What is there to Know about Gangs

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# ABSTRACT

Crimes due to different gang’s activities are increasing. Gangs are mainly involved in many white collar crimes and non-traditional crime activities such as drug trafficking, blackmailing, robbery, and murders. This is an increasing threat to communities living in the United States. Now gang’s activities can be seen in urban as well as rural areas. There are different types of these gangs that are operating in the United States. These can be categorized on the basis of their ethnic affiliation, structure as well as the purpose of their membership. The objectives behind the gang membership vary such as finances, need of power, safety and family influences. This report is providing information about the history of gangs and their formation in the United States. It is not only reviewing previous reports on anti-gang initiatives but it is also giving different recommendations to reduce the number of these gangs from the United States.

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# Introduction

The United States is facing serious crime problems as a result of gang activities. These gang activities include assaults, shootings, homicides, robberies, drug trafficking as well as blackmailing. This gang violence in all the 50 states of the United States has been increased since the mid-20th century. All gangs in the United States are well organized and enhancing their illegal money-making activities in their neighborhoods. People’s general perceptions of gangs are largely shaped by media. Youth gangs in the United States as shown in media were flourishing in the 1950s, demise in the 1960s, then revived in the 1970's(Howell, 2011). These gangs not only affect the general public but also their gang members. There are more deaths in the United States due to gang members as compared to deaths due to mass shootings. In the United States, nearly 2,000 gang-related homicides are reported every year and these account for 13 % in the United States(National Gang Center., 2019). Street gang’s proliferation is the result of migrants who moved into urban and industrial areas.

## Historical growth of Gangs in the United States

What constitutes a street or a youth gang is a varying concept. Throughout the 20th century, there were groups of young adults who in their twenties used to flock together in public spaces. Gangs in the United States emerged in 1783 when the American Revolution ended(Flores, 2016). However, serious street gangs in the United States were found at the start of the nineteenth century. The fighting gangs arose with the settlement of African Americans in the 1930s then they progressed to the North and Midwest and from there they progressed to other parts of the United States. The period of the Second World War is also significant for gang activities as after the war the United States faced a flood of Mexican and Latino immigrants. They stated dwelling in Midwest cities such as Chicago and started their violent street activities (Griffiths & Chavez, 2004). Their violent activities were at a peak in the mid-1970 and after they had an only occasional outburst of their violence. During the 1970s, only 19 states in the United States reported youth gang problems(Howell, 2011). After that period, people perception about gangs changed and shifted to frightening robbery bands that used to robbed as well as assault the citizens. With this, gang’s activities also increased and spread to all the 50 states. For example, since 1900s white gangs were very active in different cities such as Chicago and were operating in the form of well-organized crime mobs (Wood, 2014). White male gangs made use of terror tactics in order to strengthen their borders in many cities. Then, as a result, there also came fighting gangs in black and Latino neighborhoods. They were fighting for the sake of their rectitude as well as for esteem. These gang activities were at peak during the 1960s and 1970s as their gang growth was powered by migration largely by Mexicans and blacks to northern U.S. cities. They were struggling for their civil rights and ideology. This gangsterism was started in Chicago and progressed to more cities causing an increase in inter-racial mistrust that lasted for decades (Wood, 2014). In addition, The National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) reported gang activities during 200-2008 with an increase of 15-percent in youth gang problems(Howell, 2011). In New York City, 50 percent of all shootings in 2017 were related to gang members in which they were either perpetrator or victim (National Gang Center., 2019).

## Current status of Gangs in the United States

Today in the U.S. nearly 33,000 violent street gangs, motorcycle gangs as well as prison gangs are illegally active (National Drug Intelligence Center, 2008). Police have started collecting data on gang members and have formed computerized gang databases(National Gang Center, 2019). These gang databases are important to know about gangs and their current demographics. Gang-related problems are not only reported in urban areas but these are also common in many suburban areas(National Drug Intelligence Center, 2008). For example, there are gangs in Chicago that have maintained connections to gangs in remote suburban communities (National Drug Intelligence Center, 2008). In addition, more and more youth is becoming part of these gangs. National Longitudinal Survey of Youth has reported 8 percent of the youth that linked to a gang during their ages of 12 and 17(National Drug Intelligence Center, 2008). The number of juvenile gang members is greater than 1 million (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015).

## Gang formation and the implications

There had been long debates by experts for the formal definition of the term gang and its types. Gangs are composed of people that have ages between 12 -24. Gangs also have specific names and they make use of some symbols for their identity. This symbol can be in the form of their clothing, colors as well as hand signs. These are found to involve in different criminal activities such as graffiti, robbery, and extortion, drug trafficking, rape as well as murder.

Gangs are formed having different objectives and aims. Some want to join for belongingness and prestige. Male members join gangs for this reason but now females also join gangs for this reason. Girls that are grown up in an environment of unrecognized and defenseless are more prone to this reason. Others want to join for their financial needs, protection from other gangs as well as due to their preexisting social connections to the gangs. Financial benefits are the major attraction for youth to join gangs (Howell, 2011). With criminal activities, gangs get finances that can be related to drugs, blackmailing as well as robbery. Moreover, gangs have their own reputation and joining of gangs for the protection from other gangs is tremendously becoming an increasing reason for gang's formation. Gangs thus offer different kinds of power such as coercive power, the power to pay/ buy and the power of status. Here, unified theory can explain people behavior in joining the gangs. Youth that is isolated from their families and education systems easily become part of gangs. They get safety when they belong to a gang. Moreover, gang members also join under the influence of their family members. This is more common for Mexican American youth (Howell, 2011).

## Gang research, purpose and findings

Research has been conducted on North American Indigenous Adolescents to check for different risk factors that can make them members of criminal gangs (Hautala, J. Sittner, & Whitbeck, 2016). Tribal communities are facing the threats of gangs as their youth is increasingly becoming members of these gangs.

Different risk factors for gang involvement are*:*

### Family risk factors

Family is the most important factor that can either push or pull youth into gang involvement. Thus, it serves as a key source of risk for gang involvement if the family is identified with socioeconomic disadvantage. Indigenous communities are also facing the issue of weakening positive parenting practices as a result of poverty and low educational attainment. Thus, poor parental monitoring and association of family member in a gang involve other family members in criminal activities of the gangs.

### School risk factors

School is another important factor that can either inhibit or aggravate the risk of gang involvement. If a youth has a strong attachment with school, then they will not get involved with gangs(Hautala et al., 2016). They will then become easy prey for the gangs.

### Peer risk factors

Peers affect a number of decisions of youth including the gang involvement. Peers are considered as a dominant socializing group. If a youth has an affiliation with delinquent peers then they will eventually get involved in gangs criminal activities. However, gangs represent different kind of peer group as compared to conventional peer groups. This is not only different due to members of these groups but also the group processes within the gang.

### Individual risk factors

If the youth is under stress and negative emotions, then, these psychosocial stressors can serve as a risk factor for their gang involvement. Moreover, due to belongings to minority indigenous people may fell prey of perceived racial discrimination that will lead to their gang involvement.

## Gang membership and characteristics of its members

Youth gangs are increasing in the U.S. since 1990 and have spread to all 50 states(Lenzi et al., 2015). Their activities are intimidation and extortion, defacement, theft, drug trafficking, shootings, and murder. Different factors are causes for gang membership such as family and peer influence, financial and economic reasons as well as the need for power and safety. Moreover, there are different distinguishing characteristics of its members. They have specific clothing styles, colors, and way of wearing clothes. They also have specific nicknames or symbols such as graffiti.

## Types of gangs and problems in classification

Gang’s criminal activity can be taken as a crucial feature to define their group (Wood, 2014). Gangs are mainly classified on the basis of their ethnic affiliation, organization, and membership. National Gang Intelligence Center classified gangs as the prison gang, the motorcycle gang, organized crime gangs, juvenile gangs, and Hispanic gangs.

### Prison gangs

Prison gangs are the result of the desire of getting protection from other gangs. A famous American prison gang is the Aryan Brotherhood. The gang was formed during the 1960s and is found to be participating in different violent crimes such as drug trafficking and illegal gambling. They get involved in these activities both in and out of prisons.

### Motorcycle gangs

These gangs are found to have an association with motorcycle clubs, which serves as their organizational structures.

### Organized crime gangs

These gangs' consists of criminal group members and are formed for the personal gains of members. They get involved in a number of criminal activities for instance in drug, weapons as well as in human trafficking. They also go for murder, copyright infringement, illegal gambling in addition to terrorism.

### Juvenile Gangs

Young people are members of these gangs. The purpose of these gangs is protection and different social and economic reasons. One famous gang of this category that is operating in the United States is North Jersey Cross Kids. In 2010, in the United States, there were nearly

1,059,000 juvenile gang members with an overall prevalence of youth gang membership as 2.0 percent (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015).

### Hispanic gangs

This is an ethnic-based gang in the United States that started forming in California during the early 1920s. These are mostly involved in the burglary and strong-arm robbery. However, there are also certain problems with the classification.

There are numerous factors that can be taken as a basis for the classification. Gangs are mostly classified on the basis of their member’s characteristics and gangs processes. These are factors that keep on changing with time and make this classification difficult. Moreover, there are also factors that can use for classification such as demographic characteristics, geographic presence, and ethical and cultural identities.

## Previous reports analysis

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) which is the component of the United States Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) released its statistics about students gangs present in schools. This is the 21st report that is providing the recent data available on school crime and student safety. It has been published with the joint efforts of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Institute of Education Sciences (IES) as well as the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). Sources of information for the report were national surveys of students and postsecondary institutions. During the period of 2001 to 2017, there was a decline in student’s percentages in gangs having ages 12 to18 years. The research was carried out to make schools safe for teaching and learning and to eliminate any kind of crime and violence in schools.

## Various approaches, programs, and policies for responding to gang formation and activities

Growth in the number of youth gangs has been accelerated since 1980. With the passage of time, these gangs are also spreading to the rural areas and even crossing international borders. It has fueled the public’s fear as well as increased different misconceptions about these gangs. To check with this rate, there is a need for limiting the factors that are increasing the gang memberships. Additionally, these gangs formation are also be required to stop as these also cause harm to these gangs members. There is a number of homicides reported by these gangs members, female are also found to be increasingly involved in gangs. Their activities related to drugs and violence not only affects the community but also members.

### Anti-Gang Initiatives

The FBI has been working for decades and showed its dedication to the disrupting of bands. For this purpose, they make use of gangs databases that the government has established based on their criminal activities (Simon, Ritter, & Mahendra, 2013). The FBI has successfully unsettled gang activities through intelligence-driven investigations. For this purpose, it has gone for partnerships with Safe Streets Task Forces, the National Gang Intelligence Center, and Transnational Anti-Gang Task Forces. National Gang Intelligence Center was established in 2005 and assist the FBI to control the growth of gangs by integrating gang intelligence across federal, state as well as local law enforcement. With its timely and accurate information, law enforcement get enable to act promptly and get the desired results. The other purpose of NGIC is to recognize those gangs that are the greatest danger to communities.

### Transnational Anti-Gang (TAG) Task Forces

Transnational Anti-Gang (TAG) Task Forces are presently situated in El Salvador, Guatemala and in Honduras(Simon et al., 2013). The mission of the force is to investigate, dislocate as well as disassemble transnational gangs in three Central American countries. These forces cooperate with host nation agencies in the investigation.

### Violent Gang Task Forces

All the federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies collaborate with the help of these task forces. Nationwide there are 160 Violent Gang Safe Streets Task Forces operating. They carry out coordinated investigations against violent gangs and obtain prosecutions on their violations(Simon et al., 2013). The FBI with the collaboration of these agencies has successfully prosecuted against the leaders of some famous gangs such as MS -13 and 18th Street Gang.

# Recommendations

Gangs are in the form of groups that function in the society by giving their members protection, support as well as loyalty. However, in today environment not all gangs provide these elements to its member’s positively. There are violent gangs that promote violence through their criminal activities. More and more youth is becoming part of these gangs as a result of different factors such as peer pressure, family influence, financial objectives and need for safety. There is a need to check activities at community’s level to stop the spread of these gangs. It is a difficult and challenging task to prevent youth from joining these gangs. There are numerous elopements that make this task challenging. These gangs operate in communities through socially acceptable places such as parks and schools. Therefore, there is a need to identify these places and suspicious activities to stop these activities. Moreover, communities should participate in following the below recommendations.

* Parents and delinquent youth must get training.
* Schools should revise their “zero tolerance” policies in order to reduce expulsions.
* Engage students more in schools.
* Assist students in resolving conflicts by providing training to them.
* Students should also get training about gangs awareness.
* Such programs should be developed that can stop gangs development.
* Relationships in families should be strengthening.

## Gang programs and policy

Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Act of 1974 was used by the President and Congress to establish the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). The goal of the establishment is to address the issues of juvenile delinquency and enhance juvenile justice. OJJDP not only sponsors research and training but also help individual youth-serving agencies. Research and Program Development Division of OJJDP widens information on national trends in juvenile delinquency. It also supports the research program and assists in data collection. There is also Training and Technical Assistance Division that assist in arranging juvenile justice training.

### Desired outcomes

* Address the issues of juvenile delinquency and enhance juvenile justice.
* Sponsors research and training and assist in data collection.
* Assist different departments for maintain peace in communities.
* Community awareness about gangs.
* Know about gangs problems and devise practical solutions for them.

### Measurement of success

* Reduction in the number of criminal gangs
* Reduction in juvenile delinquency
* Knowledge enhancement of communities about gangs.
* Strengthening family bonds.

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