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Highlights of the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey

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Background

The first national gang survey conducted by the National Youth Gang Center (1997) gathered basic data for 1995 from police and sheriffs' departments across the Nation. More than 2,000 of the 3,140 responding agencies reported gangs in their jurisdictions in 1995. Although the 1995 survey showed that both youth gangs and gang members were more numerous than previously estimated, it was recognized that the actual numbers were undoubtedly higher since not every law enforcement agency was surveyed, nor were the data extrapolated for the Nation as a whole.

The 1996 National Youth Gang Survey was designed not only to be more comprehensive in regard to types of data collected, but also to be statistically representative, resulting in a more extensive national picture.

Survey Sample

Despite limitations in quality and uniformity, data furnished by law enforcement agencies continue to be the best available resource for gauging the extent of youth gangs and their activities. Like the initial survey, the 1996 effort queried police and sheriffs' departments. The 1996 sample consisted of the following:

- A total of 1,216 police departments serving cities with populations of more than 25,000 (large cities).
- A total of 664 suburban-county police and sheriffs' departments (suburban counties) (FBI, 1995).
- A randomly selected representative sample (n=399) of police departments serving cities with populations between 2,500 and 25,000 (small cities).
- A randomly selected representative sample (n=745) of rural-county police and sheriffs' departments (rural counties) (FBI, 1995).

This mix struck a balance between two competing concerns: a need to collect comparative data on previously identified gang cities and counties versus the cost advantage of statistical sampling.

Definition

A youth gang was defined as "a group of youths in (the respondent's) jurisdiction that (the respondent) or other responsible persons in (the respondent's) agency are willing to identify or classify as a 'gang.' " Motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, and exclusively adult gangs were excluded from the survey.

Survey Results

A total of 2,629 agencies responded to the survey (an 87-percent response rate). Approximately 53 percent of survey respondents reported that gangs were active in their jurisdiction in 1996. Respondents in large cities reported the highest level of gang activity (74 percent), followed by suburban counties (57 percent), small cities (34 percent), and rural counties (25 percent). Gang problems were reported in 1,385 cities and counties identified by respondents. From these data, it is estimated that up to 4,824 U.S. cities may be experiencing gang problems and that nationwide there may be as many as 31,000 street gangs, with a total membership of 846,000. Not unexpectedly, these numbers are higher than those in the 1995 survey, due in large measure to the greater scope and representativeness of the 1996 sample as compared with the 1995 sample.

The year most frequently cited by respondents for the onset of their gang problem was 1994. The average year of onset varied with the type of locality: 1989 for large cities, 1990 for suburban counties, 1992 for small cities, and 1993 for rural counties.

The race and ethnicity of gang members appear to be changing compared with earlier national surveys and research involving smaller samples (Curry, 1995; Howell, 1998; Klein, 1995). Respondents in the 1996 survey reported the following percentages nationally for gang members: Hispanic/Latino—44 percent, African-American/black—35 percent, Caucasian/white—14 percent, Asian—5 percent, and other—2 percent. The proportion of Caucasian/white gang members in rural counties (32 percent) and small cities (31 percent) was more than twice the national average.

Respondents indicated that 90 percent of youth gang members were male and 10 percent were female. This contrasts with recent self-report studies in which females represented approximately one-fourth to one-third of all gang members in urban adolescent samples (Curry, 1998; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen and Osgood, 1997; Esbensen and Winfree, in press; Fagan, 1990; Hill, Howell, Hawkins, and Battin, in press). Survey respondents placed youth gang members in the following age groups: under 15 years old—16 percent, 15 to 17 years old—34 percent, 18 to 24 years old—37 percent, and over 24 years old—13 percent.

Youth gang members in responding jurisdictions were estimated to be involved in 43 percent of all illegal drug sales. However, a significant number (47 percent) indicated that gang members controlled or managed less than one-fourth of all drug distribution in their jurisdiction.

Most respondents (84 percent) indicated that some gang members had migrated to their locality. Those jurisdictions reporting migration estimated that, on the average, 21 percent of their gang members were migrants.

Survey recipients were asked to indicate the degree to which gang members had engaged in the following offenses in their respective jurisdictions: aggravated assault, robbery, larceny/theft, burglary, and motor vehicle theft. As a whole, respondents indicated that youth gang members were more involved in larceny/theft, followed (in the order of degree of involvement) by aggravated assault, motor vehicle theft, and burglary. Youth gang members were not extensively involved in robbery, with almost half of respondents reporting low degrees of involvement. Small-city and rural-county agencies reported much lower youth gang involvement in aggravated assault and robbery than did those policing large cities and suburban counties. Respondents in suburban and rural counties reported relatively high youth gang involvement in burglary. Youth gang involvement in motor vehicle theft was relatively low in small cities and rural counties, and involvement in larceny/theft was relatively high in all four types of localities.

Conclusions

The youth gang problem in this country is substantial and affects communities of all sizes. Almost three-fourths of cities surveyed with populations of more than 25,000 reported youth gangs in 1996. A majority of suburban counties had gangs, as did a significant percentage of small cities and rural counties. Demographic characteristics of gang members appear to be changing. While Hispanics and African-Americans continued to comprise the majority of U.S. gang members, almost one-third of gang members in small cities and rural counties were Caucasian. Gang members were involved in a significant amount of crime, but the degree of involvement and type of crime varied by type of locality.

For Further Information

An indepth analysis of the survey data will be contained in the *1996 National Youth Gang Survey*, to be published later in 1998. Regional variations in demographic data and data on gang homicides will be included in the forthcoming report. For additional information about youth gangs, call the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (JJC), 800–638–8736.

Funded by and operating under the auspices of OJJDP, the National Youth Gang Center is a component of OJJDP's Comprehensive Response to America's Youth Gang Problem. For further information about the Center, visit its Web site at www.iir.com/nygc.

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