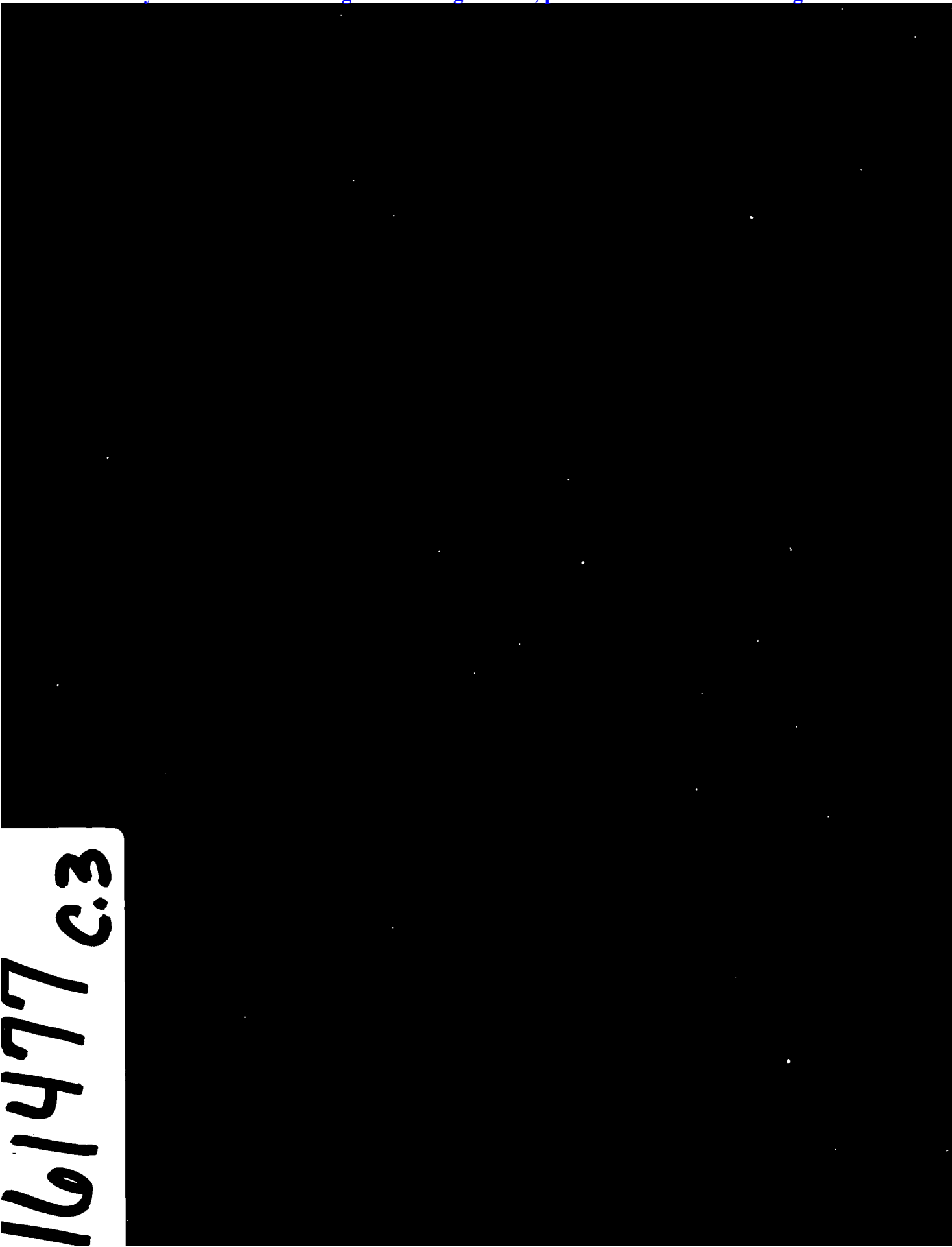


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# National Institute of Justice

## Research in Brief

Jeremy Travis, Director

August 1996

### Issues and Findings

#### **Discussed in this Research in**

**Brief:** Results from the 1994 national-level survey of law enforcement information on gang-related crime, which extended NIJ's 1992 survey chronologically (by updating data on the 122 municipalities and 8 of the 11 counties included in the earlier survey) and geographically (by including data on all U.S. cities ranging in population from 150,000 to 200,000 and a random sample of 284 municipalities with populations of 25,000 to 150,000).

**Key issues:** The Nation's gang-crime problem is underestimated because many cities do not have the capacity to compile statistics and report on gang-crime activity. To address this issue, researchers estimated the magnitude of gang crime using both "conservative" and "reasonable" approaches. In addition, the absence of uniform definitions and differences in the policies, practices, and procedures of law enforcement agencies around the country contribute to statistical error.

**Key findings:** Regardless of the method used to calculate national estimates, dramatic increases in gang crime activity were shown from 1991 (the year captured in the 1992 survey) to 1993 (the year covered by the 1994 survey).

## Estimating the National Scope of Gang Crime From Law Enforcement Data

by G. David Curry, Richard A. Ball, and Scott H. Decker

Reliable estimates of the magnitude and scope of gang-related crime in the United States are important to effective policymaking, but capturing complete and accurate data on these incidents is problematic. Law enforcement agency definitions of "gangs" and "gang-related offenses" differ widely. In addition, agency practices, procedures, and capacity for reporting vary, and responses to gang crime are frequently influenced by jurisdictional issues.

Results of the 1994 National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Gang Survey show that 88 percent of law enforcement agencies in the largest cities (populations of more than 150,000) and 56 percent in medium-size cities (populations between 25,000 and 150,000) reported gang crime problems.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of the survey, researchers estimated that the number of gang-crime incidents in 1993 ranged from 437,066 to 580,331—a more than 8- to nearly 12-fold increase over the 46,359 gang crimes estimated to have occurred in 1991.

### Collection of data

NIJ's 1994 national survey of law enforcement information on gang-related

crime updated statistics on the 122 municipalities and 8 of the 11 counties included in the 1992 sample. In addition, coverage was expanded to include data on all U.S. cities with populations ranging from 150,000 to 200,000 and a random sample of 284 of the 1,126 municipalities with populations between 25,000 and 150,000.

Researchers sent letters to the departmental administrators of each law enforcement agency in 1994 inquiring about the existence of a gang crime problem within their jurisdictions. If agencies reported a problem, gang crime statistics and information on anti-gang field operations for the previous year (1993) were requested. "Gang crime" was defined in the same manner as in the 1992 survey: participation in criminal activity by a police-identified group involving youths in its membership.<sup>2</sup>

### Computing estimates

Two sets of estimates were computed from survey results to approximate the gang problem nationwide. The "conservative" estimate was derived using the technique employed in the 1992 survey analysis for tabulating gang information. This approach followed a methodology comparable to that

continued . . .

## Issues and Findings

*continued . . .*

- The conservative estimate of nationwide gang-crime activity, based on law enforcement reports, is 8,625 gangs, 378,807 gang members, and 437,066 gang-related crimes for 1993.

- A more reasonable estimate is 16,643 gangs, 555,181 gang members, and 580,331 gang-related crimes for 1993.

- The number of gangs estimated for 1993 represents a 76.7-percent or 241-percent increase over 1991 figures, depending on the approach used.

- The number of gang members estimated for 1993 represents a 51.9-percent or 122.7-percent increase over 1991 figures, depending on the approach used.

- The number of gang-crime incidents estimated for 1993 represents an 843-percent or 1,152-percent increase over 1991 figures, depending on the approach used.

**Target audience:** Law enforcement administrators, statistical researchers, and directors of juvenile justice organizations and agencies.

of the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), in which jurisdictions that do not formally compile annual statistics are not counted in the national estimates of gangs, gang members, and gang-related crimes—even when officials report gangs in their midst. The second estimate, characterized by the study as “reasonable,” generated statistical projections to compensate for underreporting in the conservative method.

**Conservative estimate.** In the 1992 and 1994 NIJ gang surveys, all available gang-related statistics were obtained from officially designated representatives of local law enforcement jurisdictions. The conservative approach (in which no adjustments or calculations are made in aggregate numbers) revealed that 68 (89.5 percent) of the 76 largest U.S. cities surveyed in 1994 reported having gang-crime problems in the previous year. Some of these cities did not track gang-crime activity (see exhibit 1), tracked it inconsistently, or tracked it incompletely; the statistical profile that follows reflects actual numbers reported by survey respondents.

- A total of 3,844 gangs were reported by 53 cities.

- A total of 196,587 gang members were reported by 46 cities.

- A total of 26,731 gang crimes were reported by 29 cities.

Of the 39 cities with populations of less than 200,000 but greater than 150,000, 34 (87.2 percent) reported prior-year problems with gang crime, but as with the larger cities, reporting capacities were uneven (see exhibit 1).

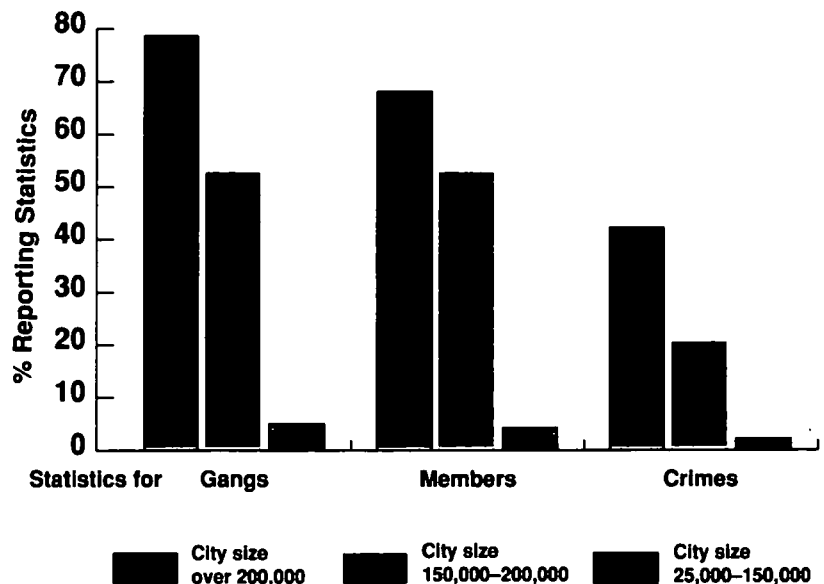
- A total of 505 gangs were reported by 18 cities.

- A total of 10,698 gang members were reported by 18 cities.

- A total of 10,382 gang crimes were reported by 7 cities.

A random sample of 284 (25.2 percent) cities with populations between 25,000 and 150,000 provided the basis for estimating gang crime problems in smaller urban areas. Of the sample cities, 56 percent reported gang crime problems. Re-

**Exhibit 1. Gang Statistics Reporting by City Size: 1994 Extended Survey**



**Exhibit 2. "Conservative" Estimate of National Gang Problem from NU 1994 Extended Survey**

Jurisdiction Size	Problem Reported	Gangs 1993	Members 1993	Crimes 1993
Cities Over 200,000 <sup>a</sup>	89.5%	3,844	196,587	26,731
Cities 150,000–200,000 <sup>a</sup>	87.2%	505	10,698	10,382
Cities 25,000–150,000 <sup>b</sup>	56.0%	2,193	25,620	8,497
1992 Smaller Cities <sup>c</sup>	87.1%	165	10,636	1,284
Selected Counties <sup>d</sup>		1,918	135,266	390,172
<b>National Total</b>	<b>57.0%</b>	<b>8,625</b>	<b>378,807</b>	<b>437,066</b>

a Tabulated from official reports.

b Estimated from 25.2 percent random sample.

c Tabulated from official reports from smaller cities included in Spergel and Curry (1993)<sup>4</sup> and Curry, Ball, and Fox (1994).<sup>5</sup>

d Tabulated from official reports from smaller cities included in Spergel and Curry (1993) and Curry, Ball, and Fox (1994). Members for Los Angeles County reduced 25 percent (Reiner, 1992).<sup>6</sup>

searchers then projected from the sample to the 1,126 cities in the same population range. Using a 5-percent confidence interval, they estimated that 631 (599 to 663) cities this size, if asked, would report gang-crime problems. Assuming the reporting capacity of cities not surveyed to be comparable to those that were surveyed, researchers projected that law enforcement agencies in all 1,126 cities would have reported 2,193 (2,083 to 2,303) gangs, 25,620 (24,339 to 26,901) gang members, and 8,497 (8,072 to 8,992) gang crimes.

In addition, researchers collected information from 31 cities with populations under 150,000 that had been specifically identified in 1988 as potential gang problem cities.<sup>3</sup> In 1994, 87.1 percent of these cities reported a gang crime problem—a figure substantially higher than the 56 percent found in the random sample of cities of similar size reported on above. These 31 cities were treated, therefore, as a distinct population with a greater likelihood of a reported presence of gang crime problems and higher levels of gangs, gang members, and gang-re-

lated crimes per city. Accordingly, the 165 gangs, 10,636 gang members, and 1,284 gang-related crimes reported for these cities were included in the national estimate. Similar logic dictated the inclusion of data on 8 counties, including Los Angeles County (a 25-percent reduction was made in the number of gang members reported to adjust for overlap with the city of Los Angeles), that were counted in previous surveys.

Totaling these data, the scope of the U.S. gang problem in 1993 was conservatively estimated at 735 (705 to 765) jurisdictions with 8,625 gangs, 378,807 gang members, and 437,066 gang crimes, as shown in exhibit 2.

**"Reasonable" estimate.** Earlier surveys have been criticized for underestimating the magnitude of the Nation's gang crime problem, in part, because jurisdictions that produced no annual gang crime statistics were counted as having no gangs, no gang members, and no gang crimes—even if they had reported having a gang-related crime problem. The capacity to report gang

crime statistics was significantly related to city size, with 68.2 percent of cities with populations over 200,000 reporting the number of gang members, 52.9 percent of cities with populations between 150,000 and 200,000 reporting this statistic, and only 4.4 percent of cities with populations between 25,000 and 150,000 reporting it. The comparable range for numbers of gang crimes is 42.4 percent in the largest cities and 2.3 percent in the smallest cities (see exhibit 1). The "reasonable" estimates generate smaller increases where reporting was already most complete—22.8 percent for the number of gangs and 25.4 percent for the number of gang members in the largest cities. The greatest increases emerge where reporting capacity is lowest—a 950-percent increase in the number of gang-related crimes in the smallest cities.

In this study, estimates were derived for cities that indicated they had gang crime problems but no supporting data. To obtain "reasonable" estimates, researchers selected the 5-percent trimmed mean<sup>7</sup> for each population level as a substitute for the zero values used in the conservative approach. They calculated the mean value of 90 percent of the similarly populated cities that had reported gang crime data but excluded from their computations 5 percent of the cities at either extreme of the statistical curve (that is, those with the highest and lowest numbers of gang crime problems). The "reasonable" estimates thus generated were 16,643 gangs, 555,181 gang members, and 580,331 gang crimes in 1993 (see exhibit 3). These numbers are 47 percent and 33 percent higher than conservative estimates of the number of gang members and gang-related crimes, respectively.

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r assessing the seriousness of the gang problem in years to come.

**Notes**

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2. Ibid.
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12. Toobin, J., "Capone's Revenge," *New Yorker*, 46-59, May 23, 1994.

This research was supported by NIJ grants 93-IJ-CX-0040 and 94-IJ-CX-0066. Drs. Curry and Decker are associate professor and professor, respectively, in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Missouri, St. Louis; Dr. Ball is a professor in West Virginia University's Department of Sociology and Anthropology. The report summary of this study, *Update on Gang Crime and Law Enforcement Recordkeeping: Report of the 1994 NIJ Extended National Assessment Survey*, is available through the National Criminal Justice Reference Service on interlibrary loan or xerox reproduction. Call 800-851-3420. Ask for NCJ 161476.

Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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**NCJ 161477**

When compared to 1992 survey data, the “reasonable” estimates represent increases of 241 percent, 123 percent, and 1,152 percent in the number of gangs, gang members, and gang crimes, respectively.

**Sources of error in law enforcement statistics**

Although the “reasonable” estimates attempt to adjust for the absence of annual gang-crime statistics from many jurisdictions, other types of error remain. These spring from technological limitations, differences in the purposes and policy emphases of local and Federal agencies, the absence of uniform definitions, organizational changes, and local effects on law enforcement responses to gang-related crime. Enhancing information technology resources and coordinating Federal efforts to collect gang-crime data will improve estimates of the changing nature of gang crime in this country. The findings of this research have been included in the statistical collection of the Office of Juvenile Justice and De-

linquency Prevention’s National Youth Gang Center, which is working to develop a uniform gang reporting system.

**Trends**

Of the numbers used to measure changes in the national gang-crime problem, the least important appears to be the number of gangs. In cities where gangs are loosely organized, e.g., St. Louis, continual changes in the number of gangs are indicative of the collective and contagious nature of gang behavior.<sup>11</sup> Even in cities with chronic gang problems, such as Chicago, once-powerful gangs can eventually become relatively unimportant in the overall picture.<sup>12</sup> However, the other two measures—number of gang members and number of gang-related crimes—merit further attention.

**Number of gang members.** This law enforcement measure of at-risk youths whose lives have been touched by gang-crime problems (as actual or potential offenders or victims) suggests the role that gang organization may play

in national increases in violence and associated costs in young lives. Approximately one-half million youths officially identified as gang members by police is a sobering national statistic.

**Number of gang-related crimes.** Although this statistic has been the most neglected in law enforcement recordkeeping, it is the one researchers consider most important for assessing the magnitude of gang-crime problems at national and local levels. Each counted gang-related crime reflects an actual violation of law that is associated with gang involvement. For violent and property crimes, each offense represents a victim or victims, as well as one or more offenders.

Although researchers must be careful to control for variations in definition across jurisdiction and time in analyzing gang incident data, the national conservative measure (and local measure from which it was aggregated) of 437,066—and the statistical estimate of 580,331 gang-related crimes for 1993—make excellent starting points

**Exhibit 3. “Reasonable” Estimate of National Gang Problem from NIJ 1994 Extended Survey**

Jurisdiction Size	Gangs 1993	Members 1993	Crimes 1993
Cities Over 200,000 <sup>a</sup>	4,722	246,431	51,155
Cities 150,000–200,000 <sup>a</sup>	788	19,478	46,616
Cities 25,000–150,000 <sup>b</sup>	8,964	122,508	89,232
1992 Smaller Cities	251 <sup>a</sup>	31,498 <sup>a</sup>	3,156 <sup>c</sup>
Selected Counties <sup>d</sup>	1,918	135,266	390,172
<b>National Total</b>	<b>16,643</b>	<b>555,181</b>	<b>580,331</b>

a For jurisdictions with reported gang crime problems but not reporting annual statistics, 5-percent trimmed means were substituted.  
 b Estimated from 25.2 percent random sample, with 5-percent trimmed means substituted for jurisdictions with reported gang crime problems but not reporting annual statistics.  
 c Minimum number of incidents substituted for jurisdictions with reported gang crime problems but not reporting annual statistics. (Insufficient cases to compute trimmed means.)  
 d Tabulated from official reports from smaller cities included in Spergel and Curry (1993)<sup>8</sup> and Curry, Ball, and Fox (1994).<sup>9</sup> Members for Los Angeles County reduced 25 percent (Reiner, 1992).<sup>10</sup>