# *Gangs in Rural America*

## Final Report

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# Contents

# Gangs in Rural America

## Executive Summary

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# Executive Summary
# Gangs in Rural America

## Introduction

Both researchers and the popular press suggest that gangs are increasingly becoming a problem in rural areas, but to date there has been limited empirical consideration of these perceptions. The only gang data that utilizes a representative national sample, includes a substantial number of rural jurisdictions, and is collected annually, is that gathered by the National Youth Gang Crime Center beginning (with a nationally representative sample) in 1996. The National Youth Gang Surveys (NYGS) are given to a near-census of urban or metropolitan police agencies and nationally representative samples of cities and counties in rural or non-metropolitan areas. These surveys show that gang problems are occurring in communities of all sizes and locations, although they are still most heavily concentrated in medium and large cities. While the data are limited by using the police as informants, there is no other data set that is comparable in coverage or quality.

Utilizing the NYGS, this study has two distinct components. First, the NYGS data were merged with other county-level data to create a completely unique data set for secondary analysis. This secondary analysis considered the relationship between reports of a gang presence and county-level social, economic, and demographic characteristics. The second component of this study utilized interviews with agencies in nonmetropolitan counties reporting gangs. Those agencies were contacted and interviewed about their current gang status, what they meant by the term gang, the nature of gang-related problems in their jurisdiction, and effective responses to rural gangs.

**Part I: Secondary Analysis**

Recent NYG surveys document that small towns and rural areas are not immune to youth gang or street gang problems, but we do not know what community attributes are most strongly correlated with reports of gang problems, nor do we have a well-developed theory that would predict these correlations.

This study employs a comparative macro-level perspective in which the focus is on analyzing variations in reports of gang problems across communities in nonmetropolitan counties. Data for this study were drawn from four separate sources: (1) local police agency responses to three waves (1996, 1997, 1998) of the NYGS, (2) county-level economic and demographic data, (3) a rural-urban classification and county-level measures of primary economic activity, and (4) county-level data on access to interstate highways. The three waves of the NYGS were merged into a single data set using the FIPS (Federal Information Processing Standards) codes for state, county, city, and place. The FIPS county code also made it possible to merge NYGS agency-level gang data with corresponding county-level contextual data. The basic unit of data in the merged datafile is the police agency (municipal or county). The various county-level characteristics are included as contextual variables for each police agency.

While there may be few explicit models of rural gang development and little existing research empirically describing rural gang problems, it was possible to extrapolate from ideas raised in the urban gang research or appearing in the popular press. From these sources we suggested four general explanatory frameworks about rural gang development. These perspectives were: (1) ecological, (2) economic deprivation, (3) population composition, and (4) diffusion. Twenty-one county-level variables were used as indicators of these four frameworks.

Linking the three years of gang survey data, we began our analysis by distinguishing among three types of jurisdictions, based on police reports on the persistence of gangs from 1996 through 1998. Among agencies in non-metropolitan counties 22.6 percent reported persistent gang problems, 57.0 percent reported a persistent absence of gangs, and 20.4 percent reported transitory gang problems. Given that the data cover only a 3-year period, the percentage of non-metropolitan agencies with transitory gang problems was quite high. Of the agencies with a transitory gang problem, over half (58 percent) reported gangs in year one but not in year three--raising questions about the commonly held belief that after gangs have a foothold in a community it is rare for them to leave.

The bivariate analysis, with gang situation as the dependent variable and each of the 21 county-level measures as independent variables, suggested that the most consistent indicators of a gang presence in non-metropolitan counties were those reflecting social stability and the composition of the population. Our findings suggest that urban gang models based on economic factors may not be directly applicable to non-metropolitan areas. Economic stability was not associated with gangs and measures of economic deprivation were mixed and not consistently in the predicted direction. In fact, gangs were more likely to be reported in jurisdictions located in counties experiencing economic growth.

There was only modest support for arguments that urban gangs spread into rural areas through diffusion. The presence of an interstate highway was associated with the presence of gangs, as was the percentage of the workforce working outside the county, but this latter difference was in an unexpected direction--i.e., counties with the most people working outside the county were less likely to report gangs. Perhaps people willing to drive to another county to work while maintaining their current residence may be highly committed to the community in

which they live and would rather drive than move. Alternatively, gangs may be more attracted to rural areas with a strong local labor market in which it is not necessary to leave the county for work.

In the multivariate analysis, several variables important at the bivariate level dropped out of the analysis. The presence of an interstate highway was no longer important, nor was the divorce rate, the high school graduation rate, the percent Black, the percent Hispanic, the percent living the the same county from 1985-1990, or the percentage of the population ages 15-24.

The data suggested many similarities between models of metropolitan and non-metropolitan gangs. Both were strongly associated with indicators of social stability and both were shaped by characteristics of the population. The biggest difference was in the role of economic factors, which appear more important in accounting for gangs in metropolitan areas. The findings suggest that gang activity may have a different relationship to poverty in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. Specifically, gangs were more likely to be reported in nonmetropolitan areas experiencing economic growth.

In both the bivariate and the multivariate analyses the single most important predictor of gangs in non-metropolitan areas was the percentage of the county's population living in urban areas (i.e., incorporated areas with a population of 2,500 or more people). That the strong association remains while controlling for a substantial number of other factors suggests that urbanization has an influence that may be distinct from conventional measures of social disorganization or economic conditions.

This study has a variety of implications for future research. First, the current study illustrates that it cannot be assumed that urban models of gang development apply everywhere. Second, this study emphasizes the importance of being explicit about the level of analysis used in

gang research, and making certain that the level of analysis is consistent with the level of explanation. Third, the study provides another reminder of the distinction between theories of crime and theories of gangs. Fourth, this study is an important first step in the development of more explicit models of gangs in smaller cities and rural areas. These findings confirm the view that in non-metropolitan areas the social context is an important factor in shaping crime, gangs, and the operation of the criminal justice system.

**Part II: Interviews with Police in Nonmetropolitan Counties**

This portion of the study was based on a telephone survey of municipal and county police agencies in nonmetropolitan counties in the United States reporting the presence of a gang in the 1997 NYGS. By using agencies reporting the presence of gangs in 1997, we were able to maximize the likelihood of contacting rural agencies with gang problems, while also providing a random sample of such agencies. In the 1997 survey sample there were 980 nonmetropolitan agencies. Of these, 286 (33.1 percent) reported the presence of gangs in their jurisdiction. These 286 agencies were contacted for interviews about gangs, gang problems, and their agency's response. The findings here are based on responses from 216 agencies distributed across 39 states.

We did not give respondents a precise definition of a gang, but consistent with the National Youth Gang Survey, we made it clear our focus was on youth gangs and not on adult gangs, and we made a distinction between youth groups and youth gangs, with the latter having a higher degree of organization and structure. Beyond these general distinctions, we allowed representatives of each agency to define gangs and youth groups for themselves.

Of those agencies reporting gangs in 1997, only 41 percent indicated the presence of at

least one youth gang at the time of our interview. Further, of the nonmetropolitan agencies reporting gangs in 1997, the percentage also reporting them for our 2000 interview declined as the county in which the agency was located became more rural, suggesting that gangs may be relatively ephemeral in rural areas. It is likely that because both the number of gangs in any single rural jurisdiction is small, and the number of members in any single gang is also small, that rural gangs are often short-lived. Losing one or two members through arrest, movement out of the area, or maturing out could easily mean the end of a rural gang.

As an illustration of how complex the concept of gangs can be, particularly when applied to rural areas, several respondents indicated that although there were no gangs in their community there were gang members:

> ID#212: We don't really have any gangs that are centered here in our community, because we just don't have that large of a community. But we have some that are members of gangs in surrounding communities and, occasionally, they come over here.

For purposes of this study, such communities were categorized as not having gangs, but it would be easy to argue otherwise.

Respondents generally used several indicators of a gang presence in these communities. Perhaps the most frequent indicator was self-identification by youth. Also frequently used was the presence of graffiti, tatoos, a youth's affiliation with others thought to be gang members, and the wearing of gang colors. In a number of jurisdictions, any one of these indicators might, by itself, be used as evidence of the presence of a gang. Other jurisdictions were more selective, requiring several indicators. A few jurisdictions used guidelines established by their states. Some of the agencies reported using relatively detailed and concrete indicators, while other jurisdictions used criteria that were more vague and impressionistic, such as " . . . well, I don't know. I just look at them." Relying on outward signs of gang membership has become more

problematic in jurisdictions in which gangs are attempting to keep a low profile by not displaying signs, tattoos, or colors – something that many agencies thought was becoming more common.

Even when criteria were quite demanding, they generally were used to decide if an individual could be labeled as a gang member, and were not used as proof of the existence of a gang. This system could be problematic in rural jurisdictions in which there were reported to be gang members but no gangs.

Questions about the types of problems associated with gangs led to a wide range of responses. In some jurisdictions having a gang problem meant nothing more than the presence of graffiti, while in others there were reports of murders committed by gang members. Of the agencies reporting the presence of a gang, nearly all believed that at least some gang members used drugs, sold drugs, and engaged in violence -- though respondents were seldom able to differentiate actions engaged in by individual members from activities orchestrated by the gang. When asked to self-generate a list of problems they experienced as a result of gangs the most frequent responses were drugs, assaults, theft, and burglary.

Despite reports of drugs, assaults, drive-by shootings and even homicides, only 43 percent of those reporting gangs described the gang problems in their community as "Serious." And, some of those describing the problem as serious, qualified their rating with such comments as:

> ID#179: In a small town like this our little gangs, to the people, are serious. But, to the big city, this would be minor.
>
> ID#151: Well, again, the problem is significant for us, but I suppose if you were comparing it to an urban environment it would be minimal.

Although drug use and drug sales were common among gang members, and while violence was periodically seen, most of the observed gang crime problems were of a relatively minor nature,

such as graffiti, parties, and alcohol consumption.

Some have assumed that gangs spread from urban to rural areas through a process in which urban gang members themselves migrate to rural areas, while others have assumed that only the symbols and culture of the gang are exported to rural communities. We asked about how many of the gang members came from outside the local area, and the results were mixed. The estimated number of current gang members who came into the area from another jurisdiction varied from "none" to "all of them," but most estimates ranged between 10 and 30 percent. That is, in most rural jurisdictions reporting gang activity, the majority of gang members are local youth. However, in many jurisdictions the impact of imported gang members was substantially greater than their numbers alone would suggest, because they became an important conduit for the movement of ideas and symbols into these areas.

Officials gave a variety of reasons why gang youth moved into the area, but were specifically asked about five reasons: social reasons (e.g., their family moved there, often for employment), expand drug markets, engage in other illegal activities, avoid the police, and getting away from gang influences. Although urban gang members often moved into rural areas for more than one of these reasons, most gang youth move into the area for social reasons, that is, to accompany the family or to move in with relatives. Other reasons occurred with enough frequency to suggest that a single model of the in-migration of urban gang members into rural areas will not suffice.

These agencies appeared ready to deal with gangs. Most had at least some officers with gang training. Among agencies reporting gangs problems, there was reported to be a "great" interest in additional gang-related training (52 percent), in receiving technical assistance regarding gangs (35 percent) and in assistance in forming task forces (28 percent).

The most frequent agency response to gang activity was suppression through strict enforcement – "zero tolerance" – a style one might easily associate with urban police. It was also suggested that zero tolerance practices were easier to apply in smaller communities where gang members stood out and in which individual police officers, prosecutors, probation officers, and judges may have had a closer working relationship. For many agencies, strict enforcement against individuals perceived to be gang members was accompanied by a more tempered approach to potential gang members. Many also stressed the importance of prevention and of working with the community. Thus it appeared that for outsiders engaged in gang activity, or for insiders deemed beyond redemption, harsh criminal penalties were seen as appropriate. However, for youth with stronger bonds to the local community, and for whom there was some hope, the emphasis shifted to community and family pressure and to prevention.

# Part 1

# Gang Problems in Non-Metropolitan Areas: A Longitudinal Assessment

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**Gang Problems in Non-Metropolitan Areas:**
**A Longitudinal Assessment**

## ABSTRACT

The spread of youth gangs to non-metropolitan counties in the 1990s has been widely cited but difficult to document empirically and to interpret theoretically. Using linked data from the 1996, 1997 and 1998 National Youth Gang Surveys, and by merging the combined National Youth Gang Surveys with demographic data from the Departments of Commerce and Agriculture, this study provides a comparative analysis of social, economic, and demographic differences among nonmetropolitan jurisdictions in which gangs are reported to have been persistent problems, those in which gangs have been more transitory, and those which report no gang problems. In the process, it provides a preliminary assessment of the application of urban gang explanations to less urbanized areas.

## Gang Problems in Non-Metropolitan Areas:

## A Longitudinal Assessment

During the 1990s youth gangs drew considerable attention from law enforcement officials, policy makers, and academic researchers, along with repeated warnings about the proliferation of gangs within urban centers and their spread to other communities. As Fagan (1999: 165) noted: ". . . gangs have emerged now in more cities than ever before, a response to profound social structural changes, fueled by processes of rapid and efficient cultural diffusion and sustained by a gang enforcement apparatus that itself has diffused to legal institutions across the country." Of particular concern has been the spread of large urban gangs into smaller cities and outlying rural areas--a pattern widely reported by researchers (e.g., Maxson, 1998; Caldarella et al., 1996; Curry et al., 1996; Hagedorn, 1999; Howell, 1998; Klein, 1995; Short, 1998), and in the popular press (e.g., Miller, 1996; Poe, 1998; The Economist, 1996; Coates and Blau, 1989).

While widely "known" and reported, the proliferation of urban gangs in small cities and rural communities has been difficult to document empirically. With a few recent exceptions, the focus of gang research and policy has been on urban gangs and has generated a large and detailed literature on gangs in metropolitan centers (see Howell, 1998). In contrast, research on gangs in small cities and rural areas is almost nonexistent. There is no body of systematic field studies of gangs in rural communities. Most case studies of gangs in smaller communities have been anecdotal and impressionistic, limited to a few interesting but atypical cases. Most community surveys of gang problems have been limited to larger cities (e.g., of 100,000 population or greater), which provide no data on the prevalence of gangs in small towns and rural communities, or have limited geographic coverage, such as the survey of gangs in North Carolina by Oehme (1997). Other studies (e.g., Maxson, 1998) include small jurisdictions, but do not distinguish

between those in metropolitan and those in nonmetropolitan areas. This is problematic for purposes of this study because many small jurisdictions are located within urbanized areas (Weisheit, Falcone and Wells, 1999).

More comprehensive data on gangs and gang crimes in smaller communities have recently become available with the publication of the National Youth Gang Surveys (National Youth Gang Center, 1997; 1999a; 1999b). These data document reports of youth gangs across many different sizes of communities, and show that reported gang problems do not occur everywhere to the same degree. While valuable, the National Youth Gang Survey data provide only the most general descriptive information about gang patterns and only minimal information about community characteristics that correlate with reported gang problems.

Along with a lack of comprehensive data on gang problems in smaller communities, there is a shortage of explicit theoretical models of gang development in smaller communities. This reflects two distinct and problematic tendencies of the available research. One is to presume that the social dynamics of urban settings are universal. Existing theoretical accounts of gang development and dynamics have been developed for a few large urban centers, with an implicit premise that these analyses yield general theoretical accounts of gang development applicable in all sizes and types of community. As several writers have noted (e.g., Fagan, 1999; Hagedorn, 1988; Jackson, 1991), the simple generalizability of these gang development models to smaller towns and rural areas remains unexplicated, untested, and unlikely.

A second limitation is the common tendency to treat community-level models of crime and theoretical accounts of gang development as equivalent. While, crime rates and gang problems may be substantially related in many areas, the correlation between gangs and crimes is highly variable across communities and across different types of crimes. Indeed, Jackson (1991)

reports a near zero correlation between crime rates and gang problems across a sample of 60 urban communities. These two phenomena represent conceptually distinct community problems and cannot be substantively regarded as equivalent, as others have noted (Curry and Spergel, 1988; Jankowski, 1991). In brief, recent surveys document that small towns and rural areas are not immune to youth gang or street gang problems, but we do not know what community attributes are most strongly correlated with reports of gang problems, nor do we have a well-developed theory that would predict these correlations.

## Conceptual Framework for the Analysis

This study employs an explicitly comparative macro-level perspective in which the research focus is on analyzing variations in reports of gang problems across nonmetropolitan communities. The aim of the study is to replace impressionistic speculation about gang proliferation in rural communities with a more systematic empirical analysis of police reports on gangs. To do this, we must first operationalize three key concepts: rural, community, and gangs.

Rural (versus urban): An empirical analysis of changes in the presence of gangs in rural areas requires a conceptually meaningful operational definition of rural. Several authors have addressed the difficulty of this task (e.g., Weisheit, Falcone, and Wells, 1999; Bealer, Willits, & Kuvlesky, 1965; Deavers, 1992), a discussion too large to repeat here. While conceding that no single operational definition is completely satisfactory, we argue that the usual rural-urban dichotomy found in crime and delinquency research is too coarse to be theoretically useful. Among possible empirical definitions, we selected the rural-urban continuum coding developed by the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Cook, 1989)--also referred to as "Beale Codes" after its initial developer. This typology has the advantage of

being a county-level measure that allows for finer analytical distinctions among non-metropolitan counties, reflecting both urban population size and proximity to metropolitan areas. The ERS data provide for 10 categories on the rural-urban continuum, including four categories of metropolitan and six categories of non-metropolitan counties. Using the Census Bureau definition, metropolitan counties are those containing a city of 50,000 or more people, along with the less populated areas that are economically dependent on such a city, with a total area population of 100,000 or more. Nonmetropolitan counties are all those not included within a census-designated metropolitan statistical area. As an exploratory analysis we elected to utilize a simple metropolitan/non-metropolitan dichotomy, which results in our sample including 1866 agencies from 645 metropolitan counties and 1145 agencies from 1010 counties in our revised non-metropolitan category.[1]

Community: The idea of community is implicit in all research on gangs, since by definition gangs represent a collective response to a particular set of socially organized conditions or contexts. In these terms, gang processes are inherently contextually embedded and relative to the social settings in which they develop. Despite its theoretical primacy, the issue of community remains a rather undeveloped element in most gang research, which generally has a micro-social focus on gang dynamics and gang members, and invariably is carried out within a single community or a few selected communities. Even where community is explicitly listed as an important theoretical concern in gang studies (e.g., Monti, 1993; Spergel, 1995), the concept of community is left undefined and theoretically unexplicated.

Although the general sense of what a community is may seem obvious, it is not at all clear what is the most meaningful level of social organization or aggregation for empirically describing community. "It has long been recognized that American communities do not consist

of a number of discrete and separate entities but that there are communities within communities, depending on what level of goods and services and social behavior is under consideration (Warren, 1978:7)." The level at which gang patterns are most meaningfully analyzed has not been explicitly considered. Without exception gang research has implicitly defined and operationalized communities merely through the administrative or governmental units in which the population and areal statistics were collected--e.g., neighborhood, census block, or municipality--without additional consideration of its theoretical validity. At first glance such operational definitions may seem reasonable, but a even a casual review of community studies in sociology and human ecology--particularly those adopting a social systemic perspective--shows that the assumption is questionable (Hawley, 1950; Warren, 1978; Wilkinson, 1991).

The "community" as a meaningful sociological unit of collective social life can seldom, if ever, be equated with a single neighborhood. If by "community" we mean the spatial and social arena within which a population of people collectively carry out and sustain their daily lives, then community is generally a much larger area than a census block or neighborhood and often larger than a single city (Hawley, 1950; Poplin, 1972; Bursik and Grasmick, 1993). This becomes increasingly true in less metropolitan areas where the effective scope of community stretches well outside city limits to include the surrounding outlying areas and even other cities in the region. This pattern was noted by rural sociologists at the beginning of the century and it has become even more pronounced as recent developments in transportation, communication, and technology have dramatically stretched the effective dimensions of people's daily worlds (e.g., Hawley, 1950; Poplin, 1972; Warren, 1978; Wilkinson, 1991). Thus, simply equating "community" with "city" becomes less plausible once analysis moves beyond large metropolitan areas.

In this analysis we expand the analysis of community gang research by conceptualizing community in broader terms and more inclusive units than previously used. While acknowledging that the effective size of a community will vary between more urbanized and more rural areas, we propose that in non-metropolitan areas, as a first approximation, the county serves as an important organizational context that shapes the local community. Many local social, economic, and political functions are organized at the community level with the county seat serving as the hub of the social system. Many collective actions may be accomplished at smaller, more local levels (e.g., neighborhood watch, taxing districts; municipal police departments), but the county provides the larger context within which they occur; they cannot be analyzed very meaningfully in isolation from that the systemic context. Especially in rural areas, "community" cannot be viewed as isolated from the larger social and economic systems immediately surrounding it. In Wilkinson's (1991: 48) terms, following Galpin (1918), "Town and county are not separate rural communities. Together . . . [they] form a 'rurban community.'"

Operationally we distinguish between the community as an administrative unit by which the lives of community residents are socially identified and institutionally organized, versus an ecological context within which the daily activities of community residents are carried out and functionally shaped. Correspondingly, for analyzing community gang problems we will use the area of police jurisdiction as the appropriate unit reflecting community perceptions of gangs and use the police agency as the basic unit of data collection. We also use the county as the appropriate unit for measuring the social, economic, and ecological context within which local gang problems develop. Consequently, county-level variables are included as contextual attributes of responding agencies.

Gang: Gang researchers have long debated how gangs should be conceptualized and operationally defined (e.g., Bursik and Grasmick, 1993; Curry and Spergel, 1988; Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1995). While this is a central issue for gang researchers, it seems less problematic for this study than for traditional gang research. Our focus is on gangs as socially identified community problems that involve both objective events by youth organizing and acting as informal collective units, and shared perceptions by community agents of social control that gangs are present and active in the jurisdiction. This perspective is explicitly a more macro-level, social constructionist approach to gang study that corresponds directly to the analytical question of gangs as an "emerging social problem" within counties. It also relates closely to social and political issues of gang intervention programming and policy making.

Beyond merely categorizing nonmetropolitan counties as either having or not having gang problems, we acknowledge that such phenomena are more complex and dynamic than these two categories can express. To express this complexity better, county gang problems are conceptualized and operationalized in this study by a three-category classification that reflects both the presence of gangs and their temporal stability. Chronic gang jurisdictions are those in which gangs are an enduring and persistent problem. Stable non-gang jurisdictions consistently have reported no significant gang problems. Transitory gang jurisdictions are those in which the problem is temporally limited with gangs appearing or changing markedly over a short period of time. This third category has some analytical antecedents in Spergel's (1995: 180-4) discussion of "emerging" gang communities and to Klein's (1995: 99) brief description of "cities on the cusp"--i.e., communities in which gangs problems are quickly emerging or eminent but subject to considerable change. We expect transitory gang jurisdictions to be somewhere between stable gang and non-gang jurisdictions in their collective and ecological dynamics. We also expect,

following Spergel's (1995) suggestion, that appropriate gang intervention and prevention efforts in such situations might be quite different from those needed in situations with more enduring gang problems.

## The Data

Data for this study were drawn from four separate sources, one pertaining to local police jurisdictions and three pertaining to the counties in which the police agencies were located. They were then merged into a single data set using the county FIPS code as the attribute of common identification. These data sets include: (1) local police agency responses to three waves (1996, 1997, 1998) of the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) (National Youth Gang Center, 1997; 1999a; 1999b), (2) county-level economic and demographic data from the U.S. Department of Commerce's USA Counties, 1998 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999), (3) a rural-urban classification and county-level measures of primary economic activity from the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Economic Research Service, 1995), and (4) county-level data on access to interstate highways provided by Dr. Tom Ricketts and Randy Randolph from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The three waves of the NYGS were merged into a single data set using the FIPS (Federal Information Processing Standards) codes for state, county, city, and place. The FIPS county code also made it possible to merge NYGS agency-level gang data with corresponding county-level contextual data. The basic unit of data in the merged data file is the police agency (municipal or county). The various county-level characteristics are included as contextual variables for each police agency.

National Youth Gang Survey: The core gang data set was constructed by merging three waves of data from the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS), a survey of police agencies in the U.S. administered by the National Youth Gang Center. The NYGC began surveying police

agencies in 1995 and has re-administered the survey in each subsequent year. The 1995 survey was based on a non-representative random sample of agencies across the United States and the survey itself was only one page long.

Surveys conducted in 1996, 1997 and 1998 were substantial improvements over the 1995 survey and were used for the present analysis. First, they used longer, more detailed sets of questions about gangs, gang members, and gang activities--including gang crimes, drug involvement, and gang migration. Second, the 1996-1998 surveys utilized a near-census of urban or metropolitan police agencies and random sampling procedures to obtain representative samples of cities and counties in rural or non-metropolitan areas. Third, the 1996, 1997, and 1998 surveys each used several follow-up calls to non-respondents after the initial mailing of surveys to achieve an impressively high return rate on the survey of 87 percent. Finally, the 1996, 1997, and 1998 National Youth Gang Surveys utilized the same sampling list, allowing a one-to-one matching of agencies in the sample across the three annual surveys.

The two most serious criticisms of the NYGS are the absence of a standardized definition of "gang" in the questionnaire and the reliance on police as a source of information about the nature and extent of gang activity. Respondents were open to defining the term for themselves, except that "motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, or other exclusively adult gangs" were explicitly excluded. For clarification, several follow-up questions were asked about what kinds of groups the agency considered "youth gangs" (versus "troublesome youth groups that you do not consider to be youth gangs"). While we recognize the serious limitations of asking police to self-define gangs, the focus of this study is on official perceptions of a gang problem, and the unit of analysis is the agency, rather than the gang or gang member.

While we would not claim that police are a perfect source of information about the nature

and extent of gang activity, several characteristics of rural police make them more reasonable sources for this information than urban police. First, rural agencies tend to be small. The median size of non-metropolitan municipal agencies is three (Weisheit et al., 1999). All officers, including the chief are generalists who spend most of their time in the community interacting with citizens, increasing the likelihood they will be aware of gang activity. The small number of officers and the tendency for all officers to share similar duties reduces the likelihood of inter-officer variations within individual departments. In smaller, non-metropolitan agencies the survey was usually filled out by the sheriff himself, the police chief, or a designated gang officer, resulting in more consistent and knowledgeable responses than in larger metropolitan agencies where it was more often delegated to a wide variety of persons with variable knowledge of local gang activities. Second, because the communities themselves are small with relatively stable populations, officers are better able to know their citizens and to be aware of things going on in the community. In small communities, outsiders are likely to stand out, including those with gang affiliations. Third, geography requires that most rural police live in the communities they police. They are thus in a position to monitor activities even when off duty. Further, their children and relatives are additional sources of information and give the officer a personal stake in being aware of goings-on in the community. Finally, other social service agencies are less often available in smaller communities, and police are often the only social service agency available on a 24-hour basis (Weisheit et al., 1999). Thus, rural police are first responders to a wider variety of concerns than are urban police and consequently have additional channels for gathering information.

USA Counties, 1998: These data were obtained by the U.S. Department of Commerce (1999) and include county-level measures of such demographic features as: population change

over time, minority population, unemployment rate, education level, age distribution, poverty level, single-parent households, renter-occupied households, vacant housing units, population density, divorce rate, residential stability, and percent of the population living in incorporated areas of 2,500 or more.

Economic Research Service Data: Economic Research Service (ERS) data are available on-line (Economic Research Service, 1995) and include a 10-category rural-urban continuum classification (the "Beale Codes") for each county, as well as additional indicators of the primary economic activity of the county (e.g., manufacturing, service, retail) and other socio-economic features. As discussed more fully in the section above, the ERS data were used to distinguish metropolitan and non-metropolitan counties and to identify economic activities and attributes of counties. A more complete discussion of these data are available elsewhere (Cook and Mizer, 1994; Salant and Waller, 1995).

## Characteristics of Rural Counties and Patterns of Local Gang Reports

While gangs became substantially more widespread and problematic in the 1990s, they were not ubiquitous. Some communities reported substantial and persistent problems with gangs, while others, especially in non-metropolitan locations, had not experienced gang problems. Attempts to understand these variations are limited by a lack of explicit general models of community gang development. The general theoretical models cited in gang research are either broad sociological accounts of juvenile delinquency in general (rather than of gang problems *per se*), or social psychological theories of who will join gangs and how gang membership will influence their criminal activity (micro-level events rather than macro-level rates of community gang problems).

While there may be few explicit models of rural gang development and little existing research empirically describing rural gang problems, it is possible to extrapolate from ideas raised in the urban gang research or appearing in the popular press. We draw on these to identify plausible frameworks for understanding the most important causes or precursors to youth gang development within rural communities. We suggest that four general explanatory frameworks characterize most discussions about when and why gangs develop in different places that should be useful in the study of rural gangs. These perspectives, whose empirical indicators are listed in Table 1, include: (1) ecological explanations; (2) economic deprivation explanations; (3) population composition accounts; and (4) social diffusion models. This analysis is not intended as a critical test of any particular theory or as a comparative test among these four frameworks, since (a) the frameworks suggest somewhat overlapping predictors rather than mutually exclusive and competitive sets of variables; and (b) none of the frameworks has been fully explicated to yield a clearly testable set of predictions about where gang problems will occur. They tend to predict community gang development only indirectly and implicitly. That is, we have no fully explicated theories of community gang development to test.

Ecological Explanations: From the earliest writings of the Chicago School of Criminology, ecological elements of community organization and disorganization have been associated with crime and the emergence of organized criminal groups, including gangs (e.g., Thrasher, 1927; Bursik, 1988). Reflecting a homeostatic view of social life that presumes order, consensus and stability, ecological explanations emphasize the disruptive causal effects that changes in community conditions have on the regulation of social life. In its fullest accounts, referred to as social disorganization theory, it involves a multi-step causal sequence in which changes in community conditions are the initiating cause in the chain of effects leading to gang

**Table 1: Theoretical Concepts and their Empirical Indicators**

| Concept | Empirical Indicator |
|---|---|
| **Ecological Factors** | |
| Social Stability | |
| | – Percent change in population 1990-1997 |
| | – Percent renter-occupied housing units |
| | – Percent of population living in same county, 1985-1990 |
| | – Percent of ever-married population that is divorced |
| Economic Stability | |
| | – Change in unemployment rate |
| | – Change in percent of jobs in manufacturing |
| | – Change in percent of jobs in service |
| **Economic Deprivation** | |
| | – Unemployment rate in 1996 |
| | – Median household income |
| | – Percent of persons living below the poverty level in 1993 |
| | – Percent of housing units that are vacant |
| **Population Composition** | |
| Demographics of the Community | |
| | – Percent of the population that is 15-24 years old |
| | – Population per square mile |
| | – Percent of population living in urban area (incorporated area with a population of 2,500 or more) |
| | – Percent of the population that is Black |
| | – Percent of the population that is Hispanic |
| Human/Social Capital | |
| | – Percent family households with one parent |
| | – Percent of population 25 yrs old or more who are high school graduates |
| | – Percent of persons 5 yrs old or more not speaking English in home |
| **Social Diffusion** | |
| Relative Social Isolation | |
| | – Percent of workforce working outside the county |
| | – Percent of households with no telephone |
| Relative Physical Isolation | |
| | – Adjacency to a metropolitan county (for non-metropolitan counties only) |
| | – Access to an interstate highway |

problems, with weakening community organization and loss of social control over young people as the intermediate causes. Because it counts as the first cause in the series, indicators of community stability are often treated as direct indicators of social disorganization, even though the full process is actually a bit more complex and indirect. Recently Sampson (Sampson and Groves, 1989; Sampson, 1991) and Bursik (1988; Bursik and Grasmick, 1993) have revised social disorganization theory to give greater emphasis to these intervening events representing social networks and relationships. This revision shifts the theoretical focus in contemporary social disorganization theory from macro-level structural conditions to meso- or micro-level interactional events, with community variables serving as ecological precursors, rather than direct indicators of social disorganization.

Indicators of community stability may be either measures of social stability representing the institutional and residential order of the community (e.g., population changes, fluctuations in renter-occupied housing, shifts in long-term residents, and changes in family intactness and divorce) or measures of economic stability representing the social systems by which community residents earn their livelihoods (e.g., changes in household income levels, changes in the unemployment rate, changes in the types of jobs available to community residents such as manufacturing or service or retail). These indicators all focus on relative stability rather than absolute conditions. Instability might represent rapid population decline but it might also represent rapid population increases. One might expect gangs to flourish in areas of economic decline, and a number of urban gang researchers have commented on this (cf., Hagedorn, 1998; 1999; Spergel, 1995; Fagan, 1996), using such terms as "deindustrialization" and "disinvestment." However, gangs problems may also be observed in "flourishing" communities experiencing rapid growth. Although nonmetropolitan gang development has not been studied

directly, Freudenburg and Jones' (1991) meta-analysis concluded that in rapidly growing small communities, crime increased disproportionately faster than the population.

Economic Deprivation: Although urban gang researchers seem to use the concepts of economic decline and economic deprivation interchangeably, Curry and Spergel (1988) caution that these are not the same. Economic deprivation explanations provide a more structural, less ecological, account of why gangs develop in communities, being closer to the structural concept of anomie than social disorganization--a feature explicitly argued by Hagedorn (1998). In these terms, gangs represent a collective and adaptive response to a lack of legitimate economic opportunities (e.g., Hagedorn, 1998; 1999; Jankowski, 1991; Fagan, 1996; Spergel, 1995; Williams, 1989) which generate systemic conditions of economic deprivation and social marginalization. These are not unique, transitory community deficiencies but rather endemic structural features of the larger society in which the community is located. What matters for the development of gangs is the state of deprivation or marginalization resulting from particular social and economic structures, rather than the mere fact of change itself. From this perspective, conditions of deprivation that are stable and enduring may be more important influences on gang development than instability and change. It has been argued elsewhere that rural areas have lower rates of many types of crime but also have more dismal economic circumstances than typical urban areas (Weisheit et al., 1999). Although others have argued that "poverty is more extensive and severe in non-metropolitan areas than in metropolitan areas (Albrecht, Albrecht, and Albrecht, 2000)," the economic transformations documented by Wilson (1987) and other urban researchers have not been studied for their effects in non-metropolitan areas. This study provides an opportunity to consider whether the general economic health of a rural community, apart from changes in economic circumstances, is associated with reports of gangs.

Population Composition: This explanatory model for gang development involves a purely demographic account relying on aggregate measures of the "kinds of people" who live in a community. Gang development is predicted as a result of having large numbers of those categories of people who are "high risk" candidates for gang involvement. The higher the proportions of these at-risk people in a community, the greater the likelihood of gang problems occurring. This is similar to predicting changes in crime rates by noting changes in the age distribution of the population. "At-risk" characteristics predictive of gang involvement should include the age distribution (namely the proportion of young males), the relative sizes of socially or economically marginal groups, as well as the social capital available in that community represented in the aggregated attributes or attainments of its population. Such variables as percentage of young adults in the population, population density, the extent to which people live in urbanized areas and the racial heterogeneity of the population are all demographic characteristics that have the potential to place a community at risk for gang problems. In addition, a community with such social capital as one-parent households, a poorly educated population, and residents for whom English is not the dominant language is likely to be more poorly equipped to resist the incursion of gangs. Many of these same variables frequently are associated with a social disorganization framework (e.g., percent minority, percent urbanized; percent under 18 years of age), but their derivation from this perspective is rather indirect and confounded with indicators of both population and economic decline.

Social Diffusion: The diffusion perspective represents a simple ecological or geographic model positing that: (a) the flow of culture (e.g., new customs, ideas, behaviors, values) in a society is from urban to rural; and (b) the greater the flow between rural and urban communities, due to closer, stronger, or more frequent connections, the more similar rural areas will be to

urban areas in their social behaviors and ideas. Fischer (1980) has provided the most explicit contemporary version of this model as it applies to crime, arguing that "cultural change is continually generated in major urban centers, diffuses to smaller cities and then to the rural hinterland" (p. 416). Donnermeyer (1994) has suggested that a diffusion model substantially explains the distribution of gangs in the rural countryside as a consequence of the migration of gang members from large cities to outlying communities. Maxson (1998) evaluates this argument in her summary of gang migration studies, but speculates that cultural diffusion (e.g., through the mass popular media) would seem to be a more likely explanation. Hagedorn (1988) has offered a similar sounding argument, although Hagedorn suggests that it is the gang culture (e.g., gang symbols, rituals, codes, and behaviors) that migrates to outlying communities rather than the gang itself. If this diffusion model is correct, then we would expect that rural gangs would be most prevalent in counties with the most direct links to urban areas outside of the county and in rural counties immediately adjacent to metropolitan areas. For this study, indicators of diffusion measure both the relative social isolation of the community (percent working outside the county and percent of households with no telephone), and the physical isolation of the community (whether it is adjacent to a large metropolitan area and it is accessible to outside visitors by interstate highway). If the diffusion model is accurate, it can be expected that non-metropolitan communities that are most isolated should least frequently report gang problems.[2]

**Nonmetropolitan Counties Reporting Gangs**

A study of factors associated with the development of gangs in nonmetropolitan jurisdictions must include enough cases for meaningful analysis. Table 2 shows the distribution of responses across police agencies in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas for each of the

three waves of the linked data. Although the focus in this analysis is on nonmetropolitan agencies, results from metropolitan police agencies are included in Table 2 for comparison.

**Table 2: Percent of Agencies Reporting Gangs by Year and Type of County**

| County Type | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Metropolitan | 65.9% | 64.3% | 60.1% |
| Non-Metropolitan | 36.9 | 35.2 | 29.9 |
| Total | 55.2 | 53.2 | 48.3 |
| N of Agencies | 2498 | 2643 | 2567 |

Table 2 shows that the percent of agencies reporting gangs declined from 1996 through 1998 in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan counties. The table also shows that although a smaller percentage of agencies in non-metropolitan counties reported gangs, the numbers were still quite substantial--29.9 percent of the sample or 300 cases in 1998.

Linking the three years of gang survey data, we began our analysis of nonmetropolitan jurisdictions by distinguishing among three types, based on police reports on the persistence of gangs from 1996 through 1998. Among agencies in non-metropolitan counties 22.6 percent reported persistent gang problems, 57.0 percent reported a persistent absence of gangs, and 20.4 percent reported transitory gang problems. Given that the data cover only a 3-year period, the percentage of non-metropolitan agencies with transitory gang problems was quite high. Of the agencies with a transitory gang problem, over half (58 percent) reported gangs in year one but not in year three--raising questions about the commonly held belief that after gangs have a foothold in a community it is rare for them to leave (cf. Klein, 1995).

## County-Level Factors and Gangs

Table 3 shows the association between the presence of gangs in non-metropolitan jurisdictions and a variety of county characteristics. The last two columns reflect the relative magnitudes of differences among the three types of jurisdiction.

Ecological Factors: The county-level variables that are statistically significant and that have the strongest association with a jurisdiction's gang status are all indicators of social stability. Population change, the presence of renter-occupied housing, residential stability, and the divorce rate are all associated with persistent police reports of a gang presence in non-metropolitan areas.

While indicators of social stability were all associated with reports of gangs, none of the indicators of economic stability were statistically significant, although the differences were in the predicted direction. In non-metropolitan counties the perceived presence of gangs was unrelated to changes in unemployment, changes in the percentage of jobs in manufacturing, or changes in the percentage of jobs in service occupations.

Economic Deprivation: Of the four measures of economic deprivation, unemployment, median income and the presence of vacant housing units were all significantly associated with a persistent gang presence. However, poverty, perhaps the most direct measure of economic deprivation, was not significantly associated with reports of gangs; and while the association with unemployment was statistically significant, the effects were weak. Curiously, the two strongest associations were in the wrong direction from what had been predicted. A persistent gang presence was associated with a higher median household income and with a lower percentage of vacant housing units. Thus, reports of a stable gang presence in non-metropolitan areas were more closely tied to positive economic conditions than to economic deprivation.

**Table 3: Association between Major Concepts and Agency Reports of Gangs in Non-Metropolitan Counties**

| Concept | Variable | Stable – No Gangs | Transitory Gangs | Chronic Gangs | Signi-ficance | Eta |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Ecological Factors** | | | | | | |
| | Social Stability | | | | | |
| | – % Pop. change 1990-1997 | 5.4 | 9.7 | 10.9 | .000 | .21 |
| | – % Renter-occupied housing | 25.6 | 27.1 | 29.7 | .000 | .25 |
| | – % in same county, 1985-1990 | 80.9 | 78.9 | 77.4 | .000 | .18 |
| | – % divorced | 8.9 | 9.9 | 10.6 | .000 | .30 |
| | Economic Stability | | | | | |
| | – Change in unemployment rate | -0.2 | -0.6 | -0.3 | n.s. | — |
| | – Change in % jobs in manuf. | -2.9 | -3.0 | -3.8 | n.s. | — |
| | – Change in % jobs in service | 6.6 | 6.7 | 7.7 | n.s. | — |
| **Economic Deprivation** | | | | | | |
| | – Unemployment rate | 5.8 | 6.0 | 6.3 | .002 | .07 |
| | – Median household income | 26,748 | 28,045 | 29,291 | .000 | .16* |
| | – % below poverty level | 16.1 | 16.7 | 16.2 | n.s. | — |
| | – % vacant housing units | 17.3 | 14.1 | 11.8 | .000 | .21* |
| **Population Composition** | | | | | | |
| | Demographics of the County | | | | | |
| | – % of pop. 15-24 years old | 13.1 | 14.0 | 15.0 | .000 | .23 |
| | – Population per square mile | 46.2 | 72.7 | 84.3 | .000 | .23 |
| | – % of pop. living in urban area | 25.0 | 35.9 | 48.9 | .000 | .40 |
| | – % Black in population | 7.6 | 11.0 | 9.7 | .035 | .05 |
| | – % Hispanic in population | 3.9 | 4.9 | 6.9 | .000 | .11 |
| | Human/Social Capital | | | | | |
| | – % 1-parent households | 15.8 | 18.0 | 18.2 | .000 | .20 |
| | – % 25 yrs. + HS grads | 68.9 | 69.3 | 71.8 | .000 | .12* |
| | – % Non-English spoken at home | 6.2 | 6.3 | 8.3 | .027 | .09 |
| **Social Diffusion** | | | | | | |
| | Relative Social Isolation | | | | | |
| | – % working outside county | 28.7 | 28.6 | 23.7 | .003 | .12* |
| | – % households w/no phone | 8.8 | 9.0 | 8.2 | n.s. | — |
| | Relative Physical Isolation | | | | | |
| | – Adjacent to metro. County | — | — | — | n.s. | |
| | – Access to interstate highway | — | — | — | .000 | .21** |
| N of Agencies | | 473 | 169 | 187 | | |

Note: Numbers in the table are means for that variable.

*The direction of these differences are the opposite of what was expected.

** Because these are categorical variables, means are not presented and Cramer's V is reported rather an Eta coefficient.

One possible explanation for this pattern was suggested in interviews conducted with sheriffs and municipal chiefs in this sample. They suggested that in periods of economic growth, the families of urban gang members move into these nonmetropolitan areas seeking employment, and bring the youthful gang members with them. Further research is needed to verify these speculations, but they are consistent with the conclusions reached by Maxson (1998) in her review of research and data on the issue of gang migration.

Population Composition: As predicted, both demographic characteristics of the county and the social capital available in the county were associated with the reported presence of gangs. Among demographic variables, having a large population of 15-24 year-olds, a high population density, a highly urbanized population, a large Black population, and a large Hispanic population were all associated with persistent reports of a gang presence. The variable most strongly associated with reported gangs was percentage of the county population that was urban--i.e., percentage living within incorporated areas of 2,500 people or more, following the Census Bureau definition.

All three indicators of social capital were associated with reports of gangs in non-metropolitan counties. Single-parent households and speaking a language other than English in the home were both associated with an increased presence of gangs. Language spoken in the home was not simply a surrogate measure for percent of the population that was Hispanic. In non-metropolitan counties about half of the non-English households spoke a language other than Spanish, and the association between the presence of gangs and speaking a language other than English in the home was about the same whether one considered Spanish only or any non-English language. Contrary to expectations, having a high percentage of high school graduates in the county increased the likelihood of a reported gang presence.

Consistent with findings of urban gang researchers, the composition of the non-metropolitan county's population was related to its risk for developing and maintaining gangs. Both demographics and indicators of social capital were associated with reports of gangs, although it is difficult to provide a theoretical rational for the finding that a persistent gang presence is associated with a better educated population.

Social Diffusion: It is often assumed that gangs emerge first in urban areas and then spread from urban centers into the adjoining countryside (e.g., Donnermeyer, 1994; Weisheit et al., 1999; Wells and Weisheit, 1998). One way to consider the issue is to determine whether gangs first emerged in metropolitan or in non-metropolitan areas. In the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey, respondents indicating that gangs were present were asked when those gangs first emerged. In the 1997 and 1998 surveys respondents were asked if youth gangs were active in their community in the previous year. That information was combined with their responses in earlier surveys to determine in which year gangs were first noticed as problems in the community. The data show that gangs did emerge earlier in metropolitan areas. Only about 11 percent of gangs in non-metropolitan areas emerged before 1990, compared with 33 percent of metropolitan areas. And, 27 percent of non-metropolitan gangs first emerged in 1997-98, compared with only 14 percent of metropolitan gangs. This pattern is consistent with general diffusion predictions. The merged data set allows us to further examine the gang diffusion hypothesis, considering both measures of social isolation and measures of physical isolation.

Among the indicators of social isolation, the percent of households without a telephone was not related to the presence of gangs. And, while the percent of the labor force working outside the county was associated with the presence of gangs, the direction of the association was counter to expectations. Counties with the lowest percentage of workers traveling outside the

county for work were most likely to report the presence of gangs. The reasons for this finding are unclear but it is consistent with the argument that rural communities in which jobs are available locally may be more likely to report gang problems.

Regarding measures of physical isolation--adjacency to a metropolitan county and access to an interstate highway--it is possible to consider two dimensions of the diffusion hypothesis using the merged data sets from this study: whether adjacency to a metropolitan area matters, and whether access to an interstate highway is related to the reported presence of non-metropolitan gangs.

While differences between adjacent and non-adjacent counties were in the predicted direction, the differences were too small to be statistically significant. Thus, the data did not support the argument that non-metropolitan jurisdictions closer to metropolitan areas were at higher risk for developing gangs.

Another way to address the effect of adjacency is to examine when gangs first emerged. It is possible that by the late 1990s gangs already had dispersed to most vulnerable areas and that proximity was no longer an issue. However, if proximity does influence initial diffusion, then non-metropolitan jurisdictions close to metropolitan areas would have seen gangs emerge before non-metropolitan jurisdictions that were more distant. Contrary to this expectation, the data show that adjacency to a metropolitan area was not significantly related to when gangs emerged. These data disconfirm the simple premise that gangs spread from urban to rural areas through a process of diffusion driven primarily by propinquity.

A second indicator of physical proximity is the presence of a major highway. It has been argued that crime is more frequent in those rural areas through which major highways pass (Martin, 1995). Certainly this is a popular element of conventional wisdom about gang problems

among police officials in rural areas. Highways may provide a mechanism for the spread of gang activity into rural areas in three ways. First, gangs may commit crimes in transit as they travel from one major city to another – what might be called pass-through crimes. Second, highways may efffectively channel travel from major urban areas into particular areas in the countryside for temporary vacations and business, as well as for permanent migration. Third, highways may facilitate economic development and population growth, which may lead to a gang presence. Earlier research has provided anecdotal evidence to support the first two arguments (Donnermeyer, 1994; Weisheit et al., 1999), and the third is consistent with research showing an association between population growth and crime in non-metropolitan areas. Further, these three explanations need not be mutually exclusive. To date, these ideas about rural gang development have not been empirically tested. Table 4 reports cross-tabulation of reported gang problem by whether the county was crossed by an interstate highway. These results show that agencies in non-metropolitan counties with access to an interstate highway were significantly more likely to have both a transient and a stable gang presence than were agencies in counties without an interstate highway.

**Table 4. Reported Gang Presence for Agencies in Non-Metropolitan Counties by Access to an Interstate Highway.**

| | Access to Interstate Highway | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Yes** | **No** |
| Stable – No Gangs, 96-98 | 44.1% | 65.2% |
| Transitory Gangs, 96-98 | 25.3 | 17.3 |
| Chronic Gangs, 96-98 | 30.6 | 17.5 |
| Total | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| N of Agencies | 320 | 509 |

Chi-Square = 36.67, df=2, p=.000

If highways are an important mechanism for the spread of gangs from urban to rural areas, as a geographic diffusion model suggests, then jurisdictions in non-metropolitan counties with access to an interstate highway would have developed a gang presence earlier than those without such access. The data show that although the differences are in the expected direction, they are not statistically significant. Jurisdictions in non-metropolitan counties with access to an interstate highway did not develop gangs earlier than those without such access.

The data on highways present a mixed picture. **A** reported gang presence was significantly associated with access to an interstate highway, but there was no significant link between access to an interstate and the year in which gangs emerged. Whatever influence highways may exert on the spread of gangs appears to be limited.

Overall, the data in Table 3 suggest that social and demographic characteristics of counties are more relevant to the jurisdiction's gang status than are economic indicators or the relative isolation of the county. These findings are not consistent with arguments that gangs primarily emerge and survive to meet economic needs or that gangs can be defined primarily as economic entities, nor do they support arguments that propinquity to an urban area is enough to explain non-metropolitan gangs. Rather, the findings support models that link the presence of gangs with ecological indicators of social disorganization and with higher risk conditions and population characteristics. More surprising was the direction of some of these associations. The reported presence of gangs was associated with higher household incomes, fewer vacant housing units, and a more highly educated adult population is consistent with accounts given in our interviews with rural police suggesting that in rural areas gangs are more likely to emerge in communities experiencing economic growth, rather than economic decline. Where jobs become available, people from urban areas may be attracted to the countryside, and bring gang

connections with them.

### Comparing Metropolitan and Non-Metropolitan Gangs

The primary focus of this study has been on non-metropolitan gangs; however, a comparison of these findings against those for metropolitan counties seems essential since explanations for crime developed in large urbanized areas may not apply in rural areas (Weisheit and Wells, 1996). These data from the National Youth Gang surveys provide an opportunity to directly compare metropolitan and non-metropolitan jurisdictions to determine whether the same factors are associated with the reported presence of gangs in each setting.

Table 5 shows that a chronic gang presence is the most frequent response from agencies in metropolitan counties, while a stable absence of gangs over time is the most frequent response from agencies in non-metropolitan counties. Table 5 also shows that gangs are not present in all metropolitan counties, nor are they absent from all non-metropolitan counties. It is this variation to which our attention now turns.

**Table 5: Type of County by Agency Reports of Gang Status**

| | Metropolitan | Non-Metropolitan |
|---|---|---|
| Stable – No Gangs, 96-98 | 28.4% | 57.0% |
| Transitory Gangs, 96-98 | 18.2 | 20.4 |
| Chronic Gangs, 96-98 | 53.4 | 22.6 |
| Total | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| N of Agencies | 1333 | 829 |

Chi-Square = 224.11, df=2, p=.000

To provide an urban reference point, Table 6 presents a comparative summary of the patterns of association between gang status and county characteristics using the eta values from Table 3 and from a parallel analysis on police agencies in metropolitan counties.

**Table 6: Strength of Association between Major Concepts and Gang Status in Non-Metropolitan and Metropolitan Counties**

| Concept / Variable | Strength of Association (eta) Between Gang Status and Key Concepts: Non-Metropolitan | Metropolitan |
|---|---|---|
| **Social Disorganization** | | |
| Social Stability | | |
| – % pop. change 1990-1997 | .21 | .11 |
| – % renter-occupied housing | .25 | .28 |
| – % in same county, 1985-1990 | .18 | .15 |
| – % divorced | .30 | .38 |
| Economic Stability | | |
| – Change in unemployment rate | — | .09 |
| – Change in % jobs in manufacturing | — | .15* |
| – Change in % jobs in service | — | — |
| **Economic Deprivation** | | |
| – Unemployment rate | .07 | .13 |
| – Median household income | .16* | .07 |
| – % below poverty level | — | .18 |
| – % vacant housing units | .21* | — |
| **Population Composition** | | |
| Demographics of the Community | | |
| – % of pop. 15-24 years old | .23 | .11 |
| – Population per square mile | .23 | .07 |
| – % of Population living in urban area | .40 | .30 |
| – % Black in population | .05 | — |
| – % Hispanic in population | .11 | .30 |
| Human/Social Capital | | |
| – % 1-parent households | .20 | .15 |
| – % 25 yrs. + HS grads | .12* | — |
| – % Speaking non-English in home | .09 | .24 |
| **Diffusion** | | |
| Relative Social Isolation | | |
| – % working outside county | .12* | .26* |
| – % households w/no phone | — | — |
| N of Cases | 829 | 1,333 |

*The direction of these differences are the opposite of what was expected.
Note: Constructed from data presented in Table 4 and Table 11 showing the association between each item and the status of gangs in the county from 1996 through 1998 (stable–gangs present throughout, transient—gang emerged or disappeared, stable–gangs absent throughout the three-year period). Dashed lines ( — ) indicate the association was not statistically significant.

Table 6 reveals several interesting patterns. Regarding the influence of ecological factors, for non-metropolitan and metropolitan jurisdictions there was a similar pattern of association between the reported presence of gangs and indicators of social stability. While the presence of gangs and indicators of the county's economic stability were unrelated in non-metropolitan areas, in metropolitan areas there was an association between the presence of gangs and changes in the unemployment rate and in the percentage of jobs in manufacturing. However, these two indicators seemed to operate in contrary directions. In metropolitan jurisdictions, increases in unemployment were positively associated with the reported presence of gangs, but declines in manufacturing jobs were associated with fewer reports of a gang presence. This latter pattern was opposite the pattern predicted by those advocating a deindustrialization hypothesis.

While economic deprivation did not operate as expected in non-metropolitan counties, three of the four indicators were statistically significant and in the predicted direction in metropolitan jurisdictions. In other words, economic deprivation received some empirical support in accounting for metropolitan gangs, but operated quite differently in non-metropolitan communities.

The relationship between the presence of gangs and indicators of population composition were similarly associated in non-metropolitan and metropolitan jurisdictions, although the associations were somewhat weaker in metropolitan areas. Consistent with Curry and Spergel's (1988) finding from communities in Chicago, the percent of the population that was Hispanic was important but the percent Black was unrelated to the presence of gangs. By comparison, the influence of an Hispanic population on reports of gangs appeared less in non-metropolitan areas.

Those indicators of population composition reflecting social capital did not follow identical patterns of association with a reported gang presence in non-metropolitan and metropolitan jurisdictions. Speaking a language other than English in the home was more strongly associated with the presence of gangs in metropolitan than in non-metropolitan areas. Single-parent households were less strongly associated with the presence of gangs in metropolitan than in non-metropolitan areas, and having more high school graduates was unrelated to reported gang problems in metropolitan areas but increased the likelihood of reporting gangs in non-metropolitan areas.

Multivariate Analyses: The preceding analyses examined the correlation of police gang reports with 21 county-level variables, each considered singly and independently. While useful, such an approach can not take into account patterns of interdependency and mutual variation among the variables. Bivariate comparisons do not consider the likelihood of redundancy and spuriousness among the predictors. To consider this possibility, a multiple discriminant analysis was conducted.[3]

The aim of multiple discriminant analysis is to identify statistically a set of predictor variables that accurately predicts the agencies' reported gang classification (i.e., stable non-gang, transitory gang, or stable gang). Discriminant analysis takes into account colinearities among the independent variables, as well as their associations with the categorical dependent variable. It estimates the "best fitting" linear combination of independent variables that maximally distinguishes among the categories of the dependent variable. Analogous to multiple regression, the outcome of this statistical procedure is an identification of a subset of all the independent variables in the collection that are most useful (i.e., least redundant and most accurate) in predicting which agencies are in each of the gang categories. It should also provide some

statistical indexes of how useful each of these predictor variables are in the discrimination.

The most commonly used form of multiple discriminant analysis is stepwise estimation to incrementally calculate the best set of predictor variables. However, while computationally convenient and readily available in standard statistical packages, mechanical use of such procedures has been strongly criticized (e.g., Huberty, 1984, 1989; Thompson, 1995) as potentially yielding misleading results. Because they are based on frequently inappropriate assumptions about variable distributions, statistical degrees-of-freedom, and significance testing--along with often maximizing the wrong statistical criteria of "best solutions"--stepwise procedures do not necessarily yield optimal results. According to Huberty (1989), stepwise procedures may be useful as first approximations but not for final selections of variables and estimation of predictive relevance. Some alternative procedures described by Huberty (1989) aim at minimizing the errors of classification, while considering all combinations of predictors simultaneously and selecting the one combination with the highest accuracy in predicting categories of the dependent variable. Since conventional statistical packages do not automatically provide for this alternative procedure, it must be done by repeated estimation of the data, adding or subtracting variables one-at-a-time until the percent of correct classifications or "hit rate" has reached its maximum value. While more labor intensive, this will always yield the best-predicting combination of variables from the original set of predictors.

Following this approach our analysis of the 21 county-level variables began with a reverse-stepwise procedure--as a first-pass estimation-- that identified a small subset of variables most strongly correlated together with police gang reports. From this reduced list variables were excluded or added one-at-a-time; the discriminant analysis was rerun; and the predictive accuracy of the remaining variables was reassessed. Systematic repetition of this process was continued

until a final set of 10 variables was found with the maximum attainable accuracy for the gang report categories. That is, adding or dropping any variables beyond this set of ten only reduced predictive accuracy. These ten "best-predicting" variables produced by the discriminant analysis are listed in the upper part of Table 7.

The variables identified by the multiple discriminant analysis are not very different from those described in the earlier bivariate comparisons. Nine of the 10 variables identified in the discriminant analysis were previously identified in the bivariate analysis as significant correlates of reported gangs. Only one variable not apparent from the bivariate analysis emerged in the multivariate analysis --i.e., changes in the employment rate of the county--a variable which has a "non-linear" pattern of correlation with the gang categories. With that one exception, no new variables were identified in the multivariate analysis beyond those already noted in earlier bivariate comparisons. However, several variables noted in the earlier analysis do not appear in the multivariate results. These include: percent divorced (of ever-married persons); percent of the population between 15 and 24 years old; percent living in the same county in 1990 as in 1985; percent of the adult population who are high school graduates; percent of the population classified as Hispanic; and presence of an interstate highway in the county. While these variables seem individually meaningful as gang predictors, they seem to have rather complex patterns of inter-correlation and redundancy with other independent variables in the analysis. Thus, when these colinearities are taken into account in a multivariate analysis, these variables drop out as separately useful predictors. Overall, the results of the multiple discriminant analysis confirm the findings and interpretations of the bivariate comparisons, but they do provide a more parsimonious set of predictor variables.

## Table 7: Multiple Discriminant Analysis For Non-Metropolitan Agencies

**Structure Coefficients (Correlations of Variables with Discriminant Functions)**

| 10 Best Predicting Variables | Function | |
|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 |
| % of population in urban areas | .800 | .369 |
| % renter-occupied housing units | .458 | .386 |
| population density (per sq. mi.) | .419 | -.216 |
| % vacant household units | -.402 | .024 |
| % change in population 1990-97 | .386 | -.312 |
| Median household income | .286 | .078 |
| % of workforce working outside the county | -.186 | -.482 |
| % single-parent headed households | .357 | -.478 |
| Change in unemployment rate 1990-1996 | -.076 | .457 |
| % not speaking English at home | .148 | .353 |

Correct Classification Rates:

Using best 10 predictors variables: 64.3% of cases correctly classified

Using all 21 variables in the equation: 57.9% of cases correctly classified

"By-chance" correct classification rate: 41.7% of cases correctly classified by random guess (based on the observed distribution of cases across categories)

Relative improvement over chance (RIOC) for best 10 predictors: 38.8% improvement

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**Group Centroids on Discriminant Functions***

| Community Gang Category | Function | |
|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 |
| Stable - No gangs | -.443 | .038 |
| Transitory - gangs | .288 | -.242 |
| Stable - Gangs | .850 | .123 |

*Unstandardized canonical discriminant functions evaluated at group means.

Discriminant analysis of a three-category dependent variable (like reported gang status) always results in two orthogonal discriminant functions. These functions can be interpreted like factors in factor analysis according to how they distinguish between categories of the dependent variable and what predictors seem to load on (correlate with) most highly the discriminant function. Table 7 presents the numerical results of the discriminant analysis, displaying the correlations between the predictor variables and the discriminant functions (termed the structure coefficients) in the upper part of the table, and the association between categories of the dependent variable and the discriminant functions (termed the group centroids) in the lower part. In the upper table the correlations (structure coefficients) indicate how strongly each of the variables contributes to the discrimination between group categories on each of the discriminant functions. They provide a rough assessment of the variable's predictive utility and potential causal relevance. From Table 7 county population variables seem to be the most strongly related predictors of gang patterns, with only one weakly related economic variable and two family-related variables making a smaller contribution to the prediction of gangs. Again, this pattern was noted earlier in the bivariate results, but it is even more strongly apparent in the multivariate results.

The lower part of Table 7 shows how the three county gang status categories are distributed on the discriminant functions (as the average function score in each category). These numbers suggest a rather clear interpretation of what the functions are distinguishing in the county gang variable. Function 1 represents a gang vs. nongang discrimination: with stable nongang jurisdictions at one end (-.443), stable gang jurisdictions at the other end (+.850), and transitory gang jurisdictions located roughly in the middle (+.288). (Note that each function is scaled to range from -1 to +1 at the extremes.) Function 2, which makes a numerically smaller,

weaker separation between the categories, represents a stable vs. unstable distinction: with transitory gang jurisdictions (-.242) being separated from stable gang (+.038) and stable nongang jurisdictions (+.123), and the latter two being fairly close on this dimension. These results confirm the theoretical validity of the 3-category classification of the community-level gang variable as a substantively meaningful and predictable distinction.

**Discussion**

This analysis departs from prior gang studies in two key ways. One is its focus on gang developments in nonmetropolitan jurisdictions. To date, there have been few empirical studies of gangs in more rural areas, and no research that looks for systematic gang patterns across such communities. The available research on crime or delinquency in rural areas demonstrates that models developed in metropolitan settings are not consistently applicable to non-metropolitan locations. It also shows that models of delinquency do not directly provide adequate explanations of gangs, since most instances of delinquency are not gang-related.

Second, this analysis has a macro-level focus on county-level factors associated with variations in gang reports, specifically on between-county differences in gang reports. The orienting questions are: (a) why agencies in some nonmetropolitan counties report gangs but agencies in other similar-sized counties do not; and (b) what county attributes, as indicators of the ecological context for the police agency, might predict or explain these differences. In this study the county provides a substantially broader context for analysis than current gang research which has a distinctly micro-level focus on the personal etiology of gang involvement or the group dynamics of specific gangs within particular neighborhoods. Even recent "community-based" research on gangs (e.g., Bursik and Grasmick; 1993; Monti, 1993; Spergel, 1993) reflects a meso-level focus on variations within neighborhoods, census blocks, precincts, or other

residential subareas within particular communities. These involve what Choldin (1984) has termed "subcommunity" studies, aimed at understanding internal social dynamics within communities, especially residential divisions, rather than collective differences between communities. In utilizing data on the county rather than the subcommunity, the present study is addressing a different and broader set of analytical questions about gangs in communities.

It is also important to note that this analysis is not aimed at providing a rigorous test of any specific theoretical model of community gang development, including social disorganization theory, which is arguably the dominant conceptual perspective on gangs. This study provides a systematic empirical examination of current premises (drawn from academic, practitioner, as well as popular sources) about how and where gangs develop. None of these sets of ideas constitutes a fully explicated model of community gang development; rather, they are conceptually organized groups of intuitive suggestions and general expectations. As noted earlier, they are mostly general models of delinquency and crime etiology, rather than gang development per se; and the implicit scope of these seems to be limited to larger metropolitan areas, since that is where all the related research has been done. Thus, the analysis utilized an inductive rather than a confirmatory strategy, aimed as establishing a solid empirical base from which more theoretically explicit and elaborated studies may be developed.

In light of these qualifications, what are the significant patterns of variation revealed in this data analysis? Drawing both on the urban models of gang delinquency and on popular accounts of gangs occurring in rural areas, the analysis organized twenty-one county-contextual variables into four conceptual groupings: (1) ecological; (2) economic deprivation/marginalization; (3) population composition ; and (4) diffusion. The relevance of these variables for explaining gangs was initially studied by bivariate comparisons to identify

those indicators most strongly associated with gang reports and to examine the form of their associations. These bivariate results were supplemented with multivariate analyses to assess the redundancies among the indicators.

The bivariate analysis suggested that the most consistent indicators of a gang presence in non-metropolitan jurisdictions are those reflecting social stability and the composition of the population. Our findings suggest that urban gang models based on economic factors may not be directly applicable to non-metropolitan areas. Economic stability was not associated with gangs and measures of economic deprivation were mixed and not consistently in the predicted direction. To the extent that economic factors are important in rural areas, gangs appear more closely associated with economic growth than with economic decline.

There was only modest support for arguments that urban gangs spread into rural areas through diffusion. The presence of an interstate highway was associated with the presence of gangs, as was the percentage of the workforce working outside the county, but this latter difference was in an unexpected direction--i.e., counties with the most people working outside the county were less likely to report gangs. Perhaps working outside the county is not an indicator of social isolation but of social stability. That is, people willing to drive to another county to work while maintaining their current residence may be highly committed to the community in which they live and would rather drive than move. Or, perhaps gangs emerge in those rural counties in which jobs are most plentiful.

In the multivariate analysis, several variables important at the bivariate level dropped out of the analysis. The presence of an interstate highway was no longer important, nor was the divorce rate, the high school graduation rate, the percent Black, the percent Hispanic, the percent living in the same county from 1985-1990, or the percentage of the population ages 15-24.

The data suggest many similarities between models of metropolitan and non-metropolitan gangs. Both are strongly associated with indicators of social stability and both are shaped by characteristics of the population. The biggest differences are in the role of economic factors, which appear more important in accounting for gangs in metropolitan areas. This difference between metropolitan and non-metropolitan models has important policy implications. Studying rural youth violence at the county level, Osgood and Chambers (2000) also found that indicators of social disorganization were important but that indicators of poverty were not. They concluded that poverty may not have the same influence on criminal activity in rural and urban areas, a conclusion consistent with that reached by others (Weisheit et al., 1999). These data suggest that like delinquency, gang activity may have a different relationship to poverty in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. In fact, in nonmetropolitan areas gangs were more often associated with economic growth than with economic decline.

In both the bivariate and the multivariate analyses the single most important predictor of gangs by agencies in non-metropolitan areas was the percentage of the county's population living in urban areas (i.e., incorporated areas with a population of 2,500 or more people). That the strong association remains while controlling for a substantial number of other factors suggests that urbanization has an influence that may be distinct from conventional measures of social disorganization or economic conditions. These findings are consistent with van Dijk's (1999) analysis of the International Crime Victim Survey of 55 different countries, in which he concluded that "For more serious crime, the strongest factor explaining risks across different countries was urbanization (p. 31)." The data do not indicate why urbanization is important but the strength of the association and the importance of urbanization for predicting serious crime across a variety of cultures, suggest that urbanization itself needs to be more thoroughly

examined as a correlate of both gangs and serious crime--particularly in non-metropolitan areas.

This study has a variety of implications for future research. First, it illustrates that urban models of gang development may suffer from what one author has called "urban ethnocentrism" (Weisheit, 1993). The current study illustrates that it cannot be assumed that urban models of gang development apply everywhere. Rural areas and small towns are not only different from cities as physical spaces, but also as social spaces. Without examining gang development in a variety of community sizes, existing formulations may have limited applicability (Weisheit and Wells, 1996).

Second, this study emphasizes the importance of being explicit about the level of analysis used in gang research, and making certain that the level of analysis is consistent with the level of explanation. Short's (1985) warnings about this problem are too often ignored in criminological research. Individuals, small groups, neighborhoods, and counties are all relevant to the study of gangs but the empirical indicators of each are not interchangeable.

Third, the study provides another reminder of the distinction between theories of crime and theories of gangs. In gang communities not all crime is gang related and not all gang activity is criminal activity. By its nature gang activity involves a social group, whereas the group nature of non-gang crime and delinquency is quite variable.

Fourth, this study is an important first step in the development of more explicit models of gangs in smaller cities and rural areas. This study suggests that models of rural gang development should place a greater stress on social and demographic factors than on economic issues. This is also consistent with Weisheit et al.'s (1999) study of rural policing in which they found that compared with urban police, for rural police social factors were much more important than organizational factors in shaping the nature of police work.

Finally, the study of crime and gang activity in rural areas invites a renewed appreciation for an ecological approach that is multi-level, that considers variations among communities, and that gives explicit attention to contextual variables. It is instructive that economic factors have a less pronounced role in accounting for non-metropolitan gangs than they have in accounting for metropolitan gangs, and that in nonmetropolitan areas gangs may be associated with economic growth rather than economic decline. These findings confirm the view that in non-metropolitan areas the social context is an important factor in shaping crime, gangs, and the operation of the criminal justice system.

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## Notes

1. Our classification of police agencies into metropolitan and nonmetropolitan differs somewhat from that used by the National Youth Gang Survey. First, we utilize the ERS classification, rather than the UCR classification, as a more meaningful and empirically descriptive categorization of nonmetropolitan contexts. While highly correlated, the ERS and UCR classifications are not identical. Second, early analyses of the 10 ERS categories indicated that nominally metropolitan counties that were fringe areas within large consolidated metropolitan areas, that were themselves not heavily populated and that had a substantial proportion of their population outside of incorporated communities, were more like non-metropolitan counties in terms of demographic and delinquency characteristics. For this reason, these adjacent counties (coded as Category 1 in the ERS classification) were included within the category of non-metropolitan in the analyses that follow. In the sample of 3011 police agencies, this involved shifting 165 agencies from the category "metropolitan" to the category "non-metropolitan."

2. The 1997 and 1998 National Youth Gang surveys did include police agency reports about the percent of the local gang membership who are nonlocal migrant gang members. However, these numbers are subjective self-estimates by police respondents in almost all cases, and thus provide only indirect estimates of questionable reliability. For this reason, our analysis of diffusion factors is limited to physical variables reflecting the jurisdictions' geographic proximity and access to larger urban areas. These variables seem to be the factors most frequently mentioned by rural police in describing gang migration problems, and they are objectively measurable with little (or no) error.

3. We note that multiple discriminant analysis makes some assumptions about the distributions of variables used in the analysis, including: linearity of the discriminating variables, multivariate normality of their distributions, and equal covariances within the groups ( Cliff, 1987; Huberty, 1984; Klecka, 1980). In real data samples, these assumptions are always violated to some degree, but the procedure is fairly robust against minor degrees of violation. In the present analysis, we do not expect the effects of these violations to be particularly serious for several reasons. (1) The interpretation of the final results is based largely on pragmatic empirical criteria (i.e., percent correct group classifications compared with the actual observed data) rather than parametric tests of significance. (2) The number of cases in each group is rather large (the smallest has 415 cases). (3) The distribution of cases across groups is fairly proportional. As Klecka (1980) notes, violation of assumptions mainly become serious when analytical conditions are extreme in some way--e.g., extremely small group sizes, extremely small group differences on the predictor variables, extremely skewed variable distributions, extremely disproportionate distribution of cases across groups--or when the analysis relies heavily on rigorous parametric tests for strong inferences about the data structure. None of these conditions particularly applies in the present analysis.

# Part 2

# The Social Construction of Gangs in Nonmetropolitan Areas

**Ralph A. Weisheit**
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# The Social Construction of Gangs in Nonmetropolitan Areas

## ABSTRACT

The emergence of gangs in nonmetropolitan areas is a phenomenon that has neither been well documented nor well accounted for. This study utilizes telephone interviews with 216 nonmetropolitan agencies that had previously reported gangs in their jurisdictions. The interviews focused on how rural agencies defined gangs and gang-related problems, and local strategies for responding to gangs. Rural gangs were often short-lived and the criteria used to determine whether gangs were present varied widely across jurisdictions. Rural gangs were composed mostly of local youth engaged in minor delinquency, although there were some reports of more serious violence.

## The Social Construction of Gangs in Nonmetropolitan Areas

### Introduction

Traditionally youth gangs or "street gangs" in the U.S. have been regarded as urban phenomena-- the products of large, crowded, disorganized metropolitan communities. This view has been amply detailed in ethnographic studies focused on a few of the largest metropolitan centers. However, in recent decades the problem of youth gangs has visibly grown, spreading to smaller cities and less metropolitan communities across most areas of the U.S. This trend has been widely reported in the media in frequent and sometimes sensational stories about "gangs in the heartland" or "gangs invading small town America" (e.g., Miller, 1996; Poe, 1998; The Economist, 1996; Coates and Blau, 1989). This pattern has also been reported by scholars who study gangs (e.g., Maxson, 1998; Caldarella et al., 1996; Curry et al., 1996; Hagedorn, 1999; Howell, 1998; Klein, 1995; Short, 1998), although the empirical study of this has been rather limited. There is some documentation for this phenomenon in empirical research from surveys of police agencies across the U.S. According to these studies, the number of police agencies reporting gangs increased alarmingly from about 286 in 1980 (Miller, 1980) to over 2,000 in 1995 (National Youth Gang Center, 1997). Moreover, these studies show that beyond merely expanding to more cites, youth gangs have moved beyond the cities into small towns and outlying rural areas. The most recent surveys (e.g., National Youth Gang Center, 1999a; 1999b) show that gang problems are occurring in communities of all sizes and locations, although still most heavily concentrated in medium and large size cities. The recent surveys also suggest that the expansion of gangs (both in numbers and distribution) may have peaked in the mid-1990s and is now leveling off or even ebbing.

While we now have more extensive information about gangs in more types of places, our

knowledge about gang dynamics in different communities is still incomplete--especially in the smaller cities, towns, and rural communities not included in traditional gang research. Since there are no standard, routinely collected statistics on gangs that are comparable to the Uniform Crime Reports, almost all of the information about growth of gangs in U.S. communities in the past two decades is derived from questionnaire surveys of police agencies. They rely on police to identify the presence of "gang problems" in their jurisdiction and to accurately report on the numbers of youth gangs and members in their communities. This kind of data provides a systematic, quasi-official measure of the prevalence of youth gangs in different communities.

However, it is explicitly dependent on the perceptions and reports of police officials, which may be different from the gang data provided by other information sources. In addition, wide variation exists among police agencies and officers regarding what the term "gang" refers to and what it means when they say their community has a "gang problem" (Decker and Kempf-Leonard, 1991). This seems especially problematic for analysis of delinquent youth groups in small towns and rural communities, since the traditional ideal-typical image of youth gangs is a thoroughly urban conception, defined in terms of urban conditions and dynamics. Mechanically applying this traditional urban interpretation to smaller, less urbanized settings may provide an inaccurate picture of gang processes in these settings. Even though they all may be labeled as gangs by rural and urban respondents, they may involve widely different kinds of group dynamics and social indicators.

## Analytic Definitions of Gangs

While a part of the gang measurement problem is methodological--i.e., the fact that different police agencies do not keep records in the same way and have differentially incomplete

information on youth activities in their jurisdiction – a major portion is conceptual. What exactly is it that distinguishes a youth gang (or street gang) from other types of troublesome youth groups? Gang researchers, as well as police administrators, have perennially struggled with the task of defining gangs as a distinct, objective phenomenon (Bursik and Grasmick, 1995; Decker and Kempf-Leonard, 1991). What does a gang look like in concrete, empirical terms, so that police can reliably count the number and type of gangs in their jurisdictions? Are there specific attributes that define the existence of a gang?

Many descriptions have been offered by both researchers and practitioners, but to date there is no definition that both captures the essence of the concept as it is commonly used and provides widely agreed upon criteria for operationally defining a gang. Sociological definitions tend to be loose and broad, describing gang as a sensitizing concept that serves to direct research (mostly qualitative and interpretive) on the group dynamics of juvenile delinquency but that defies any precise operationalization (e.g., Fleisher, 1998; Hagedorn, 1988; Horowitz, 1990; Yablonsky, 1962). Law enforcement-oriented definitions, as used by many current gang researchers, define gang as an operationalizing concept. It entails specific sets of measurable social attributes, even though there is considerable disagreement about which particular attributes are essential to the definition (e.g., Bursik and Grasmick, 1993; Goldstein, 1991; Howell, 1998; Klein, 1995; Miller, 1981; Shelden et al., 1997; Spergel, 1995; Spergel and Curry, 1988 ). As Ball and Curry (1995) have noted, the problem of defining gang is analogous to defining obscenity. Almost everyone knows it when they see it or can give obvious and flagrant examples what it is, but they cannot define it analytically in terms that are fully agreeable to others. Consensus may be sought either by collecting votes (e.g., Miller, 1974, 1981; Oehme, 1997) or authoritative fiat (e.g., Klein, 1995) but widespread disagreement remains.

This study approaches the issue from a different perspective viewing the *gang* as a social construct, recognizing that whether a group is a gang is not completely definable by objective attributes or criteria. The often listed organizational features of gangs (e.g, organizational identify and culture, delimited membership, leadership hierarchy, temporal endurance, territoriality, collective action, occasional illegal behavior) can not clearly distinguish gangs, since they are shared with many other groups not considered to be gangs, such as college fraternities, some business enterprises, and many social clubs. Rather, it is the perception by some relevant social audiences that a group is outside the conventional social order--i.e., a menacing and organized gang rather than merely an ordinary group of troublesome individuals. This approach makes the definition of gang relative to the viewpoint of formal or informal social audiences that may include neighborhood residents, community leaders, police officials, school officials, the youths themselves, their peers, or researchers.

While common sense accounts of gangs view them as existing as objective realities whether we correctly recognize and label them, most rigorous theoretical definitions of gangs are (at least implicitly) constructionist. They largely define a gang by social reactions to and social judgments about the meaning of the group's activities. For example, Klein's (1971: 428) oft-cited formulation defines a gang as: "any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or law enforcement agencies." As this explicitly indicates, it is the social reaction to the group (categorization and consistent negative response) that defines it as a gang.

The fundamentally subjective nature of gang definitions is aptly highlighted by Ball and Curry's (1995) observation about the parallel difficulties in defining a gang and in defining obscenity. Both involve observable factual conditions--for the gang an objectively observable group; for obscenity an explicit depiction of sexual events--about which a judgment is made that these particular conditions are social and morally threatening or problematic--i.e., outside the bound of conventional society. A group may have all the objective attributes of a gang without being considered a gang; materials may be sexually explicit without being considered obscene. It is the social judgment or reaction to these objective features by relevant social audiences that ultimately defines them; and such judgments may be highly variable across social audiences and relative to their situational contexts.

This study is based on the presumption that the police--as the officially designated agency in a community for dealing with troublesome and order-threatening groups--are arguably the most influential source for officially defining gang problems and for shaping media images of gangs (McCorkle and Meithe, 1998). This research examines how police define, perceive, and identify gang phenomena. Utilizing descriptions and explanations generated by police respondents in non-metropolitan agencies that have reported gang activity in their jurisdictions, this study seeks to better understand what police mean by the term "gang" in community contexts outside the traditional large urban centers and to better understand the perceived nature of gang problems in non-metropolitan areas.

## Method

This study was based on a telephone survey of municipal and county police agencies in nonmetropolitan counties in the United States. To be included in the original sampling frame,

the agency had to have reported the presence of a gang in the 1997 National Youth Gang Survey. In addition, the county in which the agency was located had to be classified as nonmetropolitan by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. This meant there could be no urbanized center of 50,000 or more in the county plus contiguous areas having strong economic and social ties to that urban center. The 1997 NYGS utilized a random sample of police agencies in smaller cities and nonmetropolitan areas. By using agencies reporting the presence of gangs in 1997, we were able to maximize the likelihood of contacting rural agencies with gang problems, while also providing a random sample of such agencies. In the 1997 NYGS sample there were 980 agencies located in nonmetropolitan counties. Of these, 286 (33.1 percent) reported the presence of gangs in their jurisdiction. These 286 agencies were sent letters indicating they would receive a telephone call to ask about gangs, gang problems, and their agency's response. The findings reported here are based on telephone interviews with 216 of the original 286 agencies distributed across 39 states.

As an exploratory study, the interviews were loosely structured. That is, while there were several questions that could be easily coded some of the questions of greatest interest (e.g., How do you know you have a gang?) were open-ended, allowing the respondent to describe the situation in their own words. Perhaps the most difficult issue facing any gang research is the question of what is meant by a gang. In the interviews we did not give a precise definition, but followed the approach of other researchers by suggesting some boundaries. Consistent with the National Youth Gang Survey, we made it clear our focus was on youth gangs and not on adult gangs. Also consistent with the National Youth Gang Survey, we suggested a distinction between youth groups and youth gangs, with the latter having a higher degree of organization and structure. Beyond these very general distinctions, however, we allowed representatives of each agency to define gangs and youth groups for themselves. Our discussion first considers several

of the coded items and will then turn to a more qualitative analysis of respondent comments.

## Findings

When asked if there were currently problems with youth gangs in their jurisdiction, of those reporting a gang in 1997, only 41 percent (n=88) reported the presence of a gang in our year 2000 follow-up interviews. This figure is substantially lower than would be expected if gangs were pervasive and persistent in rural areas. Further, of the nonmetropolitan agencies reporting gangs in 1997, the percentage also reporting them for our 2000 interview declined as the county in which the agency was located became more rural, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Reports of Gangs by Rurality of Jurisdiction

| Rurality of County in Which Jurisdiction is Located | Number Reporting Gangs | Percent Reporting Gangs |
|---|---|---|
| Nonmetropolitan with: | | |
| Urban population of 20,000 or more | 51 of 88 agencies | 58% |
| Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999 | 31 of 97 agencies | 32% |
| Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population | 4 of 28 agencies | 14% |

N of Cases = 213; All agencies had reported the presence of gangs in 1997. The figures above reflect the number/percentage still reporting gangs in 2000.

The numbers in Table 1 suggests several possible concerns. One is that gangs in rural areas are relatively ephemeral and transitory phenomena whose characteristics may change considerably over time, even in a short span of two or three years. A second concern is with the consistency and reliability of police reports as sources of data on gang events--i.e., that these are problematic, reflecting either unclear police definitions of what gangs involve or inconsistent reporting by small rural agencies. A third concern is whether the conventional conceptualization of gangs in urban terms meaningfully apply in less urbanized settings. It is also possible that the

unexpected pattern of results may reflect some combination of all three factors.

Resolution of these concerns is hindered by a conceptual vagueness in current gang analysis regarding what exactly is meant by "having a gang", as an objectively definable and measurable social fact, in the community. Does "having a gang" refer to the presence of a specific kind of persistent corporate group (i.e., organized gangs rather than loosely affiliated youth groups), to a certain number of special kinds of people (officially and self identified as gang members), or to recurring patterns of certain kinds disruptive or criminal activities (identified as "gang-banging"). Gang research in urban settings seems to treat these events--i.e., having gangs, having gang members, and having gang problems--as interchangeable and equivalent indicators of the same phenomenon. In urban settings they seem to be highly colinear, but in rural settings they are empirically and conceptually distinguishable.

Applying these conceptualizations of gang processes to rural settings and smaller communities may highlight the conceptual ambiguity implicit in many urban discussions of gang phenomena. As an illustration of how complex the concept of gangs can be, particularly when applied to rural areas, several respondents indicated that although there were no gangs in their community there were gang members. Other respondents reported that, although they had no gangs or resident gang members in their communities, they did occasionally have "gang problems" or "gang situations" from gangs in neighboring communities dropping in, or transient gangs passing through the community. Specifically:

> ID#146: In the last maybe four years we have had various problems with a gang members from other communities. We don't really have a text-book type definition of gangs here. I mean we do have gang members here but we don't have a large number of them. Most of them and most of their activity and most gangs are affiliated with our neighboring communities both to the north and west. They come to obviously commit various offenses and go back to their home communities.

> ID#065: The other thing that is a headache is that some drug dealers are from out of town,

from _____ [names large cities within driving distance]. We do feel strongly that these people have gang associations, so they are a problem. But again, they don't have a lot of success at creating a gang organization in this part of the state. In that way gangs are a headache for us, but not organized.

ID#024: Periodically we will discover an organized gang member from another part of the state operating in this area primarily in drug distribution, but they're not actually gang banging here. They are up here making money, selling drugs to the kids. We have had several gang members . . . come up here and infiltrate the students at [local college] and conduct their business. But, they are not actually banging while they're here.

ID#212: We don't really have any gangs that are centered here in our community, because we just don't have that large of a community. But we have some that are members of gangs in surrounding communities and, occasionally, they come over here.

For purposes of this study, such communities were categorized as not having gangs. However, it would be easy and equally plausible to argue otherwise using common urban definitions, since the jurisdictions do report having gang members and/or recurring gang problems. This distinction among gangs, gang members, and gang problems comes up frequently in smaller communities. If this is an issue in larger communities it has not been widely reported or discussed, although there are almost certainly urban neighborhoods with no permanent gang presence but to which gang members periodically visit or in which they periodically do business. This suggests that some conceptual issues commonly ignored in urban gang research (because they seem to involve only small differences) may be highlighted in rural gang studies where wider variations are readily apparent.

Our attention now turns to four areas focused on in the course of our interviews. These were: (1) How did the respondent's agency know there was a gang in their jurisdiction? (2) What kinds of problems did they have from gangs? (3) How did gangs emerge in their community? and (4) How did their agency respond to gangs?

## Identifying Gangs

Respondents generally used several things as indicators of a gang presence in these communities. The most frequent indicator was a juvenile's self-identification as a gang member. Also frequently used was the presence of graffiti, tatoos, a youth's affiliation with others thought to be gang members, and the wearing of gang colors. In a number of jurisdictions, any one of these indicators might, by itself, be used as evidence of the presence of a gang. Other jurisdictions were more selective, requiring several of these indicators. When asked, "How have you determined that you have organized gang in your jurisdiction? What are some of the things you used as indicators?" some of the agencies reported using relatively detailed and concrete indicators:

> ID#048: Well we have confiscated gang bibles, which is all their signs and all their language and everything else. I mean it's obvious they don't hide it you know the colors they wear, the information that we get from the schools, school activities that the gangs are going to fight or meet or whatever. What they're going to be wearing things like that.
>
> ID#050: Number one you've got their admissions. Number two their hang – they are hanging, and they have hung with known gang members in and around the area. That's where many of them picked up their wanna-be attitudes and then that developed a little further. We've identified them through tattoos, the groups all seem to have their own jewelry and tattoos. Then you get into some of the clothing even though that has subsided to some extent over the last several years.
>
> ID#099: You see the same members hanging together is one thing I see. You see their gang signs, their colors, you can tell here I'm sure it's the same everywhere automobiles you'll start seeing one particular group they'll been four or five real expensive automobiles and they'll there's always three, four, five per automobile. They're all hanging together. Anywhere one goes the other ones go and you know the graffiti shows up to on top of that. Then when something happens within the community as far as with another group of kids or what ever you'll see that particular group go and try to take care of it. And normally through violence.
>
> ID#039: We have six criteria. . . . The officer can check as many of those as apply. Obviously, if they check the one about whether they fit their style of dress or tattoos, I mean if they check that one box and that one box only we don't classify them as being a gang member solely on how they dress.

Other jurisdictions used criteria that were more vague and impressionistic:

ID#186: Just by their names, with the colors they wear, the things they are doing . . . And, well, I don't know. I just look at them.

ID#129: Of course dress, tattoos, the gang signs – you know they'll wear certain colors, or they used to, jewelry that they wear with six and five point stars. Just their appearance.

ID#046: Through our school resource officers that have developed a relationship with a lot of the kids, and they talk to them and the kids are opening up to them and saying, yeah, I was approached by so and so to be a member of this gang or that gang, and that's basically the way we've determined what gangs we have in the area.

ID#113: Basically, it's the color that they wear.

ID#224: Some of the things are their clothing and their hats, they wear them all the same. Some of their hand signals are all the same, and they all hang around together.

ID#043: Our local community doesn't allow them to fly colors. We don't allow that. We have an ordinance against it. So the only way we know that they are part of a gang is the actual corners they hang on, and everyone of them has a different area of town that they sort of claim as their own.

ID#246: Obviously just the graffiti, the signs of the youths themselves, similar clothing and hair styles, but truthfully mostly through the investigation of crimes – from interviewing them.

ID#198: Mostly it's the fights between youth at school.

ID#025: It would be two or more individuals who get together, have a common name, and one of the primary goals is to further the stature of that gang, whether it's group assaults, whether it's robbery, intimidation, etc. They may claim turf or they may be profit oriented.

Relying on such things as colors, tatoos and signs has become more problematic in communities in which gangs are attempting to keep a low profile – something that many agencies thought was becoming more common:

ID#038: Most of the gangs I understand are getting away from indicators, tattoos, colors or whatever. They still have them but they don't display them for police, ever since the gang laws and everything came into effect. Basically, the people they hang out with are the people that they don't find offensive. In other words, when you talk with a person and he hates the people in this side of town and he won't go over there it's an indicator that he's probably affiliated with some group that hates another here.

A few jurisdictions used guidelines established by their states. These guidelines listed specific criteria and required that a certain proportion of these criteria be met before someone could be called a gang member (e.g., 4 of 12 criteria). For most states these criteria are quite demanding. As one Minnesota official described their system:

> ID#109: We have identified members through a criteria system that we follow through the Minnesota Gang Strike Force, which is basically a ten-point criteria system. If someone has been convicted of a gross misdemeanor or higher gross misdemeanor felony and also meets three out of these ten criteria, we can then identify them as a known gang member.

Generally, however, these criteria were used to decide if an individual could be labeled as a gang member, and were not used as proof of the existence of a gang. This system could be problematic in rural jurisdictions in which there were reported to be gang members but no gangs, a situation noted earlier in the discussion.

## The Nature of Gang Problems

Questions about the types of problems associated with gangs led to a wide range of responses. In some jurisdictions having a gang problem meant nothing more than finding graffiti, while in others there were reports of murders committed by gang members. Of the agencies reporting the presence of a gang, nearly all believed that at least some gang members used drugs (99 percent), most believed that gang members sold drugs (90 percent), and most believed the gang members engaged in violence (90 percent) -- though respondents were seldom able to differentiate actions engaged in by individual members from those engaged in as an activity orchestrated by the gang.

When asked to describe the types of problems they experienced as a result of gangs, without listing specific topics or other prompting, the most frequent responses (shown in Table 2) were drugs, assaults, theft, and burglary.

Table 2: Mentions of Gang-Related Problems by Nonmetropolitan Police

| Gang-Related Problem | Number of Mentions |
|---|---|
| Drug Use/Drug Dealing | 61 |
| Fighting/Assaults | 46 |
| Theft | 28 |
| Burglary | 27 |
| Graffiti | 24 |
| Drive-By Shootings | 16 |
| Vandalism/Criminal Damage | 14 |
| Intimidation | 12 |
| Homicide | 11 |
| Shootings/Weapons | 11 |
| Robbery | 11 |
| Auto Theft | 8 |

Based on 88 agencies reporting the presence of a gang and specifying crime-related problems. Multiple Responses were Allowed. A variety of other problems were listed in very small numbers.

Despite reports of drugs, assaults, drive-by shootings and even homicides, only 42 percent of those reporting gangs described the gang problems in their community as "Serious." And, some of those describing the problem as serious, qualified their rating with such comments as:

ID#052: I consider any gang activity to be serious.

ID#179: In a small town like this our little gangs, to the people, are serious. But, to the big city, this would be minor.

ID#003: In comparison to other jurisdictions our problems right now are minor. They are minor with the exception that every once in a while they become rather serious with the execution of drive-by shootings. You know, homicides with gang-related undertones, you know, and stuff like that.

ID#151: Well, again, the problem is significant for us, but I suppose if you were comparing it to an urban environment it would be minimal.

Although drug use and drug sales were common among gang members, and while violence was periodically seen, most of the observed gang crime problems were of a relatively minor nature. The kinds of offenses described here are the kinds of offenses that might describe juvenile

delinquency in general:

> ID#133: Most of the problems would be graffiti, parties, and alcohol consumption. Occasionally we have had problems in the past with some shootings and some fights, and weapon violations.
>
> ID#014: For the most part, our problems from a criminal standpoint involve minor property crime, auto burglaries, residential burglaries, and then of course we have the assaults and nothing, at least in our community, nothing has exceeded the point beyond maybe an aggravated assault. We have had I think three drive-by shootings that we've actually been able to trace back to a gang. We have had a couple of gang members involved in a homicide but that wasn't a crime that was in furtherance of the gang per se. I think that was something outside that realm. So for the most part of I would say property crimes, graffiti, auto burglaries, residential burglaries that kind of stuff.

It is clear from these interviews that "gang problems" include activities that vary greatly in seriousness from one community to the next. Some rural jurisdictions have problems that are serious by any standard, while for others the problems are rather minor. It is important to recognize this variability across jurisdictions when describing rural gangs and when establishing policies for responding to them. Asking police if they have "gang problems" in their jurisdictions, as some surveys have done, does not provide much specific information about the presence of gangs or nature of gang activities in those communities.

## The Emergence of Gangs

Some have assumed that gangs spread from urban to rural areas through a process in which urban gang members themselves migrate to rural areas (Donnermeyer, 1994), while others have assumed that only the symbols and culture of the gang are exported to rural communities (Hagedorn, 1988). We asked those in jurisdictions reporting gangs about how many of the gang members came from outside the local area. The results were mixed. There were a few jurisdictions in which all gang members were reportedly from other areas, but this was not the most typical circumstance. And, while it is sometimes assumed that rural gang problems are

almost entirely imported, there were a few jurisdictions in which the gang problem was completely home-grown:

> ID#019: [How many local gang members came from somewhere else?] Almost none. I would say that any that did probably grew up here and went off somewhere for whatever reason, and wound up back here with it. I mean it actually did come from somewhere else, but percentage wise it is almost non-existent. It all somehow started here.
>
> ID#247: [How many youth gang members came from somewhere else?] I'd say most of these came straight from here. I can't say none, but I bet it would be close to none.
>
> ID#051: We primarily have local kids who have for some reason got the idea that having a gang would be cool, would be the thing to do. Over the years we have had a few people actually come up from places like L.A. and Salt Lake that were gang members in those areas and have started groups, but they've been arrested and sent away and are no longer in our area.
>
> ID#079: Right now I don't have any migrant gang members at all. All of these are local folks. They went off somewhere and brought it back home, but they're our local folks.

Further, even when outsiders moved into the area, continued gang activity depended on the cooperation of local youth. As one respondent noted:

> ID#246: [Gang members are] primarily local residents. We found that even if you're from another city and you come up here to set up business, you have to work through local residents to do business.

Estimates of the number of current gang members who came into the area from another jurisdiction varied from "none" to "all of them," but most estimates ranged between 10 and 30 percent. That is, in most rural jurisdictions reporting gang activity, the majority of gang members were local youth. However, in many jurisdictions the impact of these imported gang members was substantially greater than their numbers alone would suggest, because they became an important conduit for the movement of ideas and symbols into these areas.

Focusing for the moment on gang members who moved into the community, officials gave a variety of reasons why these youth moved into the area, but were specifically asked about four

reasons. These were: moving for social reasons (e.g., their family moved there), moving to expand drug markets, moving specifically to engage in other illegal activities, moving to avoid the police, and moving to get away from gang influences. These reasons include a mix of the sinister and the more benign. Table 3 shows the frequency of response for each reason:

Table 3: Reasons Why Gang Members Moved into the Nonmetropolitan Community

| Reason | Percent |
|---|---|
| Moved for Social Reasons | 86% |
| Moved to Avoid the Police | 46 |
| Moved to Expand Drug Markets | 41 |
| Moved to Engage in Other Illegal Activities | 33 |
| Moved to Get Away from Gangs | 30 |

n=80; Multiple Responses were Allowed

Although urban gang members often moved into these rural areas for more than one of these reasons, Table 3 shows that the most gang youth move into the area for social reasons, that is, to accompany the family or to move in with relatives. Family moves were generally precipitated by changing jobs or by the availability of subsidized housing, consistent with the speculations of Maxson (1998). Other reasons, although less frequently reported than social reasons, occured with enough frequency to suggest that a single model or explanation for the in-migration of urban gang members into rural areas will not suffice.

Previous research has speculated that gangs may emerge in nonmetropolitan areas through several avenues (Weisheit, Falcone & Wells, 1996; 1999; Donnermeyer,1994). These explanations for the rise of rural gangs include (1) displacement: when urban gang members move into rural areas in response to enforcement pressure from urban police, (2) branch office: when an urban gang sets up a drug operation in a rural area because prices are good and pressure

from local police is expected to be minimal, (3) franchise: in which small-town drug dealers seek to expand their business by linking up with urban drug gangs, (4) social learning: in which local youth learn about gangs and make gang connections while incarcerated in a state or regional facility, and (5), urban flight: when urban families, including gang-affiliated youth, move into rural areas to escape gangs and/or violence in the cities. Displacement, branch office, and urban flight explanations assume that rural gangs are primarily imported from urban areas. The branch office and social learning explanations assume that gang members are primarily local youth who import urban gang symbols and customs. The open-ended comments of these officials allowed us to give some consideration to the relative frequency with which these explanations occur.

Displacement: Several agencies reported that gang members came into their area to avoid problems with the police in their home cities:

> ID#143: We have a lot of drug activity and I think a lot of the problem is that the gangers from Washington and Oregon, you know, head over this way to evade the law over there.
>
> ID#059: The ones that I've interviewed, which has been about fifty percent of them, have either been cooling off from the area that they're from, or avoiding trouble with California laws. Three strike laws and stuff like that.

Although nearly half agreed that some gang members moved into the area to avoid the police, displacement mentioned as the primary reason for the move in only a few jurisdictions.

Branch Office: Several agencies reported that gangs came from larger cities and set up operations in their community because it was seen as a lucrative market where drugs sold for a higher price and where enforcement was likely to be weak:

> ID#091: Nearly all of them have done that. Some of them have recruited the local kids from different high schools and communities but our problem gangs have been all based out of Chicago and Minneapolis. And they've just reached out to the rural area because there's

> less pressure and they're able to obviously get more money for their narcotics. . . . There's more of a demand you know in the area of the state where you're not real close to metropolitan cities. There is less law enforcement in those areas and a less likelihood of being detected by law enforcement. . . .A gang member will move in from Chicago and he'll talk to his brother, or he'll talk to his sister, or relative or friend and they'll say come up to [his community], you know there is very little law enforcement and there's a need for us to come up here to setup our illegal activities.
>
> ID#084: They move from place to place. They don't really set up any permanent residence in this community. They operate either quick crack houses that they don't keep in operation very long at that location or they move to motel rooms. They jump around on us quite a bit.

While the establishment of a branch office did occur in some of these jurisdictions, it was not the most common situation reported by these agencies. Further, we would expect such branch offices to be relatively easily neutralized by local police.

Social Learning: Though not a frequent response, some did indicate that local youth learned about gangs and gang activities from urban youth:

> ID#139: A couple of juveniles that came back from JDC (juvenile detention center) started with a basic interest in the gang and then they recruited, oh, probably thirty some members at the height of their glory.
>
> ID#041: You know a lot of them go to boot camp or they go to the job corps and they bring that stuff back. Some have relatives who leave and they come back and they learn it from the relatives.

This quote suggests that youth may leave the community and return for a variety of reasons, and not simply for being institutionalized, as was suggested in earlier research.

Urban Flight: About 30 percent of respondents to our structured question reported that gang members or their families had migrated to their area in an attempt to get away from urban gangs. On our open-ended query, a number of jurisdictions reported the presence of individual gang

members whose families had moved them from the city to get them away from gang influences. But, instead of leaving the gang, these youth often initiated or otherwise became involved in gang activity with local youth:

> ID#026: One gang has its origins from [a large city] and has gravitated here when some of the kids who were involved with gangs have been redistributed by families to get them out of that environment. But, rather than getting them out of that environment they bring to these rural communities that gang culture.

> ID#014: Actually we have run into quite a few who have said that their parents moved them to get away from gangs. We hear that a lot from the few kids from the Chicago area that live here that we have a pretty consistent contact with.

> ID#090: They left [the city] because of the gangs there. Every single parent says the same thing. We left Chicago because of the gangs, or we left Detroit because of the gangs, and then they end up starting their own here.

> ID#154: We find out that a lot of people that move in may have family problems where they come from, which could be Los Angeles, for example, and their child is involved in gang activity. They move to this county to get away from it. Then, what happens is those kids influence others to start up a gang.

> ID#246: Most of those kids [gang involved] move into our area because of their parents, who are trying to move their kids away from trouble.

> ID#093: In one case I can think of his parents brought him here. I think they had some family ties here and they brought him here to get him away from gang activity out there. It didn't work obviously, you know, but that was and I think that is probably one of the main reasons. Some of them are families that move and the kid goes with them. In some cases, they intentionally move and to move into an area like this where there are no obvious signs of gang activity. They think that is where they want to be, not realizing that what they brought the problem with them.

> ID#050: I have yet to find a parent that didn't say I was trying to move them and get them into a new environment. See our gang members are sophisticated kids from Tacoma, or Los Angeles, or Phoenix, or where ever. They weren't a gang member but they were around it enough that when they came here they were able to talk the talk and walk the walk enough to impress the bumpkin locals who have a leaning that way. That's kind of where our people have sprung up. If you were to take these people and drop them into Compton, California they would all disappear within a matter of five minutes. These people have no real idea of what a true gang-banger is. Nonetheless that's what we have here that's what we see here.

ID#048: They think that we're a smaller town and they can get away from the big city gang lifestyle by coming here, but then they realize that we also have it here, but it's on a smaller scale.

ID#099: A lot of times it's the parents. The parents will move back south because they feel like their kids are getting to out of hand up north, and actually we're suffering the same problems they do up there, we just get it later. A lot of them decide to come home just to be home. Most of their homes, their relatives, or their parents, whatever, were probably originally from here and they wanted to come back home. Usually a sick grandparent or something like that brings most of the parents home and that's how they wind up working themselves back in.

ID#075: [How many current gang members came from outside your jurisdiction?] In my personal opinion, all of them. I'd say a good percentage of them. We tried to do that years ago, to trace back how this got started. Our main problems stem from a kid whose mom moved him down here to live with his aunt from Chicago to get him out of the gangs and stuff up there, and guess what, he brought it with him. Now he's a big fish in the small city here.

ID#136: Yeah, to get away from bad activity on the coast. Most came from California. Our first gang-related shooting was a family that came from California to get their son away from a gang problem, and he gets here and he gets shot and killed.

Urban flight was easily the most frequently mentioned response to our open-ended question about why gang members from other communities moved into their community, although it was not the most frequent response to our more structured questions.

In addition to the five categories identified in earlier research, this study found another method by which gang influences enter rural communities. This is through migration driven by employment, social programs, or other factors. In some jurisdictions, migrant workers move into the area for a short time and bring gang-related activities with them. In other cases local military bases provide an influx of gang activities as the family members of military personnel move into an area. Other jurisdictions reported the spread of public housing into rural areas, and the placement of urban gang youth into rural areas through social programs:

ID#048: We are a military town so we get a lot of our problems from other areas, problems that come with the people, and they bring them in so I'm going to venture to say that a third of our problems are imported.

ID#212: [When asked why gang members move into the area.] I think mainly family reasons. They've been younger members that have moved here to live with grandparents, or aunts and uncles or, you know, with a brother or cousin or something for a while.

ID#134: Mostly [gang members moved into the area from cities because of] the parents. The parents moved up here because of their jobs or to get out of the big cities. That's the biggest reason.

ID#135: According to them, they moved here to – we'll make this multiple choice, it breaks down just about evenly – to get out of a gang environment, to be safe because they've moved to a smaller community, or they came here with family members who relocated for jobs. According to me, I would say the last one, moving here with family in order to get jobs, is true. The rest of it is a lie. They have no desire to stop gang life. They bring gang life with them, and they would be incredibly uncomfortable if they could not function in that lifestyle.

ID#092: Some of the ones that I'm thinking of moved with their friends into our area, and the other group that I'm thinking of moved and brought their whole family. I think that was part of the crime-free multi-housing thing.

ID#061: We have one government subsidized housing complex in our community. This is in an area of town that's located pretty much in a good neighborhood, and in this area we have had some known gang members who have moved in with some single parent females, and they [known gang members] have had some of their associates come down from Chicago or Joliet and they've been involved in some criminal activity there and have actually retaliated against opposing gang members in different parts of the town, members who might not be as organized as they are.

ID#063: We have a lot of prisons in this area. We have federal prisons and state prisons and youth boot camps, so you have a lot of migration of families into the area for a period of time and then they [the inmates] get transferred or released and they move out again.

ID#102: Mainly its because of placement and foster care, or facilities such as that – foster homes, group homes.

Thus, gang members may move into rural areas for reasons completely unrelated to their involvement in gangs, their fear of urban police, or their interest in establishing drug markets.

Although the discussion has focused one at a time on the reasons for gang members moving into the area, it was common for agencies to list multiple reasons:

ID#003: We've been able to identify several different reasons. [Our town] is located adjacent to two military installations. We have an Army post, which is actually a part of [the community], and then probably about thirty minutes down the road there's an Air Force base, too. We're seeing a lot of guys coming in as members of the military, coming down from the States, and the kids are involved down there and they are coming up here and suddenly they are the big wigs. We're encountering we're seeing family members that send their kids here in an effort to get them out of that environment. They think where can I send them to get away from this well we'll send them to [this community]. We have guys that have come here for the purpose of expanding you know the narcotics trade and what not.

ID#051: [Reasons why gang youth move into the area.] Um, couple of reasons. One, is family, family that lives in the area. Another is to escape problems they were having in the areas they were in. You know either somebody was after them or the police wanted them, or whatever, but to escape from problems where they were coming from. And then for some of them it was flat out expansion. You know, expand their business opportunities.

These interviews suggest that the five explanations for the emergence of gangs in rural areas offered in earlier research may require some modification. First, there was no support for the idea that rural drug dealers seek to expand their business and clout by setting up "franchises" with urban gangs, although we are aware of communities in which local dealers have claimed ties to urban gangs, those claims seem questionable:

ID#136: For the most part they may claim to be a faction of the "Bloods" or the "Crips" or the "Latin Kings," but they're not really closely associated. I mean they're not taking any marching orders. They're not funneling any profits to anybody in particular, so I would say they're kind of autonomous groups that claim national affiliation for extra power and prestige.

Further, these interviews revealed a method of gang importation speculated on in the work of Maxson (1998) but otherwise not systematically studied. Social factors unrelated to gang activity, such as the presence of a military base, the movement of workers through an area, or the expansion of subsidized housing into more rural communities, were cited as having a role in the importation of gangs and gang ideas into these communities.

## Responding to Gangs

In general, these agencies appeared ready to deal with gangs. Most (83 percent) had at least some officers with gang training. Of those agencies reporting gangs, 91 percent had officers with gang training, 30 percent had a gang unit (many agencies were simply too small to have a separate unit of any kind), 63 percent maintained separate files on gangs, and 64 percent were part of a task force that could address gang issues, if not a task force specifically focused on gangs. Further, among agencies reporting gangs problems, there was reported to be a "great" interest in additional gang-related training (51 percent), in receiving technical assistance regarding gangs (34 percent) and in assistance in forming task forces (27 percent). It must be remembered, however, that these agencies represent a relatively small percentage of nonmetropolitan agencies and include only 41 percent of the agencies that had reported the presence of gangs in 1997.

Several researchers have argued that rural policing involves a very different style of policing. In particular, research has suggested that rural police rely more on interpersonal skills and diplomacy, commanding respect because of who they are as a person rather than because of the uniform they are wearing. It was expected that if this were true, rural police might also adopt very different styles of responding to gangs. This expectation was not entirely born out by the interviews, in which the most frequent agency response to gang activity was suppression through strict enforcement, a style one might easily associate with urban police:

> ID#171: It is our philosophy that we don't give warnings for tobacco, we don't give warnings for alcohol, we don't give warnings for trespass or truancy, and we have adopted a zero tolerance policy on possession. And then, the second prong of the strategy is that when we code an offense a particular way that indicates a gang or a group activity – we've gone to our judicial partners, the judicial system, and demanded maximum penalties or guilty verdicts. . . .And being creative in enforcement, looking at zoning, looking at a parked cars, looking at animal control laws, and having zero tolerance on possession at an address or on a group. Whenever we receive a complaint there's an arrest made. There's no negotiating,

suspected gang members feel uncomfortable and unwelcome, with the expectation that they would then leave. In the smallest jurisdictions continuous and conspicuous monitoring of suspected gang members was possible at a level that would probably not be practical in most large jurisdictions. By most police accounts, this approach was effective.

Many of the conceptual and operational difficulties discussed in this study – defining a gang and distinguishing gang behavior from the behavior of individual members – are probably similar in rural and urban communities. However, in rural communities, these issues stand out. Further, rural communities greatly outnumber large cities, thus providing a much wider range of economic, social, and geographic circumstances, for the study of gangs. For example, of the 19,290 villages, towns, and cities in the United States, "Only 12 percent of the incorporated areas had a population of more than 10,000; 88 percent had a population of less than 10,000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991, cited in Hobbs, 1994)." This large number of communities allows researchers to consider the emergence and functioning of gangs in a wider variety of conditions than is possible with studies limited to urban areas. It is for this reason that the continued study of rural gangs is important for addressing issues surrounding the study of gangs in a variety of settings.

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# IV. APPENDIX

- **Advance Letter to Agencies**
- **Questions Used to Guide Telephone Interviews**

ILLINOIS STATE
UNIVERSITY

*Department of Criminal Justice Sciences*
*Rural Crime Project*

401 Schroeder Hall
Campus Box 5250
Normal, IL 61790-5250
Telephone: (309) 438-3849
Facsimile: (309) 438-7289

xxxxx, xx, 2000

Chief
xxxx Police Department
Street
City, State, Zip

Dear Chief:

In 1997 the National Youth Gang Survey contacted a representative sample of agencies throughout the country to ask about gang-related problems. We are selecting a small but representative sample of those agencies responding to the 1997 survey to gather more information about the issue of gangs and youth groups in their community. We are focusing particular attention on the problems facing agencies serving rural areas or small towns.

Within the next week or two we will contact you by telephone to set up a time for a telephone interview. The questions will address:

- the current situation in your community regarding gangs and youth groups
- the nature of gang and youth group problems, if any
- things you have found helpful in responding to gang and youth group problems
- resources, training, or other things you would find helpful in responding to gangs and youth groups

The telephone interviews should last only about 20 minutes and your participation is voluntary. Reports and papers generated by the study will not link your responses to you or your agency. The findings of the study will be shared with every agency that participates, with policy makers, and with those involved in police training.

Thanks in advance for your cooperation. If you have any questions please feel free to call or write.

Ralph A. Weisheit
Project Director
Phone: 309-438-3849
FAX: 309-438-7289

# Rural Gang Telephone Survey — Cover Page with Call Record

Agency ID#: _____

Phone #: _____

Title/Name: _____

Agency: _____

County: _____

City: _____

State: _____

(When person is reached) Hello, this is _____ and I am calling from Illinois State University regarding gang issues in your area. According to the 1997 National Youth Gang Survey, your agency reported having gang problems at that time. We are contacting you to learn more about those problems and the current gang situation in your area. You should have received a letter from us a short time ago explaining the project. (If they say they have not, then briefly explain the project.)

| Date | Time | Interviewer | Code for Result |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

**Codes for Result**

NA = Not available (write in when we should try again)
REF = Refused
IC = Interview Completed (write in approximate length of interview)
PC = Partially Completed (when should we call back; write in approx. length of interview)

# RURAL GANG STUDY
# TELEPHONE INTERVIEW GUIDE

## I. INTRODUCTION – THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

### Organized Gangs and Youth Groups

1. According to your response to the 1997 survey, gangs were present in your community. Do you currently have problems in your community with organized gang members or youth groups?

1 YES----> Which do you have a problem with? (Mark all that apply)

1 YOUTH GROUPS----------> (Go to page 2, the Yellow Page)
2 ORGANIZED GANGS ----> (Go to page 3, the Ivory Page)
3 BOTH ----------> (Go first to Yellow and then to Ivory Page)

2 NO-----> Have you had problems in the past?

1 NO
2 YES —> Organized Gangs —> Describe the problems.
Did they have a name?
When did they begin?
How long did they last?

—> Youth Groups —> Describe the problems.
When did they begin?
How long did they last?

Are you expecting problems in the future?

1 NO —> Why not?
2 YES
What makes you think you will have problems in the future?
What kinds of problems do you think are most likely?
Are you doing anything to prepare for those future problems?

Are there problems in nearby communities?

1 NO
2 YES
What kinds of problems are they having?
How far away are these communities?
Do you expect those problems to come to your community?

(WHEN FINISHED WITH THESE QUESTIONS GO TO PAGE ___ )

## YELLOW PAGE
## PROBLEMS WITH YOUTH GROUPS

2A. Would you describe the groups?

_____

_____

_____

How many youth groups are there? _____
How long have they been around? _____ YEARS _____ MONTHS
What kinds of kids are in these groups?

2B Would you please describe the problems you have had with **YOUTH GROUPS**?

_____

_____

_____

Interviewer: Specifically note if any of these problems have involved:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| YES | NO | Drug Use |
| YES | NO | Drug Sales or Distribution |
| YES | NO | Drug Manufacturing |
| YES | NO | Violence |

2C Are the problems with **YOUTH GROUPS** serious or minor?

1 SERIOUS
2 MINOR
9 DON'T KNOW; NO RESPONSE

2D In the past year, has anyone in your jurisdiction been arrested because of activities they engaged in while part of a **YOUTH GROUP**?

1 YES ----------> 2F How many people were arrested in the past year because of youth group activities? _____
2G How many groups were involved? _____
2 NO
9 DON'T KNOW, NO RESPONSE

## IVORY PAGE
## PROBLEMS WITH ORGANIZED GANGS

3A. Your agency reported that for 1997 there was a youth gang problem in your jurisdiction. Can you describe the youth gang(s)?

_____

_____

_____

How many youth groups are there? _____
How long have they been around? _____ YEARS _____ MONTHS
What kinds of kids are in these groups?

3B. Would you please describe the problems you have had with **ORGANIZED GANGS**?

_____

_____

_____

(Interviewer: Specifically note if any of these problems have involved):

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| YES | NO | Drug Use |
| YES | NO | Drug Sales or Distribution |
| YES | NO | Drug Manufacturing |
| YES | NO | Violence |

3C. Are the problems with **ORGANIZED GANGS** serious or minor?

1 SERIOUS
2 MINOR
9 DON'T KNOW; NO RESPONSE

3D. How have you determined that you have an **ORGANIZED GANG**? What have you used as indicators?

_____

_____

_____

3E. How can you tell if a particular person is a member of an **ORGANIZED GANG**?

_____

_____

_____

3F. For 1997, your agency reported _____ **youth gangs** in your jurisdiction. How many organized gangs are currently operating in your area? _____

3G. For 1997, your agency reported _____ **youth gangs members** in your jurisdiction. How many gang members are there now in your jurisdiction? _____

3H. Does your jurisdiction have any problems with **adult gangs**, such as motorcycle gangs or adult drug gangs?

1 YES ------> 2I How many groups were involved? _____

2J Are these groups made up of local residents or people from outside?

2K Are these groups permanently in the community or just passing through?

2J What were the names of these groups? _____

_____

2L How many people were arrested in the past year because of adult gang activities? _____

2 NO

9 DON'T KNOW, NO RESPONSE

3M. Of the **youth gang members** in your jurisdiction, about how many moved from somewhere else and brought their gang activities with them? _____

3N. Of those who brought gang activities with them from somewhere else, do you know why they came to you area? (e.g., social, set up drug markets, other illegal activities, avoid police, get away from gang life)

_____

_____

_____ SOCIAL (move with family, visit friends, etc.)
_____ DRUG MARKETS (set up drug distribution or production operations)
_____ OTHER ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES (burglaries)
_____ AVOID POLICE
_____ GET AWAY FROM GANG LIFE

3O. Do the(se) **ORGANIZED GANG(S)** in your jurisdiction have a name?
1 NO
2 YES —> What are the name(s)? _____

_____

_____

3P. As far as you know, are they affiliated with or do they work with gangs from larger cities?

1 NO
2 YES —> Describe _____

_____

_____

3Q. What kinds of things tell you they are organized? _____

_____

_____

3R. In the past year, has anyone in your jurisdiction been arrested because of activities they engaged in while part of an **ORGANIZED GANG**?

1 YES ----------> How many people were arrested in the past year because of **ORGANIZED GANG** activities? _____
How many groups has this involved? _____

2 NO

9 DON'T KNOW, NO RESPONSE

## RESPONDING TO YOUTH GROUPS AND ORGANIZED GANGS

1. Have any officers in your agency received special training to respond to gangs?

1 NO —>
2 YES —> 1a. How many officers have received such training? _____

2. For 1997 your department reported (____) having (____) not having a gang unit. Does your department have a special gang unit now?

1 NO (are there plans for such a unit; has there been one in the past)
2 YES (how long has it existed, how many officers are involved)

3. Does your department keep separate records or files or a data base on gang members and gang activity?

1 NO (are there plans for keeping such records)
2 YES (how long have such records been kept existed)

4. Is your agency part of a multijurisdictional task force that can help with gang problems?

1 NO (interest in developing such a task force)
2 YES (how long been in it, is it useful?

5. Are there agencies you can call on if you need direct help dealing with gangs?

1 NO
2 YES —> Which agencies?

6. How much does your agency need each of the following? For each item indicate whether your agency has a GREAT NEED, MINOR NEED, or NO NEED:

GREAT MINOR NONE Gang-related training for individual officers.

GREAT MINOR NONE Technical assistance in creating or operating a gang unit.

GREAT MINOR NONE Technical assistance in joining or forming a task force

7. Are there other needs your agency has regarding gangs or youth groups? (Specify) _____

_____

_____

8. Does your agency participate in gang education and prevention programs in the community?

1 NO (interest in developing such a program?)
2 YES (describe the program)

## BEST PRACTICES

## (FOR AGENCIES WITH A GANG/YOUTH GROUP PROBLEM)

1. How has your agency handled gang/youth group problems? Give examples of problems and how you handled them.

_____

_____

2. In your community, what kinds of things have worked well dealing with youth gangs/groups? Would these things work in other communities?

_____

_____

3. Are there things you have tried that have not worked out very well? What were those things and why do you think they did not work?

_____

_____

4. Are there people or agencies you can turn to if you want ideas for dealing with these groups?

1 NO
2 YES (which agencies or people?)

_____

_____

## CONCLUSION

ABOUT YOUR JURISDICTION AND AGENCY

1. Does a major highway run through or near your jurisdiction?

   1 NO
   2 YES —> Does this highway have any impact on your gang problem?

2. How far away in miles and in driving time is the nearest large city (large being over 100,000)?

   _____ MILES

   _____ HOURS OF DRIVING TIME (report hour and fraction of hour)

3. What is the name of that city? (Give name & state) _____

4. How many officers are in your department?

   _____ FULL-TIME UNIFORMED

   _____ PART-TIME UNIFORMED

**********

Thank you for your time. Your help is very much appreciated. The study will be ongoing for several months, but we would be happy to send you a copy of the results when they are ready. Would you like a copy?

1 NO

2 YES —> (Get name and mailing address)

_____

_____

_____

_____