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Gurele', J. "OJP [Office of Justice Programs] Initiative on Gangs: Drugs and Violence in America." *NIJ Reports [National Institute of Justice Reports]*, June 1991, No. 224, 4-5.

**NATIONAL YOUTH GANG INFORMATION CENTER**

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NYGIC Document Number: *J0038*

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# OJP Initiative on Gangs: Drugs and Violence in America

by Jimmy Gurulé, Assistant Attorney General  
Office of Justice Programs

**G**ang violence is a growing problem across the Nation. It cuts across ethnic and cultural lines, involves youths and, increasingly, adults, and is spreading at an alarming rate. It is responsible for an urban gang warfare that has resulted in drive-by shootings, turf battles, killings of informers. And more and more it stems from gang traffic in drugs.

I am no newcomer to this battlefield. As a former Federal Prosecutor in Los Angeles, serving as Deputy Chief of the Major Narcotics Division, I saw firsthand the destructive impact that drug trafficking is having on this country. Honest, law-abiding citizens are prisoners in their own homes, afraid to walk the streets of their neighborhoods at night. Recreational parks have been turned into drug bazaars. The growth of street gangs threatens the stability of the urban community.

Because I believe that gang-related narcotics trafficking and violence is a national problem of drastic proportions, I have recommended an agencywide Office of Justice Programs "Initiative on Gangs: Drugs and Violence in America." This effort is being closely coordinated with the Criminal Division, Department of Justice.

I am working with the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the Office of

Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), and the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) to launch a comprehensive OJP research and action plan to strengthen Federal leadership and coordinate Federal efforts to combat gang-related crime in America's cities.

As part of its fact-finding mission, OJP will initially conduct onsite visits around the country, utilizing the NIJ research network, and will publish a report on its findings. OJP will also develop a long-term plan for continuing cooperation between Federal, State, and local agencies, whose research will aid general understanding of the scope of the gang problem.

I can speak from personal experience about two of the most violent youth gangs in America today, the Los Angeles-based Crips and Bloods. Their activity in the Los Angeles subculture is well-known and widely reported in area media. According to a recent Drug Enforcement Administration report, conflict between these two groups has escalated into open guerilla warfare. Youth gang members are readily armed with AK-47's, AK-15's, and other fully automatic weapons.

But more significant is the fact that California gang members are spreading out into such areas as Shreveport, Louisiana; Kansas City, Missouri; and Seattle, Washington.

That the gang problem involves adults as well as juveniles is well documented. The average age of the gang homicide offender in Los Angeles is between 19 and 20 years; gang homicide reports from Chicago show that nearly 50 percent of the offenders are over the age of 19. Similarly, research conducted by OJJDP has shown that it is adults who adopt leadership roles and engage in the greatest violence: homicides, aggravated assaults, robberies and drug trafficking. Their victims may include innocent members of the public, other gang members, and some professional community members such as police officers and teachers in schools. Prison gangs constitute a serious though separate problem as well, noticeably in Illinois, New York, California, and Texas.

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Assistant Attorney General Jimmy Gurulé was sworn in as Assistant Attorney General in August 1990. He is responsible for coordinating policy, management, and priorities within the Office of Justice Programs. A former associate professor of law at Notre Dame Law School, Mr. Gurulé also served in the Office of the United States Attorney in Los Angeles. He received the Attorney General's Distinguished Service Award in 1990 for his work in prosecuting the killers of Drug Enforcement Administration Special Agent Enrique Camarena.

Evidence further suggests that gang youths are particularly susceptible to being recruited into larger criminal organizations involved in drug trafficking. The link between organized crime and youth gangs, however, remains to be fully researched and reported.

The need for Federal support and intervention is readily apparent. The problem of youth gangs in America has been documented in a recent volume of the *Crime and Justice* series, edited by Norval Morris and Michael Tonry and sponsored by NIJ. Irving Spergel's article, "Youth Gangs: Continuity and Change," provides a comprehensive overview of research and programs that deal specifically with gangs.

A 1989 survey of law enforcement officials in 45 cities across the country produced the startling estimate of nearly 1,500 youth gangs nationwide, with more than 120,500 members. African Americans and Hispanics made up 87 percent of gang membership, far in excess of their representation in the general population. Many of these gangs were involved in serious violent crimes. The rate of violent offenses for gang members was three times as high as that for nongang delinquents.

But while African Americans and Hispanics seem to dominate in memberships in criminal gangs, the problem embraces other ethnic groups and cultures. Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian youth gangs have emerged in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. In particular, recent news reports have detailed the involvement of Chinese youth gangs in a resurgent heroin trade in New York City.

No national data on gangs or gang activity are collected; only gross estimates, based on law enforcement perceptions, are available in most cities. The definition of the term "gang" and what constitutes gang-related crime varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, as well as in the research literature. This frequently renders problematic the development of laws and subsequent policies and

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strategies for dealing with the gang problem.

OJP's Initiative on Gangs will fill this important gap. Research and report efforts by OJP, and the coordination of the results with data provided by other agencies, will provide a broader understanding of the youth gang problem and its scope, and, it is hoped, recommendations on ways to address it.

Because so little is known about what works in gang suppression, prevention, and intervention, OJP will create a support system for more effective investigation, evidence gathering, and prosecution of gang-related crimes,

including a clearinghouse for new ideas and innovations in practice.

Clearly, sufficient knowledge of the gang problem exists to provide a tremendous opportunity for shaping strategies. What remains is to assemble the forces necessary to the task, and to enter this battle with sufficient determination to resolve it successfully. ■

Editor's Note: See page 21 of this issue for an article on gang-related research sponsored by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

## **NIJ To Analyze Promising Approaches to Gang Control**

Because urban areas continue to be plagued by both juvenile and adult gangs involved in violent crime and drug trafficking, it is critical to get information about what works into the hands of State and local criminal justice practitioners.

To this end the National Institute of Justice is developing an analysis of emerging theory and practice on gangs. It will include a description of various state-of-the-art antigang programs and a synthesis of expert opinion on which approaches work best with which gang types and age groups. This analysis will provide the foundation for the development of demonstration programs and technical assistance for State and local authorities dealing with this growing menace.

As part of its 1991 Research Plan, NIJ will also examine basic, unanswered questions about gangs, drugs, and crime, such as the extent of gang violence, the link between gangs and organized crime, the roots of gang membership, and the criminal careers of gang members. Particular attention will be given to the phenomenon of gang migration, its extent, the gangs involved, factors contributing to its development, and effective strategies for combating it.

Research that examines suppression, prosecution, and incarceration of gang members is not fully developed. NIJ will test the strength of a variety of interventions in the field to determine which ones are most effective.