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U.S. Gang Problem Trends and Seriousness, 1996–2009

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents new information on the long-term trend in street gang activity and violent crime in the United States. The major focus of the trend analyses reported here is on the ebb and flow of gang activity in U.S. cities and counties of varying sizes. For the first time, trajectory analysis,[i] which can group cities according to common patterns, is used to examine cities' and other localities' histories of gang problems as a way of gaining insights into gang activity across multiple years. In the second section of this report, attention is turned to large cities' violent gang histories.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF GANG ACTIVITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Street gangs did not develop uniformly across the United States. Serious gangs first emerged on the East Coast in the 1820s, led by New York City (Howell and Moore, 2010). A half-century would pass before gangs emerged in the Midwestern (Chicago) area and Western (Los Angeles) regions, which would see significant gang development a full century later than New York City. The South would not experience significant gang problems for almost another half-century, starting in the 1960s. Brief summaries of gang emergence in each of the major geographic regions follow.

Eastern Region. The first gang-like groups began to emerge in New York City immediately after the American Revolution ended in 1783, but they were not seasoned criminals; only youngsters fighting over local turf (Adamson, 1998; Sante, 1991). The beginning of serious ganging in New York City would commence a few years later, around 1820, following far more large-scale immigration. The early white European ethnic gangs of New York City inevitably emerged from wave after wave of immigrants (Sante, 1991) and extreme economic and social conditions characterized as "hypoghettoization" (Adamson, 2000). Street gangs dominated by adult barroom brawlers were entwined with organized crime and political corruption in a symbiotic relationship (Sante, 1991). "Immigrant children, who found themselves caught between the old-world communal practices of their parents and the norms of an often hostile host society, frequently got together in corner groups and gangs" (Adamson, 2000, p. 276). Nearly 50 Philadelphia gangs were identified between 1840 and 1870 by Philadelphia's *Public Ledger* (Adamson, 1998, p. 62). Boston also saw gangs form in the North End and Fort Hill areas before the Civil War (Adamson, 2000). Another wave of gang activity developed in the Eastern region during the 1950s and 1960s after Latino and black populations arrived en masse. For a time, broadcast media dubbed Philadelphia the "youth gang capital" of the nation (Ness, 2010, p. 32). During the 1980s, many of the new immigrants into New York City were Asian and non-Puerto Rican Latinos—especially Dominicans followed by Central and South Americans (Sullivan, 1993, pp. 8–9). Gang culture travelled outward from New York City in the Eastern corridor, engulfing major cities from Pennsylvania to Connecticut.

Midwest Region. Gangs that flourished in Chicago in the early part of the 1900s grew mainly from the same immigrant groups that populated the early serious street gangs of New York City (Thrasher, 1927). Polish and Italian gangs were most numerous among Chicago's first gangs. Street gangs were said to "prosper in the very shadow of organized crime mobs" (McKay, 1949, p. 36). Perkins (1987) found evidence of White gangs "roving the streets" of Chicago as far back as the 1860s, but violent black street gangs did not have a notable presence until the 1960s. The second period of gang growth in Chicago commenced in the 1930s after a steady migration of Mexicans and blacks to northern cities. The post-World War II period also saw another surge of Mexican and Latino workers move into Midwest cities, including Chicago and Detroit (Pachon and Moore, 1981). Mexican immigrants spread into Chicago communities that had long been settled by the Irish, Germans, Czechs, and Poles, wherein Latino gangs grew to join the ranks of the most violent gangs in the city (Spergel, 2007). Soon, "the Chicago style of gangsterism" would stretch "to Gary, Indiana, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where alliances are fragile enough to promote inter-racial mistrust and solid enough to fuel feuds lasting for decades" (Cureton, 2009, p. 354).

Western Region. Gang-like groups are said to have first appeared in the Western region as early as the 1890s (Redfield, 1941; Rubel, 1965). These nascent gangs appear to have migrated along the trail that originated in Mexico and continued along a route through El Paso and Albuquerque, and onward to Los Angeles. This trail would later come to resemble a well-traveled road, carrying gang culture back and forth between Mexico, Central America, and Los Angeles. The Mexican-American gangs in the barrios (neighborhoods) of East Los Angeles typically formed in adolescent friendship groups in the 1930s and 1940s (Moore, 1993). These "boy gangs" were transformed into street gangs (Vigil, 1988, 1990, 2002), which drew most of their strength from their own ethnic history. A second period of massive immigration of Mexicans into Los Angeles from 1940 to the 1970s gave rise to more Mexican-American gangs. In a third stage, the development of black gangs in Los Angeles was fueled by the "great migration" of black people out of the Southern states, spawning the Crip and Blood gangs in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles gang culture soon began to draw the attention of youth in nearby cities. By the 1970s, street gangs had emerged in most populated areas across California (Miller, 1982/1992, pp. 35–36), and two of the city's largest gangs, MS-13 (originally Salvadoran) and 18th Street (Mexican-American), would be dubbed "transnational gangs" as a result of the movement of some of their members to and from Mexico, Central America, and the West and Southwest (Howell and Moore, 2010).

Southern Region. The Southern region emerged much later as an important gang territory. First, it lacked a central large city that could have provided a springboard for gang growth. For many years, San Antonio was the only large city, but it was too isolated to extend its gang influence (Telles and Ortiz, 2008). Second, the early immigrant groups were dispersed across the area. Hence, significant gang activity likely did not emerge in the Southern states prior to the 1970s (Miller, 1982/1992). Toward the end of that decade, only five Southern cities reported gang activity (Dallas, Fort Worth, New Orleans, Miami, and San Antonio) (pp. 42, 110). However, before the end of the 20th century, the Southern region matched the other major regions in the prevalence of gang activity, but gang problems remained dispersed across the region (Miller, 1982/1992, Miller, 2001). From the 1970s through 1995, this region led the nation in the number of new gang cities (a 32 percent increase), versus increases of 26 percent in the Midwest, 6 percent in the Northeast, and 3 percent in the West (Miller, 2001, p. 32).

Recent regional trends in gang activity are shown in the sidebar on page 13.

Early Multicity Gang Surveys

Miller's study (1982/1992) provides the national baseline of early multicity gang survey research. His studies were conducted against a backdrop of very limited knowledge of gangs in the United States. Only two previous efforts had been made to assess the gang problem in multiple cities. Bernstein (1964) examined gang problems in nine major cities in 1962, although not for the purpose of assessing gang characteristics; only to explore solutions. Simultaneous with Miller's 1982 survey, Needle and Stapleton (1983) surveyed 60 police departments in 1980, although the central purpose was to evaluate methods they were using to suppress and control gangs. Subsequent single-year gang surveys encompassed major cities (see Curry and Decker, 2003, pp. 17–30; Howell, 1994; Miller, 2001).

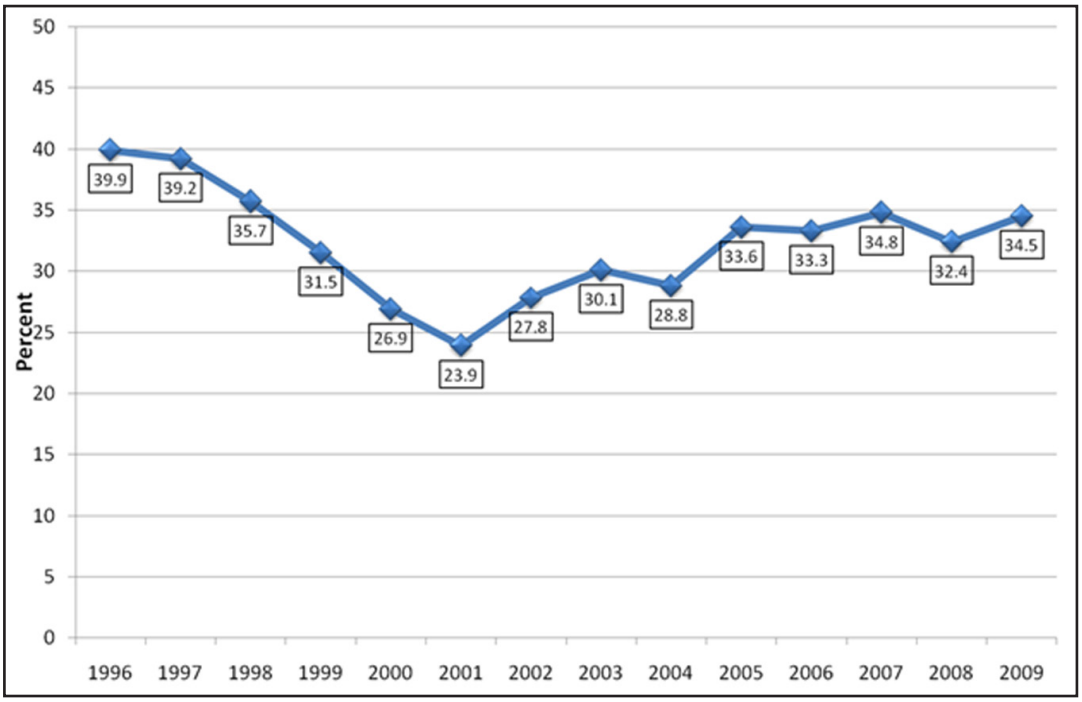
At the time of Miller's research, gang knowledge was based largely on a New York-centered picture of gang evolution: growth in the 1950s, demise in the 1960s, revival in the early 1970s, and dormancy in the later 1970s (Miller, 1982/1992, 2001). The popular perception was that the New York sequence of events applied to other cities. Miller's pilot study (1975) found this assumption to be seriously flawed. He found high levels of gang violence in 6 of the 12 largest cities in the United States. Hence, Miller's gang survey was expanded to encompass 26 cities (1982/1992). Based on this study, Miller (1990) recommended the creation of a federal center for statistically tracking and monitoring gang activity. The National Youth Gang Center (NYGS) was established in 1995 along with other federal anti-gang programming, following comprehensive reviews of gang research, programs, and policies (Howell, 1994; Kelley, 1994; Miller, 1990).

GANG PROBLEM PREVALENCE TRENDS, 1996–2009

The National Gang Center (NGC)[ii] has tracked the distribution and level of the gang problem in the United States since its first nationally representative National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS), in 1996. The NYGS is the first gang survey in any country that annually contacts a nationally representative sample of authoritative respondents in their respective jurisdictions regarding the prevalence and characteristics of gang activity using the same methodology each year. With the accumulation of 14 years of data, this report provides a long-term view of data generated in the NYGS, covering the time period from 1996 to 2009.[iii]

The 14-year gang prevalence trend shown in Figure 1 demonstrates that gang activity remains a widespread problem across the United States. By 2009, prevalence rates were significantly elevated compared with recorded lows in 2000 and 2001. Approximately one-third of the jurisdictions in the NYGS study population experienced gang problems in 2009, compared with under one-quarter in 2002, an increase of more than 20 percent in the estimated number of gang-problem jurisdictions between 2002 and 2009.

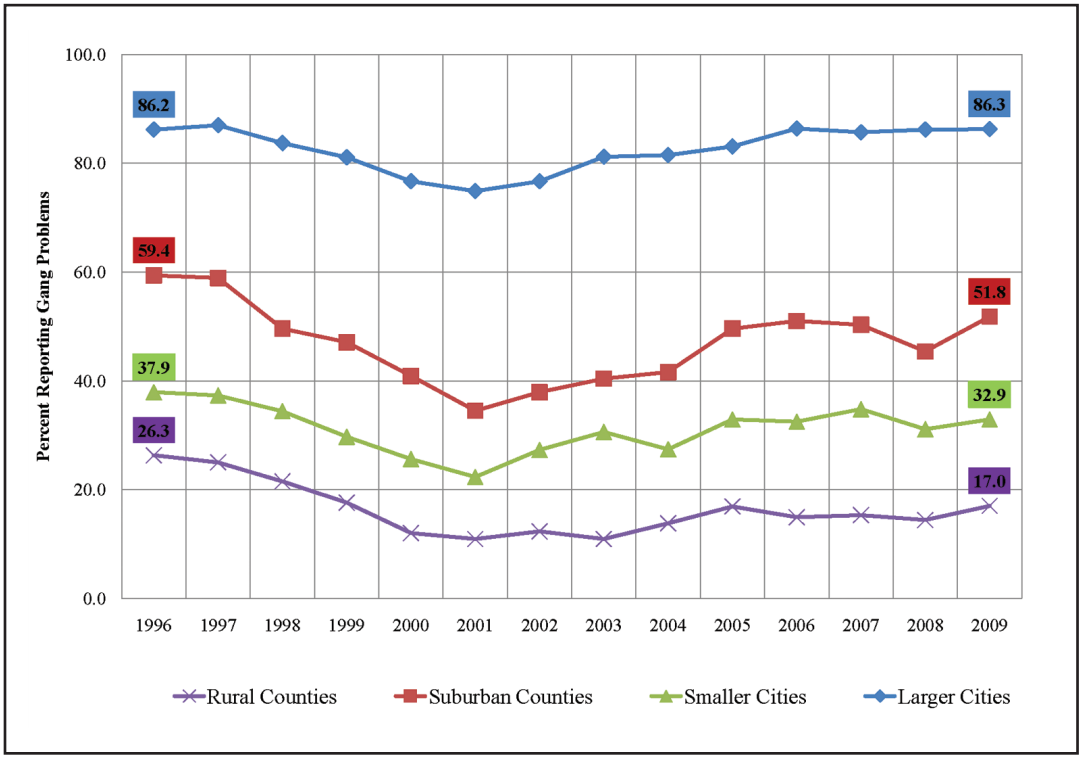
Figure 1. Prevalence of Gang Problems in Study Population, 1996–2009



Note: Gang problems are measured by respondents' affirmative response that youth gangs were active in their jurisdictions during the past year.

Figure 2 shows the prevalence of gang activity within each of the four NYGS subsamples (see Appendix A for sample details). Each subsample follows a similar trend over time, albeit at noticeably different levels. Larger cities consistently exhibit the highest prevalence rates of gang activity among the four groups, followed by, in order, suburban counties, smaller cities, and rural counties.[iv] The rates of reported gang activity in suburban counties are closest to the rates for larger cities because of the relatively large populations in suburban counties (i.e., a high capacity to sustain gang activity, Egley et al., 2006), the shifting of previous inner-city slums and ghettos to ring-city or suburban areas (Miller, 1982/1992, pp. 75–76), and the growing popularity of gang culture in these areas (Miller, 2001). Mirroring the overall trend displayed in Figure 1, each of the subsamples shows uniform declines in the late 1990s, reaching a low point in 2001 and then steadily increasing before leveling off in recent years.

Figure 2. Law Enforcement Agency Reports of Gang Problems by Area Type, 1996–2009

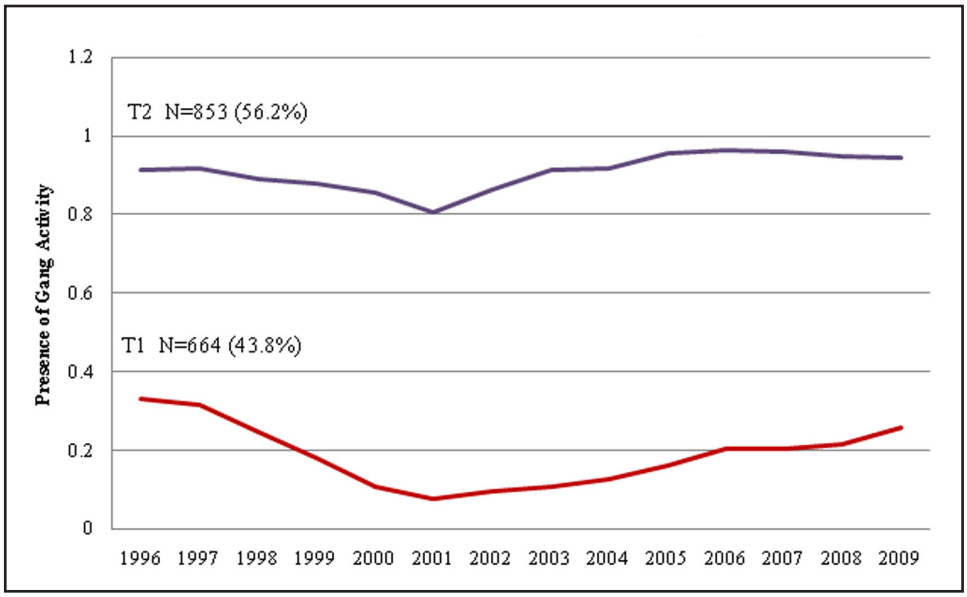


Grouping Jurisdictions by Gang-Problem Patterns

Gang-problem patterns within jurisdictions are further examined here through trajectory modeling, which groups jurisdictions that share similar trends in the outcome of interest (specifically, gang activity and gang-related homicides) and graphically illustrates those patterns over the 14-year survey period. For example, some jurisdictions may report a consistent presence of gangs, while others could experience no gang activity over time, rapid increases over time, rapid decreases, fluctuating presence of gang activity, or other more complex trends between 1996 and 2009.

The first trajectory model (Figure 3) displays *trends in the presence of gang activity* across the 1,517 jurisdictions included in both the first and current NYGS samples.[v] Of the total, 664 (43.8 percent) of the jurisdictions fall into the first trajectory (T1). This group exhibited a relatively lower prevalence of gang activity in 1996, which declined precipitously until 2001 before experiencing some growth that continued through 2009. By contrast, more than half (N=853; 56.2 percent) of the jurisdictions reported a near-chronic presence of gang activity across the time period (T2). Thus, this trajectory model reveals that a small majority of all respondents reporting gang activity have a persistent gang problem which, apart from the minor deviation in 2001, has remained virtually constant over time.

Figure 3. Trajectory Model
Presence of Gang Activity
Jurisdictions included in the NYGS between 1996 and 2009 (N=1517)



Notes: Data from the NYGS 1996 through 2009; best-fitting model includes two groups with quadratic polynomial functions (BIC = -7416.92). Jurisdictions reporting the presence of gang activity were coded as 1, and those reporting no gang activity were coded as 0 at each year.

Previous NYGS analysis has firmly demonstrated that gang activity—in terms of size of gang membership and the occurrence of gang violence—remains largely concentrated in the most populated areas in the United States (Egley, Howell, and Major, 2004, 2006; Howell and Egley, 2005; Howell, 2006). Therefore, the next analysis focuses only on jurisdictions with populations greater than 50,000. This permits an examination of areas with more persistent gang activity for distinctive trends—where gang activity is not only more prevalent, but also more serious, and thus more revealing with respect to common patterns.

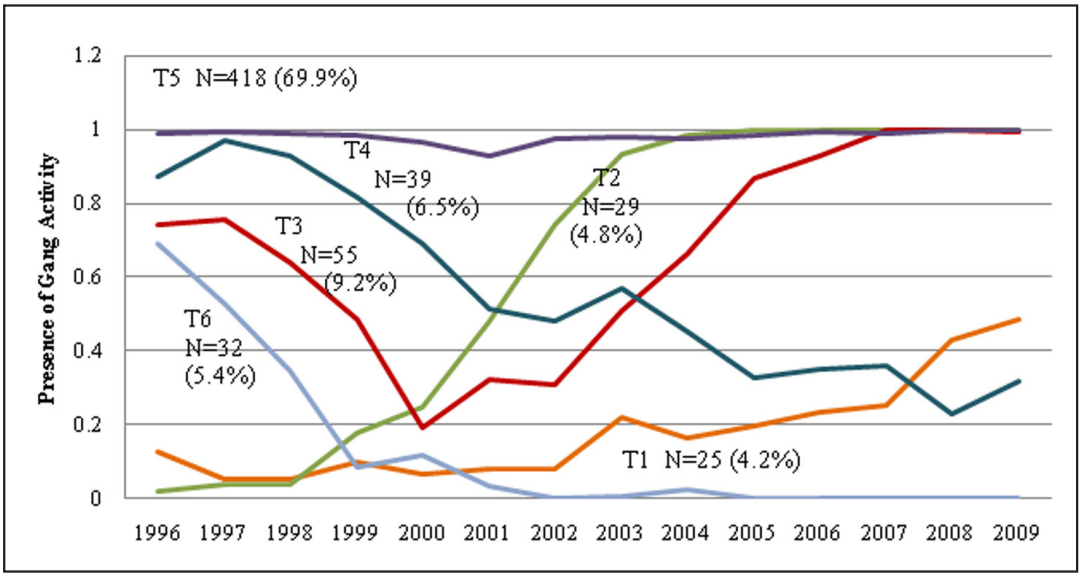
Figure 4 displays the six identifiable groups uncovered in the analysis of this smaller sample of 598 localities (versus 1,517 in the previous analysis). The most predominant group is T5 (69.9 percent), which reported a persistent and chronic gang problem over the 14-year period. The remaining five groups showed widely varied trends in gang activity. Three of these groups (T3, T4, and T6) all showed substantial declines in gang activity from 1996 to 2000. However, each experienced a very different trend after year 2000. Among these three groups, one group (T4; 6.5 percent) continued to experience steady declines in gang prevalence which leveled off somewhat in recent years. Declines for the one group (T6; 5.4 percent) continued for two more years, to the point that by 2002, virtually no presence of gang activity remained.

In stark contrast, the reductions in the presence of gang activity evidenced between 1996 and 2000 for the last of these three unique trajectory groups (T3; 9.2 percent) were short-lived, since the presence of gang activity rose sharply thereafter to near saturation in recent years.

The remaining two groups of jurisdictions (T1 and T2) exhibit an opposite pattern, beginning with virtually no gang activity at the start of the 14-year period, and experiencing increases (at different rates) over time. More specifically, the first group (T1; 4.2 percent) exhibited small yet steady increases in gang activity. The second trajectory group (T2; 4.8 percent), however, started the period with virtually no reported gang activity but experienced a steep rise after onset in 1998 (similar to that of T3) that continued upward to complete persistence toward the end of the period.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this trajectory analysis. First, for most (over two-thirds) of the cities with populations of 50,000 or more, prevalence rates of gang activity have remained unchanged for the past decade and a half. By comparison, this observed consistency is rare in smaller localities (Howell and Egley, 2005), where gang activity is more transitory and less serious over time. Second, the remaining one-third of the large cities examined here exhibit widely varying trends. Some agencies have experienced substantial declines or the complete desistence of gang activity, while others have exhibited rather extraordinary increases since the turn of the century.

Figure 4. Trajectory Model
Presence of Gang Activity
Jurisdictions with 50,000+ in 2002 and 1996–2009 Data (N=598)



Note: Data from the NYGS 1996 through 2009; best-fitting model includes six groups with quadratic polynomial functions (BIC = -1892.99).

Unfortunately, at this point, explanations are not available for the trends observed above because of the novelty of this research. Our purpose in this initial application of trajectory analysis is to develop an understanding of the varied trends in persistent gang activity across cities. Next, we turn to apply trajectory analysis to analysis of serious gang problem cities.

SERIOUS GANG PROBLEM TRENDS

The above analyses demonstrate that cities can be grouped in terms of their distinctively patterned gang problem histories. With this in mind, the next step is to assess the relative seriousness of gang activity among cities. For the purposes of this analysis, homicide is considered to be a primary indicator of serious gang activity.

Gang-Related Homicides and Serious Gang Activity

While homicides notably characterize serious gang problem cities more than any other factor, it is important to note that gang homicides are heavily concentrated geographically in the United States. Most cities have no gang homicides, and those that do usually report very few of them from year to year (Egley et al., 2006). Rather, it is in a subset of very large cities where the overwhelming majority of them occur, as this report shows. Previous research has shown that these gang homicides tend to occur in spurts, governed by episodic gang conflicts that wax and wane and sometimes extend over a number of years (Block and Block, 1993; Decker, 1996, 2007; Howell and Moore, 2010; Miller, 1982/1992; Papachristos, 2009). The use of firearms in assaults, of course, increases the likelihood of these events resulting in lethal violence in contrast to nonlethal injury. Beginning in the 1980s, youth gangs were reported to have more weapons of greater lethality (Block and Block, 1993; Block, Christakos, Jacob et al., 1996; Decker, 2007; Howell, 1999; Hutson, Anglin, Kyriacou, et al., 1995; Tita and Abrahamse, 2004, 2010). In an earlier analysis of NYGS data, jurisdictions experiencing higher levels of gang violence—evidenced by reports of multiple gang-related homicides over survey years—were significantly more likely than those experiencing no gang homicides to report more pervasive and frequent firearm use by gang members in assault crimes (47 percent versus 4 percent of the jurisdictions, respectively) (Egley et al., 2006).

The trajectory analysis presented in Figure 5 examines trends in the proportion of all homicides that are gang-related and, in contrast to the previous section of this report, offers a more pointed investigation of the *seriousness* of gang problems nationwide. Further, the analysis that follows is limited to cities with populations in excess of 100,000 persons and incorporates total annual homicide counts from the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data for all very large cities participating in the

NYGS between 1996 and 2009. Overall, 247 cities met the criteria for inclusion.[vi] Proportional homicide rates—along which cities' patterns are aligned here—were determined by dividing the total number of gang homicides reported in the NYGS annually by the total number of homicides reported for the city in the UCR, multiplied by 100.

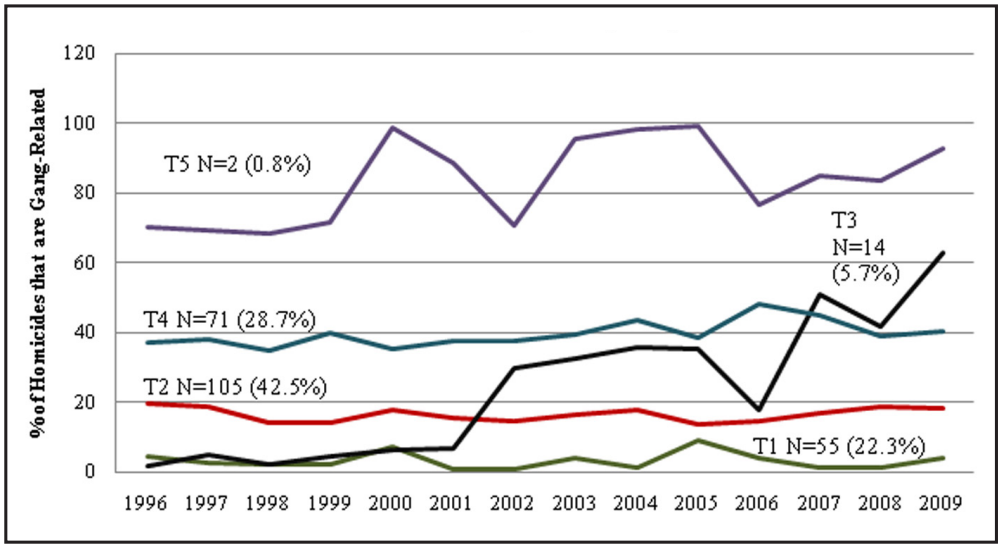
Figure 5 shows the results from the trajectory analysis of these cities, where five groups of distinctive trends were found in the percentage of homicides that were gang-related between 1996 and 2009. Two of these groups (T3 and T5) show sharp increases, while the remaining three groups (T1, T2, and T4) show relatively stable trends, albeit at significantly different levels. For the group of cities with the largest frequency (T2; 42.5 percent), nearly one in five homicides were gang-related annually over the 14-year period. For the second largest group (T4; 28.7 percent), approximately 40 percent of the homicides (or twice the rate of T2 cities) were gang-related. An additional 6.5 percent of the agencies (T3 and T5) showed increases over time, while only one group (T1; 22.3 percent) exhibited little to no lethal gang violence.

The total set of 247 cities represented in this analysis is shown in Appendix C. Note that these cities are listed in the trajectory group in which the analysis places them. This listing is provided for the benefit of stakeholders in the respective cities who wish to consider this information further in local strategic planning activities.

Three noteworthy observations can be made by analyzing gang-related homicides as a proportion of the total number of homicides reported in the UCR for very large cities. First, almost eight out of ten cities with populations greater than 100,000 regularly report gang homicides. Second, a remarkable degree of consistency in the rate of gang-related homicides across trajectory groups is observed. *None* of the groups found in these cities displayed a pattern consistent with a decline in the prevalence of gang homicide. Third, in the two largest groups (T2 and T4), comprising 70 percent of all the cities, between 20 percent and 40 percent of all homicides annually were found to be gang-related.

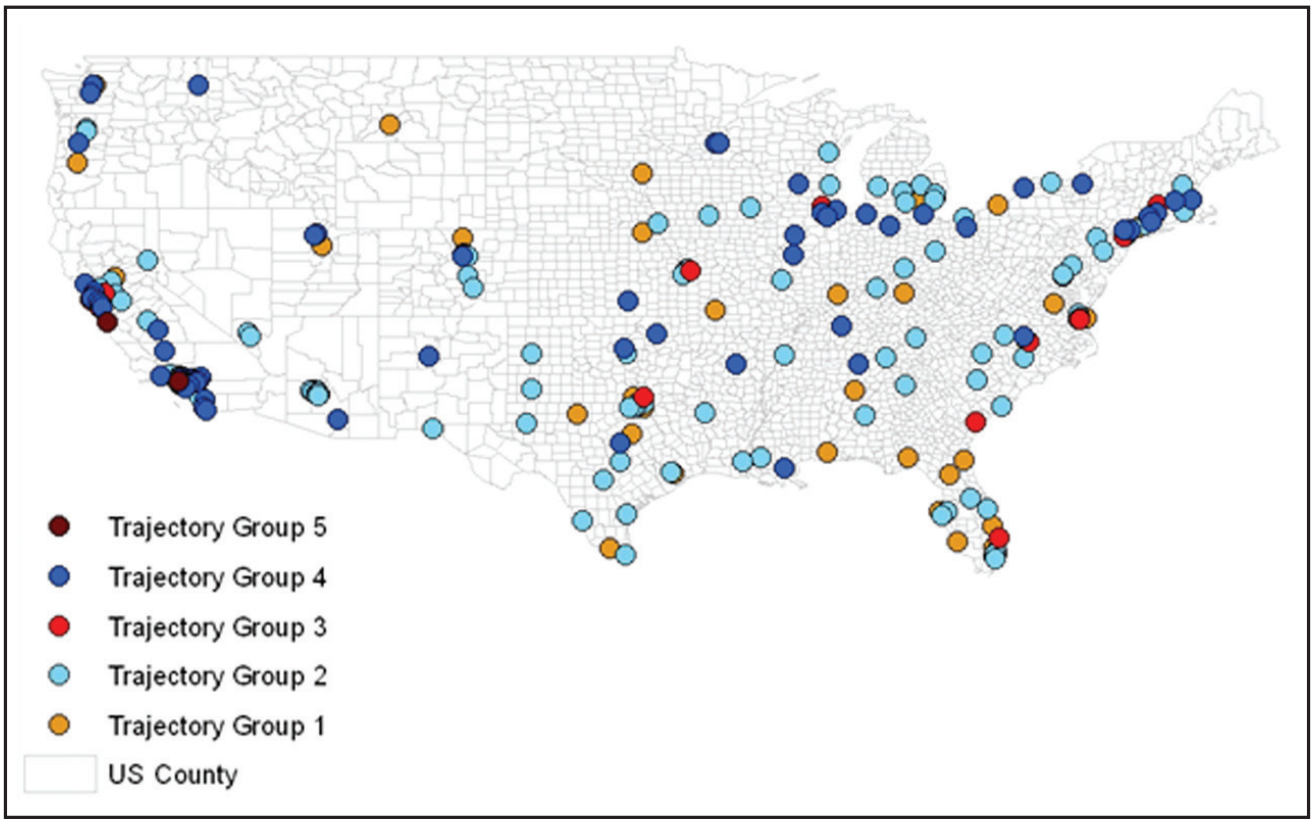
These findings beg an important question: Are many gang homicides concentrated in one or more regions of the United States? Map 1 takes the five trajectories and maps their locations. While Trajectory 5 is limited to two California cities (the less-urban Salinas and the densely populated, urban Inglewood), the remaining cities exhibiting varied gang seriousness trajectories appear to be randomly distributed across geographic regions of the United States. Most clusters of reporting cities (e.g., the Bay Area of California, Los Angeles Basin, Great Lakes Region, Northeast, and Florida's Atlantic Coast) contain jurisdictions following at least three of the different trajectories. Therefore, with the exception of these five clusters (and Chicago and Los Angeles, which are examined below), one can conclude that very large cities with consistently high levels of gang homicides are widely dispersed across the United States.

Figure 5. Trajectory Model
Percent of Homicides That Are Gang-Related
Cities with 100,000+ Population (N=247)



Note: Data from the NYGS 1996 through 2009 and UCR 1996 through 2009. The best-fitting model includes five groups with linear polynomial functions (BIC = -7348.85).

Map 1. Spatial Distribution of Trajectory Analysis for Gang-Related Homicide in Large Cities, 1996–2009



In the next section, we provide a case study of one very large city, Pittsburgh, to gain some insights regarding the histories of cities with chronic, violent gang histories.

PITTSBURGH ILLUSTRATION

Pittsburgh appears to be somewhat typical among very large cities (populations greater than 100,000) with respect to the long-standing seriousness of its gang problem. Before examining its history, we pause to reveal Pittsburgh's location in the above trajectory sets. Pittsburgh is among the cities in Trajectory Group 2 (Figure 3) that consistently experienced gang activity throughout the 14-year survey period 1996–2009. As expected, because of its size, Pittsburgh is among the cities with populations above 50,000 shown in Figure 4, and it is located in Trajectory Group 5, again consistently reporting gang activity. Finally, Pittsburgh is representative of the very large cities in the Trajectory 4 group (Figure 5 and Map 1) that reported a high level of gang homicides (approximately 40 percent of total annual homicides, on average) during 1996–2009.

From other NYGS analyses, we know that Pittsburgh is one of 28 cities with populations greater than 100,000 that reported onset of gang activity in the period 1991–1992; it is generally considered a "late onset" city (Howell, Egley, and Gleason, 2002). However, unlike other cities in the late onset group, Pittsburgh quickly developed a serious gang problem. Its gang activity developed in two stages, which are characterized here as early emergence and recent gang activity.

Emergence of Gang Activity in Pittsburgh

A surge in drug-related arrests (apparently driven by crack cocaine offenses) preceded the emergence of gang activity in Pittsburgh (Tita, 1999; Cohen and Tita, 1999).[vii] Almost immediately following the emergence of gang activity, homicides began growing "across spatially independent but socially similar Pittsburgh areas (specifically, fractured, high poverty, African American communities)" (Tita and Cohen, 2004, p. 200). Interestingly, "shots-fired" calls [viii] spontaneously increased in "a classic epidemic" during a pregang period (1990–1991) in census tracts [ix] distributed widely throughout the city (p. 195). Tita and Cohen observed that it was precisely in the high-violence communities where gangs emerged.

Violent urban street gangs, including sets (subgroups) of Crip and Blood gangs, began to take hold in Pittsburgh during the latter half of 1991 (Tita and Cohen, 2004). All of the hard-core sets had black gang members (Tita, Cohen, and Engberg, 2005). Gang emergence continued through 1993 and stabilized in 1994–1995 with no new gangs forming and no gangs desisting. The emergence of youth gangs "was followed by a contagious spread of shots fired activity in gang tracts

or tracts adjoining them," fueling an epidemic of gun violence or "contagious diffusion" to other areas (Tita and Cohen, 2004, p. 195). In addition to spawning a number of gang homicides, these murders seemingly precipitated a more general class of nongang youth homicides.

Perhaps largely attributable to the violent community context within which they formed, "all of the gangs included in this [Pittsburgh] study share one thing in common: They are known to be violent" (Tita and Ridgeway, 2007, p. 217), and they have earned "respect" and fear from the community (Tita, 1999). Given the territorial and retaliatory natures of urban youth gang violence (Block and Block, 1993; Decker, 2007; Rosenfeld, Bray, and Egley, 1999; Hughes and Short, 2005), it is reasonable to expect that gang-related violence would follow predictable spatial and temporal patterns. In short, "one might expect set space to serve as a sort of lightning rod for intergang violence" (Tita and Ridgeway, 2007, p. 217). From the onset of gang activity in Pittsburgh, about two-thirds of all gang homicides were gang-motivated. [x]

Recent Gang Activity in Pittsburgh

Tita and colleagues' on-site study of Pittsburgh ended in 1995. This section summarizes the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police's responses to the National Youth Gang Survey from 1996 onward. Beginning in 1996, a well-publicized Federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization Act indictment of a local street gang "had an enormous impact on all Pittsburgh gangs. Gangs and gang violence virtually disappeared from the streets of Pittsburgh" (Tita et al., 2005, p. 281). From 1996 to 1999, the number of gangs reported by the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police dropped 77 percent, from 86 to just 20.

For several years thereafter, the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police's responses to the NYGS characterized the city's gang problem as somewhat stabilized and at a serious level, particularly in drug trafficking, aggravated assault, and firearm use. Law enforcement considered a majority of the gangs to be "drug gangs." The proportion of gang members that is black has remained virtually unchanged over the 14-year period, averaging almost 86 percent. Gangs still were well-established in certain areas of the city as at the beginning of the new millennium, with subgroups based on age, gender, and geographical area. Then the gang problem became noticeably larger and turned more serious. In six out of nine years (from 2001 to 2009), the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police reported that the city's gang problem was "getting worse" in three main respects.

First, law enforcement reported more gangs from the middle of this decade onward, which likely contributed to increased intergang conflicts and gang violence. While only 20 gangs were counted in 1999, an average of 36 was reported each year during 2001–2009. This is a conservative estimate because Pittsburgh police count multiple sets as one gang. Although police had more difficulty estimating the number of gang members during the early part of this decade, during 2005–2008 an average of 869 gang members were reported each year. The few very large gangs were estimated to have between 95 and 200 members.

Second, gang members apparently remained in the gangs for multiple years. In the 1990s, police had estimated that seven out of ten gang members were juveniles. By 2008, this proportion had dropped to one-half.

Third, inmates returning from prison may have reconnected with some of the gangs or joined outright as a result of relationships they formed in prison. Survey respondents said the returning inmates influenced local gang activity in important ways in the new decade, including drug trafficking, access to weapons, and violence itself. Three-fourths of these former inmates were estimated to be adults. From 2003 to 2006, the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police reported more than 20 gang homicides each year along with increases in gang-aggravated assaults.

In sum, Pittsburgh's gang problem developed quickly and worsened measurably over time. Early gang emergence was preceded by widespread drug dealing and gunplay. Gangs emerged in the high-violence communities, followed by a contagious spread of shots-fired activity in gang tracts or tracts adjoining them. Once the gangs developed a reputation for violence and earned respect for this, gang violence stabilized, but at a high level. Now, inmates returning from prison appear to be refueling existing gangs.

AN ANNUAL SNAPSHOT OF GANG HOMICIDE IN THE LARGEST CITIES

In this final section, we explore some dimensions of the current concentration of high homicide levels in very large U.S. cities. Chart 1 shows the total percent of homicides that were gang-related among cities with populations of 100,000 or more in 2009 (for which homicide data were reported). Separate figures are presented for Chicago and Los Angeles because of their historically high numbers of gang homicides. Overall, approximately one-quarter of all homicides in these cities were gang-related. By comparison, one-half of the homicides in Los Angeles and one-third of the homicides in Chicago were gang-related in 2009.

Chart 1. Gang Homicide Prevalence, Cities With Populations of 100,000 or More, 2009

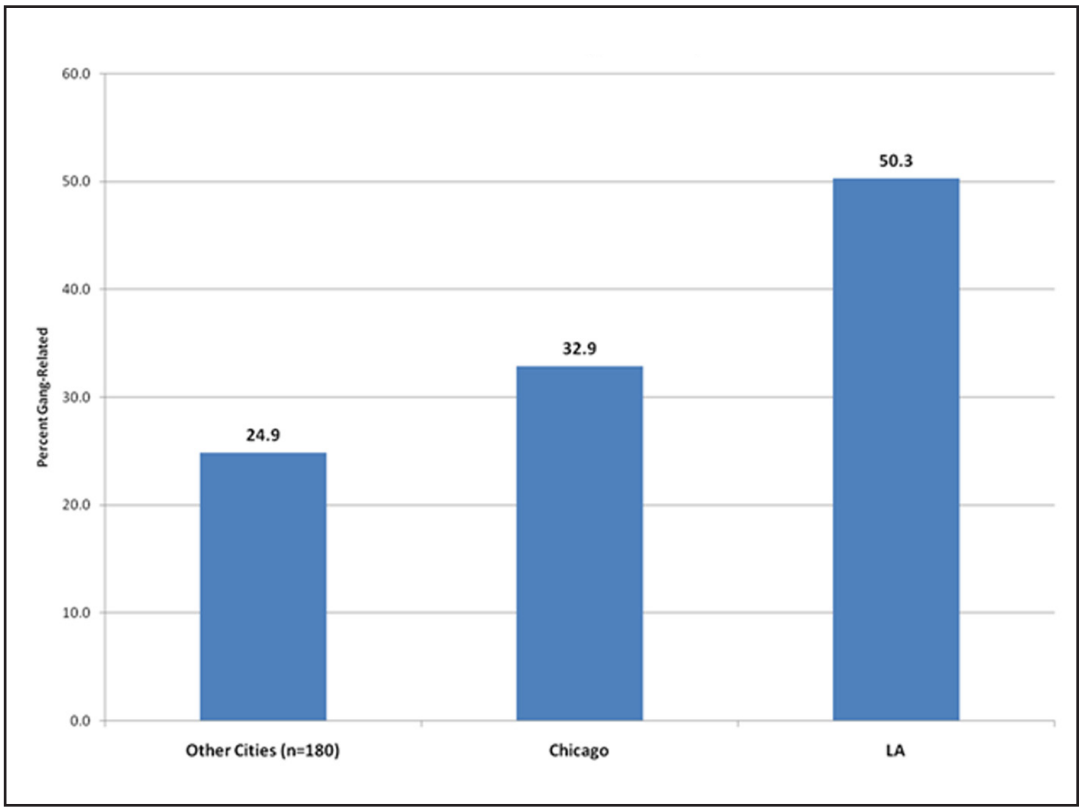


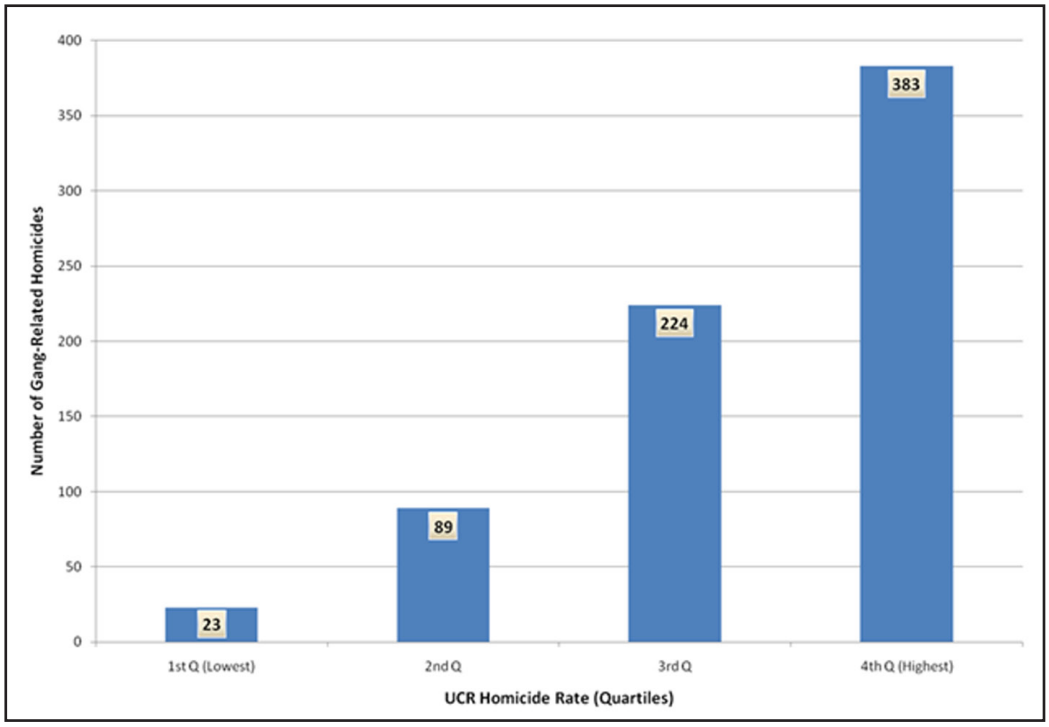
Chart 2 displays findings on homicide concentration from another viewpoint. First, the overall homicide rate for each of the 282 very large cities was calculated from the UCR and then placed into quartiles. Next, total gang homicide counts for cities within each quartile were calculated. This analysis finds that for cities with the lowest homicide rate (i.e., 1st quartile), a total of 23 gang homicides were reported. In cities with the highest homicide rate (4th quartile), nearly 400 gang homicides were reported (note that this highest-rate group *excludes* Chicago and Los Angeles). In other words, the serious gang homicide problem in the United States extends far beyond these so-called "gang capitals," and is disproportionately found in cities with higher murder rates throughout the nation.

Cumulative Gang-Related Homicides

Map 2 shows the locations of cumulative gang-related homicides, shaded according to rate (per 1,000 gang members) that all NYGS respondents reported across the 2002–2009 surveys. Given the large number of reported gang members in such "chronic gang cities" as Los Angeles and Chicago, it is not surprising that the rate is comparably low in these areas.[xi] While counties with high rates of gang homicide per 1,000 gang members are generally spread throughout the United States, there does appear to be a "high rate belt" in the Midwest-Great Lakes corridor and the Northeast Atlantic region.

Readers should be mindful, however, that counties with very few reported gang members will exhibit extremely high rates of violence with only very few homicides (which analysts call the "tyranny of small numbers" principle). The ten counties displayed in Table 1 have the highest gang homicide rates in the United States during 2002–2009, as determined by data provided to the National Youth Gang Survey. The highest rate of all, in Nash County, North Carolina, is attributable to a small number of gang homicides and relatively few gang members. Two other counties in this listing stand out for having a high gang homicide rate for this same reason, even when the actual number of homicides is very small (13 in Richland County, South Carolina, and just three in Cumberland County, Maine). Each of these ten counties is shaded darkest in Map 2.

Chart 2. Gang Homicide Rates, Cities With Populations of 100,000 or More, 2009



Map 2. Rate of Gang-Related Homicides (Per 1,000 Gang Members), 2002–2009

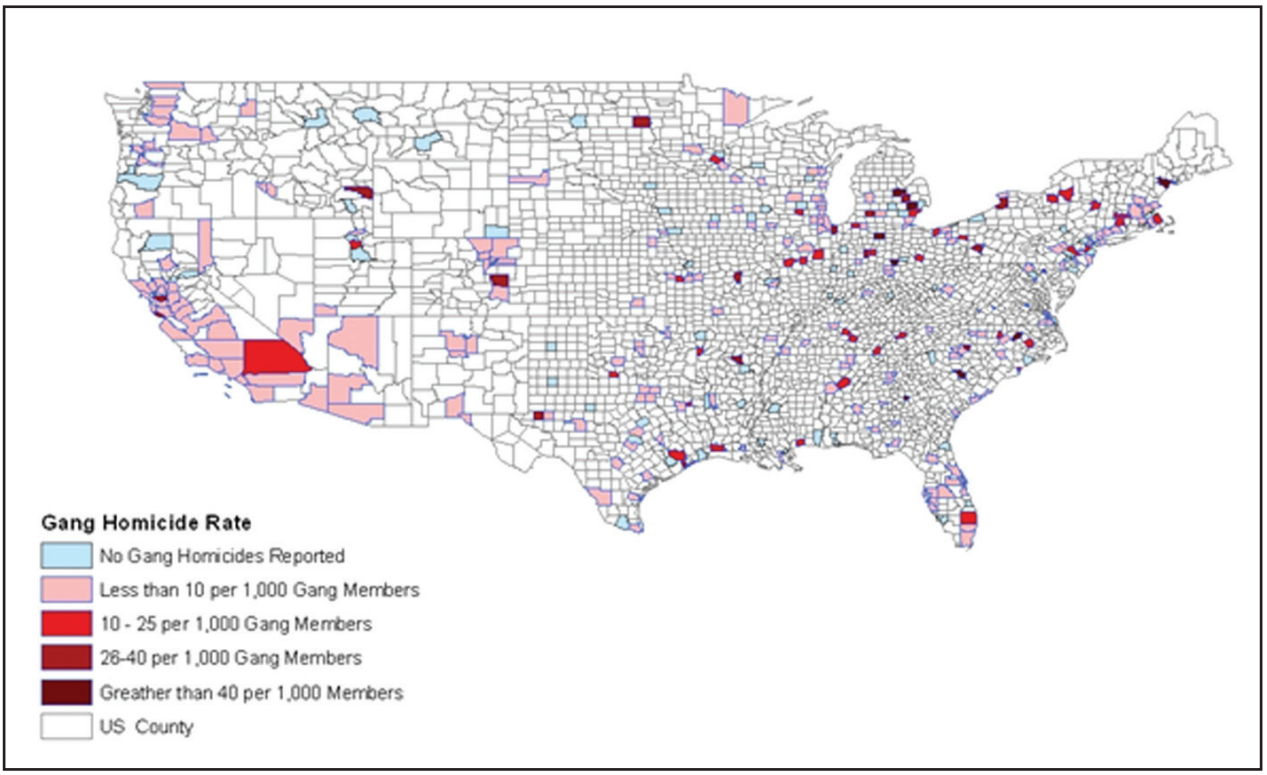


Table 1. Ten Counties with the Highest Gang Homicide Rates, 2002–2009

County	Rate	Number of Homicides
Nash, North Carolina	111.8	19
San Francisco, California	97.5	195
Baltimore, Maryland	88.3	53
Richland, South Carolina	76.5	13
Montgomery, Ohio	70.0	28
Saginaw, Michigan	63.3	57
Oakland, Michigan	60.1	16
Cumberland, Maine	42.8	3
Bibb, Georgia	42.5	17
Allen, Indiana	40.9	19

Regional Trends in Gang[Xii] Activity as Viewed by the FBI and Police Agencies

Northeast Region.[Xiii] New York City is no longer the epicenter of serious street gang activity in the Northeast, as was the case in the early 1900s (Howell and Moore, 2010). Gradually, gang activity in this region expanded to include other East Region and New England states, particularly Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Connecticut (FBI, 2009). According to the FBI's intelligence reports, "the most significant gangs operating in the East Region are Crips, Latin Kings, MS-13, Ñeta, and United Blood Nation" (p. 16). "The most significant gangs operating in the New England Region are Hells Angels, Latin Kings, Outlaws, Tiny Rascal Gangster Crips, and UBN" (p. 17).

Central Region.[Xiv] In the Midwest region, traditional Chicago gangs still have the strongest presence. In 2008, the largest street gangs in Chicago included the Gangster Disciple Nation (GDN), Black Gangsters/New Breeds (BG), Latin Kings (LKs), Black P. Stone Nation, Vice Lords (VLs), Four Corner Hustlers, and Maniac Latin Disciples (MLDs) (Chicago Crime Commission, 2006, p. 11). The most recent chapter in Chicago's gang history is the proliferation of gangs outside the city. By 2006, 19 gang turfs were scattered around Chicago, throughout Cook County (Chicago Crime Commission, 2006, p. 119). Next, gangs began emerging in the larger region surrounding Chicago on the North, West, and South sides. Other cities in this region that have extensive gang activity include Cleveland, Detroit, Joliet, Kansas City, Minneapolis, Omaha, and St. Louis (FBI, 2009, p. 18).

Pacific Region.[Xv] Street gangs in Los Angeles remain legendary. Los Angeles is now said to be "the gang capital of the world" (The Advancement Project, 2007, p. 1). The Los Angeles Police Department (2007) recently designated the 11 most notorious gangs in the city: 18th Street Westside (Southwest Area), 204th Street (Harbor Area), Avenues (Northeast Area), Black P-Stones (Southwest, Wilshire Areas), Canoga Park Alabama (West Valley Area), Grape Street Crips (Southeast Area), La Mirada Locos (Rampart, Northeast Areas), Mara Salvatrucha (Rampart, Hollywood, and Wilshire Areas), Rollin 40s (Southwest Area), Rollin 30s Harlem Crips (Southwest Area), and Rolling 60s (77th St. Area).

Southern Region.[Xvi] The most significant gangs operating in the Southeast region (Deep South states) are said to be the Crips, Gangster Disciples, Latin Kings, Sureños 13, and United Blood Nation (FBI, 2009). According to the FBI, the increased migration of Hispanic gangs into the region has contributed significantly to gang growth (p. 20). In the Southwest region (Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona), the most significant gangs are Barrio Azteca, Latin Kings, Mexikanemi, Tango Blast, and Texas Syndicate (FBI, 2009). Among 25 major Houston gangs, the Tango Blast, Houstone Tango Blast, and Latin Disciples are said to be the main regional gangs that are Houston-based (http://www.stophoustongangs.org).

Sources: Chicago Crime Commission (2006); FBI (2009); Los Angeles Police Department (2007)

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Gang activity and its associated violence remains an important and significant component of the U.S. crime problem. While it has been reasonably assumed that gang-related violence would follow the overall dramatic declines in violent crime nationally, analyses provided in this report find overwhelming evidence to the contrary—that is, gang violence rates have continued at exceptional levels over the past decade *despite* the remarkable overall crime drop. Gang violence that is rather commonplace in very large cities seems largely unaffected by, if not independent from, other crime trends—with the possible exceptions of drug trafficking and firearm availability (Block and Block, 1993; Block et al., 1996; Howell, 1999; Tita and Cohen, 2004; Tita and Griffiths, 2005; Tita and Ridgeway, 2007).

This study has shown that while fluctuations in the prevalence of gang activity are certainly evident since the mid-1990s to the present, much of this instability has occurred outside the largest U.S. cities where gang activity has remained concentrated and prevalence rates have remained nearly constant. In addition, and perhaps more important, the seriousness of gang problems in these cities has not changed appreciably in this period. Two distinct groups of very large cities (with populations greater than 100,000 persons), together making up 70 percent of all large cities, consistently reported that between 20 and 40 percent of their homicides were gang-related from 1996 to 2009; and only *one group*, composed of less than one-quarter of the cities, exhibited very few to no gang homicides in the study period. Moreover, reported gang-related homicides in these cities increased 7 percent from 2005 to 2009 (Egley and Howell, forthcoming).

Developing a strategic plan for intervening in gang homicides is complicated by gang dynamics. "Even labeling something as a 'gang' homicide masks important aspects that need to be understood before enacting policy; for example, whether the homicide was motivated by gang rivalry, or the protection of drug markets, or was merely an argument that involved young males who happened to be gang members" (Tita and Abrahamse, 2010, p. 29). These situations underscore the importance of making a careful assessment of overall youth violence and the gang component before developing a strategic plan (Tita, Riley, and Ridgeway, 2003). A user-friendly protocol is available that communities themselves can follow in conducting a communitywide assessment (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2009a). Analysis of the specific circumstances surrounding gang homicides also greatly increases the likelihood of successful interventions (Braga, 2004).

Several gang programs have demonstrated effectiveness in intervening in street-level gang violence. Only three of these are noted here, specifically for their capacity to intervene directly in violent gang incidents. The OJJDP Comprehensive Communitywide Approach to Gang

Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Program, which was later renamed the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2009b), has reduced gang-related violence in Chicago, Los Angeles, and other sites (Hayeslip and Cahill, 2009; Cahill and Hayeslip, 2010; Spergel, 2007; Spergel, Wa, and Sosa, 2006).

CeaseFire–Chicago is a community-level, gun-related violence prevention program that has demonstrated effectiveness in gang violence reduction, including homicide (Skogan, Hartnett, Bump et al., 2008). It specifically targets dangerous activities of carefully selected members of the community who have a greatly elevated chance of either being shot or being shooters in the immediate future. Program outreach workers called "violence interrupters" work on the streets, in hospitals, and other settings to mediate conflicts between gangs and especially individual gang members. They also connect would-be shooters to services and employment to help stem the cycle of retaliatory violence.

In a program modeled after the Boston Operation Ceasefire, Los Angeles explicitly defined "triggering events" as any serious crimes by a gang member or any gang crimes in which a gun was used by the members of two violent gangs. The results from the law enforcement components were surprisingly good, even though the intervention did not proceed exactly as planned. In the area of Hollenbeck, where the two gangs were most active and enforcement was most intensive, both gang crime and violent crime fell (Tita et al., 2003). Despite other mixed results, the program "demonstrated the potential for using data-driven research to identify problems and design interventions, obtain the commitment of disparate criminal justice agencies to work together on a discrete problem, and secure the support of an array of partners in the community" (p. 2).

In most jurisdictions, improvements are needed in the targeting of gang violence. To aid statewide initiatives, Tita and Abrahamse (2010) recommended that California implement a gang homicide surveillance system, designed much like systems used by the public health community to monitor disease threats. The proposed system would provide an early warning of a rise in homicide victimization within particular communities, much like the public health model. In addition, Tita and Abrahamse suggest that such a homicide surveillance system needs to work fast enough to provide a warning within a few months of gang homicide onset. "It also needs to be fine grained with respect to geography and demography" (p. 29). However, reporting should not be delayed until a homicide is "solved," they argue, because early intervention opportunities could be lost. In addition, such a system should capture and publish essential diagnostic information (including age, race, sex, circumstance, and census tract) about suspected homicide victims within a month of the event, which "would provide an important tool for detecting and reacting to upswings in violence in the state" (p. 29)." This is an excellent recommendation for other states and cities with gang-related homicides.

Appendix A

National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS)

Agencies included in the two nationally representative NYGS samples are as follows:

1996–2001 NYGS Sample
(Former Sample):

- All police departments serving cities with populations of 25,000 or more (n=1,216).
- All suburban county police and sheriffs' departments (n=661).
- A randomly selected sample of police departments serving cities with populations between 2,500 and 24,999 (n=398).
- A randomly selected sample of rural county police and sheriffs' departments (n=743).

2002–Present NYGS Sample
(Current Sample):

- All police departments serving cities with populations of 50,000 or more (n=624).
- All suburban county police and sheriffs' departments (n=739).
- A randomly selected sample of police departments serving cities with populations between 2,500 and 49,999 (n=543).
- A randomly selected sample of rural county police and sheriffs' departments (n=492).

Study population refers to the entire group of jurisdictions that the current sample represents; that is, all jurisdictions served by county law enforcement agencies and all jurisdictions with populations of 2,500 or more served by city (e.g., municipal) police departments.

Sixty-three percent of the agencies in the 2002–present NYGS sample were also surveyed from 1996 to 2001, permitting an ongoing longitudinal assessment of gang problems in a large number of jurisdictions.

The average annual survey response rate is approximately 85 percent for the entire sample, as well as within each area type. Ninety-nine percent of the respondents in the current sample have provided gang-related information in at least one survey year. Survey recipients were asked to report information solely for youth gangs, defined as "a group of youths or young adults in your jurisdiction that you or other responsible persons in your agency or community are willing to identify as a 'gang.'" Motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, and exclusively adult gangs were excluded from the survey.

Appendix B

Trajectory Models

The trajectory models presented in this report are based on a customized SAS procedure called PROC TRAJ (Jones, Nagin, and Roeder, 2001; Nagin, 1999). In this case, we use the trajectory procedure to examine trends in gang presence, and gang homicide as a proportion of total homicide within U.S. policing jurisdictions between 1996 and 2009. Trajectory models essentially group jurisdictions sharing similar trends in the outcome of interest and graphically illustrate those patterns over the period. For example, some jurisdictions may report a consistent presence of gangs while others could experience no gang activity over time, rapid increases over time, rapid decreases, fluctuating presence of gang activity, or other kinds of more complex trends between 1996 and 2009. This methodology does not require that researchers specify the number of groups or the shape of the trajectories in advance.

Appendix C

Trajectory Group 1 (N=55)

Abilene, TX
Alexandria, VA
Amherst Town, NY
Ann Arbor, MI
Athens-Clarke County, GA
Beaumont, TX
Bellevue, WA
Billings, MT
Birmingham, AL
Cambridge, MA
Cape Coral, FL
Cary, NC
Clearwater, FL
Coral Springs, FL
Dallas, TX
Denton, TX
Erie, PA
Eugene, OR
Evansville, IN
Fort Collins, CO
Gainesville, FL
Gilbert, AZ
Hialeah, FL
Hollywood, FL
Irving, TX
Jacksonville, FL
Lexington, KY
Lincoln, NE
McAllen, TX
Mesquite, TX
Miramar, FL
Mobile, AL
Naperville, IL
Orange, CA
Overland Park, KS
Pasadena, TX
Peoria, AZ
Plano, TX
Port St. Lucie, FL
Provo, UT
Rancho Cucamonga, CA
Richardson, TX
Richmond, VA
Roseville, CA
Santa Clara, CA
Sioux Falls, SD
Springfield, MO
Stamford, CT
Tallahassee, FL
Torrance, CA
Virginia Beach, VA
Waco, TX
Warren, MI
Westminster, CO
Winston-Salem, NC

Trajectory Group 2 (N=105)

Allentown, PA
Amarillo, TX
Anchorage, AK
Arlington, TX
Arvada, CO
Atlanta, GA
Aurora, CO
Austin, TX
Baltimore, MD
Baton Rouge, LA
Berkeley, CA
Boise, ID
Bridgeport, CT
Burbank, CA
Carrollton, TX
Cedar Rapids, IA
Chandler, AZ
Charleston, SC
Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC
Chattanooga, TN
Cincinnati, OH
Cleveland, OH
Colorado Springs, CO
Columbia, SC
Columbus, GA
Columbus, OH
Corpus Christi, TX
Costa Mesa, CA
Dayton, OH
Denver, CO
Des Moines, IA
Detroit, MI
El Paso, TX
Fairfield, CA
Fayetteville, NC
Flint, MI
Fort Lauderdale, FL
Fort Worth, TX
Fresno, CA
Garland, TX
Glendale, AZ
Glendale, CA
Grand Prairie, TX
Grand Rapids, MI
Green Bay, WI
Greensboro, NC
Hampton, VA
Henderson, NV
Honolulu, HI
Houston, TX
Huntington Beach, CA
Irvine, CA
Jackson, MS
Jersey City, NJ
Kansas City, KS
Kansas City, MO
Knoxville, TN
Lafayette, LA
Lansing, MI
Laredo, TX
Las Vegas, NV
Louisville Metro, KY
Lubbock, TX
Manchester, NH
Memphis, TN
Mesa, AZ
Miami, FL
Midland, TX
Milwaukee, WI
Modesto, CA
Montgomery, AL
Nashville, TN
Newark, NJ
Norfolk, VA
Norman, OK
North Las Vegas, NV
Oakland, CA
Oceanside, CA
Olathe, KS
Omaha, NE
Orlando, FL
Palm Bay, FL
Pembroke Pines, FL
Phoenix, AZ
Portland, OR
Portsmouth, VA
Providence, RI
Pueblo, CO
Reno, NV
Rochester, NY
Rockford, IL
Sacramento, CA
San Antonio, TX
Scottsdale, AZ
Shreveport, LA
Simi Valley, CA
St. Louis, MO
St. Petersburg, FL
Sterling Heights, MI
Stockton, CA
Tampa, FL
Tempe, AZ
Vancouver, WA
Victorville, CA
Washington, DC

Trajectory Group 3 (N=14)

Antioch, CA
Chesapeake, VA
Concord, CA
Daly City, CA
El Monte, CA
Elgin, IL
Elizabeth, NJ
Independence, MO
McKinney, TX
Raleigh, NC
Savannah-Chatham Metropolitan, GA
Springfield, MA
Sunnyvale, CA
West Palm Beach, FL

Trajectory Group 4 (N=71)

Akron, OH
Albuquerque, NM
Anaheim, CA
Aurora, IL
Bakersfield, CA
Boston, MA
Buffalo, NY
Chicago, IL
Chula Vista, CA
Clarksville, TN
Corona, CA
Downey, CA
Durham, NC
Escondido, CA
Fontana, CA
Fort Wayne, IN
Fremont, CA
Fullerton, CA
Garden Grove, CA
Hartford, CT
Hayward, CA
Huntsville, AL
Indianapolis, IN
Joliet, IL
Killeen, TX
Lakewood, CO
Little Rock, AR
Long Beach, CA
Los Angeles, CA
Madison, WI
Minneapolis, MN
New Haven, CT
New Orleans, LA
Oklahoma City, OK
Ontario, CA
Oxnard, CA
Pasadena, CA
Paterson, NJ
Peoria, IL
Pittsburgh, PA
Pomona, CA
Rialto, CA
Richmond, CA
Riverside, CA
Salem, OR
Salt Lake City, UT
San Bernardino, CA
San Diego, CA
San Francisco, CA
San Jose, CA
Santa Ana, CA
Santa Rosa, CA
Seattle, WA
South Bend, IN
Spokane, WA
Springfield, IL
St. Paul, MN
Syracuse, NY
Tacoma, WA
Toledo, OH
Tucson, AZ
Tulsa, OK
Vallejo, CA
Ventura, CA
Visalia, CA
Waterbury, CT
West Covina, CA
West Valley, UT
Wichita, KS
Worcester, MA
Yonkers, NY

Trajectory Group 5 (N=2)

Inglewood, CA
Salinas, CA

NOTES

[i] This technique has been widely used in the classification of individuals according to their pattern of offending over time (Lacourse, Nagin, Tremblay, Vitaro et al., 2003; Piquero, 2008). (See Appendix B for a technical explanation of the trajectory procedure). In 2004, researchers began to apply this group-based trajectory method to model the criminal careers of geographic areas, such as street segments and census tracts, to capture communities' trajectories across time and space (Griffiths and Chavez, 2004; Weisburd, Bushway, Lum, and Yang, 2004).

[ii] The National Gang Center was formerly called the National Youth Gang Center.

[iii] For previous NGS publications covering relatively short time segments, see Egley, Howell, and Major (2004, 2006); Howell (2006); Howell and Egley (2005); Howell and Gleason (1999); Howell, Egley, and Gleason (2002); and Howell, Moore, and Egley (2002).

[iv] The upturn in suburban counties from 2008 to 2009 is the result of a group of agencies newly reporting gang problems in their jurisdictions to the NYGS. However, based on the initial data submitted by these agencies, the gang problem appears relatively small in size (e.g., fewer than 20 gang members) and magnitude (all of the agencies with the exception of one reported zero gang homicides) in these areas.

[v] See Appendix A for further description of the two samples. Both samples included all cities above 50,000 in population and all suburban counties, and randomly selected agencies from smaller cities and rural counties. Thus, these analyses necessarily exclude agencies not participating in both samples.

[vi] Only two of the eligible cities were excluded from the analysis due to missing data for the entire time period.

[vii] Reports from Tita and colleagues' extensive program of gang research in Pittsburgh include Cohen, Cork, Engberg, and Tita, 1998; Cohen and Tita, 1999; Tita, 1999; Tita and Cohen, 2004; Tita, Cohen, and Engberg, 2005; Tita and Griffiths, 2005; and Tita and Ridgeway, 2007.

[viii] These are citizen-initiated emergency (911) calls to police.

[ix] A census tract is considered to be a reasonable approximation of a "neighborhood" or a "community" (Griffiths and Chavez, 2004, p. 942).

[x] Tita and Cohen (1999) classified a homicide as gang-related if it involved some gang motivation (such as intergang disputes, initiation activities, or spontaneous drive-by killings) or if any participant was a gang member. Member-only homicides involved at least one gang member, but no gang motivation.

[xi] Places with the highest number of gang homicides typically report inordinately large numbers of gang members. Thus, their gang homicide rates (per 1,000 gang members) tend to be lower than those of other jurisdictions reporting some gang homicide among far fewer gang members.

[xii] Includes "gangs" not traditionally considered "street gangs," including Hells Angels and motorcycle outlaw gangs.

[xiii] This broad area encompasses both the East Region (Virginia, West Virginia, District of Columbia, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, and New York) and the New England Region (Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine).

[xiv] North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, and Ohio.

[xv] California and Nevada.

[xvi] Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia.

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This partnership works to provide professionals in the field of gangs with tools that can be used in a comprehensive range of strategies to respond to street gangs, from prevention and intervention to criminal justice strategies such as suppression, prosecution, and reentry.

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