



Youth Gangs in Rural America

by Ralph A. Weisheit and L. Edward Wells

About the Authors

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The prevailing image of youth gangs—with their symbols, colors, and territorial graffiti—is that they are found in the poorest neighborhoods of America's large cities. Certainly, they are. In recent years, however, such gangs also have been popping up in outlying rural areas, far away from urban decay. A number of assumptions about these rural gangs are popular in the criminal justice research literature. For example, researchers commonly believe that once a youth gang establishes itself in an area, it will be around for quite some time.

A study focused on the numbers and locations of gangs in rural America reveals that this and many other assumptions about rural

youth gangs are inaccurate. The data also show that gang activity in rural America is not as extensive as many fear. Lastly, the research indicates that rural gangs are unlike urban ones in many respects; one of the most surprising findings was that gang activity in rural areas rises rather than falls during times of economic recovery.

The differences between urban and rural gangs strongly suggest that the policies and practices aimed at suppressing urban gangs may not be the best approaches in nonurban areas. A different set of strategies must be created, directed squarely at the unique characteristics of rural youth gangs.

Counting Rural Gangs

Both researchers and the popular press suggest that gangs are increasingly becoming a problem in rural areas, but scientific consideration of this idea is limited. The National Youth Gang Crime Center conducts

the only annual survey of gang data using a representative national sample that includes a substantial number of rural jurisdictions. National Youth Gang Surveys (NYGS) have shown that gang problems are occurring in communities of all sizes and locations, although they are still most heavily concentrated in medium and large cities.

This study merged NYGS data with economic, demographic, and other data concerning the same geographic areas, so the factors associated with the presence of rural youth gangs could be analyzed. Agencies in rural counties also were contacted for additional information about gang-related problems not included in the NYGS data. (See “What Is a Gang?”)

WHAT IS A GANG?

Phase 2 of the Gangs in Rural America study consisted of a telephone survey of municipal and county police agencies in nonmetropolitan U.S. counties that reported the presence of at least one gang in the 1997 National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS). The authors did not provide any precise definition of a gang to the people being interviewed, but consistent with NYGS, it was clear that the focus was on youth gangs and not adult gangs. The authors also made a distinction between mere groups of youth and gangs, with the latter having a higher degree of organization and structure. Beyond these general distinctions, representatives of each agency defined “gangs” for themselves.

As an illustration of how complex the concept of gangs can be, particularly when applied to rural areas, several survey respondents indicated that there were no gangs in their community, only gang members. As one respondent put it:

We don't really have any gangs that are centered here in our community, because we just don't have that large of a community. But we have some that are members of gangs in surrounding communities and, occasionally, they come over here.

For purposes of this study, such communities were categorized as not having gangs, but it would be easy to argue otherwise.

Gang Indicators

Agencies taking part in the survey used several indicators of gang presence in their communities. Perhaps the most frequent indicator was self-identification by youths. Respondents also frequently used the presence of graffiti and tattoos, the wearing of gang colors, and the judgment of criminal justice officials that some youths were gang members.

In a number of jurisdictions, any one of these indicators might, by itself, be used by local agencies as evidence of the presence of a gang. Other jurisdictions were more selective, requiring several indicators. A few jurisdictions used guidelines established by their States. Some of the

agencies reported using relatively detailed and concrete indicators, while others used criteria that were more vague and impressionistic (such as, “...well, I don't know, I just look at them”). Relying on outward signs of gang membership has become more problematic as many gangs attempt to keep a low profile by not displaying signs, tattoos, or colors—something that many agencies thought was becoming more common.

Questions about the types of problems associated with gangs led to a wide range of responses. In some jurisdictions, having a gang problem meant nothing more than the presence of graffiti, while in others there were reports of murders committed by gang members. Of the agencies reporting the presence of a gang, nearly all believed that at least some gang members used drugs, sold drugs, and engaged in violence (though respondents were seldom able to differentiate actions engaged in by individual gang members from activities orchestrated by the gang). When asked to list the gang-related problems agencies had experienced, the most frequent responses were drugs, assaults, thefts, and burglaries.

Seriousness

Despite reports of drugs, assaults, drive-by shootings, and even homicides, only 43 percent of those reporting gangs described the gang problem in their community as “serious.” And some of those describing the problem as serious qualified their rating with such comments as:

In a small town like this, our little gangs, to the people [here], are serious. But to the big city, this would be minor.

Well, again, the problem is significant for us, but I suppose if you were comparing it to an urban environment it would be minimal.

Although drug use and drug sales were common among gang members and periodic violence was evident, most of the observed gang problems (such as graffiti, parties, and alcohol consumption) were of a type that would, indeed, frequently be viewed as minor.

Three Levels of Gang Problems

The study data divided the nonmetropolitan jurisdictions into three categories (as shown in figure 1): about 23 percent reported persistent gang problems; 57 percent reported a persistent absence of gangs; and approximately 20 percent reported transitory or temporary gang problems. Of the agencies with transitory gang problems, more than half (58 percent) reported gangs in 1996 but not in 1998—raising questions about the commonly held belief that once gangs have a foothold in a community it is rare for them to leave or disappear. Indeed, most rural youth gangs are so small and unstable that the loss of one or two members—through arrest, movement out of the area, or maturation—can easily mean the end of the gang.

When asked if there were currently problems with youth gangs in their jurisdiction, only 41 percent of the agencies reporting a gang in 1997 reported the presence of a gang in 2000. This figure is substantially lower than would be expected if gangs were pervasive and persistent in rural areas. Further, of the nonmetropolitan agencies reporting gangs in 1997, the more rural the jurisdiction, the less likely they were to continue to report gangs in 2000, as shown in figure 2.

Concerns Raised by Findings

The numbers in figure 2 suggest several possible concerns. First, it may be that gangs in rural areas are relatively ephemeral and transitory phenomena whose characteristics may change considerably over time,

Figure 1: Agency Reports of Gang Status, by Type of County

	Metropolitan	Nonmetropolitan
Stable—No Gangs, 1996–98	28.4%	57.0%
Transitory Gangs, 1996–98	18.2%	20.4%
Chronic Gangs, 1996–98	53.4%	22.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%
Number of Agencies	1,333	829

Figure 2: Reports of Gangs by Rurality of Jurisdiction

Rurality of County in Which Jurisdiction is Located	Number Reporting Gangs	Percentage Reporting Gangs
Nonmetropolitan with:		
Urban population of 20,000 or more	51 of 88 agencies	58%
Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999	31 of 97 agencies	32%
Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population	4 of 28 agencies	14%

Number of Cases = 213. All agencies had reported the presence of gangs in 1997. The figures above reflect the number/percentage still reporting gangs in 2000.

even in a short span of 2 or 3 years. Second, police reports may not be consistent or reliable sources of data on gang events; the problem may be unclear police definitions of what gangs involve or inconsistent reporting of gang activity by small rural agencies. Third, the conventional conceptualization of gangs in urban terms may not apply in a meaningful way to less urbanized settings. It is also possible that the unexpected pattern of results may reflect some combination of all three factors.

Prosperity Invites Gangs

Urban gang theories based on economic deprivation do not appear to apply to non-metropolitan areas. In fact, gangs were more likely to be reported in areas experiencing economic growth. The authors suggest that this may be because economic growth brings inner-city families to outlying areas. Then, as parents with gang-affiliated children leave the city to find jobs in rural areas, the culture of gangs is transported with them.

Most Gangs in Rural Areas Are Homegrown

The single most important predictor of gang activity in a primarily rural county was the percentage of the county's population that lived in an "urban" area (that is, an incorporated area of 2,500 or more people). Urbanization—the physical sprawl of a city's de facto boundaries into outlying areas—seems to have an influence in and of itself, distinct from the poor economic conditions or social disengagement often associated with big city life.

A common argument for how gangs appear in rural areas is that they, like other aspects of urban life, spread out (or "diffuse") from the nearest metropolitan area. Rural areas connected to the city by a highway are thus thought to be at greatest risk, and the study did find a correlation between the presence

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of gangs in an area and the proximity of that area to a highway. However, when a multivariable analysis was conducted comparing numerous factors with the presence of gangs in an area, this factor proved to be insignificant.

Although some researchers theorize that gangs spread from urban to rural areas through a process in which urban gang members themselves migrate to rural areas, others have posited that only the symbols and culture of the gang are exported to rural communities. The study found some support for this notion. When the authors asked rural law enforcement agencies how many gang members in their area had come from outside the area, the results were mixed; the estimated number of current gang members who came into the area from another jurisdiction varied from "none" to "all of them." However, most estimates ranged between 10 and 30 percent. So in most rural areas reporting gang activity, the majority of gang members were local youth. Yet, in many jurisdictions, the impact of migrating gang members was substantially greater than their limited numbers alone would suggest; they became an important conduit for the movement of ideas and symbols into these areas.

Migration of Gang Members

Officials gave a variety of reasons for why gang youth moved into their areas. Most moved for family reasons; that is, they moved along with their families or moved in with relatives. Still, the other reasons cited—expanding drug markets and other illegal activities, avoiding police, and seeking to get away from gang influences—occurred frequently enough that the authors could not formulate a single model of urban gang member migration.

Community Strength Discourages Gangs

The percentage of county residents who worked outside of their home county was a good predictor of gang activity. Unexpectedly, counties with the *most* people who commuted to work outside the county were *less* likely to report gangs. This could be based on the degree of community commitment and involvement among local residents; perhaps people willing to drive to another county to work while maintaining their current residence are highly committed to the community in which they live.

Law Enforcement Reaction

Rural agencies appear to be ready to deal with gangs. Most had at least some officers with gang training. Among agencies reporting gang problems, 52 percent reported a “great” interest in additional gang-related training, 35 percent wanted technical assistance in dealing with their gang problem, and 28 percent wanted assistance in forming a gang task force.

The most frequent agency response to gang activity was suppression through strict enforcement—“zero tolerance,” a style one might easily associate with urban police. Many agencies suggested that zero

tolerance policies are easier to apply in smaller communities where gang members stand out and where police officers, prosecutors, probation officers, and judges may have close working relationships.

For many agencies, strict enforcement against current gang members was accompanied by a more tempered approach to potential gang members. Many agencies stressed the importance of prevention and of working with the community. The agencies reserved harsh criminal penalties for outsiders engaged in gang activity and insiders deemed beyond redemption. For youth with strong bonds to the local community and/or those perceived as having some hope of change, the agencies emphasized community and family pressure and prevention measures.

Concepts for Further Study

This study illustrates that urban models of gang development do not apply everywhere. This is an important first step in the development of more explicit models of gangs in smaller cities and rural areas. The study’s findings confirm the view that in nonmetropolitan areas, a different approach needs to be taken by criminal justice systems dealing with the problem of youth gangs.

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