Introduction

Gang members represent a relatively small proportion of the adolescent population. However, they commit the majority of serious youth violence (Howell, 1998b; Thornberry, 1998). Along with the rapid proliferation of gangs since 1980, there have been growing concerns among lawmakers, law enforcement, educators, practitioners, and parents about gang behavior and gang violence. Researchers have been studying the gang phenomenon since the early 1900’s, but have yet to delineate clearly the reasons why some youth may join gangs (Howell, 1998b; Thornberry, 1998). Little is also known about the effectiveness of many of the intervention programs that exist to combat the gang problem (Howell, 1998b). Overall, the dynamics of gang behavior and persistence in the United States are not well understood (Jankowski, 1991).

Scope of the Problem

Based on 2,182 jurisdictions/police and sheriff’s departments that responded to the 2002 National Youth Gang Survey, there were an estimated 21,500 gangs and 731,500 gang members across the nation. The estimated number of gang members has decreased fourteen percent between 1996 and 2002. The majority of these gang members (85%) reside in large cities and suburban counties. For example, Chicago has an estimated 30,000-50,000 gang members. However, Los Angeles ranks first in the United States in gang-involved youth, with more than 58,000 gang members. California continues to have the most gangs and gang-related problems compared to any other state in the country, with more than 200 communities seriously affected by gang-related problems.

Most gangs are formed along racial or ethnic lines. In California, these include Latino gangs, African American gangs, Asian gangs, and White gangs. There are also further ethnic distinctions within these larger groups, such as Chicano, Central American, and Puerto Rican gangs, all considered Latino. In California, Latino gangs comprise the majority of the gang population, although Asian gangs are on the rise. Most (but not all) Latino and African-American gangs are divided by neighborhoods or location. Rivalries tend to stem from these neighborhood divisions. Asian gangs tend to be motivated more by profit than neighborhood rivalries. Violence between ethnic gangs is normally intra-ethnic (e.g., one Latino gang vs. another Latino gang) based on neighborhood or
location-based affiliation rather than inter-ethnic (e.g., Latino gang vs. African-American gang).

Gang members commit more serious and violent offenses than adolescents who are non-gang members (Howell, 1998b; Thornberry, 1998). They are not only more involved in committing delinquent acts, they are responsible for the majority of all delinquent acts that are committed (Thornberry, 1998). Survey respondents of the 1999 National Youth Gang Survey reported that the most prevalent offenses committed among gang members were larceny/theft, aggravated assault, and burglary/ breaking and entering (Egley, 2000).

Gangs tend to be composed of young males, ranging in age from 12-25 years, but there have been instances of gang members much younger and much older than this range. Some gangs are loosely knit and lack structure while others are highly organized and regimented. Indeed, gangs are organizations that develop strategies to optimize the chances of organizational survival, some more successfully than others. In many cases, gangs engage in a range of entrepreneurial activities designed to provide money, power, and prestige to members.

**Risk Factors**

Many of the risk factors for youth violence and delinquency also predict increased risk of gang involvement. In particular, researchers have emphasized the importance of neighborhood, family, school, and peer influences.

**Neighborhood**

The majority of research on neighborhood influences on gangs has focused on the role of social disorganization. The basic idea is that poverty has caused a disintegration of social organization and social control that, in turn, has led to the emergence of gangs as alternate mechanisms that provide order, safety, and economic opportunities. Thus, youth growing up in these communities are enticed by gang life because it provides them with something to do, material possessions, and protection from the existing violence on the streets. Indeed, studies have shown that the probability of joining a gang is higher in neighborhoods with low resources and high levels of community social disorganization (Covey, Menard, & Franzese, 1992; Thornberry, 1998).

**Family**

Family disorganization is another salient influence in joining a gang. Poor family management strategies increase the risk of gang membership (Thornberry, 1998). Poor strategies include low family involvement, inappropriate parental discipline, low parental control or monitoring, poor affective relationships, and parental conflict. Facing poor family relationships, a youth may be lured by a gang because it provides a “family” that is lacking at home. In some cases, parents who are themselves gang members may model and encourage the gang involvement of their children.
School

Educational variables have also been assessed as risk factors for gang membership. Studies have found that youth who have a low educational expectation have a higher risk of joining a gang. It is also a risk factor if a youth’s parent(s) have low educational expectations for their child. Poor school performance and low commitment and involvement are also correlated with gang membership. Essentially, a high commitment to school indicates an attachment to conventional institutions. The less a youth bonds to these conventional institutions the more likely he/she will participate in gangs.

Peers

One of the most robust findings in the literature is the link between having deviant peers and joining a gang. Having peers who are gang members greatly increases the likelihood of joining a gang. Peers who are engaged in this type of behavior may construe gang behavior as attractive and fun. Gangs also provide a sense of comradeship and expectations of safety and protection that can be appealing to youth. In many cases, older gang members recruit younger children for a variety of tasks, essentially creating a cadre of "trainees" who are socialized into gang life from an early age.

Promising Strategies

Due to the complex interplay of factors that lead to gang membership, there are various types of intervention programs that have been developed. These programs mainly focus on prevention, intervention, or suppression (Howell, 1998a). Prevention strategies aim to prevent youth from joining gangs through education-type programs. Intervention programs aim to divert youth from crime by providing alternatives such as after-school programs, counseling, and job training. Suppression strategies use enforcement tactics that identify, isolate, and punish criminal offenders. A mixture of approaches is currently being tried across the United States, with considerable efforts directed towards police suppression programs (Howell, 1998a). Although there are many programs representing a variety of approaches, very few of these programs have been carefully evaluated.

An exception is the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms’ Gang Resistance Education and Training Program (G.R.E.A.T.). This prevention program utilizes law enforcement officers to teach a 9-week curriculum to elementary and junior high students on resisting gang involvement and avoiding the use of violence. A number of evaluations of this program have been conducted. For example, Esbensen and Osgood (1999) surveyed 5,935 eighth-grade students in 11 sites and found that students who participated in the program reported more prosocial attitudes and lower rates of some types of delinquent behavior than students who did not participate in the program. These results suggest that large school-based preventive programs may be effective in
curtailing the gang problem, or at least in impacting attitudes and behaviors associated with gang involvement.

Howell (1998a) suggests that interventions should include multiple components, incorporating prevention, social intervention, treatment, suppression, and community mobilization approaches. One such program began in the Little Village area of Chicago and has been extended to other sites across the United States. The Little Village program targeted the older members of two of the most violent Latino gangs via two coordinated strategies: 1) increased probation department and police supervision and suppression to control violent or potentially hard-core violent youth; and 2) efforts to encourage at-risk youth to engage in conventional activities through education, jobs, job training, family support, and brief counseling. Preliminary evaluation results (after 4 years of program operation) point to a reduction in the rate of increase in gang violence in the Little Village area compared to the control area.

Still, effective prevention of gang involvement and gang activity remains a pressing challenge. In contrast to individual acts of violence that can be addressed by programs designed to reduce individual risk, gangs are also social organizations that provide an alternative option for youth competing for scarce resources in low-income neighborhoods. Social interventions that provide entry-level skills and low-paying jobs may simply not be able to compete with the social and economic opportunities provided by gangs. Similarly, harsher sentencing seems to exacerbate rather than prevent the problem, as gang members continue and escalate their gang activity in prison. A sustainable reduction in gang problems may require a focus on the multiple functions they serve and on programs that can provide reasonable and viable options for youth.

References


**Related Publications on Youth Gangs**


**Internet Resources**


Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence: [www.colorado.edu/cspv](http://www.colorado.edu/cspv).


