



# OJJDP Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Shay Bilchik, Administrator

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## Highlights of the 1995 National Youth Gang Survey

by John P. Moore

### Background

In recent years researchers, practitioners, and the general public have become increasingly interested in the presence and activities of youth gangs. Previous national surveys suggested growth in the number of cities, towns, and counties with gang problems, but there was no single source of uniform data that could be used to compare changes and trends over time.

In February 1995 the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) entered into a cooperative agreement with the Institute for Intergovernmental Research to establish the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC). (For more information on the NYGC, see OJJDP Fact Sheet #28.) One of the major tasks assigned to the NYGC was to conduct periodic national surveys to obtain comprehensive data on youth gang problems. These surveys are designed to build on previous youth gang surveys in coverage of jurisdictions and use of multiple data sources.

The first NYGC survey was designed to gather basic information on the universe of gang problem jurisdictions, generating knowledge on the scope and nature of youth gangs that would inform the design of subsequent surveys. It expanded previous surveys by including jurisdictions queried in the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) surveys, Maxson and Klein's gang migration study, Miller's 1980 gang survey (and expanded data base), and cities and towns represented in gang studies conducted by the National Drug Intelligence Center and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. The survey included a random sample of jurisdictions with populations of 25,000 to 150,000 that were included in the 1994 NIJ survey. This makes the NYGC survey cumulative in its coverage. More than 2,000 other law enforcement agencies were also surveyed.

### Survey Recipients

The first NYGC survey was mailed to 4,120 police and sheriff's departments across the Nation, requesting information about their jurisdictions. The survey targeted police and sheriff's departments that had reported a past youth gang problem; it was also sent to departments that had never been surveyed. The law

enforcement member agencies of the Regional Information Sharing Systems projects were the primary recipients of the survey.

Agencies serving all population categories, from rural localities to major cities, were surveyed. Sheriffs were asked to report about the unincorporated areas of their counties and about any localities with which they contract for services. Police departments were asked to limit their responses to activities within their jurisdictions.

### Survey Definition and Questions

A youth gang was defined as "a group of youths in (the respondent's) jurisdiction, aged approximately 10 to 22, that (the respondent) or other responsible persons in (the respondent's) agency or community are willing to identify or classify as a 'gang.'"

Motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, and adult gangs were excluded from the survey.

Survey recipients were asked:

- ◆ If youth gangs were active in 1995.
- ◆ If youth gangs were active prior to 1995.
- ◆ The number of youth gangs and youth gang members in 1995.
- ◆ The number of youth gang members involved in homicides as offenders and as victims in 1995.
- ◆ The types of personnel/units in place to deal with youth gangs.
- ◆ An assessment of the current youth gang situation.
- ◆ An estimate of the probability of future problems (if the agency had not reported a youth gang problem).

### Survey Results

Of the 3,440 agencies that responded to the survey (an 83-percent response rate), 58 percent (2,007) reported youth gangs active in their jurisdictions in 1995. More than half of these agencies serve localities with fewer than 25,000 residents. Respondents reported a total of 23,388 youth gangs and 664,906 members,

the largest numbers reported to date. Youth gangs were reported in all 50 States.

The 10 States reporting the most gangs were (in order) California, Texas, Illinois, Colorado, Arizona, Florida, Missouri, Washington, Oregon, and Utah. The 10 States reporting the most gang members were (in order) California, Illinois, Texas, Ohio, Indiana, New Mexico, Arizona, Florida, Nevada, and Minnesota.

Law enforcement agencies in 63 percent of the cities and 48 percent of the counties reported an organizational entity such as a gang unit that deals with youth gang problems. In evaluating their current youth gang situation, 90 percent of the agencies reporting a gang problem felt it was staying the same or getting worse. Only 10 percent believed their gang problem was decreasing.

Agencies that reported no youth gang problems in 1995 rated the likelihood of future problems as follows: high (7 percent), medium (30 percent), low (55 percent), and none (8 percent).

## Conclusions

The survey found that all States and most large cities have youth gangs. Gangs are appearing in new localities, especially smaller

cities and rural counties. The numbers of youth gangs and gang members are higher than previously estimated and may be even higher than the survey reports, since not all law enforcement agencies were queried.

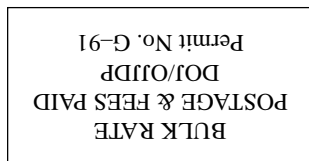
## Future Survey Plans

The next NYGC survey will collect similar data for 1996 along with information on criminal activities and ethnicity. Sources other than law enforcement agencies will also be queried. Recurrent data collection will enable comparisons to be made of changes and trends over time, resulting in a better understanding of the youth gang situation.

This Fact Sheet is based on the Program Summary *1995 National Youth Gang Survey*, which is available from OJJDP's Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, 800-638-8736.

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