

Down for the Count: Exploring the Size and Makeup of the Gang Population

It is difficult to find a law enforcement account of gang activity that does not give the impression that the problem is getting worse by the day. A review of the most recent National Gang Threat Assessment from the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations (NAGIA) suggests that gangs pose a rapidly growing threat to public safety (2005). Nationally, NAGIA claims that gangs are associating with organized crime; gang members are becoming more sophisticated in their use of computers and technology; Hispanic gang membership is on the rise; California-style gang culture is migrating and spreading gangs' reach; women are taking more active roles in gangs; "Indian Country" sources are reporting escalating gang activity; and motorcycle gangs are expanding their territory.

The report paints an even bleaker picture of regional developments. Nearly half of the key regional findings—11 of 23—contain a variant of the words *increase* or *grow*. All of the following are reputed to be on the rise in one or more regions: neighborhood/homegrown and hybrid gangs; gangs in Hispanic immigrant communities; gang violence and drug trafficking on Indian reservations; graffiti and tagging; gang activity around schools and college campuses; cooperation between gangs to facilitate crime and drug trafficking; sophistication in the planning and execution of gang crime; identity and credit card theft perpetrated by gang members; and use of firearms by gang members. There is, by contrast, no mention of reductions in any form of gang activity.

Yet the most comprehensive survey of law enforcement data on gang activity shows no significant changes in estimated gang membership or the prevalence of gang activity—both of which are

down significantly since the late 1990s. Further, law enforcement depictions of the gang population are sharply at odds with youth survey data when it comes to the geography of gang activity as well as the race and gender of gang members.

Data on the prevalence of gang problems and gang membership

The National Youth Gang Survey

The primary source of law enforcement reports on the prevalence of gang problems is the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS). The survey is distributed annually to all law enforcement agencies that serve suburban counties and cities with 50,000 or more residents, along with a random sample of police departments that serve small cities and rural counties. Each agency is asked to describe the nature of the local youth gang problem and estimate the number and demographic characteristics of gangs and gang members in its jurisdiction. Respondents are told to exclude from their reports motorcycle gangs, prison gangs, hate groups, and gangs composed entirely of adults. Response rates have ranged from 84 to 92 percent since 1996 (Egley, Howell, and Major 2006).

The National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) uses NYGS data to examine the prevalence of gang problems by type of jurisdiction and to estimate the number of gangs and gang members in the United States. The strength of gang prevalence and population estimates is limited by the quality of law enforcement data. Local estimates of gang membership can fluctuate from year to year based on shifting definitions of gang activity and changes in the capacity to track it. NYGC senior research associate

Arlen Egley explains that significant year-to-year variation in the number of gang members reported by a given jurisdiction often reflects a “change in approach” rather than a change in the gangs themselves (personal communication).

Law enforcement estimates of local gang membership can fluctuate from year to year based on changes in police practices.

The number of active gang members reported by the Detroit Police Department nearly doubled between 1996 and 1997, rising from 2,000 to 3,500 before plunging to 800 the following year (Bynum and Varano 2003). Yet gun crimes—which were considered by Detroit researchers to be indicative of gang activity—moved in the opposite direction, *falling* between 1996 and 1997 and *rising* the following year. Elsewhere, the fluctuations can be tied directly to

training and funding for gang enforcement efforts. Indianapolis Police Department estimates of local gang activity jumped from 80 gangs and 1,746 members in 1995 to 198 gangs and 2,422 members in 1997 after the city was selected to participate in a federal gang initiative (McGarrell and Chermak 2003).

Sharp year-to-year changes in local gang population estimates are excellent fodder for sensational media reports but say little about the severity of a local gang problem. 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). The national estimates of gang prevalence published by NYGC are less volatile because they combine results from hundreds of jurisdictions. Nonetheless, trends in estimated city and county gang membership reversed directions three times between 1996 and 2002 (Egley, Howell, and Major 2006).

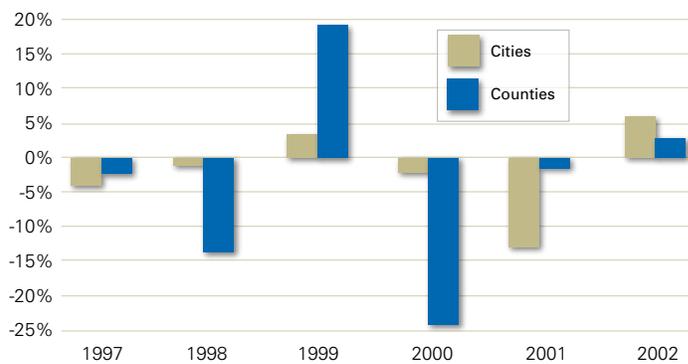
Despite these flaws, NYGS data do provide a general picture of the scope and direction of the gang problem as it is perceived by law enforcement. The most recent NYGC report indicates that the United States had roughly 24,000 youth gangs and 760,000 gang members in 2004 (Egley and Ritz 2006). The numbers are daunting, immediately conjuring images of a marauding army of gun-toting criminals half the size of the active U.S. military. But NYGC data indicate that the size and reach of gangs have actually declined over the past decade. The estimated gang population is down from roughly 850,000 in 1996, and the proportion of jurisdictions reporting gang problems has fallen sharply.

The number of jurisdictions reporting gang problems fell sharply at the end of the 1990s.

The largest reductions have occurred in rural counties, where the proportion of law enforcement respondents reporting gang problems has fallen by nearly half since the late 1990s. One in eight rural law enforcement agencies (12.3 percent) reported gang problems between 2002 and 2004, while a quarter (24.3 percent) reported problems between 1996 and 1998.

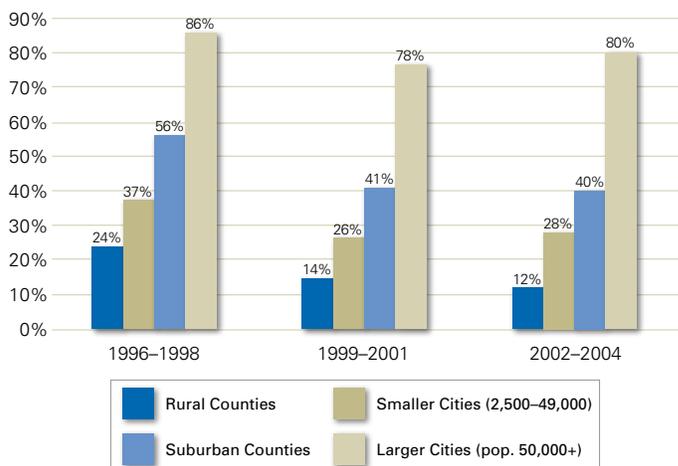
Smaller cities and suburban counties have also witnessed significant drops in the reported prevalence of gang problems since the late 1990s. Over a third

Figure 4.1. Annual change in estimated U.S. gang membership



Source: National Youth Gang Survey 1997–2006

Figure 4.2. Jurisdictions reporting gang problems



Source: National Youth Gang Survey 1996–2004

(36.5 percent) of cities with 2,500 to 50,000 residents reported gang problems in the late 1990s. A little more than a quarter of small cities (28.4 percent) reported such problems between 2002 and 2004. Gangs were active in a majority of suburban counties (56 percent) during the late 1990s, but that proportion fell to 40 percent in the most recent survey period.

Larger cities experienced a reduction in reported gang activity, according to law enforcement respondents, although the drop was less dramatic. Four in five cities with 50,000 or more residents (79.8 percent) reported gang problems between 2002 and 2004, down from the 85.6 percent that reported such problems just six years earlier. The largest decline in the number of jurisdictions reporting gang problems occurred at the end of the 1990s. The picture has remained stable since the end of the 1990s, with small and large cities reporting a small increase in the prevalence of gang problems while rural and suburban counties reported a slight decrease. None of the recent shifts are large or consistent enough to establish a clear trend, according to NYGC staff (Egley, personal communication).

Youth surveys

The second source of information on the prevalence of gang activity and the characteristics of gang members is a group of youth surveys conducted over the past 15 years. Surveys can provide greater consistency than estimates generated by law enforcement agencies employing varied definitions and data collection methods. And they can track behavior that does not come to the attention of law enforcement.

Yet surveys are limited by how representative the sample is of the general population. 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. The results of youth surveys—like law enforcement surveys—also depend on the perceptions of survey subjects and their willingness to answer questions honestly.

Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson summarize the results of nearly 20 youth surveys conducted in over 30 cities and four countries in *Street Gang Patterns and Policies* (2006). Rates of current self-reported gang membership in U.S. surveys range from a high of more than 20 percent among a sample of high school students and dropouts in Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Diego (citing Fagan 1990) to a low

of 2 percent for a nationally representative sample of youth who participated in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) (citing Snyder and Sickmund 1999).¹ Reported lifetime prevalence of gang membership ranged from a high of 31 percent among high-risk Rochester, New York, youth (citing Thornberry et al. 2003) to a low of 5 percent among NLSY respondents.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, which was sponsored by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, is the only source of survey data on youth gang membership in the United States that is based on a nationally representative household sample. The survey identified a group of nearly 9,000 youth using cross-sectional and supplemental samples to ensure adequate representation across both geography and race/ethnicity. Youth between the ages of 12 and 16 were interviewed on a wide range of subjects and reinterviewed annually over a four-year period. The large size and national scope of the sample, together with its rigorous methodology, make NLSY the most reliable source of information on the prevalence of gang involvement.

The application of NLSY prevalence rates to 2000 U.S. Census counts produces a total estimated 12- to 16-year-old gang population of roughly 440,000.² The figure is roughly half the size of the NYGC estimate, but this result is not entirely unexpected. The 440,000 estimate includes only gang members between the ages of 12 and 16, while NYGC staff estimate that adults make up two-thirds of gang members known to law enforcement (Egley, Howell, and Major 2006). The NYGC estimate and the projection from NLSY prevalence rates appear to fall within the same ballpark, assuming that some of the 440,000 self-reported gang members are never identified by law enforcement and that there are another 500,000 or so gang members over the age of 16 who are not captured by the NLSY survey.

- 1 Surveys differ in the way they formulate questions and report results on the prevalence of current gang membership. For purposes of this report, youth reporting gang membership within the past year are grouped with “current” gang members.
- 2 The 440,000 figure is a midpoint between an estimate of gang membership generated by using the overall 2 percent prevalence rate (415,000) and an estimate generated by applying race- and gender-specific prevalence rates to components of the youth population (470,000). The difference is likely a result of imprecision in the prevalence rates, which have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole percent, as well as the lack of reported prevalence rates for Asians and Native Americans.

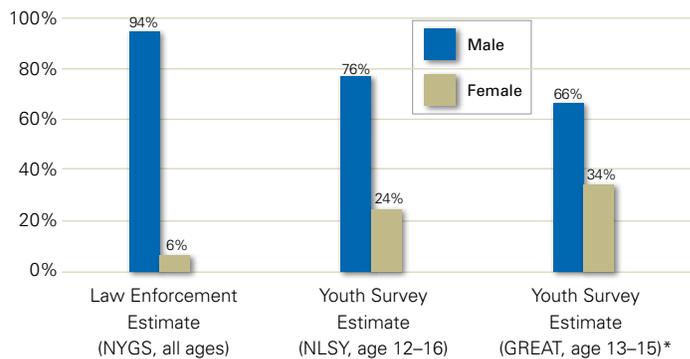
Squaring the data: Law enforcement versus youth surveys

Urban and rural youth were equally likely to report current and lifetime gang membership.

The law enforcement and youth survey results part company when it comes to the composition of the youth gang population. NYGC data indicate that gangs are primarily an urban phenomenon: four in five large-city law enforcement agencies report a gang problem compared to fewer than one in seven rural agencies. Even in the late 1990s, no more than a quarter of rural law enforcement respondents reported gang problems. But urban and rural youth were *equally* likely to report current and lifetime gang membership—2 percent and 5 percent, respectively—according to NLSY data (Snyder and Sickmund 2006).

Girls account for a quarter to a third of adolescent gang members, according to youth surveys.

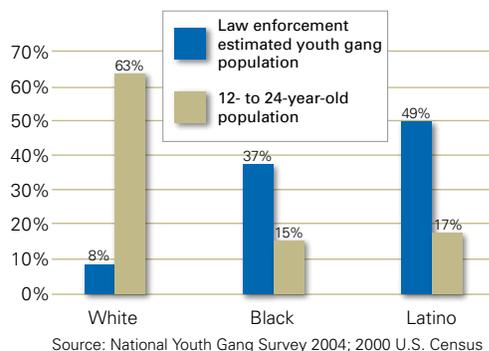
Figure 4.3. Gender of estimated U.S. youth gang population



Source: National Youth Gang Survey 2004; National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997; Esbensen and Winfree 2001

*GREAT data are not based on a representative national sample and are provided for comparison only.

Figure 4.4. Race/ethnicity of law enforcement-identified youth gang members and total youth/young adult population



Source: National Youth Gang Survey 2004; 2000 U.S. Census

The NYGC and NLSY data also point toward very different gender breakdowns. NYGC reports that women and girls made up just 6 percent of gang members known to law enforcement in 2000 (Klein and Maxson 2006). Yet NLSY prevalence rates—3 percent for boys and 1 percent for girls—indicate that girls should account for roughly a quarter of the adolescent gang population. The three-to-one ratio of male-to-female gang participation found in the national youth survey is supported by the results of other youth surveys, which found ratios ranging from three to one to nearly one to one (Klein and Maxson 2006). A research team led by Finn-Aage Esbensen reports an even lower two-to-one ratio of male-to-female gang participation based on a survey of nearly 6,000 eighth-grade public school students (Esbensen and Winfree 2001).

The gang prevalence rates generated by the NLSY survey can be used to estimate the gender breakdown of youth gang membership in the United States. The GREAT survey was not designed to select a representative sample of youth, but extrapolating from the GREAT data nonetheless provides an interesting contrast to law enforcement accounts of gang membership, as shown on the following chart.³

The most striking difference between gang population estimates generated by law enforcement and by youth surveys may be their racial and ethnic composition. Law enforcement reports indicate that the overwhelming majority of gang members are Latino or African American.

African Americans and Latinos were roughly 15 times more likely than non-Hispanic whites to be identified by the police as gang members.

Latinos accounted for nearly half (49 percent) of the estimated youth gang population in 2004, according to NYGS data, even though they make up just 17 percent of 12- to 24-year-olds in the United States (Egley, Howell, and Major 2006; 2000 U.S. Census). Blacks accounted for more than a third of known gang members (37 percent)—more than twice their 15 percent share of the adolescent/young adult population. Non-Hispanic whites, by contrast, accounted for 63 percent of adolescents/young adults but just 8 percent of gang members identified by law enforcement. In other words, African Americans and Latinos were roughly 15 times more likely than non-

³ The estimated gender breakdowns presented here differ from those reported by Esbensen and Winfree (2001) for gang members in their sample because their base population differs from the youth population in the United States.

Hispanic whites to be identified by the police as gang members.

Youth survey data also show differences in the prevalence of gang involvement among whites and nonwhites, but the gap is much smaller. Ratios of black-to-white gang membership rates range from a high of nearly five to one among high-risk seventh-graders in Pittsburgh to just under two to one among middle school students in St. Louis (Klein and Maxson 2006 citing Lahey et al. 1999; Curry, Decker, and Egley 2002). The weakness of most of these surveys, for the purpose of examining the racial and ethnic composition of youth gangs nationwide, is that they typically sample urban areas that differ from the suburban and rural areas where the majority of Americans (especially whites) lives.

Two surveys provide a more comprehensive national snapshot of youth gang involvement by race and ethnicity. NLSY data show that 6 percent of black males, 5 percent of Latino males, and 2 percent of white males between the ages of 12 and 16 reported belonging to a gang in the past 12 months; 2 percent of black and Latina females and 1 percent of white females also reported current gang membership (Snyder and Sickmund 1999). The racial and ethnic differences in self-reported gang membership remain substantial but fall *far* short of those reported by law enforcement.

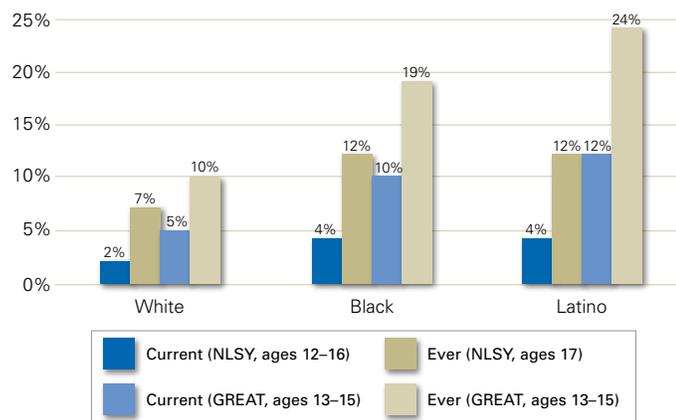
Esbensen and Thomas Winfree reported very similar results from the GREAT evaluation (2001). The GREAT sample was not nationally representative, but it did include 11 geographically and racially diverse communities ranging from large cities like Philadelphia and Phoenix to small cities and rural areas such as Pocatello, Idaho, and Will County, Illinois.

One in 20 white youths (5.1 percent) reported current gang membership, as did one in 10 black youths (10.1 percent) and just over one in 10 Latino youths (11.6 percent). The prevalence of gang membership is higher in the GREAT survey than in the NLSY survey, an outcome that may reflect the selection of communities that were actively seeking to address gang problems. But the ratios of nonwhite-to-white gang participation are remarkably similar to those generated by NLSY researchers: a little more than two to one for Latinos and between two and three to one for blacks.

Whites account for more than 40 percent of adolescent gang members, according to youth survey data.

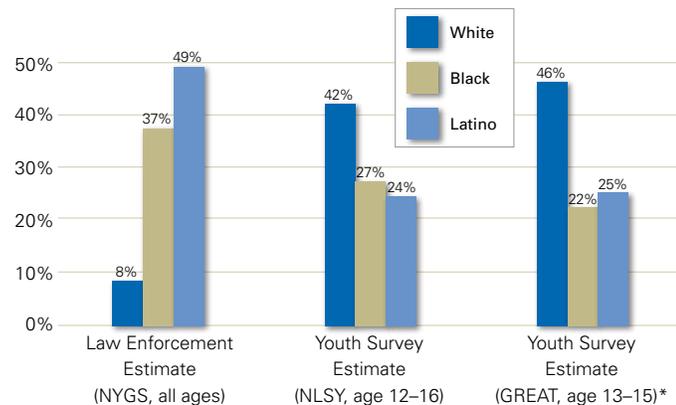
The NLSY and GREAT surveys both indicate a breakdown of gang membership very different from

Figure 4.5. Gang membership rates by race/ethnicity



Source: Snyder and Sickmund 1999 and 2006; Esbensen et al. 2001

Figure 4.6 Race/ethnicity of estimated U.S. youth gang population



Source: National Youth Gang Survey 2004; National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997; Esbensen et al. 2001

*GREAT data are not based on a representative national sample and are provided for comparison only.

that reported in law enforcement surveys. When the NLSY prevalence rates are applied to the 12- to 16-year-old U.S. population, they produce an estimated gang population that is roughly a quarter black, a quarter Latino, and *more than 40 percent white*.⁴ The GREAT survey was not designed to select a repre-

⁴ The NLSY results published by Snyder and Sickmund provide gang prevalence for white, black, and Latino youth but not for other racial groups such as Asians or Native Americans (2006). Esbensen and Winfree found prevalence rates for other racial groups that were nearly identical to gang membership rates among Latinos (2001). For the purpose of extrapolating the racial and ethnic breakdown of the adolescent gang population from NLSY data, we have substituted prevalence rates for Latinos for the missing prevalence rates for “others.” This assumption may not be correct, but it is based on the best available data. Further, even if the assumption were incorrect, the effect of the error would be minimal since other racial groups account for a small proportion of the total adolescent population.

sentative sample of youth, so the resulting data cannot be used to generate a statistically valid population estimate. But it is worth noting that the application of GREAT prevalence rates to the U.S. youth population produces a racial/ethnic breakdown of gang membership that is nearly identical to the breakdown indicated by the NLSY data, as shown in Figure 4.6.⁵ The surveys provide strong evidence that whites make up the *largest* racial/ethnic group of gang youth rather than the small fraction reported by law enforcement.

The disparities between youth surveys and law enforcement accounts of gang membership do not necessarily prove that either source is inaccurate. Law enforcement and youth surveys use different methods to gather information on distinct (if overlapping) populations. Self-reports of gang involvement by youth will not necessarily match the perceptions of police who deal with a larger and older group that has come into contact with law enforcement because of real or perceived criminal conduct. Nevertheless, there must be some explanation for why youth and young adults identified as gang members by law enforcement look so different from youth who identify themselves as gang members.

There are three likely explanations. First, youth who self-identify as gang members may be “fronting,” or involved in groups that call themselves gangs but do not engage in serious delinquency. These youth might never come to the attention of law enforcement, or their claims to gang identity might be ignored, because they are not “real” gang members.

Second, the composition of the youth gang population may change drastically between the adolescent years that are captured in youth surveys and the young adult years when law enforcement contact is more frequent. For example, if attrition rates were higher for white than nonwhite gang youth at the end of adolescence, the youth gang population could become less white.

Third, the disparity could be a result of biases in the way gang members are identified or the way data are collected that cause law enforcement officials to underestimate the gang involvement of white, female, and rural youth/young adults and overestimate the gang involvement of nonwhite, male, and urban youth/young adults.

The published results of the major national youth

⁵ The estimated racial/ethnic breakdowns presented here differ from those reported by Esbensen and Winfree (2001) for gang members in their sample because their base population differs from the youth population in the United States.

surveys that address the question of gang involvement—NLSY and GREAT—do not permit comparisons of urban and rural gang youth. They do, however, provide enough information to begin exploring similarities and differences in gang activity across race and gender lines.

Do youth surveys mix “bad apples” with oranges who only pretend to be bad?

The finding that whites accounted for a significant proportion of self-reported youth gang members came as a surprise to many gang researchers when it was first reported in 1998 by Esbensen and Winfree (Esbensen, personal communication). Many researchers expressed skepticism that white youth who reported gang involvement were “real” gang members, arguing in effect that the survey findings confused true “bad apples” with youth pretending to be bad. Similar objections have been raised to the conclusion—supported by many youth surveys—that females make up a larger share of the gang population than law enforcement reports indicate.

Gang researchers have generally found that most female gang members are involved in largely male gangs rather than all-female gangs. This makes it unlikely that difference in gang characteristics can account for the gender disparity in law enforcement and youth survey accounts of gang membership. There is convincing evidence, however, that female gang members are more delinquent than nonmembers of either gender, but less delinquent than male gang counterparts (Egley, Howell, and Major 2006). Female gang members could therefore be less likely to attract law enforcement attention and to find their way into gang databases.

White gang members report committing delinquent acts at the same rate as black and Latino peers.

On the other hand, the GREAT survey data show that the self-reported gang membership of white youth was as “real” as that of nonwhite peers across various measures of delinquency and intensity of gang participation. The researchers found that the *only* statistically significant difference in rates of offending between white, African American, and Hispanic gang members was a *lower* propensity among African Americans to use drugs. There were no statistically significant differences in self-reported rates of property offending, person offending, or participation in drug sales.

The researchers also examined the relationship between the intensity of gang affiliation and other

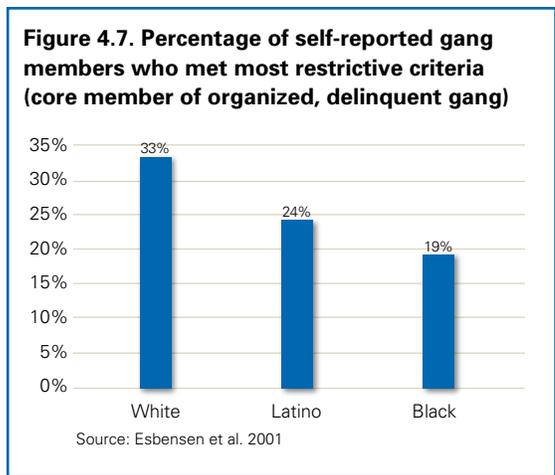
characteristics associated with gang involvement. They experimented with more and less restrictive definitions of self-reported gang membership to see whether the demographic and other variables changed with the definition. The definitions included (1) past gang membership; (2) current gang membership; (3) current membership in a gang that participates in delinquent acts; (4) current membership in a delinquent gang with some level of organization (e.g., initiation rites, colors, leaders); and (5) describing oneself as a current “core” member of an organized delinquent gang (Esbensen et al. 2001).

The increasingly restrictive definitions of gang membership correlated to increasing rates of self-reported delinquency. The big jump in delinquency occurred at the point of current gang membership, which was associated with two times more delinquent acts than past gang membership (3.52 versus 1.67). There were also substantial differences between the delinquency rates of organized delinquent gang members (an average of 3.92 delinquent acts) and core gang members (4.41 delinquent acts). The differences between core and noncore members of organized delinquent gangs were particularly notable for person offenses (3.13 versus 3.69) and drug sales (3.89 versus 4.79).

The data show a nonsignificant relationship between gang definition and the racial/ethnic breakdown of gang membership, but in the opposite of the expected direction. White gang youth were *more* likely than black or Latino gang youth to report being core members of an organized delinquent gang. A third of current white gang members (33 percent) fit the most restrictive definition of gang membership, compared to a quarter of Latino gang youth (24 percent) and one in five black gang youth (19 percent). Esbensen notes that white gang members tended to have higher scores on various risk scales than nonwhite gang members, which might explain the intensity of their gang involvement (personal communication).

The fact that a youth engages in delinquent behavior does not necessarily mean the behavior will come to the attention of law enforcement. Delinquency often goes unreported, so it is possible that self-reported gang members could engage in delinquent conduct while remaining below the law enforcement radar.

But research by David Curry provides further evidence that self-reported gang membership is a valid predictor of future contact with law enforcement (2000). Curry collected self-report and arrest data for a sample of 429 Chicago youth to test the relationships between self-reported gang membership,



self-reported delinquency, and subsequent officially recorded delinquency. He found that, after controlling for race and prior arrests, the odds of future arrest were doubled for self-reported gang members.

Together these research findings make a persuasive case that the gang involvement of white self-reported gang members is no less “real” than the involvement of black and Latino peers. The disparity between law enforcement and youth survey reports may be explained in part by differences between the character and intensity of male and female gang involvement. But another explanation is required for the racial differences.

Do rural, female, and white gang members quit gangs before their urban, male, and nonwhite peers?

Young adults account for two-thirds of gang members identified by law enforcement, while the youth cohort accounts for just a third. If the demographic profile of young adult gang members differed significantly from that of youth members, it might help to explain the gap between law enforcement and self-report data on the demographics of gang membership.

Researchers have consistently found that gang members join during early adolescence, and that the prevalence of current gang membership begins to fall after age 14 or 15. David Huizinga reports that the overwhelming majority of self-reported gang members in a Denver sample of at-risk youth joined the gang between the ages of 12 and 15 (personal communication). NLSY data show that the proportion of youth reporting ever having been a gang member rose from 3 to 6 percent between the ages of 12 and 15 before flattening out at age 16 (Snyder and Sickmund 1999). Six of seven youth surveys summarized by Klein and Maxson show that the prevalence

of current gang membership peaks at age 14 or 15 (2006).⁶ These findings indicate that any differences in the gender, race, and geographic profile of youth and young adult gang members are likely to result from attrition rather than recruitment of young adults into gangs. There is strong evidence that females “age out” of gang activity more quickly than males. NYGC staff reference several studies that show that a majority of female gang members leave within a year (Egley, Howell, and Major 2006).

Whites appeared no more likely than blacks and Latinos to leave gangs at an early age.

Comparisons of gang attrition rates for white and nonwhite youth produce mixed results. The GREAT data do not support the notion that white youth leave gangs more quickly than black and Latino counterparts—at least not prior to the eighth grade. Whites who were gang members at some time in their lives reported current involvement at roughly the same rate (50 percent) as black and Latino youth (53 percent and 47 percent, respectively) (Esbensen et al. 2001).

Nor do the NLSY data for youth ages 12 to 16 provide evidence that white youth leave gangs more quickly than nonwhite youth. The survey found that, among youth who reported ever having participated in a gang, half of white youth and *less than half* of nonwhite youth identified themselves as current gang members. Neither survey provides evidence of higher turnover among white gang youth in early and mid adolescence.

Hints that white youth age out of gangs more quickly than blacks and Latinos begin to appear at the end of adolescence. Non-Hispanic whites were 3.5 times more likely to report having been a gang member by the age of 17 (7 percent) than to report current gang membership between the ages of 12 and 16 (2 percent). The ratios of current-to-ever gang membership were slightly smaller for blacks and Latinos (4 percent current and 12 percent ever), which could indicate lower turnover rates among nonwhites. But these differences are too small to draw any firm conclusions from them about the relationship between race and the persistence of gang involvement.

⁶ The GREAT survey findings are excluded because the entire sample was made up of eighth-grade students and age differences in the group could be a result of factors that correlate to gang membership (e.g., excellent or poor high school performance causing a youth to be advanced or held back a grade).

No comparable survey data exist for young adults, so it is impossible to determine whether, and to what degree, differences in gang attrition rates change the face of gang membership in the young adult years. John Hagedorn and other gang ethnographers have argued that the loss of jobs and social capital brought about by deindustrialization has kept young inner-city men involved in gangs into their adult years (Hagedorn 2005). It is certainly plausible that white gang youth who have better employment and educational opportunities available to them are more likely to give up gang life than African American and Latino youth with few prospects.

Yet even if the life courses of white and nonwhite gang members diverged sharply during the young adult years, it is not clear that such a divergence could fully explain the racial/ethnic disparity between youth survey and law enforcement depictions of the youth gang population. Law enforcement reports identify many more black and Latino gang members—and many fewer white gang members—than the survey data suggest should be out there. We can test this proposition by comparing NYGC gang population estimates to projections based on NLSY gang prevalence rates and 2000 U.S. Census data.

The white gang undercount

NYGC staff report that there were roughly 770,000 youth gang members in 2000, including around 250,000 African Americans, 370,000 Latinos, 90,000 whites, and 60,000 members of other racial groups. The application of NLSY prevalence rates to race and gender components of the 2000 youth population produces an estimate of 470,000 12- to 16-year-old gang members, including 130,000 African Americans, 110,000 Latinos, 200,000 whites, and 30,000 members of other racial groups. These competing estimates are not easy to reconcile.

Even if every white gang member quit by the age of 17, the white gang population would be two times the law enforcement estimate.

The first issue is the apparent undercount of white gang members, a problem that persists even if we accept the unproven hypothesis that whites age out of gangs faster than nonwhite peers. If we assume that *every single white gang member* left the gang by the age of 17, there would still have been 200,000 white youth gang members in 2000—nearly *twice* the law enforcement estimate. It is, of course, quite unlikely that white youth quit gangs en masse on their 17th birthdays. If just a third of 16-year-old

white gang members stuck around until the age of 24, the total white gang population would be 300,000—more than three times the law enforcement estimate.

The fact that many white youth gang members go undetected—or at least unrecognized—by law enforcement should not come as a surprise. Juvenile misbehavior may not be reported to police, and law enforcement agencies tend to focus their efforts on crimes committed by adults and older youth. It is plausible that most white gang youth are never identified as such by police because their behavior is not considered serious or persistent enough to attract notice or merit a gang enforcement response. But if we accept this explanation for the apparent white undercount, why should it not also apply to black and Latino gang youth, who are no more delinquent or deeply involved in gangs than white gang youth?

The nonwhite gang overcount

This point leads us to the second issue: an apparent overcount of black and Latino gang members. Based on NLSY prevalence rates, in 2000 there should have been 130,000 black gang members between the ages of 12 and 16—just about half the total law enforcement estimate of 250,000. If we assume that youth gang members fall in the 12- to 24-year-old age group,⁷ then black young adults would have to remain involved in gangs at two-thirds the rate of 12- to 16-year-olds in order to meet law enforcement estimates.⁸ There is no evidence that African Americans are joining gangs in large numbers after the age of 16, so the numbers would work only if a large majority of black 16-year-old gang members remained active well into young adulthood.

This scenario further depends on law enforcement correctly identifying *every single black youth gang member in the United States*. We know that juvenile

7 This assumption may prove incorrect; however, the evidence from survey research efforts that followed Denver and Rochester youth into adulthood indicate that youth and young adults account for the overwhelming majority of gang activity (Huizinga and Thornberry, personal communication). There is general agreement among gang researchers that gang membership is more likely to persist into adulthood today than a generation ago. But we have found no evidence that older adults (age 25 and up) constitute a significant share of gang members.

8 NLSY results suggest that 4 percent of the 3.2 million black 12- to 16-year-olds were current gang members (6 percent of males and 2 percent of females), generating an estimated youth gang population of 130,000. In order to reach the law enforcement estimate of 250,000 black gang members within the 12- to 24-year-old cohort, the rate of gang membership among the 4.6 million black 17- to 24-year-olds would have to be 2.6 percent.

misbehavior often goes unreported and undetected by law enforcement. We also know from the GREAT survey that many black youth have joined and left gangs by the time they reach the eighth grade. If we assume, as we did for white gang youth, that most 12- to 16-year-old black gang members stay below the law enforcement radar (at least until they get older), then the prevalence of gang membership among 17- to 24-year-olds would have to equal the prevalence among 12- to 16-year-olds to meet the law enforcement estimate.⁹

Finally, the gang population extrapolated from NLSY prevalence rates is nearly a quarter female, while law enforcement estimates put the female proportion of gang members at just 6 percent.

Figure 4.8. Scenario No. 1: Law enforcement ID 100% of gang males; 100% of blacks/Latinos and 0% of whites remain active from ages 17 to 24

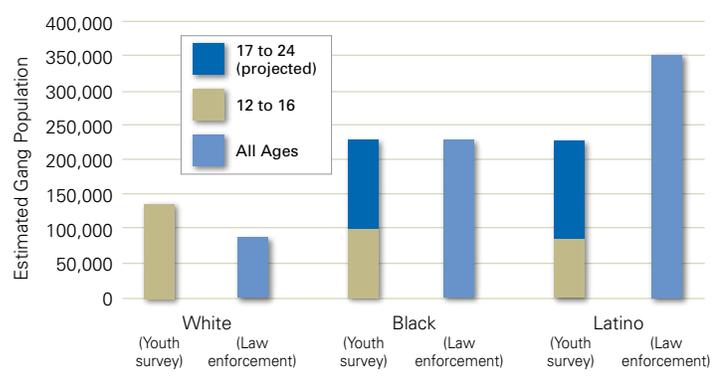
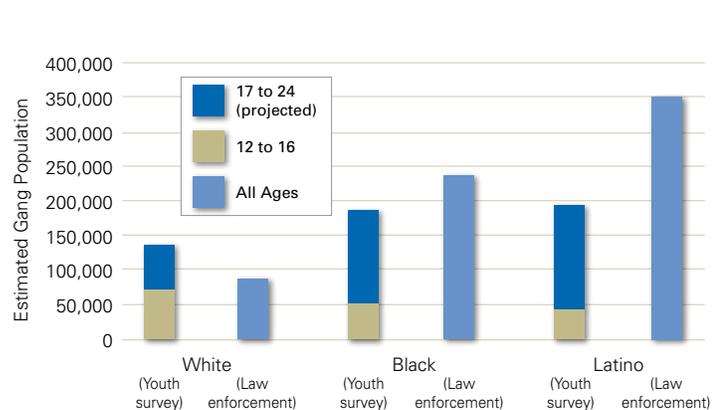


Figure 4.9. Scenario No. 2: Law enforcement ID 50% of 12- to 16-year-old gang males and 100% of 17- to 24-year-olds; 100% of blacks/Latinos and 33% of whites remain active from ages 17 to 24



9 If half of black gang youth (ages 12 to 16) were not detected by law enforcement, the 12- to 16-year-old cohort would account for just over a quarter (65,000) of the law enforcement estimate (250,000), and the prevalence rate among 17- to 24-year-olds would have to rise to 4 percent.

In order to meet a law enforcement estimate of roughly 225,000 black *male* gang members (based on a population of 250,000 gang members that is 94 percent male), the gang prevalence rates for 17- to 24-year-old black males would have to go even *higher*. The numbers work only if black young adult males participated in gangs at a slightly greater rate than adolescents *and* all black male gang members were detected by law enforcement; or if young black men participated in gangs at much higher rates than black male youth and not all gang members were detected by law enforcement.¹⁰

The disparity between estimates based on law enforcement and those based on youth surveys is much greater for Latinos. NLSY prevalence rates indicate that there should have been 110,000 Latino gang members between the ages of 12 and 16, less than a third of the total law enforcement estimate of 370,000 youth gang members. The only way the number of 12- to 24-year-old Latino gang members could meet the law enforcement estimate is if Latinos participated in gangs at *higher* rates between the ages of 17 and 24 than between the ages of 12 and 16.¹¹

This calculation assumes that *all* Latino youth and young adult gang members are identified by law enforcement. It also ignores the difference in the gender breakdown of law enforcement and youth survey gang population estimates. If half of youth gang members and all adult gang members were detected by law enforcement, the overall prevalence of gang membership would have to rise from 3.5 percent among youth to 5.5 percent among young adults. In order to generate a high enough estimate of Latino *males*, the gang prevalence rate among

10 NLSY prevalence rates suggest that in 2000 there were nearly 100,000 black male gang members between the ages of 12 and 16, while law enforcement sources estimate a total black male gang population of approximately 225,000. If all black male gang youth were detected by law enforcement, the gang prevalence rate among 17- to 24-year-old black males would have to be 5.5 percent (just below the 6 percent black adolescent male rate) in order to generate 125,000 additional gang members. The prevalence rate would have to rise to 7.6 percent if all of the young adult gang members, but just half of the youth gang members, were identified by law enforcement.

11 NLSY prevalence rates suggest that 3.5 percent of the 3.2 million Latino/Latina 12- to 16-year-olds (5 percent of males and 2 percent of females) were current gang members, generating an estimated youth gang population of 115,000. In order to reach the law enforcement estimate of 370,000 Latino/Latina gang members within the 12- to 24-year-old cohort, the rate of gang membership among the 5.7 million Latino/Latina 17- to 24-year-olds would have to be 4.5 percent.

young adults would have to be nearly double the rate for adolescents.¹²

Figures 4.8 and 4.9 illustrate the difficulty of matching youth survey data to law enforcement estimates, even if one makes very broad assumptions about the divergence between paths of white and nonwhite gang members after the age of 16.

The current exercise is speculative. The available data do not allow us to definitively rule out the possibility that white gang membership is the exclusive province of youth, while black and Latino gang involvement continues unabated (or grows) well into adulthood. We have assumed that the 12- to 24-year-old cohort accounts for substantially all of the youth gang population. But we cannot completely discount the possibility that adults in their late 20s, 30s, or even 40s account for a significant proportion of “youth gang” members.

The relevance of work and family opportunities to the process of desistance from participation in gangs is well documented, and ethnographers have linked the disappearance of blue-collar jobs in urban minority neighborhoods to the extension of gang activity into young adulthood. Even without strong quantitative evidence, we can be fairly certain that the paths of white gang members diverge significantly from those of black and Latino gang members as they enter the adult years. Differences in attrition rates probably explain part of the disparity between youth survey and law enforcement depictions of youth gang populations.

Yet in order for differences in attrition rates to explain much of the disparity, the divergence in the life paths of white and nonwhite gang members would have to be so radical that it would pose its own set of troubling questions. Are the opportunities available to white gang youth as they enter adulthood so much better that they pull all of the white youth—but none of the minority youth—away from gangs? Are the responses of law enforcement and other social institutions to minority gang youth so much

12 NLSY prevalence rates suggest that in 2000 there were a little more than 80,000 Latino male gang members between the ages of 12 and 16, while law enforcement sources estimate a total Latino male gang population of around 350,000. If all Latino male gang youth were detected by law enforcement, the gang prevalence rate among 17- to 24-year-old Latino males would have to be 8.9 percent (well above the 5 percent Latino adolescent male rate) in order to generate 270,000 additional gang members. The prevalence rate would have to rise to 10.5 percent if all of the young adult gang members, but just half of the youth gang members, were identified by law enforcement.

more counterproductive that they severely delay, or completely arrest, the natural process of desistance from gang activity?

Do law enforcement agencies find the type of gang members they look for?

The mental gymnastics required to square law enforcement gang estimates with youth survey data are convoluted, forcing us to carefully consider the possibility that the law enforcement estimates are simply wrong. There are much simpler explanations for why law enforcement would tend to underestimate white gang populations and overestimate nonwhite gang populations.

First, suburban, small-town, and rural law enforcement agencies may be less capable of detecting and tracking gang activity than urban police agencies. Small-town officers may not recognize gang activity, and small-town police departments may find it more difficult to establish and maintain gang databases. These factors could contribute to the undercount of white gang members, who are more likely to live in majority white suburbs and towns than are nonwhite gang members.

Second, the practices employed by urban law enforcement agencies to identify and track gang members may contribute to the nonwhite overcount. Gang databases are notoriously unreliable because there are often too few controls on who is put in them and also because too little effort goes into removing from the database people who are no longer active gang members.

NYGC staff cite the second problem as one reason for the apparent aging of the youth gang population (Egley, Howell, and Major 2006). Jurisdictions that began tracking gang members at a given point keep people in their files long after they have ceased “banging,” creating the false impression that the membership is steadily aging and growing. Egley also observes that law enforcement agencies have an institutional bias toward identifying older individuals as the source of gang problems: “The longer they have the problem ...the more police start focusing on the older members, thinking that it’s going to solve the gang problem” (personal communication).

Third, there is ample evidence that police misidentify minority youth as gang members based on their race and ethnicity, style of dress, and association with gang peers. Loren Siegel notes that, according to a report prepared by the Los Angeles district attorney’s

office, “46.8 percent of the African American men between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-four in L.A. County have been entered into the police gang-tracking database” (2003). Siegel also cites a 1993 *New York Times* report that “two of three young black men in Denver were on a gang suspect list.” As an NAACP official put it at the time: “They ought to call it a blacklist. ... It’s not a crackdown on gangs; it’s a crackdown on blacks.”

Esbensen argues that minority youth are disproportionately identified as gang members because that is who law enforcement officers have been trained to see:

You find what you’re looking for. The training manuals for police departments; law enforcement experts that lecture to community groups and go to police officer trainings—they all perpetuate the myth that gang members are racial and ethnic minorities. Cops are trained to look and that’s what they find. The same applies to boys and girls. The Orange County Sheriff’s Department training manual says the best indicator of gang membership is self-affiliation except with girls because they’re lying. The media reiterates the myths. (Personal communication)

Several years ago, a group of U.S. and European gang researchers launched the Eurogang Project, an effort to develop a common research framework—described by James Short and Lorine Hughes as “the most ambitious street gang research effort ever undertaken” (2006). In Europe, as in the United States, Esbensen reports, law enforcement officials consistently overestimated the role of minority youth and underestimated the role of majority youth in gang activity:

The Eurogang group has been meeting since 1998 to try and get cross-national multi-site/method studies going. We have developed common measures and strategies and...there has been incredible consistency in the results. In the Netherlands, for example, law enforcement claimed that the gang members were predominantly from Morocco and Antilles, but we found that over half were native-born Dutch. We found that the U.S. is not an anomaly. Everywhere we found a higher prevalence of gang involvement than law enforcement reported. We got a lot more females and majority group members. The results are incredibly robust. (Personal communication)

The failure of law enforcement to recognize white gang activity should not come as a complete surprise. There may be very good reasons for small-town and suburban police to avoid labeling youth as gang members. The overwhelming majority of gang members are not sociopaths but troubled youth. A police officer who looks at a delinquent 14-year-old and sees a future criminal has every reason to put him in a gang database. But an officer who sees a future solid citizen or the son of a family friend may conclude that “boys will be boys” no matter what

gang signs the kids think they’re throwing.

Perhaps suburban and rural law enforcement agencies have ignored the threat posed by white gangs. Or perhaps the phenomenon of ganging has been misunderstood—and its contribution to the crime problem exaggerated—by urban law enforcement agencies that treat every troubled youth wearing gang colors like an enemy of the state. The following chapters attempt to address this question by examining the process of joining and leaving gangs as well as the gang contribution to the overall crime problem.