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## **Socialization to Gangs in St. Louis Project**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

#### **Part I. The Social Context of Gangs in St. Louis**

##### **Component 1. Empirical Research on Gangs in St. Louis and Executive Summary**

This component consists of an annotated bibliography of empirical research on gangs in St. Louis and this Executive Summary of each component of the research. The research has been divided into these distinct components in order to make it possible for each component to be treated as separate publication. This may be useful, because the research was funded by two separate Office of Justice Programs agencies, and because each component treats its specific subject in some depth.

##### **Component 2. Gang Homicides in St. Louis.**

Systematic analyses of available gang homicide data for St. Louis were an important part of defining the social context for the study and contributed to the development of the research design. The goals of Component 2 of the Socialization to Gangs in St. Louis Project were to: study patterns of gang-related homicides in the city over time; compare gang-related homicides and non-gang-related homicides in St. Louis; examine the social organization of St. Louis gang homicides; study patterns of gang-related homicides over space in St. Louis; and use patterns of gang-related homicides in St. Louis as a component in the design of the Socialization to Gangs in St. Louis Project.

Gang homicide records on St. Louis reported to federally funded surveys of law enforcement information on gangs from 1992 through 1998 were examined in order to identify a chronological pattern of the emergence and decline in gang-related homicides in the city of St.

Louis. Case records from the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department Homicide Unit and Gang Intelligence Unit were analysed to compare gang and non-gang homicides. This analysis was made more detailed by controlling for age, race, and gender of offender in comparing gang and non-gang homicides. Since St. Louis is not a chronic gang problem city, patterns of gang membership among offenders and victims in gang-related homicides were compared to those found in more chronic gang problem cities such as Chicago and Los Angeles. A Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis of gang-related homicide locations by year from 1994 to 1996 was conducted. The STAC software distributed by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority was used to generate patterns of cluster ellipses of gang homicides over time. The locations of gang homicide cluster ellipses were used to select school populations to be studied in the Socialization to Gang Project.

Youth gang problems emerged in St. Louis in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Based on patterns of gang-related homicide, levels of gang violence did not peak until the mid-1990's. In the years 1997 and 1998, the city experienced rapid declines in gang-related homicides. The epidemic of gang-related homicides that St. Louis experienced in the mid-1990's was one in which victims and offenders were almost entirely young African-American males. In fact, in comparing gang and non-gang homicides, the overwhelming difference that emerged was the greater involvement of young African-American males in gang homicides. When gang and non-gang homicides were compared for only those incidents in which offenders were African-American males under 25 years of age, it was possible to see that even within the narrower age range, gang offenders and victims were significantly younger than offenders and victims in non-

gang homicides. Guns were the most common weapon in all homicides involving young African-American males, but were involved in 100 percent of all gang-related homicides.

In cities with chronic gang problems, patterns of collective enmity across gang alliance plays an important role. Most gang violence in such cities has been identified as gang-on-gang. In St. Louis, non-gang members were the primary target of gang violence in the mid-1990's. Gang-members' killing of members of the same or allied gangs was more common than homicides involving rival gang members. Despite some variation from year to year, the GIS analysis of gang homicides in St. Louis from 1994 to 1996 revealed gang violence to be very concentrated in a small number of specific areas, and it remained so over the time period. In selecting schools to serve as survey sites for the Socialization to Gangs Project, attention was paid to each schools proximity or distance from concentrations of gang-related violence.

On the basis of these findings, the report recommends that community-based responses to gang problems continue be based on assessments of gang crime data, particularly data on gang-related homicides. Early signs of a growing gang crime problem should be subjected to careful analysis. In St. Louis, the level of gang homicide grew very rapidly over a very short period of time but remained concentrated in a few neighborhoods. It is important to know the degree to which fluctuations in gang homicides may represent general changes in youth homicides. This can only be understood by comparing gang and non-gang homicides. Community mobilization efforts in response to gangs should be implemented on the basis of a thorough study of areas in gang violence is concentrated.

**Component 3. Linking Research and Practice: The St. Louis SafeFutures Program and the Socialization to Gangs in St. Louis Project.**

The goals of Component 3 of the Socialization to Gangs in St. Louis Project were to: describe the St. Louis SafeFutures Program; show how the design of the Socialization to Gangs Project could extend the potential for evaluating the program impact of the SafeFutures Program; and describe how a computerized Management Information System (MIS) was developed to serve both the goals of program and research.

The St. Louis SafeFutures Program is one in a history of such comprehensive responses to gangs and delinquency that have been undertaken in U.S. communities. Such programs are based on collaborative efforts among a diversity of juvenile justice and community agencies. For the city of St. Louis, the SafeFutures Program represented the culmination of a series of joint efforts by institutions including the family court, law enforcement, the public schools, and community-based youth-serving agencies. In St. Louis, the SafeFutures Program, from its outset, attempted to implement two empirically-based program models developed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. These were the Comprehensive Community-Wide Response to Gangs, also known as the Spergel model, and the Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Chronic, and Violent Juvenile Offenders, often called for short, the "Comp Strategy."

The Socialization to Gangs in St. Louis Project has been a study of the context and conditions of gang involvement and delinquency. Without prior intention, the evaluation of the St. Louis SafeFutures Program and the Socialization to Gangs Project were awarded to the same research team within a period of a few months. The co-existence of these two efforts, one a

program evaluation and the other a basic research project, provided a rare opportunity to link program evaluation to basic research in the design of the two projects. The evaluation team leveraged some of the resources available for their basic research to provide more systematic tests of the Spergel model and the Comp Strategy than would have been possible with program funding alone. This consideration played a central role in selecting the school populations for study in the Socialization to Gangs Project. On the other hand (see Component 4 of this report), the collaborative efforts with the Court and other SafeFutures partners allowed the evaluation team access to official records that are not always easily obtained by researchers with research as their only goal.

Over the first three years of the SafeFutures Program, partner agencies worked to implement policies and practices in dealing with gang-involved and serious, violent, and chronic youthful offenders in ways that would result in enduring system change. At the same time, the evaluation team worked with the program administrators and staff to develop the kind of effective information sharing infrastructure that would enhance service delivery while at the same time providing the kind of data necessary for measuring the level and quality of that service delivery. In the fourth year of the St. Louis SafeFutures Program, a comprehensive computerized Management Information System has been available to meet both the information needs of the practitioners, the researchers, and, hopefully, the policy makers.

#### **Component 4. Referrals and the Referral Process in the St. Louis Family Court**

The Family Court is at the center of the juvenile justice system. The social world of the gang-involved and delinquent youths who are the subject of this research is greatly influenced by

the operation of the Court. The official records of Court referrals for delinquency and status offenses are important outcome measures in Component 5. It is in part for this reason, this study of the operation of the St. Louis Family Court has been conducted and included here. Additionally, access to these kinds of data are rarely available to researchers, so we have taken this opportunity to take as close a look as possible at the St. Louis Family Court.

The goals of this component of the Socialization to Gangs in St. Louis Project are to: examine the numbers and demographic characteristics of youth referred to the 22<sup>nd</sup> District of Missouri Family Court, City of St. Louis, for delinquency between January 1994 and December 1997; examine proportions of serious, violent, chronic offenders referred to the Family Court; examine the history of contacts with Family Court between 1994 and 1997 for juveniles originally referred for the first time in 1994; examine services and sanctions provided to youth referred to the Family Court, and examine the numbers and demographic characteristics of youth referred to the St. Louis Family Court for status offenses between January 1994 and December 1997.

Our analysis of the St. Louis Family Court revealed a number of findings that have already emerged from other research on juvenile courts. One-time referrals account for the majority of cases. Fifty-three percent of all referrals to the juvenile court are for individuals who make one and only one appearance in court records. The modal charge for first offenders is a non-serious, non-violent offense. Status offenders remain a large and problematic group to deal with. The majority of first referrals are for non-serious, non-violent offenses. This suggests that early intervention and prevention should pay dividends.

Minority over-representation remains a serious issue for the court. Eighty-seven percent of all court referrals are for African-American youth. Once other factors in a delinquent history were controlled higher levels of sanctions were not associated with being an African-American child. Over-representation of African-American males at every level of the system is related to number of prior offenses and offense seriousness. The number and seriousness of referrals, mirroring the pattern for arrests, has not increased over time. The group of serious, violent and chronic offenders is small, and readily identifiable. An appearance in juvenile court at an early age has negative consequences for the delinquent career and official sanctioning of a juvenile. A relatively small proportion of all juveniles accounts for a large volume of referrals. In St. Louis, fourteen percent of all juveniles account for forty-one percent of all court referrals.

Taken together, the findings above lead to the following policy recommendations. First, it is critical to bear in mind that the majority of youth referred to the court never come back after their initial contact with the court. This suggests a number of conclusions, the initial one being that delinquent involvement is typically a sporadic and short-term event in the lives of young people. The court must strike a balance between serving the needs of those youth likely to return and not unnecessarily involving less serious offenders in court processes, as we know that such involvement is strongly related to subsequent court contact. This dictum is especially true of minor offenders making their first appearance. It is difficult to resist the temptation to intervene in every case, however that is the appropriate response for the majority of cases referred to the juvenile court.

There is a very small group of serious, violent, chronic offenders. These individuals are likely to experience their first court contact at a young age, and present to the court for a more serious offense. Dealing with them should be a high priority for the court, and interventions designed for this small, but notable population should be used judiciously and in a narrowly targeted way as such interventions are likely to be costly and have negative long-term consequences when applied to less serious, non-violent, non-chronic offenders.

The conclusion that a small group of juveniles accounts for a large fraction of referrals suggests the need for targeted attention to members of this group. The concentration of referrals within a small of juveniles is consistent with findings from a large number of similar studies dating back to the 1960's, and is one of the central tenets of delinquency research. However, crafting the appropriate policy response is more difficult. All too often, such findings lead to global interventions too costly and unneeded for the majority of youth. Instead we recommend the use of graduated sanctions that respond correspondingly to the seriousness of offenses committed and provide sanctions for each act of wrongdoing for individuals in this group. Current federal strategies such as the Juvenile Accountability programs and local strategies such as the Seven Percent Solution, pioneered in Orange County, California are appropriate responses to this target population.

It is important to bear in mind that these findings support the conclusion that reforming the assignment of sanction is not so important as implementing early and effective prevention and intervention. The court must strive to maintain a difficult balance. On the one hand it must strive not to pull minor first-time offenders unlikely to return to the court further into court

processes. Counterbalancing this is the need to intervene early and incrementally in response to serious, chronic violent offenders. Finding this balance is not easy, but it is clear that consistent data analysis can help to lead the way.

## **PART II. KEY FINDINGS**

### **Component 5. Gang Involvement and Delinquency**

The goals of this component of the Socialization to Gangs in St. Louis Project were to: study the relationship between self-reported gang membership and self-reported delinquency in St. Louis; study the relationship between self-reported gang involvement and self-reported gang membership and officially recorded delinquency in St. Louis; identify a proportion of youth who are involved with gangs but who do not consider themselves to be members; and study the relationship between self-reported gang involvement among nonmembers and delinquency in St. Louis.

Schools attended by populations of at-risk youth were selected on the basis of the geographic distribution of gang violence (Component 2), the focus of response programs (Component 3), and patterns of court referrals (Component 4). Self-report measures of gang-involvement and membership was used to compare self-reported delinquency for gang-involved and other youths. All attending students were surveyed.

This study supported prior research that has found higher levels of self-reported delinquency for gang members. In addition, this analysis also linked self-reported gang membership to official record data from the juvenile court on status offending and delinquency.

The results showed that gang membership is associated with higher levels of delinquency as reflected by official records, as well as self-report measures.

Measures from prior research were used to identify a category of youth who were “gang-involved” but not members. The St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department Gang Intelligence Unit refers to such youths in official reports as “gang associates.” These were youths did not consider themselves to be gang members, but often associated with gang members and had gang members as friends or relatives. In levels of self-reported delinquency and levels of officially recorded delinquency and status offending, these gang associates fell exactly between non-gang involved youth and gang members.

This study joins others in showing that the relationship between self-reported gang membership and delinquency is one that emerges in early adolescence. This supports the need for early prevention and intervention programs with youth and families.

#### **Component 6. The Gangs of St. Louis: Perspectives of Young Members**

Followup interviews were conducted with 94 gang-involved respondents selected either through the initial survey of school youth or through special identification of participants in SafeFutures Program components. The object of these interviews was not to learn more about gang participants, but to initiate data collection on gangs themselves as units of analysis. This effort stems on James Short’s recommendation that gangs as organizations have been a neglected aspect of gang research. This highly explorative effort tests the viability of studying gangs as groups as well as serves as the basis for baseline collection of St. Louis gangs as objects of study. The specific goals of this component of the Socialization to Gangs in St. Louis Project were to:

study key features of gang organization in St. Louis; study how gang organization affects gang activity; and identify how level of gang involvement influences perceptions of gang organization.

The analysis shed light on a number of key issues regarding gangs, youth policy, and juvenile offending. Three distinct subgroups of gang involvement were identified, current members, associate members and former members. Specifically, reasons to join the gang were examined along with the organizational characteristics of the gang, gang process issues, and family variables. This study examined patterns of gang membership before the typical age of onset, and provided more depth to the longitudinal studies of gang membership, delinquent involvement, and adolescent development.

In general the analysis revealed few differences across the three subgroups, and little clustering of significant differences within any of the categories of gang activity examined. With one exception, current, associate and former members did not differ from each other in patterned ways. This finding has important implications for prevention and intervention among young gang members. The absence of statistically significant differences across the three groups suggests that gang involvement is not a master status among these adolescents, certainly it is less powerful for members of this group than older teenagers and individuals in their twenties. This suggests that despite reports of short intervals between hanging out with gang members and joining the gang, immersion in gang life is not complete, and adolescent activities and concerns dominate the lives of these adolescents. In addition, the gang is seen as more organized by those who are not members. Suggestions that prevention may pay off more than intervention may be ill founded, as the hold of the gang on adolescent members appears not to be strong.