

Gangs

Introduction

The image of the violent, anti-social gangster is part of the American landscape, often romanticized and glamorized by popular culture. Gang activity in the United States has been traced to the early 19th century when youth gangs emerged from some immigrant populations. Now, as then, gangs provide identity and social relationships for some young people who feel marginalized by the dominant social, economic and cultural environments in which they live.¹

Gangs, however, are not simply a "street family" to some of the nation's disenfranchised. As distinguished by the [U.S. Department of Justice](#), "a group must be involved in a pattern of criminal acts to be considered a youth gang."²

Between 1980 and 1996, the U.S. experienced significant growth in youth gangs, when the number of cities and jurisdictions that reported gang problems rose from 286³ to approximately 4,800.⁴ [From 1996 to 1998 the growth seemed to slow down](#), but according to the [1999 National Youth Gang Survey](#) (<http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojdp/fs200020.pdf>), the number of gang members is again on the rise.

The survey reports that an estimated 26,000 gangs and 840,500 gang members were active in the U.S. in 1999. The survey also challenges the traditional view that urban centers are the hub of gang activity. Between 1998 and 1999, gang membership increased by 27% in suburban areas, and by 29% in rural areas.⁵

Overview

Gangs pose a significant threat to community safety. Understanding how gangs develop and what they offer to their members is critical in order to create effective intervention and prevention strategies. Although gangs all engage in criminal behavior, extensive research reveals that they have different codes of conduct, are motivated by different values, and commit different types of crimes. Appreciating such distinctions is crucial to developing effective local responses.

Even though gangs have distinct characteristics, they tend to be similar in that they:

1. Develop along racial and ethnic lines;⁶
2. Are male-dominated associations with an increased proliferation of female gangs;
3. Stake out a specific territory;
4. Operate as an organization that may be part of a larger group; and
5. Display symbols of their organization in dress, tattoos, graffiti, hand signals, language, etc.

Stop youth violence before it starts

Historically, youth have been drawn to gangs because they increase a sense of self-worth and acceptance in individuals and hold out promises of higher status and personal protection. Gang affiliation can provide the status and peer acceptance important in adolescent development that is otherwise unavailable to at-risk youth.

The common perception of youth gangs is that they are composed exclusively of racial and ethnic minorities. However, the [1998 National Youth Gang Survey](#) (www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/jjsum_11_00/) suggests that the proportion of gang members of particular race or ethnicity is largely a reflection of the demographics of their surrounding community. While Caucasians accounted for only 11 percent of gang members in urban areas, they constituted 30 percent of gang membership in small cities and rural counties.⁷

Recent research about youth gangs reveals that most members join before the age of 18, and, contrary to popular belief, they do not make membership a lifelong commitment. Three longitudinal studies showed that from one-half to two-thirds of members stay in a gang for one year or less.⁸ Unfortunately, gang lifestyles are sensationalized in fashion, music, and the mass media. Such attention serves to reinforce the attractiveness of gang membership, especially to adolescents, for whom a sense of belonging is an important aspect of identity formation.

Drugs, Guns & Violence

Despite the popular perception that belonging to a gang and drug-dealing go hand-in-hand, the research is somewhat contradictory. Recent studies conclude that larger gangs can be classified as "entrepreneurial gangs," that is, organized in a money-making enterprise like drug sales. Most gangs are better described as "street gangs," and are less focused on economic gain than other turf issues.⁹ Research conducted in California indicates that there was an increase in drug sales by gang members that paralleled high unemployment and the rise of the crack cocaine economy in the 1980s, but in general, drugs remain peripheral to the purposes and activities of the gang.¹⁰

Even though most gang members are not involved in organized drug trafficking, concern over drugs and violence related to gangs is not unfounded. Studies show that young gang members have a higher drug usage rate than non-gang members.¹¹ In addition, delinquency rates, including drug use, commission of violent offenses, and arrest rates, were higher for gang members.¹²

Perhaps the most threatening aspect of gang proliferation has been the increasing use of firearms. Gang members are shown to possess significantly more guns than other at-risk youth.¹³ Studies cite "the threat of a rival gang," as the primary factor motivating youth to carry guns. Older youth and young adults are motivated more by the fact that their peers own guns, causing an escalating arms race of guns with greater and greater sophistication and lethality [in some communities].¹⁴

Gangs and Schools

When gangs exist in a community, they can seriously impact schools, using them as recruitment centers and claiming them as gang territory. A [report issued by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice](#) (www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/iscs99.htm) found that the percentage of students reporting gangs at school nearly doubled between 1989 and 1995. This report also found a strong correlation between the presence of gangs and both guns and drugs on campus.¹⁵

However, it has not been shown that gangs are a direct cause of criminal victimization in schools, although the presence of gangs does contribute to an atmosphere of perceived danger. In fact, belonging to gangs may be a type of self-protection employed by students in response to threatening school and community environments.¹⁶

[The National Education Association \(NEA\)](http://www.nea.org) (www.nea.org) has developed a 'Safe Schools Framework' to help communities identify and deal with gangs. In its 1997 report, *Youth Gangs: Findings & Solutions for Schools, Communities & Families*, NEA recommends involving schools, communities, and families to develop plans to eliminate gangs and make schools safe. After determining if the problem is emerging or chronic, this group of stakeholders can devise appropriate responses that include prevention, intervention, and suppression components.

Prevention

Strategies that aim to prevent youth from joining gangs and engaging in gang behavior, including education about the dangers of joining a gang.

Intervention

Programs that aim to divert youth from crime, providing alternatives such as after-school programs, counseling, work-study, conflict-resolution, etc.

Suppression

Enforcement tactics that usually involve policies and procedures to identify, isolate, punish and rehabilitate criminal offenders.

To combat the presence of gangs on school campuses, current policy advises some specific interventions, including:

- Requiring students to wear school uniforms,
- Enforcing parental and community curfews to restrict delinquent behavior at night,
- Employing truancy prevention efforts, and
- Setting zero-tolerance policies on underage drinking and guns in the schools.

Confronting the Gang Issue

Before developing a response to gangs, it is important to assess the situation carefully. Defining "youth gang" within a community may be a useful starting point for a new initiative. A key issue in combating youth gangs will be distinguishing them from groups of youth who merely hang out together and adult criminal organizations. Such clarifications will help define the types of strategies that are most effective with the at-risk and offending populations. Not all individuals who display the outward signs of gang membership are actually involved in criminal activities. It is also important to distinguish between core gang members, fringe/peripheral members and the "wannabe" recruits.

Gangs are a complicated problem and solutions are often difficult to find in the midst of popular myths and stereotypes. Staying informed of new studies and developments will aid in your understanding of the nature of youth gangs. The resources listed here include publications and Web sites to review for additional information.

Resources & Publications

[U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION](#)

www.ed.gov

- **[The ERIC Clearinghouse for Urban Education](#)**
<http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/administration/safety/>
One of 16 ERIC Clearinghouses that collects abstracts and indexes materials related to education and teaching. This site provides access to a variety of publications to help prevent youth violence, including: "Gang Activity at School: Prevention Strategies" by Shirley Lal; and "Gangs in the Schools" (1994), by Garry Walz.
- **[Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools](#)**
www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osdfs/index.html
The Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools is the federal government's primary vehicle for reducing drug, alcohol and tobacco use, and violence, through education and prevention activities in our nation's schools.

[U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES](#)

www.dhhs.gov

- **[Center for Substance Abuse and Prevention](#)**
www.samhsa.gov/centers/csap/csap.html
Produces the Substance Abuse Resource Guide "Gangs." For an updated copy, contact: SAMHSA National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI), P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, MD 20847-2345 www.samhsa.gov

[U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE](#)

www.usdoj.gov

- **[Bureau of Justice Statistics](#)**
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/welcome.html
Collects, analyzes, publishes, and disseminates information on crime, criminal offenders, victims of crime, and the operation of justice systems at all levels of government. These data are critical to Federal, State, and local policymakers in combating crime and ensuring that justice is both efficient and evenhanded. Of particular interest is the [1999 Annual Report on School Safety](#) (www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/iscs99.htm), a joint report prepared by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice.
- **[National Youth Gang Center](#)**
www.iir.com/nygc
Assists state and local jurisdictions in the collection, analysis, and exchange of information on gang-related demographics, legislation, literature, research, and promising program strategies. NYGC coordinates activities of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

(OJJDP) Gang Consortium, and provides training and technical assistance for OJJDP's Rural Gang, Gang-Free Schools, and Gang-Free Communities Initiatives.

This site includes access to studies, analysis, and reports, including information about successful prevention programs involving youth, strategies for gang prevention and intervention, and documents to assist law enforcement. Individuals may also sign onto the Youth Gang Consortium's listserv to receive regular updates. See: GANGINFO on the NYGC Web site.

- **[Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention \(OJJDP\)](http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org)**

www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org

Comprehensive gateway site for programs, funding, and publications related to juvenile justice. Recommended publications: "Highlights of the 1999 National Youth Gang Survey" and "Preventing Adolescent Gang Involvement," a well-documented 11-page report detailing the characteristics of and responses to America's youth gang problem. Analyzes risk factors for gang involvement as well as effective prevention and intervention strategies.

The publications used to research this fact sheet can be obtained from the Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention index:

- *Crime by Youth Gangs and Groups in the United States*
- *Gang Membership, Delinquent Peers and Delinquent Behavior, 1998*
- *Highlights of the National Youth Gang Survey, years 1996-1999*
- *Preventing Adolescent Gang Involvement*
- *The Youth Gangs, Drugs and Violence Connection*
- *Youth Gangs: An Overview*
- *Youth Gangs in Schools*
- **Gang Prevention/Intervention Through Targeted Outreach**
In response to the number of youth gangs growing in cities and expanding to suburban and rural communities, [Boys and Girls Clubs of America](http://www.bgca.org) (www.bgca.org) with the assistance of OJJDP has developed special gang prevention and intervention initiative targeting youth ages 6-18. Through referrals from schools, courts, law enforcement and community youth service agencies, the tested and proven Targeted Outreach program identifies and recruits delinquent youth, or those "at risk" of delinquency, into ongoing Club programs and activities.

References

¹Vigil, J.D. and Long, J.M. 1990. "Emic and etic perspectives on gang culture". In *Gangs in America*, edited by C.R. Huff. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, pp. 146-162.

²This overview relies on definitions of the term "youth gang" offered by the leading gang theorists and researchers, as reported in the article, "Youth Gangs: An Overview" in *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, published by U.S. Dept. of Justice, August 1998.

³Miller, W.B. 1992. (Revised from 1982.) *Crime by Youth Gangs and Groups in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

⁴Moore, J.P. and Terrett, C.P. In press. *Highlights of the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey*. Fact Sheet. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

⁵Egley, A. 2000. *Highlights of the 1999 National Youth Gang Survey*. Fact Sheet. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

⁶Bodinger-deUriarte, C. (1993). Membership in violent gangs fed by suspicion, deterred through respect. Los Alamitos, CA: Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory. As cited by Burnett, G. and Walz, G. (1994.) *Gangs in the Schools*, New York, NY: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, ERIC Digest 99.

⁷Esbensen, F. 2000. Preventing Adolescent Gang Involvement. Washington, D.C.: Juvenile Justice Bulletin, September 2000. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

⁸Battin-Pearson, et. al. 1997. Early predictors of sustained adolescent gang membership. Paper presented at the American Society of Criminology Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA.

⁹Klein, M.W. and Maxson, C.L. 1996. Gang Structures, crime patterns, and police responses. Unpublished final report. Los Angeles, CA Social Science Research Institute, University of Southern California.

¹⁰Reiner, I. 1992. Gangs, crime and violence in Los Angeles. Unpublished manuscript. Office of the District Attorney of the County of Los Angeles.

¹¹Howell, J.C. and Decker, S.H. 1999. The Youth Gangs, Drugs and Violence Connection, Washington, D.C.: Juvenile Justice Bulletin, January 1999 U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

¹²Battin-Pearson, S.R, Thornberry, T.P., Hawkins, J.D. et.al. 1998. Gang Membership, Delinquent Peers and Delinquent Behavior, Washington, D.C.: Juvenile Justice Bulletin, October 1998. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

¹³Huff, R.C. 1998. Washington, D.C. Comparing the Criminal Behavior of Youth Gangs and At-Risk Youth, Research in Brief, October 1998, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.

¹⁴Lizotte, A.J., et al. 2000. Washington, D.C. Factors Influencing Gun Carrying Among Young Urban Males Over the Adolescent-Young Adult Life Course. *Criminology* Volume: 38 Issue: 3, August 2000 pages: 811-834. US Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute on Drug Abuse.

¹⁵Block and Block, 1993: Howell, in press [a]; Hutson et al., 1995; Zimring, 1996.

¹⁶Chandler, K.A., Chapman, C.D. Rand, M.R., and Taylor, B.M. 1998. Students Reports of School Crime: 1989 and 1995. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, and U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Date of Publication: 2001