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Highlights of the 2009 National Youth Gang Survey

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Gangs, and their activities, remain a serious concern for law enforcement agencies and the public in many jurisdictions across the United States. Since 1996, the National Gang Center, through the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS), has collected data annually from a large, representative sample of local law enforcement agencies to track the size and scope of the national gang problem.¹ This fact sheet summarizes findings from the 2009 NYGS.

Survey Findings

As shown in figure 1 (p. 2), the prevalence rate of gang activity increased slightly from 2008 (32.4 percent) to 2009 (34.5 percent). Over the entire survey period, three trends are apparent in the prevalence rate of gang activity: a sharp decline throughout the late 1990s, a sudden upturn beginning in 2001 and continuing until 2005, and a relative leveling off thereafter. As shown in table 1 (p. 2), larger cities exhibited a large and stable prevalence rate of gang activity from 2005 to 2009, while the less populated areas reported a smaller rate with a more fluctuating pattern.

Based on law enforcement reports, it is estimated that in 2009, there were 28,100 gangs and 731,000 gang members throughout 3,500 jurisdictions in the United States. Table 2 (p. 2) provides percentage changes in these key indicators of gang activity from 2002 to 2009. The number of jurisdictions with gang problems and the number of gangs increased

more than 20 percent from 2002 to 2009, with both indicators recording a 5-percent increase in more recent years. The number of gang members, which has averaged more than 750,000 across survey years, decreased slightly from 2008 to 2009 but remains unchanged from the 2002 total.

As in previous years, gang-related homicides remain highly concentrated in the most populated jurisdictions, with larger cities and suburban counties accounting for more than 96 percent of all gang-related homicides recorded in the NYGS in 2009. Of the 167 cities with populations of more than 100,000 that provided gang homicide data, 57 (34 percent) reported no gang-related homicides and the remaining 110

Key Points

Based on law enforcement reports, in 2009—

- There were an estimated 28,100 gangs and 731,000 gang members throughout 3,500 jurisdictions nationwide.
- The prevalence rate of gang activity increased to 34.5 percent from 32.4 percent in 2008.
- Larger cities and suburban counties accounted for more than 96 percent of all gang homicides.
- Sixty-six percent of the 167 responding cities with populations of more than 100,000 reported a total of 1,017 gang homicides.

Figure 1. Prevalence of Gang Problems in Study Population, 1996–2009

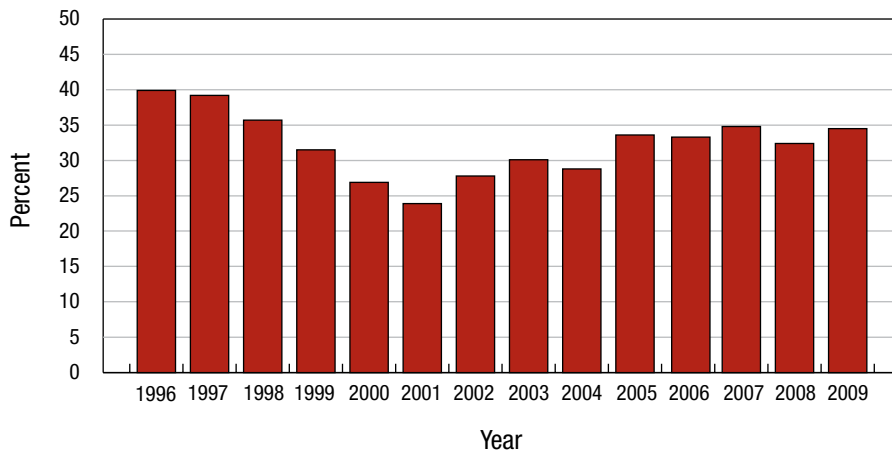


Table 1. Law Enforcement Reports of Gang Activity, 2005–09

Area Type	Gang Activity Reported in 2009	Gang Activity Consistently Reported, 2005–09
Larger cities	86.3	79.8
Suburban counties	51.8	38.9
Smaller cities	32.9	23.8
Rural counties	17.0	11.0

Table 2. Percentage Change in Gang Estimates, 2002–09

	Percentage Change		
	2002–09	2005–09	2008–09
Gang-problem jurisdictions	20.7	<1.0	5.1
Gangs	28.9	5.3	<1.0
Gang members	<1.0	-7.4	-5.6
Gang homicides (cities with population over 100,000 only)	2.1	7.2	10.7

(66 percent) reported a total of 1,017 gang-related homicides in 2009. This total represents a 2-percent increase from 2002 and an 11-percent increase from 2008 for these same cities (see table 2).

Respondents also estimated year-to-year changes regarding other gang-related crimes and violence in their jurisdictions. For the gang-related offenses of robbery, aggravated assault, drug sales, and firearms use, respondents most frequently reported that there was “no substantial change” (i.e., neither significant increase nor decrease) from 2008

to 2009 in the number of offenses committed. One notable exception to this pattern is graffiti—a little more than 40 percent of the respondents reported an increase in gang graffiti in their jurisdictions, while fewer than 3 percent reported no such incidents in 2009.

Half of the survey respondents (49.8 percent) characterized their gang problems as “staying about the same” in 2009, the largest percentage ever recorded in the NYGS. Agencies reporting a fluctuating pattern of gang activity over the past 5 years were more likely to characterize their gang problems as “getting worse” than were agencies consistently reporting gang activity.

Factors Influencing Local Gang Violence

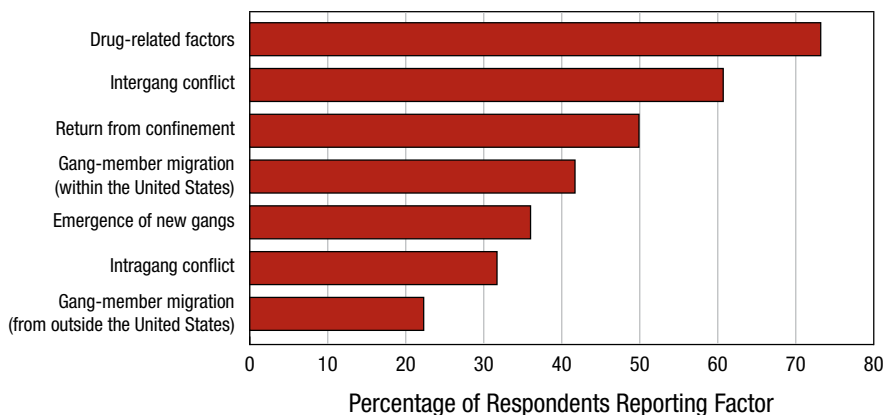
Figure 2 shows the influence of several factors on local gang violence from the viewpoint of law enforcement as reported in the 2009 NYGS. Half or more of the survey respondents viewed drug-related factors, intergang conflict, and returning inmates as significantly influencing local gang violence, followed by gang member migration within the United States and emergence of new gangs. The three top-rated factors are further discussed below.

Drug-Related Factors

NYGS respondents reported that overlap of drug-related factors and local gang violence is an ongoing issue; however, determining the extent of this association remains difficult. Approximately 6 in 10 agencies in jurisdictions with gang activity do not record local drug crimes as gang

related—in fact, with the exception of graffiti offenses, nearly half of these agencies as a matter of practice do not record *any* local crime as gang related. Analyses from previous survey years also show that organizational control of the local drug distribution by gangs is uncommon. Other gang research studies (Decker, 2007; Howell, Egley, and Gleason, 2002; McGloin, 2005) also find that most youth gangs lack the necessary organizational structure and capacity to effectively manage drug distribution operations; however, drug use and drug sales have been shown to increase after joining a gang, and then decrease after

Figure 2. Factors Influencing Local Gang Violence, 2009



leaving the gang (Gordon et al., 2004; Krohn and Thornberry, 2008; Thornberry et al., 2003). In other words, the association between gangs, drugs, and violence remains a complex issue.

Intergang Conflict

Intergang conflict and local gang violence are commonly reported in the NYGS and other gang studies as well. Gang-related homicides in particular have been shown to be related to several circumstances, including maintenance of “set space” (i.e., gang “territory”), interpersonal “beefs,” surprise assaults, and drug-turf disputes. They often are coupled with a variety of motives, such as defending one’s gang identity, defense of the gang’s honor and reputation, set space trespassing, and gang revenge or retaliation.

Returning Inmates

Over recent survey years, a majority of respondents report a noticeable effect on the local gang problem when gang-involved individuals return to the community

after a period of confinement. Although law enforcement agencies do not collect statistics measuring the impact of returning gang-involved inmates on local crime rates, NYGS respondents generally observe an effect on local gang issues such as (in descending order of reported importance) violent crime, drug trafficking, property crime, access to weapons, and local gang dress and demeanor.

About the National Gang Center

In October 2009, the National Youth Gang Center, which the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) had funded since 1995, merged with the National Gang Center, which the Bureau of Justice Assistance had funded since 2003. Consolidation of the centers has leveraged resources and resulted in a single, more efficient entity that is responsive to the needs of researchers, practitioners, and the public.

For Further Information

For additional information about youth gangs, call OJJDP’s Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse at 800–851–3420, contact the National Gang Center at 800–446–0912, or visit www.nationalgangcenter.gov.

Endnote

1. For a description of the NYGS study population and sample methodology, see www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis/Methodology.

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