

CITY OF SAN DIEGO
Commission on Gang Prevention and Intervention
January 18, 2007

To: Commissioner

From: Lynn Sharpe-Underwood
Executive Director

Action Item-3:

Define the focus commission will be working on and direct an Ad Hoc committee to complete a workplan.

Background

The charge by the City is for the Commission to develop strategies to reduce gang violence. Gang problems in City of San Diego are not the same as in other communities across the county. Therefore clarifying what the Commission will be focusing on should be developed to reflect the local concerns and involve all who are working on the issues – law enforcement, schools, community organizations and the community. Further, it will help in defining the types of data that need to be collected and refine the questions regarding risk factors and protective factors for any further analysis/surveys to assess gaps in services.

Defining Gangs

According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, no one has been able to adequately define the term “gang” and there is little consensus among researchers about the term itself.

The demographics of a gang member are the following:

- Nationally, average age of gang members is 17-18 years old. There is conflicting data that shows the age span is actually 15-17. Law enforcement usually reflects older because that is who is getting arrested self-reporting surveys show younger. Typical age range of gang members is 12- 24.
- Gang Researcher Malcolm Klein, points out that “vulnerability to joining gangs is highest among youths from 13-15 years and decreases thereafter.”*
- Females gang members are being arrested more than before. No real data about the growth of female gang members.
- The median age for joining a gang is 14 years old.

- Researchers do agree that ethnic gangs are more similar than dissimilar and that that risk factors for gang involvement and protective factors for keeping youth out of gangs crosses ethnic lines (though cultural sensitivity is critical in program design).

It is important to include law enforcements definitions of street gangs as part of the focus per The California Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention (S.T.E.P.) Act *California Penal Code Section 186.22*

f) As used in this chapter, "criminal street gang" means any ongoing organization, association, or group of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, having as one of its primary activities the commission of one or more of the criminal acts enumerated in paragraphs (1) to (25), inclusive, of subdivision (e), having a common name or common identifying sign or symbol, and whose members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal gang activity.

The legal consequences of being a member of a street gang impact the suppression strategies and influence the prevention and intervention discussions that focus on the needs of youth gang members.

Defining the Focus

The Commission's recommendations and work is to impact those who are members of local gangs *as well as* those at risk of joining gangs.

The Commission's vision is to develop a more strategic, coordinated, and collaborative effort between the City, law enforcement agencies, social service providers, and the general public with the objective of significantly curtailing gang involvement, and its negative impact, in the City of San Diego.

As a result, a clearly defined focus will illuminate the work to be done and the data that need to be collected to support the recommendations.

As an example, consider these California cities' definitions and descriptions.

San Jose Mayor's Gang Task Force

The final report of the Mayor's Task Force stated on page 11:

The MGPTF target population is: youth ages 12-21 exhibiting high-risk behaviors; youth committing intentional acts of violence; youth exhibiting high-risk behaviors related to gang lifestyles; youth identified as gang members and/or arrested for gang-related incidents or acts of gang violence; and families

(including parents and children) and friends of youth involved with the gang lifestyle or incarcerated for gang-related crimes.

Santa Clarita

In earlier Task Forces like Santa Clarita's 1999 Report, many cities simply used and/or modified the general definition of a gang as developed by Scott Decker and David Curry**:

A gang is a group of three or more persons who have a common identifying sign, symbol, or name and whose members individually, or collectively, engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal activity creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation in the community.

Conclusion

It also should be noted that many communities are just beginning to create organizations such as ours to impact the gang violence in their communities. The City of San Jose has become the model for such efforts. Other cities, Fresno, Salinas, San Francisco and Santa Rosa have quickly moved forward to attempt to implement that model.

Each city defines their focus very differently according to their local experience. There have been other collaborations within the County that have taken a county-wide view of the juvenile delinquency and the gun violence issue and these collaborations are ongoing from the Juvenile Justice Comprehensive Strategy Task Force to the District Attorney's monthly Gang meetings and the Project Safe Neighborhood collaboration that deals with gun violence to name a few.

The urgency of the problem of gang violence in our community requires that the Commission move forward simultaneously responding to current issues but also carefully laying the ground work for a strategic response that can be sustained and accomplish the goal of seriously reducing gang violence and the potential for more gang violence in our community. Clarifying the focus prepares the commission to work together with the community on this issue.

- Klein, Malcolm, Street Gangs Patterns and Policies, Oxford University Press, (2006)
- Curry, David and Decker, Scott, Confronting Gangs: Crime and the Community, (1998)

The prevalence of youth gangs declined in nonurban areas, but gangs remain a substantial urban problem

Law enforcement agencies are the primary source for data on youth gangs nationwide

Accurately estimating the scope of the youth gang problem is difficult in part because of the lack of consensus about what “counts”—what combination of size, stability, hierarchy, symbolic communication, and ongoing criminal activity distinguishes a true gang from a transitory collection of individuals, not to mention what level of involvement in and adherence to the gang distinguishes a real member from a hanger-on or “wannabe.” In addition, the available sources of information on gangs are unreliable. Gangs are, after all, inherently secret groups. Outsiders are apt to miss or misinterpret signs of their presence. Insiders are liable to distort the signs.

Nevertheless, based on surveys of local authorities, it appears that the overall number of communities with active youth gangs grew sharply during the last few decades

of the 20th century, peaked in the mid-1990s, and recently declined somewhat.

A comparison of the number of localities reporting problems with youth gangs during the 1970s with the number reporting gang problems in the 1990s found a tenfold increase in gang jurisdictions—including more suburban, small-town, and rural jurisdictions with reported gang problems than ever before. On the basis of law enforcement agency responses to the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey, which gathered data on gangs from a representative sample of police and sheriff departments across the country, the nation’s total youth gang membership was estimated at more than 846,000, with 31,000 gangs operating in 4,824 local jurisdictions. Estimates based on subsequent surveys have steadily receded from those highs. Based on the 2004 survey, youth gang membership was estimated at 760,000 and total youth gangs at 24,000. Youth gangs were estimated

to be active in more than 2,900 jurisdictions served by city (population of 2,500 or more) and county law enforcement agencies.

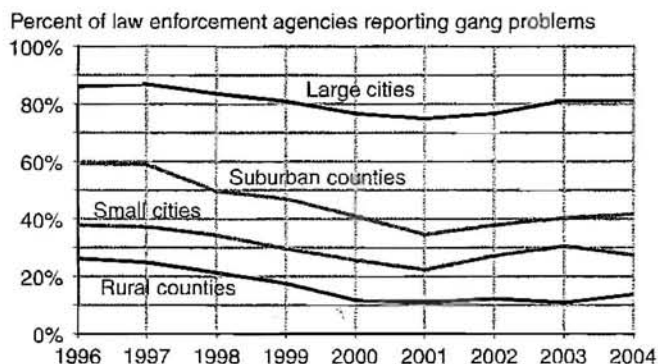
The drop between 1996 and 2004 in the number of localities reporting gang problems was almost entirely attributable to small cities and suburban and rural jurisdictions—where gang problems had tended to be relatively minor and less persistent. Nearly 8 in 10 cities with populations of 50,000 or more continued to report gang problems. Thus, most Americans still live in or near areas that have problems with youth gangs.

A third of public high school and middle school principals report gang activity in their schools

In a 1999–2000 survey of a nationally representative sample of public school principals, 18% reported “undesirable gang activities” in their schools—including 31% of the middle school and 37% of the secondary school principals. Apart from being more common in schools located in urban areas, in poor communities, and in communities with large minority populations, gang activity was strongly linked with school size: principals of schools with enrollments of 1,000 or more were about 4 times more likely to report gang activity than those with enrollments of less than 500.

In 2001 and again in 2003, as part of the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey, students ages 12–18 were asked about the presence of gangs in their schools during the prior 6 months. In both years, about 1 in 5 reported that gangs were present. Among minority students, students in city schools, and those in upper grades, much higher proportions reported gang presence. For instance, in 2003,

The number of law enforcement agencies reporting gang problems appears to have stabilized



Notes: Large cities have populations of 50,000 or more. Small cities have populations of 2,500 to 49,999. The observed changes in the percentage of agencies in small cities and rural counties reporting gang problems between 2000 and 2004 are within the range attributable to sample error and, thus, do not indicate actual change.

Source: Authors' adaptation of Egley and Ritz's Highlights of the 2004 National Youth Gang Survey.

42% of urban Hispanic students said they attended schools in which gangs were present.

Youth gang members are overwhelmingly male and predominantly minorities

Law enforcement agencies responding to National Youth Gang Surveys over a number of years have reported demographic details regarding gang members in their jurisdictions, including age, gender, and racial and ethnic background. Although reported characteristics varied considerably by locality—with emergent gangs in less populous areas tending to have more white and more female members—overall, gang demographics have been fairly consistent from year to year.

Estimated race/ethnicity of U.S. youth gang members, 2004:

Hispanic	49%
Black	37
White	8
Asian	5
Other	1
Total	100%

On the basis of responses to the 2004 survey, gang membership was estimated to be 94% male. Youth gang membership was estimated to consist of 41% juveniles and 59% young adults (18 or older).

Gang demographic profiles based on law enforcement estimates differ from profiles emerging from youth surveys. Self-reported gang members tend to include many more females and nonminority males. For example, in one large-scale 1995 survey of public school 8th graders, 25% of self-reported gang members were white and 38% were female. Even when more restrictive criteria for gang membership were applied to these self-report results—in an

effort to filter out fringe or inactive members and isolate only the most active core gang members—significant demographic differences from law enforcement estimates persisted.

Sustained gang membership is rare even among high-risk youth

Law enforcement estimates of nationwide juvenile gang membership suggest that no more than about 1% of all youth ages 10–17 are gang members. Self-reports, such as the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97), find that 2% of youth ages 12–17 (3% of males and 1% of females) say they were in a gang in the past year. NLSY97 also found that 8% of 17-year-olds (11% of males and 6% of females) said they had ever belonged to a gang. These proportions obviously vary considerably from place to place. For example, researchers tracking a sample of high-risk youth in Rochester, NY, reported that 30% joined gangs between the ages of 14 and 18.

Gang membership tends to be short-lived, even among high-risk youth. Among the Rochester gang members, half of the males and two-thirds of the females stayed in gangs for a year or less, with very few youth remaining gang members throughout their adolescent years.

Many factors are related to whether youth join gangs

When asked directly what led them to join gangs, 54% of Rochester gang members said they had followed the lead of friends or family members who preceded them, 19% said they did it for protection, and 15% said it was for fun or excitement. Younger gang members were somewhat more likely to cite protection as the primary motivation.

However they may characterize their own motivations, gang members' backgrounds commonly include certain features that may make them more inclined to join gangs. The following risk factors have been found to predict gang membership:

- Individual factors: early delinquency (especially violence and drug use) and early dating and precocious sexual activity.
- Family factors: non-two-parent structure, poverty, and other gang-involved members.
- School factors: low achievement, commitment, and aspirations; truancy; negative labeling by teachers; and lack of a sense of safety in school.
- Peer factors: associations with delinquent or aggressive peers.
- Community factors: poverty, drug availability, gang presence, lack of a sense of safety and attachment.

Some risk factors are more predictive than others. In a longitudinal study of youth living in high-crime neighborhoods in Seattle, for example, pre-adolescents (ages 10–12) who later joined gangs were distinguished most markedly by very early marijuana use, neighborhood conditions making marijuana readily available, and learning disabilities. The presence of any of these factors in a juvenile's background more than tripled the odds of his or her later becoming a gang member. Childhood risk factors that were predictive of later sustained (as opposed to transient) gang membership included early violence, acting out, and association with antisocial peers.

The more risk factors present in a youth's background, the more likely that youth is to join a gang. In Seattle, for example, those with two or three identified risk factors at ages 10–12 were 3 times more likely to go on to join a gang than those with none or one, those with four to six risk factors were 5 times more likely, and those with seven or more were 13 times more likely. Having background risk factors in more than one area of life—that is, individual, family, community, etc.—increases the likelihood of gang involvement even more than a general accumulation of factors. The Rochester study, which divided risk factors into seven general domains, found that 61% of the boys and 40% of the girls with problems in all seven areas were gang members.

Gang members are responsible for a disproportionate share of violent and nonviolent offenses

By their own account, gang members are more likely to engage in criminal activity than their peers. In response to interview questions regarding their activities in the prior month, Seattle gang members were 3 times more likely than nongang members to report committing break-ins and assaults, 4 times more likely to report committing felony thefts, and 8 times more likely to report committing robberies. When asked about their activities during the prior year, gang members were 3 times more likely to say they had been arrested, and 5 times more likely to say they had sold drugs.

In surveys of high-risk youth, gang members represent a minority of these youth but account for most of the reported crime. In the Rochester study, gang members made up 30% of the sample but accounted for 54% of the arrests,

68% of the property crimes, 69% of the violent offenses, 70% of the drug sales, and 82% of the serious delinquencies. A similar study of high-risk Denver youth found that gang members constituted just 14% of the sample but committed 80% of the serious and violent crimes.

Guns are a key factor in gang members' heightened criminality

A body of longitudinal research discredits the notion that gangs are simply collections of antisocial individuals who would be offending at the same rates even if they were not organized into gangs. For one thing, gang members have been found to be more criminally active and violent than delinquents who are not gang affiliated, even those who associate to the same extent with other delinquents. Furthermore, this heightened criminality and violence occur only during periods of gang membership—not before or after. Rochester juveniles who were gang members during only 1 year between ages 14 and 18 committed more offenses during that 1 gang year than they did in any of the remaining 3 years. Denver youth involved in gangs over some part of a 5-year period committed 85% of their serious violent offenses, 86% of their serious property offenses, and 80% of their drug sales while gang-involved. All of these findings strongly suggest that the gang structure itself tends to facilitate or even demand increased involvement in delinquency.

A significant factor may be the strong association between gang membership and gun possession. Gang members are far more likely than nonmembers to own or have access to guns, to carry them on the street, and to use them to commit crimes. Gang membership both

facilitates juveniles' access to guns—through illegal markets and through borrowing—and provides strong and constant incentives for being armed in public. Rochester gang members' rates of gun-carrying were 10 times higher than those of nonmembers. For these youth, gun-carrying not only multiplies opportunities to commit violent crimes and raises the risk that ordinary disputes will escalate into violence—it may increase a youth's crime-readiness by supplying an all-purpose, aggressive confidence that unarmed youth do not have.

Gang membership has lasting negative consequences for gang members themselves

Being a member of a gang sharply raises a young person's risk of being a *victim* of violence, not just a perpetrator. Gangs may harm members in subtle as well as obvious ways, cutting them off from people and opportunities that could help them with the transition to adulthood and disrupting their lives even after they have moved beyond the gang.

Researchers tracking the lives of Rochester gang members to age 22 found evidence of serious adult dysfunction that could not be explained by other factors. Young adults who had been in gangs were more likely to have ended their education prematurely, become pregnant or had children early, and failed to establish stable work lives—all of which were associated with an increased likelihood of being arrested as adults. The differences were more notable among those who had been in gangs for a long time and persisted even when gang members were compared with nonmembers who had histories of delinquency and association with delinquent peers.