

Public Enemy #1? Gang Crime Myths and Realities

Mayors and U.S. Attorneys are on the front lines in our communities and know better than anyone that gangs have become an increasingly deadly threat to the safety and security of our Nation's citizens.

—U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL ALBERTO GONZALEZ,
MARCH 31, 2006

For the most part, gang members do very little—sleep, get up late, hang around, brag a lot, eat again, drink, hang around some more. It's a boring life; the only thing that is equally boring is being a researcher watching gang members.

—MALCOLM W. KLEIN, 1995

Gangs can be understood in many ways. John Hagedorn (2005) and Sudhir Venkatesh (2003) describe gangs as replacements for mainstream institutions (the state, the family) that find themselves in crisis. Others such as Luis Barrios (2003) and David Brotherton (2003) argue that gangs take on aspects of social movements. Finally, many have observed that gangs proliferate and operate within the realm of youth culture, citing among other examples the role of the film *Colors* in the dissemination of Los Angeles gang culture (Klein 1995).

But the dominant public discourse treats gangs as a particularly virulent subset of the crime problem. James Short and Lorine Hughes argue that this tendency has affected gang studies, which largely “regard gangs as a fractal of crime” (2006, emphasis in original). The tendency to equate gangs with the most spectacular forms of crime has also generated a set of public myths about the relationship between gangs and crime. These myths hold that:

- Most or all gang members are hardened criminals.
- Gang members spend most of their time planning or committing crimes.
- Gang members are responsible for the bulk of violent crime.
- Gangs largely organize and direct the criminal activity of their members.

There may be a handful of gangs and gang members who meet this description. Researchers who study gangs generally find, however, that most “gang crime” is not well planned or centrally directed, but is instead committed by individual members or small groups on an ad hoc basis.

Ethnographic and survey research have fairly consistently shown that:

- The seriousness and extent of criminal involvement varies greatly among gang members.
- Gang members who engage in crime nonetheless spend most of their time in noncriminal pursuits.
- Gang members account for a small share of all crime (including violent crime), even within communities and neighborhoods where there are gang problems.
- Much of the crime committed by gang members is self-initiated and is meant to serve personal rather than gang interests.

What is a gang crime?

Law enforcement officials generally employ one of two definitions of gang crime for the purposes of tracking and measuring the problem. The first counts all crimes committed by individuals who are believed to be gang members as *gang-related*, regardless of the nature of the offense or the circumstances surrounding it. The second and more restrictive definition includes only *gang-motivated* crimes that are believed to have been committed for the benefit of the gang or as part of a gang function.

Many crimes committed by gang members are unrelated to gang activity.

Cheryl Maxson and Malcolm Klein examined police data in South Central Los Angeles and found that use of a motive-based definition generated half as many gang homicides as a member-based definition (2001). In other words, half of the homicides committed by

gang members were not committed for the gang or as part of gang activity.

Gang-motivated crimes can be further divided into two categories: *self-directed* crimes that are initiated and organized by individuals or small groups of rank-and-file gang members, and *gang-directed* crimes commissioned or orchestrated by gang leaders or the gang as a whole. Finally, gang-motivated crimes can be understood in terms of *instrumental* actions that are intended to advance the material interests of the gang or its leaders, and *expressive* actions that show gang pride and demonstrate that the group is more fearless than its rivals by defending turf, avenging past injuries, and so on.

Consider the following four cases:

1. A gang member gets in a fight with another man who makes a pass at his girlfriend at a party.
2. A gang member assaults a young man affiliated with a rival gang who has ventured onto territory claimed by the subject's gang.
3. A gang member is asked by older gang members to go on a "mission" into enemy territory to find and attack rival gang members.
4. A gang member is asked by gang leaders to punish a witness who testified against another member.

All four cases would fall under the member-based definition of gang crime, but the first would not meet the motive-based definition because the fight had nothing to do with the gang. The third and fourth cases could be considered gang-directed incidents, but not the second, which was initiated spontaneously by the individual in question.

The fourth case could represent an instrumental effort to advance gang members' material interests by deterring witnesses from testifying against the gang. The third case, by contrast, depicts what is probably an expressive use of gang violence that is more likely to harm than to help gang members' material interests by generating further violence and drawing unwanted attention from law enforcement.

Tales of sophisticated criminal conspiracies and calculated use of violence dominate the public discussion of gang crime. But gang-directed, instrumental activities are the exception, not the rule. Descriptions of gang activity drawn from ethnography and survey research provide little support for the view that gangs are a form of organized crime.

As a general rule, gang members do not spend

Figure 6.1. Definitions of gang crime



hours carefully planning out robberies and burglaries with their fellows. They do not turn drug revenues over to the gang to finance its activities, but instead spend their money on clothes and fast food, as many other teenagers do. And most do not wait for permission from higher-ups to attack members of a rival group. Many gang youth engage in violence, but it is overwhelmingly expressive in nature and often initiated by rank-and-file members—at times *against* the wishes of gang leaders who seek to keep a lid on conflicts. Drug sales are also common among gang members, but the activity generally ranges from a completely disorganized pursuit of individuals to loosely organized cooperative endeavors.

The disorganized character of most gang crime does not reduce its significance. Nor can we ignore the moments when the wrong set of circumstances generates the kind of gang threat that we most fear. Short (2006) recounts the efforts of Richard Brymmer to locate the large youth gangs that had been described to him by police and neighborhood residents. After encountering only small groupings of eight to ten youth (*palomillas*) for two years, Brymmer witnessed the sudden transformation of the *palomillas* into a "wall of young males" in response to a threat from a rival gang. The transformation of the *palomillas* into a gang was a rare occurrence, but one with potentially lethal consequences.

But the disorganized character of gang crime does raise the question of whether a gang is best understood as an organization with defined leadership, goals, and means to achieve those goals, or as an activity that orients youth toward crime and conflict with other gang members. Understanding the disorganized character of gang crime also makes it possible to consider the degree to which getting rid of gang leaders, or even the gang itself, is likely to affect the incidence of crime and violence.

Measuring gang crime and delinquency

There are three methods for measuring gang crime and delinquency:

- self-reports of delinquent activity by youth who identify themselves as gang members;
- self-reports of victimization by people who believe that their attacker was a gang member; and
- police reports of crimes committed by known or suspected gang members (typically generated at arrest).

Each type of data has methodological weaknesses. Youth self-reports may inflate or minimize delinquent behaviors if the respondents seek to exaggerate or conceal their involvement in them. Most surveys of youth gang activity target specific locations or segments of the youth population, making it difficult to derive general conclusions about the larger youth gang population. Finally, many of the relevant surveys include only youth under the age of 18 and ignore a young adult gang population that is of great interest to law enforcement, although the Denver and Rochester youth surveys have continued to collect information from participants into their adult years.

The respondents in the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) report victimization by people whom they believe to be gang members, a belief that could be inaccurate or influenced by outside factors such as media reports of gang activity. Further, NCVS data are reported only at the national level and cannot be used to track regional or local trends.

Researchers have found that law enforcement gang membership and crime statistics are not a reliable basis for tracking trends or comparing jurisdictions.

Law enforcement gang crime numbers include only crimes that are reported to police and identified by the police as gang-related or gang-motivated. There is no agreed-upon definition of a gang or a gang crime, much less a uniform system for tracking and reporting it. Finally, the capacity and criteria for measuring gang crime vary greatly between law enforcement agencies and can shift from year to year as priorities change. A number of gang researchers have collaborated with police to improve data collection or used police records to conduct their own analyses of crime data, but these efforts are few and far between.

Deborah Lamm Weisel and Tara O'Connor Shelley

warn that “while it is tempting to use law enforcement data about gangs and gang-related offenses to make comparisons between—or even within—jurisdictions, gang-related data are exceptionally unreliable for this purpose” (2004). Law enforcement data provide no more than a blurry snapshot of the scale of gang crime in a particular jurisdiction in a particular year. Nonetheless, law enforcement gang crime reports are frequently cited because they are often the only figures that can be compared to overall crime reports at the local level.

With the exception of law enforcement agencies that employ the less common motive-based definition, all three measures track crimes committed by gang members that may or may not be gang-motivated. The use of a broad membership-based definition overstates the contribution of gangs to the crime problem, since some members would engage in criminal activity whether or not they were affiliated with a gang.

How much crime and delinquency do gangs and gang members generate?

To repeat, most gang members' behavior is not criminal, and most gang members' crimes are not violent. And of course, most violent people are not gang members, so it's not very useful to define gangs in terms of violent crime alone.

—MALCOLM W. KLEIN, 1995

Juvenile delinquency

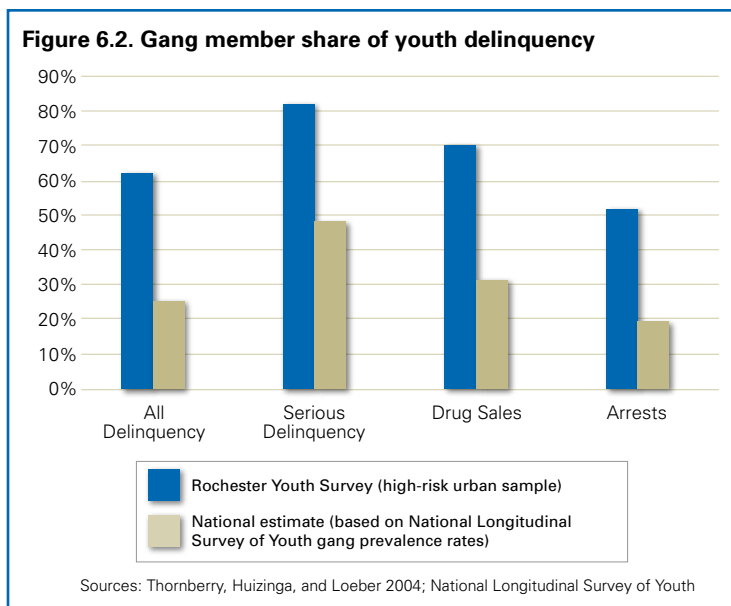
Data from youth surveys indicate that gang members commit delinquent acts at much higher rates than nongang peers and account for a significant share of juvenile crime. The research teams that conducted the multiyear Denver Youth Survey and the Rochester Youth Survey found that gang members were responsible for a disproportionate share of self-reported delinquency (Thornberry, Huizinga, and Loeber 2004).

Youth who reported gang membership prior to the end of high school made up 30 percent of the Rochester youth sample but accounted for over half of arrests (54 percent), close to two-thirds of delinquent acts (63 percent), and 82 percent of serious delinquent acts. The divide between gang and nongang youth was even greater in Denver, where gang members account for a smaller share of the sample (18 percent of boys and 9 percent of girls) but roughly the same proportion of serious delinquency (80 per-

cent of serious and violent crime).

Gang members are responsible for a disproportionate share of delinquency, but most delinquent acts are committed by youth who are not gang members.

It would be incorrect to conclude from these findings, however, that gang members commit the majority of crimes in the United States. The Denver and Rochester teams conducted their surveys in high-risk neighborhoods and oversampled youth considered to be “at high risk for serious delinquency” in order to strengthen the statistical power of their findings on delinquency. The prevalence of gang membership in the Denver sample was roughly 50 percent higher than the rates generated by the nationally representative National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) sample (11 percent of males and 6 percent of females), while rates of gang membership in Rochester were nearly four times the national rate (8 percent overall) (Snyder and Sickmund 2006).



The number of gang members in a more nationally representative sample of youth would be too small to drive the overall incidence of crime. For example, gang youth who participated in the Rochester Youth Survey reported three times more arrests, five times more drug sales, 11 times more serious delinquent acts, and four times more overall delinquency than nongang peers. These results are largely consistent with findings from Esbensen and Winfree’s research on a broader sample of 5,935 eighth-grade students (2001). Gang members who participated in the latter survey reported committing four to five times more property crimes—and three to five times more person crimes—than nongang peers.¹

¹ The pattern was somewhat different for drug sales. Esbensen and Winfree reported gang to nongang offending ratios of

The Rochester Youth Survey results are also roughly consistent with findings from interviews conducted with a snowball sample of high school students and dropouts in San Diego, Los Angeles, and Chicago in the late 1980s by Jeffrey Fagan (cited in Thornberry 2001a).² Gang members made up 23 percent of the three-city sample but accounted for two-thirds of self-reported assaults and robberies, nearly seven times the rate for nongang peers.

A very rough estimate of the gang share of juvenile delinquency can be obtained by applying the gang-to-nongang offending ratios generated from the Rochester Youth Survey to NLSY gang prevalence data (8 percent of youth). The resulting picture is quite different: the proportion of delinquency attributable to gang members drops from 63 percent to 26 percent overall, from 82 percent to 48 percent for serious delinquency, from 70 percent to 32 percent for drug sales, and from 54 percent to 19 percent for arrests. Further, these proportions include crimes committed by gang youth before and after periods of gang membership. The Denver Youth Survey research team found that gang youth reported the bulk of their delinquent activity during periods of active gang membership, including 85 percent of serious violent offenses, 86 percent of serious property offenses, and 80 percent of drug sale offenses (Thornberry, Huizinga, and Loeber 2004). But the fact that 15 to 20 percent of delinquent acts attributed to “gang members” were committed during nongang years indicates that the contribution of *active* gang members to overall delinquency may be closer to 20 percent. The observation that young people who are not gang members commit most juvenile crimes does not diminish the seriousness of the problems posed by juvenile gang members. It does, however, remind us that “gang crime” occurs in a larger context of juvenile delinquency that crosses gender, race, and class as well as gang lines.

Youth typically begin to exhibit somewhat higher levels of delinquency before joining gangs, but their delinquent behavior peaks during periods of gang involvement.

Several research studies have sought to determine whether gang youth are more delinquent than nongang peers because gangs attract delinquent youth,

between 9 and 12 to one—much larger than the five-to-one ratio reported by Thornberry. One possible explanation is that the oversampling of at-risk youth in the Rochester project produced higher rates of drug sales among nongang youth.

² A snowball sample is a nonrandom group of research subjects assembled through a referral process. Snowball samples are often used to reach population groups such as high school dropouts who may otherwise be difficult to locate.

or because the social dynamic of the gang facilitates delinquency among its members. The Denver and Rochester Youth Surveys, the Seattle Social Development Project, and a fourth longitudinal study of youth in Montreal all found that higher rates of self-reported delinquency preceded gang membership (Thornberry 2001a). These findings suggest that seriously delinquent youth select themselves, or are selected by peers, for gang membership.

But the group effect of gang membership appears to exceed the impact of factors that contribute to individual delinquency. Thornberry concludes that “prior to joining the gang, gang members have somewhat higher rates of violent offending than do non-members, but the predominant change in behavior patterns occurs during periods of active gang membership. A similar pattern is observed for general delinquency and property crime.”

Gang youth are far more likely to commit delinquent acts during periods of active gang membership than during other years. Thornberry and his colleagues found that male gang members in the Rochester sample tended to report two times more person offenses in gang years than in nongang years. The Rochester team found a similar “gang facilitation effect” for general delinquency and drug sales, but not for property offenses.

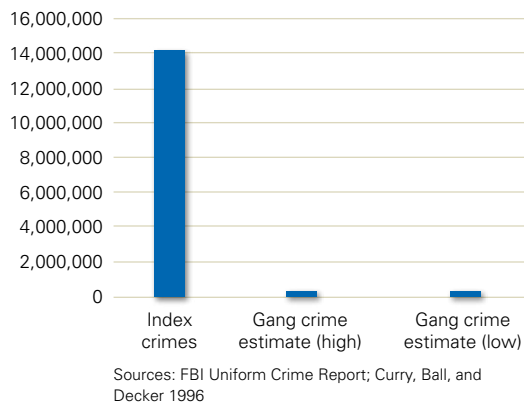
Gang youth also reported committing more offenses than other youth with delinquent peer groups. Thornberry and his colleagues found that average levels of self-reported delinquency were two to four times higher among gang members than among non-members with delinquent peers. The Seattle Social Development project data also show that gang youth committed three times more offenses than nongang youth whose best friends had been in trouble with the law (cited in Thornberry 2001b).

Crime

One estimate of gang crime amounts to less than 6 percent of all crime in the United States.

Reliable data on the extent of gang crime do not exist. David Curry, Richard Ball, and Scott Decker produced estimates of total gang membership and gang crime for 1993—a peak moment for juvenile crime in the United States—by tabulating data from law enforcement surveys and using statistical estimates for jurisdictions that failed to provide information in the surveys (1996). Their method produced a “conservative” estimate of roughly 380,000 gang members and 440,000 gang crimes, and a “reasonable” estimate of

Figure 6.3. U.S. index crime and gang crime estimates: 1993



560,000 members and 580,000 crimes.

These gang crime numbers must be taken with fistfuls of salt. Even if all of the assumptions guiding the statistical estimates were accurate, Weisel and Shelley (2004) argue persuasively that there are serious problems with the reliability of the underlying data. Nevertheless, the numbers provide a point of departure for examining gang members’ contribution to the total incidence of crime.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program recorded more than 14 million serious (Part I) violent and property crimes in 1993.³ If a range of 440,000 to 560,000 accurately captured the number of serious property and violent crimes committed by gang members in 1993, then gang members would have been responsible for 3.1 percent to 4.1 percent of serious crime in the United States.

This estimate could be low if police departments recorded in their gang statistics only the most serious and violent offenses—crimes that receive more attention and resources. But the estimate could be high if law enforcement agencies’ gang crime reports counted less serious offenses (simple assault, disorderly conduct) or drug offenses that are not included in the overall index crime total.

The gulf between the estimate of gang delinquency obtained from youth survey data (20 to 25 percent) and the estimate of gang crime obtained from law enforcement surveys (3 to 4 percent) demands some explanation. One explanation is that law enforce-

³ The Uniform Crime Reporting program collects crime report data from local law enforcement agencies. Criminal offenses are classified according to a uniform system to facilitate compilation of national statistics and comparison of jurisdictions. Part I offenses include the most common serious person and property offenses and make up the UCR crime index.

ment agencies may underreport gang crime because many jurisdictions lack the capacity—or the political will—to carefully track the extent of gang involvement in criminal activity. Law enforcement underreporting may account for some of the gap, but the most compelling explanation is that gang activity peaks during early adolescence and drops sharply as youths approach adulthood.

The Rochester research team reports that the prevalence of active gang membership among male survey respondents dropped from 18 percent in the first year (average age 14) to 7 percent in the fourth year (average age 17) (Hall, Thornberry, and Lizotte 2006). Other surveys have found a more gradual drop-off in gang membership. Fagan (1990) reports gang prevalence rates that decline from 26 percent at age 15 to 22 percent at ages 17 and 18 (cited in Klein and Maxson 2006). Data from the Seattle Social Development Project show rates of gang membership that fall from 6 percent at age 15 to 5 percent at age 18 (Hill, Lui, and Hawkins 2001 cited in Klein and Maxson 2006). Nonetheless, it is clear that adults—who commit the vast majority of crimes—participate in gangs at substantially lower rates than adolescents.

It should not be surprising, given the small contribution of gang members to the crime problem, that there is little or no correlation between law enforcement gang population estimates and overall crime trends. An analysis of gang membership and crime data from North Carolina found that most jurisdictions reporting growth in gang membership also reported falling crime rates. Large, urban counties that apparently experienced the greatest growth in gang membership achieved some of the largest reductions in crime. The full results of this comparison can be found at the end of this chapter.

Homicide

Public concerns about gang crime often focus on well-publicized incidents of lethal violence. Many lives have been lost to gang violence over the past decades. African American and Latino parents in high-crime neighborhoods have good reason to fear for the well-being of their sons. Fifteen years ago, for example, the homicide rate for black males between the ages of 20 and 24 in St. Louis—one of the most violent cities in America—reached a shocking 626 per 100,000 residents (Decker and Curry 2003). Nevertheless, gang members are responsible for a relatively small share of the nation's homicides.

Author and activist Tom Hayden cites a 2001 figure of 1,335 gang-related homicides in 132 cities with populations over 100,000 provided by the staff at the National Youth Gang Center (2005).⁴ The gang homicide total amounts to 8.4 percent of the 15,980 homicides reported to the FBI and is a little more than half the 2,387 people known to have been killed by family members or intimates in 2001.⁵ Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson cite a slightly smaller 2002 figure of 1,119 gang homicides—less than 7 percent of all homicides that year—based on the FBI's Supplemental Homicide Reports, which use criteria that “approximate a gang motive approach to defining gang homicides” (2006).

The reported prevalence of gang-related homicides varies widely by jurisdiction. In California, George Tita and Allan Abrahamse found that “gang killings accounted for 16 percent of all homicides between 1981 and 1991” (cited in Klein and Maxson 2006). Tita and Abrahamse also reported that three of every four California gang homicides took place in Los Angeles County. The most recent available National Youth Gang Survey data indicated that gang members were responsible for more than half of all homicides in Chicago and Los Angeles, and a quarter of homicides in 173 other large cities that reported gang problems and provided gang homicide information (Egley and Ritz 2006).

Gang-related homicides are a serious problem in a number of cities, but nationally just one gang homicide occurs annually for every 18 gangs and 570 gang members.

The National Youth Gang Center estimates that there are roughly 24,000 youth gangs with 760,000 members in the United States. If just one member of each youth gang committed a single homicide each year, the annual number of gang homicides would reach 24,000—nearly 10,000 more homicides than the nation experienced in 2005 under *any* circumstances.

The most recent available figure for gang-related homicides is 1,335 killings in 2001—one homicide for every 18 gangs and 570 gang members. At that rate, it would take 18 years for each gang to be responsible for a single killing, assuming that the homicides were divided evenly (they are not) and that the gangs

⁴ The total does not include smaller cities or rural areas, but the impact of the omission is small because gang-related homicides are rare in less-populous jurisdictions. A large majority of rural counties and small cities reported no gang problems at the turn of the century, and among those reporting gang problems, 80 percent reported no gang-related homicides (Egley and Ritz 2006).

⁵ The FBI does not include victims of the attacks of September 11, 2001, in the annual homicide count.

survived that long (many do not). Since a handful of cities and gangs account for a disproportionate share of killings, we can infer that most gangs will *never* have a murderer in their midst.

Most law enforcement agencies reported zero youth gang homicides between 2002 and 2004.

Most law enforcement agencies reported *zero* youth gang homicides between 2002 and 2004. Jurisdictions that experienced no gang homicides over the three-year period included two in five larger cities (50,000 or more residents), a majority of suburban counties, and four in five smaller cities and rural counties. Just one in 10 larger cities—and one in 37 suburban counties—reported 10 or more gang-related homicides in at least one of the three survey years. Gang-related homicides happen occasionally in a large number of jurisdictions and are a major problem in a handful of cities, according to the surveys. Murders committed by family members and partners are a more serious issue in most jurisdictions.

Policy makers and the public at large generally believe that gang killings are fueled by struggles for control of the illegal drug trade. Yet researchers have consistently found that drug motives are present in a very small proportion of gang homicides. Carolyn and Richard Block conducted a comprehensive analysis of gang homicides in Chicago at the height of the crack epidemic and concluded that guns, not drugs, were behind a spike in gang killings (2001).

Fewer than 3 percent of gang-motivated murders that took place between 1987 and 1990 were drug-related, according to Chicago homicide data, and just five of 288 cases (1.7 percent) were connected to drug business. There was also a much stronger correlation at the neighborhood level between gang-motivated homicides and nonlethal violence than was found between gang homicides and gang-motivated drug crimes.

A spatial analysis of violent incidents showed that gang-related homicides and nonlethal violence were much more likely to occur at the border of gang territories than in places with high levels of gang-related drug activity. The researchers found that “street gang–motivated homicides tended to occur within or close to the boundaries of turf hot spot areas, and only rarely in drug hot spot areas except when a drug hot spot area intersected with a turf hot spot area.”

The number of gang-motivated homicides rose sharply in Chicago at the end of the 1980s, from 50 in 1987 to a record 101 gang-motivated homicides in

1990. The spike in homicides did not correlate to an increase in levels of nonlethal gang violence, which actually declined slightly over the period. Instead, the researchers report that “virtually the entire increase in the number of street gang–motivated homicides seems attributable to an increase in the use of high-caliber, automatic, or semiautomatic weapons.”

Research teams in Boston and Los Angeles conducted extensive analyses of homicide patterns and came to the same conclusion. They found that youth and young adult gang members were killing each other in a cycle of violence that had no motive other than the perceived need to defend symbolic turf and retaliate for past violence. The Boston researchers who designed Operation Ceasefire (discussed in chapter 7) determined that most incidents “were not in any proximate way about drug trafficking or other ‘business’ interests” (Kennedy, Braga, and Piehl 2001). Further, youth known to be associated with homicides were more likely to have been arraigned in the past for violent, property, and disorder offenses than for drug offenses.

The RAND Corporation researchers who assisted in the replication of Operation Ceasefire in Los Angeles report that their findings “drew incredulous responses from members of the working group, including one law enforcement member who insisted ‘these kids are...being killed because of [dope]’ ” (Tita et al. 2003). A review of the case files with the detective who assembled them confirmed the team’s initial assessment: the kids were not being killed over dope. The findings from Chicago, Boston, and Los Angeles are supported by research studies that produced similar results in Miami, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis (cited in Howell and Decker 1999 and Tita et al. 2003).

In a recent summary of gang research literature, Short observes that both intergang and intragang homicides are associated with external challenges to group solidarity and internal challenges to group norms (2006). The perceived need to uphold a code of honor drives violence among gang members more than the interests of the gang or its members:

Donald Black (1993) and Mark Cooney (1998) note that the violence associated with such concerns appears to be overwhelmingly “moralistic” rather than “predatory.” That is, it occurs in response to “a violation of standards of acceptable behavior” rather than as a means of achieving personal gratification. (Cooney, p. 4)

The intention here is not to minimize the toll gang wars have taken on youth, especially youth of color, over the past two decades, but instead to place it in context. Lethal violence remains a serious problem in the United States, and it requires a thoughtful response. Blaming the problem on “gangs” may be politically expedient, but it does little to advance a solution.

Violence

Research results in three gang problem cities show that gang members were responsible for less than 10 percent of violent crime.

Researchers working at the local level have also reported that known gang members account for a small fraction of violent criminal activity, even in cities and neighborhoods that report serious gang problems. Las Vegas law enforcement officials talked up the extent of gang violence prior to the passage of a law establishing enhanced sentences for gang-related crimes. But when researchers went back to examine police data, they determined that the prevalence of gang violence had been greatly exaggerated. Defendants identified by police as gang members accounted for just 6 percent of violent crime charges and 5 percent of drug charges filed in Las Vegas between 1989 and 1995 (Miethe and McCorkle 2002).

Data published by a team of researchers that evaluated a gang suppression effort in Dallas show that gang-related offenses accounted for less than 10 percent of serious violent crime in the year preceding the intervention, even in target areas that experienced “large amounts of gang violence” (Fritsch, Caeti, and Taylor 2003). The same conclusions can be drawn from data collected by investigators evaluating the efforts of a gang task force in Westminster, California (Kent et al. 2000). Gang-related offenses

in Westminster peaked at roughly 7 or 8 percent of all crime during the preintervention period, and the researchers concluded that “violent gang crime is a relatively small proportion of violent crime” in the jurisdiction.

The data from Las Vegas, Dallas, and Westminster roughly correspond to previously reported findings from the National Crime Victimization Survey that gang members are responsible for a small share of violent crime (Ziedenberg 2005). The proportion of violent crimes in which the victim believed the perpetrator to be a gang member peaked at 10 percent of all victimizations in 1996 before declining 6 percent in 1998 and remaining stable thereafter.

One study of highly organized gangs in New York’s Chinatown found that most violence was motivated by gang rivalries or personal disputes, and that it was initiated by rank-and-file members rather than gang leaders.

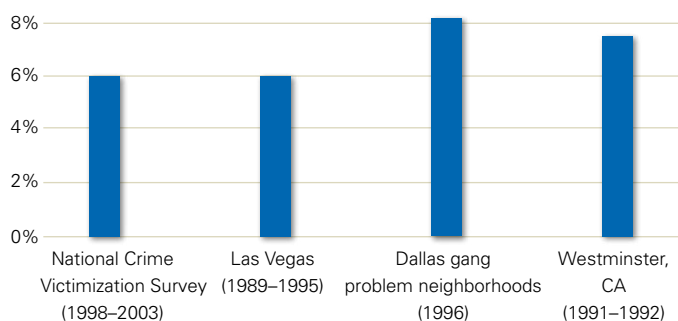
It is often assumed that gang leaders orchestrate violence in order to secure control of drug markets and other criminal enterprises. This notion has been challenged by findings from ethnographic research that gang violence is often expressive in nature and initiated from below. Ko-lin Chin interviewed 62 male members of Chinese gangs in New York’s Chinatown in 1992 and found that, while fighting was common among the gang members he interviewed, the violence originated in personal disputes and gang rivalries rather than in instrumental concerns (1996). He also reported that leaders of Chinatown’s youth gangs and adult criminal organizations were more likely to restrain than to encourage gang violence.

Law enforcement authorities had identified drug trafficking as a major gang activity and a leading cause of violence among Chinese gang members. But the gang members interviewed by Chin reported little involvement in drug sales; just one in six indicated that he had ever sold drugs. The top two reasons supplied by the interviewees for violence between members of rival gangs were “staring” during chance encounters in public locations (mentioned by 45 percent of respondents) and fights over turf (32 percent). Disputes over money (25 percent) and girls (21 percent) were the most commonly cited reasons for conflict between members of the same gang.

Chinatown gang leaders were more likely to intervene to restrain, rather than to promote, conflict between gang members.

Most gang members reported that gang leaders, sometimes joined by representatives of adult criminal

Figure 6.4. Proportion of violent crime committed by people believed to be gang members



Sources: Bureau of Justice Statistics; Miethe and McCorkle 2002; Fritsch, Caeti, and Taylor 2003; Kent et al. 2000

organizations, would intervene to resolve intergang and intragang conflicts. Chin concludes that “(a) violence between gang members is freelance and erupts rather spontaneously over personal matters, and (b) gang leaders strive to control and contain violence for purely pragmatic purposes.... Drug use, drug trafficking, tong [organized crime] affiliations, protection rackets, and community politics appear to have little influence on gang violence in New York City’s Chinatown.”

Drug distribution

National and local law enforcement officials have long argued that gangs are heavily involved in drug trafficking and distribution, but the evidence behind the contention is thin. The National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) reported in the October 4, 2005, issue of *Narcotics Digest Weekly* that gangs (including street gangs, prison gangs, and outlaw motorcycle gangs) are “the primary retail distributors of drugs in the country.” The National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations (NAGIA) makes a similar claim in its most recent National Gang Threat Assessment, which is based on a survey of gang investigators at 455 law enforcement agencies (2005).

The NAGIA survey is not, as the authors readily admit, “representative of the nation as a whole, nor is it based on a statistically valid sample.” Beyond problems with the representativeness of the sample, however, the NAGIA report clearly overstates the survey findings. Three in five law enforcement respondents (60.2 percent) reported “moderate” or “high” gang involvement in total street-level drug sales in their areas. But when the responses are broken down by substance, it becomes clear that the figures are driven primarily by marijuana distribution.

Marijuana is the only drug for which a majority of law enforcement respondents reported “moderate” or “high” gang involvement in distribution.

Marijuana is the only drug for which a majority of law enforcement respondents reported “moderate” or “high” gang involvement in distribution (64.8 percent). Close to half reported moderate to high levels of gang involvement in the distribution of crack cocaine (47.3 percent), while fewer than 40 percent of respondents identified a significant role for gangs in the distribution of methamphetamine (39.1 percent), powdered cocaine (38.2 percent), or heroin (27.9 percent). Just a quarter of law enforcement agencies in Southern states indicated moderate or high gang involvement in the distribution of meth-

amphetamine (24.9 percent), despite local media reports that have suggested much closer ties between gangs and meth trafficking.

Researchers found that law enforcement officials overestimate gang member involvement in drug distribution.

Further, researchers Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson found that law enforcement officials have an exaggerated perception of gang member involvement in drug distribution. In the mid-1980s the two conducted research on cocaine sales in South Central Los Angeles, where they were told that “upward of 90 percent” or “almost all” sales were gang-related (Maxson 1995).

A review of police records, however, showed that the share of arrests attributable to gang members ranged from 9 percent in 1983 to 25 percent in 1985. Despite stereotypes that gang drug activity is associated with “high levels of violence” (NDIC 2005), the researchers found that gang members were no more likely to carry firearms than nonmembers (Maxson 1995).

Maxson replicated these findings six years later when she used police records to examine 1,563 cocaine sale incidents and 471 other drug sale incidents in Pasadena and Pomona, California. Gang members accounted for just over a quarter of cocaine sale arrests (26.7 percent) and one in nine non-cocaine sale arrests (11.5 percent). The proportions of cocaine sales attributable to gang members—21 percent in Pomona and 30 percent in Pasadena—were consistent with the last year of the Los Angeles data (25 percent) and well below law enforcement estimates, which ranged from 30 to 50 percent.

The proportion of non-cocaine sale arrests attributed to gang members (one in nine) also failed to meet the expectations of law enforcement officials who reported that “gangs were prominent in the distribution of marijuana, heroin, and PCP, although less so than in the distribution of cocaine.” Maxson further notes that these proportions may overstate the role of gangs in the drug trade since many gang members sell drugs independent of their gangs: “It should also be noted that these gang member arrestees might have been entrepreneurs. Involvement of the gang might have been minimal.”

Gang members arrested for drug sales were no more likely than nonmembers to carry weapons or engage in violence associated with the sale.

Maxson’s findings also belied the stereotype of heav-

ily armed gang members who use violence to control local drug markets. Gang members arrested for cocaine sales were no more likely than nonmembers to carry a firearm (10 percent) or to engage in violence in conjunction with the sale or arrest (5 percent). Cocaine sales by gang members were somewhat more likely to involve the rock form of cocaine. But the average amount of cocaine sold by nonmembers was twice that sold by gang members (6.95 grams and 3.55 grams, respectively). The only other significant differences between cocaine sale incidents involving gang members and those involving nonmembers were that gang members were disproportionately black, male, and young (a mean age of 22.5).

Youth survey and interview data suggest that a significant proportion of gang members participate in drug sales during their time in the gang. Members of gangs that were considered by law enforcement to be the most highly organized in Chicago and San Diego all reported drug sale activity to interviewers (Decker, Bynum, and Weisel 2001). A large majority of St. Louis gang members said that more than half of their gang peers sold drugs (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). Several other studies conducted during the early 1990s found rates of self-reported participation in drug sales that ranged from a low of 30 percent to a high of 95 percent (Maxson 1995).

One study found that just one Los Angeles gang member in seven sold drugs as often as once a month.

The character of gang-member-involvement drug sales is poorly understood. Drug selling is not typically a full-time occupation for gang members. A study conducted by the Los Angeles County district attorney's office in 1992 found that *just one gang member in seven sold drugs on a monthly basis* (Howell and Decker 1999). Scott Decker and Barry Van Winkle describe the drug sale activity of St. Louis gang members as "sporadic," observing that they sold drugs "when they wanted to make money, not at any fixed time" (1996). "It is probable," the authors conclude, "that the majority of the drug sellers in the St. Louis area are not gang members."

Instead, drug sales represent an occasional source of income that allows gang youth to obtain the consumer goods and services that are readily available to more affluent teens. Nearly two-thirds of St. Louis gang members said that most of their drug revenues were spent on clothing. San Diego gang members told interviewers that their drug profits were spent on fast food and parties (Decker, Bynum, and Weisel 2001).

Gang members are clearly not the primary retail distributors of drugs in the country. In Southern California cities with recognized gang problems, gang members accounted for roughly a quarter of drug sale arrests. It is safe to assume that gang members account for a much smaller share of drug sale arrests in jurisdictions with smaller gang problems. It is also likely that gang members are heavily underrepresented in the many drug transactions that take place in more affluent neighborhoods where police make fewer drug arrests.

Gang members do not even account for a majority among youth who have sold drugs. Sixteen percent of 17-year-olds report selling drugs at some point in their lives, while just 8 percent report past or current gang membership (Snyder and Sickmund 2006). The prevalence of drug sale activity was even higher among white youth (17 percent) despite the fact that white youth had a lower rate of gang involvement (7 percent).

Several researchers have described gang member involvement in drug sales as sporadic and poorly organized.

Law enforcement officials generally perceive the involvement of gang members in drug sales as a criminal conspiracy on the part of the gang to traffic in drugs. Most of the ethnographic and survey literature paints a very different picture of the relationship between gangs and the drug trade. They describe gang member drug activity as sporadic and disorganized—less Drug Traffickers Inc. than a fraternal association whose members network and occasionally do deals with one another.

Scott Decker, Tim Bynum, and Deborah Weisel interviewed 85 active members of the four most organized gangs in Chicago and San Diego (2001). All of the interviewees reported selling drugs, and most said that their gangs were involved in organizing drug sales. But their responses generally suggested low levels of organization with few defined roles or rules. According to one San Diego gang member:

The gang don't organize nothing. It's like everybody is on they own. You are not trying to do nothing with nobody unless it's with your friend. You don't put your money with gangs.

Drug profits were not primarily used to finance gang activities but instead were retained by individual drug sellers. Even members of Chicago's Gangster Disciples—arguably one of the most highly organized street gangs in the United States—overwhelmingly reported that drug profits went into their own pocket.

ets and not back to the gang. San Diego gang members were even more emphatic, with one responding, “A percentage of the drug money [to the gang]? Hell, no. You keep it to yourself.”

Decker and Van Winkle found similar results in their investigation of St. Louis gangs: “Although every gang in our sample had some members who sold drugs (crack cocaine, in the main), gang involvement was generally poorly organized, episodic, nonmonopolistic, carried out by individuals or cliques on their own, and was not a rationale for the gang’s existence and continuance” (1996). Gangs did not dominate the drug trade in St. Louis, nor did they attempt to do so. Gang members who were interviewed often referred to nonmembers who sold drugs, and to drug houses within gang neighborhoods that were not controlled by the gang.

The drug economy plays a significant role in the lives of many gang members, a fact that has been well documented by Hagedorn (2005) and others. But the drug trade is not responsible for the existence of gangs or the activities of their members. And gangs are not responsible for the flow of drugs and drug dollars into low-income communities.

Perception and reality

All of the available evidence indicates that gang members play a relatively small role in the crime problem despite their propensity toward criminal activity. Gang members appear to be responsible for fewer than one in four drug sales; fewer than one in 10 homicides; fewer than one in 16 violent offenses; and fewer than one in 20 index crimes. Gangs themselves play an even smaller role, since much of the crime committed by gang members is self-directed and not committed for the gang’s benefit. The question, then, is why the problem of gang crime is so commonly overstated by law enforcement and media reports.

There are several possible explanations for why law enforcement and media reports consistently overestimate the role of gangs and gang members in crime and violence. First, gang members often make themselves highly visible, while others who commit crimes try to keep a lower profile in order to avoid arrest. Graffiti, colors, hand signs, and dramatic rivalries ensure that gang activity will be more memorable and more newsworthy than the less spectacular offenses that drive crime statistics.

Second, law enforcement and media depictions of gangs fuel gang crime myths by equating all gang activity with criminal activity and by tarring all gangs

and members with the worst crimes committed by any gang member. Klein succinctly illustrates the tendency of law enforcement agencies to cram all drug crime in a gang box when he quotes the deputy chief of a large police department on the subject of crack sales:

Look, this narcotics stuff is all a matter of gangs and conspiracy. To me, a gang is any two or more guys working on crime together. In a drug sale, you got at least the seller and the distributor involved. Now that means it’s a conspiracy. And there’s two guys, right. So all these crack sales are gang crimes. . . . Two or more guys conspiring to make crack sales means it’s a gang affair. . . . that’s how we define gang around here. (1995)

Law enforcement and media accounts also tend to attribute to the gang any crime for which an alleged gang member stands convicted, charged, or even suspected. This practice implies that every member of a gang has committed, or is at least capable of committing, a laundry list of heinous offenses. Some agencies such as North Carolina’s State Bureau of Investigations (SBI) go even further by lumping together the alleged activities of many gangs. The gangs of Charlotte/Mecklenburg County, for example, are said to engage in:

homicides, threats against law enforcement, firearm possession, drug possession, assaults, fighting, kidnapping, carjacking, armed robbery, home invasions, vandalism (graffiti), auto theft, breaking into vehicles, restaurant robberies, gun trafficking, extortion, prostitution and gambling.

The list of alleged gang activities creates the impression that every Charlotte gang member is a sociopath with a long criminal record, or, at a minimum, that every gang contains murderers, drug traffickers, carjackers, armed robbers, and their ilk. A quick review of the national gang data dispels any such idea.

The typical gang is not an army of killers or even potential killers. It is a group of youth and young adults who are alienated from mainstream society and caught up in a mythical world of excitement and danger. The damage that these young people do to themselves, to each other, and to more than a few bystanders is very real. But as Klein and many other researchers have observed, most gang members are more talk than action. A more realistic assessment of the gang contribution to the crime problem is needed if policy makers are

to avoid playing into the gang myth by inflating the dangers to public safety posed by gangs.

North Carolina: More gangs, less crime

Mercer Sullivan contends that the focus on gangs distracts researchers and policy makers from the real problem of youth violence (2006). He points to the lack of a correlation between youth violence and the most solid measure of gang prevalence, the National Youth Gang Center gang population estimates:

During the 1990s, youth gangs were widely reported to be increasing in numbers and membership throughout the United States (Miller 2001). Yet, during the latter part of the decade, youth violence decreased sharply (Butts and Travis 2002), while gang membership underwent but a slight decline and remained at historically unprecedented levels. . . . Given the choice, who would not prefer more gangs and less youth violence to the opposite combination.

A comparison of North Carolina crime data and gang membership estimates provides further evidence for Sullivan's argument, as well as an example of how gang hysteria can elicit counterproductive policy responses. Legislation introduced by Representatives Henry Michaux, a Democrat from Durham, and Phillip Frye, a Republican from Spruce Pine, in February 2005 declared that gang activity had brought North Carolina to a "state of crisis":

The General Assembly, however, further finds that the State of North Carolina is in a state of crisis that has been caused by violent street gangs whose members threaten, terrorize, and commit a multitude of crimes against the peaceful citizens of their neighborhoods. These activities, both individually and collectively, present a clear and present danger to public order and safety and are not constitutionally protected.

H.B. 50 would have made participation in a street gang a separate criminal offense; added 10 years to the sentence of anyone found to be an "organizer, supervisor or manager" of gang activity; required judges to make a determination on the record as to whether an offense was committed to benefit a street gang; allowed the state to seize property used for gang activity; added at least five years to the sentence of any defendant convicted of a serious felony committed to benefit gang activity if he or she was in possession of a firearm; and established a grant program for gang

prevention and intervention efforts.

The legislature's Fiscal Research Division estimated that the proposed changes would cost the state nearly \$80 million to implement over the first four years if just 1 percent of eligible offenses resulted in convictions. The monies would have gone largely to the construction and operation of nearly 400 new adult and juvenile corrections beds. The estimate did not include any costs associated with the penalty enhancement provisions of the bill. The legislation would also have exposed children as young as 12 to stiff penalties, prompting concern that troubled youth could suffer lasting damage at the hands of the criminal justice system.

The public often assumes that such harsh and costly measures would be proposed only in the face of a true public safety crisis. A review of the gang literature, however, shows that some jurisdictions have adopted tough gang control measures only to discover that the gang threat was greatly exaggerated. Nevada state lawmakers enacted strict gang sentencing enhancements based on law enforcement claims that arrest data did not support. A review of crime trends suggests that North Carolina risks repeating Nevada's mistake.

Families Against Mandatory Minimums organizer LaFonda Jones says that the gang panic was precipitated by several killings in Durham. Jones agrees that Durham has a youth violence problem. But she argues that youth violence is a long-standing local problem with roots in youth unemployment and the "severe gap between haves and have-nots" rather than a statewide crime epidemic.

Uniform Crime Report data support Jones's contention: statewide index crime rates *fell* by 12 percent during the five-year period that preceded the introduction of H.B. 50, dropping from 5,267 crimes per 100,000 residents in 1999 to 4,642 crimes per 100,000 residents in 2004. Violent crime rates saw an even greater 16 percent decline, dropping from 551 to 461 crimes per 100,000 residents over the period. Even juvenile violent crime arrests declined slightly, from 2,749 per year in 1999 to 2,574 in 2004.

Despite falling crime rates, two reports issued by state law enforcement agencies fueled fear of gangs by appearing to show rapid growth in gang activity. The North Carolina State Bureau of Investigations produced a report summarizing gang activity in 15 alleged "hot spots" for the General Assembly's Fiscal Research Division.

The language of the SBI report is alarming: Durham's

Hispanic gangs were “becoming more visible”; Charlotte/Mecklenburg County had a “growing number of Hispanic gangs” as well as Asian gangs that were “becoming more active”; Wake County had seen “a large influx of gang activity”; Hispanic gang activity had “increased significantly in the town of Angier” and “recently emerged in the Fayetteville area”; “gang members from Charlotte” were committing crime in Catawba/Iredell County, which was also witnessing the “development of MS-13 [Mara Salvatrucha gang] activity in the area”; gang activity had “erupted in the Kinston area...in the last three or four years”; Hispanic gangs were “emerging” in Wilmington/New Hanover County; and Henderson County had “seen Hispanic gangs move into the area.” The report contains no references to gang membership decreasing, nor does it mention gangs becoming less active in any of the 15 hot spots.

The Governor’s Crime Commission also released a report that compared local law enforcement estimates of gang activity in 2004 and 1999. Author

Richard Hayes notes that apparent changes in gang activity over the period might in fact be changes in law enforcement *acknowledgment* of gang problems. Nevertheless, a more than 3,000-person jump in the estimated gang population—from 5,068 in 1999 to 8,517 in 2004—led the *News and Observer* to print a story headlined “Gangs on the Rise in N.C.” (Manware and Wootson 2005). The article quoted Charlotte-Mecklenburg gang detective Joel McNelly, who told the paper that “the spike in gang numbers is as much about gang members who’ve moved to the city as about officers better documenting them.”

Yet the pattern of rising gang activity and falling crime was evident at the local level. Most North Carolina counties either failed to report any gang activity or reported an “unknown” number of gang members in one or both of the surveys. But 22 counties did provide estimates of local gang membership in both 1999 and 2004. Nineteen counties, including some of the state’s largest, submitted uniform crime reports for the same years, permitting comparison between

Table 6.1. North Carolina local gang membership and crime trends: 1999 to 2004

County	Members 1999	Members 2004	Members change (#)	Members change	Index crime change	Violent crime change
Cumberland	2547	259	-2288	● -89.8%	● 7.3%	● 17.6%
Burke	154	12	-142	● -92.2%	● -12.8%	● -51.3%
Guilford	144	68	-76	● -52.8%	● -17.0%	● -22.9%
Stanly	58	18	-40	● -69.0%	● -37.0%	● -6.4%
Avery	22	10	-12	● -54.5%	● -21.1%	● -52.6%
Brunswick	9	7	-2	● -22.2%	● -0.5%	● -21.0%
Lenoir	20	21	1	● 5.0%	● 16.4%	● 3.1%
Rowan	32	34	2	● 6.3%	● 8.6%	● -4.8%
Duplin	23	30	7	● 30.4%	● -13.4%	● -16.0%
Northampton	15	22	7	● 46.7%	● 36.2%	● 11.0%
Franklin	16	27	11	● 68.8%	● -19.4%	● -23.3%
Rockingham	15	30	15	● 100.0%	● -6.8%	● -42.9%
Catawba	8	60	52	● 650.0%	● -0.6%	● 5.1%
Davidson	187	263	76	● 40.6%	● 1.8%	● 22.2%
New Hanover	20	105	85	● 425.0%	● -5.7%	● 1.0%
Nash	7	300	293	● 4185.7%	● 0.0%	● -0.3%
Pitt	40	835	795	● 1987.5%	● -13.8%	● -11.3%
Mecklenburg	168	1739	1571	● 935.1%	● -14.4%	● -24.7%
Wake	30	1753	1723	● 5743.3%	● -32.4%	● -21.3%

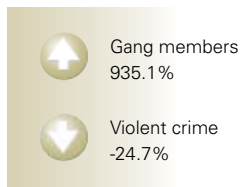
Source: Governor’s Crime Commission 2005; FBI Uniform Crime Reports 1999 & 2004

gang membership and crime trends.

The results are striking. Of the four counties reporting the greatest increase in gang membership, three (Wake, Mecklenburg, and Pitt) saw substantial drops in violent and overall crime rates, while the fourth (Nash) saw no change in its overall and violent crime rates. The county with the greatest reported *decrease* in gang membership—Cumberland County, where the number of reported gang members dropped by 90 percent—saw growth in overall and violent crime rates and a 62 percent spike in its murder rate. Other counties that reported declining gang membership also experienced falling crime rates. But only one (Stanly County) saw a greater reduction in overall crime than Wake County, where reported gang membership increased by nearly 6,000 percent as the index crime rate dropped by 32 percent.

Five of North Carolina's six largest counties were profiled by the SBI report. Gang membership and crime trends moved in opposite directions in four of the five counties.

Charlotte/Mecklenburg County



The SBI report indicated that the Charlotte area was plagued by a “growing number of Hispanic gangs,” that MS-13 had become “the most violent gang” in the city, and that Asian gangs were “becoming more active.”

A comparison of law enforcement survey data from 1999 and 2004 shows that the number of alleged gang members grew tenfold, from 168 to 1,739, while the number of gangs shot from 15 to 65. Yet crime trends went in the opposite direction over the five-year period. The overall index crime rate decreased by 14.4 percent, and the violent crime rate fell by an even larger 24.7 percent.

Wake County



The SBI report notes that Wake County municipalities had seen a “large influx of gang activity,” including United Blood Nation and Crips, as well as Hispanic gangs, which posed the “largest threat” to the county. Law enforcement survey data also indicate a tremendous proliferation of gang activity, with the number of gangs jumping from one to 39 between 1999 and 2004, while the population of gang members shot from 30 to 1,753. But crime trends moved in the opposite direction. Wake County's overall index crime

rate was down by a third (32.4 percent) and violent crime fell by a fifth (21.3 percent) over the period.

Greensboro/Guilford County



The SBI report indicates that a number of gangs are involved in criminal activities in the Greensboro/Guilford County area, but it provides no information on recent

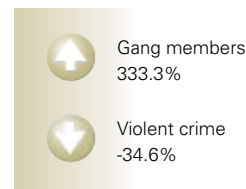
trends. Law enforcement survey data show that gang membership actually dropped sharply between 1999 and 2004, falling from 144 to 68 known members (a 52.8 percent decrease). Crime rates also declined in Guilford County, although the overall reduction was smaller than that achieved in Wake County. Total index crime was down by 17 percent, and violent crime was down by 22.9 percent.

Fayetteville/Cumberland County



The SBI report notes that Fayetteville gangs have strong ties to other parts of the country and states that “Hispanic gangs have recently emerged” in the area. But law enforcement officials in Cumberland County actually reported a 90 percent *reduction* in youth gang membership—from 2,547 members in 1999 to 259 members in 2004—along with a drop in the number of gangs from 23 to 14. Crime trends moved in the opposite direction of reported gang membership; the index crime rate climbed by 7.3 percent and the violent crime rate jumped by 17.6 percent over the period.

Durham



The SBI reported that Durham's largest gang, United Blood Nation, had “ties to New York” and was engaged in “numerous” shootouts with rival Crips. Hispanic gangs were becoming “more visible” and had documented ties to the largest population of MS-13 members on the East Coast, located in Fairfax County, Virginia. The city of Durham was said to have “over 20 organized gangs” that were “constantly attracting new members from all ethnic backgrounds.” The same year, the Governor's Crime Commission reported the existence of 10 “criminal youth gangs” in Durham based on law enforcement surveys, a threefold

increase over 1999. Yet again, crime trends moved in the opposite direction. Between 1999 and 2004, Durham's overall and violent crime rates dropped by a third—33.6 percent and 34.6 percent, respectively.

There are several possible explanations for the lack of correspondence between law enforcement reports of crime activity and crime trends. The apparent rise in gang membership may reflect a change in law enforce-

ment priorities rather than new gang activity. A recent influx of Latino immigrants may have led officers to misidentify young Latino men as gang members. On the other hand, it is conceivable that gang activity could be growing even as crime falls, since gang members account for a very small share of the crime problem. In any case, the data provide no support for the notion that North Carolina is experiencing a gang crime crisis.