

Chapter 12: Juvenile Violence and Gangs

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In 2005, Illinois reported one of the highest violent crime arrest rates for individuals under 18 years of age (1,075 per 100,000) in the nation (OJJDP, 2005). Prior to that, Hahn (1999) reported that “The youth gang problem is increasingly widespread in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Present day youth gangs, particularly in Chicago and other major urban centers, appear to be larger, better organized, more violent, and more criminally oriented than in earlier decades.”

Keegan (2004) concluded that “Looking at a map of Illinois, with stars to mark the existence of a gang of some kind, there is nary a county that is not part of the galaxy... The notorious Chicago street gangs are heading out to newer and, in many cases, more naive pastures. “Like the old-time gypsies,” says one Chicago street cop, ‘when it gets too hot, they move away from the heat and out of town.’ The migration is discernible, not just to Chicago police, but to destination towns that are starting to become concerned about this influx of outsiders with big city ways... [In] a 2003 study conducted by the Gang Crime Prevention Center... Respondents from 222 law enforcement agencies reported an average of five gangs and 67 gang members in their jurisdictions... No community is immune. Today, there are 72 recognized street gangs operating in Illinois. Most are contingents of the major coalitions formed in the 1980s — the people and the folks... The “people” gangs — such as the El Rukns, Latin Kings and the Vice Lords — tie a five-pointed star into graffiti, while the “folks” — such as the Black Gangster Disciples — use a six-pointed star... ‘You can’t talk about a gang problem without talking about the narcotic problem. You can’t talk about the narcotic problem without talking about the gun problem,’ says Michael Smith, deputy chief of special prosecutions in the Cook County state’s attorney’s office. ‘You can’t peel one off from the other. And the result of all three is violence and death.’” And, according to the National Drug Intelligence Center (2002), “The state of Illinois, specifically the Chicago area, is the focal point for the flow of illicit drugs into the Great Lakes Region... Organized street gangs such as the Gangster Disciples, Vice Lords, and Latin Kings control the distribution and retail sale of cocaine, heroin, and marijuana. Violent crime associated with street gangs, while declining in some major urban areas, is increasing in suburban and rural areas of the state as these gangs expand their drug markets.”

A website sponsored by the Lake County, Illinois Juvenile Justice Council indicates that “The number of gangs and gang members has dramatically increased throughout Lake County over the past decade. A gang can be any organized group of people with a recognized leader that remains together with a common cause during times of peace and times of conflict and shows unity in obvious ways... What distinguishes a gang from other groups is that a gang’s activities are either criminal or threatening to the general public.” This website contains a variety of information concerning the identification of gang members and the structure of two major gangs in Illinois, People and Folks and their affiliates. <http://www.19thcircuitcourt.state.il.us/juveniles/gangs.htm>

Attempts to reduce gang violence in Illinois include “CeaseFire, an initiative of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention, [which] has been using outreach workers, clergy, and other community leaders to combat gang violence in some of Chicago’s most dangerous neighborhoods since 2000. This year’s funding is allowing the project to expand to 11 neighborhoods in Chicago, as well as sites in East St. Louis, Rockford, Aurora, and Maywood... CeaseFire is unique among crime prevention strategies in the way that it takes a public health approach to stopping firearm violence. It does this by mobilizing all elements of the community to drive home the message that violence is not acceptable and that there are always alternatives to violence... In the core Chicago police beats where CeaseFire is operating with outreach workers there has been an average reduction in shootings of 44 percent since implementation. For the first four months of 2004, shootings in CeaseFire areas were down nearly 30 percent compared to

the same period a year ago, according to preliminary Chicago Police Department data...Shootings cost the state hundreds of millions of dollars each year in medical and criminal justice expenses. It has been estimated that an investment of \$5 million in a violence prevention outreach program like CeaseFire can result in savings to the state of between \$100 million and \$150 million.” (Press Release, Office of the Governor, 2004).

In addition, the University of Illinois, Chicago has “plans to establish a violence prevention research center that brings together researchers, community representatives, practitioners and policy makers committed to understanding and reducing youth violence in poor, inner-city communities in Chicago communities with some of the highest rates of youth violence in the country. The core work of the center is guided by the perspective that the most effective way to combat youth violence is to coordinate empirical "pre-intervention" work designed to understand the risk and development of such violence and to rigorously evaluate preventive interventions conducted both under tightly controlled conditions (i.e., randomized control efficacy trials) and in real world settings (i.e., effectiveness trials). Understanding that context is central to the work of the center is meaningful, in that the characteristics of the neighborhood and community are important in both reducing risk of youth violence and developing effective interventions.

The center's primary aims are to bring together researchers, community representatives, practitioners and policy makers to build an integrative approach to address youth violence within poor, inner-city neighborhoods in Chicago. The center will address these issues across developmental periods and with children and families with different levels of risk and involvement in youth violence; promote the use of evidence-based practice to reduce youth violence; develop a comprehensive surveillance system to guide intervention activities and to evaluate changes in youth violence in communities and neighborhoods; provide training and technical assistance to support schools and community agencies in selecting, implementing and evaluating youth violence prevention programs; train new investigators in context-based prevention science; and to disseminate empirical findings regionally and nationally (Gorman-Smith, 2007).

Violence by and against youths has received considerable attention in Illinois and the rest of the country over the past decade. Stories appearing in the mass media leave the impression that violence committed by youths is epidemic. Current official statistics and other sources of information indicate that violent acts committed by youths have increased in recent years. Youths who commit violent offenses deserve our immediate attention, since they are likely to continue to commit such acts unless effective intervention or incarceration occur since evidence indicates that unless one of these two alternatives is employed, recidivism is very likely.

Our society is confronted by a multitude of problems relating to gangs. Preventing youths from becoming involved in gang activities, particularly in inner-city neighborhoods, is extremely difficult. Youths who don't join gangs voluntarily risk their lives, as well as the lives of their family members. Thus early identification of new recruits and comprehensive knowledge concerning the membership and actions of existing gangs are essential. Identification of youths who are in the process of becoming gang members may be accomplished through a variety of means. Tattoos, chronic problems with police, school, and family; discovery of strange logos/insignias on notebooks, or clothing; use of new nicknames (monikers); flashing of hand signs; and unexplained money may be signs of gang involvement. Parents, teachers, concerned peers, and police who view these and other suspicious signs need to take appropriate action to address the possibility of gang involvement.

Even early intervention does not ensure that gang influence will be reduced, since even the youths in question are most likely to be returned to gang-infested neighborhoods or to correctional facilities which may also be largely controlled by gangs. Incarcerated adult gang leaders often continue to control

gang activities on the outside while they are in prison and frequently control the gangs within the prisons themselves.

Identifying the signs of gang activities as early as possible and prosecuting gang members to the fullest extent of the law in order to send gang leaders the message that their actions will not be tolerated are necessary steps in gang control. “Zero tolerance” programs, meaning that no amount of gang activity will be accepted are often the cornerstone of gang control activities and are intended to convince gang leaders looking to expand their spheres of influence to move elsewhere. Where gangs are already clearly established, as in most metropolitan areas, a massive, coordinated effort, addressing socioeconomic conditions as well as criminal behavior, are required if gang behavior is to be brought under some degree of control. Some such efforts are now being made, and careful evaluation of their impact is crucial.

Gang activities have a long history in the United States, but attention has been redirected recently toward gangs as a result of their involvement with drug trafficking and gunrunning, which are multimillion dollar enterprises. The complexion of gangs has changed somewhat over the years, and referring to gangs as “juvenile” gangs is not totally appropriate due to the strong influence of adult gang leaders who supervise, organize, and control gang activities.

Juveniles continue to join gangs in order to attain status and prestige lacking in the domestic and educational arenas. They also continue to fight territorial wars, extort protection money, and exclude from membership those from different racial or ethnic groups. They exist in all urban areas, have extensive organizations in most prisons, and are spreading out to medium-size and even smaller cities. Gang involvement in violent activities has received a good deal of attention from both media and justice officials. The latter are organizing to better combat gang activities, but their success has yet to be carefully evaluated. Similarly, get-tough legislation has been passed at all levels, but the impact of such legislative action remains in question.

Review Questions

1. Are gangs and the crimes associated with their activities confined to urban areas in the State of Illinois? Support your answer.
2. What is the relationship between guns, drugs, and gangs in Illinois?
3. What is the purpose of the Ceasefire program in Illinois?
4. How great is the cost of gang-related violence in Illinois?
5. What plans does the University of Illinois, Chicago, have for dealing with violence in Illinois?