

CHAPTER 6

Youth Gangs

The terms *street gang* and *youth gang* are used interchangeably. These seemingly similar terms can embrace widely varying gangs (Box 6.1). At one end of the spectrum, researchers define youth gangs very restrictively. To illustrate, the following are widely accepted criteria among researchers for classifying groups as youth gangs (or street gangs):

- The group must have three or more members, generally ages 12–24.
- Members must share some sense of identity, especially symbols and a name.
- Members must view themselves as a gang and be recognized by others as a gang.
- They must have some permanence and a degree of organization.
- They must have verbal and nonverbal forms of communication.
- They are involved in an elevated level of criminal activity (Curry & Decker, 2003; Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001; Klein, 1995).

IN FOCUS 6.1

Youth Gang Definitions and Characterizations

The term gang tends to designate collectivities that are marginal members of mainstream society, loosely organized, and without a clear, social purpose. (Ball & Curry, 1995, p. 227)

The Fremont Hustlers gang was a haphazardly assembled social unit composed of deviant adolescents who shared social and economic needs and the propensity for resolving those needs in a similar way. (Fleisher, 1998, p. 264)

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Gangs are one delinquent subgroup along with other homogeneous adolescent subgroups: skaters, preps, hip-hop, ravers, postgrunge, goths and stoners. (Fleisher, 1998, p. 257)

[For control and prevention efforts, gangs are] a shifting, elusive target, permeable and elastic . . . not a cohesive force but, rather, a spongelike resilience. (Klein & Maxson, 1989, p. 211)

The gang is an interstitial group (between childhood and maturity) originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. (Thrasher, 1927, p. 18)

[A gang is] any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in the neighborhood, b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and c) have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistently negative response from neighborhood residents and/or law enforcement agencies. (Klein, 1971, p. 13)

A youth gang is a self-formed association of peers united by mutual interests with identifiable leadership and internal organization who act collectively or as individuals to achieve specific purposes, including the conduct of illegal activity and control of a particular territory, facility, or enterprise. (Miller, 1992, p. 21)

[Gangs are] groups that are complexly organized although sometimes diffuse, sometimes cohesive with established leadership and membership rules, operating within a framework of norms and values in respect to mutual support, conflict relations with other gangs, and a tradition often of turf, colors, signs, and symbols. (Curry & Spengel, 1988, p. 382)

[A gang is] an age-graded peer group that exhibits some permanence, engages in criminal activity, and has some symbolic representation of membership. (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 31)

Gang characteristics consist of a gang name and recognizable symbols, a geographic territory, a regular meeting pattern, and an organized, continuous course of criminality. (Chicago Police Department, 1992, p. 1)

A Criminal Street Gang is 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 criminal acts. (Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act, 1988, California Penal Code sec. 186.22[f])

[A gang is] a self-identified group of kids who act corporately, at least sometimes, and violently, at least sometimes. (Kennedy, Piehl, & Braga, 1996, p. 158)

What makes these criteria so restrictive is not only the sheer number of them but also that they can be used to winnow a broad range of adolescent groups down to those that are bona fide youth gangs (see Box 6.2; Esbensen, Winfree, et al., 2001). This ingenious process for sifting out nongangs that Esbensen and colleagues developed reduces the remaining gangs to those that have a name, are somewhat organized, and are involved in delinquent or criminal activity. Their research shows that these are central features of the most highly delinquent and organized gangs. The researchers found that as each more restrictive definitional criterion was added, the proportion of qualifying gang members was reduced. The fact that nearly half of the eighth graders who claimed gang membership (“ever involved”) were no longer active members confirms that gang membership is short-lived for most very young members.

IN FOCUS 6.2

Indicators of Bona Fide Gangs

Youth gang researchers have devised a way to measure adolescents’ involvement in youth gangs by determining their degree of bonding to the gangs (Esbensen, Winfree, et al., 2001). These researchers’ study sample consisted of some 6,000 eighth graders (average age nearly 14) in known gang problem localities. The study measured gang bonding on a continuum of five levels of involvement in progressively more serious gangs:

1. Level 1: Ever involved in a gang (17%)
2. Level 2: Currently a gang member (9%)
3. Level 3: Currently a member of a *delinquent gang* (8%)
4. Level 4: Currently a member of a delinquent gang that is *organized* (5%)
5. Level 5: Currently a *core* member of a delinquent gang that is organized (2%)

Esbensen and colleagues also discovered that members of gangs that were somewhat “organized” (i.e., had initiation rites, established leaders, and symbols or colors) self-reported higher rates of delinquency and involvement in more serious delinquent acts than other youths. Another study tested the influence of gang organization on members’ involvement in violent crime and drug sales (Decker, Katz, & Webb, 2008). The researchers found that people who were members of more organized gangs in three Arizona cities reported higher victimization counts, more gang sales of different kinds of drugs, and more violent offending by the gang than did members of less organized gangs.

At the other end of the spectrum, many state legislatures and law enforcement agencies define gangs very broadly to include a variety of adult criminal organizations including drug cartels and ongoing criminal enterprises. For example, as seen in Box 6.1, California's gang law defines a "criminal street gang" as any ongoing organization, association, or group of three or more people, whether formal or informal, having as one of its primary activities the commission of criminal acts (Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act, 1988, California Penal Code sec. 186.22[f]). Several states have modeled their gang definitions after this broad one even though it encompasses adult criminal enterprises ("organized crime") that typically are not considered to be street gangs. When law enforcement agencies estimate the number of gangs in their jurisdiction, they often include a variety of gangs that encompass the two extremes discussed here (Howell, Egley, & Gleason, 2000).

This chapter provides an overview of youth gang problems in the United States. It begins with an examination of youth gang trends. The next two sections shed light on the relative seriousness of gang problems in American cities, towns, and rural areas. More transitory gang problems in sparsely populated areas are examined first, followed by more persistent gang activity in the most densely populated centers. That information is important for the section to follow, which examines myths about youth gangs. These tend to apply mainly to gangs in smaller cities and towns and rural areas, where gang problems are less entrenched. The chapter concludes with a pitch for measured response to gangs based on a local assessment rather than overreaction with law enforcement suppression strategies.

Youth Gang Trends

The National Youth Gang Center (NYGC), established by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, has chronicled the distribution and level of the U.S. gang problem since its first systematic National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) in 1996 (Figure 6.1). In the mid-1990s, gang problems in the United States increased to an unprecedented level (Miller, 2001). A precipitous decline followed. From 1996 to 2001, the systematic NYGS revealed year-to-year declines or a leveling off of the number of jurisdictions reporting youth gang problems (Egley, Howell, & Major, 2006). Between 1996 and 2002, the estimated number of gang members declined 14%, and the estimated number of gangs decreased nearly 30%. Still, gang crime problems plague large numbers of U.S. cities, towns, and counties.

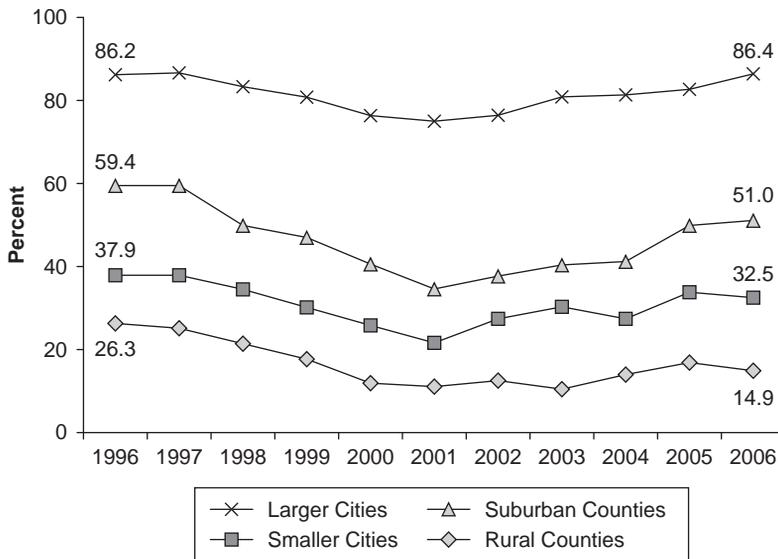


Figure 6.1 Prevalence of Gang Problems in the United States, 1996–2006

This downturn was followed by a substantial upturn in youth gang problems reported in the NYGC from 2002 to 2005, particularly in rural counties and suburban counties (Table 6.1, Curry & Howell, 2007; Egley, O’Donnell, & Curry, 2007). Overall, 20% more localities reported gang activity in 2005 than in 2002. Three other indicators of gang activity buttress this observed trend. First, the NYGS respondents are asked each year

Table 6.1 Law Enforcement Agencies Reporting Gang Problems, 2002 and 2005

Area Type	2002 Total	2005 Total	Percentage Change
Rural counties	53	89	68
Smaller cities	178	210	18
Suburban counties	143	189	32
Larger cities	320	346	8
Total	694	834	20

NOTE: Rural counties and smaller cities estimated from samples.

whether gang problems are “getting better,” “getting worse,” or “staying about the same.” In 1999, 25% of jurisdictions classified their gang problem as “getting worse,” and this statistic increased to about 50% in 2005 (Egley et al., 2007), indicating a doubling of the proportion of agencies that regard their gang problem as worsening.

Second, the estimated number of gangs reported by NYGS respondents increased at a similar pace (up 21% from 2002 to 2005), but the estimated number of gang members increased by much less (8%) during this period (Egley & Major, 2004; Egley et al., 2007). The slower increase in the growth of gang members is attributable to the fact that most of the increase in gang activity was reported in rural counties (68%), where the number of gang members is small. Cities with a population of 50,000 or more and suburban counties accounted for approximately 85% of the estimated number of gang members in 2002 (Egley et al., 2006).

Third, gang homicides increased across the United States in the early 2000s (Curry et al., 2004). To use the most reliable indicator, researchers examined the number of gang homicides reported in municipal areas with populations of 100,000 or more. In these areas, gang homicides increased 34% from 1999 to 2003. The 2003 figure (1,451 reported homicides) was about the same as the number in the peak year for the 1990s (1,447). Reported gang homicides declined from 1997 to 2000, after which the increase commenced.

An independent validation of the increase in reported gang activity cited here is seen in the trend in student reports of gang activity in schools. Pertinent data were collected in the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey. In the mid-1990s, 28% of the national sample of students reported that gangs were present in their schools (Chandler, Chapman, Rand, & Taylor, 1998). This amount dropped to 17% in 1999 and then began to increase to 24% in 2005, almost to the level reported a decade earlier (Dinkes et al., 2006). Although these two surveys have important differences—mainly that the student survey gauges the youngest segment of gang participants (Curry, 2000)—they reveal a similar trend, a decrease in gang activity in the late 1990s and an increase in the opening years of this century.

It is too soon to say whether the recent increase in gang activity is a lasting trend. Gang problems in the United States as a whole appear to occur in spurts or cycles, and the length of the upswings and downturns cannot be predicted. Miller (1992) describes this pattern as like “a wave that strikes with great fury at one part of the shore, recedes, strikes again at another, ebbs away, strikes once more, and so on.” Indeed, variations from one geographic area to another are common—even within the same city—depending on the existence of recurring gang conflicts that create peaks and valleys in gang crimes (Block & Block, 1993; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

Transitory Gang Problems



Figure 6.2 People See Gangs in Different Ways

Many small cities and towns and rural areas experienced gang problems for the first time in recent years (Egley et al., 2007; Howell & Egley, 2005a). The heightened public awareness of gangs and reports of a pervasive gang presence in different parts of the country has complicated community reactions. The visibility of adolescent 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 gang symbols. Identifying a group as a gang isn't always easy (Figure 6.2 and Box 6.3). Knowing their history helps (Howell, 1998d).

IN FOCUS 6.3

What Makes a Gang a Gang?

Peggy Sanday (1990) described in detail the events that led to a gang rape allegedly committed by several members of a fairly well-organized, cohesive group of older adolescents in Philadelphia. Even before this particular incident, the XYZs (the fictitious name Sanday gave the group) had already developed a reputation throughout the neighborhood for making trouble. They often congregated on benches situated in front of their clubhouse, which the XYZs claimed as their turf. On more than one occasion, women

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had reported verbal harassment by members of the gang when they passed by. New members of the community were commonly warned about the group, and women were urged to take precautions if they attended parties that were regularly thrown by the gang.

This short description has many of the indicators of traditional descriptions of a gang, that is, “a group of inner-city adolescents, a concern with turf, harassment of local residents, an organizational structure, some degree of solidarity, and mutual participation in serious forms of illegal behavior. . . . However, we have left one very important piece of information out of our short summary of Sanday’s study: these were all members of a prominent fraternity at a prestigious upper-middle-class university” (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993, p. 8).

Differential Impacts of Gangs on Communities

Cities, towns, and rural counties can be grouped into three categories with respect to their youth gang problems. The scope and severity of their gang problem corresponds closely to the size of their population. In the first category—rural areas and small towns with populations under 25,000—very few of the gangs are well organized, and few of them seem to survive. Only 4 in 100 rural counties and 10 in 100 small cities and towns report a persistent gang problem (Howell & Egley, 2005a). In these sparsely populated areas, the typical community with reported gang problems has on average three to six gangs and 50–100 members. If they do not report a gang problem year after year, their estimates are on the low side of both of these indicators.

Localities in the second group (cities and suburbs with populations between 25,000 and 100,000) are the most difficult to classify with certainty because many of them experience a gang problem at some point, but this may not be a permanent or serious condition (Howell, Moore, & Egley, 2002). In contrast, the likelihood of gang problems—and more persistent and serious gang problems—is much higher for the third category, cities and suburban areas with populations greater than 100,000 (Howell, 2006). In fact, all cities with populations greater than 250,000 consistently report gang problems year after year (Egley, Howell, & Major, 2006).

Table 6.2 shows how the reported number of gangs and gang members grows larger as city size increases, from 3–6 gangs and 50–100 members in rural counties and towns under 25,000 population to an average of 7–30 gangs with 200 or more members in larger cities (100,000–250,000 population). Nationwide, the bulk of all gang members are found in the very largest cities (250,000 population and greater), where more than 30 gangs are typically reported, and the majority of these cities typically have more than 1,000 gang members (Howell, 2006; Howell & Egley, 2005a).

Table 6.2 Estimated Number of Gangs and Gang Members and Population Size

<i>Estimated Number of Gangs</i>	<i>Estimated Number of Gang Members</i>
Populations under 25,000	
3–6	50–100
Populations between 25,000 and 100,000	
4–15	50–200
Populations between 100,000 and 250,000	
7–30	200+
Populations greater than 250,000	
30+	1,000+

The youth gang myths that are previewed in the next section apply mainly in the first and second categories, the less entrenched gang problem communities that are just beginning to experience a youth gang problem (or suspect that they are) and other localities that have an ongoing gang problem that is not particularly persistent or serious. Community leaders in these circumstances often are susceptible to misleading information about youth gangs and often feel uncertain about what an appropriate response might be. It is very common for uncertain community officials and others to overreact to youth gangs.

Youth Gangs: Myths and Realities

Felson (2006) argues that the gangs themselves create myths as part of what he calls their “Big Gang Theory.” As Felson explains it, youths sometimes feel that they need protection on the streets in their communities. The gang provides this service. However, few gangs are nasty enough to be particularly effective in protecting youths. Therefore, they need to appear more dangerous than they actually are to provide maximum protection. Felson observes that gangs use a ploy found in nature to maximize the protection they seek to provide. In order to scare off threatening predators, some harmless animals and insects mimic a more dangerous member of their species. In turn, predators learn to avoid all species—both harmless and dangerous—that look alike. For example, Felson notes that the coral snake, an extremely dangerous viper, is mimicked by the scarlet king snake, which is often called the “false coral snake” because of its similar colors and patterns. Although the latter snake is not venomous at all, it scares off potential predators by virtue of its appearance.

Felson suggests that gangs use the same strategy, providing signals for local gang members to help make their gangs resemble truly dangerous big-city gangs. These standardized signals or symbols typically consist of hand signs, colors, graffiti, clothes, and language content. Indeed, gang membership is often more symbolic than real (Espelage, Wasserman, & Fleisher, 2007).

Armed with indicators of truly bad gangs, members of harmless gangs can display scary signals at will to create a more menacing image (Felson, 2006). Graffiti is often used, but it's not always gang related (Table 6.3; Weisel, 2004). Using a famous gang name helps gangs propagate a menacing image that may intimidate others. Once enough people believe their overblown dangerous image, it becomes accepted as reality.

The myth that local gangs are affiliated with big-city gangs also supports the exaggerated dangerousness of gangs in small cities and towns. This image persists because of the similarity of local gangs' names and symbols, which is explained by mimicry or imitation. An analogy helps reveal the reality of the situation. Local Little League baseball teams may appear to be affiliated with major league baseball teams because of similar names and uniforms, but there is no connection between local youth teams and professional baseball clubs. So it is with gangs; there rarely is any connection between local gangs and big-city gangs known by the same names. The reality is that local gangs often cut and paste bits of Hollywood images of gangs and big-city gang lore into their local versions of gangs (Starbuck, Howell, & Lindquist, 2001). And they often do a poor job of this copying, perhaps using the wrong colors, distorting the original gang's symbols, and so on. To illustrate the point, a gang of youth in Kansas City said they were affiliated with the Chicago Folks gang, but when asked about the nature of their affiliation, they couldn't explain it. They said that they just liked to draw the Folks' pitchfork symbol (Fleisher, 1998, p. 26).

One example illustrating this point is the broadcasting of the names of local groups that claim to be gangs—such as Crips or Bloods that have a legendary image as Los Angeles gangs—which helps validate scary images of the local gangs. Unfortunately, the broadcast media sometimes unwittingly help local gangs promote their Big Gang Theory. Misrepresentations of gangs in the print media have been well documented in a study covering articles published in the past quarter century (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007). These researchers found that the leading newsweeklies consider gangs to be a monolithic phenomenon and do not describe the diversity among distinctively different types of gangs, such as prison gangs, drug gangs, and youth gangs. They also portray gangs as highly organized groups that have spread to new areas as part of a conspiracy to establish satellite sets across the country.

Although gang coverage by broadcast electronic media has not been systematically analyzed through the method by which Esbensen and Tusinski examined newsweeklies, it appears that the gang phenomenon is often exaggerated and grossly misrepresented. Similar distortions of other crime problems by the broadcast media are not uncommon. The exaggeration of the

Table 6.3 Types of Graffiti and Associated Motives

<i>Type of Graffiti</i>	<i>Features</i>	<i>Motives</i>
Gang ^a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gang name or symbol, including hand signs. • Gang member names or nicknames, or sometimes a roll-call list of members. • Numbers: Offenders commonly use numbers as code in gang graffiti. A number may represent the corresponding letter in the alphabet (e.g., 13 = M, for the Mexican Mafia) or represent a penal or police radio code. • Distinctive, stylized alphabets: These include bubble letters, block letters, backwards letters, and Old English script. • Key visible locations. • Enemy names and symbols or allies' names. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mark turf • Threaten violence • Boast of achievements • Honor the slain • Insult or taunt other gangs
Common tagger ^b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-volume, accessible locations. • High-visibility, hard-to-reach locations. • May be stylized but simple name or nickname tag or symbols: The single-line writing of a name is usually known as a tag, whereas slightly more complex tags, including those with two colors or bubble letters, are known as throw-ups. • Tenacious (keeps retagging). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notoriety or prestige • Defiance of authority
Artistic tagger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colorful and complex pictures known as masterpieces or pieces. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artistic • Prestige or recognition
Conventional graffiti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spontaneous. • Sporadic episodes or isolated incidents. • Malicious or vindictive. • Sporadic, isolated, or systematic incidents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play • Rite of passage • Excitement • Impulse • Anger • Boredom • Resentment • Failure • Despair
Ideological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offensive content or symbols. • Racial, ethnic, or religious slurs. • Specific targets, such as synagogues. • Highly legible. • Slogans. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anger • Hate • Political • Hostility • Defiance

a. Copycat graffiti looks like gang graffiti and may be the work of gang wannabes or youths seeking excitement.

b. Tagbangers, a derivative of tagging crews and gangs, are characterized by competition with other crews. Therefore, crossed-out tags are features of their graffiti.

crack cocaine “epidemic” of the late 1980s and early 1990s is a case in point (see Brownstein, 1996, and Reeves & Campbell, 1994, for well-researched analyses of that coverage). There were cocaine “wars” (Eddy, Sabogal, & Walden, 1988), to be sure, but they mainly involved adult criminal organizations (see also Gugliotta & Leen, 1989). Almost invariably, newspaper accounts, popular magazine articles, and electronic media broadcasts on youth gangs contain at least one myth or fallacy (Box 6.4). These and several other gang myths are analyzed in detail elsewhere (Howell, 2007). Objective assessments of gang activity—or suspected gang presence—usually will debunk most of the gang myths.

IN FOCUS 6.4

Top 10 Gang Myths

1. Gangs are highly organized criminal enterprises.
2. Gangs migrate across the country to establish satellite sets.
3. Small local gangs are spawned by big-city gangs.
4. Gangs, drugs, and violence usually go together.
5. All gangs are alike.
6. Youth usually join a gang because of peer pressure.
7. Adolescents are often recruited by adults to join gangs.
8. Once kids join a gang, they're lost for good.
9. Once a gang forms, it's probably permanent.
10. Male gangs dominate gang girls.

When allowed to persist, gang myths tend to influence gang prevention and control policies (Archbold & Meyer, 2000; S. Moore, 2007; Toch, 2007), often leading to excessive use of gang suppression strategies and tactics. Two researchers carefully documented the process by which violent youth crimes were defined by the police as a gang-related problem in the community and the conditions that lead to a moral panic in a midsized Midwestern town of approximately 50,000 people (Archbold & Meyer, 2000). Similar gang-related moral panics have been documented elsewhere (Jackson & Rudman, 1993; McCorkle & Miethe, 2002; Zatz, 1987). One reason for panicking over suspected gang activity is that community leaders often are uncertain as to what youth gangs are all about. In addition to the absence of a commonly shared gang definition, the widely varying definitions of them (Box 6.1), and the numerous myths that are perpetuated in gang lore (Box 6.4), gangs

are also confusing for other reasons that Felson identifies (Box 6.5). This situation is far more likely to exist in less populated areas where gang problems are intermittent because community conditions are not sufficient to sustain them (see Chapter 7).

IN FOCUS 6.5

Why Youth Gangs Are Confusing, According to Felson

- The *gang* word has many meanings: drug gangs, prison gangs, organized crime, juvenile gangs, etc.
- Different gangs use the same name.
- Gangs are unstable; they often change.
- Many gangs get too much credit for their dangerousness.
- It is often difficult to find the gang's structure.
- Gang leadership may change with activities.
- The "Big Gang Theory" can exaggerate the size and danger of juvenile gangs.

Bad community conditions may only produce delinquent groups, however. The tipping point (Klein, 1995, pp. 29–30) at which an adolescent group becomes a gang requires two "signposts," according to Klein. The first one is a commitment to a criminal orientation (or willingness to use violence; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). The second signpost is when the gang-to-be takes on a collective criminal orientation as a group, a gang, that is set apart from others. "Very often, part of this process is an acceptance of intergroup, now intergang, rivalries and hostilities. It's hard to find a one-gang city; gang cohesiveness thrives on gang-to-gang hostilities" (Klein, 1995, p. 30). Self-recognition is almost always fostered by a group name, signs, clothing, symbols, and territorial graffiti.

Persistent Gang Problems

As noted earlier, *persistent gang problems* are viewed as gang activity that is reported year after year and is more easily recognized. This likelihood is much greater in cities and suburban areas with populations greater than 100,000, in which gang problems date back many years (Howell & Egley, 2005a). There, more gangs and larger ones are commonly found (for an excellent overview of these gangs see Valdez, 2007). The following sections examine their impacts in several contexts: on communities, in schools,

females in gangs, gang migration and immigration, and gang members returning from prison.

General Community Impacts of Youth Gangs

Although residents' major concern is with the more organized and violent gangs, the startup gangs also instill fear in residents when their troublesome behaviors involve intimidation, vandalism, graffiti, and occasional drug sales (Weisel, 2002, 2004). Nevertheless, community residents' fear of gangs and of becoming victims of gang crime is very great in the most gang-infested communities. A study in Orange County, California, that interviewed a random sample of residents illustrates this case (Lane & Meeker, 2000). Fear of crime and gangs was an immediate, daily experience for people who lived in lower-income neighborhoods where gangs were more prevalent and dangerous. But for people in other areas, fear was generally an abstract concern about the future that became immediate only when they entered certain pockets of the county. In the most gang-ridden areas, many residents reported having avoided gang areas because they are afraid of gangs and criminal victimization. Others talked about avoiding certain streets and taking a circuitous route to shopping areas at night to avoid gangs that operate in certain neighborhoods. Intimidation of other youths, adults, and business owners is not uncommon, and intimidation of witnesses or potential witnesses is particularly serious because it undermines the justice process (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997).

Gangs have a formidable presence in many of this country's major metropolitan areas (Coughlin & Venkatesh, 2003; Egley et al., 2004). A recent nationwide study of reported drive-by shootings found that almost half (46%) of them appeared to be gang-related (Violence Policy Center, 2007). Venkatesh (1996) describes one of the worst cases of gang dominance in Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes, a low-income public housing development. In the early 1990s, gangs in the housing development were transformed from turf gangs to drug gangs, and an escalation of gang violence resulted. Use of zip guns and hand-to-hand fighting of the past had given way to powerful handguns, drive-by shootings, and some use of assault weapons. The residents' safety was jeopardized, with a high risk of being caught in gang cross-fire. Other drug gangs operating as organized criminal groups have had devastating impacts on communities. New York City's Puerto Rican Black Park Gang, so named because it shot out lights surrounding its base of operations in a park to avoid police detection (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1997) is a classic example. It was a very violent drug gang—believed to be responsible for 15 murders—that trafficked in drugs and used the proceeds to buy legitimate businesses through which it laundered drug profits. In addition to drug trafficking and violent crimes, it was involved in trafficking or using illegally obtained firearms and using force to intimidate witnesses and victims. Urban gang problems are formidable, to be sure, yet modern-day urban gangs seem to be ever-changing (Coughlin & Venkatesh, 2003).

Impact of Gangs in Schools

Where they have a substantial community presence, youth gangs are linked with serious delinquency problems in elementary and secondary schools across the United States (Chandler et al., 1998). This study of data gathered in the School Crime Supplement to the 1995 National Crime Victim Survey documented several examples. First, there is a strong correlation between gang presence in schools and both guns in schools and availability of drugs in school. Second, higher percentages of students report knowing a student who brought a gun to school when students report gang presence (25%) than when gangs were not present (8%). In addition, gang presence at a student's school is related to seeing a student with a gun at school: 12% report having seen a student with a gun in school when gangs are present, compared with 3% when gangs are not present. Third, students who report that any drugs (marijuana, cocaine, crack, or uppers or downers) are readily available at school are much more likely to report gangs at their school (35%) than those who say that no drugs are available (14%). Fourth, the presence of gangs more than doubles the likelihood of violent victimization at school (nearly 8% vs. 3%). The presence of gangs at school also can be very disruptive to the school environment because they may not only create fear among students but also increase the level of violence in school (Laub & Lauritsen, 1998). Gang presence is also an important contributor to overall levels of student victimization at school (Howell & Lynch, 2000).

Unfortunately, school administrators' reports of gang activity in school do not correspond with other reports (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Naber, May, Decker, Minor, & Wells, 2006). In a national study, in the 10% of schools with the highest student gang participation rates, only 18% of principals reported that gangs are a problem in the school (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001, p. 3).

School administrations have taken greater security measures in response to the gang problem, but their effectiveness is subject to debate (Howell & Lynch, 2000). "The presence of security officers, metal detectors, and security cameras may deter some students from committing acts of violence, but this presence also serves to heighten fear among students and teachers, while increasing the power of some gangs and the perceived need some students have for joining gangs" (Thompkins, 2000, p. 54). It is also important to be aware that school-related gang crime extends beyond the boundaries of school buildings themselves to contexts in which youths congregate before and after school; in fact, gang crime begins to escalate very early on school days (Wiebe, Meeker, & Vila, 1999).

Females in Gangs

Female participation in youth gangs has increased in the past decade or more (Curry, 1998; Fleisher, 1998; Moore & Hagedorn, 2001). In some localities, girls represent one-fourth to one-third of the current gang

members (Esbensen, Deschenes, & Winfree, 1999; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). In the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a nationally representative sample of 9,000 youth between the ages of 12 and 16, found that 8% had belonged to a gang. The male to female ratio in this group was approximately 2:1 (11% vs. 6%) (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006, p. 70). Even law enforcement officials, who historically have minimized female participation in gangs, have begun to recognize their increased presence in the NYGS (Figure 6.3). This is an important issue because a multicity study found that criminal activity is elevated in gangs that have gender-balanced membership (Peterson, Miller, & Esbensen, 2001).

Gang Migration and Immigration

The impact of gang migration on local gang problems is not as large as commonly perceived. First, there is very little evidence supporting the notion that youth gangs have the capacity to set up satellite operations in distant cities (Decker, Bynum, & Weisel, 1998; Howell & Decker, 1999). Recent studies debunk the popular belief that gangs are engaged in a systematic, organized effort to spread their influence internationally (McGuire, 2007; Ribando, 2005). Second, “gang migration” almost exclusively involves relocation of gang members with their families (Maxson, 1998).

However, migration of gang *members* can present substantial problems (Ribando, 2005). The 2004 NYGS asked law enforcement respondents about gang member migration, or the movement of actively involved gang youth

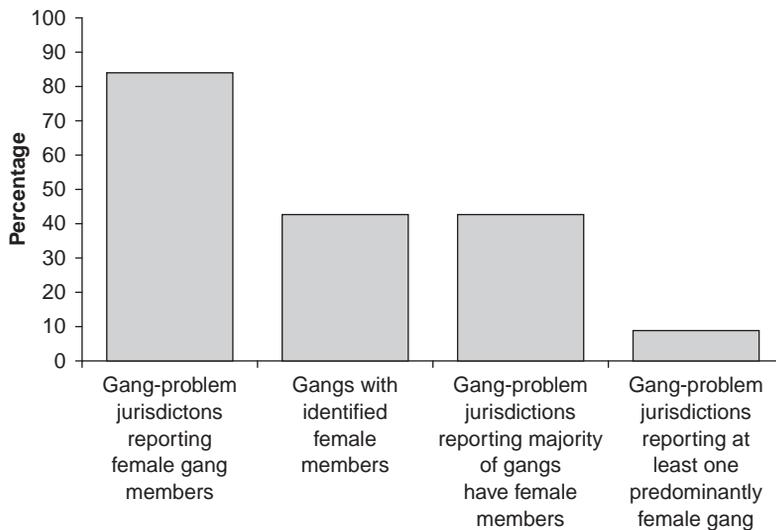


Figure 6.3 Female Participation in Youth Gangs According to Law Enforcement Views

from other jurisdictions. An analysis of survey results (Egley & Ritz, 2006) showed that a small number of agencies (10%) reported that more than half of the documented gang members in their jurisdiction had migrated from other areas, and a majority (60%) of respondents reported none or few (less than 25%) gang member migrants. Among agencies experiencing a higher percentage of gang member migration, 45% reported that social reasons (e.g., members moving with families, pursuit of legitimate employment opportunities) affected local migration patterns “very much.” Also reported, but to a lesser degree, were drug market opportunities (23%), avoidance of law enforcement crackdowns (21%), and participation in other illegal ventures (18%). Social reasons were significantly more likely to be reported among agencies experiencing higher levels of gang member migration (Figure 6.4). The 2006 NYGS requested each respondent to indicate the factors that influenced gang-related violence in the respondent’s jurisdiction. Although not ranked among the most important factors, gang member migration across U.S. jurisdictions was perceived to be a more important factor in local gang violence than gang member migration from outside the United States (Egley & O’Donnell, 2008).

Nevertheless, heavy immigration, particularly from Latin America and Asia, has introduced extremely violent gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS) to the United States (Johnson, 2005; Triplett, 2004). Johnson (2005) suggests that two California-based groups have drawn on the ebb and flow of migrants to become substantial threats to public safety: the 18th Street and MS gangs. The MS identify themselves with tattoos such as the number 13, meaning *trece* in Spanish, shown as “MS-13.” The MS gang is said to be involved in a variety of criminal enterprises, and they show no fear of law enforcement (Valdez, 2000). They seem willing to commit almost any crime, and MS gang members tend to have a higher level of criminal involvement than other gang members. Valdez reports that MS members have been involved in burglaries, auto thefts, narcotic sales, home invasion robberies, weapon smuggling, carjacking, extortion, murder, rape, witness intimidation, illegal firearm sales, car theft, aggravated assaults, and drug trafficking. They also have been known to place a “tax” on prostitutes and non-gang member drug dealers who are working on MS turf. Failure to pay up usually results in violence. Valdez also reports that MS gang members are involved in exporting stolen U.S. cars to South America. The cars are often traded for contraband when dealing with drug cartels. He estimated that 80% of the cars on El Salvador streets were stolen in the United States.

Gang Members Returning From Prison

The return of gang inmates to their communities of origin is another instance of gang member relocation that presents special problems. It is widely recognized that national prison data seriously underestimate the proportion of inmates who are gang involved (because of inmates’ reluctance to

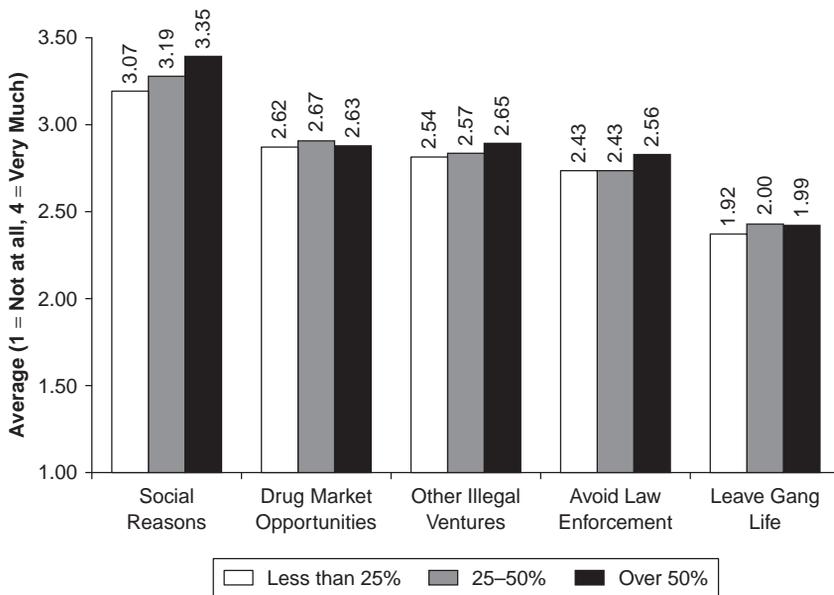


Figure 6.4 Reasons for Gang Member Migration (by percentage of gang member migrants, 2004 National Youth Gang Survey)

divulge their gang affiliations). However, in recent years the issue of gang members returning from secure confinement has received greater attention, in part because of the growing numbers of inmates who are released annually. A recent estimate is that nearly 700,000 prison inmates arrive in communities throughout the United States each year (Sabol, Minton, & Harrison, 2007).

Recent NYGS findings reveal that returning members are a noticeable problem for approximately two-thirds of the gang problem jurisdictions nationwide (Egley et al., 2006). Of the agencies reporting the return of gang members from confinement in 2001, nearly two-thirds (63%) reported that returning members “somewhat” or “very much” contributed to an increase in violent crime among local gangs; 69% reported the same for drug trafficking. Respondents said returning members had less of an impact on local gang activities such as property crimes and weapon procurement: 10% or less reported that returning members influenced each of these areas “very much.” According to these respondents, the effect of returning members was typically observed in increases in violent crime and drug trafficking among local gangs.

An Illinois study supports these perceptions of law enforcement professionals. In this study of more than 2,500 adult inmates released from prison across the state in 2000, nearly one-quarter of them were identified as gang members (Olson & Dooley, 2006). More than half (55%) of the gang members were readmitted to Illinois prisons within the 2-year follow-up period, compared with 46% of the non-gang members. Gang members were more likely

than nonmembers to be arrested, were rearrested more quickly after release from prison, were rearrested more frequently, and were more likely to be arrested for violent and drug offenses than were non-gang members.

Reducing Gang Problems

This final section examines priority aspects of gang problems that must be reduced, beginning with their economic impact, and the criminal and violent crimes for which they are responsible. The increase in a youth's involvement in criminality after joining a gang is then considered, followed by a review of how gangs increase the level of criminal violence in cities and thus account for more violence than nongang groups. Last, the impact of gangs on the participants themselves is considered.

Economic Impact of Gangs

An informed estimate of the economic cost of gang crimes cannot be made because gang crimes are not routinely and systematically recorded by most law enforcement agencies. Therefore, the proportion of all crimes attributable to gangs is unknown. In addition, the medical and financial consequences of gang violence per se are often overlooked. The total volume of crime is estimated to cost Americans \$655 billion each year (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2004), and gangs are responsible for a substantial proportion of this cost.

A study of admissions to a Los Angeles hospital trauma center found that the costs of treating 272 gang-related gunshot victims totaled nearly \$5 million (emergency room, surgical procedures, intensive care, and surgical ward stay), which equated to \$5,550 per patient per day (Song, Naude, Gilmore, & Mongard, 1996). More than a decade ago, the total medical cost of gang violence in Los Angeles County alone was estimated to exceed \$1 billion annually (Hutson, Anglin, & Mallon, 1992). Nationwide, the complete costs of gun violence indicate a value of approximately \$1 million per assault-related gunshot injury (Cook & Ludwig, 2006). A single adolescent criminal career of about 10 years can cost taxpayers between \$1.7 and \$2.3 million (Cohen, 1998), or \$110 million per 500 boys (Walsh et al., 2008).

Criminal and Violent Gang Activity

National law enforcement data on gang-related crimes are not available because less than half (47%) of these agencies record gang crimes (Egley et al., 2006). In several of its annual surveys, the NYGC has elicited information from law enforcement agencies about their *estimates* of gang involvement in serious crimes, including aggravated assault, robbery, larceny or theft, burglary or breaking and entering, and motor vehicle theft.

Generally speaking, many gangs were involved in a variety of these crimes (Howell & Gleason, 1999). However, gangs in very large cities that emerged by the early 1980s were far more actively involved in violent crimes than late-onset gang jurisdictions, particularly aggravated assault and robbery (Howell, Egley, & Gleason, 2002). In contrast, gang members in the latest-onset jurisdictions were most likely to be involved in burglary or breaking and entering and larceny or theft.

NYGS respondents estimated the proportion of gang members who engaged in the following six serious or violent offenses in 2001: aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, motor vehicle theft, larceny or theft, and drug sales. Two clear patterns were seen (Egley et al., 2006). First, a large majority of agencies noted some gang member involvement in all six of the measured crimes. Second, the most common response was that none of these crimes was committed by a large proportion of gang members in the jurisdiction, indicating wide variability among gang members in terms of offending. Agencies that said a large proportion of gang members were involved in one or more of these offenses most often reported drug sales. A clear majority of law enforcement agencies in the NYGS report that although gang and drug problems overlap, it is typically only a subset of gang members in their jurisdiction who are actively involved in drug sales. These findings correspond with other research that finds a weak causal relationship between gang activity, the drug trade, and violence (Bjerregaard, 2008) and an extensive amount of variation in the types of crimes in which gangs are involved (Klein, 1995).

Of course, homicide is the crime of greatest concern to everyone. Reports of gang-related homicides are concentrated mostly in the largest cities in the United States, where there are long-standing and persistent gang problems and a greater number of documented gang members, most of whom are identified by law enforcement as young adults (Howell, 1999; Maxson, Curry, & Howell, 2002). In the 2002 and 2003 National Youth Gang Surveys, nearly 4 out of 10 very large cities (populations of 250,000 or more) reported 10 or more gang homicides (Egley, 2005). However, 2 out of 10 respondents could not determine whether they had any gang homicides.

Youth gangs are responsible for a disproportionate number of homicides. In two cities, Los Angeles and Chicago—arguably the most gang-populated cities in the United States—more than half of the combined nearly 1,000 homicides reported in the NYGS in 2004 were attributed to gangs (Egley & Ritz, 2006). Of the remaining 171 cities, approximately one-fourth of all the homicides were considered gang related. More than 80% of gang problem agencies in both smaller cities and rural counties recorded no gang homicides.

Jurisdictions experiencing higher levels of gang violence—evidenced by reports of multiple gang-related homicides over survey years—were significantly more likely than those experiencing no gang homicides to report that firearms were “used often” by gang members in assault crimes (47% vs. 4% of the jurisdictions, respectively) (Egley et al., 2006). Areas with longer-standing gang problems and a larger number of identified gang members—most often

those with more adult-aged gang members—were also more likely to report greater firearm use by gang members in assault crimes.

Although the proportion of all crimes committed by gang members is unknown, analyses of reported violent crimes in several cities reveal that their members often represent a large proportion of the high-rate violent offenders (Braga, Kennedy, & Tita, 2002). Lethal violence related to gangs tends to be concentrated in the largest cities that are mired with larger and ongoing gang problems. Frequent firearm use in assault crimes is typically reported in these larger cities.

Gangs Increase a Youth's Involvement in Criminality

Surprisingly, a couple of criminologists have suggested that gangs do not increase a youth's involvement in criminality (Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2004). Their contention has been refuted by very rigorous scientific studies of prospective longitudinal panels of child and adolescent subjects in four large U.S. cities (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Rochester, New York; Denver, Colorado; and Seattle, Washington) and also in two cities in other countries (Montreal, Canada; and Bergen, Norway). The research teams in Pittsburgh, Rochester, Denver, and Seattle recorded delinquent acts reported to them by study youths from as early as the first grade into adulthood. These long-term data permitted them to analyze delinquency rates before, during, and after gang involvement. The researchers found that although future gang members tend to be aggressive and involved in fights and other violent acts at a very young age (Craig et al., 2002; Lahey et al., 1999), they do commit many more serious and violent acts while they are gang members than before joining and after leaving the gang (Bendixen, Endresen, & Olweus, 2006; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Gatti, Tremblay, Vitaro, & McDuff, 2005; Gordon et al., 2004; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). Figures 6.5 and 6.6 show this pattern in the Norway study (Bendixen et al., 2006), in which surveyed students were ages 13–14 at Time 1, ages 14–15 at Time 2, and 15–16 at Time 3. Moreover, the violence facilitation function of gangs persists even beyond the influence of risk factors for gang membership (Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1998; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003) and neighborhood conditions (Hall, Thornberry, & Lizotte, 2006). This finding, that gang involvement increases youths' criminality, has been noted as “one of the most robust and consistent observations in criminological research” (Thornberry, 1998, p. 147). Since Thornberry made this astute observation, this important finding has been further replicated in the United States and also in Canada (Gatti et al., 2005) and Norway (Bendixen et al., 2006).

Gangs Increase the Level of Criminal Violence in Cities

The second notion promulgated by the same criminologists (Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2004) is that gangs do not increase the level of criminal

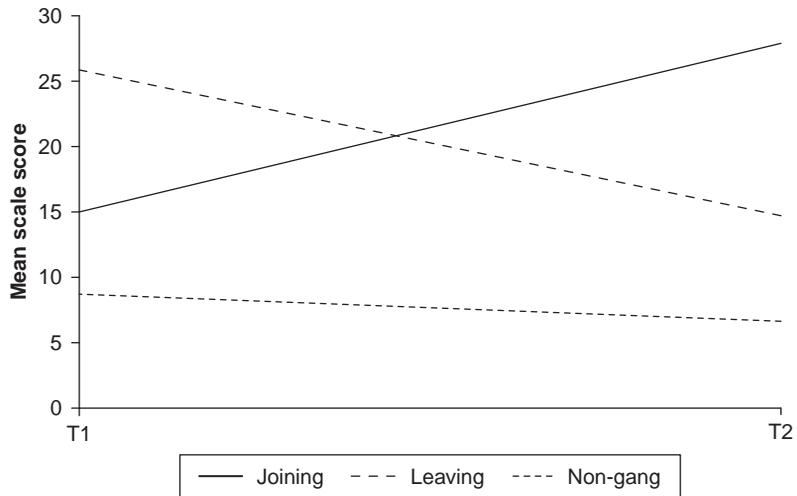


Figure 6.5 Mean Antisocial Behavior Scores for Gang Members (Joining and Leaving) and Non-Gang Members, Time 1 and Time 2

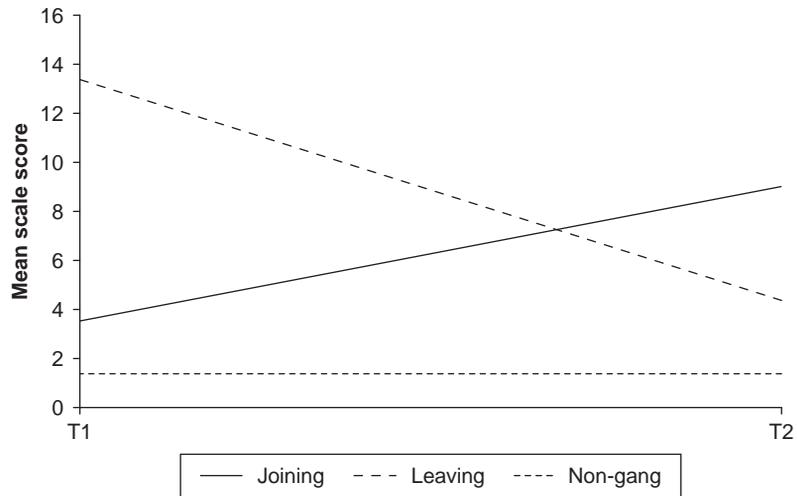


Figure 6.6 Mean Violent Behavior Scores for Gang Members (Joining and Leaving) and Non-Gang Members, Time 2 and Time 3

violence in cities. This unusual view was debunked when researchers in the aforementioned longitudinal studies compared violent crime rates of gang and nongang youths in these urban samples. If the rates of the gang youths were higher, then it would be difficult to deny that gangs increase the level of criminal violence in society. As it turns out, gang members' violence rates were up to seven times higher than the violent crime rates of adolescents

who were not in gangs in longitudinal data sets in five cities: Denver, Montreal, Pittsburgh, Seattle, and Rochester, New York (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Gatti et al., 2005; Gordon et al., 2004; Hill et al., 2001; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003).

The following data on youths in three of these cities show that gang members were responsible for a large proportion of all self-reported violent offenses committed by the entire sample during the adolescent years. Rochester gang members (30% of the sample) self-reported committing 68% of all adolescent violent offenses; in Seattle, gang members (15% of the sample) self-reported committing 85% of adolescent robberies; and in Denver, gang members (14% of the sample) self-reported committing 79% of all serious violent adolescent offenses (Thornberry, 1998). In the Rochester adolescent sample, two-thirds (66%) of the chronic violent offenders were gang members (Thornberry et al., 1995). Given these significantly higher violent crime rates among gang members compared with nongang youths, it is difficult to imagine how the level of violent crime in these cities would not be higher from the presence of highly delinquent gangs.

Gangs Account for More of the Violence

Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004) also suggest that other delinquent groups could well account for more violence than the gang youths. Researchers examined this a decade ago. In four of the longitudinal studies, in Seattle, Rochester, Denver, and Montreal, the influence of gang membership on levels of violence was found to be greater than the influence of other highly delinquent peers (Battin et al., 1998; Gatti et al., 2005; Huizinga et al., 2003; Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). During periods of active gang membership, the Rochester gang members were responsible for, on average, four times as many offenses as their share of the total study population would suggest (Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). Two empirical studies have found that police-identified gang members are significantly more delinquent, including higher levels of involvement in serious and violent offenses, than a comparison group of nongang youth with prior arrests (Curry, 2000; Katz, Webb, & Schaefer, 2000). Given the consistency of the findings on this point in prospective longitudinal studies in multiple sites, this too must be accepted as a notably robust finding in criminological research.

Impact of Gangs on Participants

Most youths who join gangs have already been involved in delinquency and drug use. Once in the gang, they are quite likely to become more actively involved in delinquency, drug use, and violence, and they are more likely to be victimized themselves (Peterson et al., 2004; Taylor, 2008). Their problems do not end here. They are at greater risk of arrest, juvenile court referral, detention, confinement in a juvenile correctional facility, and, later,

imprisonment. For the gang to have devastating consequences, it doesn't necessarily have to be a large formal gang. Even low levels of gang organization have important consequences for involvement in crime and victimization (Decker et al., 2008; Esbensen, Winfree, et al., 2001; Taylor 2008).

Gang involvement has a way of limiting youngsters' life chances, particularly if they remain active in the gang for several years (Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). Over and above embedding its members in criminal activity, the gang acts as a powerful social network in constraining the behavior of members, limiting access to prosocial networks, and cutting members off from conventional pursuits (Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003). These effects of the gang tend to produce precocious, off-time, and unsuccessful transitions that bring disorder to the life course in a cascading series of difficulties, including school dropout, early pregnancy or early impregnation, teen motherhood, and unstable employment.

This section has considered the impacts of gangs on communities and the levels of violence and other crimes in cities where they are most prevalent and dangerous. We also have examined the various criminal and life-course impacts of gangs on their members. The many excellent gang studies lead "to one inescapable conclusion: if we are to be successful in our efforts to reduce delinquency and youth violence, we have to intervene successfully in the criminal careers of gang members" (Thornberry, Krohn, et al., 2003, p. 193). This means that programs and strategies must address the risk factors and treatment needs of gang members and also prevent and control gang activity in the contexts where their criminality is most prevalent. Promising and effective programs and strategies are reviewed in the next chapter.

Discussion Topics

1. How many of the gang definitions in Box 6.1 would qualify the XYZs as a gang?
2. Pick five gang articles from the archives of a local newspaper (or that of a larger city nearby) and see how many gang myths can be found in each article (consult the gang myths article, Howell, 2007).
3. From the articles you reviewed, pick the gang that appears to be the most dangerous. Determine how many of the criteria for classifying groups as youth gangs (presented in the opening paragraph of this chapter) that gang would meet.
4. Why are gangs so difficult for communities to control?
5. Why do gangs have more devastating impacts on the life-course of adolescents than other delinquent groups?