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The Impact of Gangs on Communities

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This bulletin considers the impact of gang-related criminal activity on communities. To assess this, however, it is important to take into account the scope and nature of gang activity in different size communities, because gang impact on communities varies in accordance with their differing characteristics. This is the point of departure in this bulletin. Next, the impact of youth gangs on communities in several contexts is examined: the impact of gang members' criminal activity, general community impact, violent gang criminal activity, gang members returning from prison, gang migration and immigration, gangs in schools, and the economic impact of gangs.

Common Gang Patterns

National Youth Gang Surveys show distinguishing features of the least and most problematic areas in which gangs are active. In the first category of communities, the least populous areas—cities, towns, and rural counties with populations of less than 50,000—youth gangs tend to be much smaller, with very few members, and the youth gang problem may dissipate as quickly as it develops. This observation applies especially to small cities or towns with less than 25,000 population and to rural counties (Howell and Egley, 2005). A variable gang problem is observed much more often in less-populated areas (under 50,000 population) than in larger, more populous areas. Nearly half of the communities in these areas experienced a variable gang problem over the six-year period from 1996 to 2001 (Egley, Howell, and Major, 2004), and only 4% of the rural counties and 10% of the small cities and towns (under 25,000 population) reported a gang problem in six consecutive years (Howell and Egley, 2005). This figure increases to 32% for cities in the 25,000–49,999 population range (Egley et al., 2004).

The small towns and rural areas (under 25,000 population) that inconsistently report gang problems typically have only 3 gangs with approximately 50 members (versus 6 gangs and 100 members when consistently reporting gang problems) (Howell and Egley, 2005). Gangs that first emerged in these areas in the 1990s—or later—had several distinguishing features. They tend to have a much larger proportion of middle-class teens, mixed-gender gangs, more females, and more white youths. The members of these recently emerging gangs are far less likely than gang members in the early onset jurisdictions (prior to the 1990s) to be involved in violent crimes (i.e., homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, and use of firearms) as well as property crimes and drug trafficking (Howell, Egley, and Gleason, 2002).

In summary, most of the less-populated areas, including rural counties, that first experienced gang problems in the 1990s tend to evidence unstable and intermittent gang problems that are relatively nonserious in terms of their impact on the community (Howell et al., 2002). This observation also applies, generally, to cities and towns under 50,000 population. Few small cities, towns, and rural areas have the necessary population base and extremely disadvantaged community conditions to sustain gangs. Moreover, any disruption that the gang experiences—including arrests of its members, diminished conflict with other groups, or members dropping out—is likely to weaken or destabilize it.

In the second category of communities, generally, cities and suburban areas with populations of approximately 50,000 and greater, gang problems are somewhat more formidable. As the size of the population group increases, so does the percentage of city agencies that report a persistent gang problem (Egley et al., 2004). Egley, Howell, and Major (2006, p. 11) show this relationship. In the smallest areas (under 25,000 population), only 10% of the localities report persistent gang problems. In contrast, 58% of the cities and suburban areas with populations between 50,000 and 99,999 report persistent gang problems, 85% of the next larger population group, and 100% of the largest cities (with populations of 250,000 and above). Cities with populations between 50,000 and 100,000 typically report between 4–15 gangs and about 50–200 members. In contrast, the next population group (between 100,000 and 250,000) estimates about 7–30 gangs and 200 or more members (Egley, 2005).

But cities that report a persistent gang problem do not necessarily have a huge problem in terms of numbers of gangs and gang members; gangs are more prevalent and considerably larger in the more heavily populated areas. In cities with populations between 50,000 and 99,999, only 3% reported more than 30 gangs in 2002–2003 (Egley, Howell, and Ritz, 2005). In contrast, 15% of the cities with populations between 100,000 and

249,999 reported more than 30 gangs in this period, and the situation was noticeably different in the very largest cities (with populations of 250,000 and above). In the latter group, more than 60% reported more than 30 gangs. The proportion that reported more than 1,000 gang members in these three population groups was 4%, 17%, and 61%, respectively. Another distinguishing feature of the gangs in the larger cities is their longevity. The more persistent gang problem areas tend to have first experienced gang activity before the 1990s (Egley et al., 2004).

Many of the youth gangs in these latter areas are extremely dangerous, as evidenced by reported gang-related homicides in National Youth Gang Surveys for 1999–2001 (Egley et al., 2006). Cities that reported one or more gang-related homicides had more than 100,000 population (78%), experienced the onset of gang problems before 1985 (71%), consistently reported a gang problem during 1996–2001 (54%), averaged 50 or more gang members in each gang, and had a greater number of adult gang members (57%). Nearly 4 in 10 of the very largest cities experienced 10 or more gang-related homicides in 2002–2003, in contrast with 8% of the cities in the 100,000 to 249,999 population range and less than 1% of the cities with populations between 50,000 and 99,999 (Egley et al., 2005).

In summary, the impact of gangs is notably worse in the more densely populated areas—those with populations of 50,000 or more. Although this is not a new discovery, the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) data reported here begins to paint a picture of the relative seriousness of gang problems in areas with greater populations. On each of the criteria examined, gang problems are far greater in cities with over 50,000 in population than in less-populated areas. More specifically, cities with populations greater than 100,000 report noticeably more gangs and gang members. But the very largest cities (with populations of 250,000 and above) typically report more than 30 gangs, more than 1,000 members, and far more gang-related homicides than less-populated cities.

In the remainder of this bulletin, the impact of gangs is considered but only in the second category of communities (those with populations of 50,000 or more) in which gang problems are somewhat more formidable.

The Impact of Youth Gang Members' Criminal Activity

The following findings come mainly from studies of gang member subsamples that have been embedded in several longitudinal studies of large, representative samples of children and adolescents in three large U.S. cities (Rochester, New York; Denver, Colorado; and Seattle, Washington) and in Montreal, Canada. Comparative studies of these urban samples in which the criminal activity of gang members in the samples is compared with the criminal involvement of nongang youth are very revealing.

A comparison of the criminal acts among these two groups of youngsters clearly shows that gang members living in high-crime areas are responsible for far more than their share of all self-reported violent offenses committed by the entire sample during the adolescent years. Rochester gang members (30% of the sample) self-reported committing 68% of all adolescent violent offenses; in Seattle, gang members (15% of the sample) self-reported committing 85% of adolescent robberies; and in Denver, gang members (14% of the sample) self-reported committing 79% of all serious violent adolescent offenses (Thornberry, 1998; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte et al., 2003). In the Montreal study, gang members had four times more court appearances at age 15 and 7 times more at age 17 (Gatti, Tremblay, and Vitaro, 2005).

Second, survey research has consistently demonstrated that youth are significantly more criminally active during periods of active gang membership, particularly in serious and violent offenses. This finding has been noted as "one of the most robust and consistent observations in criminological research" (Thornberry, 1998, p. 147). During periods of active gang membership, the Rochester gang members were responsible for, on average, four times as many offenses as their share of the total study population would suggest (Thornberry et al., 2003).

Third, gang members in the adolescent samples committed more serious crimes. In general, gang members' violent offense rates are up to seven times higher than the violent crime rates of adolescents who are not in gangs (Howell, 2003, pp. 83–84), or stated otherwise, there is a high degree of overlap between gang membership and serious violent and chronic juvenile offending. In the Rochester adolescent sample, two-thirds (66%) of the chronic violent offenders were gang members. In comparison with single-year gang members, multiple-year members have much higher serious and violent offense rates (Thornberry et al., 2003).

Fourth, the influence of gang membership on delinquency and violence is long-lasting. Analyses in the Seattle, Rochester, and Denver studies show that youths commit many more serious and violent acts while they are gang members than they do after they leave the gang (Thornberry, 1998). Although gang members' offense rates dropped after they left the gang in all three sites, their crime rates remained fairly high. Rates of drug use and drug trafficking, the most notable exceptions to offense rate drops, remained nearly as high after individuals left gangs as when they were active gang members (Thornberry et al., 2003).

General Community Impacts of Youth Gangs

Although a major concern of residents is the more organized and violent gangs, the start-up gangs also instill fear in residents when troublesome behaviors involve intimidation, vandalism, graffiti, and occasional drug sales (Weisel, 2002, 2004). Nevertheless, community residents' fear of gangs and of becoming victims of gang crime is very great in the most gang-infested communities. A study in Orange County, California, in which a random sample of residents were interviewed, illustrates this case (Lane and Meeker, 2000). Fear of crime and gangs was an "immediate," daily experience for people who lived in lower-income neighborhoods where gangs were more prevalent and dangerous. But for people in other areas, fear was generally an abstract concern about the future that became immediate only when they entered certain pockets of the county. In the most gang-ridden areas, many residents reported having avoided gang areas because they were afraid of gangs and criminal victimization. Others talked about avoiding certain streets and taking a circuitous route to shopping areas at night to avoid gangs that operate in certain neighborhoods. Intimidation of other youths, adults, and business owners is not uncommon, and intimidation of witnesses or potential witnesses is particularly serious because it undermines the justice process (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997).

In a few large cities, youth gangs and drug gangs have virtually taken over some public-housing developments (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997). Venkatesh (1996) described one of the worst cases of gang dominance in Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes, a low-income public-housing development. In the early 1990s, gangs in the housing development were transformed from turf gangs to drug gangs, and an escalation of gang violence resulted. Use of zip guns and hand-to-hand fighting of the past had given way to powerful handguns, drive-by shootings, and some use of assault weapons. The personal safety of the residents themselves was jeopardized to the extent that the risk of being caught in gang cross fire was imminent. Other drug gangs operating as organized criminal groups have had devastating community impacts. New York City's Puerto Rican Black Park Gang, so named because it shot out lights surrounding its base of operations in a park to avoid police detection (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997), is a classic example. It was a very violent drug gang—believed to be responsible for 15 murders—that trafficked in drugs and used the proceeds to buy legitimate businesses through which it laundered drug profits. In addition to drug trafficking and violent crimes, the gang was involved in trafficking or using illegally obtained firearms and using force to intimidate witnesses and victims.

Violent Gang Criminal Activity

Of course, homicide is the crime of greatest concern to everyone. Reports of gang-related homicides are concentrated mostly in the largest cities in the United States, where there are long-standing and persistent gang problems and a greater number of documented gang members—most of whom are identified by law enforcement as young adults. In the 2002 and 2003 National Youth Gang Surveys, nearly 4 out of 10 very large cities reported 10 or more gang homicides (Egley, 2005). However, the majority reported none or not more than one homicide.

Youth gangs are responsible for a disproportionate number of homicides. In two cities, Los Angeles and Chicago—arguably the most gang-populated cities in the United States—over half of the combined nearly 1,000 homicides reported in 2004 were attributed to gangs (Egley and Major, 2003; Egley and Ritz, 2006). Of the remaining 171 cities, approximately one-fourth of all the homicides were considered gang-related. More than 80% of gang-problem agencies, in both smaller cities and rural counties, recorded zero gang homicides. Across the United States, the number of gang homicides reported by cities with populations of 100,000 or more increased 34% from 1999 to 2003 (Curry, 2004).

Jurisdictions experiencing higher levels of gang violence—evidenced by reports of multiple gang-related homicides over survey years—were significantly more likely than those experiencing no gang homicides to report that firearms were "used often" by gang members in assault crimes (47% versus 4% of the jurisdictions, respectively) (Egley et al., 2004). Areas with longer-standing gang problems and a larger number of identified gang members—most often those with more adult-aged gang members—were also more likely to report greater firearm use by gang members in assault crimes.

Although the question of the extent to which street gangs shifted toward entrepreneurial activity in the 1980s and 1990s and the consequences of this shift are constantly debated by researchers (see Coughlin and Venkatesh, 2003), the reality is that gangs are often extensively involved in criminal activity. Although the proportion of all crimes committed by gang members is unknown, analyses of reported violent crimes in several cities reveal that their members often represent a large proportion of the high-rate violent offenders (Braga, Kennedy, and Tita, 2002). Lethal violence related to gangs tends to be concentrated in the largest cities, which are mired with larger and ongoing gang problems. Frequent firearm use in assault crimes is typically reported in these larger cities.

Gang crime, however, resembles far more of a criminal smorgasbord than a main course of violence. National Youth Gang Survey respondents estimated the proportion of gang members who engaged in the

following six serious and/or violent offenses in 2001: aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, motor vehicle theft, larceny/theft, and drug sales. Two clear patterns were seen (Egley et al., 2006). First, a large majority of agencies noted some gang member involvement in all six of the measured crimes. Second, the most frequent response was that none of these crimes were committed by a large proportion ("Most/All") of gang members within the jurisdiction, indicating considerable variability among gang members in terms of offending. Agencies that said a large proportion of gang members were involved in one or more of these offenses most often reported drug sales. A clear majority of law enforcement agencies in the NYGS report that while gang and drug problems overlap, it is typically only a subset of gang members in their jurisdiction who are actively involved in drug sales. These findings correspond with other research which finds an extensive amount of variation in the types of crimes in which gangs are involved. One noted gang researcher refers to this consistently uncovered pattern as "cafeteria-style" offending (Klein, 1995).

Gang Members Returning From Prison

Although no reliable national data are available on the prevalence and membership of prison gangs, the first collection of articles published on them indicates that experts agree that prison gangs got bigger and became more entrenched in the 1980s and 1990s (Fleisher, Decker, and Curry, 2001). The life cycle of many arrested gang members involves moving from communities to detention, to juvenile corrections, to adult prisons, and back into communities. The correctional system stage is but one segment of many gang members' "street life cycle" (Fleisher, 1995, p. 242).

It is widely recognized that national prison data seriously underestimates the proportion of all inmates that are gang-involved. However, in recent years, the issue of gang members returning from a secure confinement has received greater attention, in part, because of the growing numbers of inmates that are now released annually. A recent estimate is that nearly 600,000 adult inmates arrive on the doorsteps of communities throughout the country each year (Petersilia, 2003, p. 3). More people are leaving prison today than at any time in history, and many lack preparation for life on the outside, according to Petersilia's study.

Recent NYGS findings reveal that returning members are a noticeable problem for approximately two-thirds of the gang-problem jurisdictions (Egley et al., 2006). Of the agencies reporting the return of gang members from confinement in 2001, nearly two-thirds (63%) reported returning members "somewhat" or "very much" contributed to an increase in violent crime among local gangs; 69% reported the same for drug trafficking. Respondents said returning members had less of an impact on local gang activities, such as property crimes and weapons procurement; 10% or less reported returning members influenced each of these areas "very much." According to these respondents, the effect of returning members was typically observed in increases in violent crime and drug trafficking among local gangs.

An Illinois study supports these perceptions of law enforcement professionals. In this study of more than 2,500 adult inmates released from prison across the state during 2000, nearly one-quarter of them were identified as gang members (Olson, Dooley, and Kane, 2004). More than half (55%) of the gang members were readmitted to Illinois prisons within the two-year follow-up period, compared to 46% of the non-gang members. Gang members were more likely than nonmembers to be arrested, were rearrested more quickly following release from prison, were rearrested more frequently, and were more likely to be arrested for violent and drug offenses than were nongang members.

Gang Migration and Immigration

The impact of gang migration on local gang problems is not as large as commonly perceived. First, there is very little evidence supporting the notion that youth gangs have the capacity to set up satellite operations in distant cities (Decker, Bynum, and Weisel, 1998; Howell and Decker, 1999). Second, "gang migration" almost exclusively involves relocation of gang members with their families (Maxson, 1999). The 2004 NYGS asked law enforcement respondents about gang member migration or the movement of actively involved gang youth from other jurisdictions. An analysis of survey results (Egley and Ritz, 2006) showed that a small number of agencies (10%) reported that more than half of the documented gang members in their jurisdiction had migrated from other areas, while a majority (60%) of respondents reported none or few (less than 25%) gang-member migrants. Among agencies experiencing a higher percentage of gang-member migration, 45% reported that social reasons (e.g., members moving with families or in pursuit of legitimate employment opportunities) affected local migration patterns "very much." Also reported, but to a lesser degree, were drug market opportunities (23%), avoidance of law enforcement crackdowns (21%), and participation in other illegal ventures (18%). Social reasons were significantly more likely to be reported among agencies experiencing higher levels of gang-member migration.

As a contributing factor to local gang problems, immigration may well be a more important factor than migration of gang members across our country. Heavy immigration, particularly from Latin America and Asia, has introduced extremely violent gangs, such as Mara Salvatrucha, to the United States (Johnson, 2005; Triplett, 2004). Johnson (2005) suggests that two California-based groups have drawn on the ebb and flow of migrants to become substantial threats to public safety: the 18th Street and Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) gangs. The MS-13 identify themselves with

tattoos, such as the number 13, meaning "trece" in Spanish, shown as MS-13. The MS-13 gang is said to be involved in a variety of criminal enterprises, and they show no fear of law enforcement (Valdez, 2000b). They seem willing to commit almost any crime, and MS-13 gang members tend to have a higher level of criminal involvement than other gang members. Valdez reports that MS-13 members have been involved in burglaries, auto thefts, narcotic sales, home invasion robberies, weapons smuggling, carjacking, extortion, murder, rape, witness intimidation, illegal firearm sales, car theft, aggravated assaults, and drug trafficking. They also have been known to place a "tax" on prostitutes and non-gang member drug dealers who are working in MS-13 "turf." Failure to pay up will most likely result in violence. Valdez also reports that MS-13 gang members are involved in exporting stolen U.S. cars to South America. The cars are often traded for contraband when dealing with drug cartels. He estimated that 80% of the cars on El Salvador streets were stolen in the United States. Car theft is a lucrative business for the MS-13.

Economic Impact of Gangs

An informed estimate of the economic cost of gang crimes cannot be made because gang crimes are not routinely and systematically recorded in most law enforcement agencies. Hence, the proportion of all crimes attributable to gangs is unknown. In addition, the medical and financial consequences of gang violence, per se, are often overlooked. The total volume of crime is estimated to cost Americans $655 billion each year (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2004), and gangs are responsible for a substantial proportion of this. Gangs in the United States have long had a significant economic crime impact (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997; Valdez, 2000a). A study of admissions to a Los Angeles hospital trauma center found that the costs of 272 gang-related gunshot victims totaled nearly $5 million (emergency room, surgical procedures, intensive care, and surgical ward stay), which equated to $5,550 per patient per day (Song, Naude, Gilmore et al., 1996). More than a decade ago, the total medical cost of gang violence in Los Angeles County alone was estimated to exceed $1 billion annually (Hutson, Anglin, and Mallon, 1992). Nationwide, the complete costs of gun violence indicate a value of approximately $1 million per assault-related gunshot injury (Cook and Ludwig, 2006). A single adolescent criminal career of about ten years can cost taxpayers between $1.7 and $2.3 million (Cohen, 1998).

Some gangs have become entrepreneurial organizations. Although it is rare, some gangs, such as the Black Gangster Disciples Nation, have evolved into formal adult criminal organizations (McCormick, 1996; Spergel, 1995). This gang is reputed to manage an extensive drug operation, perhaps involving tens of thousands of members in a number of states (McCormick, 1996). Its corporate hierarchy (see McCormick, 1996, p. 57) consists of a chairman of the board, two boards of directors (one for prisons, another for the streets), governors (who control drug trafficking within geographical areas), regents (who supply the drugs and oversee several drug-selling locations within the governors' realm), area coordinators (who collect revenues from drug-selling spots), enforcers (who beat or kill members who cheat the gang or disobey other rules), and shorties (youngsters who staff drug-selling spots and execute drug deals).

Impact of Gangs in Schools

Where they have a substantial presence, youth gangs are linked with serious delinquency problems in elementary and secondary schools in the United States (Chandler, Chapman, Rand, and Taylor, 1998). This study of data gathered in the School Crime Supplement to the 1995 National Crime Victim Survey documented several examples. First, there is a strong correlation between gang presence in schools and both guns in schools and availability of drugs in school. Second, higher percentages of students report knowing a student who brought a gun to school when students report gang presence (25%) than when gangs were not present (8%). In addition, gang presence at a student's school is related to seeing a student with a gun at school: 12% report having seen a student with a gun in school when gangs are present versus 3% when gangs are not present. Third, students who report that any drugs (marijuana, cocaine, crack, or uppers/downers) are readily available at school are much more likely to report gangs at their school (35%) than those who say that no drugs are available (14%). Fourth, the presence of gangs more than doubles the likelihood of violent victimization at school (nearly 8% vs. 3%). The presence of street gangs at school also can be very disruptive to the school environment because they may not only create fear among students but also increase the level of violence in schools (Laub and Lauritsen, 1998). Gang presence is also an important contributor to overall levels of student victimization at school (Howell and Lynch, 2000).

In the School Crime Supplement to the 2003 National Crime Victimization Survey, students, ages 12–18, were asked if street gangs were present at their schools during the previous six months. In 2003, 21% of students reported that there were gangs at their schools (National Center for Education Statistics and the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005, p. 46). However, no difference was detected between 2001 and 2003 in percentages of students who reported the presence of street gangs, regardless of school location. Of all the students surveyed, students in urban schools were the most likely to report the presence of street gangs at their school (31%), followed by suburban students and rural students, who were the least likely to do so (18% and 12%, respectively).

Greater security measures have been taken by school administrations in response to the gang problem, but

the effectiveness of them is subject to debate (Howell and Lynch, 2000). "The presence of security officers, metal detectors, and security cameras may deter some students from committing acts of violence, but this presence also serves to heighten fear among students and teachers, while increasing the power of some gangs and the perceived need some students have for joining gangs" (Thompkins, 2000, p. 54). It is also important to be aware that school-related gang crime extends beyond the boundaries of school buildings to contexts in which youths congregate before and after school hours; in fact, gang crime begins to escalate very early on school days (Wiebe, Meeker, and Vila, 1999).

Impact of Gangs on Participants

Most youths who join gangs have already been involved in delinquency and drug use. Once in the gang, they are quite likely to become more actively involved in delinquency, drug use, and violence—and they are more likely to be victimized themselves (Peterson, Taylor, and Esbensen, 2004). Their problems do not end here. They are at greater risk of arrest, juvenile court referral, detention, confinement in a juvenile correctional facility, and, later, imprisonment.

Gang involvement dramatically alters youngsters' life chances—particularly if they remain active in the gang for several years (Thornberry et al., 2003). Over and above embedding its members in criminal activity, the gang acts as "a powerful social network" in constraining the behavior of members, limiting access to prosocial networks, and cutting individuals off from conventional pursuits (Thornberry et al., 2003). These effects of the gang tend to produce precocious, off-time, and unsuccessful transitions that bring disorder to the life course in a cascading series of difficulties, including school dropout, early pregnancy or early impregnation, teen motherhood, and unstable employment (pp. 179–180).

Conclusion

This bulletin has examined the impact of youth gangs on communities in more populous cities—those with populations greater than 50,000. Some youth gangs are not actively involved in criminal acts—particularly not violent crimes. However, as one moves from small towns and rural areas to large cities, and particularly to our nation's largest cities, far more gang crime is seen. The economic impact of gangs is also far greater in these areas, with a far greater deleterious impact on communities in cities of 100,000 or more population. The very largest cities—with populations of 250,000 and above—report on average more than 30 gangs, more gang members, and far more gang-related homicides than less-populated cities.

The disproportionate impact of gang members' criminal activity on our communities is evident in several ways. First, gang members account for more than their share of crimes. Second, youths commit more crimes during the period of active involvement in a gang than during periods before joining and after leaving a gang. Third, gang members commit more serious crimes than other groups. Fourth, the criminal involvement of youths who remain in a gang for more than a year is long-lasting.

Overall, the impact of youth gangs on communities is felt in many ways. Intimidation of other youths, adults, witnesses, and business owners is not uncommon. Once the enormous numbers of homicides in Chicago and Los Angeles are factored in, more than one-fourth of all the homicides across the country are considered gang-related. Gang immigration may be a factor of greater importance than gang migration, in terms of the impact of outsiders on local gangs. The MS-13 gang may be an example of this, although its numbers are likely exaggerated in the broadcast media. On the other hand, gangs in schools are likely underestimated. In general, law enforcement agencies tend to underreport gang incidents (Meeker, Parsons, and Vila, 2002), and their estimates of the number of gangs and gang members are likely to overlook substantial numbers of students. Last, gangs tend to propel youths into a life of crime, punctuated by arrests, convictions, and periods of incarceration. The costs to society are enormous. Each assault-related gunshot injury costs the public approximately $1 million. A single adolescent criminal career of about ten years can cost taxpayers between $1.7 and $2.3 million.

Regardless of population size, any community that senses that it is experiencing a youth gang problem needs to undertake a thorough, objective, and comprehensive assessment. This is the important first step before considering a response. The National Youth Gang Center has developed an assessment protocol that any community can use to assess its gang problem. This assessment guides the development of a comprehensive, communitywide plan of gang prevention, intervention, and suppression (National Youth Gang Center, 2002a).

The Comprehensive Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Model (Spergel, 1995) is a flexible framework that guides communities in developing and organizing such a continuum of programs and strategies. Resource materials that assist communities in developing an action plan to implement the Comprehensive Gang Model are also available (National Youth Gang Center, 2002b). Information on promising and effective gang programs and strategies that address specific risk factors among various age groups is also available at the NYGC Web site in the Gang Strategic Planning Tool (http://www.iir.com/nygc/tool/). ■

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[i] The National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) is conducted annually by the National Youth Gang Center. A nationally representative sample of more than 2,563 law enforcement agencies has been surveyed each year since 1996. For details of the survey and annual statistical reports, go to the NYGS page at the National Youth Gang Center Web site: www.iir.com/nygc/.

[ii] As indicated by reported gang problems in at least one survey year and no gang problems in any other year.

[iii] The evidence is stronger in analyses conducted to date on National Youth Gang Survey data for areas with populations under 25,000; however, there is substantial evidence that the gang problems in cities with populations between 25,000 and 50,000 resemble those areas with populations smaller than 25,000 more closely than they resemble cities with populations greater than 50,000 (Egley et al., 2005; Howell et al., 2002).

[iv] Cities with a population of 250,000 or more.

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