

COPS
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services
U.S. Department of Justice

Gangs

The danger of modern gangs is rooted in local, community-level activity. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) estimates that at least 30,000 gangs, with 800,000 members, are having an impact on 2,500 communities across the United States. Increasing law enforcement pressure and the desire to expand their lucrative illegal activities are leading gangs to spread from urban areas into suburban and rural areas. Partnerships with law enforcement, schools, parents, community and faith-based groups, and youth are an important element in addressing and reducing gang crime in the United States.

The National Alliance of Gang Investigators Association (NAGIA) conducted the 2005 National Gang Threat Assessment in conjunction with the FBI. The NAGIA surveyed 455 law enforcement agencies nationwide and identified several important trends in gang activity:

- Approximately 45 percent of respondents said that gangs use technology, such as cell phones, computers, and the Internet in their criminal activities. Low-cost and accessible items, coupled with ease of use and increased technological savvy, have made it difficult for law enforcement to track and combat the illegal activity of gangs consistently.
- Gangs are migrating nationwide and as they migrate they bring their culture of violence and fear to each new community. Many reasons could explain the modern migration factor such as expansion of gang territories and families moving because of jobs or incarceration.
- New immigrants are susceptible to gang influences and activities because of language barriers, employment difficulties, support, protection, and fear. In Hispanic communities, membership in a gang means support and protection. In Asian communities, however, gangs tend to victimize new immigrants to scare them into silence.
- As gang activity expands, traditional boundaries and alliances have been blurred. Modern hybrid gangs are less likely to use traditional symbols, colors, and markings to identify themselves. Hybrid gangs may use the name of one traditional gang, use the colors of another, and align themselves with rivals for financial gain. This haphazard organizational structure hampers law enforcement's ability to categorize, monitor, and reduce gang activity:
- Currently, there is no standardized definition for gangs, gang activities, or gang members. This makes it difficult for jurisdictions to compare and share best practices in dealing with gangs in the community. Lack of a standardized definition also makes legislation and prosecution a challenge.
- Community denial hinders the ability to address and combat gang activity. Approximately 31 percent of Assessment respondents stated that their communities denied having a gang problem, had no response, or expressed no interest. Some communities do not want to recognize a gang problem because of the stigma associated with it, while other communities are silent from fear.

According to the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC), "street gangs, outlaw motorcycle gangs, and prison gangs are the primary distributors of illegal drugs on the streets of the United States." The FBI concurs. The 2005 National Gang Threat Assessment also estimates that 60 percent of gangs were moderately to highly involved in drug distribution at the street level. The FBI also surmises that gangs are aligning themselves with international organized crime syndicates and estimates that 26 percent of gangs are associated with organized crime. Of that group, 80 percent of the gangs are affiliated with Mexican drug organizations. These associations provide financial benefits for both groups and allow local street gangs to act as drug smugglers and dealers in the United States. The NDIC also found that gangs are increasing their smuggling activities.

There is no one solution for solving the local gang problem. However, communities can take action to address and reduce a gang problem. An important step toward gang eradication is to create a coalition of community stakeholders, including but not limited to law enforcement, local government, parents, schools, youth,

businesses, and community- or faith-based groups. In *Gangs: A Community Response*, the Crime and Violence Prevention Center of the California Attorney General's Office recommend that "effective anti-gang efforts begin with partnerships." The office states that "the purpose of a [community action] committee can include awareness, education, and inter-community cooperation in monitoring gang activity and in coordinating or developing intervention and prevention programs." The booklet cites several ways that communities can prevent and reduce gang activity in their neighborhoods. Some prevention methods are the following:

- Conduct an assessment of the level of gang problems in schools and in the community. By compiling and sharing information, communities can customize a gang prevention and reduction plan that meets the communities' needs, thereby resulting in a greater chance for success.
- Provide safe, secure, and adequate recreational and after-school programs, especially between the hours of 2 PM and 8 PM.
- Work with law enforcement to provide supervised late-night activities such as basketball games and other constructive events.
- Encourage youth mentoring programs.
- Provide gang education and prevention training to parents, youth, and other stakeholders.

To assist law enforcement and parents in identifying and addressing gang crime, COPS Office, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Program (OJJDP) and FBI have developed *A Parent's Quick Reference* and *Preventing Gang Involvement*. This quick and easy reference guide provides common warning signs of gang involvement. Parents are encouraged to familiarize themselves with local gang symbols, seek help early, and consider contacting school officials, local law enforcement, faith leaders, and community organizations for additional assistance. In addition, the COPS Office has developed a CD-ROM, *Solutions to Address Gang Crime*, which includes over 80 government publications, and links to gang-related documents and resources.

The COPS Office has identified many resources to assist law enforcement and communities to address the issue of gangs. These resources are included in *Guides and Reports*, *Training and Technical Assistance*, and *Other Resources*.

www.cops.usdoj.gov