

CRS Report for Congress

Youth Gangs: An Overview

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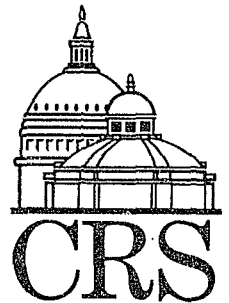
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YOUTH GANGS: AN OVERVIEW

SUMMARY

The growth in the number of youth gangs across the United States is a matter of increasing national concern. Knowledge about the nature and extent of the gang problem is often difficult to obtain. The most recent research on youth gangs focuses on four broad areas: the definition and characteristics of gangs, the spread of gangs throughout the country, the relationship between gangs and violence, and possible connections between gangs and drug trafficking.

Federal initiatives to combat the emerging problem of youth gangs grew out of efforts to deal with the broader issue of juvenile delinquency. The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 established a comprehensive program aimed at preventing and curbing juvenile crime. By the late 1980s the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's funding of research projects dealing with serious offenders became more specifically focused on the youth gang problem.

The current Federal response to youth gangs relies upon law enforcement as one of the primary weapons to control their growth and spread. Strategies to prevent and combat the problem of youth gangs often overlap and are intermixed. Legislative initiatives introduced in the 102d Congress generally embrace a variety of approaches ranging from suppression and incarceration of gangs to youth outreach and provision of more social and economic opportunities.

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YOUTH GANGS: AN OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The growth in the number of youth gangs in cities across the United States is a matter of increasing national concern. Malcolm Klein, a professor at the University of Southern California and Director of the University's Center for Research on Crime and Social Control, finds evidence of street gangs operating in 187 cities across the United States. Thirty some years ago, Klein notes, street gang activity was reported in only 23 U.S. cities.¹ In Los Angeles, the so called "gang capital of the United States," it has been estimated there are 950 gangs with a total membership of approximately 100,000 young people.²

Current research suggests that today's street gangs are more violent, as well as more numerous. Gang violence and inter-gang warfare are the cause of many drive-by shootings, turf wars, and homicides. In the Los Angeles metropolitan area, excluding Los Angeles County, gang related killings rose from 317 in 1987 to 619 in 1990.³ In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, one out of every six homicides reportedly involves youth gangs.⁴ There appears to be a growing consensus among law enforcement officials and academicians that the availability of sophisticated weaponry has exacerbated the problem of gang violence.⁵

Knowledge about the nature and extent of the gang problem is difficult to obtain. Only a few researchers have studied gangs in their neighborhoods,

¹ USC Gang Report Sparks Controversy Among Calif. Narcotics Officers. *Juvenile Justice Digest*, v. 20, Mar. 4, 1992. p. 4. Hereafter referred to as USC Gang Report Sparks Controversy.

² Clark, Charles S. Ultraviolent Gangs Wreak Havoc in the U.S. *Juvenile Justice Digest*, v. 19. Nov. 6, 1991. p. 1.

³ Gangs Problem Spreads: 'Magnitude is Startling.' *USA Today*, Oct. 24, 1991. p. 6A.

⁴ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on the Judiciary. Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice. Youth Gangs and Violence. Hearings, 102d Cong., 1st. Sess., Nov. 26, 1991. In Press.

⁵ Klein, Malcolm and Maxson, Cheryl. Street Gang Violence. In Weiner, Neil and Marvin Wolfgang, eds. *Violent Crime, Violent Criminals*. Newbury Park, Ca., Sage Publications, Inc., 1989. p. 219. Hereafter referred to as Klein and Maxson.

where some suggest a more accurate picture of youth gangs emerges.⁶ Other researchers have conducted interviews with gang members in more formal settings where communication is restricted and findings may be distorted.⁷ According to Irving Spergel, principal investigator for the National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Program sponsored by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "the youth gang needs to be better understood. The sources of knowledge concerning youth gangs are diverse and uneven, and research and program evaluation literatures are scant."⁸

This report reviews current research on issues pertaining to youth gangs; it briefly summarizes the history of the Federal response to gangs; and it discusses recent policy initiatives.

CURRENT RESEARCH ON YOUTH GANGS

Since the 1960s, there has been little research on youth gangs. In an article discussing the most effective policies for gang reduction and control, Assistant Attorney General Jimmy Gurulé concludes that "little is known about what works in gang suppression, prevention, and intervention. . . ."⁹ Similarly, social scientist John Hagedorn asserts that present understanding of youth gangs in the 1990s is limited in two ways. First, he concludes that very little empirical research on gangs has been done since the 1960s. Second, he argues

⁶ See Hagedorn, John, and Perry Macon. *People and Folks: Gangs, Crime and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City*. Chicago, Lake View Press, 1988; Vigil, James. *Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1988; and Taylor, Carl. *Dangerous Society*. East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1990.

⁷ Moore, Joan. *Gangs, Drugs, and Violence*. In De La Rosa, Mario, Elizabeth Lambert and Bernard Gropper, eds. *Drugs and Violence: Causes, Correlates, and Consequences*. National Institute on Drug Abuse Research Monograph 103, 1990. p. 172.

⁸ Spergel, Irving A. *Youth Gangs: Continuity and Change*. In Tonry, Michael, and Norval Morris, eds. *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*. v. 12. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990. p. 175. Hereafter referred to as Spergel.

⁹ Gurulé, Jimmy. *OJP Initiative on Gangs: Drugs and Violence in America*. National Institute of Justice Research in Action. June 1991. p. 4. Hereafter referred to as Gurulé.

that the research on gangs completed in the 1960s, when the bulk of the fieldwork was done, is no longer relevant to the gangs of the 1990s.¹⁰

The most recent research on youth gangs focuses on four broad areas: the definition and characteristics of gangs, the spread of gangs throughout the country, the relationship between gangs and violence, and possible connections between gangs and drug trafficking.

Definition and Characteristics

There is no generally agreed upon definition of youth gangs among those studying the gang phenomena at the present time. Most researchers agree that not all delinquent groups are gangs.¹¹ Analysts attempting to distinguish between gangs and delinquent groups point out that the two exhibit different types of deviance. For example, delinquent groups tend to be more loosely organized. By contrast, youth gangs appear to be more cohesive. Both groups engage in a range of crimes, but youth gangs are reportedly more violent.¹² Unlike members of delinquent youth groups, gang members tend to be somewhat older and share more characteristics such as age, race, sex, and neighborhood homogeneity.¹³

Sociologists Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson, who are on the faculty of the University of Southern California and affiliated with the University's Social Science Research Institute, offer a definition of a youth gang as a group of teenagers and young adults who:

- (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name) and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of [illegal] incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or enforcement agencies. . . .¹⁴

¹⁰ Hagedorn, John M. Back in the Field Again: Gang Research in the Nineties. In Huff, C. Ronald, ed. *Gangs in America*. Newbury Park, Ca., Sage Publications, Inc. 1990. p. 242.

¹¹ Spergel, p. 179; Klein and Maxson, p. 201.

¹² Spergel, p. 180-181.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Klein and Maxson, p. 205. The authors exclude youthful car clubs, motorcycle gangs, prison gangs, and satanic cult groups from their definition of youth gangs.

Members of youth gangs share characteristics of age, sex, and ethnicity/race. The age range is broad—from just under 10 years old to slightly over 50 years, with the average age for gang offenders identified as 19.4 years in a recent study. Current research indicates that members are remaining in gangs and not "maturing out" as rapidly as they once did.¹⁵ While there may be many explanations for this, analysts John Hagedorn and Perry Macon, who did field research interviewing gang members in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, attribute the failure of youths to "mature out" of gangs to the urban underclass theory. Underclass theory, according to one author:

postulates a new social class created by a new set of demographic, technological, and economic conditions whereby the demand for low-skilled workers in an increasingly service-oriented high-tech economy has been reduced drastically, permanently locking them out of the labor market and cutting off upward mobility routes available to earlier generations.¹⁶

Most youth gangs consist of males, although there is a small number of all female gangs. Male gang members reportedly commit a larger proportion of violent crimes than do their female counterparts. According to a 1988 study conducted by the Chicago Police, only 2 percent of gang offenders over a period of a year and a half were females. This percentage has remained consistent over several decades.¹⁷

Current studies indicate that gang members are predominantly black or Hispanic. A 1989 Department of Justice survey estimated that youth gang membership nationally was approximately 50 percent black, 35 percent Hispanic, and the remaining 15 percent white or Asian.¹⁸ Los Angeles police department statistics on gangs in 1991 showed 257 gangs were black, 240 Hispanic, 44 Asian, and 4 white.¹⁹ Though there are fewer Asian gangs than black or Hispanic gangs, the former are growing at a rapid rate. Many policy-makers and

¹⁵ Spergel, p. 218. See also Hagedorn, John and Perry Macon. *People and Folks: Gangs, Crime and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City*. Chicago, Lake View Press, 1988, pp. 49-50. Hereafter referred to as Hagedorn and Macon.

¹⁶ Miller, Walter B. *Why the United States Has Failed to Solve Its Youth Gang Problem*. In Huff, C. Ronald, ed. *Gangs in America*. Newbury Park, Ca., Sage Publications, Inc. 1990. p. 279. Hereafter referred to as Miller.

¹⁷ Spergel, pp. 219-20.

¹⁸ Clark, Charles. *Youth Gangs*. *CQ Researcher*. v.1. Oct. 11, 1991. p. 756. Hereafter referred to as *CQ Researcher*.

¹⁹ USC Gang Report Sparks Controversy, p. 4.

law enforcement officials predict that Chinese organized crime groups will become the leading organized crime problem of the 1990s.²⁰

Spread of Gangs

A recent phenomenon of the gang problem is the spread of gangs nationwide. Originally located on the East and West Coasts, gangs are now found in the Midwest and South. Moreover, gangs were once a problem of primarily large urban areas; today gangs exist in cities with populations as small as 8,000.²¹

There is disagreement as to whether the spread of gangs involves the linkage of one gang to another. A case in point is the alleged migration of two Los Angeles street gangs, the Crips and the Bloods. The Department of Justice maintains that gangs with links to the Crips and Bloods have appeared in nearly all of the 50 States.²² Others present an opposing view, suggesting that the migration of Crips and Bloods has been greatly exaggerated.²³ Another researcher who studied gangs in Milwaukee argues that although small city youth gangs pattern themselves after their larger urban counterparts, there is little evidence to suggest that large city gangs establish units or chapters in smaller cities.²⁴

²⁰ Chin, Ko-Lin. Chinese Gangs and Extortion. In Huff, C. Ronald, ed. *Gangs in America*. Newbury Park, Ca., Sage Publications, Inc. 1990. p. 130. U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on the Judiciary and the Caucus on International Narcotics Control. *U.S. International Drug Policy—Asian Gangs, Heroin, and the Drug Trade*. Hearings, 101st Cong., 2d Sess., Aug. 21, 1990. Washington, U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1991. pp. 4-5.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bryant, Dan. *Communitywide Responses Crucial for Dealing With Youth Gangs*. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. U.S. Department of Justice. Sept. 1989. p. 3. Despite the argument of the Drug Enforcement Administration that there is clear evidence of the migration of the Crips and the Bloods across the Nation, the DEA stresses that they find no clear organizational plan behind this migration.

²³ CQ Researcher, p. 760.

²⁴ Hagedorn and Macon, pp. 78-79.

Youth Gangs and Violence

Youth gangs and the violence they perpetrate are reported regularly by the media. District of Columbia Chief of Police, Isaac Fulwood Jr., recently commented that "heavily armed, home grown gangs . . . are the source of much of this city's seemingly random violence."²⁵ Most researchers and law enforcement officials agree that gang violence is increasing and that the increase can be attributed to several factors. For example, the growth in the number of gangs and gang members is cited as one explanation for the rise in violence.²⁶ Another is the ready availability of more sophisticated weapons. According to Irving Spergel:

The ready availability of improved weaponry—22s, 38s, 45s, 357 magnums, A.K. 47s, Uzis, and sawed-off shotguns—is associated with the changing pattern of gang conflict. The "tradition" of intergang rumbles based on large assemblages of youth arriving for battle on foot—easily interdicted—has been supplanted by smaller mobile groups of two or three armed youths usually in a vehicle out looking for opposing gang members.²⁷

Jeffrey Fagan, a professor at Rutgers University School of Criminal Justice offers another explanation for gang violence:

The context of gang life may offer more opportunities for violence, thus explaining the higher prevalence rates of violence among gang members. At the same time, there may be a self- or social selection of violent individuals into gang life that contributes to more frequent violence among gang members.²⁸

Several researchers caution that data on the growth of gang violence should not obscure the fact that the level of violence may vary among gangs. Spergel notes also that gang violence tends to be concentrated in certain neighborhoods or schools, while it is proportionally smaller on a city-wide or school-system basis. He finds that non-violent property crimes, such as burglary, larceny and

²⁵ Violent Gangs 'All Over City,' D.C. Chief Says. Washington Post. Sept. 29, 1991. p. A1.

²⁶ Spergel, p. 191.

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 190-91.

²⁸ Fagan, Jeffrey. Social Processes of Delinquency and Drug Use Among Urban Gangs. In C. Ronald Huff, Ed. Gangs in America. Newbury Park, Ca., Sage Publications, Inc., 1990. p. 199.

motor vehicle theft, are the more common offenses committed by gang members.²⁹ Klein's recent study of gangs reaches a similar conclusion. He suggests that although some research indicates an increase in gang violence, most of the crimes committed by gangs are non-violent. He characterizes gang activity as follows:

What gang members do most is nothing, . . . Members typically sleep late, wander around, and gather to watch the action. The only thing more boring than being a gang member is being a researcher watching a gang member.³⁰

Gangs and Drug Trafficking

Is there a relationship between youth gangs and drug trafficking? Professionals working in the criminal justice system say there is a relationship; research analysts disagree among themselves.

Assistant Attorney General Jimmy Gurulé identified youth gang participation in violence and drug related activity as "one of the most disturbing developments in narcotics trafficking over the past few years."³¹ For example, a 1987 study revealed that of the 276 known gang members on probation in San Diego County, 75 percent had drug convictions.³²

A 1989 Department of Justice report cited evidence of youth gang involvement in drug trafficking nationwide. For example, it named the Crips and Bloods in Los Angeles, the "Miami Boys" in Miami, Florida, and the Vice-Lords and El-Rukins in Chicago as drug-trafficking street gangs responsible for supplying crack cocaine to areas throughout the United States. Chinese youth gangs on the West coast and in New York City are identified as major suppliers of heroin.³³

²⁹ Spergel, p. 188.

³⁰ USC Gang Report Sparks Controversy, pp. 4-5.

³¹ Justice Agencies Target Activities by Gangs as a Priority for Action. Bureau of Justice Statistics National Update. Department of Justice. Jan. 1992. p. 1.

³² Spergel, p. 195.

³³ Drug Trafficking: A Report to the President of the United States. U.S. Department of Justice. Aug. 3, 1989. pp. 25, 36. Among ethnic or racial gangs, law enforcement officials find a tendency for various gangs to traffic in different illicit drugs--Black gangs and "crack" cocaine, Hispanic gangs and marijuana or PCP, and Asian gangs and heroin, Spergel, p. 198.

Youth gang researchers, in contrast, have not reached a consensus about this relationship. Peter Reuter, Senior Economist for the RAND corporation, writes that "youth gangs play a role in the distribution of illicit drugs." However, Reuter finds insufficient data to answer the question of how much the drug problem is attributable to youth gangs.³⁴ Jerome Skolnick, a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley, finds that some youth gangs are formed for the purpose of making money by selling drugs.³⁵ Klein's research reveals that "drug use among gang members is widely varied, but researchers rarely find organized gang systems for distributing drugs—except in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Detroit and a few other cities."³⁶ Summarizing the literature on youth gangs, Spergel writes, "the available research, . . . suggests neither strong nor clear relations among street gang membership, drug use, drug selling, and violence."³⁷

On January 8, 1992, the Federal Bureau of Investigation released a statement that the Crips drug distribution network is linked to the Medellin drug cartel in Colombia. A spokesperson for the FBI said "Los Angeles street gangs, such as the Crips, have become major distributors of crack This investigation revealed that many Los Angeles street gangs now have established direct connections to major Colombian smugglers, thus ensuring a continuous supply of top-quality cocaine."³⁸ University of Southern California researcher Malcolm Klein doubts the FBI's contention. He suggests that there may be a connection between the gangs and the cartels, but voices doubt that gangs are key distribution centers. Klein adds that "street gangs are a lousy mechanism for drug distribution. The members aren't trustworthy, and the gangs aren't well organized."³⁹

³⁴ Reuter, Peter. Youth Gangs and Drug Distribution: A Preliminary Enquiry. Unpublished paper prepared for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. U.S. Department of Justice. Jan. 1989. pp. 1-2.

³⁵ CQ Researcher, p. 759.

³⁶ USC Gang Report Sparks Controversy, p. 5.

³⁷ Spergel, p. 196.

³⁸ FBI Links Los Angeles Crips to Colombian Drug Cartel. Federal Bureau of Investigation Press Release. Jan. 8, 1992.

³⁹ USC Gang Report Sparks Controversy, pp. 3-4.

FEDERAL RESPONSE TO YOUTH GANGS

Federal Initiatives: 1953-1988

Federal initiatives to combat the emerging problem of youth gangs grew out of efforts to deal with the broader issue of juvenile delinquency. These efforts began in 1953 with a Senate Judiciary subcommittee's hearing on the problem of juvenile delinquency. Two years later, President Eisenhower called for legislation to assist States in combatting the problem of juvenile crime, but Congress did not enact such a measure until 1961, when it passed the Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act of 1961 (P.L. 87-274). This Act authorized a Federal grant program, to be administered by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), to develop techniques and train personnel to control or prevent juvenile delinquency. In addition, it created the Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime to study juvenile crime and to offer recommendations for its control and prevention.⁴⁰

Congress broadened the scope of the Federal response to the problem of juvenile delinquency with the passage of two acts in 1968. The Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act (P. L. 91-445), which replaced the 1961 act, authorized HEW to provide assistance to States and local governments for the improvement of their juvenile justice programs and the coordination of governmental agencies with jurisdiction in this area. The Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act (P.L. 91-351) allowed the use of block grant monies to States for the prevention and control of juvenile delinquency.⁴¹

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-415) was the most comprehensive Federal legislation enacted to date. Titles I and II of the Act established the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) within the Department of Justice (DOJ) to administer block and discretionary (special emphasis) grants for the prevention of juvenile delinquency and improvement of the juvenile justice system. Title III of the Juvenile Justice Act, the Runaway Youth Act, authorized a grant program to develop shelter facilities, administered by HEW (now the Department of Health and Human Services or HHS) and outside the jurisdiction of the law enforcement or juvenile justice systems.⁴² DOJ's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and HHS's Administration on Children, Youth, and

⁴⁰ Congressional Quarterly Almanac. v. 17, 1961. pp. 204-05.

⁴¹ U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Education and Labor. Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Amendments of 1988. Report to accompany H.R. 1801. House Report No. 100-605, 100th Cong., 2d Sess. Washington, U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1988. p.3.

⁴² Ibid. The 1974 Juvenile Justice Act was reauthorized in 1977, 1980, 1984, and 1988. It will expire on Sept. 30, 1992 if it is not reauthorized.

Families have primary responsibility for the administration of current programs aimed at the prevention and control of youth gangs.

OJJDP funding of research projects dealing with serious juvenile offenders began to focus on the youth gang problem by the late 1980s. For example, in 1987 OJJDP sponsored research on drug use and delinquency among dropouts and gang members in New York City.⁴³ In 1987 OJJDP, in cooperation with the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration, initiated a major research and development program to address the gang problem. This project, the National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Program, is a four-stage process that includes an assessment of the gang problem, a model program development for preventing the rise of youth gangs, a review of the literature about gangs, and a national survey of youth gang problems and programs.⁴⁴

The 1980s witnessed the enactment of a series of anti-crime/anti-drug trafficking measures that provided enhanced penalties for career criminals or repeat offenders. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-690) addressed the gang problem specifically in three ways. It established grant programs within OJJDP for prevention and treatment relating to juvenile gangs, drug use, and drug trafficking, and within the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families for drug abuse education and prevention relating to youth gangs.⁴⁵

Federal Anti-Gang Activities: 1989-Present

The Federal response to youth gangs in the late 1980s and early 1990s relies upon law enforcement as one of the primary means to control their growth and spread. Jimmy Gurulé, Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) and a former Federal prosecutor in Los Angeles argues that "gang-related narcotics trafficking and violence is a national problem of drastic proportions."⁴⁶ Working with the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice, he launched an OJP initiative in 1991 designed to enhance Federal law enforcement efforts to combat gang-related crime.

⁴³ Fagan, Jeffrey. Drug Use and Delinquency Among Dropouts and Gang Members. OJJDP Grant #87JNCX0012, 1987.

⁴⁴ Spergel, Irving, and Ronald L. Chance. National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Program. National Institute of Justice Research in Action. June 1991. pp. 21-22.

⁴⁵ P.L. 100-690; 102 Stat. 4254-55; 4450-52.

⁴⁶ Gurulé, Jimmy, p. 5.

In January 1992, Attorney General William Barr announced the assignment of 300 FBI agents to DOJ's gang-related crime efforts.⁴⁷ As part of this process, the FBI is working with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) of the Treasury Department to establish a gang intelligence center. A spokesperson for ATF describes the center as follows:

The gang intelligence center is intended to be a distributive system where an inquiry to ATF/FBI will result in the inquirer being put in touch with the law enforcement agency having the information on the subject. It will not be a centralized database with terminals giving open access to any user. The gang intelligence center will be operated to identify the known and identified members and associates of gangs actively involved in serious crimes.⁴⁸

Federal anti-gang efforts may also be found within two anti-crime/anti-drug initiatives of the National Drug Control Strategy. In a speech given January 27, 1992, and quoted in a Department of Justice Program Description, President Bush described "Operation Weed and Seed," one of the two initiatives:

First we join federal, state and local forces to "weed out" the gang leaders, the violent criminals, and the drug dealers that plague our neighborhoods. When we break their deadly grip, we follow up with part two: we "seed" those neighborhoods with expanded educational opportunities and social services. But the key to the seed concept will be jobs generating initiatives such as Enterprise Zones—to give people who call these neighborhoods home something to hope for.⁴⁹

The second initiative, attacking drug trafficking by youth gangs, envisions a two-pronged approach that emphasizes prevention and suppression. Prevention efforts encompass funding for school safety research, public housing assistance, and programs for the reduction of drug trafficking and use by high-risk youth. The suppression strategy includes multi-agency coordination in tracking and

⁴⁷ FBI Reassigns 300 Agents to Fight Drug Gangs. *Narcotics Control Digest*. Jan. 15, 1992. p. 8.

⁴⁸ Fax transmission from Karen Michell, Congressional and Media Affairs. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. Jan. 27, 1992.

⁴⁹ U.S. Department of Justice. Office of the Attorney General. Operation "Weed and Seed." FY1993 Program Description. March 1992. p. i. See also Executive Office of the President. Office of National Drug Control Strategy. National Drug Control Strategy. Part IV. Washington, U.S. Govt. Print. Off., Jan. 1992. p. 117. Hereafter referred to as Strategy.

investigating gang activity, and the development of enforcement models for use at the State and local levels.⁶⁰

Legislative and Other Suggested Policy Initiatives

The congressional response to the problems of youth gangs is consistent with the findings of one researcher that there exists a growing level of concern about gangs, limited agreement on how to address the problem, and a considerable consensus that law enforcement should play a primary role in controlling gang behavior.⁶¹ Anti-gang legislation introduced in the 102d Congress tends to focus on two policy alternatives—suppression and prevention.⁶²

Gang Suppression

Legislative proposals for the suppression of gangs generally provide for some form of enhanced penalties for certain illegal activities performed in a gang context. Two major anti-crime bills, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1991 (H.R. 3371 Brooks), and the Crime Control Act of 1992 (S. 2305 Thurmond), both provide for an additional penalty of up to ten years imprisonment for criminal street-gang activity. In addition, both bills would require a prison sentence of up to 25 years for drive-by shootings—offenses associated with gang violence. The latter would allow juveniles to be tried as adults for certain violations of the Controlled Substances Act (21 U.S.C 841).

Other measures aimed at gang suppression would establish national centers for the exchange of information about gangs (H.R. 2814, S. 339, S. 1303, S. 2305). The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Amendments of 1992 (H.R. 5194, Martinez) would create two new discretionary grant programs, Gang Free Schools and Communities, and Community-Based Gang Intervention, which contain funding for the reduction of criminal activities of juveniles in gangs. For example, the latter program would allow the use of funding to develop regional task forces with authority to curtail interstate gang activities. To address the problem of gang violence in prisons, the Anti-Gang Violence Act of 1991 (S. 1337 Specter) would authorize up to \$1 million to the National Institute of Corrections of the Federal Bureau of Prisons for assisting States in

⁶⁰ Strategy, p. 119.

⁶¹ Huff, Ronald C. Youth Gangs and Public Policy. Crime and Delinquency, v. 35. Oct. 1989. p. 525. Hereafter referred to as Huff, Youth Gangs.

⁶² Included in this discussion are proposals specifically related to youth gangs. Other, more general bills, for example, those pertaining to juvenile delinquency and the juvenile justice system, education, literacy, and employment, are not included here.

separating rival gang factions in State prisons and juvenile correctional institutions.

Researchers generally agree on the importance of gang suppression as a policy option, though they argue that suppression alone will not solve the gang problem.⁵³ Some assert that increasing gang violence, the use of more sophisticated weaponry, and the alleged links of certain gangs to drug cartels warrant more severe prison sentences and the prosecution of juveniles as adults. Others believe that such an approach weakens the philosophy of the juvenile justice system. They maintain that more moderate sentencing and separate incarceration of juveniles are intended to divert youth from association with career criminals in the adult criminal justice system. Other critics argue that gang suppression efforts are largely directed at minority youth who compose the bulk of gang membership.

Gang Prevention

Legislative proposals for the prevention of gang formation include such approaches as diverting youth away from joining gangs; encouraging youth participation in legal activities, especially at school and within the community; providing drug education and treatment for at-risk juveniles; and, improving socioeconomic conditions that are thought to contribute to gang development and growth.

The Reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (S. 2792 Kohl) provides funding for youth gang prevention—targeting elementary school students for diversion from gang involvement, providing student and family counseling where there is a risk of such involvement, and promoting community education about gangs. Other bills seek to promote local community outreach programs, such as the establishment of midnight basketball leagues (H.R. 3102, H.R. 3371), and community youth corps (H.R. 4591). Congressional efforts to address the gang problem by providing drug education and treatment include H.R. 3238 (Goodling), proposing the extension of youth programs under the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-690), and a measure to authorize appropriations for drug abuse and prevention programs relating to youth gangs and to runaway and homeless youth (P.L. 102-132).

With the outbreak of the April 1992 riot in Los Angeles the Administration has placed increased emphasis upon Operation Weed and Seed, a proposal to reduce crime and rebuild troubled urban areas. The "seed" aspect of the program envisions social programs such as tenant ownership of public housing,

⁵³ Huff, *Youth Gangs*, p. 533. Huff notes that several police officers remarked during his study that "Simply arresting them and locking them up is not the whole answer. We have to figure out a way to reach young kids before they get involved with these gangs."

neighborhood revitalization projects, and "enterprize zones" to encourage businesses to return to the inner-city through tax incentives. The Senate passed its version of H.R. 5132, the Dire Emergency Supplemental Appropriation Act of 1992, which includes \$250 million in funding for "Weed and Seed." The Weed and Seed Implementation Act of 1992 (S. 2726 Biden) proposes an authorization of \$500 million for "Weed and Seed" in fiscal year 1993.

Congressional response to the problem of gangs continues to be multifaceted, but lacking in a unified national plan or policy. This approach is consistent with the lack of agreement among law enforcement officials and researchers with respect to the definition of gangs; geographic and racial/ethnic variations among gangs; and the relationship of gangs to violence, crime and drug activity.

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