



Gangs in Small Towns and Rural Counties

by James C. Howell and Arlen Egley, Jr.

Introduction

Your community is not alone if you have an emerging youth gang problem. Many small towns and rural areas are experiencing gang problems for the first time. In other communities, local observers jump to the mistaken conclusion that gangs are present. This may occur because small groups of delinquents are very common, even in the smallest communities. Adolescents enjoy hanging out together, and the reality is that juvenile delinquency is often committed in groups. The visibility of these groups in shopping malls and on street corners and their frequent troublesome behavior may suggest gang involvement. Another factor that may lead to the mistaken conclusion that a gang problem exists is the recent transfusion of gang culture into the larger youth culture. Certain clothing styles and colors commonly worn by gang members have become faddish in the popular youth culture. One need only watch MTV for a short period of time to see the popularity of what once were considered exclusively to be gang symbols.

Even if local youths are displaying gang symbols such as the colors of big city gangs, this alone does not necessarily signify a genuine gang problem. Local groups of youths often imitate big city gangs, generally in an attempt to enhance their self-image or to seek popularity and acceptance among their peers. Furthermore, although community officials and/or residents may encounter episodic or solitary signs of gang activity in an area (e.g., graffiti, arrest of a nonlocal gang member, and other isolated incidents), absent further conclusive and ongoing evidence, this is not necessarily indicative of an "emerging" gang problem that is likely to persist.

In most cases, the gang problem is short-lived and dissipates as quickly as it develops. Most often, this is mainly because small towns and rural areas do not have the necessary population base to sustain gangs and any disruption (e.g., arrest, members dropping out) may weaken the gang. For prolonged survival, gangs must be able to attract new members to replace short-term members and older youths who typically leave gangs toward the end of adolescence. Research across a number of cities with typically longer-standing gang problems has found considerable movement in and out of gangs: approximately half of the youth who join leave the gang within a year (Hill et al., 2001; Peterson et al., 2004; Thornberry et al., 2003; Thornberry et al., 2004).

Thus, the more long-term members of gangs compose one of the many dimensions of a community's gang problem—albeit typically the most serious dimension.

An often overlooked feature of youth gangs is that they are a symptom of deeper community problems, not an isolated problem in and of themselves (Huff, 2002). That is, gangs and related gang problems tend to emerge from larger social and economic problems in the community and are as much a consequence of these factors as a contributor. One noted gang researcher has outlined four community conditions that often precede the transition from typical adolescent groupings to established youth gangs (Moore, 1998). First, conventional socializing agents, such as families and schools, are largely ineffective and alienating. Under these conditions, conventional adult supervision is largely absent. Second, the adolescents must have a great deal of free time that is not consumed by other healthy social development roles. Third, for the gang to become established, members must have limited access to appealing conventional career lines; that is, good adult jobs. Finally, the young people must have a place to congregate—such as a well-defined neighborhood.

National Trends in Gang Problems in Small Towns and Rural Counties

Since 1996, the National Youth Gang Center™ (NYGC) has conducted an annual survey of a representative sample of law enforcement agencies across the United States pertaining to the presence and characteristics of local gang problems. Recent analysis of the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS), largely contained in the 1999-2001 NYGS Summary Report (National Youth Gang Center, forthcoming), investigated gang-problem trends in smaller cities and rural counties. Some of the more noteworthy findings are summarized in this section.

For the 1996 through 2001 time period, gang-problem patterns were recorded for 1,066 agencies representing rural counties and smaller cities (populations between 2,500 and 25,000).^{1,2} Persistent gang problems were coded for agencies that consistently reported gang problems in the NYGS, while variable gang problems were coded for agencies that reported the presence of gang problems in one or more years and the absence

of gang problems in other years. As shown in Table 1, very few agencies in these areas reported persistent, ongoing gang problems: 4 percent of the rural counties and 10 percent of the smaller cities. In contrast, variable gang problems were much more frequently observed. Fully 9 times as many rural counties and nearly 5 times as many smaller cities reported a variable gang problem versus a persistent gang problem during this time period.³ Overall, these findings correspond to the steady decline in proportion of agencies in rural counties and smaller cities reporting gang problems in the NYGS (see Egley and Major, 2004).

Further analysis revealed several distinguishing characteristics between variable and persistent gang-problem areas. Agencies reporting persistent gang problems reported an average of approximately six documented gangs with over 100 documented gang members. For agencies reporting variable gang problems, these numbers were approximately three gangs and 50 members—or half the rate of their counterparts. Moreover, persistent gang-problem areas were much more likely to report a greater proportion of adult-aged gang members and the occurrence of one or more gang-related homicides in their jurisdiction than variable gang-problem areas.

In short, although an appreciable number of smaller city and rural county agencies reported gang problems from 1996 through 2001, most of these agencies experienced unstable, intermittent gang problems that were, comparatively speaking, relatively minor in terms of size (e.g., number of gangs and gang members) and impact on the community. Thus, the sudden appearance or announcement of a gang problem in a particular community does not necessarily signify the beginning of a protracted gang problem, nor does it signify that it will inevitably become as serious a gang problem as observed in some larger cities. The characteristics and behaviors of gangs are exceptionally varied within and across geographical areas (Klein, 2002; National

Youth Gang Center, forthcoming; Weisel, 2002), such that communities would be far better positioned to effectively respond to a local gang problem by first examining objectively the characteristics of it before assuming similarities to other, even nearby, areas.

Population Shifts May Fuel Youth Gang Problems

Changing demographics in some small towns and rural areas may contribute to the emergence or escalation of gang problems. This may be related to the immigration of newly arrived racial or ethnic groups into an area. For example, language barriers and being ostracized by the dominant population of youths at school and on the streets may lead excluded youths to band together and coalesce into a permanent youth group and potentially come to be recognized as a gang.

The fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States is Latinos. This ethnic group has grown to be the second-largest group in the country, to approximately 40 million in 2003 (The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, 2004). Latinos are now the largest ethnic minority in nearly half of the states, and their numbers are growing fastest in the South, although the largest Latino concentrations are in the West, South Florida, and a few large cities.

The rapid growth of immigrant population groups is not limited to Latinos. From 1990 to 2000, the foreign-born population in the United States increased 57 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). About half of the foreign-born population in the United States in 2000 was from Latin America (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). The remaining foreign-born were from Asia, Europe, and North America. Latin-American or Asian regions accounted for nine of the top ten countries from which foreign-born immigrants came to the United States in the 1990s (Mexico, China, India, Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador).

Table 1. Gang-Problem Patterns in Small Cities and Rural Counties, 1996-2001

	Rural Counties		Smaller Cities*	
	n	% of total	n	% of total
Agencies Reporting Persistent Gang Problems	27	4	36	10
Agencies Reporting Variable Gang Problems	256	37	165	44
Ratio of Variable to Persistent Gang-Problem Agencies		9.5:1		4.6:1

* Populations between 2,500 and 25,000

Such rapid growth of any of these ethnic groups can contribute to local gang problems. For example, the growth of Latinos in North Carolina and Salvadorans in northern Virginia has been said to be contributing to growing gang problems in those areas. However, it is very important to be mindful that the overwhelming majority of youth gangs are “homegrown” (Klein, 1995). They grow in the cracks of our society and local communities, where social institutions such as families and schools are ineffective, and social controls on young people and adults are weak.

How to Develop an Anti-Gang Action Plan

Although research indicates that youth gang problems in small towns only occasionally rise to levels experienced in larger cities, the ongoing presence of a gang problem in smaller areas clearly poses a continued potential to escalate. As noted above, most smaller communities that experience the emergence of youth gang problems see them dissipate rather rapidly—perhaps most likely due to the varying characteristics and oftentimes loose structure of youth gangs across the United States (see Klein, 2002)—while other communities experience the ongoing presence of gang problems.

Relatedly, a community's initial response may inadvertently serve to prolong the existence of gang problems in at least two ways. First, undue media attention, particularly publishing gang names, may serve to give local gangs notoriety and confirm their existence and importance. Second, overreliance on and excessive use of law enforcement suppression strategies may provide cohesiveness to the gang—which has been linked to increased criminal behavior (Klein, 1995). A quick suppression response may be useful to alert members of the public's awareness of and willingness to address the problem; however, the appropriateness of such “crackdowns” depends on the extent of violent activity on the part of the gang members. Community acceptance of law enforcement's use of force against their youths may not be forthcoming if residents do not view the youths as representing a public safety threat. Moreover, giving emergent gangs such attention may facilitate their recruitment efforts, provide cohesion among their members, and inadvertently give them the community presence they need to thrive.

A balanced and carefully developed strategy that is the product of a collective community effort is likely to be far more effective. A Comprehensive Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Model is available for communities' use in addressing gang problems. It consists of three core components:

- Intervention programs that aim to rehabilitate delinquents and divert gang-involved youths from gangs. Intervention also includes social control activities that involve sanctioning and rehabilitating juvenile delinquent and young adult criminal offenders.
- Suppression activities that include targeting of the gangs with the most high-rate offenders by law enforcement, prosecutors, and courts.

The Comprehensive Gang Model incorporates a problem-solving approach to gang-related crime by engaging law enforcement, prosecution, juvenile and criminal court officials, correctional officials, social and youth services representatives, and other community stakeholders in a comprehensive assessment of the gang problem and crime trends involving gang members. In addition to identifying hot spots for the targeting of high-rate gang offenders and violent gangs, the assessment provides guidance in the development of prevention and intervention strategies and programs. An assessment protocol is available from NYGC that any community can use to assess its gang problem and guide its development of a continuum of gang prevention, intervention, and suppression programs and strategies. Resource materials that assist communities in developing an integrated action plan to implement the Comprehensive Gang Model are also available from NYGC.

Implementation of the Comprehensive Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Model involves six steps, which are managed by a Steering Committee of policy- or decision-makers from organizations or agencies that have an interest in or responsibility for addressing the community's gang problem.

Step One

Acknowledge the gang problem. The presence of a potential gang problem must be recognized before anything meaningful can be done to address it. There may be observable signs of a potential gang problem, including graffiti in public places, flashing of hand signs by adolescents, symbolic clothing, appearance of coded messages, unusual symbols on classroom notebooks, and the presence of social groups with unusual names. Denial is a common initial response to a gang problem in many communities. If denial is present, it must be confronted. Unfortunately, a tragic gang event, such as a drive-by shooting, is sometimes required to bring community leaders to acknowledge the presence of a gang problem. It is far more advantageous to objectively assess the prospects of a potential gang problem before a tragic gang event occurs.

- Prevention programs that aim to prevent youth from developing problem behaviors and later becoming delinquent and joining gangs. These need to address the predominant risk factors for gang involvement in the specific community.

Step Two

Form an agreement among stakeholders to work together in addressing the potential gang problem. Once a community acknowledges the existence of a potential gang problem, stakeholders must resolve among themselves that steps need to be taken collectively to assess the situation and take appropriate steps to address any gang activity. Community safety is put at risk if the problem is not addressed in an organized approach. Anyone in a position of public responsibility can convene a small number of stakeholders to make a commitment to work together in, at a minimum, conducting an objective assessment of the potential gang problem.

Step Three

Conduct an objective assessment of the potential gang problem using the NYGC gang problem assessment protocol. An Assessment Team needs to be formed to collect and analyze data during the assessment. Staff in agencies with responsibility for addressing the problem—representatives of police, prosecution, courts, corrections, parole, schools, youth- and family-serving agencies, grassroots organizations, government, and others—form the Assessment Team. Recognizing that each community is different, as are its gang problems, the Team must develop a working definition of a youth gang. It is recommended that the community representatives start with how law enforcement defines a gang and then move to invite others to share their definitions or perspectives. The assessment results in an understanding of who is involved in gangs and where gang crime is concentrated in the community. This, in conjunction with other data and information, enables communities to target intervention strategies on:

- Seriously at-risk youth,
- Gang-involved youth,
- The most violent gangs and gang leaders, and
- The area(s) where gang crimes occur most often.

Step Four

Set goals and objectives. Once the gang problem is analyzed and described, goals and objectives are established that are based on the assessment findings. These should emphasize changes the Steering Committee aims to bring about in the target area identified in the gang-problem assessment as the area in which gang activity is most concentrated. Specific goals and objectives of the community strategies should be stated in a quantifiable manner, such as a given amount of gang crime reduction, so that self-evaluation of them is feasible.

A Continuum of Troublesome and Criminal Groups

Troublesome Youth Groups

Children and adolescents who hang out together in shopping malls and other places and may be involved in minor forms of delinquency

Delinquent groups

Small clusters of friends who band together to commit delinquent acts such as burglaries

Youth subculture groups

Groups with special interests, such as "goths," "straight edgers," and "anarchists," that are not gangs (Arciaga, 2001)

Taggers

Graffiti vandals (Taggers are often called gang members, but they typically do nothing more than engage in graffiti contests.)

School-based gangs

Groups of adolescents that may function as gangs only at school

Street-based gangs

Semistructured groups of adolescents and young adults who engage in delinquent and criminal behavior

Drug gangs

Loosely organized groups of drug-trafficking operations that generally are led by both young and older adults but sometimes include adolescents

Adult criminal organizations

Small groups of adults that engage in lucrative criminal activity primarily for economic reasons

Source: Howell, 2003, p. 80.

Step Five

Develop and integrate relevant services and strategies, using the NYGC planning and implementation guide. A detailed Implementation Plan is developed, linking goals, objectives, and desired outcomes. Rationales for services, strategies, and policies and procedures that involve each of the key agencies are articulated and then implemented. Strategies must be closely coordinated or integrated to ensure that the work of collaborating agencies is complementary (Wyrick and Howell, 2004). Implementation must be overseen by the Steering Committee.

Step Six

Develop and evaluate your comprehensive gang strategy. Evaluation is a valuable tool for determining whether or not the community has achieved what it set out to accomplish. Provided that specific goals and objectives of the community strategies were stated in a quantifiable manner, self-evaluation of them should be quite feasible. Resources should be set aside for a more rigorous, independent evaluation as well. ■

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Notes

1. Beginning in 2002, a new sample of smaller city and rural county agencies was selected. Therefore, the present analysis pertains only to those agencies who were surveyed from 1996 through 2001.
2. Seventy-four (6.5 percent) of the agencies in this group were not included in the analysis because of infrequent response to the National Youth Gang Survey.
3. Of those agencies reporting variable gang problems, very few (approximately 14 percent) also reported a pattern consistent with what might be regarded as evidence of a continuing emergence of gang problems—that is, reporting the absence of gang problems during initial survey years but the continued presence of gang problems in later years. The finding that there are comparatively few of these agencies provides further evidence of the uncommon development of long-term, persistent gang problems in these areas.

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