
Youth Gangs and Youth Crime in North Carolina's Schools

This issue of SystemStats presents the condensed version of a much longer study, *Perceptions of youth crime and youth gangs: A statewide systemic investigation*, which surveyed members of the criminal justice system about their perceptions of today's youth crime and about gangs in the schools and neighborhoods. This issue will focus exclusively on youth gangs in the schools with a forthcoming companion issue which discusses gangs in the communities.

What is known about contemporary gangs in North Carolina?

Anecdotal evidence, media accounts, and conversations with criminal justice personnel indicate the presence of gangs in North Carolina. Indeed, Klein (1995) identified the presence of gangs in at least one North Carolina city prior to 1970 with the number of cities reporting a gang presence increasing to 13 by the end of 1992. The National Youth Gang Survey (1997) lists 24 cities and 10 counties which reported active gangs in their respective jurisdictions in 1995.

Only one comprehensive statewide research study has been conducted in this area. Oehme (see reference) surveyed 410 non-randomly selected law enforcement, educational, court and correctional personnel in 1994. Of the 257 survey respondents, which represented 58 cities and 95 counties, 2,772 youth gang members were reported. These members belonged to 127 different gangs that were located in 39 different localities (18 cities, 15 counties, and six correctional facilities). Gangs were reported to exist in both urban and rural areas of the state with the largest perceived number being identified in the cities of Charlotte, Durham, Brevard, and Lumberton and in the unincorporated areas of Mecklenburg, Caldwell, and Durham Counties. Eighty-four non-gang youth groups, with 1,450 members, were also reported and as the researcher notes, these youth groups have the dangerous potential to evolve into formal youth gangs.

The number of reported members per gang ranged from three to 20. The typical municipal youth gang was reported to consist of 16 members while the average size of the typical county youth gang was reported to be slightly larger with 19 members. Demographically, 66.1 percent of the members were black, 24.3 percent were white, 1.6 percent were of Hispanic origin, and the remaining 1.7 percent were of Asian descent.

Oehme (1997) found a significant relationship between these youth gangs and both the level of serious violent crime and drug-related activities. Sixty-one percent of those respondents, who reported the presence of youth gangs in their jurisdictions, described the gangs' involvement in Part I offenses (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, motor vehicle theft, larceny, and burglary) as being either very serious or serious. These agencies also mentioned that when contact with a gang member occurred 67 percent of the cases involved gang members with prior criminal records. Sixty-eight percent of the agencies reported that drug distribution was a primary activity of the gang while 64 percent responded that this drug distribution involved importation from outside the community.

Gangs with larger memberships and more adult members were more likely to be involved in both serious violent crime and drug-related activities. Strong evidence of non-local gang members being involved with drug importation, and the presence of adult gang members possessing common ties to other adult organized crime groups, was discovered and offers limited support for the existence of drug franchising in North Carolina. The study also noted evidence of increasing drug involvement among many street gangs in spite of the fact that these gangs did not possess the typical attributes of a drug gang.

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The causative factors of limited social opportunities, dysfunctional family life, and poverty were the most commonly cited explanations for gang formation and persistence. Law enforcement agencies and juvenile court counselors were the most active in terms of responding to the presence of gangs within their respective communities; and the trend was toward suppression activities and strategies as 42.3 percent of the agencies acknowledged engaging in these tactics. All agencies which had active gang programs reported an unusually strong belief that these approaches were highly effective (Oehme, 1997).

The renewed national attention on youth gangs has impacted North Carolina and research is beginning to emerge which examines the state's gangs. However, with the exception of Oehme's (1997) seminal work, this research appears to be more focused on gathering intelligence information which is normally only descriptive in nature. Little systematic work has been conducted which addresses the key and emerging gang issues such as migration and the relationship between drugs and gang violence. Research, which utilizes a uniform or standard definition of gangs, gang members, and gang crime needs to be initiated. This will enable researchers to compare and contrast the state's gangs with each other. Information on the evolution of gangs, and the extent to which their criminal activities vary over time needs to be provided in order to advance our knowledge in this area.

Methods

Survey Instrument

A 73-item questionnaire was compiled based upon the existing gang literature. The questionnaire was subdivided into three sections with part one collecting basic demographic information about the survey respondent. The respondents' positions within their respective agencies, years of criminal justice experience, age and gender were asked in order to produce a basic profile of those practitioners who completed the survey. The second section of the survey dealt with youth crime in general and specifically addressed comparative analyses with youth crime over the past five years. Questions dealing with violent crime,

drug related crime, and firearms-related offenses were included with the respondents being asked to indicate if these offenses have increased, decreased, or remained the same within their jurisdictions, over the past five years. Respondents were also queried about today's typical youthful offender compared to the typical youthful offender of five years ago.

The issue of gangs and their absence or presence and influence within the community was initially addressed in the second section. A four-pronged test was utilized in order to determine the types of gangs within the respondents' respective jurisdictions. Respondents were asked if youth tend to "hang out" in groups, if any of these groups demonstrated a commitment to criminal activity, if these groups acknowledged their collective identity through names, dress, graffiti or other means, and if these groups restricted their activities to certain geographical areas. Affirmative responses to all four questions would serve as an indicator that classic street gangs exist within the respondent's community.

The researchers debated over the issue of imposing a common definition of gangs as opposed to simply asking: "Do you have gangs in your jurisdiction?" Asking this question would allow each respondent to define gangs as they are locally perceived but prevent the possibility of comparing gangs across jurisdictions. Consequently, it was determined to use the four-pronged test, for some survey items, as a common definition of what constitutes a gang in order to permit comparative analyses across jurisdictions, over time, and between differing gangs. Other questions allowed the survey respondent to utilize their own perceived and/or locally-defined definition of what constitutes a gang. Utilizing both approaches would allow the researchers to examine the disparity between the perceptions of gangs and the reality of gangs.

The final section of the survey dealt specifically with the attributes of gangs and gang members. Questions were asked about gang crime and the criminal justice response to the gangs, as well as specific information on individual gangs. Respondents were asked to identify unique gang names, the gang's affiliation, the number of members, the types of criminal activity that the gang predominately commits, and the racial

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composition of the gang. Each respondent was asked to delineate information on up to eight different gangs within their community.

When discussing gang typologies, the majority of the existing gang literature tends to define gangs along discrete and dichotomous taxonomies, i.e. gangs are either street, or territorial, gangs or drug gangs. Little discussion has been devoted to those street gangs who also distribute drugs nor to those drug gangs who still retain some "turf," such as an open air drug market. This study sought to organize gangs along a continuum ranging from strictly street gangs, to primarily street gangs who deal drugs, to primarily drug gangs who maintain minimal territory, to purely drug distribution gangs. Consequently specific questions were asked about each gang's drug distribution involvement and the extent to which they maintained "turf." Thus the method allowed the researchers to identify pure street gangs and pure drug gangs, as well as those gangs which fall within the gray areas of the street-drug gang dichotomy.

Finally, the respondents were asked a series of questions in which they were asked to use a seven point Likert type scale to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with questions concerning gang violence, drug sales, gang origins, gang member attributes, and gang migration. These questions were included in order to identify how the gangs have evolved from the time they were first noticed within the community to the present time.

Survey Sample

A total of 1,137 surveys were mailed to various criminal justice professionals throughout the state. Numerous agencies within each county were surveyed in order to increase the reliability and comprehensiveness of the study and also to reduce the likelihood of encountering gang denial which would have been much higher had only one branch of the criminal justice system been surveyed. Of this number, 433 were completed and returned by the respondents. These respondents resided in 94 of the state's 100 counties. This equates to an overall return rate of 38.1 percent.

Surveys were mailed to all of the state's 492 School Resource Officers (SROs) with 171, or 34.8% being returned. Surveys were also mailed to every Sheriff's Office with 36, or 36% being completed. The same was true with the police departments with 389 cities being surveyed and 109, or 28%, responding to the survey. Surveys were distributed to each of the state's 39 Chief Court Counselors of which all 39 were returned for a 100% return rate. Each of the state's 34 Chief Probation Officers were asked to return three completed surveys from their district. Sixty-seven, or 65.7 percent, were returned. Finally, the ten directors of the state's detention centers and the five training school directors were surveyed of which 11, or 73.3 percent, replied.

Youth Gangs in North Carolina

The survey respondents identified a total of 332 distinct gangs in North Carolina with at least 5,143 total members or an average of at least 15.5 (16) members per gang. This average gang size is consistent with Oehme's (1997) prior finding and suggests that individual gangs are not getting larger in terms of their membership. These gangs were located in 62 of the 94 counties (66%) in which a survey response was obtained. Of the 5,143 total gang members 1,183, or 23%, were reported by the SROs which indicates that nearly ¼ of the reported gang members are still in the classrooms of the state's public school facilities. These gang members, who are still within the schools, were found in 35 (37.2%) of the 94 counties in which at least one survey response was obtained. SROs indicated that these gangs were present in at least 58 of the state's middle and senior high schools.

While direct comparisons with Oehme's 1997 study are not possible due to differing sampling strategies, it is at least informative to note that the number of gangs has risen from 127 gangs, since the early 90s when he collected his data, to the current 332. This represents an increase of 161 percent during the decade. Oehme found 2,772 members whereas the current studied identified 5,143 which represents an increase of 85.5%.

As previously mentioned, a standard definition of what constitutes a gang was adopted in order to permit comparisons between gangs and across counties. The definition was drawn heavily from Klein's (1995) previous work. A four-pronged test was utilized in

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order to determine the types of gangs within the respondents' respective jurisdictions. Respondents were asked if youth tend to "hang out" in groups, if any of these groups demonstrated a commitment to criminal activity, if these groups acknowledged their collective identity through names, dress, graffiti or other means, and if these groups restricted their activities to certain geographical areas. Affirmative responses to all four questions would serve as an indicator that classic street gangs exist within the respondent's community.

Applying this four-pronged test greatly diminished the number of self-defined gangs from 332 to only 99. These 99 gangs represent the classic street gang, which maintains a turf, identifies themselves as a gang, and maintains a commitment to criminal activity. These 99 gangs have a total reported membership of 2,003 individuals and are located in 30 (31.9%) of the 94 counties for which at least one survey was returned.

Of these 99 gangs, 52 were reported to be either active in the schools or at least have members who still attend school. These 52 school oriented gangs consisted of at least 471 reported members and are located in 18 different counties.

Perceptions of Youth Crime in the Schools

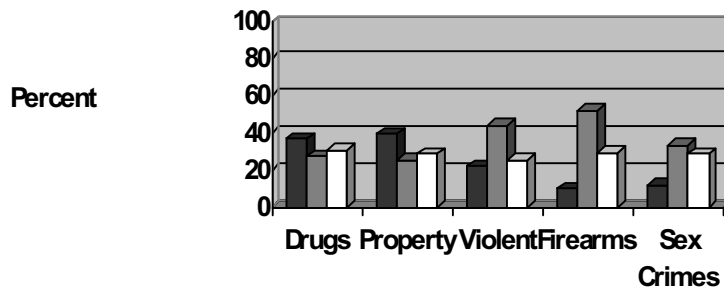
The School Resource Officers (SROs) were also asked the same questions as those presented in the preceding section; however they were instructed to respond

based on their perceptions of youthful offending and offenders within the context of the school and school grounds and **not** the community as a whole. This enabled the collection of **school specific** data which would provide short term trends concerning the perceptions of school violence and the nature of youthful offenders who commit criminal activity within the schools.

Fewer SROs perceived an increase in school-related crime over the last five years, however this increase was not as intense as the perceived increase in youth crime in the community. A lower percentage of SROs reported a perceived increase when contrasted with those respondents who were queried about crime in the community. Less than half of the SROs noted this increase (43.5%). A slightly greater number of SROs perceived crime in their respective schools as remaining the same or declining (47.6%).

Figure 1 reflects this overall trend in which the majority of the SROs either reported a decline in criminal activity within the schools or noted that crime has not changed within the past five years. Based on the survey data the perceptions of youth related crime vary substantially with the perceptions of increasing youth crime being greater in the community and to a lesser extent in the schools. As the figure reveals, more SROs perceived drug and property crimes as having increased over the past five years. The majority of the respondents perceived violent crime, firearm offenses, and sex crimes as remaining the same during this period.

Figure 1 SROs Perceptions of School Related Offenses within the Past Five Years



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While the SROs perceptions of youth violence in the schools differed from those of criminal justice personnel who work in the community, their perceptions of the typical youthful offender who commits school-related crime paralleled their community counterparts. Perceptions of youth who commit school violence today versus five years ago indicate a similar offender profile. The majority of the SROs noted that youth who commit school-related crime are becoming younger, more violent, more likely to use drugs and carry a weapon, and more likely to commit crime in groups versus the typical school-related offender of five years past.

Incidents of satanic rituals and hate-related groups were reported to be present within the schools. Eighteen percent of the SROs reported confirmed cases of satanism and 20.6 percent reported the presence of skinheads or other hate groups within their schools.

Youth Gangs in the Schools

The following sections delineate the perceptions of the School Resource Officers (SROs) as related to the issue of gangs in the schools. Their viewpoints on how today's gangs are similar to, and different from, those of the past will be presented; as well as the specific attributes of school gangs and their members.

The Evolution of Youth Gangs in the Schools

One-third of the SROs reported that gangs have been present in their schools from two to four years with 28.9 percent noting that gang members have been in the classroom for five years or more. Nine percent reported that gangs were a new phenomenon as having existed in the classrooms for one year or less.

The origin of these school-related gangs closely resembles the evolutionary pattern as found in the general community with 55.1 percent of the SROs noting that the gangs in their respective schools were a combination of local, home grown gangs and gang members who immigrated from other schools or communities. Slightly more than one-third (36.7%) noted that all the gangs in their schools were formed by, and consist of, local youth.

A comparative analysis of today's school related gangs with those of the past reveals a strikingly different profile when compared with the changing nature of gangs in the community. A greater percentage of SROs, as compared to those respondents who were asked to describe gangs in the community, noted that today's school-related gangs are becoming more violent (40.1 % versus 27.3%). Gang members in the schools also appear to have become more involved with drug sales as half of the SROs agreed that this crime has increased over time. Gang members in the schools are also more likely to be involved with firearms as 70.1 percent of the SROs believed this to be more problematic today.

The School Resource Officers reported more organizational cohesiveness and a strengthening of the gangs' organizational structure as contrasted with the school gangs when they were first identified. Nearly half (47.9%) agreed that the gangs have become more organized in the schools.

More female members are forming, or joining, gangs in the schools with 43.5 percent of the SROs reporting this fact. The aging of the school gang members has not changed over time with nearly 50 percent responding that they have not witnessed any significant changes in the members' ages. Likewise, today's school gangs are no more likely to have ties with prison gangs or other adult criminal enterprises. Today's school gangs and their members were alleged to have become more involved in vandalism with 59 percent of the SROs noting an increase in this behavior.

Based on the survey responses of the SROs it appears that school-related gangs and their gang members have evolved in a more drastic manner over time when compared to the evolution of those gangs who conduct their activities in the community. School gangs are becoming more violent, engaging in more drug selling activities, more vandalism and are more likely to possess firearms than their predecessors. Their organizational structure appears to have changed also with many gangs being reported as possessing a greater degree of solidarity and having a far greater degree of internal cohesiveness than prior school-related gangs.

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Attributes of Youth Gangs in North Carolina's Schools: Age

The average gang member within the schools was 16 years old with the average youngest age being 13 and the average oldest age being 19 years. Of the 1,183 gang members which were identified by the SROs 783, or 66.1 percent, were 13 years old or younger.

Attributes of Youth Gangs in North Carolina's Schools: Race/Ethnicity

The racial and ethnic composition of the gang members in the schools varied from those gangs found within the community with a larger percentage of African-American gang members being reported as existing within the state's public schools (52.4 % versus 33.1%). School gangs were found to be more homogenous with only 18.9 percent of the reported gangs being identified as possessing members of more than one racial or ethnic group. White youth gangs constituted 18.9 percent of the sample with Asian and Latino gangs representing 3.5 percent each (Refer to Figure 2).

Attributes of Youth Gangs in North Carolina's Schools: Gender

The number of females who were reported to belong to school based gangs ranged from one to 15 with the average number of females per gang being three (2.8).

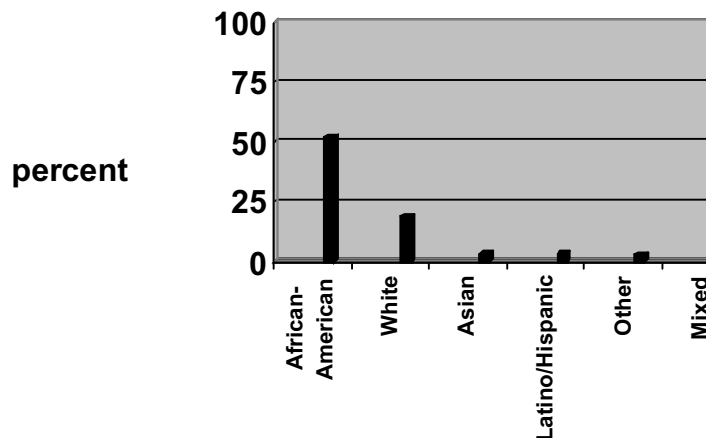
Of the 1,183 youth who were identified as gang members within the schools, 216 were females (18.3%) who were affiliated with 44 different gangs.

Attributes of Youth Gangs in North Carolina's Schools: Criminal Activities

Figures 3 and 4 depict the percentage of SROs who responded that documented cases, for the specific crimes listed, had occurred in their schools or were aware that the schools' gang members engaged in these criminal activities. Fewer school gang members were reported as being violent, as compared to the community based gangs, but more than half of the SROs (54.4%) did report violent activities. Slightly more SROs reported that school gang members were engaging in drug possession (65.7%) versus those respondents who were queried about gangs in the community (62.1%). Drug trafficking and extortion were less common among the school gang members, however 21.6 percent of the SROs had knowledge of this activity among their gang members.

Graffiti (48%) and weapons possession (47%) were reported as being common practices of the school gang members with almost half of the SROs seeing these activities. Property crimes were also frequent with 55 percent of the SROs acknowledging these types of crimes. Motor vehicle theft and weapons trafficking were rarely observed among the school gang members.

Figure 2 Racial/Ethnic Composition of Gangs in the Schools



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Figure 3 Percent of School Gangs Engaging in Violent and Weapon Related Crimes

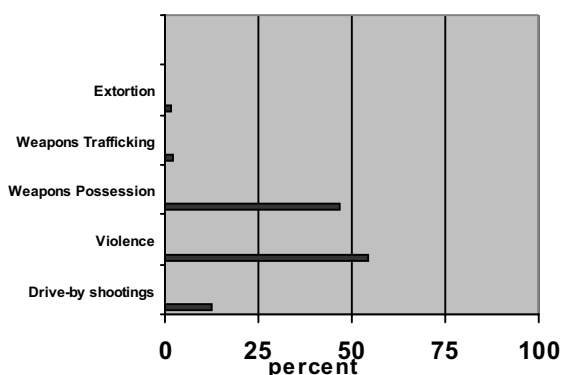
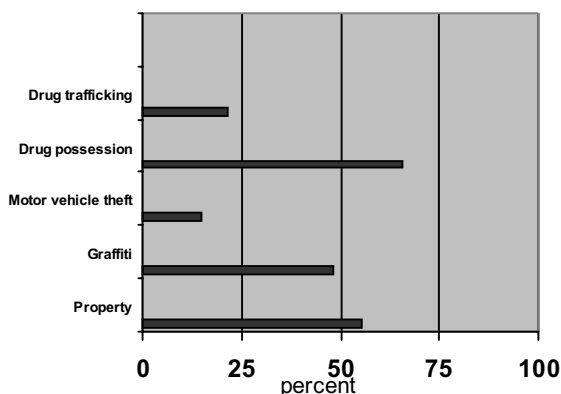


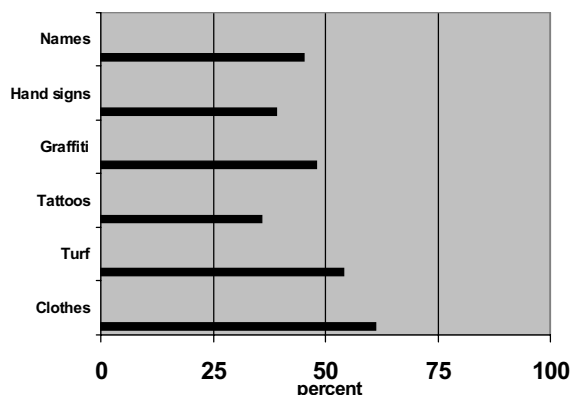
Figure 4 Percent of School Gangs Engaging in Property and Drug Related Crimes



Attributes of Youth Gangs in North Carolina's Schools: Identifying Features

As Figure 5 demonstrates, relatively no noticeable differences existed between the gangs and gang members in the schools and those in the community on their identifying features. Slightly more SROs reported a higher prevalence of the use of hand signs and distinctive names or nicknames.

Figure 5 Percent of School Gangs with Specific Identifying Features



Recommendations

- Target at-risk children. Efforts should be made to identify those children who possess some, or all, of the warning signs for future gang involvement. Programs should be developed specifically for these children which include a gang resistance, or gang awareness type, component.
- Involve those individuals who are directly affected by the gangs. Community residents, who are terrorized by gangs, parents, former and current gang members should be involved in gang education, prevention and intervention programs and projects.

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- Follow the best practice recommendations as outlined by the National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Research and Development Program.



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