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Highlights of the 2011 National Youth Gang Survey

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This fact sheet provides an overview of the nation's gang problem. In 2011, there were an estimated 29,900 gangs (versus 29,000 in 2010) and 782,500 gang members (versus 756,000 in 2010) throughout 3,300 jurisdictions (down from 3,500 in 2010) with gang problems. The number of reported gang-related homicides decreased from 2,020 in 2010 to 1,824 in 2011.

About the Survey

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 gang activity nationwide. The sample consists of two groups: (1) all police departments in cities with more than 50,000 residents (larger cities) and all suburban county police and sheriffs' departments and (2) a random sample of police departments in cities with populations between 2,500 and 50,000 (smaller cities) and rural county sheriffs' departments.¹

Survey Findings

This fact sheet summarizes findings from the 2011 survey. Of the 2,544 survey recipients, 2,046 (80 percent) responded to the survey.

Trends in Gang Activity

In 2011, gangs were active in slightly less than one-third (31.6 percent) of the responding jurisdictions. This estimate has remained fairly stable since 2005, fluctuating by only 3 percentage points during that time. The decline in prevalence rates from 2010 to 2011 can be almost solely attributed to the drop in smaller cities, where gang prevalence decreased 4 percentage points. For both types of jurisdictions, prevalence rates of gang activity declined sharply in the late 1990s, surged in the early 2000s, and generally stabilized in recent years (see figure 1 on page 2).

Key Points

Based on law enforcement reports, in 2011—

- Nearly one-third of all responding law enforcement agencies reported gang activity.
- Slightly fewer jurisdictions experienced gang activity than in 2010 (3,300 versus 3,500).
- Gang activity was concentrated primarily in urban areas, especially larger cities.
- Gang-related homicides declined overall nationally but fell only slightly in metropolitan areas.



Gang Presence in Metropolitan Areas

The three commonly used gang-magnitude indicators—number of gangs, gang members, and gang-related homicides²—suggest that gang activity is concentrated primarily in urban areas, especially larger cities. NYGS 2011 results indicate that 56 percent of gangs and 75 percent of gang members were located in metropolitan areas³ and a substantially large proportion of gang-related homicides (87 percent) occurred in these areas.

As shown in the table, following all-time lows recorded in 2002, the number of gang members and gang-related homicides increased slightly in metropolitan areas between 2002 and 2011. Similar results were found for the change between 2005 and 2011. The largest and most notable change occurred in the number of gangs, which increased by more than one-third in the past decade. Change estimates

Percentage Change in Gang Estimates in Metropolitan Areas, 2002–11

	2002–11	2005–11	2010–11
Gangs	35.7%	19.7%	9.0%
Gang Members	4.6	5.9	8.8
Gang Homicides	5.5	2.4	-7.7

from 2010 to 2011 indicate a measurable increase in gangs and gang members and a nearly 8-percent drop in the number of recorded gang-related homicides.

Fifty-four percent of the responding agencies characterized their gang problems as “staying about the same” in 2011, an increase over the percentage of agencies in 2009 and 2010 and the largest percentage that the survey has ever recorded. Reflecting the findings above, responding

agencies in areas where gang problems have emerged only recently (in the past decade) were most likely to report that their gang problems improved over the past year, whereas agencies in areas with longstanding gang problems were least likely to report diminishing gang problems.

Figure 1. Percentage of Local Law Enforcement Agencies Reporting Youth Gang Problems, 1996–2011

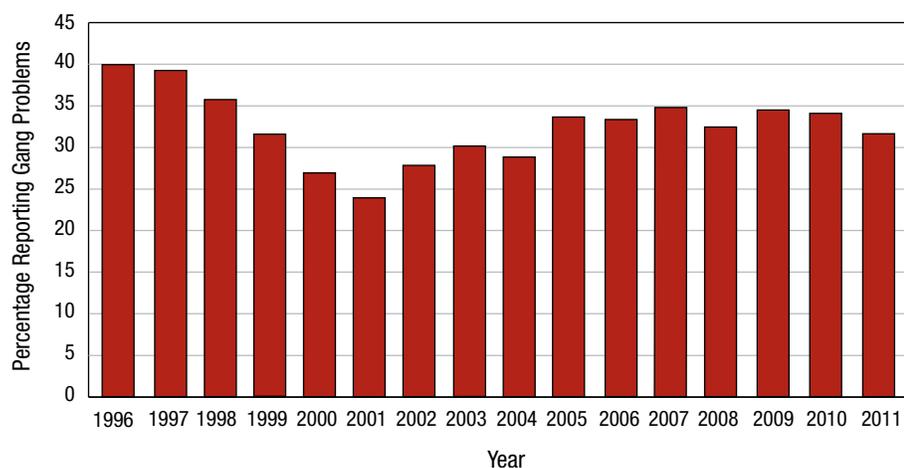
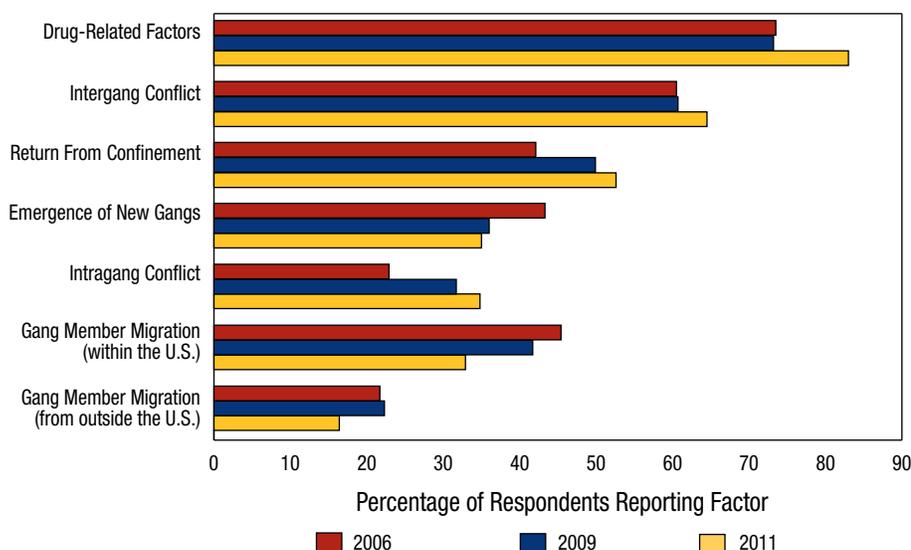


Figure 2. Factors Influencing Local Gang Violence



Factors Influencing Local Gang Violence

Figure 2 shows seven main factors contributing to local gang violence. The two highest rated factors across survey years are drug-related factors and intergang conflict. Two factors, gang members returning from confinement and intrgang conflict (conflict within gangs), increased in importance over survey years by more than 10 percentage points. In contrast, the emergence of new gangs and the migration of gang members within the United States declined noticeably over time as factors influencing local gang violence. Responding agencies ranked gang member migration from outside the United States last each year, and the percentage of respondents reporting this declined over time. The diminishing importance of gang member migration on local gang violence runs counter to wide-ranging media accounts but is consistent with previous NYGS findings on this issue.⁴



Law enforcement agencies frequently report an observed overlap of gangs and drugs, especially street-level sales, although several studies show limited gang member control of drug trafficking distribution and its associated violence, particularly homicide (McDaniel, Egley, and Logan, 2012; Howell, 2012). Intergang conflicts are wide-ranging, typically involving turf disputes, interpersonal disagreements, and a series of escalating and deescalating stages that create a cycle of retaliatory acts (Decker and Pyrooz, 2010).

Antigang Measures

Forty percent of respondents in the 2011 NYGS reported that their agencies operated a specialized gang unit. This figure is unchanged from 2006 when it was last measured. All but a small percentage of the gang units were operated in metropolitan areas, and approximately two-thirds had as many as five officers currently assigned.

More than three-quarters (78 percent) of the agencies reported that they currently collect and maintain intelligence on local gang activities. Of these agencies, a majority reported that their gang intelligence is computerized (84 percent), distinguishes between categories of gang membership (71 percent), and is subject to purging after a specified period (74 percent). These figures were significantly lower among agencies in jurisdictions where gang activity has emerged only recently (i.e., in the past decade). Twelve percent of the agencies said their gang intelligence databases specifically exclude juveniles (younger than 18). Most agencies (82 percent) share gang intelligence with other local law enforcement agencies; however, fewer contributed gang intelligence to a national, state-wide, or regional database system (15, 41, and 20 percent of respondents, respectively).

The Gang Resistance Education And Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program is an evidence-based gang-prevention program that law enforcement officers deliver in classrooms (Esbensen et al., 2012). Among agencies reporting a gang problem in 2011, 17 percent reported delivering the program in local schools. Use of the program appears to be wide-ranging, however, as agencies of varying types and sizes and across all U.S. regions reported their involvement in G.R.E.A.T.

Conclusion

Slightly fewer jurisdictions experienced gang activity in 2011 than in 2010. However, this change can almost entirely be attributed to a decline in gang prevalence in less densely populated areas.

Nearly 90 percent of all gang-related homicides nationally occurred in larger cities and suburban counties (i.e., metropolitan areas) in 2011. Metropolitan areas also accounted for 56 percent of the nation's gangs and three-fourths of all gang members. In addition, all three of the survey's gang-magnitude indicators—number of gangs, gang members, and gang-related homicides—show increases within metropolitan areas from 2002 to 2011, despite the historical drop in violent and property crime rates over the past decade (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2012; Truman and Planty, 2012).

Endnotes

1. For a description of the NYGS study population and sample methodology, see www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis/Methodology.
2. Law enforcement agencies use varying methods for classifying a homicide as “gang related.” The most commonly used method is the “member-based” approach in which a homicide is classified as gang related if the victim was and/or the perpetrator is a gang member. Some agencies report using a more restricted classification method called the “motive-based” approach, which involves also proving that the crime furthers the interests of the entire gang. The survey results were derived from the more encompassing member-based approach.
3. In this fact sheet, metropolitan areas refer to police departments serving cities with populations greater than 100,000 and suburban county sheriffs' and police departments.
4. See especially findings from the 2010 NYGS: Egley, A., Jr., and Howell, J.C., *Highlights of the 2010 National Youth Gang Survey*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available online: www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/237542.pdf.

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