

## DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Ask the average person to describe a location where youth gangs can be found, and he or she will probably conjure up a gritty inner-city neighborhood. In recent years, though, gangs and their associated problems have been reported in the most rural areas. How serious is the problem of gangs in rural America? And how does the problem differ from that presented by urban gangs?

The cover story in this issue of the *NIJ Journal* attempts to answer these questions. Ralph A. Weisheit and L. Edward Wells conducted a two-part investigation into the characteristics of rural youth gangs. They first analyzed data from the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS), which has been conducted since 1996. By merging this data with economic and demographic information from other sources, they were able to paint a clearer picture of where gangs are located, who their members are, and the factors that lead to their appearance in rural areas. Phase 2 of the study consisted of telephone interviews with police agencies in nonmetropolitan counties reporting the presence of at least one gang through the NYGS. These interviews helped the researchers define the parameters of precisely what the terms "gangs" and "gang members" mean.

On the whole, there were a lot of surprises, and quite a bit of good news. Rural gangs unexpectedly (and unlike their urban counterparts) tend to thrive in times of economic resurgence. They also tend to be made up primarily of local youth, although families that move from the city with their gang-affiliated teens do help to spread the trappings of gang culture (like wearing "colors" and marking territory with graffiti). The encouraging news is that many rural gangs don't seem to last, disappearing from the landscape as the bulk of their membership grows up or leaves town. The researchers suggest that the differences between rural and urban gangs require that those dealing with rural gangs need new ways to think about and contend with them.

Also in this issue are an explanation of the "Top Twelve" ways to ensure a successful collaboration of disparate law enforcement agencies; a report on the Crime and Justice Group of the Campbell Collaboration, which is gathering a database of criminal justice research reviews based on the model developed in the field of physical medicine; and an overview of the Data Resources Program, NIJ's long-standing program to help researchers locate data from previous NIJ-funded studies so they can reanalyze or expand upon earlier findings.



Sarah V. Hart  
Director