

GANGS in Texas Cities

The
Background

Survey Results

State-level Policy Options

137580

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Office of the Attorney General

DAN MORALES

Texas Attorney General

June 1991



Office of the Attorney General
State of Texas

DAN MORALES
ATTORNEY GENERAL

June 1991

Dear Concerned Texas:

As Attorney General, I am prepared to commit the full resources of my office to the problem of gang violence on the streets of our Texas cities. Only immediate action can stem the alarming growth of these criminal street gangs, and only a true picture of the prevalence of gangs throughout our state can take us toward lasting solutions.

This report, *Gangs in Texas Cities*, is a first step in that direction, developed at the request of local police agencies. It is offered as an initial overview of a complex problem whose ultimate answer lies in a sustained and coordinated effort by all concerned Texans.

We recognize that we have a basic right to be safe in our homes, in our businesses, and on our streets. Yet, more and more Texas children are born into circumstances in which they are increasingly likely to be both victims and perpetrators of violent crime.

It is my hope that this report will encourage a new partnership among state and local officials, among the law enforcement and business communities, and among educators and counselors to invest in efforts geared toward keeping the young at-risk Texans of today from becoming the hardened, incorrigible criminals of tomorrow.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dan Morales".

Dan Morales
Attorney General

137580

GANGS IN TEXAS CITIES

Background, Survey Results, and State-level Policy Options

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June 1991

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IN C J F S
JUL 20 1992
ACQUISITION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is very little doubt that youth gangs are now a part of the urban landscape in Texas.

- Almost one-third of Texas Youth Commission (TYC) referrals are members of named gangs, and another third belong to a circle of friends who at least sometimes think of themselves as a gang.
- The Attorney General's survey of Texas municipal police departments found that youth street gangs are a presence and a law enforcement problem in most Texas cities of pop. 40,000 and above.
- The Houston Police Department documented the existence of 17 criminal gangs in 1988, 56 in 1989, 83 in 1990, and 102 in early 1991.

However, the concept of a "gang" and the criteria for gang membership vary so widely from one city to the next that it is extremely difficult to assess the extent and the seriousness of the problem. Moreover, to date, no major study of gang behavior has been completed in Texas. With this publication the Attorney General wishes to encourage and contribute to an atmosphere of organized official inquiry and balanced informed policy toward this disturbing new phenomenon in youth behavior.

The report on Gangs in Texas Cities consists of three parts. The first is a review of some recent sociological literature on gangs, the second presents the results of the Attorney General's latest survey of law enforcement officials in Texas, and the third is a discussion of state-level policy options with respect to youth gangs. Highlights are summarized below:

The Sociology of Gangs

Although no major study of gang behavior has yet been published in Texas, gangs have been studied for decades in other parts of the country, and many of the socioeconomic conditions that have been found to accompany gangs elsewhere are present in Texas cities today. In particular, gangs are found in environments that are most often urban and characterized by a high poverty rate.

Gang members, by every indication, tend to be from marginal families. A recent study of gang members in California consistently found family backgrounds marked by severe physical hardship: hunger, poor housing, inadequate clothing. Often families of gang members had been disrupted by death, desertion, or divorce. Many children who become involved with gangs have histories of running freely on the streets from a very early age, for extended periods of time and on a regular basis. If gang members are ranged along a spectrum, according to the intensity of their involvement in the gang,

the children coming from the most neglectful and needy environments are most likely to seek protection and strong bonding in a gang.

The Prevalence of Gangs in Texas

A preliminary survey by the Attorney General's Office in late 1990 suggested that gangs were active in most of the largest Texas cities. A second survey in April 1991 studied the prevalence of gangs in Texas' cities in greater depth. Results from this second survey are being presented and analyzed in this report for the first time.

Police departments in 50 Texas cities were contacted by telephone, and asked whether they were experiencing a gang problem. Out of 50 cities, ranging in size from 1.6 million (Houston) to 22,205 (Cleburne), twelve reported no gang problem; the remaining 38 (75%), including nine of the ten largest cities, reported a gang problem. Arlington was conspicuous among the ten largest cities in reporting no gangs, and Brownsville was notably gang-free by its own estimate, among cities near the border.

A more detailed survey was completed for eight major cities, including Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, El Paso, Corpus Christi, Abilene, and Harlingen. The cities all have different definitions of what a gang is, they all have different criteria for whether they consider someone to be a gang member or not, and moreover the cities are all different sizes. Each of these three factors---the definition of a gang, criteria for membership, and population---was taken into account in the interpretation of the raw data for each city surveyed.

With regard to how broadly they defined gangs, participating cities were ranked. El Paso's was evidently the broadest definition used; Harlingen's definition was judged to be nearly as broad. Corpus Christi, Dallas and Austin comprised a middle range. Houston, Fort Worth and Abilene had relatively narrow definitions. The definitions used by El Paso and Harlingen were therefore likely to yield relatively high numbers of gangs. The totals for Fort Worth, Houston and Abilene can probably be regarded as more exclusive, and therefore probably on the low side.

Any gang has a core of committed regular members, another group of more peripheral members, and an even wider group of associates. For any given gang, the estimated number of members could vary by a factor of two or three, depending on whether or not the peripheral members and associates are included. Harlingen and Corpus Christi member totals are probably somewhat inflated by broad criteria for membership, while member totals were probably understated as a result of the stricter criteria used in Houston.

Raw numbers of gangs and gang members were expressed as ratios, according to population. Both by gangs per 100,000 and by gang members per 10,000, El Paso ranks well above the field, even taking into account its broad definition of what counts as a gang. By both measures Houston ranks surprisingly low, even considering its narrow definition of a gang and its strict criteria for gang membership. Austin, Dallas

and Fort Worth appear to be roughly comparable, in terms of the level of gang activity reported. Totals for Harlingen appear to be high, compared to those for Corpus Christi and Abilene, both of which are larger cities. Houston reports lower numbers than might have been expected; Houston is the largest city in the state, and has with the lowest proportionate number of gangs and gang members.

The identification and reporting of gangs and gang members is so localized in Texas as to make a statewide comparison practically impossible to achieve. However, from the survey it is apparent that fairly high levels of gang activity are occurring in several cities, especially in El Paso, but also in Austin, Dallas and Fort Worth. To a lesser extent, Harlingen and Corpus Christi are also affected. Houston police express concern over what they perceive as a steady and alarming growth of gang violence in their city. However the numbers they report, even taking into account the strictness of their definitions, are enigmatically low. A plausible hypothesis is that, in a city as large as Houston, with the levels of serious crime that such large cities experience, police are unlikely to choose an operative definition that captures relatively low-impact youth delinquency.

Total gang membership for the eight cities represents approximately 9% of the total 7th-12th grade male enrollment plus dropouts, in the major urban ISDs. Gangs may present a significant law enforcement problem, but urban youth are not joining gangs wholesale. By rough estimation, less than one urban youth in ten is a gang member, even by the very generous criteria applied by some law enforcement agencies.

Out of the eight cities, five (Austin, Corpus Christi, Dallas, El Paso and Houston) reported that gang activity had increased in the last year (though Austin attributed the increase partly to changed methods of reporting). Three cities (Abilene, Fort Worth and Harlingen) reported that gang activity was down from last year, but Fort Worth attributed the decrease entirely to changed methods of reporting. Harlingen indicated that its reporting methods had been refined, but also that its anti-gang initiatives appeared to be working.

A more accurate assessment of the gang problems in Texas cities will have to begin with future observations. A complete and uniform record up to now simply does not exist. Future studies of gangs in Texas are needed, but further surveys of law enforcement agencies are not likely to shed more information than the spring survey already provides, until some sort of mechanism for uniform reporting is in place.

State-level Policy Options

Policies specific to the youth gang problem may have three aspects: monitoring, suppression, and prevention of gang activity. All three aspects must be addressed for a balanced approach. The Attorney General offers several findings and recommendations.

- The first priority must be establishing and maintaining a statewide gang database, based on uniform criteria for what counts as a gang, a gangmember, gang activity, and gang-related offenses. Only by working toward common criteria for monitoring youth gangs can state policymakers eventually reach a balanced assessment of a problem that has often been sensationalized.
- The definition of a gang for monitoring purposes should exclude "identity gangs" and merely undesirable behavior, despite the fact that there is a "slippery slope" between identity gangs and criminal gangs. Affectation of a gang's image, formation of a non-criminal youth gang, and marginal association with a criminal gang are widespread and often harmless. Similarly, criteria for gang membership should probably be designed to exclude less hardened junior participants, especially in the case of less serious offenses.
- Suppressive measures should be implemented. Vertical prosecution is one strategy that should be considered for offenses that are determined to be gang-related according to the criteria. Suppressive measures should be directed at the "hard core" of gang members.
- Law enforcement alone will not make the gang problem go away. A comprehensive, effective policy for the future must be preventive and compassionate as well as suppressive, with an emphasis on community involvement, with provisions for supervised recreation, and with attention to the problem of economic opportunity.
- It is important to recognize that youth gang activity is symptomatic of diverse social and economic problems. It is also important to make pathways of escape available to the redeemable fringe element in a gang's membership. Data suggests a positive relationship between unemployment, lack of education, and continued gang involvement as adults.

The Attorney General recognizes that many communities, agencies and individuals are already working to understand and solve the gang problem. This office is also concerned that more can be done on the level of state government, to support community and law enforcement efforts. Texas needs a gang policy that includes clear, well-thought-out criteria for identifying gangs, gangmembers and gang offenses; with tough penalties for hard-core gang activity; with provisions for a statewide gang database; and with adequate attention to related problems like youth unemployment, substance abuse, and dropping out of school.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF GANGS

In the most general terms, gangs are youth groups whose main activities are delinquent and criminal. Juvenile delinquency is, in fact, predominantly a group activity by nature. Studies have found that the great majority --- as many as 80% by some accounts --- of delinquent youths act with companions.¹ In many of these cases, the groups of companions are gangs. In Texas today, almost one-third of Texas Youth Commission (TYC) referrals are members of named gangs, and another third belong to a circle of friends who at least sometimes think of themselves as a gang.² A study of gangs is therefore to a large degree simply a study of the conditions and behavior associated with youth crime and delinquency.

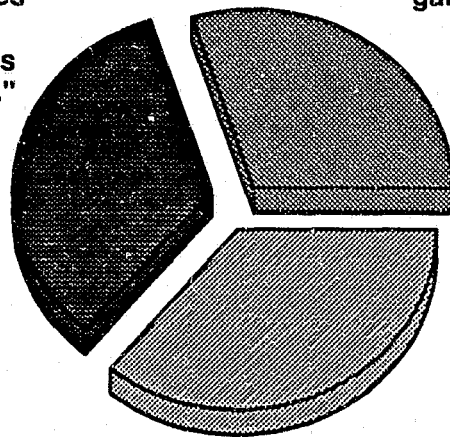
Gangs can be studied on a variety of levels: they can be studied in terms of the larger population or environment that characteristically produces them; in terms of the families within the larger group that produce the gang members; and in terms of the individuals who participate in gang activities. The following discussion reviews a few generally accepted findings at each of these levels. Attention to all three levels is needed, for gangs do not occur in just any neighborhood; their members do not generally arise from just any family; and of course even in the worst circumstances, the great majority of children do not turn to violence and crime.

Juvenile delinquency is predominantly a group activity by nature...

TEXAS YOUTH COMMISSION REFERRALS
1990

34% belong to a group that "sometimes think of themselves as a gang."

30% belong to gangs



TCADA

NEIGHBORHOODS THAT SPAWN GANGS

Gangs are territorial in the sense that they are associated with particular neighborhoods. The gang environment is most often urban and characterized by a

high poverty rate.³ Gang activity may occur in suburban neighborhoods, but this is definitely not the rule, and gangs in those circumstances tend to be newer and smaller.⁴ Moreover, when gangs do occur in the suburbs, they tend to appear in suburban neighborhoods with large concentrations of poor families, large numbers of youth, and high rates of crowding.⁵ Gangs are fundamentally a phenomenon of economically disadvantaged areas of cities, especially large cities.⁶

It is also widely agreed that the gangs of today are primarily found in association with what has come to be called the "underclass". These are people who are not just poor, but chronically poor. The underclass represents only a fraction --- possibly even less than 10% --- of the poor in this country.⁷ For the majority of poor people in America, poverty is temporary, either the result of personal misfortune, such as illness or injury; or the result of an economic downturn and the loss of a job. With the underclass, the situation is different. These are people who are chronically disadvantaged.

The underclass predicament has been described as a sort of self-perpetuating trap:

"Family stress...in one generation often leads to its perpetuation in the next, because youths raised in such situations...tend to incorporate the frustrated behavior patterns of adult role models into their own adult behavior."⁸

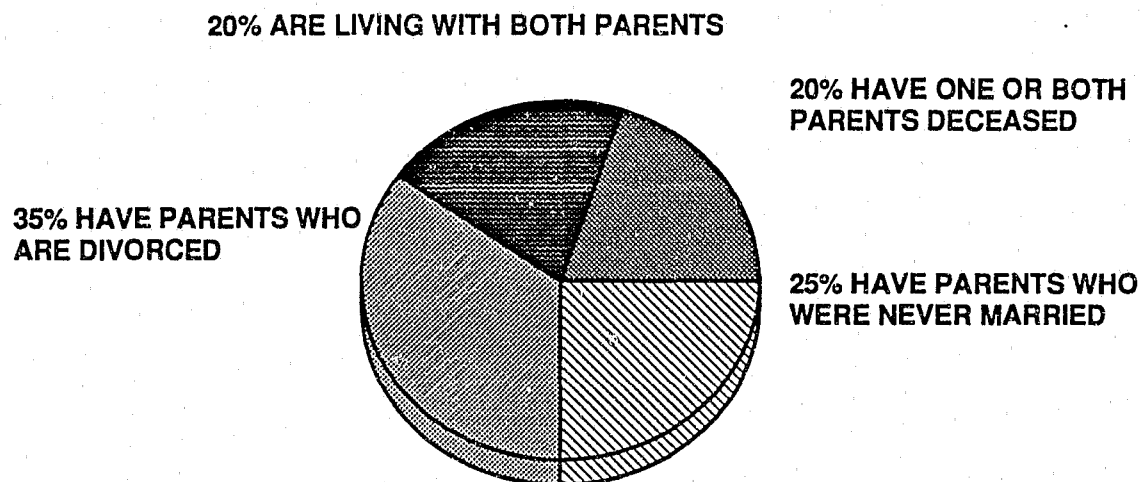
Within the most recent sociological theories about gangs, it is a persistent theme that, for underclass youth, middle class aspirations are largely impractical, and middle class goals are virtually unattainable. The fact of poverty or unemployment does not seem to be as central as the hopelessness of the situation, the absence of a socially sanctioned means of moving up. The majority of gangs today form in a socioeconomic climate that features *chronic* unemployment, underemployment, undereducation, and poverty.

Most major studies of gangs in this country were performed prior to the 1980's, and many of them date from the fifties and sixties. If there is any one feature that distinguishes the findings in the 1980's from those of earlier studies, it is the emphasis on the nature of the underclass niche. With unemployment high and chronic among underclass young adults, individual gang members have little opportunity to "mature out" of a gang.⁹ Consequently, in this most recent decade, gang members are more likely to maintain their gang membership into adulthood.

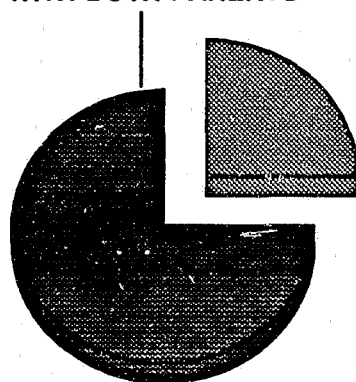
FAMILIES OF GANG MEMBERS

Gang members, by every indication, tend to be from marginal families. A recent study of gang members in California consistently found family backgrounds marked by severe physical hardship: hunger, poor housing, inadequate clothing. Often families of gang members had been disrupted by death, desertion, or divorce.¹⁰ Not only were gang members very likely to come from single parent families; gang members from single parent families were more likely than other gang members to be hard-core rather than transitional or peripheral.¹¹

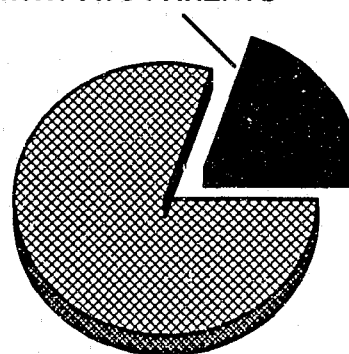
**FAMILY BACKGROUNDS OF TYC REFERRALS
1990**



**75% OF ALL CHILDREN
LIVE WITH BOTH PARENTS**



**BUT ONLY 20% OF TYC REFERRALS
LIVE WITH TWO PARENTS**



TYC

In Texas, a survey of TYC referrals shows that a disproportionate number are from disrupted families. In recent years only about 20% of TYC referrals are children of married couples. About 35% have parents who are divorced, another 20-30% have parents who were never married, and the remainder have one or both parents deceased. If the gang-involved youth within the TYC referral group share the characteristics of the whole, then about 80% are from single-parent homes. James Vigil (1988) suggests that in California something like 80% of gang members are from single parent homes.¹² In the population as a whole, by contrast, about three-quarters of all children live with both parents.¹³

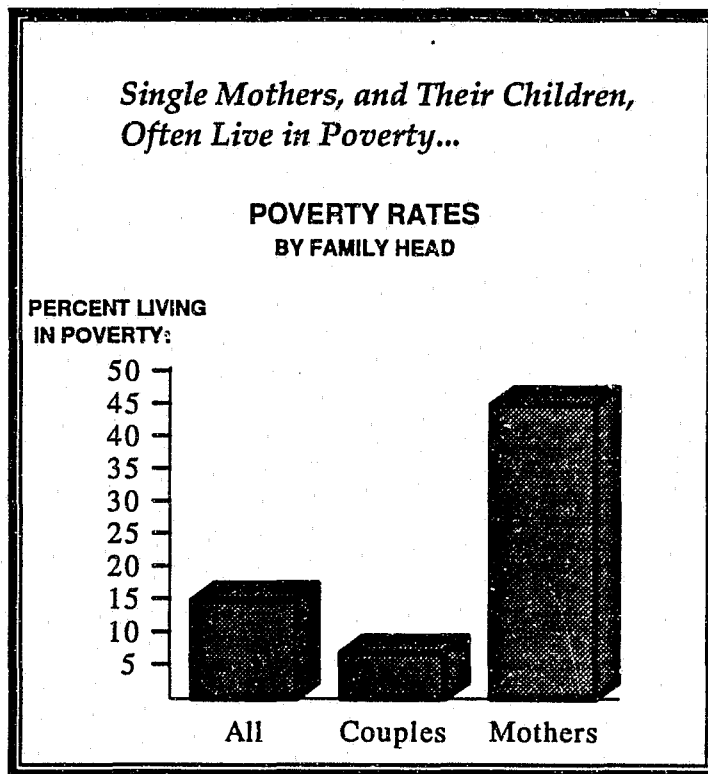
POVERTY AND THE SINGLE PARENT

Part of the reason single-parent families figure so prominently in the etiology of gangs is that so many of those families are desperately poor. Most single parent families are female headed. In 1988, 77% of all family households with children were headed by a married couple; 3% were headed by a male householder, and the remaining 20% were headed by single mothers.¹⁴ Women earn less than men (about two thirds as much), and less than half of all single mothers receive child support from the absent fathers. The result is that single mothers, and their children, often live in poverty. In 1987, 15% of all families with children were living below the poverty level; but the poverty rate for families headed by married couples was only 7%, whereas the poverty rate for families headed by single mothers was 45%.¹⁵ It has been estimated that half of the underclass live in single parent families (and that 70% of its members are children under 18).¹⁶

CHILDREN IN "SELF-CARE"

Another common factor in the families of gang members is a lack of adequate adult supervision for the children. This situation can easily occur in a single-parent family simply because affordable day-care may be hard to find. The average cost of child care paid was \$45 per week in 1986, or more than \$2000 per year, about 25% of a family's income at the poverty level.¹⁷ Conservative estimates are that more than 10% of elementary school children are regularly left in "self-care" for part of the day. According to some estimates, as many as 40% of Houston schoolchildren go home to an empty house after school.¹⁸

Gangs tend to be organized roughly into age groups ("klikas"), which are in turn organized concentrically, with those individuals most intensely involved in the gang at its center. The core may be temporarily joined by shorter term "transitional" participants, and is surrounded by less involved "peripheral" members. Associates (or "situational" members) populate the fringes, in virtue of acquaintance and social contact. The associates represent the lowest level of involvement in the gang. Within an age stratum, the leader is found among the hard-core ("regulars"). Organization between klikas is not hierarchical, but is rather more in the nature of a coalition.



Members of the older strata of a gang informally "help" and "advise" members of the younger groups.¹⁹

If Gang members are ranged along a spectrum, according to the intensity of their involvement in the gang, the children coming from the most neglectful and needy environments are most likely to seek protection and strong bonding in a gang. What distinguishes the hard-core gang member from the others is the depth of the need.

Kind of Gang Member:	Regular	Peripheral	Temporary	Situational
Age at which joins gang	10-14	14-18	14-18	14-18
Age at which leaves gang	22+	20+	18-20	16-20
Involved in violence	All	All	Some	Almost none
Criminal behavior*	Most	Many	Some	Almost none
Identification with gang	Profound	Strong	Marginal	Marginal

*(not including "status" offenses, like minors consuming alcohol.)

SOCIAL CONTROLS

The emergence of gang behavior can be seen as a failure of social control mechanisms. The first line of social control is traditionally the family, of course; in the case of many a gang member, parents and guardians have not been successful in this regard. The secondary net should be the schools. In the communities where gangs form, very often, the schools are failing too. In Texas, because the public school finance system has been inequitable, poor neighborhoods often have the worst schools. Children from the most marginal families are often those least prepared to succeed in the education system.

Analysis at the level of an individual life history of a gang member reveals a pattern remarkably similar to that of a high school drop out.²⁰ These are, in many cases, the same kids. They are born into poverty and they are often behind in school from the start. Their grades get worse and worse, as they spend less and less time in the classroom, and more and more time "hanging out" with their friends. Unsuccessful at school, these children find in their "corner groups" criteria for status that they can meet.²¹ Right around age thirteen, they begin developing delinquent behaviors in earnest.

Peak recruitment age for gangs is between 5th and 8th grade, according to the National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Research & Development Program Assessment.²² First substance use happens at about age thirteen. First use of tobacco, alcohol, and inhalants occurs at an average first age of about 13, among Texas secondary school students. Average age of first use of marijuana, uppers and downers is 14; average age of first use of cocaine and hallucinogens is 15.²³ And by far

the greatest portion of school-leaving occurs in ninth grade (almost 14,000 boys dropped out in Texas, in 1988-1989).²⁴

GANGS IN TEXAS

Research into the nature of gangs has been going on for most of this century, and the recurring theme is that gangs form among the urban minority underclass. Only a few studies have been done in the 1980's, and no studies have been completed in Texas so far. However, many of the economic conditions associated with gangs---poverty, crowding, undereducation and limited economic opportunity---can be found in Texas' largest cities today.

It used to be that youth in gangs could be expected to "mature out"---but this was at a time when nearly anyone could climb out of poverty with "hard work, English and a little luck."²⁵ The situation has changed: the consequences of undereducation are much more severe today.²⁶ Gang members tend to come from families enduring prolonged decline, rather than temporary hardship.²⁷ Children in these families generally face even bleaker prospects than their parents faced when they were young.²⁸ While these conditions persist in Texas cities, it is predictable that youth gang involvement will persist as well.

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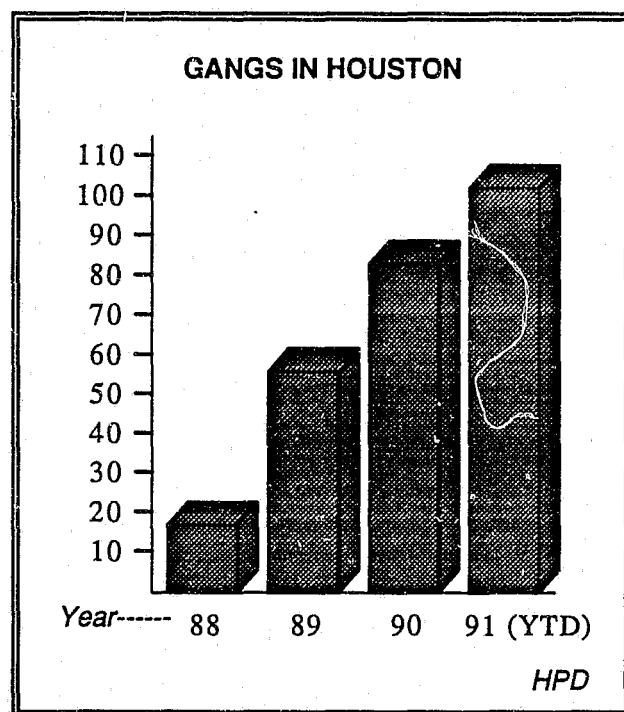
- ¹ ***Sociology of Deviant Behavior***, by Marshall Clinard, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., (1963) pp. 229-230.
- ² "Substance Use among Youth Entering Texas Youth Commission Reception Facilities, 1989," Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, p.15.
- ³ ***Barrio Gangs***, by James Diego Vigil (Street Life and Identity in Southern California), UT Press, (1988), p. 4, p. 10. ***Sociology of Deviant Behavior***, by Marshall Clinard, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., p. 227. Cites Cloward and Ohlin. ***People and Folks: Gangs Crime and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City***, John Hagedorn, Lake View Press, Chicago, (1988), p.33, p. 25; also in the introduction by Moore, p. 7.
- ⁴ Vigil, p. 8.
- ⁵ ***People and Folks: Gangs Crime and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City***, John Hagedorn, Lake View Press, Chicago, (1988), p. 78. Quoting Johnstone (1981).
- ⁶ ***Barrio Gangs***, by James Diego Vigil (Street Life and Identity in Southern California), UT Press, citing Cloward and Ohlin, on p.10.
- ⁷ ***Poor Support***, David Ellwood, Basic Books, (1988), pp.193-4.
- ⁸ ***Barrio Gangs***, by James Diego Vigil (Street Life and Identity in Southern California), UT Press, (1988), citing Cloward and Ohlin, on p. 25.
- ⁹ Hagedorn, Op. cit., pp. 33,38, 44-45, 49-50.
- ¹⁰ ***Barrio Gangs***, by James Diego Vigil (Street Life and Identity in Southern California), UT Press, (1988), p. 27.
- ¹¹ ***Barrio Gangs***, by James Diego Vigil (Street Life and Identity in Southern California), UT Press, (1988), p. 27.
- ¹² ***Barrio Gangs***, by James Diego Vigil (Street Life and Identity in Southern California), UT Press, (1988), p. 43.
- ¹³ ***Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1990***, p. 52.
- ¹⁴ ***Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1990***, p. 51.
- ¹⁵ ***Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1990***, p.462.
- ¹⁶ Ken Auletta, citing Frank Levy of the Urban Institute. ***The Underclass***, p.27.
- ¹⁷ ***Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1990***, pp. 371, 424.
- ¹⁸ ***Latchkey Children in Texas***, The Task Force on Latchkey Children, p. 3, citing Blank & Wilkins (1985). "Study Links substance use, 'latchkey kids,'" ***Austin American Statesman***, 9/7/89, citing a NIDA study.

- ¹⁹ Hagedorn pp. 86-94.
- ²⁰ Hagedorn, pp. 44-45.
- ²¹ Cohen, via Vigil, Op. cit., p.37.
- ²² National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Research & Development Program Assessment, May 1990, University of Chicago, in cooperation with the US Justice Department, p. 20, Executive Summary.
- ²³ Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, 1990 Texas School Survey of Substance Abuse, p. 39.
- ²⁴ 1988-1989 Public School Dropout Report, Texas Education Agency.
- ²⁵ Hagedorn, Op. cit., p. 45.
- ²⁶ Hagedorn, Op. cit., pp. 44-45; pp. 49-50.
- ²⁷ Hagedorn's sample shows this on p. 114, Op. cit.
- ²⁸ Hagedorn, Op. cit., p. 115.

THE PREVALENCE OF GANGS IN TEXAS

In the early 1970's Harvard law professor Walter Miller surveyed 12 of the largest cities in the US, and found that most had gang problems, some quite severe. The conspicuous exception was the one Texas city included in the survey: Houston was apparently gang-free.¹ Things have changed. In the first edition (1988) of its now-annual status report on gang activity in Houston, the Houston Police Department reported that the city was "literally witnessing the 'birth'" of youth gangs on its streets. The HPD documented the existence of 17 criminal gangs in 1988, 56 in 1989, 83 in 1990, and 102 in early 1991.²

A preliminary survey by the Attorney General's Office in late 1990 suggested that gangs were even more active in other Texas cities. Officials from Austin, Corpus Christi, Dallas, Fort Worth, Harlingen, Houston and San Antonio provided estimates of how many gangs and gangmembers they had identified in their respective jurisdictions. Dallas and Fort Worth both recorded higher numbers than Houston, while one small city, Harlingen (pop. 48,000), reported proportionately higher numbers still.



The fall 1990 results were convincing evidence that there was a gang problem in Texas; however it was also clear that there were no uniform criteria for counting gangs, and that there were no shared guidelines for maintaining records of gang-related incidents, gang prevalence, or gang membership. In the absence of statewide criteria, these locally maintained records were not really comparable. The numbers provided by Fort Worth and San Antonio represented "all kinds of gangs," while those from Harlingen represented only "hard-core" gangs. Austin and Corpus Christi counted "aggressive" gangs, and Houston counted "criminal youth gangs." Dallas counted any gang involved in criminal activities.

Given the disparity in what counted as a gang, it was impossible to draw any conclusions as to which cities were experiencing the most serious gang problems. Fort Worth and Dallas had very high numbers, compared to other cities; but they are very large cities, and they used a relatively broad definition. This was particularly true for Fort Worth, where all kinds of gangs were counted.

SPRING 1991: FIFTY TEXAS CITIES

From the results of fall survey, it was clear that gangs were present in all of the six largest cities in Texas, in Corpus Christi (eighth largest, with 257,000) and in Harlingen (48,735). During the first half of April 1991 the second survey of gang activity was conducted. Police departments of the fifty largest cities in the state were contacted by telephone, and asked whether they detected a gang problem in their respective cities. Out of 50 cities, ranging in size from 1.6 million (Houston)³ to 22,205 (Cleburne), twelve reported no gang problem; the remaining 38 (75%), including nine of the ten largest cities, reported a gang problem. Arlington was conspicuous among the ten largest cities in reporting no gangs, and Brownsville was gang-free by its own estimate. The 50 cities are listed on page 12, along with their responses.

The results of the fifty-city survey are superficial. A more extensive study would be needed to determine if the youth gangs in each of these cities are actually having a significant impact on the local crime rate. A more extensive study would also be needed to correct for those cases where political pressures or agendas may influence official comments one way or another about whether or not a city has a gang problem. But where the police department perceives a gang problem, there is obviously strong *prima facie* evidence that there is one.

SPRING 1991: THE DETAILED SURVEY

Police departments of ten cities were asked to complete a more detailed written survey as well. Participants in the detailed phase included all those cities that participated in the first survey, plus three additions, El Paso, Brownsville and Abilene. On the written detailed survey, participants were asked to report the number of gangs and gang members in their city, as before; but this time they were also asked to indicate some detail about the kinds of gangs they counted, and about the criteria they used for counting someone as a gang member. Options for kinds of gangs counted were:

- Delinquent Juvenile Gangs ("identity" gangs; kids wearing colors)(Activities include: graffiti, loitering, drinking, taking drugs).**
- Racist-hate gangs (Skinheads, White Supremacists)(Activities include graffiti, assault.)**
- Criminal Youth Street Gangs (Activities include: theft, burglary, taking drugs, assault, criminal mischief, weapons violations.)**
- Hard-core gangs ("Aggressive" gangs; gangs with economic power base)(Activities include: dealing drugs, assault, attempted murder, murder, weapons violations, "drive-by shootings", robberies.)**
- Prison gangs (Inmate gangs)(Individuals were members of prison gangs when inside TDCJ.)**
- Other**

*Does your
city have a
gang
problem?*

Responses to an April 1991
Attorney General survey of
police departments in fifty
Texas cities.

<i>City</i>	<i>Population</i>	
Houston	1,630,553	yes
Dallas	1,006,877	yes
San Antonio	935,933	yes
El Paso	515,342	yes
Austin	465,622	yes
Ft. Worth	447,619	yes
Arlington	261,721	no
Corpus Christi	257,453	yes
Lubbock	186,206	yes
Garland	180,650	yes
Amarillo	157,615	yes
Irving	155,037	no
Laredo	122,899	yes
Pasadena	119,363	yes
Beaumont	114,323	yes
Abilene	106,654	yes
Waco	103,590	yes
Mesquite	101,484	yes
Grande Prairie	99,616	yes
Brownsville	98,962	no
Wichita Falls	96,259	yes
Odessa	89,699	no
Midland	89,443	no
San Angelo	84,474	no
McAllen	84,201	yes
Carrollton	82,169	no
Tyler	75,450	yes
Richardson	74,840	yes
Longview	70,311	yes
Denton	66,270	yes
Baytown	63,850	yes
Killeen	63,535	yes
Galveston	59,070	yes
Port Arthur	58,724	yes
Victoria	55,076	yes
Bryan	55,002	yes
College Station	52,456	yes
Harlingen	48,735	yes
Lewisville City	46,521	yes
Temple	46,109	yes
N. Richland Hills	45,895	no
Bedford	43,762	no
Texas City	40,822	yes
Texarkana	31,656	no
Sherman	31,601	no
Edinburg	29,885	yes
Conroe	27,610	yes
Marshall	23,682	yes
Big Spring	23,093	yes
Cleburne	22,205	no

Options for which individuals were being counted as gang members were as follows:

- "Hard-core" members
- "Wannabes"
- Anyone who gets picked up in connection with a gang-related incident
- Other

The questions about kinds of gangs and gang members were supported by two open questions, "Do you have a working definition of a 'gang'?" and "What do you look for, that tells you whether someone is a gang member?"

Other questions on the survey involved gang-related offenses, and increases or decreases in gang activity.

RESULTS OF THE DETAILED SURVEY

Ten cities were provided with the detailed survey; results from eight will be used in this report. San Antonio provided numbers over the telephone (24 gangs with 600 members), but has not completed the written questionnaire. In the absence of the complete written survey, the numbers cannot be interpreted with confidence. Brownsville reported 0 gangs and 0 gang members. The raw numbers of gangs and gang members for the eight other respondents were as follows:

City	Gangs:	Gang Members:
Abilene	5	60-66
Austin	50	1,885
Corpus Christi	12-15	500-700
Dallas	221	3,695
El Paso	200	3,476
Fort Worth	115	1,542
Harlingen	7	300
Houston	102	1,098

Gangs. From the questions on definitions, it was clear that there was still a wide disparity between kinds of gangs counted from one city to the next, and even from one survey to the next for the same city. Kinds of gangs checked by the cities were as follows:

City	Identity	Racist	Criminal	Hard-Core	Prison
ABILENE	(Yes)	(No)	(Yes)	(No)	(No)
AUSTIN	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(No)
CORPUS CHRISTI	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)
DALLAS	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)
EL PASO	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)
FORT WORTH	(No)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)
HARLINGEN	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(No)
HOUSTON	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(No)

All options were checked by Corpus Christi, Dallas, and El Paso. Under the "other" option El Paso indicated that it also felt the presence of gangs crossing the border, biker gangs, satanic gangs, and "car club" gangs. Harlingen also reported gangs from across the border, and indicated over the telephone that a variety of gangs was occurring in that city. However, Harlingen either does not count or does not detect the presence of prison gang members. Results from Abilene indicate that the department has not counted racist, hard-core or prison gangs. Both Austin and Houston exclude prison gangs from their tallies, and Fort Worth does not count the merely delinquent juvenile gangs.

Gang Members. Harlingen and Corpus Christi evidently both counted gang members broadly, more so than other cities. Abilene, Austin and El Paso all exclude "wannabes", while Dallas and Fort Worth do not automatically count anyone who gets picked up in relation to a gang offense. Houston counts only hard-cores. Options checked on the question about gang members were as follows:

City	Hard-Cores	Wannabes	Anyone Picked Up
ABILENE	(Yes)	(No)	(Yes)
AUSTIN	(Yes)	(No)	(Yes)
CORPUS CHRISTI	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)
DALLAS	(Yes)	(Yes)	(No)
EL PASO	(Yes)	(No)	(Yes)
FORT WORTH	(Yes)	(Yes)	(No)
HARLINGEN	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)
HOUSTON	(Yes)	(No)	(No)

INTERPRETING THE RESULTS: VARIABLES

The cities all have different definitions of what a gang is, they all have different criteria for whether they consider someone to be a gang member or not, and moreover the cities are all different sizes. Each of these three factors---the definition of a gang,

criteria for membership, and population---must be taken into account in the interpretation of the raw data for each city surveyed.

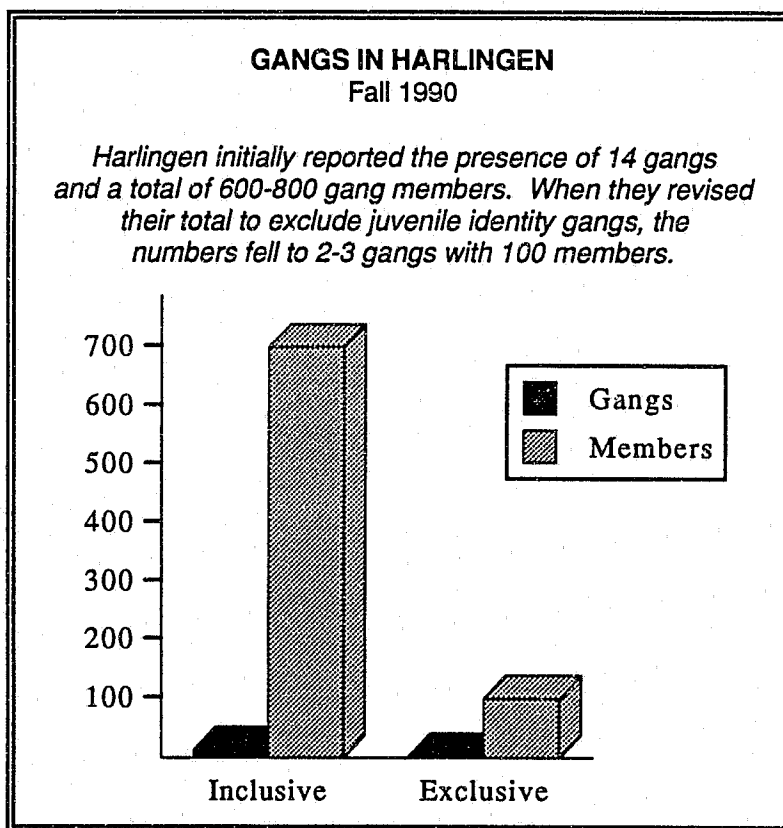
Definition of a Gang. A city that counts every juvenile identity group as a gang will report a much higher number than if it only counted the gangs actually involved in serious criminal offenses. This variation is strictly a function of the manner of reporting. The city of Harlingen serves as a good illustration: during the fall survey Harlingen initially reported the presence of 14 gangs with 600-800 members. These were startlingly high numbers, coming from a town of less than 50,000. Austin, with a population of over 400,000, had reported only slightly higher figures. When the Harlingen police were called a second time it became apparent that the numbers for that city were based on a broader definition.

To bring their own numbers more into line with those of other cities, Harlingen police revised their estimate to 2-3 hard-core gangs, with 100 members. Thus a single city at a single point in time, with perfectly good police intelligence input, could reasonably make two estimates that varied by a factor of seven, depending on what they counted as a gang.

This case clearly demonstrates the difficulty of judging levels of gang activity on the basis of reported numbers alone. Harlingen was not an unusual case. San Antonio showed a similar fluctuation. In the fall survey San Antonio police reported 54 gangs with 1000 members; in the spring they reported 24 gangs with 600 members. It is just possible that gang membership in San Antonio actually decreased by 40% in six months; but it is unlikely.

Participating cities were grouped as far as possible according to how broadly they defined gangs. El

Paso's was evidently the broadest definition used, since it included all the five options listed and other kinds as well. Harlingen's definition was judged to be nearly as broad despite its exclusion of prison gangs: Harlingen appeared to count any and all groups with leaders and territories. Also Harlingen, as noted, named several kinds of gangs in



addition to the five options listed on the survey (Houston, by contrast, specifically mentioned on the telephone that it *excluded* "biker gangs, "Gypsy" gangs, etc.).

Corpus Christi and Dallas comprise a middle range. Houston and Austin both excluded prison gangs, but judging from comments made by Houston police, Houston has a more significant prison gang problem than Austin. Also, Houston police reported in conversations that they counted few identity gangs. Houston's definition was therefore judged to be more exclusive than Austin's. Fort Worth may have a narrower definition than Abilene: by excluding identity gangs, Fort Worth probably excludes a more significant number of doubtful cases.

The table below shows a ranking of the cities, based on a comparison of the operative definitions of what counts as a gang. It appears that the definitions used by El Paso and Harlingen are relatively more inclusive, and are likely to yield relatively high numbers. The totals for Fort Worth, Houston and Abilene can probably be regarded as more exclusive, and therefore probably on the low side.

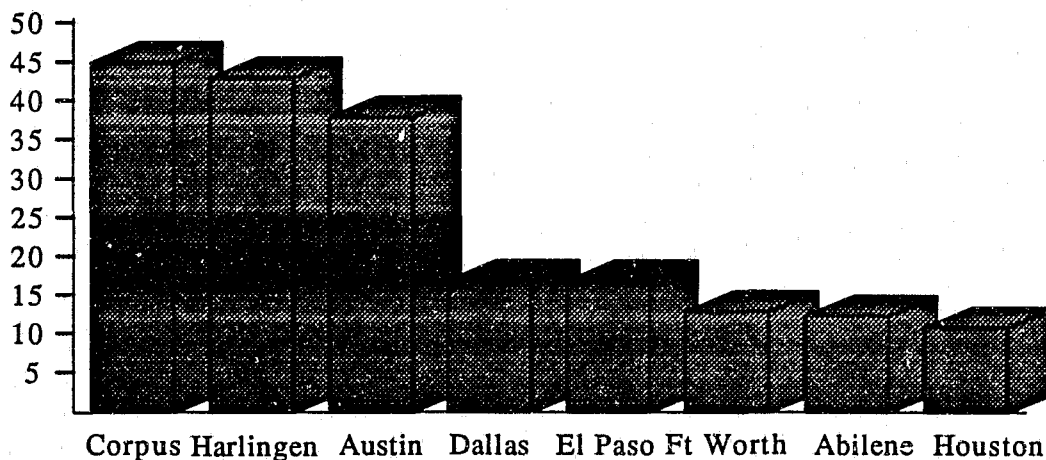
City:	Kinds of Gangs Counted:	
EL PASO	All five kinds plus others	Broad
HARLINGEN	All but prison, plus others	
CORPUS CHRISTI	All kinds	Medium
DALLAS	All kinds	
AUSTIN	All except prison gangs	Narrow
HOUSTON	No prison gangs, few identity gangs	
ABILENE	Identity & criminal only; no racist, hard-core, prison	
FORT WORTH	No identity gangs	

Criteria for Gang Membership. Any gang has a core of committed regular members, another group of more peripheral members, and an even wider group of associates. For any given gang, the estimated number of members could vary by a factor of two or three, depending on whether or not the peripheral members and associates are included. In the spring survey average gang size, based on the reported numbers of gangs and members, ranged from 11 (in Houston) to 40-50 (in Corpus Christi).

To some degree the variation in gang size was explained by the options checked and definitions given in the questions about who counted as a gang member. Of course it is possible that gangs are larger in some areas than others. Still it appears that Harlingen and Corpus Christi member totals are inflated by broad criteria for membership, while member totals were probably understated as a result of the stricter criteria used in Houston.

AVERAGE GANG SIZE
Spring Survey Participants

(Cities are arranged according to how inclusive their criteria for gang membership were, from left to right, city with the broadest criteria on the left)



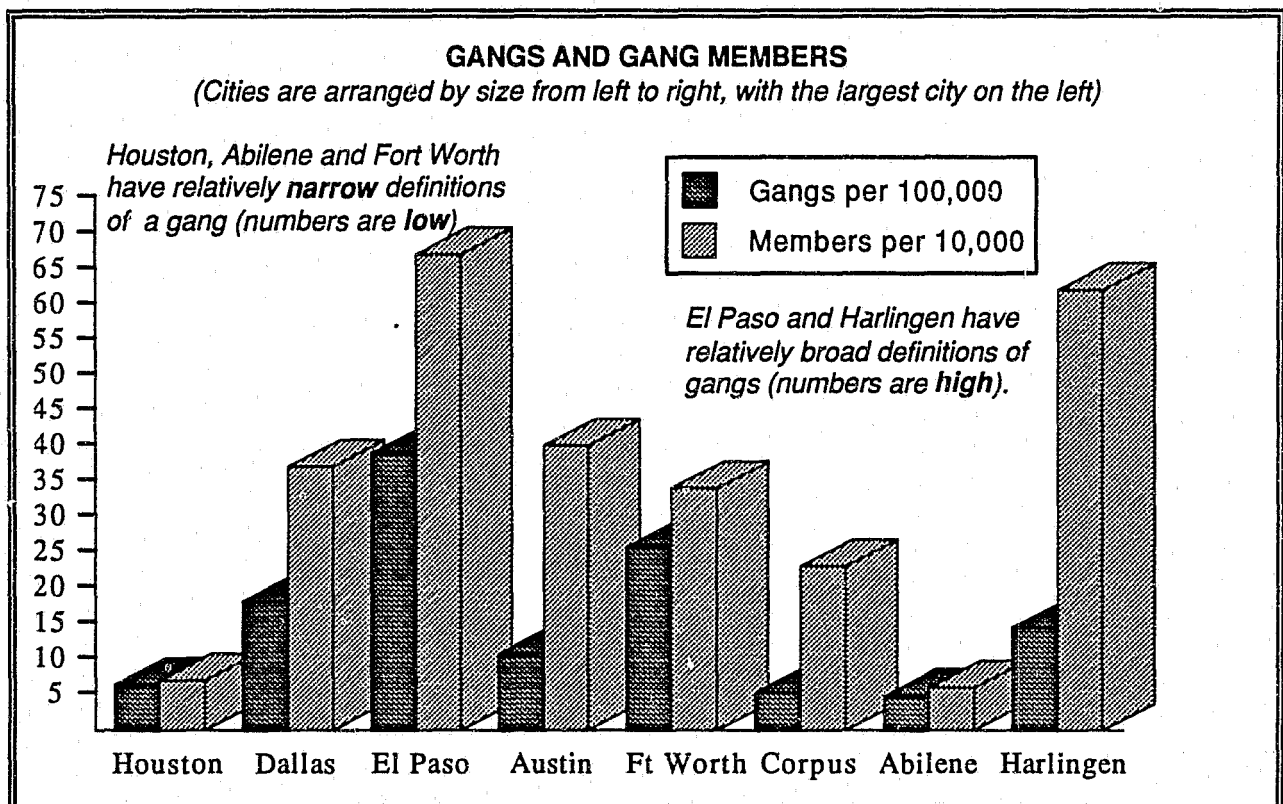
City:	Includes as Gang Members:	Avg. Gang Size
	Wannabes and Associates	over 30
HARLINGEN	Wannabes and Associates	
	Excludes Wannabes	15-20
DALLAS	Not everyone picked up	
	Excludes Wannabes	10-15
	Not everyone picked up	
HOUSTON	Hard-cores only	

Population. The size of a city is crucial also. Harlingen, for example, reports about 300 gang members and Houston reports nearly 1100, so Houston has nearly four times as many gang members as Harlingen. But this hardly shows that Houston has a worse gang problem: Houston has a population of 1.6 million, versus Harlingen's 50,000.

The cities surveyed range in population from 1.6 million to 49,000. If the raw data is expressed in terms of gang members per 10,000 population, values range from 6 gang members per 10,000 in Abilene to 67 gang members per 10,000 in El Paso. The number of gangs per 100,000 population ranged from 4.7 in Abilene to 38.8 in El Paso.

	Population	Gangs/100,000	Members/10,000
ABILENE	106,654	4.7	6
AUSTIN	465,622	10.7	40
CORPUS CHRISTI	257,453	5.2	23
DALLAS	1,006,877	21.9	37
EL PASO	515,342	38.8	67
FORT WORTH	447,619	25.7	34
HARLINGEN	48,735	14.4	62
HOUSTON	1,630,553	6.3	7

Both by gangs per 100,000 and by gang members per 10,000, El Paso ranks well above the field, even taking into account its broad definition of what counts as a gang. By both measures Houston ranks surprisingly low, even considering its narrow definition of a gang and its strict criteria for gang membership. Austin, Dallas and Fort Worth appear to be roughly comparable, in terms of the level of gang activity reported. Totals for Harlingen appear to be high, compared to those for Corpus Christi and Abilene, both of which are larger cities. Houston reports lower numbers than might have been expected; Houston is the largest city in the state, and has with the lowest proportionate number of gangs and gang members.



Police officers in both El Paso and Houston were contacted about their positions (apparently having most and least gangs, respectively) when the final results had been tabulated. Neither expressed surprise at the outcome. Gang specialists in both cities thought it plausible that El Paso has a very high level of gang activity, and that Houston has a relatively low level, considering its size.

THE PREVALENCE OF GANGS AMONG URBAN YOUTH

In his study of southern California gangs, James Vigil estimated that only about 5-10% of underclass youth are involved in gangs.⁴ If that estimate is correct, then gang membership is decidedly exceptional behavior: only one in ten or twenty underclass youths is participating. This is a fairly modest rate of participation, in light of the fact that underclass youth are only a portion of all youth, even in major metropolitan areas. In an earlier study, Miller (1975) estimated that, in six major cities studied, gang members represented less than 4% of the male adolescent population.⁵ No comparable estimate of youth participation in Texas is available, and none will be available until a detailed sociological study is performed in a Texas city. However, a hypothesis can be made, based on gang membership totals reported in the spring survey.

Public school enrollment in any district is not really an approximation of relevant local youth population, for two reasons: some youth are not in school, and some gang-involved youth are older than school age. Nor is it clear which school districts in each city best capture the important gang-producing territories. Gang member totals collected in the spring survey are city-wide, and in some cases include gangs based outside the city's major urban ISD. Notwithstanding all these considerations, enrollments are used below, along with dropout counts, to place in perspective the numbers of gang members reported in the eight survey cities.

The table below shows fall 1990 7th-12th grade male enrollment in the major urban independent school districts for each city surveyed,⁶ the number of male dropouts reported for those school districts the previous year,⁷ and the number of reported gang members for each city. (Gang members are overwhelmingly male.) Total gang membership for the eight cities represents approximately 9% of the total 7th-12th grade male enrollment plus dropouts, in the major urban ISDs. Gangs may present a significant law enforcement problem, but urban youth are not joining gangs wholesale. By this rough estimation, less than one urban youth in ten is a gang member, even by the very generous criteria applied by some law enforcement agencies.

**Total Gang Members Compared to Enrollment and Dropouts
Eight Survey Cities & Major Urban ISDs**

(Total gang members may be drawn from additional ISDs in some cities. Therefore, the number of gang members in each city cannot be simply represented as a proportion of enrollment plus dropouts. Also, ratios of gang members to enrollment plus dropouts for the different cities are not simply comparable. However, it is clear that gang-involved youth represent no more than roughly 10% of local urban youth in the eight survey cities.)

	Male Enrollment Major Urban ISD (1980-91) (TEA)	Male Dropouts (1989-90) (TEA)	Gang Members (Citywide)
Abilene	3,555	122	66
Austin	12,487	1,071	1,885
Corpus Christi*	9,383	469	600
Dallas	25,706	4,571	3,695
El Paso**	25,622	1,651	3,476
Ft. Worth***	13,652	732	1,542
Harlingen	3,291	375	300
Houston	36,100	4,101	1,098
Total:	129,796	13,092	12,662

*Includes West Oso ISD
**Includes Ysleta ISD
***Includes Castleberry ISD

Actual estimates of the proportions of youth joining gangs will not be available until a more detailed study is done. It does appear that in El Paso the number of gang members in comparison to enrollment is nowhere near as high as the discussion so far would lead one to expect. Also the numbers for Houston, once again, look amazingly low. The unexpected results in the latter two cities could only be explained by a more detailed geographical analysis comparing the area encompassed by the gang members estimates with the school district boundaries that yield the enrollment and dropout totals.

HOUSTON

In the table above, the enrollment total is for Houston ISD alone. However, based on the Houston Police Department Gang Report, gangs are distributed over a much wider area in the city. If the other ISD's were included, the total enrollment would jump by over 30,000, and the proportion of youth involved in gangs in this largest city in the state would drop almost out of sight, under 2%, below even Abilene. Is it possible that Houston youth are so much less involved in gangs than the youth in other (smaller) Texas cities? Or is HPD actually significantly more restrictive about applying the gang label than police in any other city?

A look at TYC referrals is suggestive. In Texas TYC commitments are concentrated in the counties with the largest urban areas. Harris County leads all other counties, accounting for 29% of all TYC referrals. In seven of the eight counties listed below (these are the counties where the survey cities are located), the county share of the state's 10-17 year-old population is roughly greater than or equal to its share of TYC referrals. Harris county is a glaring exception, with 16% of the state's 10-17 year-olds, but 29% of TYC referrals. Delinquency is obviously not outstandingly low in this part of the state.

County	10-17 year olds in county (1988):	County share of state's 10-17 year- olds:	County share of TYC referrals (1990):
Bexar	76,652	8%	6%
Cameron	19,726	2%	2%
Dallas	101,063	10%	9%
El Paso	41,731	4%	5%
Harris	165,493	16%	29%
Nueces	19,697	2%	2%
Tarrant	66,304	7%	9%
Travis	27,179	3%	2%

Data from TYC and Texas Department of Commerce.

It may be that gang activity is not as prevalent a style or vehicle of delinquency in Harris county; or it may be that Houston's criteria for gang membership are even more stringent that it appeared in the analysis up to this point. All that can be said with certainty is that the identification and reporting of gangs and gang members is so localized in Texas as to make a statewide comparison practically impossible to achieve. A plausible hypothesis is that, in a city as large as Houston, with the levels of serious crime that such large cities experience, police are unlikely to choose an operative definition that captures relatively low-impact youth delinquency.

OTHER RESULTS OF THE SPRING SURVEY

Reports of gang-related incidents were even less illuminating than the estimates of gang membership. Three of the eight police departments do not document whether an offense is gang-related. Reporting of specific gang-related offenses for 1990 (even just for murders, gang-related deaths, and drive-by shootings) was scant.

Gang Related Offenses in 1990				
City	Offenses	Drive-Bys	Murders	Deaths
Abilene	50-60	20	3	4
Austin	988	69	7	1
Corpus Christi	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Dallas	1,793	N/A	N/A	N/A
El Paso	N/A	N/A	9	9
Fort Worth	1,290	112	30	N/A
Harlingen	125	3	N/A	N/A
Houston	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Out of the eight cities, five (Austin, Corpus Christi, Dallas, El Paso and Houston) reported that gang activity had increased in the last year (though Austin attributed the increase partly to changed methods of reporting). Three cities (Abilene, Fort Worth and Harlingen) reported that gang activity was down from last year, but Fort Worth attributed the decrease entirely to changed methods of reporting. Harlingen indicated that its reporting methods had been refined, but also that its anti-gang initiatives appeared to be working.

SUMMARY OF SPRING SURVEY RESULTS

When different methods of counting gangs and gang members have been taken into account as far as possible, it appears that a high level of gang activity is occurring in several cities, especially in El Paso, but also in Austin, Dallas and Fort Worth. To a lesser extent, Harlingen and Corpus Christi are also affected. Houston police express concern over what they perceive as a steady and alarming growth of gang violence in their city. However the numbers they report, even taking into account the strictness of their definitions, are enigmatically low.

A more accurate assessment of the gang problems in Texas cities will have to begin with future observations. A complete and uniform record up to now simply does not exist. Future studies of gangs in Texas are needed, but further surveys of law enforcement agencies are not likely to shed more information than the spring survey already provides, until some sort of mechanism for uniform reporting is in place.

¹ "Violence by Youth Gangs and Youth Groups as a Crime Problem in Major American Cities, Walter B. Miller, Center for Criminal Justice, Harvard Law School, Cambridge, Mass., December 1975, p. 12.

² *Gang Activity in Houston, A Status Report*, Criminal Intelligence Division, Houston Police Department, Introduction.

³ 1991 city populations (governmental units only), US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census.

⁴ *Barrio Gangs*, James Diego Vigil, UT Press (1988), 7.

⁵ "Violence by Youth Gangs and Youth Groups as a Crime Problem in Major American Cities, Walter B. Miller, Center for Criminal Justice, Harvard Law School, Cambridge, Mass., December 1975, p. 18.

⁶ Texas Education Agency.

⁷ Texas Education Agency.

STATE-LEVEL POLICY OPTIONS

The Attorney General's surveys on gangs show convincingly that there are gangs on the streets of Texas cities. Generally, local police departments are making a conscientious effort to identify and monitor local youth street gangs. But they have no uniform criteria for counting gangs, and no shared guidelines for maintaining records of gang-related incidents or gang membership. Given the absence of uniform crime reporting in this important area, it is impossible to draw firm conclusions about the seriousness and prevalence of this youth gang activity in cities across the state.

Leadership is therefore needed on a state level, in the area of uniform crime reporting on gangs and gang activity. The present situation is an opportunity for state government policy to support the efforts of local communities and law enforcement agencies. Only by working toward common criteria for monitoring youth gangs can state policymakers eventually reach a balanced assessment of a problem that has often been sensationalized.

Assessments are not all that is needed, however. Major studies that have taken place in other areas of the country are pretty much in agreement that the "gang problem" is not strictly---not even primarily---a law enforcement problem. It is a child care problem, a child support problem, and an economic opportunity problem. Firm suppressive measures may be necessary for the hard-core and for the short run. But a comprehensive, effective policy for the future must be preventive and compassionate as well.

BALANCING A POLICY ON GANGS

Policies specific to the youth gang problem generally have three aspects: monitoring, suppression, and prevention of gang activity. All three aspects are needed for a balanced approach.

Monitoring. The first step toward dealing with the gangs in Texas should be an accurate assessment of the problem. It is important to determine how widespread gang activity is, and how serious it is. Also, it is important to have a means of measuring whether gang activity and gang prevalence are increasing or decreasing over time. This would require a uniform method of reporting, similar to the uniform crime reporting program currently practiced with respect to murder, nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and property crimes. The Attorney General has found that there is no such mechanism for gang activity or gang-offenses. There is no central gang data bank in Texas, and there is no nationally accepted procedure for documenting or reporting gang-related crime.

Suppression. Most youth that are involved in gangs eventually do run afoul of the law. In fact, it is in the nature of gangs, as opposed to mere youth groups, that its members collectively engage in delinquent behavior. As one authority notes, gangs are

traditionally delinquent by definition.¹ James Vigil, in a study characterizing youths in various levels of gang involvement, reports that most members of a gang's core group exhibit criminal behavior *not including* mere status offenses (like minors drinking alcohol).² Similarly, Hagedorn (Milwaukee, 1988) found that his sample of gang founders was well-armed with illegally obtained weapons.³ A survey of TYC referrals found that 80% of gang members reported that their gangs stole, robbed, and/or distributed drugs.⁴

A gang policy will need to include some provisions for suppression of gang activity. The readily available options are enhanced penalties for gang offenses and vertical prosecution. The former requires guidelines for determining when an offense is to be regarded as gang-related, and when a person is to be considered a gang member. The offenses in question could include murder, arson, robbery, kidnapping, aggravated assault, sexual assault, weapons violations and violations involving controlled substances. When such offenses are committed by persons acting as gang members, the penalties would be those normally carried by the next-higher category of offense.

Vertical prosecution can expedite the trial and sentencing processes, so that individuals who are responsible for gang offenses can be more swiftly and surely removed from the streets. Under vertical prosecutorial representation, the prosecutor who makes the initial filing or appearance in a gang-related case will perform all subsequent court appearances on that case through its conclusion, including the sentencing phase. Gang violence prosecution in some cases involves protection for cooperating witness from intimidation or retribution.

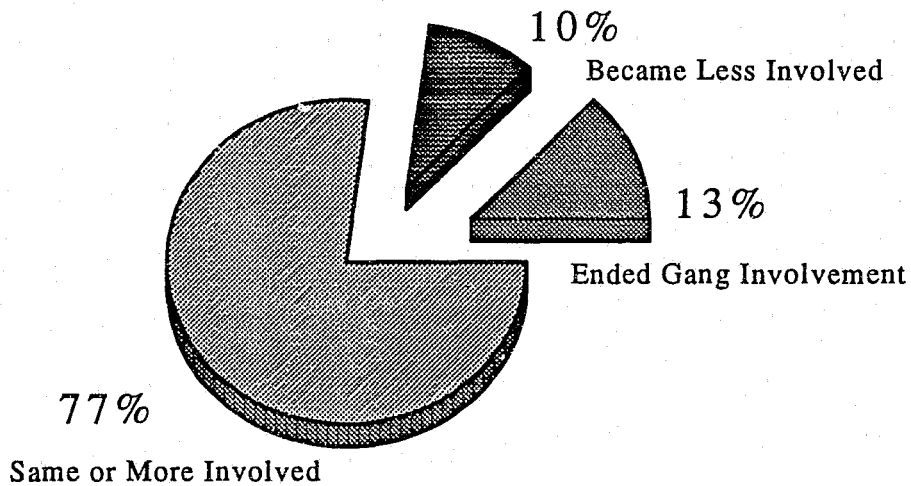
Prevention. Although removing hard-core gang members from the streets obviously keeps them out of action for as long as they remain off the streets, it should be mentioned that there is no further deterrent value in the law enforcement approach. There is no evidence whatsoever that being jailed inclines youth to discontinue their gang affiliations. On the contrary, there is some evidence, both from interviews and from statistics, that as the conflict with the law deepens, the commitment to antisocial behavior deepens as well. In Hagedorn's study, for example, among gang members who were incarcerated and released, only 13% ended their gang involvement, 10% became less involved, and the remaining 77% were as involved as ever, or more involved.⁵ Law enforcement alone will not make the gang problem go away.

SOLVING THE PROBLEM AT ITS ROOT

Much of what is believed to be true about gangs is based on studies performed in cities outside Texas. But if the heart of the matter is the same here, then solving the gang problem once and for all, at its root, is a rather tall order. For if nothing else has emerged from the literature, it should be clear that gangs are a symptom of a much larger problem. Gang behavior is not a commonplace response to poverty and social disadvantage. But it is one kind of result that can be expected, as long as very poor children run in the streets starting at ages as young as age seven;⁶ as long as

Incarceration & Gang Membership

Gang members who have been incarcerated are not less likely to be involved in gangs.



Hagedorn 1988

underclass life undermines family and community structure; and as long as the vacuums in certain very poor children's lives are filled by street subculture.⁷

This is not to say that there is nothing to be done about gangs, short of eliminating underclass poverty. Some of the more specific findings about the life patterns of hard-core gang-involved youth can be useful in designing a response. Some features of the predictable paths and outcomes:

"Street socialization" is taking the place of family structure for some of these young people. For a small but considerable portion of the underclass population, the gang has taken over where other influences have failed.⁸ Most street habits and customs represent normal cohorting behavior; the trouble comes when other deviant activities are also learned (petty crime, substance use).⁹ While it is not possible to eliminate street culture or the conditions that generate it, it may be possible to intervene in the drift of some adolescent groupings. It is for this reason that many communities are trying to provide recreational facilities and structure, interjecting some appropriate adult models, influences, and supervision.

Schools are the intended secondary socializing influence and instrument of social control (after parents). But in the highest poverty neighborhoods, schools are often ineffective. In theoretical terms, the problem is a "means/goals dichotomy" (that is, for underclass kids schools are not really a means of the attaining socially acceptable, middle class goals).¹⁰ In Texas, this translates into an annual dropout rate of 10.5% for major urban school districts in 1988-89. The rate for other central city districts was 6.1%. Rates for other district types (suburban, town, rural, etc.) were all under 6%.¹¹ The gang member has been characterized as fitting the dropout profile rather exactly.¹²

The dropout problem is a bigger and more difficult problem than the gang problem. But the shift of focus, from gangs to dropouts, may be a constructive one. Young gang members are an exceptional few in a larger population of disadvantaged children and young people in need of resources and prospects for social and economic advancement.

Law enforcement is a third line of social control, after parents and schools. Some have said (speaking of California, for example) that in the neighborhoods where gangs arise, police have a particularly antagonistic relationship with the people on the street.¹³ This is perhaps understandable, as the lives of delinquent youth follow a predictable path, starting with unsophisticated confrontational criminal behavior (such as robbery, shoplifting, mugging), and ending with arrest.¹⁴ However, along preventive lines, it may be helpful to promote positive interface between police and residents of underclass neighborhoods. DARE is a good example of a program that is designed to allow young children to form friendly personal relations with police officers, while also learning to avoid substance abuse.

There are established programs and there are funds for helping disadvantaged young people avoid dropping out and substance use. Efforts along these lines can all help communities to establish secondary and tertiary social controls, even for marginal and neglected youth. However, there are limits to what can be achieved by these means. For older youth especially, it is difficult to get results without addressing the still larger problem of economic opportunity (rather, lack of it).

INTERVENTION

John Hagedorn's study of gangs in Milwaukee found that neither prison nor education induced hard-core young men to leave their gangs. Hagedorn studied a group of gang founders (age 18-25) who were 13-17 when Milwaukee's 19 criminal youth street gangs formed. In this group, only one thing positively correlated to leaving a gang: a full-time job, something only ten percent of these youth had managed to acquire, five to eight years after starting a gang.¹⁵ Data on the present circumstances of the 260 young people who founded Milwaukee's nineteen major gangs suggests a positive relationship between unemployment, lack of education, and continued gang involvement as adults.¹⁶

For many of the youth who are the most hard-core, long-term gang members, finding and keeping a full-time job sets a goal virtually impossible to achieve. These tend to be people who lack training or skills, whose behavior is criminal or otherwise aberrant, and who come from families of long-time dependents on social services and transfer payments such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children.¹⁷ Reversing the direction of the most difficult cases may be virtually impossible. But for others there may still be more than one path open:

(In California:) "...contemporary evidence on hard-core adult former gang members indicates that they had a poor job record from the beginning...Most of their jobs were of the secondary level---noncareer, without fringe benefits, and seasonal."¹⁸

"...interviews with and observations of other former gang members (from the same age-levels and areas as the hard-core adults) showed that they regarded having found a stable, primary occupation as a life-turning event..."¹⁹

It is sometimes argued that youths on the street cannot be induced to work at decent but low-paying jobs, as long as they can make big easy money dealing drugs in gangs on the streets. But the situation is nowhere near as hopeless as that. A career as a dealer in a gang is not so glamorous or rewarding. One study showed that the average street gang dealer in Chicago made about \$150 a week, or less than minimum wage. It is estimated that the career of a dealer in New York generally lasts only about 3-6 months, before arrest and incarceration.²⁰ If youth are being led astray by the image of the high-rolling crack dealer in the movies, then this is an image that needs demythologizing.

GANG POLICY AND THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE GANG LAW

A state-level gang policy could be implemented by means of a new gang law; however, no gang legislation so far offers what could be called a comprehensive plan. Current legislation offers some legal criteria relating to gangs, and enhanced penalties for gang-related offenses. Texas law still does not mandate uniform reporting of gang activity or any form of gang prevention measures. Features of a truly comprehensive gang law could include:

- Guidelines or even mandates for establishing and maintaining a statewide gang database, based on uniform criteria for what counts as a gang, a gangmember, gang activity, and gang-related offenses;
- Suppressive measures, in the form of enhanced penalties and vertical prosecution strategy for offenses that are determined to be gang-related according to the criteria; and
- Provisions for gang prevention programs and activities, with an emphasis on community involvement, with provisions for supervised recreation, and with attention to the problem of economic opportunity.

One of the most important policy decisions has to do with the relative emphasis being placed on each of the three aspects of gang policy. The kind of law prescribed above would attend to each.

WHAT IS A GANG?

Central to any database, any effort at monitoring, is a set of defining criteria: for gangs, for gang members, for gang activity. Gangs are groups that are "operationally

important to the police."²¹ That is, a gang is defined ultimately in terms of the perceptions of others, especially law enforcement.

The definition used in the Attorney General's first Report on Gangs in Texas follows the precedent of a study produced by the Houston Police Department in November 1988, revised and reissued in November of 1989. The HPD definition mentions four defining criteria for gangs:

- A gang has a name and an identifiable leadership;
- It maintains a geographic, economic or criminal enterprise turf;
- Its members associate on a continuous or regular basis; and
- Its members engage in delinquent or criminal activity.

This definition is fairly broad, and encompasses relatively non-violent "identity gangs" along with criminal youth street gangs, prison gangs, organized crime gangs, and racist hate gangs. Some law enforcement agencies (including Houston, actually) are more selective in practice, preferring to count only those groups which engage in violent or "aggressive" criminal activities, or only those gangs which show a relatively high degree of organization and commitment, or only those with a relatively high level of "economic" activity (stealing and selling drugs, for example).

Current legislation defines a gang as a group of two or three or more persons who have a common name, or identifying sign, or identifying symbols, or leadership; and who engage in a pattern of criminal gang activities. Criminal gang activity is then defined in terms of specific offenses, with the proviso that at least two such offenses are committed within a three year period. The offenses include murder, capital murder, involuntary manslaughter, assault, aggravated assault, arson, criminal mischief, robbery, aggravated robbery, tampering with a witness, and retaliation; and various offenses under the Health and Safety Code, having to do with manufacturing, delivering, or possession of controlled substances.

These criteria are a bit more stringent than those adopted by many law enforcement agencies. They appear to exclude "identity gangs" and merely delinquent behavior. This raises the question how broadly the term "gang" should be defined. There are arguments on both sides. A broad definition, and the broader surveillance it entails, takes into account the fact that there is a "slippery slope" between identity gangs and criminal gangs. Arguably, a broad definition might tend to promote early intervention.

The disadvantage to grouping informal nonviolent associations with criminal gangs is that there may be a tendency, on the part of law enforcement, policymakers, media and communities, to overreact---to spread resources thin, to stimulate counterproductive notoriety, or to pin hard-to-shake labels on individuals too hastily. This latter consideration---the detrimental effects of labelling youth as "gang members"---leads the **National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Research & Development Program Assessment** (*University of Chicago, in cooperation with the US Justice*

Department) to recommend a narrow definition of gangs, and one that specifically targets serious criminal gangs.

WHO IS A GANG MEMBER?

Suppose it is practical to define a criminal youth street gang as a group of three or more individuals with a common name, identifying symbol or leadership, that engages in criminal gang activity. The activities may be defined in terms of specific offenses, such as those listed above, performed for the benefit of, at the direction of, or as an activity of, the gang.

Who should count as a member of such a gang? Current legislation does not address the question. The implication is that anyone who gets charged with a gang-related offense is a gangmember. But this seems to mean that anyone who is picked up along with a gang, who is participating in a gang offense, gets the gang treatment---enhanced penalties. Is this desirable?

In Florida, the recently enacted **Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act of 1990** provides criteria for identifying gangs and gangmembers, and provides enhanced penalties for offenses found to be gang-related. (The Florida law also mandates a state gang prevention policy and a statewide gang database.) This combination of ingredients is attractive in that it balances the need for strong suppressive measures directed at the hard-core, with the recognition that, for many youth, a phase of marginal gang involvement might be harmless and even understandable, given the conditions under which it occurs.

The Florida law defines a gangmember as a person who engages in criminal gang activity (defined much as it would be under the Texas bills) and who meets two or more of several criteria:

- Is a youth under 21 who is identified by a parent or guardian as a gang member;
- Admits to being a gangmember;
- Is identified as a gangmember by a documented reliable informant;
- Resides in or frequents a gang's territory and adopts its dress, hand signs, or tattoos, and associates with its known members;
- Is identified by an untested informant with corroboration;
- Has been arrested more than once in connection with the gang;
- Is identified as a gangmember by physical evidence (eg, photos); and
- Has been stopped in the company of known gangmembers four or more times.

These criteria are still fairly broad, but at least it is quite clear that not just any kid who happens to get collared once in the company of a marauding gang would get the heavier penalty, or the record that would carry such penalties in the future. For the less serious offenses, and for the less hardened junior participants, this could be an important difference.

PATHWAYS OF ESCAPE

"Most adolescents in American society walk a tightrope between conventionality and wildness. Gang members are different only because they are tipped toward wildness---and they need most urgently more weight on the other side and more opportunity to become conventional."²²

It may be desirable to introduce a number of measures designed to increase penalties and expedite prosecution for gang-related offenses committed by hard-core gang members. However most sources urge caution: the argument that "if it walks like a duck, talks like a duck...it must be a duck" can be very deceptive in the case of gangs, where youths dress and affect mannerisms to create similar impressions.²³ Field studies of gangs in other parts of the country document the role the police can play in strengthening gang identities, by labelling kids as gang members before they have even labelled themselves.²⁴ There is evidence that a strict law enforcement approach to less extreme delinquent behavior just further stigmatizes and isolates the offenders.²⁵

The Florida and California gang laws go beyond any of the bills so far considered by the Texas legislature in explicitly recognizing that youth gang activity is symptomatic of diverse social and economic problems. The Florida Legislature acknowledges that it is important to make pathways of escape available to the redeemable fringe element in a gang's membership. Affectation of a gang's image, formation of a non-criminal youth gang, and marginal association with a criminal gang are widespread and often harmless. When youth in a community show a tendency to adopt these behaviors, it is appropriate for youth, community, and law enforcement organizations to act. But apparently it is not constructive to begin by labelling individuals as gangmembers. Rather, preventive measures such as community and parental involvement are needed, along with alternative activities for youth and, very importantly, educational and economic opportunities for youth.

The function of a set of defining criteria for gangmembers should be the identification of the hard-core. Florida law and Texas' proposed laws would respond to that hard-core with enhanced penalties, and this is probably appropriate. The criteria are *not* useful for netting marginally involved youth, throwing the book at them, and pinning on them the stigma of gang membership. Texas needs a new law providing clear, well-thought-out criteria for identifying gangs, gangmembers and gang offenses; with tough penalties for hard-core gang activity; with provisions for a statewide gang database; and with adequate attention to contributing problems like youth unemployment, substance abuse, and dropping out.

- ¹ *People and Folks: Gangs, Crime and the Underclass*, by John Hagedorn, Lake View Press, Chicago, 1988, p. 55, with reference to Cloward and Ohlin.
- ² *Barrio Gangs, Street Life and Identity in Southern California*, James Diego Vigil, UT Press (1988), p. 90.
- ³ Hagedorn, Op. cit., p. 144.
- ⁴ "Substance Use Among Youth Entering Texas Youth Commission Reception Facilities, 1989," Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, p. 15.
- ⁵ Hagedorn, Op. cit., pp. 162-163.
- ⁶ Vigil, Op. cit., pp. 44-51.
- ⁷ Vigil, Op. cit., p. 36-37.
- ⁸ Vigil, Op. cit., p.35
- ⁹ Vigil, Op. cit., p. 52.
- ¹⁰ Vigil (citing Merton, Cloward and Ohlin, Moore), Op. cit., pp. 36-37.
- ¹¹ Texas Education Agency, 1988-89 Public School Dropout Report, p. 7.
- ¹² In terms of unemployment, poverty, minority overrepresentation, etc. See for example Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), Texas School Dropout Survey Project; and Texas Education Agency, Texas School Dropout Survey.
- ¹³ Vigil, Op. cit., pp. 36-37.
- ¹⁴ Vigil, Op. cit., p. 33.
- ¹⁵ Hagedorn, Op. cit., pp. 124-127.
- ¹⁶ Hagedorn, Op. cit., p. 114.
- ¹⁷ Moore, introduction to Hagedorn, Op. cit., p. 7.
- ¹⁸ Vigil, Op. cit., p. 31.
- ¹⁹ Vigil, Op. cit., p. 32.
- ²⁰ "Crack Dealing Not Easy Money," *Austin American Statesman*, 11/26/89.
- ²¹ Hagedorn, Op. cit., pp. 82-83.
- ²² Moore, in the introduction to Hagedorn, Op. cit., p. 17.
- ²³ Vigil, Op. cit., pp. 83-84.
- ²⁴ Hagedorn, Op. cit., p. 160.
- ²⁵ Hagedorn, Op. cit., p. 17.

GANGS IN TEXAS CITIES

The Sociology of Gangs. No major study of gang behavior has been performed in Texas; however gangs have been studied for decades in other parts of the country, and many of the socioeconomic conditions that have been found to accompany gangs elsewhere are present in Texas cities today. In particular, gangs are found in connection with impoverished urban single-parent families.

The Prevalence of Gangs. A survey of Texas municipal police departments leaves no doubt that youth street gangs are a presence and a law enforcement problem in most Texas cities of pop. 40,000 and above. However, the concept of a "gang" and the criteria for gang membership vary so widely from one city to the next that it is extremely difficult to assess the extent and the seriousness of the problem. Texas needs guidelines for uniform crime reporting of gang-related offenses.

State-level Policy Options. Strong suppressive measures may be indicated for the "hard-core", but law enforcement alone is not the answer to the gang problem. Comprehensive policy must include criteria for developing a statewide gang database, and preventive programs as well. To get results it is necessary to address the problems of economic opportunity and affordable child care.

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