

Youth Gangs

The State Gang Work Group, which was formed at the direction of 2007 State legislation, HB 5987, requested that the GJJAC to research “best practice for prevention and intervention of youth gang membership.” The GJJAC developed a position paper based on research, and presented this information to the State Gang Work Group. The position paper and recommended action was endorsed, and included in the Gang Work Group Report, found at: <http://www.leg.wa.gov/documents/joint/grc/FinalReport.pdf>.

The Position Paper was refined, and was published as the first GJJAC “Policy Brief”. This policy brief, in its entirety, is available on line at <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/gjjac/priorities.shtml>.

The Policy Brief includes background information on risk and protective factors of juvenile delinquency prevention, national and state data on gangs and juvenile violence, description of successful prevention and intervention strategies, and recommended community response.

In a cooperative effort between the National Gang Intelligence center (NGIC) and the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) to examine the threat posed to the United States by criminal gangs, The “National Gang Threat Assessment 2009” was published. The report can be found on-line in it's entirety at <http://www.justice.gov/ndic/pubs32/32146/index.htm#National>. The assessment is based on federal, state, and local law enforcement information and is supplemented by information retrieved from open sources. Information and data used for the report were collected through September 2008.

The following key findings were developed by analysis of available federal, state, and local law enforcement information; 2008 National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) National Drug Threat Survey (NDTS) data; and verified open source information:

- Approximately 1 million gang members belonging to more than 20,000 gangs were criminally active within all 50 states and the District of Columbia as of September 2008.
- Local street gangs, or neighborhood-based street gangs, remain a significant threat because they continue to account for the largest number of gangs nationwide. Most engage in violence in conjunction with a variety of crimes, including retail-level drug distribution.
- According to NDTS data, 58 percent of state and local law enforcement agencies reported that criminal gangs were active in their jurisdictions in 2008 compared with 45 percent of state and local agencies in 2004.
- Gang members are migrating from urban areas to suburban and rural communities, expanding the gangs' influence in most regions;

⁹ Excerpt from *OJJDP Gang Prevention, Model Program Guide: “Membership in Youth Gangs and Involvement in Serious and Violent Offending.”* Thornberry, 1998; p. 157, Sage Publications.

¹⁰ *Early Precursors of Gang Membership: A Study of Seattle Youth;* Hill, Lui, and Hawkins

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they are doing so for a variety of reasons, including expanding drug distribution territories, increasing illicit revenue, recruiting new members, hiding from law enforcement, and escaping other gangs. Many suburban and rural communities are experiencing increasing gang-related crime and violence because of expanding gang influence.

- Criminal gangs commit as much as 80 percent of the crime in many communities, according to law enforcement officials throughout the nation. Typical gang-related crimes include alien smuggling, armed robbery, assault, auto theft, drug trafficking, extortion, fraud, home invasions, identity theft, murder, and weapons trafficking.
- Gang members are the primary retail-level distributors of most illicit drugs. They also are increasingly distributing wholesale-level quantities of marijuana and cocaine in most urban and suburban communities.
- Some gangs traffic illicit drugs at the regional and national levels; several are capable of competing with U.S.-based Mexican DTOs.
- U.S.-based gang members illegally cross the U.S.-Mexico border for the express purpose of smuggling illicit drugs and illegal aliens from Mexico into the United States.
- Many gangs actively use the Internet to recruit new members and to communicate with members in other areas of the United States and in foreign countries.
- Street gangs and outlaw motorcycle gangs pose a growing threat to law enforcement along the U.S.-Canada border. They frequently associate with Canada-based gangs and criminal organizations to facilitate various criminal activities, including drug smuggling into the United States.

Youth gang membership

There is no consensus on the definition of a youth gang. However, research describes a set of broad characteristics in identifying gangs:

- Formal or semi-formal organizational structure,
- Clearly identified leadership,
- A specific territory,
- Patterns of interaction, and
- Engagement of a group in serious or violent behavior.¹³

¹¹ *The Causes and Correlates Studies: Findings and Policy Implications*; Thornberry, T.P., Huizinga, D., and Loeber, R.; *Journal of the OJJDP*, Volume IX, Number 1; September 2004.

¹² *Risk Factors for Health and Behavior Problems, 1995*, Hawkins-Catalano; *Forty Developmental Assets, 1997*, Search Institute

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Gang membership may often be less of a long-term commitment than is commonly believed. Studies in Denver and Rochester¹⁴ report that half of the male youth gang members belonged to a gang for less than one year. The studies also found that gang members are responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime.

Many researchers have found that youth gangs have low levels of organizational sophistication and are typically loose in structure.

Child Abuse

In 2009, 72,040 children were referred to Child Protective Services (CPS) in Washington State. This reflects a decrease of 383 from the number of children referred in 2008 (72,423). The number of child abuse reports in 2009 was the lowest in the past ten years. The highest number of referrals to CPS was 78,336 in 2004. The average number of CPS referrals per year (2000-2009) is 75,736.

According to Washington's Children's Administration, approximately 40 percent of the referrals for child abuse and neglect are screened out "because there is not sufficient information to locate the child, the alleged perpetrator is not a caretaker, the risk factor does not exist, or the allegation does not meet the legal and/or WAC definition." Thus, the number of confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect in Washington State in 2009 is estimated to be approximately 43,224.

According to the National Youth Law Center, in homes where domestic violence occurs there is a 30 to 60 percent likelihood that child abuse also is happening.

According to staff in Washington's Division of Children and Family Services, at least 50 percent of the families of victims of child abuse contained an adult with a substance abuse problem. In addition, research continues to document a link between domestic violence and substance abuse, and domestic violence and child abuse. According to the National Youth Law Center, in homes where domestic violence occurs there is a 30 to 60 percent likelihood that child abuse also is happening.

Nationally, nearly one million children each year are confirmed by State agencies as abused and neglected, and over 1,200 children tragically die at the hands of caretaker. (Prevent Child Abuse America, September 2007)

Child abuse and neglect have known detrimental effects on the physical, psychological, cognitive and behavioral development of children (National Research Council 1993). These consequences range from minor to severe, and include physical injuries, brain damage, chronic low self-esteem, problems with bonding and forming relationships, developmental delays, learning disorders, and

¹³ *Youth Gang Membership Risk Factors Amenable to Change*, from "Strategic Response to Youth Gangs," Wyrick and Howell, OJJDP, September 2004.

¹⁴ Thornbery et al