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Gangs and Gang Activity in America: A Prevention Report

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Portland State University

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Introduction

Portland State University requires undergraduate students to complete a Senior Capstone course in order to obtain a Bachelor's Degree. Students in this capstone course for the Criminology and Criminal Justice Online degree were required to work in teams to create a report summarizing existing research on a particular crime prevention problem and to present the research to a community partner. The topic for the Winter 2011 Capstone is "Prevention of Gang Activity" and it is our pleasure to submit the report to our community partner, the Portland Police Bureau.

The 2011 Winter Senior Capstone class was divided into two teams of ten students. Both teams were assigned 30 peer-reviewed articles divided evenly among the members by the team leader. Team members read their articles identifying which of the following categories were covered in the articles: definition and prevalence; victims; offenders; *modus operandi*; and prevention. After the articles were categorized, the teams began writing the report one section at a time, focusing on one of the aforementioned topics each week. Team members completed a summary of each article relevant to the section, which was then written into a 600-word summary of the findings. After all the topics were covered, the introduction and conclusion were formed, and the Prevention Report was completed.

This report is a product of our team's findings from the assigned articles and covers information on gangs, gang activity, and gang prevention. The report reveals information such as the history of gangs in the U.S., the definition of "gang," data on prevalence, persons affected by gang activity, demographics of gangs and their members, criminal activity committed by gangs, gang hierarchical structure, prevention strategies, and effectiveness of gang prevention programs.

Definition and Prevalence

We reviewed eight (8) articles containing information about the definitions of gangs, gang activity, and gang membership. The articles also contained information on the prevalence of gangs in the United States, and the variation of gang prevalence across different types of jurisdictions.

One of the challenges in studying gangs is agreeing upon a definition, as no clear consensus on what a gang is and or isn't exists. Decker and Kempf (1991) examined the definition of gangs across three groups: juveniles in a detention center, police officers, and policy makers on a gang task-force. They found the groups did not agree on the definition of a "gang," who gang members are, or what gang activity is. They did find, however, definitions of gangs to be highly related to their sources of knowledge regarding gangs, such as the media, which can influence an exaggerated view. On the other hand, police officers were found to use the most restrictive definition of gangs and downplayed their dangerousness (Decker and Kempf, 1991, p.284). Youths could correctly identify the names of gangs better than both police and policy makers, but also had the most expansive definition, considering a wide-variety of activities as "gang behavior."

Researchers have attempted to develop a standard definition of gangs. The two most widely accepted criteria for whether a group is a gang are: **age** - generally adolescents (14- 24) and the **engagement in law-violating or “imprudent” behavior** (Esbensen, Winfree, He, and Taylor, 2001, p.106). Huff (1998), states the typical age range of gang members is 14 to 24 years-of-age, but researchers have seen children as young as 10 or as old as 30 who are gang members (p.1).

Some researchers question institutional and political meanings of the word “gang.” Meehan (2000) concluded “gangs” are partly fiction. While serious problems with youth violence related to group dynamics exist, use of the word “gang” and police “gang team” can be abused to the point where almost any activity in which young people engage can be called “gang activity.” Because of this, outside resources might be brought to the problem and allow politicians to claim they are solving “gang” problems, but still distort what is really happening. Sullivan (2005) argues “gang” should not be used, as the real problem is youth violence which has decreased, while the number of “gangs” has increased.

There are approximately 27,900 gangs and 774,000 gang members in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006). From 2002 to 2008, the number of gangs increased by 28% and gang members increased by 6% (Egley, Howell, and Moore, 2010, p.1). Gang membership varies considerably from place to place. According to the National Gang Center (2011), 85% of large cities report gang problems, whereas only 15% of rural counties report gang problems. Between 2002 and 2007, the percentage of jurisdictions reporting gang problems increased by 25%. Suburban counties saw the largest increase (33%) but rural counties reported a 24% increase, as well. Whether this is a real increase in gangs or evidence of a strategy to secure federal and state funding is open to question.

Victims

We reviewed nine (9) articles containing information on victims of gang activity. One consistent finding was gang members, themselves, are often victims of gang-related violence, though victimization involves gang members and non-gang members, alike (Sullivan, 2005, p.184). Taylor, Peterson, Esbensen, and Freng (2007) found gang members are at higher risk for experiencing several types of violent victimization and half of gang affiliated youth had encountered one or more general victimizations over a one year period (p.362). DeLisi, Barnes, Beaver, and Gibson (2009) conducted a three-wave longitudinal survey of victims of gang violence with both gang members and non-gang members. Results from two of the three waves indicated gang members’ general victimization and violent victimization rates were much higher than those of non-gang members.

Research also indicates persons belonging to certain groups (particularly sex, age) are more likely to be victims of gang activity. Gender appears to be one of the most defining characteristics of gang victimization. Pizzaro and McGloin (2006) found males are 92.7% more likely than females to become victims of gang violence. Chermak and McGarrell (2004) found males accounted for 80% of victimization. Female gang members may find joining a gang offers protection from assaults by rival gang members, but may also increase the likelihood of other types of violence (sexual exploitation, assault, or repeated victimization by male peers) (Miller,

1998). Stewart, Schreck, and Simons (2006) found adolescent males who were victims of prior violence and who had friends with violent backgrounds most likely to be victimized.

Age is another factor related to gang victimization. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2011), the majority (68.4%) of gang-related homicide victims in the U.S. from 1976 to 2005 were 18-34 years old. Those under 18 years-of-age accounted for 24.2% of the victims, 6.1% were 35-49, and those 50+ years-old accounted for only 1.3% of victimizations. Analyzing 1985-1995 data, Mares (2009) found 55% of gang-related homicide victims were 19 or younger, while only 16% of non-gang homicide victims were below 20 years old. Pizarro and McGloin (2006) examined the race of gang homicide victims in New Jersey and found African Americans accounted for 86.9% of the victims, Hispanics for 12.4%, and whites for less than 1%.

Neighborhood characteristics can also be a risk factor for gang activity and victimization. Howell and Moore (2010) contend the use of federal housing policies concentrating on disadvantaged groups in high-density urban housing developments is a recipe for gang violence. African-Americans have been affected by these housing policies more than Hispanics (p. 20). Stewart, et al (2006) researched the “code of the street,” the tough-posturing many young people use to get respect on the streets, part of which is to always retaliate in cases of perceived injustices or signs of disrespect. The researchers also found youths who adopted this code, even though they believed it would protect them from harm, were more likely to be victimized than those who did not assume such a stance.

While victims of gang violence and gang related crimes vary demographically, a clear picture of typical victims has emerged. Victims of gang related violence have risk factors and characteristics similar to their offenders. Contrary to media portrayals of random acts of gang violence which make any unsuspecting citizen a victim of gang crime, research shows gang members themselves are at the greatest risk for gang-related victimization.

Offenders

Of the assigned articles, seven (7) contained information pertaining to offenders who are involved in gang activity. The articles covered offender characteristics such as age, race, and gender of gang members, different reasons youth join gangs, and risk factors which influence gang membership.

The National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC) (2009) conservatively estimates there are one million gang members in the United States—up from the 800,000 estimate in 2005 and that roughly 900,000 of the members live in communities across the nation, while more than 147,000 are incarcerated in local, state, and federal correctional facilities. While some researchers believe the increase in numbers is due to drug smuggling and sales, immigration, gang alliances, migration, government policies, weakening of family structure, and the media, Sullivan (2005) believes the numbers may be exaggerated due to definitional ambiguity. He views the term “gang” as being overused because it is not well-defined. Whatever the reasons, it is clear the official data show an increase in the number of youths joining gangs.

Gang members often share similar demographic characteristics. Youths typically join gangs at around 13 years-of-age and most continue until their early to mid-20s (Huff, 1998). Although some gangs are racially mixed, most are segregated by race. In 2001, approximately 50% of the gang members reported by law enforcement were Hispanic/Latino, 30% African American, and 10% Caucasian (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006). Esbensen, Deschenes, and Winfree (1999) found that of the gang youth sampled, 38% were female and 62% were male (p. 39). They also found female gang members commit crimes similar to those of male gangsters, but at a slightly lower frequency.

Gang members come together for various reasons. They commonly form allegiances for a common purpose and engage in criminal activities to advance their reputations, protect territory, or expand operations. Individuals join gangs for different reasons, as well, driven by both personal and environmental factors. Howell (2010, p.4) found reasons for joining gangs typically fall into one of two categories: risk factors and - contrary to popular belief - desire to belong to a gang (i.e., they are **not** pressured into it).

While it is not possible to predict whether a young adult will join a gang, possession of certain risk factors can increase the probability. Individual risk factors include whether the youth has antisocial behaviors, uses alcohol and/or drugs, suffers from mental health issues, or has been a victim of abuse or neglect (Howell, 2010, p.6). In addition, family structure, where youths from single-parent households where the parent is rarely present, and those from neighborhoods where peers are gang members are at higher risk for joining gangs (Hill, 1999). Communities also pose as risk factors if they contain active gangs, which may make youths feel the desire, or even the need, to be part of a particular gang. While the presence of these risk factors does not guarantee a youth will join a gang, the more factors present, the higher the probability of becoming a gang member.

A personal desire to join a gang can also be strong, as gangs' social benefits, such as parties and opportunities to associate with friends or members of the opposite sex are appealing to teens and young adults (Howell, 2010, p.6). Esbensen, Deschenes, and Winfree (1999) found gang youths, themselves, provided the following reasons for joining gangs (in descending order of importance): protection, fun, respect, money, and because one of their friends was in a gang (p.44).

Modus Operandi (M.O.)

We reviewed eight (8) articles containing information on *modus operandi* (how gang-related crimes are committed). The location of criminal activities depends on the types of crimes committed. A gang's drug dealings typically occur within its "set space" (turf), though robberies and burglaries are often carried out in locations outside home turf. Gangs flourish in "set spaces," forming relationships (of sorts) with their communities, where gangs are the parasites and communities are the hosts (Tita and Ridgeway, 2007, p.215).

Some researchers believe "parasitic" is not an accurate characterization of the relationship between a community and a gang. They believe the relationship could be viewed as gang members providing protection for local merchants, policing their own neighborhoods, and providing protection from other gangs for merchants and citizens. Those who accept this

version of “the truth” believe the arrangement is due to merchants’ general mistrust and fear of local police departments. Some communities have a long history of antagonism with policing agencies, believing they provide oppression, not protection. Some gang members, therefore, may see themselves as performing an important service of protection to their communities (Tita and Ridgeway, 2007, pp.213-216).

Some gangs have unique M.O.s, setting them apart from other gangs, such as initiation rituals, specific illegal activities, or territorial markings. The Crips, for example, use graffiti to indicate the boundaries of their turf. The East Coast Bloods require would-be members to cut or slash another person before being considered a member, while the Mexican Mafia, founded in prison, extorts drug distributors, who are not in prison, to distribute drugs in prison (Howell and Moore, 2010, pp.4, 5, 12).

Much of the violence in the United States is caused by gang rivalry, often manifested by drive-by shootings and homicides. Serious gun assaults and homicides are typically perpetrated among young, minority males residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods. While the U.S. saw a decline in the overall homicide rates between 1980 and 1990, youth homicide rates increased dramatically (Braga, Kennedy, Waring, and Piehl, 2001). Braga, McDevitt, and Pierce (2006) found that in Lowell, Massachusetts from 2000-2002, 70.5% of homicides and 35.3% of aggravated gun assaults were considered gang-related and believed to be committed by a small number of highly active youth offenders, similar to violence problems in many other cities (p.33). Pizarro and McGloin (2006) researched gang and non-gang homicides in Newark, NJ and found gang-related murders more likely to occur in public, involve firearms, have multiple suspects, and have more minority male victims than non-gang homicides (p.204).

In addition, there is a clear connection between drug use, drug distribution, homicides, and gang activity. Chermak and McGarrell (2004) found more than half the homicides in their study related to some type of drug connection. Gangs are known to be extensively involved in selling cocaine and marijuana. Of 50 gang members interviewed in four Ohio counties, 61.7% admitted to selling drugs (Huff, 1998, p.4). The same study found crack cocaine comprised from 38.7%-65.9% of total drug sales, while marijuana made up 48.9% to 73.5% of sales. Gang members usually sell drugs daily, earn about \$1,000 a week selling to approximately 30 customers, and deal in expensive and profitable products.

A common perception concerning gangs is that young people experience pressure to join and, if they resist, will be victimized. Regarding this, both Huff (1998, pp.5-6) and Decker and Kempf-Leonard (1991, p.279) were told by gang members this was not necessarily true. Decker and Kempf-Leonard's research indicates 60% of gang-members polled reported it was “not hard” or only “moderately hard” to resist pressures to join gangs.

Prevention

We reviewed ten (10) articles containing gang prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies targeting different stages of the developmental model of gang participation. “Prevention” involves working with communities and individuals to avert youths from joining gangs at all. “Intervention” is working with youths when they are on the “cusp” of joining a

gang or are moderately involved in gang activity. “Suppression” focuses on eliminating the violent or illegal behavior of people who are heavily immersed in gang activity.

The goal of prevention programs is to reduce the number of youths who become gang members. At the family, school and community levels, these programs 3 to 14-year-olds, not yet involved in gangs, but who display risk factors which may increase their chances of becoming gang members (living in gang-ridden communities, living in one-parent households with little supervision, having peers who are gang members, and demonstrating delinquent behaviors).

Gang Resistance Education and Training program (G.R.E.A.T), exemplifies a school-based prevention program, implemented by police officers, targeting middle-school students to help them resist joining gangs, by teaching life-skills and targeting criminogenic risk factors (G.R.E.A.T., 2011). While found to be only modestly effective, G.R.E.A.T. invokes pro-social attitudes, creates favorable attitudes toward police and negative attitudes toward gangs, and improves conflict resolution skills (Esbensen, Osgood, Taylor, Peterson, and Freng, 2001). It might produce stronger results if delivered to elementary students (Hill, Howell, and Hawkins, 1999).

Huff (1998) claims opportunities for intervention occur in two stages: (1) between the “wannabe” stage and the age of first arrest, and (2) the time gang members are first arrested for property crimes and before moving on to more serious crimes (p.7). Intervention focuses on steering current gang members (12-24 years old), involved in a considerable amount of gang activity, away from gangs and reduces criminality by providing alternative activities and rehabilitation opportunities (Howell, 2010, p.14). Programs focus on developing life skills, increasing education and employment opportunities, diffusing tensions between rival gangs, and reducing gang violence (Howell, 2010).

Mesa Gang Intervention Project (MGIP) is an example of an intervention program. Participants are monitored daily and offered job placement, drug and alcohol counseling, and other social services (Howell, 2000). The program has been effective in repressing the gang problem, reducing violent crime, and other types of crime (Spergel, Wa, and Sosa, 2005, p.57).

Suppression programs use a combination of law enforcement, prosecution, and incarceration to deter the criminality of gangs, disband gangs, and remove gang members from their “turfs” (Howell, 2000). Suppression strategies include targeting hotspots, crackdowns, and truancy and curfew enforcement. Suppression tactics target more established violent gang members who have a high level of involvement in criminal activity.

The Dallas Anti-Gang Initiative has been effective in reducing gang-related through aggressive curfew and truancy enforcement (Fritsch, Caeti, and Taylor, 1999). Boston’s Operation Ceasefire, a problem-oriented policing approach, based on the “pulling levers” deterrence strategy, focusing on a small number of chronically offending gang members responsible for most youth homicides, has reduced youth homicides, shots-fired calls, and gun assaults in the city (Braga, Kennedy, Waring, and Piehl, 2001; Braga, 2008).

Suppression the most commonly used strategy, followed by intervention. Prevention programs are most effective when addressing multiple domains (individual problems, family structure, school issues, associations with peers, and conditions in the community).

Intervention is strongest when programs target youths in the early stages of gang involvement. Suppression tactics are most effective when targeting specific crimes, locations, gangs, and individuals (Howell, 2000). The most effective programs are those combining all three strategies (“Spergel Model”). This is a multifaceted approach focusing on individual youths’ needs, and improving relationships within families, organizations, and communities around them (Cahill and Hayeslip, 2010, p.2).

Conclusion

While the word “gang” lacks a universal definition, it is generally recognized as being a group of youths who engage in law-violating behavior. Of the approximately one million gang members in the U.S., most are either Hispanic/Latino or African American males from 13 to 25 years-old; they usually live in disadvantaged neighborhoods and possess multiple risk factors for gang involvement. Victims of gangs’ criminal activities are typically minority males from 18-34 years-old, who are gang members, themselves. Gang members band together to protect their territories, expand operations, and make a name for themselves, frequently engaging in criminal activity, such as selling illegal drugs, theft, robbery, assault, and homicide.

Although there is not a “one size fits all” approach which can solve a community’s gang problem, actions can be taken to reduce gang violence and prevent future gang activity. Identifying those who are the greatest risk for current or future gang activity is crucial to successfully preventing gang membership and crimes. Although many youths will have risk factors for gang membership, not all will join gangs. There are many programs designed to intervene in the lives of young people and give them alternatives to a gang lifestyle. Suppression strategies, such as those practiced by the Dallas Anti-Gang initiative and Boston's Operation Ceasefire have demonstrated success in de-escalating gang violence. The most effective approach appears to be combining prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies instead of just focusing on one tactic.

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