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Robert W. Sweet, Jr., Administrator

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National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Program

by Irving A. Spergel, Ronald L. Chance, and G. David Curry

The national scope and seriousness of the youth gang problem have increased sharply since the late 1970's and early 1980's. Gang violence and gang-related drug trafficking have risen drastically in a number of large cities. Even more remarkable, gangs have now developed in many middle-sized and smaller cities and suburban communities around the country.

The gang problem has become more complex as well. Youth gangs are more violent than before, and gangs are increasingly serving as a way for older or former gang youths to engage in illegal money-making activity, especially street-level drug trafficking. Our lack of knowledge of the problem's scope is due in large measure to the absence of a commonly accepted law enforcement definition

of the terms "gang" and "gang crime incident."

In 1987 the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention established a research and development program to address the gang problem in policy and programmatic terms through a cooperative agreement with the School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago.

The National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Program is carrying out a four-stage process of assessment, model program development, technical assistance, and dissemination. The age of gang youths—at least those known to the police—tends to be in the range of 13 to 24 years and older. The age range has expanded, especially at the upper end. The

evidence also indicates that the problem is predominantly a male one.

Assessing the problem

Our purpose in the first stage of the research and development program was not so much to assess the problem's scope as to assess the nature of the organized response to it, particularly in suppression and intervention terms. It became evident early in our analysis that the youth gang fulfilled socialization and survival functions for youths in low-income, socially isolated ghetto or barrio communities and increasingly in transitional areas with newly settled populations.

Social disorganization or failures of basic local institutions such as family, schools, and employment, as well as poverty or

From the Administrator

In 1990, the number of gang homicides reached an all time high of 329 in Los Angeles and 98 in Chicago, with gang homicide, as a proportion of total homicides, ranging from 11 percent in Chicago to 34 percent in Los Angeles. The average age of gang homicide offenders is 20 to 21 years. The age range of gang members known to the police is 13 to 24 years and older.

Youthful involvement in gangs, gang violence, and gang-related drug trafficking has long been a concern of the Office of

Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Three and a half years ago the Office asked the School of Social Service Administration of the University of Chicago to study what diverse cities and counties were doing to respond to the problem and to identify strategies that seemed to work. This article reports on the study and some of its findings.

An important outcome of this project is that we will be able to provide police, juvenile justice professionals, and community organizations with some concrete suggestions for programs, policies, and procedures they can use to respond to gang problems.

Manuals for dealing with youth gangs have been prepared for specific audiences and are already being tried out by a variety of organizations, groups, and individuals around the country.

When the program and manuals are more widely implemented, local jurisdictions are expected to be in a far better position to control and reduce youth gangs and their illegal activities.

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lack of social opportunities, were apparent causal factors. A variety of other factors also seemed to contribute to gang membership—racism, particular cultural traditions, different opportunities to commit crime, fragmentation of policy and program approaches of criminal justice and social service agencies, as well as simply the presence of gangs in a community.

The assessment stage consisted of three major components: (1) a comprehensive review of the research, reportorial, and program literature on gangs; (2) a national survey of organized approaches to the problem; and (3) field visits to cities and sites where programs had apparently led to a significant reduction in the problem.

To supplement these components, we conducted two law enforcement conferences, two symposia of African-American and Hispanic former gang leaders, a brief survey of the responses of current and former gang members to antigang programs, and an analysis of a data set on the socialization to gangs of middle school youths in four inner-city Chicago communities.

Literature review

We conducted a literature review that covered the history of responses and program approaches to the problem by criminal justice agencies, community-based youth agencies, and grassroots organizations. It also covered such topics as estimates of the number of youth gangs and youth gang members; amounts of gang violence; gang-related drug trafficking; gangs as organizations; membership and demographic characteristics; gang experiences; and the social context of gang development with special attention to family, school, politics, organized crime, and cultural, socioeconomic, and neighborhood territorial factors.

The literature review showed that the primary approach to youth gangs in the 1950's and 1960's was to reach out to youth and prevent gang involvement or intervene with social services. In the 1970's and 1980's a police suppression approach prevailed. There is no clear evidence that either approach was successful. On the other hand, a few

communities adopted comprehensive approaches that combined social intervention and suppression strategies with jobs for gang youths. In places that used these approaches, there was an apparent reduction in youth gang activity, but no adequate research exists to verify these results.

National survey of youth gang problems and programs

Our telephone and mail survey of 254 experts from 45 cities and 6 special program sites was conducted in 1988 and 1989, following the literature review. The survey has guided the direction of the project and the subsequent materials produced.

We identified agencies and organizations across the country with programs that specifically dealt with youth gangs or youth gang members. We interviewed knowledgeable persons from police, prosecution, judiciary, probation, corrections, parole, school youth, grassroots, church, and criminal justice planning organizations. We were interested in definitions of the terms "gang," "gang member," and "gang incident." We asked about gang characteristics and behavior, agency policies and program activities, and specific advisory and interagency structures. We asked if agencies provided special training and how effective they were in dealing with the gang problem.

Findings

Our findings revealed that while certain police departments defined a gang incident as dependent on gang-oriented motivations or circumstances of the criminal incident, others defined a gang incident more broadly, basing their definition on whether the offender or victim was a gang member, regardless of the criminal circumstances.

In other cities, especially where the gang problem was new, police officers defined the gang incident simply in terms of any group of youth engaged in a criminal act. Two-thirds of the law enforcement respondents perceived gangs as somehow identified with other gangs or cliques beyond particular neighborhoods or areas. They reported that 25 percent of gang

youth known to them had prior police records and that gang youth committed 22.7 percent of the total index crime in their jurisdictions.

Respondents viewed the gang problem as involving adults in 45.6 percent of incidents related to youth gangs. A majority of respondents believed that one of the primary purposes of youth gangs was to sell drugs, mainly at the street level. However, independent research does not support this perception.

Five strategies identified

Probably the most important survey findings were related to the ways different organizations and cities dealt with the problem. Strategies fell into five groups:

- Suppression*, including such tactics as prevention, arrest, imprisonment, supervision, and surveillance.
 - Social intervention*, including crisis intervention, treatment for the youths and their families, outreach, and referral to social services.
 - Social opportunities*, including the provision of basic or remedial education, training, work incentives, and jobs.
 - Community mobilization*, including improved communication and joint policy and program development among justice, community-based, and grassroots organizations.
 - Organizational development or change*, including special police units, vertical prosecution, vertical probation case management, and special youth agency crisis programs. The organizational development strategy modified the other four strategies.
- The survey showed that suppression was the most frequently employed strategy (44 percent), followed by social intervention (31.5 percent), organizational development (10.9 percent), community mobilization (8.9 percent), and social opportunities (4.8 percent).

Prosecutors and judges were most committed to suppression, while social agencies and grassroots organizations chose social intervention. Respondents in jurisdictions with emerging juvenile gang problems dating after 1980 were divided

in their approaches, some emphasizing community mobilization and organizational development, and others depending almost completely on suppression.

Effectiveness

We used our survey data to determine if different strategies, policies, specialized structures, and procedures led to a perceived or actual reduction in gang crime. A large majority of respondents believed that the gang situation had worsened, although law enforcement respondents were less pessimistic than others; 23.1 percent of the police and 10.4 percent of nonpolice respondents saw progress since 1980. In only 17 percent of our 45 cities were there perceptions and quantitative estimates of any level of improvement in the gang situation, and there was no evidence that improvement was related to size of city or duration of the gang problem.

An important step in the search for promising approaches was to analyze the survey data using the type of city (i.e., experiencing emerging gang problem versus chronic one) as the unit of analysis.

In cities with chronic gang problems, several variables were found to be strongly associated with effectiveness in dealing with the gang situation: (1) the use of community mobilization and social opportunity as primary strategies, (2) community consensus on the definition of a gang incident, and (3) the proportion of agencies or organizations that had an external advisory group.

In cities where the gang problem was just beginning, community mobilization was perceived to be the effective primary strategy.

We also obtained quantitative data to validate our respondents' perceptions for the period between 1980 and 1987 on five empirical indicators of improvement in the gang situation: the number of gangs, gang members, gang homicides, gang assaults, and gang-related narcotics incidents.

In summary, community mobilization was the factor that most powerfully predicted a decline in the gang problem. The provision of basic social opportunities to

gang youth, that is, education and employment, was also very important in cities with chronic gang problems.

Field visits

Using the survey findings, we selected five cities and one correctional site where antigang efforts had apparently been effective within a significant time period. We visited them to further validate and elaborate the elements of a promising approach to the youth gang problem. These elements consisted of proactive, sustained leadership by agency representatives and collaboration among justice agencies, community-based organizations, and grassroots groups. These representatives met regularly over several

years to develop and maintain a variety of gang control and prevention efforts.

Other elements of a promising response to gangs were mutual trust, similar perceptions about the nature of the youth gang problem, and belief in the complementary use of social control and social opportunity strategies. In addition, in cities where the gang problem was an emerging one, clear and forthright recognition—rather than denial that a gang problem existed—was a key factor. In communities with a chronic gang problem, problem reduction meant forgoing narrow agency interests and unilateral approaches that served mainly fundraising, professional, or political purposes.

Gang Definitions

During the assessment phase, it became apparent that a common definition of what was meant by "gang," "gang member," and especially "gang incident" was essential. Such a consensus was necessary for effective data systems, interagency communication, and public policy, on both local and national levels.

The term *street gang* is the term preferred by key local law enforcement agencies because it includes juveniles and adults and designates the location of the gang and most of its criminal behavior. The youth gang, for criminal justice policy purposes, is a subset of the street gang. We recommend the following definitions:

□ A *street gang* is a group of people that form an allegiance based on various social needs and engage in acts injurious to public health and public morals. Members of street gangs engage in (or have engaged in) gang-focused criminal activity either individually or collectively; they create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation within the community.

□ A *gang* for criminal justice purposes is a somewhat organized group of some

duration, sometimes characterized by turf concerns, symbols, special dress, and colors. It has special interest in violence for status-providing purposes and is recognized as a gang both by its members and by others.

□ The notion of a *youth gang* incorporates two concepts: often a more amorphous "delinquent group" (e.g., a juvenile clique within a gang), and the better organized and sophisticated "criminal organization." The latter may be an independent group or clique of the gang and usually comprises older youth and young adults primarily engaged in criminal income-producing activity, most commonly drug trafficking.

□ A *gang crime incident* is an incident in which there was gang motivation, not mere participation by a gang member. If a gang member engages in nongang-motivated criminal activity (e.g., crime for strictly personal gain), the act should not be considered a gang incident. However, since gang members are likely to be serious offenders as well, information systems should record all types of crime but at the same time distinguish gang from nongang crime.

Developing strategies that work

Our assessment indicated that communities with gangs had socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, generational, and local policy characteristics that distinguished them from other communities.

For example, racism and poverty appear to be particularly potent factors in the development of drug-related gang problems in certain African-American communities. Population movements and certain cultural traditions may be relatively more important to the growth of gang violence in Hispanic communities. Among Chinese and other Asian communities, certain criminal traditions and social isolation may be significant factors. In white communities, personal and family disorganization as well as the declining strength of local institutions may have led to the development of cult and racially oriented gang patterns.

Given this diversity of community factors, it is likely that different kinds of community mobilization and combinations of strategies will be required to deal with the distinct gang problems of these various communities.

At the present time there is a lack of clearly defined prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies. Furthermore, it is not effective or efficient to target large groups of neighborhood youth for gang suppression or to consider that all youths in particular schools or neighborhoods require antigang social intervention or social opportunity services.

Selected younger youth should be identified for prevention or early intervention services based on a combination of certain risk factors (e.g., prior police contact, school failure, drug use, identification with a gang, presence of a gang member in the family).

Certain older youths—even hardcore gang youths—should be identified as ready to leave the gang at a certain age based on their interest in training and a job, battle fatigue, and readiness to settle down with a girlfriend or spouse. When designing gang programs and strategies, we must take into account the youths' ages and the stage of their identification with the gang.

Program models and technical assistance manuals

Based on our findings, we developed 10 program models and manuals addressed to specific audiences: police; prosecutors; judges; probation, corrections, and parole officers; schools; business and industry; community-based youth agencies; and grassroots organizations. Two additional cross-cutting, systemwide models and manuals are designed for general community planning and mobilization. The program models have been reviewed by experts, and the technical assistance manuals are in the testing phase.

The manuals set forth steps for implementing the program models. Each manual emphasizes distinctive community context and organizational mission and provides criteria for selecting a specific combination of strategies appropriate to that community and that mission.

In each manual we emphasize mobilizing community interest, concern, and resources in a way that neither exaggerates or denies the problem but develops consensus among key actors on the nature, causes, and ways to deal with the youth gang problem.

For more information

The School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago has prepared a series of reports on the National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Program. The reports are available from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850 (800-638-8736, or 301-251-5500 from Maryland and Metropolitan Washington, D.C) for the cost of reproduction and mailing.

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The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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