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Highlights of the 2010 National Youth Gang Survey

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Nationally, violent crime and property crime rates have declined dramatically over the past decade (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011; Truman, 2011). An enduring concern for many jurisdictions, however, is the continued presence of gangs and gang activity, which are often associated with violence and serious crimes (Cooper and Smith, 2011). Despite the overall decline in crime, gang violence continues at high levels in some cities (Howell and colleagues, 2011).

About the Survey

Since 1996, the National Gang Center, through the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS), has collected data annually from a large, representative sample of local law enforcement agencies to track the size and scope of the nation's gang problem. The sample consists of two groups: (1) all police departments in cities with more than 50,000 residents (larger cities) and all suburban county police and sheriff's departments (collectively referred to as "larger areas") and (2) a random sample of police departments in cities with populations between 2,500 and 50,000 (smaller cities) and rural county sheriff's departments (collectively referred to as "smaller areas").¹

Survey Findings

This fact sheet summarizes findings from the 2010 survey. Of the 2,544 survey recipients, 2,158 (85 percent) responded to the survey.

Prevalence of Gang Activity

The figure on page 2 shows the percentage of agencies nationwide that reported gang activity between 1996 and 2010. The 15-year trend, marked by decreasing prevalence rates in the 1990s and increasing prevalence rates in the early 2000s, is statistically unchanged in the past 5 survey years. The overall estimate of gang activity in the study population remained stable from 2009 (34.5 percent) to 2010 (34.1 percent). Larger cities consistently reported greater rates of gang presence and seriousness of gang crime during the 15-year period.

Key Points

Based on law enforcement reports, in 2010—

- There were an estimated 29,400 gangs and 756,000 gang members throughout 3,500 jurisdictions across the United States.
- Gang-related homicides increased more than 10 percent from 2009 in cities with populations of more than 100,000.
- Highly populated areas accounted for the vast majority of gang-related homicides nationally.
- Gang members were less likely to migrate to smaller areas and had most likely migrated for social, not illegitimate, reasons.



Based on law enforcement responses to the NYGS, it is estimated that in 2010, there were 29,400 gangs and 756,000 gang members throughout 3,500 jurisdictions in the United States. Each estimate represents less than a 5-percent change from 2009, and although this change is not statistically significant, these numbers underscore the seriousness of the continuing national gang problem.

Gang-Related Offenses

The table on page 3 shows the number of gang-related homicides reported in the United States from 2006 through 2010.² It illustrates the high concentration of gang-related homicides in very large cities (with populations of more than 100,000) and suburban counties.³ Among the very large cities, the number of reported gang-related homicides increased 13 percent from 2009 to 2010. Of the more than 700 total homicides that occurred in Chicago, IL, and Los Angeles, CA, more than half were reported to be gang-related in 2010.

More than half of the responding agencies (51 percent) characterized their gang problems as “staying about the same” in 2010, an increase over the 2009 figure (49.8 percent) and the largest percentage ever recorded by the survey. Among all respondents reporting gang activity, nearly 4 out of 10 reported increases from 2009 to 2010 in gang graffiti and a variety of violent, property, and drug crimes.

Gang-Member Migration

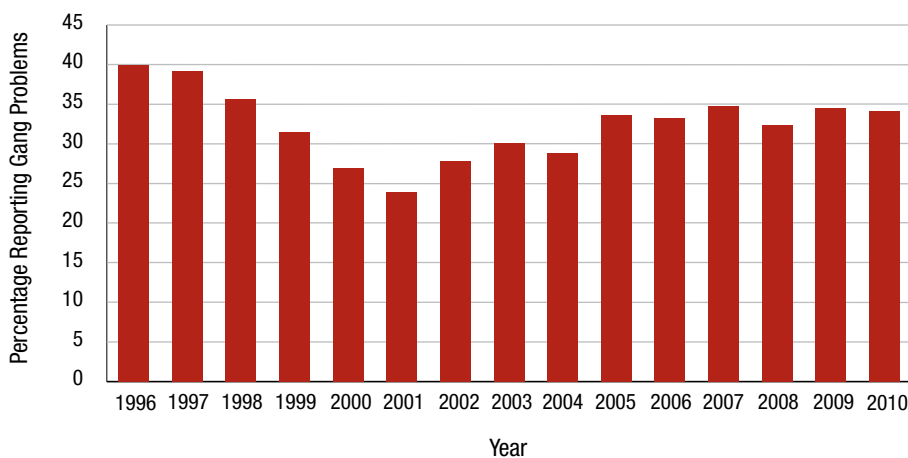
The media often portray gang-member migration, especially to jurisdictions outside urban areas, as a growing problem. However, except for responses to questions on the topic in the 2004 NYGS (see Egley and Ritz, 2004), few recent data are available on gang-member migration. To obtain updated statistics, the 2010 NYGS asked respondents a series of questions pertaining to the topic.⁴

As with the 2004 survey, most jurisdictions with gang problems (71 percent) reported the presence of one or more gang-member migrants. Respondents serving smaller areas, where gang problems are less common and/or chronic, were significantly less likely than larger areas to report gang-member migrants—65 percent versus 74 percent. Nine percent of responding agencies in 2010 (down from 10 percent in 2004) reported that more than half of the documented gang members in their jurisdictions had migrated from other areas. However, the majority of respondents (58 percent, down from 60 percent in 2004) reported no or few gang-member migrants (less than 25 percent of documented gang members).

The reasons gang members migrate can be grouped into two categories: (1) illegitimate reasons, including drug distribution and other illegal activities, recruiting members, and avoiding law enforcement, and (2) legitimate or “social” reasons, such as family moves and relocating for job opportunities. Respondents to the 2010 survey reported that social reasons significantly (more than 3 times) outweighed illegitimate reasons as motivating factors for gang-member migration.

It is a widely held public perception that larger proportions of gang-member migrants are positively associated with increases in local gang activities, such as violence, drugs, and conflict (Howell, 2012; van Gemert, Peterson, and Lien, 2008). However, the increased number of gang-related crimes in 2010 was found not to be significantly associated with the presence or the proportion of gang-member migrants. These findings, coupled with the substantially lower prevalence rate of gang activity in smaller areas, strongly suggest that on the whole, gang-member migration is far more the exception than the rule outside urban areas, and if present, gang-member migrants are usually but a small part of the total gang population, have likely moved to the area for legitimate reasons, and have no prominent impact on local gang offenses.

Prevalence of Gang Problems in Study Population, 1996–2010



External Gang Influences

There is growing concern that gangs in Central America could influence U.S. gang activity—specifically, that illicit gang activities that occur there will accelerate illegal immigration, drug and human smuggling, extortion, and trafficking in persons and weapons to the United States (Ribando, 2007). In addition, there are indications that some larger American gangs could be connected to major drug trafficking cartels in Canada, Mexico, and Central America (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009).

The 2010 survey asked respondents whether they had substantiated evidence of organizational connections between gangs in their jurisdiction and gangs outside the United States. Eighteen percent of the respondents responded in the affirmative; the majority of these respondents (81 percent) serve larger cities, and almost half (45 percent) are located in the southern United States. Responses to a follow-up question regarding the types of activities U.S.-based and foreign gangs engaged in together indicated mostly drug trafficking, followed by weapon smuggling, with far fewer connections around human smuggling and extortion. However, the number of incidents of collaboration in any of these crimes between U.S. and foreign-based gangs was very small (even for drug trafficking).

Conclusion

The prevalence rate of gang activity remained relatively stable from 2005 to 2010, in contrast to the drop in overall crime over the past decade. In 2010, gang activity and serious gang crime remained highly concentrated in the most populated jurisdictions. Nationally, gang-related homicides increased more than 10 percent from 2009 to 2010 in very large cities.

A large proportion of respondents reported the presence of gang-member migrants from other jurisdictions. However, contrary to findings from other, less extensive studies, NYGS respondents reported that gang members were less likely to migrate to smaller areas, rarely accounted for a sizeable proportion of the overall gang problem,

and had most likely migrated to the area for social, not illegitimate, reasons. Less than 2 in 10 respondents reported having substantiated evidence of organizational connections between gangs in their jurisdiction and gangs outside the United States, and fewer agencies reported joint criminal activities such as drug trafficking, weapon smuggling, and extortion.

Endnotes

1. For a description of the NYGS study population and sample methodology, see www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis/Methodology.
2. Law enforcement agencies use varying methods for classifying a homicide as “gang related.” The most commonly used is the “member-based” approach in which a homicide is classified as gang-related if the victim was and/or the perpetrator is a gang member. Some agencies report using a more restricted classification method called the “motive-based” approach, which involves also proving that the crime furthers the interests of the entire gang. The survey results were derived from the more encompassing member-based approach.
3. The total number of gang-related homicides in the United States decreased slightly, by 3 percent, from 2009 to 2010.
4. A *gang-member migrant* was defined as “a gang member who joined a gang in a former jurisdiction prior to moving to the respondent’s.” Note: These analyses do not encompass general immigration patterns across the United States.

Gang-Related Homicides in the United States, 2006–10

	2006		2007		2008		2009		2010		Percent Change 2009–10
	N	% Total	N	% Total	N	% Total	N	% Total	N	% Total	
Agencies Reporting Gang Activity	1,053	–	992	–	921	–	1,050	–	1,026	–	–
Agencies Reporting Gang Homicide Statistics	915	–	890	–	768	–	910	–	860	–	–
Coverage Rate (%)	–	86.9	–	89.7	–	83.4	–	86.7	–	83.8	–
Total Gang Homicides	2,058	100.0	1,975	100.0	1,659	100.0	2,083	100.0	2,020	100.0	-3.0
Cities With Populations of 100,000+	1,284	62.4	1,215	61.5	1,022	61.6	1,123	53.9	1,272	63.0	13.3
Suburban Counties	465	22.6	477	24.2	357	21.5	597	28.7	439	21.7	-26.5
Cities With Populations of 50,000–100,000	220	10.7	215	10.9	204	12.3	274	13.2	209	10.3	-23.7
Smaller Areas	89	4.3	68	3.4	76	4.6	89	4.3	100	5.0	12.4



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