

Fact Sheet

## YOUTH GANGS

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### Introduction

Gang members represent a relatively small proportion of the adolescent population. However, they commit the majority of serious youth violence (Howell, 1998b; Thornberry, 1998). Along with the rapid proliferation of gangs since 1980, there have been growing concerns among lawmakers, law enforcement, educators, practitioners, and parents about gang behavior and gang violence. Researchers have been studying the gang phenomenon since the early 1900's, but have yet to delineate clearly the reasons why some youth may join gangs (Howell, 1998b; Thornberry, 1998). Little is also known about the effectiveness of many of the intervention programs that exist to combat the gang problem (Howell, 1998b). Overall, the dynamics of gang behavior and persistence in the United States are not well understood (Jankowski, 1991).

### Scope of the Problem

Based on 2,182 jurisdictions/ police and sheriff's departments that responded to the 2002 National Youth Gang Survey, there were an estimated 21,500 gangs and 731,500 gang members across the nation. The estimated number of gang members has decreased fourteen percent between 1996 and 2002. The majority of these gang members (85%) reside in large cities and suburban counties. For example, Chicago has an estimated 30,000-50,000 gang members. However, Los Angeles ranks first in the United States in gang-involved youth, with more than 58,000 gang members. California continues to have the most gangs and gang-related problems compared to any other state in the country, with more than 200 communities seriously affected by gang-related problems. It is estimated that (63%) of gang members are adults, (94%) are male<sup>1</sup>, and approximately 2% of gangs have mostly female members.

Most gangs are formed along racial or ethnic lines. It is estimated that (47%) of all gang members are Hispanic, (31%) are African-American, (13%) are White<sup>2</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> In 18 youth self-reported studies conducted between 1981 and 2005 25% to 49% of gang members were female. Klein and Maxson (2006).

<sup>2</sup> According to Esbensen and Winfree (1998) 25% of gang members were white.

and (7%) are Asian. There are also further ethnic distinctions within these larger groups, such as Chicano, Central American, and Puerto Rican gangs, all considered Latino. In California, Latino gangs comprise the majority of the gang population, although Asian gangs are on the rise. Most (but not all) Latino and African-American gangs are divided by neighborhoods or location. Rivalries tend to stem from these neighborhood divisions. Asian gangs tend to be motivated more by profit than neighborhood rivalries. Violence between ethnic gangs is normally intra-ethnic (e.g., one Latino gang vs. another Latino gang) based on neighborhood or location-based affiliation rather than inter-ethnic (e.g., Latino gang vs. African-American gang).

Gang members commit more serious and violent offenses than adolescents who are non-gang members (Howell, 1998b; Thornberry, 1998). They are not only more involved in committing delinquent acts, they are responsible for the majority of all delinquent acts that are committed (Thornberry, 1998). Survey respondents of the 1999 National Youth Gang Survey reported that the most prevalent offenses committed among gang members were larceny/theft, aggravated assault, and burglary/ breaking and entering (Egley, 2000).

Gangs tend to be composed of young males, ranging in age from 12-25 years, but there have been instances of gang members much younger and much older than this range. Some gangs are loosely knit and lack structure while others are highly organized and regimented. Indeed, gangs are organizations that develop strategies to optimize the chances of organizational survival, some more successfully than others. In many cases, gangs engage in a range of entrepreneurial activities designed to provide money, power, and prestige to members.

Gang members are more likely to have one or multiple arrests. There is a lower rate of reported delinquency in gangs that are all female than in gangs that are mixed gender or majority male. Conversely, there is less offending for males in all-male gangs than for males in mixed or majority male gangs.

### Risk Factors

Many of the risk factors for youth violence and delinquency also predict increased risk of gang involvement. In particular, researchers have emphasized the importance of neighborhood, family, school, and peer influences.

#### Neighborhood

Traditionally the majority of research on neighborhood influences on gangs has focused on the role of social disorganization. The basic idea is that poverty has caused a disintegration of social organization and social control that, in turn, has led to the emergence of gangs as alternate mechanisms that provide order, safety, and economic opportunities. Thus, youth growing up in these

communities are enticed by gang life because it provides them with something to do, material possessions, and protection from the existing violence on the streets. Indeed, studies have shown that the probability of joining a gang is higher in neighborhoods with low resources and high levels of community social disorganization (Covey, Menard, & Franzese, 1992; Thornberry, 1998; Payne, 2006). However, recent research (Klein & Maxson, 2006) argues that family economic disadvantage, socially disorganized neighborhoods are considered non-risk factors for joining gangs.

### Family

Family disorganization is another salient influence in joining a gang. Poor family management strategies increase the risk of gang membership (Thornberry, 1998). Poor strategies include low family involvement, inappropriate parental discipline, low parental control or monitoring, poor affective relationships, and parental conflict. Facing poor family relationships, a youth may be lured by a gang because it provides a "family" that is lacking at home. In some cases, parents who are themselves gang members may model and encourage the gang involvement of their children. However, more recent studies indicate that although lack of parental supervision represented a risk factor for youth gang involvement low attachment to parents does not represent a risk factor for joining gangs (Klein & Maxson, 2006).

### School

Educational variables have also been assessed as risk factors for gang membership. Studies have found that youth who have a low educational expectation have a higher risk of joining a gang. It is also a risk factor if a youth's parent(s) have low educational expectations for their child. Poor school performance and low commitment and involvement are also correlated with gang membership. Essentially, a high commitment to school indicates an attachment to conventional institutions. The less a youth bonds to these conventional institutions the more likely he/she will participate in gangs.

### Peers

One of the most robust findings in the literature is the link between having deviant peers and joining a gang. Having peers who are gang members greatly increases the likelihood of joining a gang. Peers who are engaged in this type of behavior may construe gang behavior as attractive and fun. The risk factor is increased if these peers have a favorable attitude about breaking the law. Gangs also provide a sense of comradeship and expectations of safety and protection that can be appealing to youth. In many cases, older gang members recruit younger children for a variety of tasks, essentially creating a cadre of "trainees" who are socialized into gang life from an early age.

## Core Involvement

The primary factors leading to 'core' involvement in gangs include:

- Lower school performance.
- Lower intelligence scores.
- Lower impulse control.
- Higher recorded delinquency.
- More often truant in school.
- Lower desire for rehabilitation.
- Fewer outside interests.
- Tendency for aggressive behavior.

## Reasons for Joining

The most significant reasons youths gave for joining gangs include:

- Protection.
- Have a territory.
- Feel a sense of belonging.
- To get money from drugs.
- Because their friend or family member was already involved.
- To feel important.
- To engage in illicit activities.

## Promising Strategies

Due to the complex interplay of factors that lead to gang membership, there are various types of intervention programs that have been developed. These programs mainly focus on prevention, intervention, or suppression (Howell, 1998a). Prevention strategies aim to prevent youth from joining gangs through education-type programs. Intervention programs aim to divert youth from crime by providing alternatives such as after-school programs, counseling, and job training. Suppression strategies use enforcement tactics that identify, isolate, and punish criminal offenders. A mixture of approaches is currently being tried across the United States, with considerable efforts directed towards police suppression programs (Howell, 1998a). Although there are many programs representing a variety of approaches, very few of these programs have been carefully evaluated.

An exception is the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms' Gang Resistance Education and Training Program (G.R.E.A.T.). This prevention program utilizes law enforcement officers to teach a 9-week curriculum to elementary and junior high students on resisting gang involvement and avoiding the use of violence. A number of evaluations of this program have been conducted. For example, Esbensen and Osgood (1999) surveyed 5,935 eighth-grade students in 11 sites and found that students who participated in the program reported more prosocial attitudes and lower rates of some types of delinquent behavior than students who

did not participate in the program. These results suggest that large school-based preventive programs may be effective in curtailing the gang problem, or at least in impacting attitudes and behaviors associated with gang involvement.

Howell (1998a) suggests that interventions should include multiple components, incorporating prevention, social intervention, treatment, suppression, and community mobilization approaches. One such program began in the Little Village area of Chicago and has been extended to other sites across the United States. The Little Village program targeted the older members of two of the most violent Latino gangs via two coordinated strategies: 1) increased probation department and police supervision and suppression to control violent or potentially hard-core violent youth; and 2) efforts to encourage at-risk youth to engage in conventional activities through education, jobs, job training, family support, and brief counseling. Preliminary evaluation results (after 4 years of program operation) point to a reduction in the rate of increase in gang violence in the Little Village area compared to the control area.

Still, effective prevention of gang involvement and gang activity remains a pressing challenge. In contrast to individual acts of violence that can be addressed by programs designed to reduce individual risk, gangs are also social organizations that provide an alternative option for youth competing for scarce resources in low-income neighborhoods. Social interventions that provide entry-level skills and low-paying jobs may simply not be able to compete with the social and economic opportunities provided by gangs. Similarly, harsher sentencing seems to exacerbate rather than prevent the problem, as gang members continue and escalate their gang activity in prison. A sustainable reduction in gang problems may require a focus on the multiple functions they serve and on programs that can provide reasonable and viable options for youth.

Another promising program is the Gang Intervention for Teens (GIFT) Pilot Program by the Riverside County Gang Task Force (RCGTF). The RCGTF was designed with a three-pronged approach consisting of prevention, intervention, and suppression operations. The task force consists of 25 different federal, state, county, and local law enforcement agencies including the Riverside County District Attorney's Office, the Riverside County Sheriff, and the Riverside County Probation Department. After two years of operation, the RCGTF decided it wanted to expand the prevention component of its program using the Moreno Valley as a pilot area.

The prevention program hinged on identification of middle school youth at-risk of joining gangs. It consists of four distinct phases; Training, Identification, Home Visits, and Documentation. In Phase One (Training), GTF officers provide training and education to School Resource Officers (SROs), school staff, and district administrators on the goals and implementation plan of the program. A unique aspect of this program is the participation of the SROs. Given their physical presence on school grounds, they possess valuable surveillance

information about the students and their behavior patterns that are necessary for the implementation of Phase Two.

During Phase Two (Identification), the gang task force officers are assisted by school officials and SROs in identifying at-risk juveniles. According to the RCGTF the program chooses to focus mainly on children that are “on the fence” of joining gangs. The SROs are in a position to witness student fights and altercations on the school campus. They also regularly conduct large town hall-type meetings and forums at the schools. Through these multiple techniques, they look for signs of gang association and try to identify at-risk students.

However, they believe that in order to “really reach these kids” beyond identification, a more personalized approach is necessary. This leads to Phase Three (Home Visits), where the members of the RCGTF and SROs divide in five teams of three officers to conduct home visitations. These home visitations are normally conducted one day out of the month, and officers may visit as many as 14 or 15 houses. During these visits the officers sit down with the parents of the at-risk youth and provide personalized gang awareness education. This includes showing parents what to look for in their children’s behavior that may indicate an association or an attraction to the gang subculture. The students and their siblings are present during these home visitations where they are counseled about the dangers and pitfalls of the gang lifestyle. At the conclusion of the visit, the parents are given information pamphlets containing referrals to county, state, and federal resources that may provide assistance to the parents’ particular needs in dealing with their children.

As the SROs have observed, many of the parents they visit are unaware of the full extent of their children’s activities--especially as they relate to gang activity and/or involvement. Many parents do not recognize the signs and indications of gang affiliation because they do not know what to look for. The home visitation teams often have to explain to parents that certain tattoos and markings or hand signs and gestures are associated with gang activity. Many of the tattoos are marked in areas of the body not readily visible. Parents have not seen these tattoos or markings because they never see their children with their t-shirts off. Similarly, notebook drawings and scribbles may be dismissed as innocuous doodles.

Finally, during Phase Four (Documentation), the SROs provide detailed reports based on these home visitations. These reports include basic information about ethnicity, the nature of the referral, the number of siblings in the house, whether or not parents have discovered gang paraphernalia in the child’s room, basic information about the parents or legal guardians, intervention actions, whether the parents were cooperative during the home visit, specific gangs that youth may become involved with, and type of resource materials issued to the parents. The reports also contain data summarizing what occurred during the home visitation and whether or not the child already claims to be a gangster. Although

this phase is still in development, the information contained in these reports is intended for documentation and to measure the effectiveness of the program.

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#### Internet Resources

- California Gang Investigators Association: [www.cgiaonline.org](http://www.cgiaonline.org).
- Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence: [www.colorado.edu/cspv](http://www.colorado.edu/cspv).
- National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations: [www.nagia.org](http://www.nagia.org).

National Criminal Justice Reference Service: [www.ncjrs.org](http://www.ncjrs.org).

National Institute of Justice: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/).

National Youth Gang Center: [www.iir.com/nygc](http://www.iir.com/nygc).

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U. S. Department of Justice: [www.usdoj.gov](http://www.usdoj.gov).