



OJJDP FACT SHEET

March 2001 #03

Youth Gang Homicides in the 1990's

by G. David Curry, Cheryl L. Maxson, and James C. Howell

The overall number of youth gang homicides in U.S. cities declined during the 1990's, but trends varied in the early and later parts of the decade and by city. This Fact Sheet discusses the results of a study of youth gang homicides in U.S. cities in the 1990's, which was conducted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) National Youth Gang Center. The study combined results from multiple years of National Youth Gang Surveys and previous law enforcement surveys of gang activity in general and gang homicides in particular.

Throughout this Fact Sheet, the word "gang" refers to "youth gangs." The term "gang homicides" refers to incidents that involve gang members as victims and/or offenders; some cities reported figures on more narrowly defined, gang-motivated incidents. Because the study used several databases, gang homicide trends during the decade were examined in two parts: the early to mid-1990's and the late 1990's.

Results

Gang Homicide Trends in the Early to Mid-1990's

The study used three gang databases to examine gang homicides in the first part of the decade. These databases included cities surveyed in 1991 by either Maxson and Klein or Curry¹ that also provided homicide data in the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey. Trends for the early to mid-1990's reflect data for 408 matched cities. The matched-city comparison for 1991 and 1996 was the only explicit comparison that could be made, because the three surveys used different samples. If no 1996 data were available for one of the cities, data from the 1995 National Youth Gang Survey were used for the mid-1990's comparison.

During these years, the total number of gang homicides decreased among the cities in the survey by nearly 15 percent, from 1,748

to 1,492 incidents. Thirty-two percent of the cities reported a decrease, 29 percent reported an increase, and 39 percent reported no change.

Gang Homicide Trends in the Late 1990's

For the late 1990's comparison, data from the 1996, 1997, and 1998 National Youth Gang Surveys were analyzed.² The study looked at data from 1,216 cities with populations greater than 25,000 that reported on gang problems and gang homicides between 1996 and 1998.

A total of 237 cities reported both a gang problem and a gang homicide statistic in all 3 years. Forty-nine percent reported a decrease in gang homicides over the 3-year period, 36 percent reported an increase, and 15 percent reported no change. The total number of gang homicides for these cities was 1,293 in 1996, 1,260 in 1997, and 1,061 in 1998.

Relatively few cities reported large numbers of gang homicides. From 1996 to 1998, 88 percent (383) of the 436 responding cities³ had a maximum of 1–10 gang homicides in any single year, 10 percent (45 cities) reported a maximum of 11–50, and 2 percent (8 cities) had more than 50 gang homicides in any of the 3 years. The trend in cities with the most gang homicides overshadows the patterns in cities with low numbers of gang homicides.

Los Angeles, CA, and Chicago, IL, stand out among cities with the highest rates of gang homicide. In 1998, Los Angeles reported 173 gang homicides and Chicago reported 180. Although the two cities use different reporting methods (Los Angeles reports gang-related homicides and Chicago reports gang-motivated homicides), both cities reported substantial decreases in gang homicides from 1996 to 1998, with a far greater decrease reported in Los Angeles

¹ Klein, 1995a; Maxson, 1998; Maxson, Woods, and Klein, 1995, 1996; Curry, Fox, Ball, and Stone, 1992; Curry, Ball, and Fox, 1994.

² See National Youth Gang Center, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000.

³ Cities with populations over 25,000 that reported a gang problem and gang homicides in at least 1 year between 1996 and 1998.

(41 percent) than in Chicago (19 percent). Thus, these two cities contributed significantly to the overall drop in gang homicides from 1996 to 1998.⁴

Summary

From the early to mid-1990's, the total number of gang homicides reported in more than 400 cities decreased 15 percent. This 15-percent drop provides little comfort when two other findings are considered. First, just one city—Los Angeles—accounts for 29.7 percent of the 256-homicide decrease nationwide from 1991 to 1996 (or 1995, if 1996 data were not available). Second, the number of cities with decreases in gang homicides during this period is counterbalanced by a similar number of cities with increases. More cities (39 percent) reported no change in the number of gang homicides than reported either an increase (29 percent) or a decrease (32 percent). Thus, gang homicides remained a serious problem in most U.S. cities during the first part of the decade, increasing and decreasing in almost the same proportion of cities.

Gang homicide trends from 1996 to 1998 were more dynamic. One-half of the surveyed cities reported a decrease in homicides, 36 percent reported an increase, and 15 percent reported no change. The finding that more cities reported a decrease over these recent years should encourage law enforcement and social service practitioners to continue their efforts to reduce and

⁴ Gang homicides in Los Angeles were reported to be increasing in 2000, reflecting the cyclical pattern of gang homicides (Klein, 1995b).

prevent gang violence. However, the overall decrease in the numbers of homicides is strongly influenced by the trends in Chicago, Los Angeles, and a handful of other cities with substantial numbers of gang homicides.

For Further Information

For more information about youth gangs, contact the National Youth Gang Center or call OJJDP's Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (JJC), 800-638-8736.

National Youth Gang Center
P.O. Box 12729
Tallahassee, FL 32317
800-446-0912
850-386-5356 (fax)
www.iir.com/nygc/ (Internet)

G. David Curry, Ph.D., is Professor, Department of Criminology and Sociology, University of Missouri–St. Louis. Cheryl L. Maxson, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor, Department of Criminology, Law and Society, University of California, Irvine. James C. Howell, Ph.D., is Adjunct Researcher with the National Youth Gang Center, Institute for Intergovernmental Research, Tallahassee, FL. For a list of sources cited in this Fact Sheet, call JJC. The list is also available as an addendum through Fax-on-Demand at the toll-free number and from OJJDP's Web site, www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

FS-200103

FS-200103

Fact Sheet 

PRESORTED STANDARD
POSTAGE & FEES PAID
DOJ/OJJDP
PERMIT NO. G-91

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
Washington, DC 20531
Official Business
Penalty for Private Use \$300