, however, which account for 49 percent of all gangs, reported a 1-percent increase in the number of gangs since 1998.

More than 840,500 gang members were estimated to be active in the United States in 1999. This number represents an 8-percent increase from 1998, countering the decline from 1996 to 1998 and approaching the estimated high of nearly 846,500 members in 1996. The most significant changes from 1998 to 1999 occurred in suburban counties (27-percent increase) and rural counties (29-percent decrease). Large cities, which account for 60 percent of all gang members, reported a 4-percent increase, and small cities reported a 2-percent increase.

Fifty percent of gang members in 1999 were ages 18 to 24, an increase from 46 percent in 1998 and 37 percent in 1996. The proportion of gang members ages 15 to 17 decreased to 26 percent from a high of 34 percent in 1996. Race/ethnicity composition, which remained similar to previous years, was as follows: Hispanic (47 percent), African American (31 percent), Caucasian (13 percent), Asian (7 percent), and other (2 percent). In a question new to the 1999 survey, respondents were asked to identify gang members by social class. Fifty percent of gang members were reported as underclass, followed by working class (35 percent), middle class (12 percent), and upper middle class (3 percent).

Survey recipients were asked to estimate the proportion of their youth gang members who engage in specific types of serious and violent crimes. Offense types reported to be most prevalent among gang members are larceny/theft, aggravated assault, and burglary/breaking and entering. Respondents also estimated that

46 percent of youth gang members are involved in street drug sales to generate profits for the gang.

Overall, respondents in 1999 estimated that 18 percent of their gang members were migrants from another jurisdiction. The estimated percentage of migrant youth gang members varied markedly by area type, as follows: rural areas (34 percent), small cities (27 percent), suburban counties (20 percent), and large cities (17 percent). A large majority of all respondents (83 percent) agreed that the appearance of gang members outside of large cities in the 1990's was caused by the migration of young people from central cities.

The percentage of youth gangs that are considered drug gangs (i.e., organized specifically for the purpose of trafficking in drugs) increased from 34 percent in 1998 to 40 percent in 1999. The reported proportion of drug gangs varied by area type, as follows: rural counties, 51 percent (a 13-percent increase from 1998); large cities, 41 percent (a 6-percent increase); suburban counties, 39 percent (an 8-percent increase); and small cities, 26 percent (a 1-percent increase).

Respondents were also asked to rate the effectiveness (i.e., high, medium, low, none) of diverse program policies designed to combat youth gang problems. Suppression approaches were rated highly effective by 64 percent of respondents, followed by moderate law enforcement policies (48 percent), prevention and early intervention (35 percent), community mobilization (32 percent), opportunities provision (23 percent), and social intervention (15 percent). However, a majority of respondents indicated a need for greater emphasis on each type of strategy in their community.

Forty-four percent of 1999 respondents reported that their youth gang problem is "staying about the same," 31 percent that it is "getting better," and 25 percent that it is "getting worse." Results for the "getting worse" category mark a decline for the third

consecutive year. There is noticeable variation by area type in 1999, with respondents in 22 percent of large cities, 25 percent of suburban counties, 31 percent of small cities, and 36 percent of rural counties reporting that their gang problem is getting worse.

## Conclusion

Results from the 1999 National Youth Gang Survey suggest that the youth gang problem continues to be widespread and substantial across the United States. Nearly half of the survey respondents reported the presence of gang activity in their jurisdiction in 1999. The estimated number of gangs decreased from 1998, but the estimated number of gang members increased, and estimates of both gangs (more than 26,000) and gang members (more than 840,500) remained high in 1999.

## For Further Information

Extensive analysis of the 1999 survey and the forthcoming 2000 and 2001 surveys will be combined in a comprehensive report examining trends related to youth gangs. For additional information about youth gangs, call the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse at 800-638-8736 or contact NYGC at 800-446-0912 or [www.iir.com/nygc/](http://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.*

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