



CSPV FACT SHEET

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Gangs and Youth Violence

Although its definition can vary across and within geographical areas, a youth gang is commonly thought of as a self-formed association of peers having the following characteristics: three or more members, average age of between 12 and 24 years; a name and some sense of identity, generally indicated by such symbols as style of clothing, graffiti, and hand signs; some degree of permanence and organization; and an elevated level of involvement in delinquent or criminal activity. There has been a dramatic increase in gang activity in the United States since the 1970's. Because young gang members have more violent offenses, higher drug usage rates, delinquency rates (including drug use) and arrest rates than do non-gang youth, the relationship between gangs and violence is vital to community safety. The following are some key issues related to youth gangs and violence:

- About half of the cities with gang problems today report the emergence of gangs only since 1985.
- Gang problems occur in larger cities; however, many smaller cities do experience gang conflict to a lesser degree.
- Most gangs are homegrown, rather than initiated by outsiders, such as gang members who have moved from other cities.
- Most youth do not join a gang until their teenage years.
- Risk factors for joining a gang include: delinquent friends, non-delinquent problem behaviors, experience of a series of negative life events, favorable attitudes about breaking the law, lack of parental supervision and monitoring, and commitment to negative peers.
- Gangs tend to be composed of young people, mainly male, with similar ethnic and racial backgrounds.
- Because gang members are unsupervised, self-regulation is often difficult, giving free rein to peer influences and group processes. Gang members as individuals, are often largely conventional in their values and concerns, even though their gang, as a whole, may not be.
- Nearly half of all gang members are Hispanic/Latino, 34% are African American/Black, 10% are Caucasian/White, 6% are Asian, and the remainder are of some other race/ethnicity.
- Ethnic conflict is often associated with the emergence of gangs in communities, but most gang conflict takes place between gangs of the same ethnicity rather than between gangs of different ethnicities.
- The racial composition of gangs varies considerably by locality and the demographic composition is an extension of the characteristics of the larger community. Gang-problem areas that have emerged in the past decade report, on average, a larger proportion of Caucasian/White gang members than any other racial/ethnic group.
- Chinese and Vietnamese gangs appear to be oriented primarily toward economic crimes, such as gambling, extortion, drug smuggling, and drug distribution.
- Most gangs are loosely organized.

- Drug use and drug selling are common activities among many, but not all, gangs. The relationship between gangs and drug selling is extremely variable.
- There is a difference between drug gangs and street gangs. Drug gangs are typically:
 - smaller,
 - more cohesive,
 - require more group loyalty,
 - composed of older members organized through centralized leadership, and
 - market-defined in terms of group roles and group turf.
- Graffiti, often used by gangs to mark turf or convey threats of violence, is often important in establishing gang identity. It also often acts as a symbolic form of gang conflict. However, graffiti offenders are not limited to gangs.
- Violence associated with gangs is more lethal now than ever before because of the increasing use of firearms. Gang members are far more likely than other delinquents to carry guns and use them.
- Intra-gang (within a gang) violence is more common than inter-gang (between gangs) violence or violence directed outside the gang.
- Gangs appear to become violent as a result of one or more of the following:
 - escalation of ordinary rough-and-tumble behavior, which can turn into an issue of status,
 - competition with other gangs,
 - labeling by others as being violent, and/or
 - group cohesion processes which are reinforced by violent behavior.
- When youth (both males and females) are active in a gang, they have higher rates of violent and delinquent behavior than when they are not active in a gang. However, considerable variability exists in levels of violence within and between gangs.
- Prevalence rates of delinquent and violent behavior for female gang members exceed the rates for non-gang males.
- Reports of gang-related homicides are concentrated mostly in the largest cities. The number of gang homicides reported by cities with populations of 100,000 or more increased 34% from 1999 to 2003.
- Gang homicides, more often than other homicides, are usually attributed to fear and retaliation, involve unidentified assailants and more often occur in the streets.
- Gang homicide offenders and victims tend to be younger than non-gang homicide offenders and victims.
- The lack of economic opportunities for inner-city youth has led many gang members to continue gang membership rather than "growing out" of their gangs and entering conventional adult roles.
- National, broad-based gang prevention programs are not likely to be as successful in dealing with gang problems as programs that recognize variations in community populations. Successful programs should draw from risk factor research to identify and target the most appropriate program clients.

References:

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