



Highlights of [GAO-09-708](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Justice (DOJ) estimates that the United States has about a million gang members. While state and local agencies have primary responsibility for combating gang crime, the federal government has key roles to enforce laws and help fund programs to provide alternatives to gang membership for at-risk youth. GAO was asked to examine federal efforts to combat gang crime. This report addresses (1) the roles of DOJ and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in combating gang crime and the extent to which DOJ and DHS agencies coordinate their efforts with each other and state and local agencies; (2) the extent to which DOJ and DHS measure their gang enforcement efforts; and (3) how federal grant funding is used to administer or support activities to reduce gang-related crime. GAO reviewed federal agencies' plans, resources, and measures and interviewed federal, state, and local officials in 15 localities with federally led anti-gang task forces representing varying population sizes and locations.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOJ reexamine roles of headquarters anti-gang entities, establish performance measures for anti-gang efforts, review USAO gang-related case data, and, along with DHS, develop a common definition for "gang." DHS concurred with the recommendations; DOJ is considering whether to establish measures and a common definition and concurred with the other recommendations.

[View GAO-09-708](#) or [key components](#).

For more information, contact Eileen Larence at (202) 512-8777 or [larencee@gao.gov](mailto:larencee@gao.gov).

## COMBATING GANGS

### Better Coordination and Performance Measurement Would Help Clarify Roles of Federal Agencies and Strengthen Assessment of Efforts

#### What GAO Found

Various DOJ and DHS components have taken distinct roles in combating gang crime, and at the headquarters level, DOJ has established several entities to share information on gang-related investigations across agencies. However, some of these entities have not differentiated roles and responsibilities. For example, two entities have overlapping responsibilities for coordinating the federal response to the same gang threat. Prior GAO work found that overlap among programs can waste funds and limit effectiveness, and that agencies should work together to define and agree on their respective roles and facilitate information sharing. At the field division level, federal agencies have established strategies to help coordinate anti-gang efforts including federally led task forces. Officials GAO interviewed were generally satisfied with the task force structure for leveraging resources and taking advantage of contributions from all participating agencies.

Federal agencies have taken actions to measure the results of their gang enforcement efforts, but these efforts have been hindered by three factors. Among other measures, one agency tracks the number of investigations that disrupted or shut down criminal gangs, while another agency tracks its gang-related convictions. However, agencies' efforts to measure results of federal actions to combat gang crime have been hampered by lack of a shared definition of "gang" among agencies, underreporting of information by United States Attorneys Offices (USAOs), and the lack of departmentwide DOJ performance measures for anti-gang efforts. Definitions of "gang" vary in terms of number of members, time or type of offenses, and other characteristics. According to DOJ officials, lack of a shared definition of "gang" complicates data collection and evaluation efforts across federal agencies, but does not adversely affect law enforcement activity. DOJ officials stated that USAOs have underreported gang-related cases and work, in part because attorneys historically have not viewed data collection as a priority. In the absence of periodic monitoring of USAO's gang-related case information, DOJ cannot be certain that USAOs have accurately recorded gang-related data. Further, DOJ lacks performance measures that would help agencies to assess progress made over time on anti-gang efforts and provide decision makers with key data to facilitate resource allocation.

DOJ administers several grant programs to assist communities to address gang problems; however, initiatives funded through some of these programs have had mixed results. A series of grant programs funded from the 1980s to 2009 to test a comprehensive communitywide model are nearing completion. Evaluations found little evidence that these programs reduced youth gang crime. DOJ does not plan to fund future grants testing this model; rather, DOJ plans to provide technical assistance to communities implementing anti-gang programs without federal funding. DOJ also awarded grants to 12 communities during fiscal years 2006 to 2008 under another anti-gang initiative. The first evaluations of this initiative are due in late 2009, and no additional grants will be funded pending the evaluation results.