

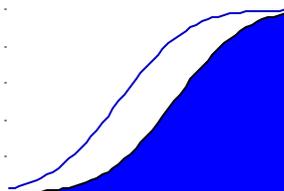
Gang Problems and Gang Programs in a National Sample of Schools

Summary

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Summary

The Survey of School-Based Gang Prevention and Intervention Programs is a study of approaches used by schools to prevent or reduce gang involvement among schools. The study describes students' involvement with gangs, the characteristics of students who are involved with gangs (including their levels of involvement with drugs, weapons, and other forms of delinquent behavior), and the extent and correlates of gang problems in schools. The study also describes what and how much is being done in the nation's schools to prevent or reduce gang-related problems, and to assess how well these prevention and intervention activities are being done. The research identifies features of prevention and intervention activity that local schools and communities can consider to strengthen their programs.

Study Design

The study of gang prevention and intervention builds on a large-scale National Study of Delinquency Prevention in Schools (G. D. Gottfredson et al., 2000). It makes use of a national sample of schools and the activities they are undertaking to prevent problem behavior and promote safe and orderly school environments.

Five main kinds of information were collected.

1. Examples of prevention and intervention models being used in schools were collected, examined and classified to develop a comprehensive taxonomy of activities. The resulting taxonomy guided the development of other data collection instruments.
2. Principals in a national probability sample of schools were surveyed to identify activities their schools had in place to prevent or reduce gang involvement, delinquency, drug use, or other problem behavior or to promote a safe and orderly school environment. Principals also described features of their schools and reported on past experiences with the implementation of programs and on school staffing.
3. Individuals knowledgeable about prevention or intervention activities in each school (called "activity coordinators") were surveyed to obtain detailed descriptions of specific prevention activities and to describe certain features of their school. Activity coordinators also reported about themselves and about school support and supervision for prevention activities.
4. Teachers and students in participating schools were surveyed to obtain their reports about victimization, safety, gang participation, delinquent behavior, school orderliness, and other aspects of school climate. Generally, all teachers in participating schools were sampled, and a sufficient number of students were sampled to produce an estimated 50 respondents per school.

5. Principals were surveyed for a second time. They reported about gang problems, school wide disciplinary policies and practices, crimes occurring in the school, and other characteristics of the school.

A sample of 1279 schools was designed to describe schools in the United States. Participation was obtained from principals in 66% of schools in the initial principal survey and 50% of the schools in the second principal survey. Of 847 secondary schools asked to participate in surveys of students, 37% did so – greater cooperation was obtained from middle schools than from high schools, and rural schools cooperated more often than urban schools. In participating schools the mean student response rate was 76%. Of 847 secondary schools asked to participate in teacher surveys, 48% did so. In participating schools the mean teacher response rate was 78%. When both school and coordinator participation are considered, a final 52% response rate was obtained in the survey of activity coordinators. Weights to take account of the sample design and survey non-response are applied in making tabulations.

Gang Participation

Overall, 7.6% of male and 3.8% of female secondary students reported that they had “belong[ed] to a gang that has a name and engages in fighting, stealing, or selling drugs” in the last 12 months. Because of the possibility that some students fail to take survey self-reports seriously, a Veridicality index was used to identify students who make inconsistent responses. When only responses from students with acceptable scores on the Veridicality index are examined, 7.1% of males and 3.6% of females reported gang participation.

Youths who participate in gangs have much lower educational expectations than do other students, and are very much more likely to be threatened or victimized in school. For example, 28% of gang-involved boys but only 5% of other boys reported that they had been threatened with a knife or a gun in the current year in school. Corresponding percentages for girls were 18% of gang-involved girls but only 2% of other girls. Gang involved boys and girls are more often afraid of being hurt or bothered in school and away from the school than are other students.

Statistical models of the likelihood of gang participation imply that being male, not being non-Hispanic White or Asian; having low commitment to education, low belief in conventional rules, or delinquent peers; and feeling unsafe or fearful in school are associated with gang involvement. Low commitment, low belief, delinquent peers, and fear make substantial direct contributions to gang involvement. (Community and family variables were not examined by these models, and models based on cross sectional data may not reflect causal processes.)

Gang participants are very much more involved with drugs than are other students. For example, 54% of male gang participants versus 9% of non-participants sold marijuana or other drugs in the last 12 months (42% and 4% of females, respectively). For drugs that have lower base rates for use, the

contrast between gang participants and others is even sharper; 18% of male gang participants and 1% of nonparticipants report using heroin (23% and .6% of girls) in the last 12 months.

Gang participants are much more likely than other students to have carried a hidden weapon other than a pocket knife (51% of gang involved boys versus 9% of others; 32% and 2% of girls). Gang participants of both sexes are much more involved in violence such as hitting teachers or other adults, robbery, and fighting. Carrying a concealed weapon is strongly associated not only with gang participation but also with use of crack, heroin, cocaine, and other drugs. Although carrying a concealed weapon is associated with fearfulness, the association is weak compared to its association with gang or drug involvement.

Gang Problems in Schools

Definitions of gang problems differ from one study to another. In the present research, principals were told that “a ‘gang’ is a somewhat organized group, sometimes having turf concerns, symbols, special dress or colors. A gang has a special interest in violence for status-providing purposes and is recognized as a gang by its members and by others.” They were asked whether gangs are a problem in the school or in the community. Overall 5% of principals reported that gangs are a problem in their schools and 36% reported a gang problem in the community. Urban principals and principals of secondary schools were more likely to report school gang problems. Principals are also more likely to report gang problems when the school enrolls relatively many Hispanic students. Principals’ reports of school gang problems do not show strong convergence with other measures of problem behavior in schools or with the percentage of schools’ students who report that they participate in gangs. In the 10% of schools with the highest student gang participation rates (14.4% or more of students reporting gang participation), only 18% of principals report that gangs are a problem in the school. Nevertheless, principals’ reports of school gang problems are associated with more victimization, less safety, and poorer administrator leadership according to teacher reports.

A statistical model of the extent to which schools have high rates of student self-reported gang participation implies that concentrated poverty and disorganization in the community, public school auspices, receiving students with behavior problems from various sources, and student perceptions that the school is unsafe (or fear) influence levels of student gang participation. The association of perceptions that the school is unsafe with gang participation rate is especially strong. The correlation between the square root of the percentage of students who reported gang participation and scores on a school Safety scale is $-.49$, and this correlation is scarcely reduced at all (to $-.46$) by the application of statistical controls. Although interpretation of these preliminary results should be tempered by the possibility that some of this association may be reciprocal in the sense that gang activity may lead to fear as well as fear leading to gang participation, the finding suggests that maintaining safe environments may be helpful in reducing gang participation.

School-Based Gang Prevention and Intervention Programs

We define a gang prevention activity as one that aims to reduce or prevent gang involvement. A gang intervention activity is defined as a program the activities of which are directed at youths who are gang members. From the survey of program providers we estimate that there are 781,800 gang prevention activities underway in the nation's schools, and 159,700 gang intervention activities. Most of these programs are not limited to a gang prevention focus but are also concerned with other forms of problem behavior.

The most common type of program intended to prevent or reduce gang involvement entails prevention curriculum, instruction, or training. About 15% of all gang prevention programs are of this type (about 115,400 such programs in U.S. schools). Naturally, many of these programs are also directed at other objectives such as reducing drug use or other problem behavior. About 11% of school based gang prevention programs involve efforts to create or maintain a distinctive school culture or climate for interpersonal exchanges; and about 8% involve recreation, enrichment, or leisure activities. Other types of prevention activities are less common. Fewer than 3% of gang prevention programs involve youth roles in regulating or responding to student conduct (e.g., conflict resolution, mediation, or youth courts), but there are so many schools and so many programs in the nation that this nevertheless amounts to about 20,500 such programs.

By far the most common type of gang intervention program involves counseling, social work, psychological or therapeutic intervention – with over 20% (or about 32,700) programs of this kind. About 13% of gang intervention activities in schools involve prevention curriculum, instruction or training, 12% involve services or programs for family members, 10% are behavioral interventions, 10% seek to influence school culture or climate, and 10% seek to improve intergroup relations or relations between the school and the community.

Quality of Gang Prevention and Intervention Programs

Like anything else done in schools, gang prevention or intervention programs may be well implemented or poorly implemented. They may employ practices that are found in programs that have been shown to be effective in prior research, or they may fail to use such practices. They may be transitory, or they may be implemented consistently over long periods of time. The typical participant may participate a great deal, or the dosage may be very small. The activity may be widely applied or be very limited in scope – involving a small percentage of students or school personnel.

The indicators of program quality developed for the National Study of Delinquency Prevention in Schools (Gottfredson et al., 2000) were applied to measure the quality of gang prevention and gang intervention activities. Data to describe the quality of prevention and intervention activities come from the reports of program coordinators in Activity Questionnaires asking about fourteen specific types of “discretionary” program activity.

Differences were observed among the average quality of implementation of activities of different types, and great variability was observed in the quality of implementation of activities of each type.

The average gang *prevention* program involving curriculum, instruction or training can be characterized as follows:

- @ One or more persons is conducting it *from time to time*;
- @ It employs 88% of the *content* elements identified as representing best practices;
- @ It employs 50% of the *methods* elements identified as representing best practices;
- @ It involves 28 sessions or lessons;
- @ It lasts about 23 weeks;
- @ Students participate once per week or slightly more often;
- @ 47% of the school's students participate or are exposed.

The average gang *prevention* program involving counseling, social work, psychological, or therapeutic activity can be characterized as follows:

- @ One or more persons is conducting it *from time to time*;
- @ It employs 35% of the *methods* elements identified as representing best practices;
- @ It involves 13 sessions or lessons;
- @ It lasts about 20 weeks;
- @ Students participate about 3 times a month;
- @ 29% of the school's students participate or are exposed.

Counseling, social work, psychological, or therapeutic activities constitute the most common gang *intervention* approach. The quality of counseling gang intervention activity resembles the quality of counseling prevention activity. For several types of activity, however, gang *intervention* activities are sometimes implemented with greater strength and fidelity to best practices than are the less targeted gang prevention activities. Curricular gang *intervention* programs can be characterized as follows:

- @ One or more persons is conducting it *from time to time*, but significantly more frequently than prevention programs are conducted;
- @ It employs 81% of the *content* elements identified as representing best practices;
- @ It employs 56% of the *methods* elements identified as representing best practices (significantly better than prevention programs);
- @ It involves 39 sessions or lessons;
- @ It lasts about 23 weeks;
- @ Students participate once per week or slightly more often;
- @ 42% of the school's students participate or are exposed.

In some respects the quality of gang intervention programs involving classroom organization and management, improvements to instructional methods, or the involvement of youths in school discipline is somewhat higher than gang prevention programs of the same type.

The typical gang prevention or intervention program implemented in schools does not compare favorably with the characteristics of effective programs – for those kinds of programs that have been the subject of research. An exception is classroom organization and management interventions directed at gang members, which make use of a high proportion of best practices and are sometimes used regularly by school personnel; but this type of intervention is relatively rarely used.

There is much room for improvement in the quality of gang prevention and intervention programs in the nation's schools.

Participation in Programs by Gang Involved Youths

Gang involved secondary school students are usually less likely to be involved in or exposed to most kinds of gang prevention or intervention programming. For example, in the current year 39% of gang involved males received instruction in ways to avoid getting involved in problem behavior such as fighting, drug use, or risky behavior compared to 49% of other male students. Among females, 37% of the gang involved and 57% of others received such instruction. Students who are gang participants are much less likely to participate in special events, recreation or activities inside or outside of the school and much less likely to report that teachers have engaged in sound classroom management procedures.

Gang participants – both boys and girls – are about twice as likely as other students to be referred or have their family referred by the school to another agency for some kind of help, and the school is

somewhat more likely to have worked with the gang participants' families. Gang involved girls are more likely than other girls to be advised by a school counselor, social worker or psychologist about ways to avoid involvement with drugs or violence than are other girls (42% versus 34%). In contrast, gang involved boys are less likely than other boys to be advised by a school counselor, social worker or psychologist (29% versus 35%).

Quality of Gang Prevention or Intervention Activity, Perceptions of Gang Problems, and Formal Needs Assessment

Programs that were developed following a formal needs assessment are implemented in significantly stronger form than those not based on a needs assessment. Programs guided by a needs assessment are of higher overall quality, of longer duration, make more use of best practices with respect to the methods employed, involve a larger proportion of students, and achieve a higher level of use by school personnel. In all, 46% of gang prevention or intervention programs were guided by a formal needs assessment – which may have been perfunctory.

School gang prevention or intervention programs are somewhat more likely to have been developed following a formal needs assessment in schools in which the principal reports that gangs are a problem in the school than in schools in which the principal reports no problem. And the programs are more likely to target gang members (as opposed to being more general prevention efforts) in schools in which the principal reports that gangs are a problem in the school.

Limitations of the Research

The most important limitation of the research is that the assessment of program quality depends on judgments by the authors about the aspects of quality to measure. Guided by their understanding of the literature on the efficacy of problem-behavior-prevention programs, they emphasized measures of dosage and those aspects of interventions that appear to be associated with effectiveness in program research. They also emphasized the extent of coverage on the grounds that interventions reaching large portions of the population are likely to have more aggregate effect. This approach to assessing program quality is a limitation because when there has been little or no research on a type of prevention or intervention activity, there is little basis for assessing program quality.

A second limitation is that results are based on a sample survey involving the reports of program implementers, principals, teachers, and students. In all surveys, respondents' reports are of imperfect reliability and validity. The method depended upon the principals' identification of prevention and intervention activities in their schools – and the correct classification of those activities. Nonparticipation in surveys may also bias results in unknown ways.

The research incorporated steps to cope with these limitations. Nonresponse adjustments were made in producing estimates (and nonresponse adjustments as well as the complex sample design were taken into account in estimating standard errors). Student self-reports of gang involvement were examined for the potential of invalid reporting to bias estimates of gang participation upwards, and estimates excluding responses that appear to be invalid were made. Including or excluding student respondents with low scores on a Veridicality index has little effect on patterns of association of gang participation with other measures.

Despite these limitations, the results provide new information on the extent of youth participation in gangs, the relation of individual gang participation to personal characteristics and problem behaviors, and the kinds of schools that tend to have greater problems with gangs. Results also provide the first comprehensive description of the nature and extent of gang prevention and intervention activity in schools, and the extent of exposure of young people to those programs. Results indicate that it is possible to measure some aspects of program quality through questionnaire surveys.

Some Implications

Results imply that there is great variability in the quality of school-based gang prevention and intervention programs. Perhaps most importantly, they imply that there is much room for the improvement in the quality of programs in some straightforward ways. This includes increases in the use of practices with respect to program content and methods that are found in programs that have been evaluated and found to be effective. It includes increases in the intensity (duration and frequency) with which programs are operated, and it includes increases in extent of their application.

Results show that secondary school students who report being involved in gangs are less exposed to many prevention activities than are students who are not involved in gangs. This suggests the potential for including more of the highest risk youths by actively seeking ways to include them. An analysis of the forces that limit the participation of gang-involved youths from participation should be a part of the planning of any gang prevention or intervention program, with program design features or arrangements put in place to cope with or minimize the influence of these forces.

Fewer than half of gang prevention or intervention programs have been guided by a formal needs assessment. Goldstein and Kodluboy (1998) among others have emphasized the importance of a comprehensive assessment of problems, and the development of programs only after such assessment. Evidently, there is much room for the increased practice of needs assessment in program planning. Formal planning was associated with stronger programs in the present research. Other correlates of the quality of school-based prevention programs are described by G. D. Gottfredson et al. (2000).

Formal needs assessment may contribute to (or depend on) principals' willingness to identify problems related to gangs. The finding that principals usually reported that gangs are not a problem even in schools with a high percentage of students reporting that they participate in gangs suggests that

lack of principal recognition of problems may be an obstacle to the development of effective prevention and intervention programs. At the very least, the results imply that principals' reports that gang activity is not a problem should be met with skepticism unless evidence from other sources confirms the reports.

In an earlier report (G. D. Gottfredson et al., 2000) we showed that principals' reports of school crime show little convergence with reports by students and teachers of school safety, problem behavior, victimization, or classroom order. When combined with the present observation that principals' accounts of school gang problems are of limited validity, those results suggest the possibility that school leaders are an obstacle to confronting problems of school safety – including gang problems.

The results extend those of earlier research on gangs in schools (Howell & Lynch, 2000) by including measures of individual gang participation and by allowing an examination of rates of gang participation in specific sampled schools. Individual gang participation – and rates of gang participation in schools – is strongly associated with fear (or perceptions that the school environment is not safe), drug involvement, and other forms of problem behavior. The analyses conducted do not allow a determination about the extent to which fear or unsafe school environments contribute to gang involvement versus the extent to which gang involvement produces fear or unsafe environments. The strong inverse link between perceptions of school safety and levels of gang involvement suggests that efforts to promote a safe environment and make all students feel safe may reduce the risk of youth gang involvement.