

Gang Prevention

According to the National Gang Center, the number of gangs in the United States has grown from a low in 2003 of around 20,000 to an estimated 30,000 in 2011. This represents a 12 percent increase from 2006 and (as of 2011) stood as the highest annual estimate since 1997. As of 2011, there were approximately 782,500 gang members. These gangs and their activities constitute a pervasive problem across the country, as demonstrated by a recent trend analysis of U.S. gang problems from 2002 to 2009 (Howell et al. 2011). Although the nation has experienced an overall decline in the rates of violent crime, this trend has not affected gang violence. Rather, rates of gang violence have continued relatively unchanged during this period for most of the cities with populations of 50,000 or more. In some of the largest cities, the percentage of homicides that are gang related is very high – in 2009, one third of the homicides in Chicago, Ill., and half of the homicides in Los Angeles, Calif., were gang related.

Target Population

The peak age range for gang membership is roughly 14 to 15 (Huff 1998). This finding is remarkably consistent across self-report studies, regardless of the risk level of the sample, the restrictiveness of the gang definition, and the study location (Klein and Maxson 2006). However, the peak age range may be older in cities where gangs have existed longer (Curry and Decker 1998). For instance, in 2011, law enforcement reported that more than three out of every five gang members are adults (National Gang Center N.d.). The proportion of adult member to juveniles was larger for larger cities and suburban counties, compared with smaller cities and rural counties. The typical range for gang members is ages 12 to 24.

The gender and racial/ethnic composition of gangs has remained relatively stable over the past decade. Although female gang membership may be increasing (Klein 1995), virtually all studies agree that males join gangs at higher rates. In fact, the prevalence rates for males are 1½ to 2 times as high as those for females in most studies, a pattern that transcends different study approaches (Klein and Maxson 2006). Data from the National Youth Gang Survey indicate that females make up fewer than 10 percent of gang membership. However, data from self-report surveys suggest that the proportion of female gang membership is higher, with estimates ranging from 8 percent to 50 percent in various locations (Howell 2007; Moore and Hagedorn 2001).

Data also indicate that the ethnic composition of gang members has remained relatively stable during the 1996–2011 survey period, although there is also a wide race/ethnic differential in gang membership. According to the National Youth Gang Survey, in 2011 the ethnicity of gang members was roughly 46 percent Hispanic, 35 percent African American, 11 percent white, and 7 percent other races/ethnicities. This pattern is consistent regardless of the definition of *gang* and the nature of the

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sample approaches (Klein and Maxson 2006). Certain offenses are related to different racial/ethnic gangs. For instance, African American gangs are relatively more involved in drug offenses, Hispanic gangs engage in turf-related violence, and Asian and white gangs display a tendency toward property crimes (Spergel and Curry 1990). The disproportionate representation of minority groups in gangs is not a result of a predisposition toward gang membership; rather, minorities tend to be overrepresented in areas overwhelmed with gang activity (Bursick and Grasmick 1993).

There are ways to classify gangs other than by ethnicity. One is to view gangs along a continuum by degree of organization, “from youth groups who hang out together in shopping malls and other places; to criminal groups, small clusters of friends who band together to commit crimes such as fencing operations; to street gangs composed of groups of adolescents and young adults who form a semistructured operation and engage in delinquent and criminal behavior; to adult criminal organizations that engage in criminal activity primarily for economic reasons” (Howell 1998).

Lack of a Standard Definition

While the research literature on gangs has grown substantially over the past decades, there is still no standard definition of the term “gang.” The range of what constitutes a gang can be quite broad: for instance, some jurisdictions deny the existence of gangs while others characterize less-serious forms of adolescent law-violating groups as gangs (Miller 1992). Naber and colleagues (2006) note that the type of definition used can affect estimates of gang prevalence in schools.

The following characterizations illustrate the variety of components that can be incorporated in defining gangs, including age, gender, organizational structure, criminal activity, symbolic labeling, and community response:

- A gang is an organized social system that is both quasiprivate and quasisecretive and whose size and goals have necessitated that social interaction be governed by a leadership structure that has defined roles; where the authority associated with these roles has been legitimized to the extent that social codes are operational to regulate the behavior of both leadership and rank and file; that plans and provides not only for the social and economic services of its members but also for its own maintenance as an organization; that pursues such goals irrespective of whether the action is legal; and lacks a bureaucracy (Jankowski 1991).
- A gang has the following characteristics: a denotable group consisting primarily of males who are committed to delinquent (including criminal) behavior or values and call forth a consistent negative response from the community such that the community comes to see them as qualitatively different from other groups (Klein 1995).
- A gang is a group of individuals who have symbols of membership, permanence, and criminal involvement. A gang member is a person who acknowledges membership in the gang and is regarded as a gang member by other members (Decker and Curry 1999).
- A gang is a well-defined group of youths between 10 and 22 years old (Huff 1998).

Despite the lack of consensus, certain characteristics often appear in definitions: 1) formal organizational structure (not a syndicate); 2) identifiable leadership; 3) identified territory; 4) recurrent interaction; and 5) engaging in serious or violent behavior (Howell 1994). A review of federal and state

definitions of the terms “gang,” “gang crime,” and “gang member” is available through the National Gang Center (<http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Content/Documents/Definitions.pdf>).

Gang Activity

While most cities and jurisdictions generally do not record criminal offenses other than homicides and graffiti as gang related, research has provided insights into the nature of gangs’ criminal activity. The research demonstrates that, while gang members commit a fair share of violent crime, gang members do not necessarily specialize in violence. Instead, gang members tend to be “generalist in nature, spanning the range of the cafeteria of delinquency choices” (Klein and Maxson 2006; Thornberry et al. 2003). Gang members do, however, commit a disproportionate number of offenses compared with nongang members (Klein and Maxson 2006; Thornberry et al. 2003; Miller 2001). For instance, in a recent comparison of patterns of offending among gang and nongang youths in Dutch and U.S. youth samples, Esbensen and Weerman (2005) found that gang members are four to six times as likely as nongang youths to engage in minor and serious delinquency. Data from the Rochester Youth Development Study indicate that gang members are seven times as likely as nongang youths to commit delinquent offenses (Bjerregaard and Smith 1993). A recent study of British high school students found that, compared with nongang youths, gang members and peripheral youths committed more overall crime, and that gang membership facilitated violent but not property crime (Alleyne and Wood 2010). This relationship is robust across a wide variety of definitions of *gang* and across different measurements of offending (Klein and Maxson 2006); it also holds up when gang members are compared with other highly delinquent nongang youths (Thornberry 1998).

Theoretical Foundation

The high costs of gang activities to individual, neighborhoods, and cities (see Howell 2006) has stimulated interest in determining why individuals join gangs or desist from gang activities.

One of the most important questions with regard to gang prevention programs is why youths choose to join gangs. Decker and Van Winkle (1996) argue that the act of choosing to join a gang can be described as numerous “pulls and pushes” on an individual. The “pull” refers to the attraction of gang membership to certain youths. On the one hand, gang membership can enhance prestige or status among friends and members of the opposite sex (Baccaglini 1993), provide excitement (Pennell et al. 1994), and give the illusion of being lucrative through the selling of drugs (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). On the other hand, social, economic, and cultural forces push many young people into gangs. For example, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) argue that protection from other gangs and general well-being are key factors in the decision to join or not join a gang. Wilson (1987) further argues that the underclass status of many minority youths can also “push” them into gang membership. Finally, gangs can provide a solution for social adjustment problems such as a need for “belonging.”

The literature on desistance has grown increasingly rich over the past several decades, as theorists and researchers have proposed various frameworks to explain the mechanisms of desistance from crime. In general, the spectrum of frameworks spans from structuralist explanations of desistance, where the concentration is on social structures and processes that shape individuals, to explanatory schema grounded in theories of human development, which emphasize the individual, the role of agency, and the importance of dynamic factors (Kurlychek, Bushway, and Brame 2012).

Prevention and Intervention Programs

Gang programs can be grouped broadly into three categories: prevention, intervention, and suppression. In general, prevention strategies keep youths from joining gangs, while intervention strategies seek to reduce the criminal activities of gangs by pulling youths away from gangs. These

strategies typically include community organization, early childhood programs, school-based interventions, and afterschool programs.

Many of these programs are designed to address the risk factors for gang membership by providing protective factors to strengthen a youth's resilience toward gang involvement. The greater the number of risk factors to which youths are exposed, the greater their risk of joining a gang. Once a youth enters a gang, the nature of gangs and their involvement in serious crime and violence produces many additional risk factors for that individual. Longitudinal studies of adolescents in multiple sites (Seattle, Wash., and Rochester, N.Y.) have identified the causal risk factors for gang membership within each domain. The Rochester site found that "youth[s] who grow up in more disorganized neighborhoods; who come from impoverished, distressed families; who do poorly in school and have low attachment to school and teachers; who associate with delinquent peers; and engage in various forms of problem behaviors are at increased risk for becoming gang members" (Thornberry 1998, 157). The researchers in Seattle found similar risk factors for gang involvement (Hill et al. 1996).

In addition to identifying risk factors to address through prevention and intervention programs, developers need to consider the timing of the programming. Because youths who join gangs tend to possess a great need for belonging at about age 13, join 6 months after this great need sets in, and have criminal records by the time they turn 14, research indicates that programs have a window of opportunity for when effective prevention is best used. This "underscores the need for effective gang-resistance education programs and other primary and secondary prevention and intervention initiatives directed at preteens, especially those prone to delinquent and violent behavior" (Huff 1998). The findings also indicate that effective intervention should address the brief window between the early belonging stage and the age of first arrest. A second window of opportunity exists between the time gang members are arrested for their first property crime and when they might graduate to more serious violent offenses. This period lasts about 1½ to 2 years and "affords a chance to divert young offenders from the gang subculture before they further endanger their own lives and victimize other citizens" (Huff 1998).

Suppression programs use the full force of the law—generally through a combination of policing, prosecution, and incarceration—to deter the criminal activities of entire gangs, dissolve gangs, and remove individual gang members from gangs (Howell 2000). Typical suppression programs include street sweeps, school-based law enforcement programs that use surveillance and buy-bust operations, civil procedures that use gang membership to define arrest for conspiracy, prosecution programs, and special gang probation and parole caseloads with high levels of surveillance and more stringent revocation rules for gang members (Klein 2004).

Unfortunately the research also suggests that most government and private programs for gang prevention have been left unevaluated and the few evaluated programs have either failed to decrease gang violence or have actually increased it (Sherman et al. 1997). Moreover, gang prevention programs have ignored the most likely causes of the recent growth of gangs (e.g., the community structure of urban neighbors). Nonetheless, successful methods for preventing gang violence are available. The next section reviews some available community-based programs for preventing gang violence.

Outcome Evidence

Spergel and Curry (1990) documented that, although suppression was the dominant response to gangs, it was the least effective (Decker 2002). Howell's (1998) review of the literature reveals that "nothing has been demonstrated through rigorous evaluation to be effective in preventing or reducing serious and violent gang delinquency, [although] a number of promising strategies are available" (Howell

1998). Moreover, Spergel's (1995) independent review of the literature reaches the same conclusion: "[T]raditional social intervention programs, whether agency based, outreach or street work, or crisis intervention, have shown little effect or may even have worsened the youth gang problem." There is still a need for "high-quality evaluation research" on gang programs, both comprehensive broad-based interventions and single-agency interventions (Decker 2002).

Operation Ceasefire (Boston, Mass.) [Braga et al. 2001; Braga and Pierce 2005] is a problem-solving police strategy that seeks to reduce gang violence, illegal gun possession, and gun violence in communities. The program carries out a comprehensive strategy to apprehend and prosecute offenders who carry firearms, to put others on notice that offenders face certain and serious punishment for carrying illegal firearms, and to prevent youths from following the same criminal path. Operation Ceasefire targets high-risk youths as well as serious and violent juvenile offenders using a focused deterrence strategy.

An evaluation study by Braga and colleagues (2001) found that Operation Ceasefire was effective in reducing the average monthly number of youth homicide victims by 63 percent, the number of monthly citywide gun assaults by 25 percent, and the monthly number of youth gun assaults in Boston's District D-2 by 44 percent. Further, the Ceasefire intervention was associated with a 32 percent reduction in the monthly number of citywide shots-fired calls for service. Another study by Braga and Pierce (2005) found that Operation Ceasefire was also effective in recovering new handguns citywide. Those authors found that Ceasefire was responsible for a 47 percent reduction in the percentage of newly traced handguns in Boston. Additionally, Operation Ceasefire was associated with a significant reduction in the percentage of recovered handguns that had a fast time-to-crime.

The Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program is a school-based gang and violence-prevention program with three primary goals: 1) teach youths to avoid gang membership, 2) prevent violence and criminal activity, and 3) assist youths in developing positive relationships with law enforcement. The program is a cognitive-based curriculum that teaches students life skills such as conflict resolution, responsibility, appreciating cultural diversity, and goal setting. G.R.E.A.T. targets youths as they begin middle school. The G.R.E.A.T. program primarily uses uniformed law enforcement personnel to teach students the 13 cumulative lessons found in the curriculum.

Evaluations of G.R.E.A.T. have indicated promising results, although it should be noted that the effects documented through evaluation are not wholly consistent with the stated goals of the program. A study by Esbensen and colleagues (2012) found the program had a moderate positive effect on gang membership. The odds of joining a gang were 39 percent lower for students completing the G.R.E.A.T. program than for students in the control group. Treatment group students receiving the G.R.E.A.T. program in the sixth grade were 39 percent less likely than control group students to have joined a gang by the eighth grade. However, there were no significant differences between treatment group students and control group students on any of the general delinquency or violent offending outcomes. The program had a small positive effect on prosocial attitudes toward the police, with intervention students reporting a statistically significant and more positive opinion of police officers than students in the control group. Lastly, G.R.E.A.T. students demonstrated a significant improvement in refusal skills, were better able to resist peer pressure, were less self-centered, and expressed less positive attitudes toward gangs than students in the control group. However, there were no statistically significant differences between the treatment group and the control group students on any of the 15 attitudinal measures (empathy, impulsivity, guilt, etc.).

The Little Village Gang Violence Reduction Project (GVRP) was a comprehensive, community-wide program designed to reduce serious violence in Chicago's gang-ridden Little Village neighborhood. The main goal of the GVRP was to reduce the extremely high level of serious gang violence, first at the individual youth gang member level, and then at the aggregate level. The program targeted two of the most violent gangs in Chicago. Gang youths, ages 17 to 24, were selected for services because they accounted for 70 percent of serious gang violence. The program later began to target youths ages 12 to 27. Targeted youths were provided with economic and social opportunities for employment and referrals to social interventions. The evaluation by Spergel and colleagues (2003) found mixed results. The GVRP appeared to reduce arrests for violent crimes, serious violent crimes, and drug crimes but did not have an effect on arrests for property crimes or total arrests.

For more information on the programs, please click the links below.

[Cure Violence](#) (Chicago, Ill.)

[Dallas \(Texas\) Anti-Gang Initiative](#)

[Gang Reduction Program](#) (Los Angeles, Calif.)

[Little Village Gang Violence Reduction Project \(Comprehensive Gang Model\)](#)

[Operation Ceasefire: Hollenbeck Initiative](#)

[Operation Hardcore \(Los Angeles, Calif.\)](#)

[Operation Ceasefire](#) (Boston, Mass.)

[Operation Peacekeeper](#)

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