



# OJJDP FACT SHEET

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## Youth Gangs

by James C. Howell, Ph.D.

### What is a youth gang?

There is no single, accepted definition. State and local jurisdictions tend to develop their own. Nevertheless, a youth gang is commonly thought of as a self-formed association of peers having the following characteristics: a gang name and recognizable symbols, identifiable leadership, a geographic territory, a regular meeting pattern, and collective actions to carry out illegal activities.

### What proportion of adolescents join gangs?

Youth gang membership prevalence varies by locality. Surveys of urban youth samples indicate that from 14% to 30% of adolescents join gangs at some point. Most youth gang members are young adults. The age range of youth gang members is about 12 to 24; membership is expanding at the top and the bottom of the age range, but mainly at the top.

### Is the youth gang problem growing?

The United States has seen rapid proliferation of youth gangs since 1980. During this period, the number of cities reporting youth gang problems has increased from an estimated 286 jurisdictions with more than 2,000 gangs and nearly 100,000 members in 1980 (Miller, 1982) to about 2,000 jurisdictions with more than 23,000 gangs and more than 650,000 members in 1995 (Moore, 1997; National Youth Gang Center, 1997). All States and almost all large cities reported youth gang problems in 1995. More than half (58%) of all responding jurisdictions, including 50% of cities and towns with populations under 25,000, also reported youth gang problems. About half the agencies reporting gang problems thought the situation was getting worse; only 10% believed it was getting better. These 1995 survey results cannot be extrapolated for the entire population, however, because the sample purposely included cities that reported youth gang problems in previous surveys.

### Is youth gang violence increasing?

Although trend data are not available on overall youth gang violence, it may be increasing along with the number of gangs and gang members, and the availability of firearms. Youth gang homicides have clearly increased. Gang-related killings in major gang cities totaled 633 in 1980 and youth gang homicides have increased dramatically since then, reaching epidemic proportions

in cities such as Chicago and Los Angeles. These two cities alone accounted for more than 1,000 gang homicides in 1994.

### Is female gang and crime involvement increasing?

Although the national trend data necessary to make precise historical comparisons are not available, the answer appears to be yes. Female involvement in youth gangs is increasing as part of the overall growth in adolescent gang involvement. However, the traditional female auxiliary role vis-a-vis male gangs may not be changing significantly (Chesney-Lind, 1993).

### What proportion of serious and violent crime is attributable to gang members?

Studies of large urban samples show that gang members are responsible for a large proportion of violent offenses. Rochester gang members (30% of the sample) self-reported committing 68% of all adolescent violent offenses (Thornberry, in press); in Seattle, gang members (15% of the sample) self-reported committing 85% of adolescent robberies (Battin et al., in press); and in Denver, gang members (14% of the sample) self-reported committing 89% of all serious violent adolescent offenses (Huizinga, 1997).

### What impact does gang membership have on individual offending levels?

Juvenile gang members commit serious and violent offenses at a rate several times higher than nongang adolescents. In Denver, gang members were found to commit about three times as many serious and violent offenses as nongang youth (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993). Even greater differences were observed in Seattle, where gang youth self-reported more than five times as many violent offenses as nongang youth (Hill et al., forthcoming), and in Rochester, where gang members were found to commit about seven times as many serious and violent delinquent acts as nongang adolescents (Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993).

### How strong are the effects of gang membership?

First, studies in Denver, Rochester, and Seattle show that the influence of the gang on levels of violent offending is greater than the influence of other highly delinquent nongang peers. Second, while in the gang, members commit serious and violent acts at a

much higher level of frequency compared with before and after gang membership. Third, the influence of the gang is longlasting. In all three sites, gang members' offense rates dropped after they left the gang, but still remained fairly high.

### **What is the relationship between gang member drug involvement and violence?**

Youth gang members often are actively involved in drug use, drug trafficking, and violence. Although drug use is strongly associated with drug trafficking and drug selling is strongly associated with other serious and violent crimes, gang drug trafficking does not necessarily cause more frequent violent offending. Rather, gang participation, drug trafficking, and violence occur together (Howell and Decker, forthcoming).

### **How can gang homicide patterns best be characterized?**

Gang homicides are characterized by periodic spurts (Block and Block, 1993), peaking, retreating to higher plateaus than before, then surging upward again. Each homicide peak tends to correspond to a series of escalating confrontations, usually over gang member recruitment, impulsive and emotional defense of one's identity as a gang member, turf protection and expansion, defending the honor of the gang, drug wars, and trivial events of a confrontational nature. These episodes generally follow a predictable pattern. First, a loosely organized gang gains cohesion as a result of a perceived or real threat from a rival gang. A mobilizing event then occurs, followed by an escalation of activity, a violent event, and rapid deescalation. The cycle is completed when the other gang retaliates for the inflicted harm, creating a feedback loop in which one killing justifies another (Decker, 1996; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996).

### **Is there a strong correlation between gang drug trafficking and homicide?**

No. The presumed strong correlation between gang-related homicides and drug trafficking has been refuted by several studies in different cities (Howell, 1997a). Two caveats to this statement are in order. First, some gang homicides are related directly to the business of drug trafficking. Second, the existence of gang drug markets provides a context in which gang homicides are more likely to occur. Drug markets bring rival gang members into

proximity with one another. However, the growth in youth gang homicides over the past decade is driven mainly by other kinds of gang conflicts and by increased access to and use of firearms, particularly more lethal automatic and semiautomatic weapons.

### **Is gang migration a major cause of the growth of gangs in the United States?**

No. A 1992 gang migration study of 1,100 U.S. cities found that "most cities had local gangs before the onset of migration, and many respondents felt their city would have a gang problem regardless of migration" (Maxson et al., 1996, p. 29). Although the study showed that most youth gang problems are "homegrown," cities reporting gang migration said local crime rates or patterns generally were affected by migrants, primarily through increases in thefts, robberies, and other violent crimes. According to Maxson and colleagues (1996, p. 27), "Gang migrants were generally not perceived as having a substantial impact on the local drug market, probably because of their relatively low numbers."

### **What is the racial and ethnic composition of youth gangs?**

In the early 19th century, U.S. gangs were primarily Irish, Jewish, and Italian (Sante, 1991). According to a recent national law enforcement survey, 48% of gang members are black, 43% are Hispanic, 5% are white, and 4% are Asian (Curry, 1996). However, student surveys show a much larger representation of white adolescents among youth gang members. In a survey of nearly 6,000 eighth graders in 11 sites (Esbensen and Osgood, 1997), 31% of the students who said they were gang members were black, 25% were Hispanic, 25% were white, 5% were Asian, and 15% were of other racial and ethnic groups (percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding).

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