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**GANG STRUCTURES, CRIME PATTERNS, AND POLICE RESPONSES:
A SUMMARY REPORT**

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**Summary of the Final Report to the
National Institute of Justice
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Introduction and Background¹

The end goal of this project was to provide useful data on how street gang crime patterns relate to common patterns of street gang structure, thus providing focused, data-based guidelines for gang intervention and control. The intermediate stages of the project, however, comprised other important goals. Using contacts from prior national surveys of gang-involved cities, we obtained data from police experts on gang structures currently in existence. We utilized these depictions to obtain estimates of the national prevalence of various types of gang structures, and of the perceived patterns of criminal activity associated with each. Finally, we attempted to collect crime data and construct crime profiles—both amount and pattern—for each of the most common gang structures.

Any attempt at gang definitions is to some extent arbitrary and subject to criticism in some form. Modifying the widely used definition we provided two decades ago (Klein, 1971), we suggested the following for the purposes of this project. We used the term **street gang**, and excluded prison gangs, organized adult crime groups, motorcycle gangs, stoners and satanic cults, and terrorist groups. We also excluded many youth groups, in school and out, that occasionally involve themselves individually or collectively in delinquent or criminal activities. However, we expressly included tagger groups in this project in order to investigate their reported evolution toward street gang structure and behavior.

¹ We are pleased to acknowledge the contributions of Heather Johnson, Caryn Schneck, and Kristi Woods to various segments of this research. The work could not have been carried out without the aid of literally hundreds of law enforcement and community respondents across the country.

We see the special nature of street gangs—what makes them qualitatively different from other groups—as revolving around their delinquent or criminal orientation. Some street gangs are far less criminally active than others—the range is considerable—but we use the term to apply to those groups that are oriented to illegal values or behaviors. For our law enforcement respondents, in order to narrow the definitional field and yet avoid too much specificity, we provided the following: "For the purposes of this survey, we define gangs quite broadly—younger and older, male and female, small and large, and so on. However, we only wish to include as gangs those groups that do have considerable orientation to or involvement in delinquent or criminal behavior. Please do not include groups whose behavior is only marginally illegal."

Methods

The research design involved three phases. The first phase utilized law enforcement gang experts in 59 cities as informants to identify and describe gang structures in their communities. The result of this phase was a set of scenarios, or gang structure profiles, used in the Phase II survey operation in 201 cities to estimate the prevalence of gang structures, nationally. Finally, we sought information from 110 candidate cities regarding capacities to provide us with crime data linked to different types of gangs.

Phase I: Gang Structures Identified

Law enforcement gang experts in a stratified random sample of sixty gang-involved cities provided information about the structural dimensions of their local street

gangs. Stratification by period of the onset of gang activity in the city (i.e., 1970 and earlier, 1971-1984, and after 1984) was necessary to ensure adequate representation of older gang cities. These data were utilized to construct narrative descriptions, or scenarios, of the most common gang types. In the telephone interviews in the sample of 60 cities, we took two approaches to asking about the structural dimensions of gangs in each city. Only the second approach is reported in the summary report. Requesting each respondent to concentrate only on the street gang he or she knew best, we asked a series of questions about size, age distribution, territorial identification, cohesiveness, and so on. We did not ask about crime patterns because we wanted them to focus on structure rather than activity. This "best known" approach, while not necessarily most representative, might nonetheless prove most reliable for production of gang scenarios in Phase II.

Case numbers dropped to 59 as one respondent did not have time to complete this section of the interview. Using the characteristics of ethnicity, subgroup organization, size, age range, date of gang emergence, territoriality, cohesiveness, and crime versatility versus specialization, six distinguishable types emerged, which we later reduced to five. No one ethnic category predominated in any type, so ethnicity was dropped as a dimension. In addition, all types were reported to be characterized by tight cohesiveness, so this was deleted. The characteristics of each of the types are displayed in Figure 1.

Each of the 59 gangs could be placed in one of the five types—not all fit perfectly, but no gang varied by more than one characteristic. We have written narrative

descriptions or "scenarios" that distinguish each type from the others and these are displayed below. Note that characteristics are shared across more than one type; no type is unique in each of its characteristics.

Figure 1: Characteristics of Five Gang Types

Type	Subgroups	Size	Age Range	Duration	Territorial	Crime Versatility
Traditional (n = 14)*	Yes	Large (> 100)	Wide (20-30 years)	Long (> 20 years)	Yes	Yes
Neotraditional (n = 13)	Yes	Medium -large (> 50)	[no pattern]	Short (< 10 years)	Yes	Yes
Compressed (n = 13)	No	Small (< 50)	Narrow (< 10 years)	Short (< 10 years)	[no pattern]	Yes
Collective (n = 9)	No	Medium -large (> 50)	Medium- wide (> 10 years)	Medium (10-15 years)	[no pattern]	Yes
Specialty (n = 10)	No	Small (< 50)	Narrow (< 10 years)	Short (< 10 years)	Yes	No

* n = number of cities

GANG STRUCTURE SCENARIOS

The Traditional gang: Traditional gangs have generally been in existence for twenty or more years - they keep regenerating themselves. They contain fairly clear subgroups, usually separated by age. O.G.s or Veteranos, Seniors, Juniors, Midgets and various other names are applied to these different age-based cliques. Sometimes the cliques are separated by neighborhoods rather than age. More than other gangs, Traditional gangs tend to have a wide age range, sometimes as wide as from nine or ten years of age into the thirties. These are usually very large gangs, numbering one hundred or even several hundred members. Almost always, they are territorial in the sense that they identify

strongly with their turf, 'hood, or barrio, and claim it as theirs alone.

In sum, this is a large, enduring, territorial gang with a wide range and several internal cliques based on age or area.

The Neotraditional gang: The Neotraditional gang resembles the Traditional form, but has not been in existence as long—probably no more than ten years, and often less. It may be medium size—say fifty to one hundred members—or also into the hundreds. It probably has developed subgroups or cliques based on age or area, but sometimes may not. The age range is usually smaller than in the classical Traditional gangs. The Neotraditional gang is also very territorial, claiming turf and defending it.

In sum, the Neotraditional gang is a newer territorial gang that looks on its way to becoming Traditional in time. Thus at this point it is subgrouping, but may or may not have achieved the size and wide age range of the Traditional gang. The subgrouping, territoriality, and size suggests that it is evolving into the Traditional form.

The Compressed gang: The Compressed gang is small—usually in the size range of up to fifty members—and has not formed subgroups. The age range is probably narrow—ten or fewer years between the younger and older members. The small size, absence of subgroups, and narrow age range may reflect the newness of the group, in existence less than ten years and maybe for only a few years. Some of these Compressed gangs have become territorial, but many have not.

In sum, Compressed gangs have a relatively short history, short enough that by size, duration, subgrouping and territoriality, it is unclear whether they will grow and solidify into the more traditional forms, or simply remain as less complex groups.

The Collective gang: The Collective gang looks like the Compressed form, but bigger and with a wider age range—maybe ten or more years between younger and older members. Size can be under a hundred, but is probably larger. Surprisingly, given these numbers, it has not developed subgroups, and may or may not be a territorial gang. It probably has a ten to fifteen-year existence.

In sum, the Collective gang resembles a kind of shapeless mass of adolescent and young adult members that has not developed the distinguishing characteristics of other gangs.

The Specialty gang: Unlike these other gangs that engage in a wide variety of criminal offenses, crime in this type of group is narrowly focussed on a few offenses; the group comes to be characterized by the specialty. The Specialty gang tends to be small—usually fifty or fewer members—without any subgroups in most cases (there are exceptions). It probably has a history of less than ten years, but has developed a well-defined territory. Its territory may be either residential or based on the opportunities for the particular form of crime in which it specializes. The age range of most Specialty gangs is narrow, but in others is broad.

In sum, the Specialty gang is crime-focussed in a narrow way. Its principal purpose is more criminal than social, and its smaller size and form of territoriality may

be a reflection of this focussed crime pattern.

Phase II: The Prevalence of Five Gang Structures

The five gang-structure scenarios positioned us to solicit data from a larger representative sample of cities on the actual prevalence of various gang structures throughout the nation. Such data have never before been sought. Further, these data would describe gangs in a way seldom attempted before—notably, in relation to their structural properties.

The data on gang structure prevalence are taken from the 201 returns from a random sample of 250 cities out of the almost 800 identified in our earlier research. This return rate of 80 percent, though below the 90 to 95 percent return rate we have had in our prior law enforcement research, is nonetheless very substantial and not a source of concern.

Figure 2 provides a summary of gang structures prevalence data. We call attention to the following:

- In row 1, cities containing Compressed gangs are the most common, and those with Collective structures the least. Since most of the classic gang literature of the 1950s and 1960s was based principally on Traditional, not Compressed structures, it is immediately clear that a reconsideration of gang "knowledge" is called for.

- In row 2, cities that are predominantly of one type of gang reveal an even stronger pattern of Compressed gang prevalence. Both rows 1 and 2 reveal that most cities will typically be more familiar with non-subgrouped gangs.

- In row 3 (reading the percentages horizontally), we see that this general pattern also applies to the number of gangs. Gangs with age-graded or geographically-based

Figure 2: Gang Structures in 201 Cities

	Traditional	Neo-Traditional	Compressed	Collective	Specialty	Σ
# Cities with:	75	100	149	40	76*	
# cities with predominance: ^{**}	15	24	86	6	14	
# of gangs across cities:	316 (11%)	686 (24%)	1,111 (39%)	264 (9%)	483 (17%)	2860
• Hispanic	179 (57%)	229 (33%)	292 (26%)	62 (23%)	95 (20%)	857
• Black	63 (20%)	191 (28%)	340 (31%)	125 (47%)	155 (32%)	874
• White	38	34	152	10	49	283
• Asian	15	73	156	49	85	378
• Mixed & other	21	159	171	18	99	468

* Specialty focus: Drugs (24), Graffiti (20), Assault (17). Others included Burglary, Auto, Theft, Robbery.

** Fifty-six cities showed no predominance of one gang structure, defined as a type appearing twice as often as any other.

subgroups are less common than the three more homogeneous structural forms, particularly the Compressed type.

- In the five sub-rows on ethnicity (now reading the percentages vertically), we see that, in line with most scholarly reports, the vast majority of gangs are composed of minority groups, principally and equally Hispanic and black. The marginal percentages are 30 percent Hispanic, 31 percent black, 10 percent white, 13 percent Asian, and 16 percent mixed.

- In the first table note (*), we list for cities with Specialty gangs what their predominant crime type was (asked only with respect to Specialty structures). Drug gangs, while a bit more prominent than other Specialty types, certainly do not dominate the picture to the extent that enforcement and media reports would suggest.

Respondents in the 24 cities with drug gangs were asked how many such gangs there

were; the result is an estimated maximum of 244 gangs with a drug focus, or about 8.5 percent of the 2,860 gangs reported in total. These data are at considerable variance with widely circulated reports in the media, and many public statements made by prominent law enforcement officials and legislative members, state and federal, to the effect that street gangs have taken over much of the drug trade.

The five scenarios do not include leadership patterns because we had little confidence in police views of gang leadership. They do not include the important dimension of group cohesiveness, because responses on this dimension proved nondiscriminating. Yet other data were gathered that give us confidence that the five types are different in meaningful, indeed in validating, ways.

The ethnic differences, as suggested in Figure 2, are in some cases very substantial. For example, Traditional gangs are more likely to be Hispanic while the Collective and Specialty gangs are more commonly composed of black members. Note, however, that the two most common types—Neotraditional and Compressed—show far less ethnic or racial predominance. Average gang size is another differentiating variable, as seen in Figure 3. We note in particular the predicted large size of Traditional gangs and small size of Specialty gangs. Year of gang emergence in the city is somewhat differentiating (Traditional gangs tend to be located in early onset cities), although not fully at the level we expected. The explosion in gang onsets in the 1980s probably puts limits on these differences. Size of the city shows some differences, but the common existence of two or more structures in the same city sets limits for these differences. The ambiguous Collective gang is significantly a product of the largest cities.

Figure 3: Selected Structural Dimensions

	Traditional	Neotraditional	Compressed	Collective	Specialty
Average Size	182	72	35	56	24
Year of Onset*					
Through 1970	24%	13%	9%	15%	7%
1971-1984	28%	18%	16%	28%	15%
1985 & beyond	49%	68%	75%	56%	78%
City Size > 100,000	35%	36%	28%	52%	33%
Average Monthly Arrests	10.9	9.2	6.1	7.4	5.7
Average Monthly Per Member Arrests	.16	.20	.22	.17	.29

*Year of onset refers to the year any gangs first appeared.

Volume of crime attributed to the structures is also important, with the Traditional and Neotraditional gangs contributing the most, and Specialty gangs contributing the least. Of course, this is a function of average gang size. If we control for size as in the last row of Figure 3, we see a considerable reversal; the average Traditional gang member contributes the lowest reported arrests, and the Specialty gang member the highest.

Phase III: Structures and Crime Patterns

In retrospect, the gang structures and crime proposal submitted to NIJ represented a short series of gambles. The first was that we could use police responses to descriptive dimensions such as gang size, clique structures, age patterns and so on to develop realistic scenarios of contrasting street gang structures. The second gamble was that the descriptions of the Phase I structures could be provided to a broad and diverse

sample of police experts to establish the national prevalence of the newly derived structures and that those might account for a substantial portion of all gangs. Both gambles paid off—even more handsomely than we had expected. For the first time, we have an empirically derived typology of street gang structures, running the gamut from the historically well-documented Traditional gang to the small Specialty structure, with estimates of their prevalence and some empirical correlates.

Finally, we gambled that if reasonably distinct structures could be developed and if their prevalence could be established, then recorded crime data on gangs and gang members could be used to determine if different gang structures were associated with different crime patterns. This last gamble rested on the capacities of police crime recording practices with respect to gang members. From past exposure to these practices, we knew from the outset that many departments could not meet our needs. Nonetheless, in preparing the research proposal to NIJ, we suggested that perhaps 25 or so departments might be able to provide the needed data. However, our estimate was very much in error and our third gamble did not pay off.

It is not that police crime data fail to yield structure-relevant differences; we couldn't get to that point in our analysis. Rather, police crime data generally are not collected in a way that allows such differences to emerge. To understand this requires a clear statement of what we determined was needed.

1. We required the recording of gang member crimes across a wide range of possible offenses. We knew that this broad range is possible in all departments, but also that police perspectives on gang crime and legislative and prosecutorial emphases would

lead to an overemphasis on the most serious offenses to the detriment (and often exclusion) of moderate and low serious offenses. Police more commonly record offenses they see as typical of gangs—assaults, drive-by shootings, robbery, graffiti vandalism, drug sales, for example—and less commonly record various forms of theft and other property offenses, status offenses, drug use, and so on, despite the fact that these latter are far more common.

2. We also required that a participating department keep records on a substantial proportion of the members of any gang included in Phase III data collection. The tendency, of course, is for offenses to be recorded primarily for those considered "core" gang members, that relatively small number of gang members who contribute a disproportionately high number of arrests, probably disproportionately of higher seriousness as well.

3. Because many gangs contain both juvenile and adult members, we sought reporting departments that did not limit their crime reports to either juveniles or adults. For instance, if gang offending was recorded only within the juvenile division of a police department, that department would not be included in the Phase III analysis.

Beyond these three restrictions, there is the obvious limitation that we could only deal with departments that did maintain gang records—both rosters of gang members and offenses committed by them, recorded individual by individual. All 201 respondents were asked, "Does your department have the capability of producing the arrest history of all or most of the members of at least one gang?" If the answer to this question was in the positive, respondents were asked to indicate for how many gangs of each structural

type such arrest histories or crime profiles could be produced. A surprising 110 departments responded that they could provide gang arrest profiles of this sort.

A procedure was established to help the 110 respondents provide the requested arrest profiles. A form was developed on which, gang by gang, they could fill in the offense data for the previous year. If they had a ready-made reporting system of a reasonably similar sort, they were welcomed to submit that to us. Finally, if the paper work involved was too extensive to be undertaken, they could report the data to us in a structured telephone interview.

All 110 respondents were approached. Over time, despite a great deal of effort and many, many attempts to elicit cooperation—which, it will be recalled, was overwhelmingly positive in Phase I and Phase II in addition to prior projects—only 16 departments responded with one or more gang arrest profiles that met the research requirements.

Of the remainder:

- Fifteen overtly refused to participate, primarily because the task was too demanding. Their data systems were not sufficient to provide gang arrest profiles.

- Twenty-four simply failed to respond, usually ignoring phone and fax messages from the same personnel that had successfully engaged them before. We take these to be refusals as well, albeit of a passive nature.

- Twenty-eight agreed to respond to faxed data recording sheets, but failed to return them. Again repeated requests proved fruitless, and a third form of refusal was the result.

- One of the respondents reported that the gang problem had dissipated.

- Twenty-six returned data forms that failed to meet the research requirements. Of these, 21 admitted that their gang rosters didn't exist, or did not include the majority of gang members or were otherwise inadequate. Four reported legal restrictions—confidentiality or protected juvenile records. One reported its single gang was no longer active.

Thus, at the end of data collection for phase III, we had obtained only 16 responses that merited further analysis. The 16 cities profiled a total of 51 gangs—17 Traditional, 12 Neotraditional, 18 Compressed, 2 Collective, and 2 Specialty. Only nine of the gang descriptions showed a close relationship between reported gang size, roster size, and number of members profiled. An additional eleven gangs showed a substantial (50 percent or better) equality between reported size, roster size, and numbers profiled. Only these 20 gangs, by even a relaxed criterion, could meet the requirements for determining valid gang crime patterns.

Finally, a review of these 20 remaining gang arrest profiles revealed that only five of the arrest profiles suggested any sort of comprehensive arrest recording practice. We know from much prior research, gang and nongang alike, that arrest patterns are versatile; gang members commit a wide variety of offenses, and this variety is manifested in both self-report and official records. Most common are various forms of theft, status offenses, drug use and other mostly non-violent crimes. Yet the arrest profiles we received on reasonably complete gang rosters were not of this sort, raising serious questions, as we suggested earlier, about the selectivity in common gang offense recording practices.

What are we left with, then? Our respondents provided crime data on 51 gangs, or less than 2 percent of the 2,860 reported in Phase II. Of these, only 20 had even mildly acceptable proportions of profiles out of total members, or 0.7 percent of the total, of which only five, or 0.2 percent were judged to have yielded reasonably undistorted crime profiles. Far too many cities have yielded far too few gangs, and these portray grossly under-reported and distorted crime pictures. It is not possible, with these data, to assess crime pattern differences between different gang structure types.

Several implications are obvious from the above conclusions. First, if this nation is to base gang control policies on police-recorded gang data, then a major effort will be needed to assist law enforcement in accurately reflecting the nature of gang arrests.

Second, the policies now in place, both locally and nationally, to the extent that they are based on officially reported gang crime patterns, are based on inadequately collected and reported information. This includes greatly under-reported levels of gang crime, and largely distorted emphases on the proportions of gang-stereotypical crime—violence, drug offenses, and the like. Such arrest-based policies thus are likely to be ill founded and inefficient at best.

Finally, for gang scholars, it appears that accurate gang crime depictions will in most cities have to start with ethnographic procedures. Reasonably full rosters of gang memberships must come from field studies, and then these rosters can be used to approach the issue of crime patterns (observed, self-reported, and official). In most jurisdictions, reliance on data from police gang units will not at this point be sufficient.

Summary

In this research, we have developed a structural gang typology which has proven applicable in the vast majority of a random sample of cities with reported gang problems.

We have learned:

- that Traditional gangs, those most subject to prior gang research, are not the most common or typical gang form;
- that some of the ethnic differences described in the literature do not hold up well for gangs in the 1990s;
- that drug gangs, so much the subject of public pronouncements and some criminological research, comprise a relatively small proportion of street gangs;
- that differences between gang types do not readily correspond to characteristics of their cities or regions in the country;
- that presumed and reported relationships between gangs and crime patterns, as reflected in official arrests, are probably unfounded—police gang arrest data are not generally up to the task of validly representing patterns of gang crime.

We caution the reader, also, that the gang typology which emerged from our data is time-limited. The data collection period of the early 1990s follows by relatively few years the major proliferation across the nation that took place in the 1980s. We may have captured a brief movement in a period of major gang evolutionary change. We know, for instance, that drug gangs have gained their prominence only during the last ten years.

It is reasonable to suggest that the Collective gang, having such an amorphous form, may be a product of this evolutionary phase and will soon become even less

common that it is now. It is also reasonable to suggest that Compressed gangs, now so common but with a relatively short history, will evolve over time into Neotraditional and Traditional forms if they continue to exist. This is logical, since current members will grow older and the gangs can only regenerate themselves via recruitment of new, presumably younger replacements. This could well result in the age-related cliques that typify the Traditional gang.

Revisiting this issue in five to ten years, using the same research methods, would seem very much in order to solidify our understanding of gang structure. Perhaps by that time a sufficient number of police departments will have developed gang rosters and crime statistics appropriate to establishing valid relationships between gang structures and gang crime patterns.

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