



OJJDP FACT SHEET

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Highlights of the 1998 National Youth Gang Survey

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Background

The 1998 National Youth Gang Survey is the fourth annual gang survey conducted by the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) since 1995. The 1998 survey uses the same survey sample as the 1997 and 1996 surveys, permitting comparative and trend analysis.

Survey Sample

The survey sample consisted of:

- ◆ A total of 1,216 police departments serving cities with populations of 25,000 or more (large cities).
- ◆ A total of 660 suburban county police and sheriff's departments (suburban counties) (FBI, 1995).
- ◆ A randomly selected sample ($n=399$) of police departments serving cities with populations between 2,500 and 25,000 (small cities).
- ◆ A randomly selected sample ($n=743$) of rural county police and sheriff's departments (rural counties) (FBI, 1995).

Definition

For the National Youth Gang Surveys, a youth gang is defined as a "group of youths or young adults in [the respondent's] jurisdiction that [the respondent] or other responsible persons in [the respondent's] agency or community are willing to identify or classify as a 'gang.'" Motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, and exclusively adult gangs were excluded from the survey.

Survey Results

Of 3,018 recipients, 2,668 (88 percent) responded to the 1998 survey. Forty-eight percent of respondents reported active youth gangs in their jurisdictions in 1998, compared with 51 percent in 1997 and 53 percent in 1996. An estimated 4,464 jurisdictions in the United States experienced gang activity in 1998, compared with an estimated 4,712 jurisdictions in 1997 and 4,824 jurisdictions in 1996.

For each area type, there was a decline between 1997 and 1998 in jurisdictions reporting gangs. The decline was from 786 of 1,098 (72 percent) to 736 of 1,049 (70 percent) for large cities, from 337 of 601 (56 percent) to 261 of 525 (50 percent) for suburban counties, from 125 of 375 (33 percent) to 117 of 368 (32 percent) for small cities, and from 164 of 692 (24 percent) to 139 of 648 (21 percent) for rural counties.

Respondents estimated that 28,700 gangs and 780,000 gang members were active in the United States in 1998, down from an estimated 30,500 gangs and 816,000 gang members in 1997, and 31,000 gangs and 846,000 gang members in 1996. The number of gangs decreased by 2 percent in large cities and suburban counties, 13 percent in small cities, and 9 percent in rural counties between 1997 and 1998. During the same period, the reported number of gang members remained virtually unchanged in large cities and decreased by 3 percent in small cities and by 16 percent in suburban counties. Counter to the overall trend in 1998, the number of gang members increased by 3 percent in rural counties.

Forty-two percent of survey respondents reported that the gang problem in their jurisdiction in 1998 was "staying about the same," 28 percent that it was "getting worse," and 30 percent that it was "getting better." In 1997, 45 percent of the respondents reported the problem was "staying about the same," 35 percent that it was "getting worse," and 20 percent that it was "getting better."

Respondents were asked to estimate the proportion of their youth gang members who engaged in specific types of serious and violent crimes. Twenty-seven percent of respondents said "most or all" gang members (75–100 percent) were involved in drug sales, and 3 percent said most or all gang members were involved in robbery. Twelve percent of respondents said most or all of their gang members were involved in aggravated assault. Twenty-eight percent of youth gangs were identified as drug gangs (i.e., gangs organized specifically for the purpose of trafficking in drugs).

Survey respondents in 1998 were asked to estimate how often gang members used firearms in assaults in their jurisdictions. The

results were as follows: "often" (19 percent), "sometimes" (30 percent), "rarely" (29 percent), "not used" (15 percent), and "did not know" or did not answer the question (7 percent).

Nationally, 92 percent of gang members were estimated to be male and 8 percent were estimated to be female. Only 1.5 percent of gangs were female dominated (more than 50-percent female). The 1998 age distribution of gang members was as follows: under age 15 (11 percent), 15 to 17 (29 percent), 18 to 24 (46 percent), and over 24 (14 percent). In 1996, respondents estimated that half of the gang members in their jurisdictions were juveniles (under 18) and half were adults.

The distribution of gang members by race/ethnicity in 1998 was as follows: Hispanic/Latino (46 percent), African American (34 percent), Caucasian (12 percent), Asian (6 percent), and other races (2 percent). About 33 percent of gangs were reported to have a significant mixture of two or more racial/ethnic groups.

New Topics

The 1998 survey requested information on several new topics and revealed important national data on how law enforcement agencies define gangs and gang crime.

Recipients were asked to describe the effect on youth gangs of adult gang-involved prison inmates returning to their communities; 9 percent of respondents said their youth gang problem was "very much" affected. Other responses were: "somewhat" (34 percent), "very little" (34 percent), and "not at all" (11 percent). Twelve percent responded that they did not know.

Finally, the survey asked about agencies' involvement in collaborative efforts to combat gangs. About half (49 percent) of the agencies participated in a formal multiagency task force or collaborative effort to deal with youth gangs during 1998.

Conclusion

Gang activity continued to affect a large number of cities and counties in 1998, but the number of agencies reporting active

youth gangs declined slightly for the second year in a row. The estimated number of gangs and gang members in the United States also decreased. Compared with 1997, more respondents perceived that their gang problem was "getting better" in 1998. Nevertheless, more than two-thirds responded that their gang problem was either "staying about the same" or "getting worse."

The 1998 survey confirmed previous findings that gang members are often involved in a variety of serious and violent crimes. Almost half of the law enforcement agencies reporting gang problems are involved in collaborative efforts with other law enforcement and criminal justice agencies to combat youth gangs and the serious and violent crimes they commit.

For Further Information

An indepth analysis of the 1998 survey data will be contained in the *1998 National Youth Gang Survey Summary*, to be published in 2000. For additional information about youth gangs, call the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (JJC), 800-638-8736.

Funded by and operating under the auspices of OJJDP, NYGC is a component of OJJDP's comprehensive response to America's youth gang problem. For further information about NYGC, visit its Web site at www.iir.com/nygc/.

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The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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