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A Comprehensive Response to America's Youth Gang Problem

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The Prevalence of Youth Gangs

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) National Youth Gang Center recently completed the first nationwide survey of youth gang problems. In the 1995 survey, 2,007 law enforcement agencies reported gang activity in their jurisdictions, a total of 23,388 gangs, and 664,906 gang members. Forty-nine percent of these agencies described their gang activity as "getting worse."¹ Gang activity has extended beyond the inner cities into smaller communities and suburbs. Today's gangs are best characterized by their diversity in ethnic composition, geographical location, organization, and the nature and extent of members' involvement in delinquent or criminal activities.²

Gang Violence Reduction Strategies

Communities are implementing a combination of prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies to address the gang problem. An effective gang program must be based on sound theory and work closely with the juvenile justice system. According to Dr. Irving Spergel, George Herbert Jones Professor at the School of Social Service Administration and the Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, "policy and program must be based on appropriate targeting of both institutions and youth and also their relation to each other at a specific time and place, e.g., when the youth is entering the gang or ready to leave it and/or at the stage the gang problem is developing in the particular institution or community."³

In the late 1980's and early 1990's, OJJDP supported the completion of phases one and two of the National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Program. This program assessed youth gang research, including definitions, the nature and causes of the youth gang phenomenon, and the effectiveness of program strategies used by various agencies and organizations in the community. Conclusive evaluations of these strategies are still needed, but the following common elements appear to be associated with sustained reduction of gang problems:

- ◆ Community leaders must recognize the presence of gangs and seek to understand the nature and extent of the local gang

problem through a comprehensive and systematic assessment of the gang problem.

- ◆ The combined leadership of the justice system and the community must focus on the mobilization of institutional and community resources to address gang problems.
- ◆ Those in principal roles must develop a consensus on definitions (e.g., gang, gang incident); specific targets of agency and interagency efforts; and interrelated strategies—based on problem assessment, not assumptions. Coordinated strategies should include the following:
 - ❖ Community mobilization (including citizens, youth, community groups, and agencies).
 - ❖ Social and economic opportunities, including special school, training, and job programs. These are especially critical for older gang members who are not in school but may be ready to leave the gang or decrease participation in criminal gang activity for many reasons, including maturation and the need to provide for family.
 - ❖ Social intervention (especially youth outreach and work with street gangs directed toward mainstreaming youth).
 - ❖ Gang suppression (formal and informal social control procedures of the justice systems and community agencies and groups). Community-based agencies and local groups must collaborate with juvenile and criminal justice agencies in surveillance and sharing of information under conditions that protect the community and the civil liberties of youth.
 - ❖ Organizational change and development (the appropriate organization and integration of the above strategies and potential reallocation of resources among involved agencies).⁴
- ◆ Any approach must be guided by concern not only for safeguarding the community against youth gang activities but for providing support and supervision to present and potential gang members in a way that contributes to their prosocial development.⁵

OJJDP's Response to the Gang Problem

OJJDP's Comprehensive Communitywide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Program is testing the above comprehensive model. Five jurisdictions (Mesa, Arizona; Tucson, Arizona; Riverside, California; Bloomington, Illinois; and San Antonio, Texas) were awarded funding in 1995 to begin a 3-year effort to implement the comprehensive model developed by Dr. Spergel.

In the first year, the demonstration sites began the process of community mobilization, identifying or assessing the nature and extent of the gang problem, and exploring ways to address these problems. In the second year, based on previous and ongoing community assessment, the sites are implementing appropriate strategies to target gang violence. Training and technical assistance are being made available to the sites, and an independent evaluation of the programs and strategies is under way.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Gang Prevention Through Targeted Outreach program is another key OJJDP gang initiative. Through a referral network that links the local clubs with courts, police, schools, social service and other agencies and organizations, as well as through direct outreach efforts, at-risk youth are recruited into local Club programs in a nonstigmatizing way. Once in the Club, youth are provided with case-managed recreational and educational activities focusing on personal development to enhance communication skills, problem solving, and decisionmaking. The most important aspect of this program is the alternative youth are being given to gang life.

Another component of OJJDP's broad-based response to the gang problem is the National Youth Gang Center, which was funded in 1995. The Center will implement a national statistical data collection and analysis effort, the ultimate goal being creation of a national uniform gang reporting system. The Center will also disseminate current information on gang-related legislation, compile and review current gang literature, identify promising gang program strategies across the country that merit replication, and support the National Youth Gang Consortium. Established in December 1995, the Consortium is composed of Federal agencies with program or enforcement responsibility for

youth gangs and related problems, gang demonstration program directors, and researchers. The Consortium's role is to formalize multidisciplinary and cross-departmental responses to the gang problem and create a link with State and local community efforts.

OJJDP also is supporting field-initiated gang research on five major topics. Two studies are examining gangs in Indian (Navaho Nation) country and among Southeast Asian youth. A study jointly funded with the National Institute of Justice, Socialization to Gangs in an Emerging Gang City, is developing systematic baseline data on at-risk youth in St. Louis, Missouri. A fourth is determining the proportion of serious and violent juvenile crime committed by gang-involved youth. A fifth, longitudinal study is examining the relationship between gang membership and juvenile crime and delinquency.

These efforts constitute a comprehensive, coordinated Federal campaign to prevent, intervene in, and suppress youth gang violence and help communities identify effective programs and strategies to address the youth gang problem.

Endnotes

1. National Youth Gang Center, forthcoming, *1995 National Youth Gang Survey*.
2. B. Tatem-Kelley, 1994, *A Comprehensive Strategy To Address America's Gang Problem* (Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice).
3. I. Spergel, 1995, *The Youth Gang Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press), 186.
4. Spergel, 1995.
5. Spergel et al., 1994 (reprinted 1996), *Gang Suppression and Intervention: Problem and Response*, Research Summary (Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice).

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