

SYSTEMS STATS

North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center

Governor's Crime Commission

Gangs in North Carolina: A Summary of the Law Enforcement Survey

Introduction and Study Rationale

The Criminal Justice Analysis Center of the North Carolina Governor's Crime Commission has investigated and researched the issue of gangs and gang activity in the state since 1998. In that time the Commission has produced numerous reports and provided federal and state funds to local agencies to prevent, intervene and suppress local gangs and their criminal activities. In 2007, the General Assembly requested a comprehensive statewide gang assessment and directed the Commission to study the following policy issues and report its findings and salient recommendations back to the legislature by March 15, 2008.

Specifically, the Commission was asked to:

1. Assess gang activity in communities known to have gangs, including any connections between gang activity and organized crime.
2. Consult with the Department of Correction to assess gang activity in the state's prisons.
3. Consult with the Departments of Public Instruction, Justice and Correction on any gang prevention initiatives they have in place or have administered in the past.
4. Summarize significant gang prevention, intervention and suppression programs that have been administered by local law enforcement, state agencies, local governments and community-based organizations and evaluate those programs for effectiveness.
5. Review accepted best practices in gang prevention and evaluate whether or not increasing penalties will mitigate gang activity.
6. Project the growth of gang activity over the next five years and identify the locations where that growth is expected to occur.
7. Provide recommendations on ways to use state and local resources to improve the effectiveness of future gang prevention initiatives.

Methodology

Numerous strategies or methodologies were used to sufficiently address all of the study directives. First, the Commission's prior gang survey instruments were updated to include general information on the nature and extent of gang activity as well as questions regarding the types of gang programs within the respondent's jurisdiction. More specific questions were asked to capture data on each active gang including known affiliation or relationship with other gangs and organized criminal groups, the number of active members and the demographic composition of the gang, leadership, types of criminal activity and other identifying attributes.

Surveys were mailed to all local law enforcement agencies in North Carolina including 100 sheriffs' offices and 400 police departments. The goal was to obtain at least one response from each of the state's 100 counties in order to portray a true statewide assessment of gangs and their related activities across the state. Data from the National Drug Intelligence Center were also analyzed and incorporated in an effort to supplement survey results and provide a more valid and complete snapshot of gangs across the state.

Results

A total of 161 surveys were completed and returned by staff from local police departments and sheriffs' offices for a response rate of 32 percent. These 161 agencies are located in 75 of the state's 100 counties.

Public outcry is often fueled by a lack of understanding of the problem. Media, government officials and law enforcement must offer an accurate picture of the scope of the gang problem.

Definitions of a Gang

The first problem is defining what a gang is and who counts as a gang member. The National Youth Gang Center survey asks law enforcement personnel to identify youth gangs as "a group of youths or young adults in your jurisdiction that you or other responsible persons in your agency or community are willing to identify as a gang" (NYGC, 2007). Such a definition lacks objective criteria and subjects itself severely to personal opinion and an overestimation of numbers. Law enforcement personnel may, or may not, include groups such as prison and motorcycle gangs, hate groups, and any number of unsupervised teen groups.

Even with a variety of legitimate gang types, most communities with gang problems intend to focus on youth street gangs, whether they define them as such or not. North Carolina researchers Frabutt and Buford (2006) conclude that a gang "is a group or association of three or more persons who may have a name and who individually or collectively engage in, or have engaged in, criminal activity which creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation."

In spite of any disagreement amongst researchers, there must at least be agreement within communities so agencies can work together to properly target gang members. Ideally, a common definition should be agreed upon statewide for better longitudinal program comparisons, as well as cross-implementation of effective programs.

A clear definition also allows for more consistent data collection. Problems with definitions and data have caused past programs to either over or

under-report results, thus further obscuring the effectiveness of the program as well.

For the purposes of this study, the definition of "gang" includes not only the criminal street gangs most commonly identified in media, but also motorcycle gangs, white supremacists and other hate groups.

The Rise in Gangs, Gang Membership and Gang-Related Crimes

Has there been an increase in gangs, membership and gang crime? There is no short answer to this question; likewise there is little empirical evidence to indicate a rise in any of the three. To the contrary, some national studies indicate that the numbers of gang members is declining. In North Carolina, the largest increases can be shown in Hispanic/Latino gang membership; however, this is slightly down over the past three years. Some of the contributing factors that drive the impression that gangs are increasing include:

1. Too many years of denial. A decade ago, when the first Governor's Crime Commission gang study was conducted, it was apparent that most jurisdictions denied there was any type of *gang problem* in their communities; however they did acknowledge a *gang presence*. We suggested at that time to "deny the denial" and acknowledge the presence of gangs in our state's communities.
2. Increases in acceptance of gangs as a problem. More recently communities have acknowledged that gang activities are problems in some areas. Law enforcement agencies formed "gang units" and trained officers to recognize gang-related activities. With these newly trained officers came an awareness of the extent of the problem so long ignored. This does not constitute a growth, but rather a recognition of what already existed.
3. Heightened awareness has increased the public's sensitivity to gang-related activities. Through the North Carolina Gang Investigator's Association a new network of well trained officers was formed to aid neighboring communities and help them recognize the presence of gangs in their

communities. Members of this organization also provide community awareness presentations and provide news media with information on gang activities.

4. Governor's Crime Commission (GCC) studies and other studies of gangs in North Carolina have increasingly been afforded better responses from law enforcement on gang activities as their knowledge and willingness to acknowledge gangs in their communities has grown. This increased willingness to share information provides new figures on the levels of gang presence in the state thus adding to the aggregate numbers published.
5. Specialized gang units provide better intelligence. Once thought of as a bunch of kids acting out and not deserving of law enforcement tracking, gangs and gang members are now documented. This allows law enforcement agencies to have a general count of gangs, gang members and their affiliates' activities. As recent as five years ago, many law enforcement agencies (Raleigh and Charlotte included) had little or no data on the gangs and gang members in their jurisdictions. Today, these and many other agencies are actively collecting intelligence data and entering this information into NC GangNet.
6. Media reports the number of gangs but may not explain what the numbers mean. Few dispute that gangs and gang membership are being more accurately counted and followed today; however, without considering baseline information, it is inappropriate to report that gangs are on the rise. In most jurisdictions gang-related crimes account for a very small portion of crimes. While it is true there are tendencies toward violence and drug related crimes, this is far from overwhelming the criminal justice system.
7. Results of the five year follow-up survey released by the GCC in 2005 indicated a dramatic increase in Hispanic gang membership. This occurred along with a rapid rise in the total Hispanic population in the state. The GCC and the National Drug Crime

Intelligence Center both released studies on the Hispanic gang membership within North Carolina within two months of each other. These two studies provided much of the same information. With the rise in this population and the degree of anger that immigration issues generate, it is likely that Hispanic gang activities are magnified to some extent. However, there is a disproportionate level of gang membership among this population.

8. Until consistent records are maintained on what constitutes a gang-related crime, it remains unclear that there has been a rise in such crimes. Some count a crime if it is committed to further the gang as gang-related, while others would also include a crime committed by a gang member even if the crime had nothing to do with furthering the gang and its activities. A report on gang crime by the Justice Policy Institute (Greene and Pranis, 2007) indicates that only a fraction of crimes committed in any jurisdiction would be gang-related and that recognizing this should be a barometer for determining a need for ordinances and laws aimed at gang-related crime. The first step would be a uniform definition of what would constitute a gang-related crime.

The Current Gang Situation in North Carolina and Where Gangs are Located

The number of gangs and gang members reported in the current survey is not a definitive and exact count and should not be misconstrued as representing a precise picture of gangs across the entire state. Data from the recent GCC survey provide a snapshot of gangs and gang members drawn from those agencies who responded to the survey and were able to provide data on the number of gangs and gang members within their respective jurisdictions.

Caution should be exercised when comparing the results of this survey with prior survey data as any increases, or decreases, in the number of gangs and gang members could be attributable to a host of factors. These factors include an increase or decrease in the actual or true number of gangs and gang members as a result of successful prevention,

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intervention and suppression activities. A heightened awareness on the part of law enforcement, stricter reporting or validation criteria for describing an individual as a gang member and differing response rates across numerous surveys and survey periods can also adversely affect comparisons.

As part of the law enforcement survey, respondents were asked how many gangs are currently active in their respective communities. For this particular question the respondents were not provided with any specific definition of what constitutes a gang; i.e. they were free to use local definitions or define gangs in any manner that suited their particular viewpoints or met their agency's definitional criteria.

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Of the 161 responding agencies 128, or 80 percent, reported that one or more gangs were currently active in their jurisdictions. The number of active gangs ranged from one to 219 with an average of 11 different gangs per jurisdiction. Fifty percent of these agencies reported more than four active gangs and 50 percent reported fewer than four gangs. Across the entire sample a total of 1,446 gangs were reported in 64 counties.¹

While 1,446 gangs were identified by respondents, only 550 of these groups met the study criteria for being defined as a gang. The over reporting of 896 groups as gangs provides some concern in the validity of having no uniform definition of "gang."

Additional questions asked respondents to provide detailed information about each active gang in their jurisdiction including demographics, types of criminal activity, the extent of organizational complexity, identifying features as well as the number of gang members. Of the 1,446 identified gangs, detailed information was provided for 766 distinct groups.

To be consistent with the Commission's prior gang research and to enhance study reliability and validity a three pronged gang definition was adopted and derived based upon prior gang research as conducted by Malcolm Klein (1995). Klein's definition includes the following: a gang is 1) a group of three or more individuals with 2) a unique name and other identifying attributes who 3) demonstrate a commitment to crime as evidenced by prior and/or current substantiated criminal activity.

Eliminating gangs that did not meet all three criteria reduced the number to 550 gangs across 62 counties. The number of gangs reported that met this definition ranged from one to 54 with the average county having nine gangs (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of Reported Gangs

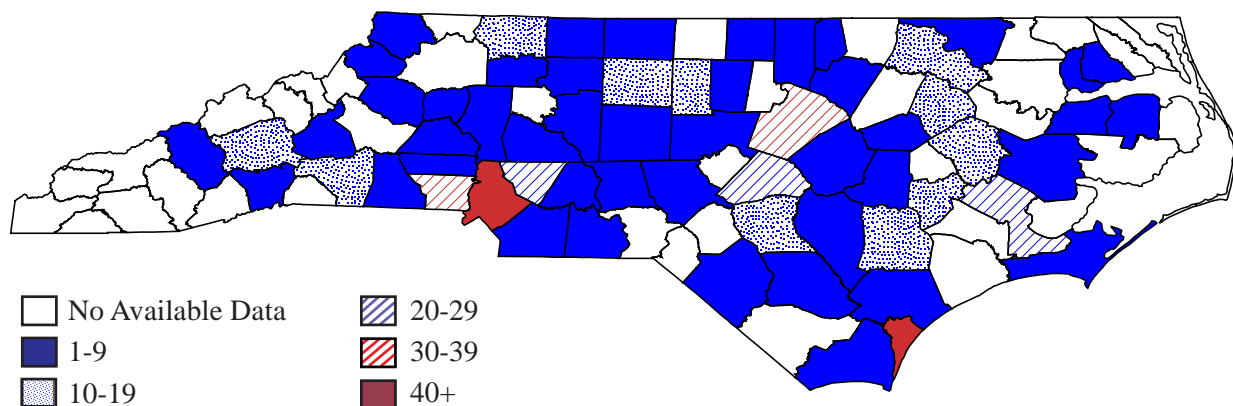
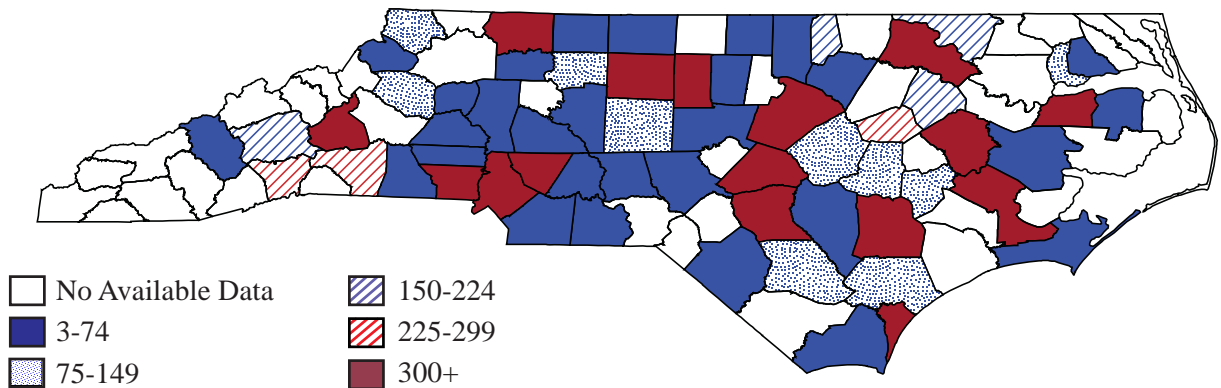


Figure 2: Number of Reported Gang Members



Combined these 550 gangs have a total of 14,500 members with the average gang consisting of 26 members (Figure 2).^{2,3} It should be noted that 62 percent of the data on the number of members in each gang was based on law enforcement estimates while 38 percent of the information was derived from validated intelligence counts. Once GangNet becomes fully operational, more reliable and valid data will be available for assessing the number of gangs and gang members.

Contrasted with the original 1999 GCC survey, which found an average gang size of 16 members, this finding suggests that either gangs are growing in size and/or law enforcement has expanded their definition of what constitutes a gang member to include those individuals that are on the fringe or peripheral boundaries of joining a gang; i.e. “wannabees.”

On February 19, 2008 there were 436 validated gangs in NC GangNet. Of these, 407 were what is currently being classified as a criminal youth gang. The remaining 29 were outlaw motorcycle gangs and white supremacist hate groups. Again, utilizing the strict validation criteria built into the NC GangNet system, it can be more accurately determined that the number of groups that will meet the definition of criminal gang is far less than the aggregate reported in the GCC law enforcement survey. While NC GangNet numbers are less salacious, they are validated against a uniform defined set of criteria.

Conversely, more agencies may be employing validation techniques and consequently are identifying more true members than in years past. Weisel and Shelley (2004) note it could be a matter of greater attention being directed to the issue of gangs with more agencies reporting and counting gangs than in the past.

The following section delineates a detailed profile of these 550 gangs and 14,500 members with an emphasis on identifying patterns of criminal activity, the demographic attributes of gang members, the extent of organizational complexity and their relationship to other gangs and criminal organizations.

Distinguishing Features of North Carolina’s Gangs

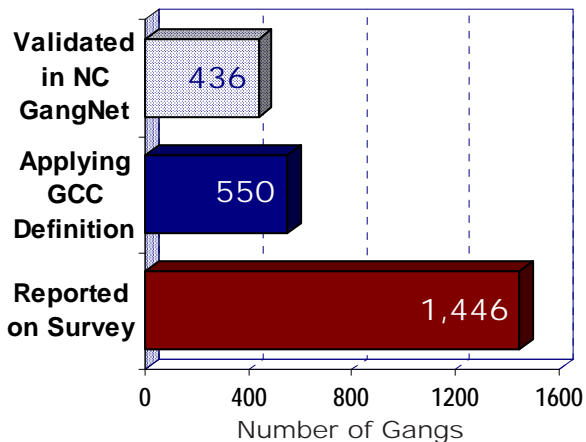
The amount of time that these gangs have been active in the community ranged from less than one month to a high of 20 years with the average gang in North Carolina having been in existence for about three years.

While three-fourths of the gangs reported in the survey did not meet the strict definitional criteria of being a gang, these groups should be monitored and intelligence maintained on their activities in the event they do cross the threshold and become a criminal gang. This again reinforces the need for a uniform definition of what constitutes a gang. NC GangNet provides what is likely the best tool in forcing gang validation when the information is entered into the database.

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Figure 3 below illustrates the differences between what is reported as a gang and what has been validated as a gang.

Figure 3: Current Gangs in North Carolina



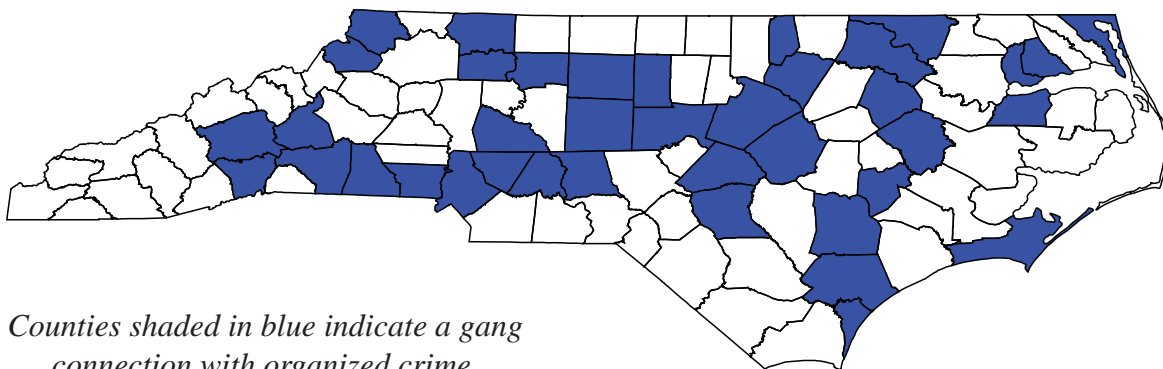
Respondents were asked to provide information concerning the extent to which their respective gangs possessed ties with other out-of-state groups or with larger organized gangs. Nearly 82 percent, or 449 gangs, were reputed to have links with larger groups or with gangs outside of the state. Of those, 134 gangs were purported to have primary ties with other Blood sets and 76 gangs were reported as being connected to other Crip sets. Ties with other Hispanic gangs were also reported with 96 gangs being connected in this manner. Seventy-five gangs had ties with two larger or out

of state gangs while 17 gangs were identified as being connected to three other larger or out of state groups.

Of the 161 respondents 116 were able to provide information regarding the extent to which the gangs in their jurisdictions possessed ties to organized crime groups. Nearly one-half answered that some of their gangs do indeed interact with other organized crime groups. Contrasted with the National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations' 2005 survey, this percentage is substantially higher than the national average of 26 percent. As Figure 4 reveals these connections were reported in 39 counties.

The exact type of organized crime groups and the nature and extent of these connections were not reported. However existing literature and research from this study suggest that the majority of these interactions probably involve other gangs as opposed to traditional Mafia-type organizations. In a prior study conducted by the Criminal Justice Analysis Center on Hispanic gangs, 77 percent of the identified gangs purportedly had connections with other gangs outside of their home jurisdictions (Rhyne and Yearwood, 2005). However, gang connections with Mexican drug traffickers have been exposed as well as connections with Asian and Russian organized crime syndicates across the country and in the south (National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations, 2005).

Figure 4: Reported Gang/Organized Crime Connection



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National research indicates that 26 percent of criminal gangs are found to have ties to larger crime syndicates such as the Crips or Bloods in California, Latin Kings in New York, Gangster Disciples in Chicago or national affiliation with MS13 or the Hell's Angels. This research indicated that North Carolina law enforcement assume that 48 percent of gangs have affiliations with other organized groups. This divergence from the national data concerns the GCC researchers. However, given the link analysis capabilities of GangNet, the GCC believes that future estimates of gang ties and affiliations will be more precise.

How do Gangs Disseminate Their Message?

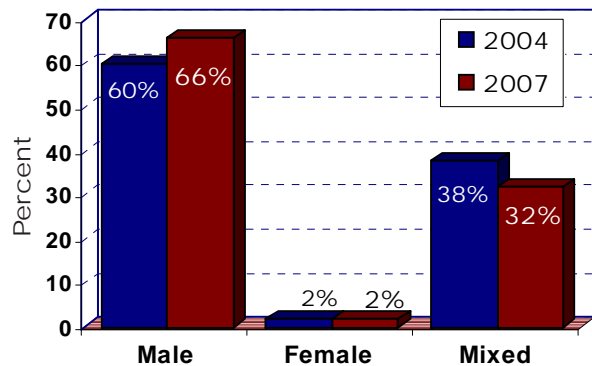
Thirty-two percent, or 164 gangs, maintain a web based presence either through such providers as Yahoo, AOL or MySpace, or have their own Internet websites.

Demographic Features of Gangs in North Carolina

Gangs continue to be highly skewed along gender lines with 361 of the 550 gangs having an all male membership. Eleven all female gangs were reported with the remaining gangs having both male and female members. The percentage of mixed gangs dropped slightly from the 2004 survey findings.

In North Carolina, gang members are mostly male, disproportionately minority, with members generally between 13 to 20 years of age.

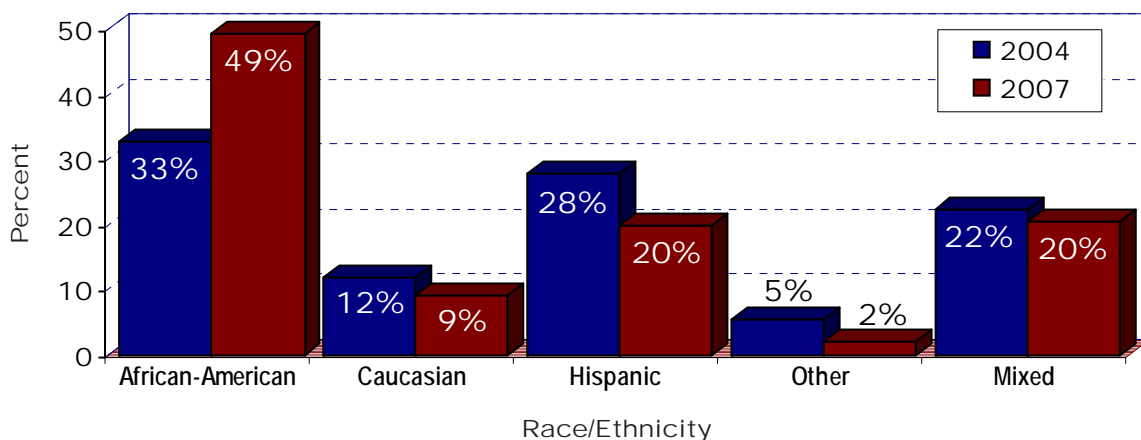
Figure 5: Gang Membership by Gender



The percentage of African-American gangs experienced the greatest increase rising from 33 percent of the total in 2004, to 49 percent of the current sample. However, there was a drop in the percentage of Hispanic gangs from 28 percent to 20 percent. Mixed racial/ethnic gangs dropped slightly from 22 percent to 20 percent. Slight declines also occurred for the Caucasian, Asian and Native American gangs.

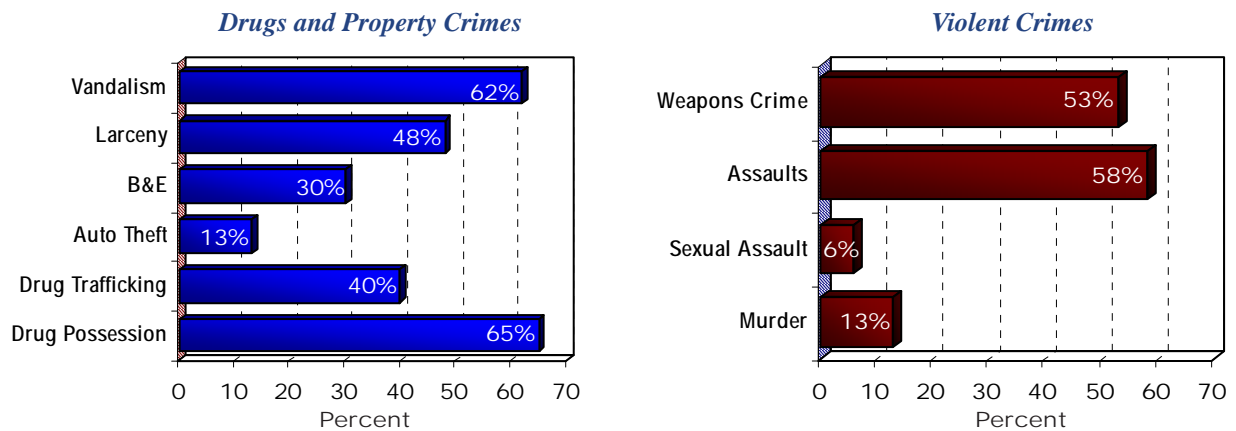
Gang members ranged from six to 70 years old; the average age of the youngest member was 15 and the average age of the oldest member was 27. The most frequently reported age of the youngest member was 15 and the most frequently reported age of the oldest member was 25. Of the 520 gangs for which age data were available 30 gangs, or about 6 percent, were exclusively youth gangs.

Figure 6: Gang Composition by Race and Ethnicity



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Figure 7: 2007 Criminal Activity

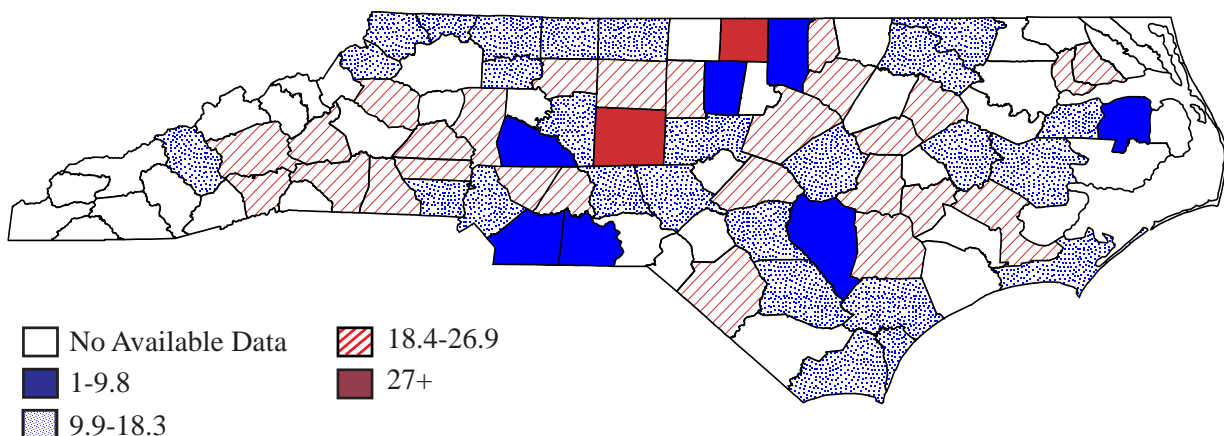


While the organizational structure of the reported gangs varied, 73 percent were described as having an organized leadership hierarchy compared to only 48 percent of those gangs reported in 2004. Figure 7 documents the type of criminal activities that were associated with the 550 reported gangs. The most commonly reported crime was drug possession (65 percent) followed by vandalism (62 percent), assaults (58 percent) and weapons related offenses (53 percent). Only a few gangs were involved with sexual assault and motor vehicle theft. Similarly, there were only a few incidences of financial crime, trespassing, intimidation, arson, armed robbery and kidnapping.

North Carolina gangs have some level of organizational hierarchy, but are generally less structured than some of the traditional gangs as in California or Chicago. Some gang experts feel that this lack of strong formal organization lends itself to infighting and violent crimes by members wishing to prove themselves to gain status.

It is important to note that criminal activities vary by gang member and gangs as a whole. Not all gang members offend at equal rates, indeed many gang members never commit criminal acts. Likewise, some gangs can be held accountable for a large proportion of crime while similar gangs, in other locations, will only be accountable for a

Figure 8: Severity of Gang Crimes



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smaller proportion of the total crime. The typical gang is loosely organized with membership constantly in flux and engages in cafeteria style crime – a little bit of drug using and selling, some vandalism, a smattering of larceny with an occasional assault or two on the side (Papachristos, 2005).

A severity of crime index was created to compare the seriousness of the gangs’ criminal activities across those counties that reported a gang presence. Each of the ten crimes listed below was assigned a numerical ranking, based on its severity (Refer to Table 1). A cumulative score was calculated for each gang with these scores being aggregated and averaged by county.

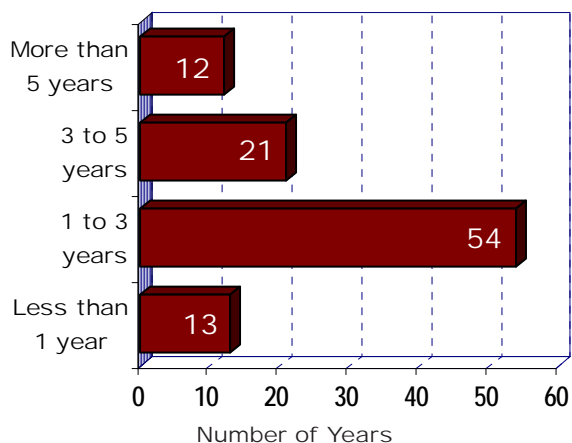
For example: a gang that was reported to have been involved with murder and drug trafficking scored 16. Meanwhile, a second gang in the county was only associated with breaking and entering—thus scoring four. Therefore, the average gang severity score for this county would be 10. The higher the average score, the more severe the gang criminality is in that particular county. It should be noted that this only measures crime severity and not crime prevalence or the frequency at which gangs commit crime.

The average gang crime severity score ranged from one to 27 with an average of 18.3. Thirty-three counties, or 53 percent, had severity scores at or below the group average while the remaining 29 counties (47 percent) had an average severity score greater than the sample average of 18.3 (Figure 8).

**Table 1: Severity of Crime Score Rankings
2007 Data**

Criminal Offense	Assigned Score or Ranking
Murder	10
Sexual Assault	9
Assault	8
Weapon Offenses	7
Drug Trafficking	6
Drug Possession & Sales	5
Breaking and Entering	4
Auto Theft	3
Larceny	2
Vandalism	1

Figure 9: Length of Time Acknowledging a Gang

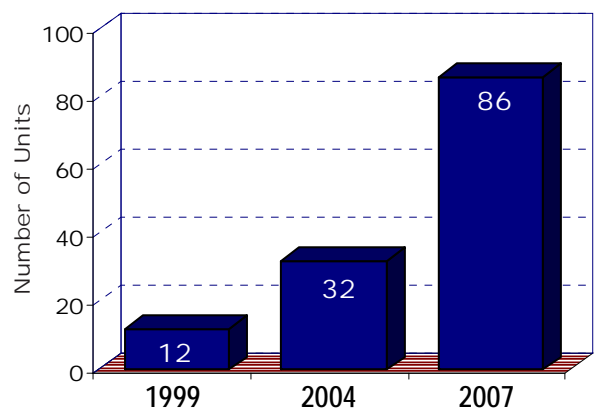


Law Enforcement Response to the Gang Situation in North Carolina

Eighty-seven percent of the respondents acknowledged a gang presence within their respective jurisdictions. Compared to the prior studies conducted by the Criminal Justice Analysis Center, the percentage of agencies officially acknowledging a gang presence has doubled since the original 1999 study in which only 43 percent acknowledged a gang presence. Slightly more than one-half of the agencies acknowledged that gangs had been present for one to three years while only 12 percent reported gangs as a long standing issue (Refer to Figure 9).

Fifty-eight (38 percent) respondents noted that their agencies currently have operational gang units with the number of assigned officers ranging from one to 14 with the typical gang unit possessing three officers. More than three-quarters (79 percent) of the respondents reported that these officers have received specialized training for identifying gangs and for intervening in their criminal activities. The data indicates that the number of law enforcement agencies with established gang units has risen since 2004, when only 15 percent of the responding agencies had such units. Findings from the original 1999 study reveal that less than 10 percent of the responding agencies had gang units nine years ago.

Figure 10: Number of Reported Law Enforcement Gang Units, 1999-1997



The number of reported specialized gang units within North Carolina's police departments and sheriff's offices has increased dramatically over the past decade, from 12 in 1999 to 86 in the 2007 survey. With this rise is an accompanying rise in the number of gangs and gang members where intelligence information is being documented. As these units populate the GangNet database with validated intelligence, future assessments of gang membership and activities within the state will be more accurate.

Seventy-six agencies (52 percent) actively track and monitor gang activities with a slightly higher percentage (66 percent) reporting that they compile additional intelligence data on individual gang members. By September 2007, only 52 (37 percent) of the responding agencies were currently using GangNet while an additional 73 (78 percent) indicated plans to join the network in the future.

While law enforcement agencies kept their own files on gang members and gang activities in their communities, there are now two free databases available to criminal justice agencies for tracking and sharing information statewide. North Carolina GangNet is proprietary software purchased for law enforcement agencies by the Governor's Crime Commission and RISS Gang is provided by a nationwide law enforcement information sharing agency, the Regional Information Sharing System.

Footnotes

¹ The Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office reported 100 active gangs; however, given the fact that this agency does not provide law enforcement or patrol coverage it is plausible that these gangs were also included in the number reported by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department. Thus in order to avoid duplication these gangs should be removed leaving a statewide total of 1,346. Similarly, the Gastonia Police Department reported 25 gangs with the Gaston County Sheriff's Office reporting 30. Removing 25 to avoid possible duplication leaves a remaining total of 1,321.

² Twenty-five cases existed in which a sheriff's office reported a gang with the same name as reported by the

city police department. Is this one gang or two separate gangs? For the purpose of this analysis these were managed as two different gangs with one operating in the city and one operating outside of the city limits.

³ As with the number of reported gangs several outliers, or extremely high or low values, can dramatically inflate or deflate the calculated average. The median and mode are more useful measures or better indicators in such cases. The median number of members in a gang was 14 with the most frequently reported number of members (mode) being 10 per gang.

For a copy of the full report, *A Comprehensive Assessment of Gangs in North Carolina*, visit www.ncgccd.org/pubs/gangs2008.pdf

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The Governor's Crime Commission was established in 1977 by the North Carolina General Assembly under G.S. 143B-479. Its primary duty is "to be the chief advisory body to the Governor and the Secretary of the Department of Crime Control and Public Safety for the development and implementation of criminal justice policy." The Crime Commission is always open to comments and suggestions from the general public as well as criminal justice officials. Please contact us and let us know your thoughts and feelings on the information contained in this publication or on any other criminal justice issue of concern to you.

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