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Highlights of the 2012 National Youth Gang Survey

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This fact sheet provides an overview of the nation's gang problem. In 2012, there were an estimated 30,700 gangs (an increase from 29,900 in 2011) and 850,000 gang members (an increase from 782,500 in 2011) throughout 3,100 jurisdictions with gang problems (down from 3,300 in 2011). The number of reported gang-related homicides increased 20 percent from 1,824 in 2011 to 2,363 in 2012.

About the Survey

Since 1996, the National Gang Center, through the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS), has collected data annually from a large, representative sample of local law enforcement agencies to track the size and scope of gang activity nationwide. The sample consists of two groups: (1) all police departments in cities with more than 50,000 residents (larger cities) and all suburban county police and sheriffs' departments, and (2) random samples of police departments in cities with populations between 2,500 and 50,000 (smaller cities) and rural county sheriffs' departments.¹

Survey Findings

This fact sheet summarizes findings from the 2012 survey. Of the 2,538 survey recipients, 2,199 (87 percent) responded to the survey.

Trends in Gang Activity

In 2012, gangs were active in slightly less than 30 percent of the responding jurisdictions. This estimate has declined slightly over the past 4 consecutive years and is at the lowest point in nearly a decade. The decline from 2011 to 2012 can be almost solely attributed to the drop in smaller cities, where gang prevalence has decreased nearly 10 percentage points since 2010. Across jurisdiction types, prevalence rates of gang activity followed a marked decline in the late 1990s, increased in the early 2000s, and, with the exception of smaller cities, have generally stabilized in recent years.²

Key Points

Based on law enforcement reports, in 2012—

- Nearly 30 percent of all responding law enforcement agencies reported gang activity.
- Slightly fewer jurisdictions experienced gang activity than in 2011 (3,100 versus 3,300).
- Gang activity remained concentrated primarily in urban areas, with available indicators suggesting this is occurring even more in recent years.
- Gang-related homicides increased overall nationally, partly due to increased reporting by agencies.

Approximately 85 percent of larger cities, 50 percent of suburban counties, and 15 percent of rural counties have reported gang activity in each of the past four surveys. The greatest change in recent years has occurred in smaller cities, where the percentage of agencies reporting gang activity has significantly declined—approximately 25 percent reported gang activity in 2012, down from 34 percent in 2010. This is the lowest rate recorded in more than a decade.

Figure 1. Percentage Change in Gang Estimates, Previous 5-Year Average to 2012

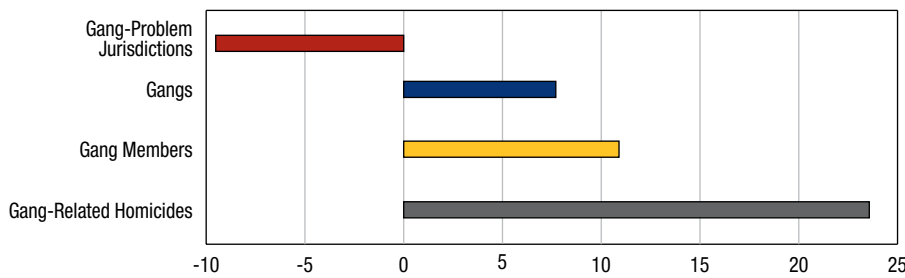


Figure 1 shows the percentage change over time in the estimated number of gangs, gang members, and gang-related homicides in 2012 compared with the national average for the past 5 years (2007 to 2011). The increase in the estimated number of gangs (8 percent) and gang members (11 percent) is primarily attributable to increased estimates that larger cities reported. For example, more than 50 percent of the net increase in the estimated number of gang members in 2012 occurred in areas with larger populations. Along with the declining prevalence rates of gang activity in smaller cities (and the historically low rates in rural counties), these results suggest that gang activity is becoming even more concentrated in urban areas.³ These findings do not support the popularly held notion that gang activity is spreading outward to less densely populated areas.

In terms of gang-related crime, law enforcement agencies report that they do not regularly record offenses as “gang related,” with the exception of homicides. Thus, the NYGS can only report findings related to this one criminal offense type. As shown in table 1, respondents reported a total of 2,363 gang-related homicides⁴ in the United

States in 2012. The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s *Uniform Crime Reports*⁵ estimates that there were more than 14,800 homicides nationally in 2012. Taken together, these findings suggest that gangs were involved in approximately 16 percent of all homicides in the United States in 2012 and underscore the considerable overlap between gang activity and violent crime.⁶

Compared with the previous 5-year average, the number of gang-related homicides that NYGS respondents reported increased by more than 20 percent in 2012.⁷ This increase is due to higher counts of reported gang homicides in certain larger cities in the NYGS sample and also to NYGS respondents reporting more completely compared with previous years (i.e., the increase in 2012 is partly an artifact of agencies reporting more complete data).

Fifty-five percent of the responding agencies characterized their gang problems as “staying about the same” in 2012, an increase over the percentage of agencies in 2010 and 2011 and the largest percentage that the survey has ever recorded.

Gang Membership Designation

Understanding law enforcement practices and procedures for designating individuals as gang members provides insight into the type and range of data maintained. The 2012 NYGS asked respondents to characterize the frequency of use of six common practices for designating an individual as a gang member (see figure 2). The percentage of agencies reporting the use of a practice as “very often” is as follows, in descending order: displays gang symbols (66 percent of respondents), has been arrested or associates with known gang members (56 percent), self-nomination in a custodial setting (54 percent), self-nomination in a noncustodial setting (49 percent), designated by another law enforcement agency (42 percent), and identified by a reliable informant (25 percent). The frequency of use of self-nomination is notable, since many states permit this technique to be used as a sole indicator.⁸

Table 1. Gang Magnitude Indicators

Indicator	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Gang-Problem Jurisdictions	3,550	3,330	3,500	3,500	3,300	3,100
Gangs	27,300	27,900	28,100	29,400	29,900	30,700
Gang Members	788,000	774,000	731,000	756,000	782,500	850,000
Gang-Related Homicides	1,975	1,659	2,083	2,020	1,824	2,363

Antigang Measures

As a followup to the antigang measures that law enforcement used, as reported in *Highlights of the 2011 National Youth Gang Survey*, the 2012 NYGS asked respondents who reported gang activity about their agencies’ participation in 11 separate gang-reduction strategies. Table 2 shows that targeted patrols and a

Figure 2. Designating Gang Membership, Frequency of Use

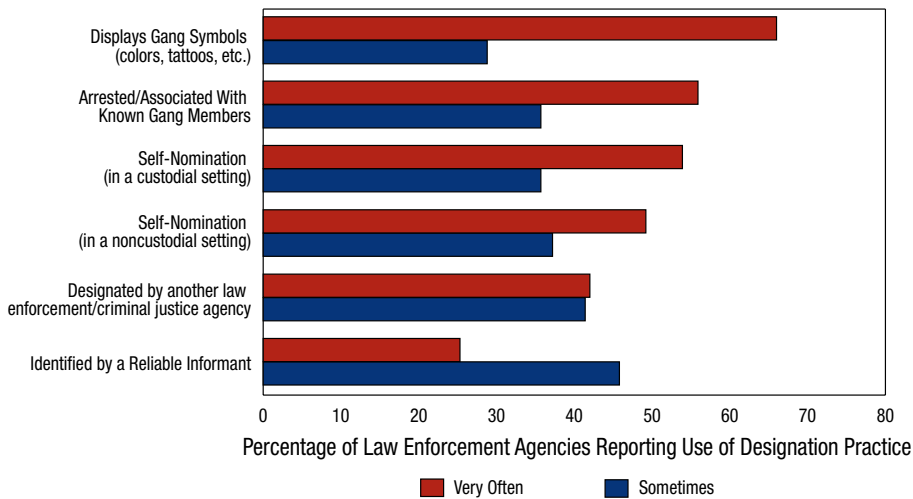


Table 2. Antigang Measures

	Agencies Reporting Use (Percent)
Targeted patrols	76
Dedicated gang unit/Officer	64
Participation in multiagency gang task force	52
Coordinated probation searches	51
Curfew ordinance	47
Participation in a multiagency community-based anti-gang strategy	30
Targeted firearms initiative	26
Gang member call-ins	15
Participation in a multiagency reentry initiative	15
Civil gang injunction	8
Other civil gang ordinance	6

dedicated gang unit (or officer) were the most frequently used measures, followed by participation in a multiagency gang task force and coordinated probation searches. Each of these strategies was more likely to have been reported in larger cities, where 86 percent used targeted patrols and 75 percent used a gang unit (or officer). Less frequently reported across all agencies were the following strategies: civil gang injunction or other civil gang ordinance.

Conclusion

Estimates of the number of gangs, gang members, and gang-related homicides all increased in 2012 as compared with 2011 and with the previous 5-year average. Concurrently, the prevalence rate of gang activity among smaller cities declined to its lowest rate in more than a decade.

Together, these findings strongly indicate the growing concentration of gang activity in largely populated areas and provide empirical evidence that the spread of gang activity outward from larger cities is limited in size and scope. Slightly fewer jurisdictions experienced gang activity in 2012 than in 2011. However, this change can almost entirely be attributed to a decline in gang prevalence in less densely populated areas, especially smaller cities. The procedures law enforcement agencies use to designate an individual as a gang member largely involve outward displays of gang symbols, arrest and/or associations with known gang members, and self-nomination (a technique that other gang research strategies use). Localized antigang measures that law enforcement agencies in the NYGS use largely involve traditional strategies, such as the use of a dedicated gang officer and/or unit, targeted patrols, and a local gang task force.

Endnotes

1. For a description of the NYGS study population and sample methodology, see www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis/Methodology.
2. See a graph depicting gang prevalence trends between 1996 and 2012 from the NYGS analysis, available at www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis/Prevalence-of-Gang-Problems#prevalenceyouthgangstudy.

3. See findings from the 2011 NYGS: Egley, A., Jr., and Howell, J.C. 2013. *Highlights of the 2011 National Youth Gang Survey*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available online: www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/242884.pdf.

4. Law enforcement agencies use varying methods for classifying a homicide as “gang related.” The most commonly used method is the “member-based” approach in which a homicide is classified as gang related if the victim and/or the perpetrator was a gang member. Some agencies report using a more restricted classification method called the “motive-based” approach, which involves also proving that the crime furthers the interests of the entire gang. The survey results were derived from the more encompassing member-based approach.

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5. See Crime in the United States 2012, www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2012/crime-in-the-u.s.-2012.

6. For previous NYGS analyses of homicide trends, see Howell et al., 2011, *U.S. Gang Problem Trends and Seriousness, 1996–2009*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Assistance and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available online: www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Content/Documents/Bulletin-6.pdf.

7. For more detailed information about the number of gang-related homicides across the study years, see www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis/Measuring-the-Extent-of-Gang-Problems#homicidesnumber.

8. For more information, see *Compilation of Gang-Related Legislation*, www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Legislation.

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