



## **GANG MEMBERS IN SMALL-TOWN AND RURAL COMMUNITIES<sup>1</sup>**

In 2001 Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) was championed by the federal government to reduce the possession of illegal firearms by ex-convicts and built largely on the then-perceived successes of New York City's Compstat, Boston's Operation Ceasefire, and Virginia's Project Exile (Rosenfeld, Fornango, & Baumer, 2005).<sup>2</sup> In 2007, recognizing the interconnectedness of guns and street gangs (DeMichele & Matz, 2012), PSN expanded its ambitions towards reducing youthful gang violence.<sup>3</sup> Given the high prevalence of work conducted in urban jurisdictions over the past two decades, where gangs are most prevalent, interest developed in re-examining the prevalence of street gangs in rural, as well as tribal (see Mowatt & Matz, in press), communities. This article briefly outlines what is known about gangs and gang members in rural communities and small towns as derived from the empirical literature.

Historically, youth street gangs have been an urban phenomenon. In the last decade there has been growing concern that gangs may have increased their presence in rural communities and small towns. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC) (2009, 2011) reports gang members may migrate from urban areas to rural and small towns for a variety of reasons including expansion of lucrative drug markets, member recruitment and avoidance of the law. The National Gang Center's (NGC) National Youth Gang Survey indicates, however, the prevalence of gangs in rural communities and small towns has been decreasing (Howell & Egley, 2005). NGC explains gang members are unlikely to migrate to small towns or rural areas, but if so, it is most often for social reasons and not in the interest of the gang or its expansion. Rather, the availability of new jobs may be one of the leading factors in creating an environment in rural and small-town areas that is conducive to gang proliferation (Weisheit, Falcone, & Wells, 1999; Weisheit, & Wells, 2004; Wells & Weisheit, 2001). Further, gangs in small towns and rural communities tend to be unstable and less cohesive, sporadically forming and then dissipating, compared to those in urban communities (Howell & Egley, 2005). Finally, research conducted in Texas found law enforcement and college students reported the presence of isolated gang activity in small-town and rural areas, and such gangs were often youthful and regularly engaged in violence (Green, 2003, 2005).

## **A LOOK BACK AT A HISTORICAL CASE STUDY: GANGS IN DEKALB COUNTY IN THE 90'S**

Despite confusion as to the presence or prevalence of gangs in small towns and rural communities, a historical case study by Coghlan (1998) in DeKalb County, Illinois illustrates gang violence can happen almost anywhere. In this case study Coghlan, a DeKalb County State Attorney at the time, outlines a rural response to gang violence that is very similar in nature to those done in urban jurisdictions under PSN, Ceasefire or related programs (see Braga, Kennedy, Waring, & Piehl, 2001; Papachristos, Meares, & Fagan, 2007). The gang issue presented itself in various forms suddenly to the DeKalb County citizens but most notably through the murder of Brent Cooper, 17 years old, in front of the county courthouse in 1991. Through the early and mid-90s there were four drive-by shootings across the county and two gang-retaliation murders.

DeKalb County represented a population of about 80,000 in the mid-1990's. It averaged roughly 2,000 crimes per year with only about 400 for felonies and the remaining 1,600 for misdemeanors and juvenile delinquency cases. Less than three percent of all criminal cases were deemed to be gang-related in a given year, meaning they may or may not have been *gang-motivated* crimes perpetuated by active/former gang members. By using a more stringent

definition more akin to a Chicago or Los Angeles definition, Coghlan (1998) estimated there were roughly three gang crimes per year. At the time, about 400 gang members had been documented as living in the DeKalb area. About 325 were considered inactive and 75 actively associated with a major street gang (for an overview of prominent street gangs see Parry, 2007). Coghlan contends many of these gang-affiliated individuals had fled Chicago to get away from the gang lifestyle and were trying to make an honest living.

However, the increase in violence mobilized the community to mount a coordinated interagency response to the developing gang crisis (Coghlan, 1998). Police and prosecutors sought out specialized gang trainings, with five police officers receiving gang specialist certifications. Schools responded similarly by seeking training on how to identify gang symbols and behaviors, and instituting anti-gang policies. Youth council volunteer groups and committees were formed comprised of citizens with an interest in preventing or intervening in street gang violence. In addition, a community volunteer organization known as the DeKalb County Partnership for a Substance Abuse Free Environment (DCP/SAFE), recognizing the interconnectedness of gangs and drugs (see Huebner, Varano, & Bynum, 2007), supported the committees and provided structure to the anti-gang response. DCP/SAFE worked with the community

and various social service providers to sponsor pro-social youth activities, assist with housing and provide anti-gang training and materials to residents. The removal of graffiti was a focus and local businesses were documented as even donating supplies and labor as needed. Former gang members were consulted by police for advice, akin to the violence interrupters or street walkers used today (see Kerr, 2009; Ritter, 2009), and supported the communities' anti-gang efforts through public speeches in schools. Faith-based organizations and churches were also involved in providing speakers and educational materials in an attempt to prevent youth from adopting the gang lifestyle. Finally, the media allegedly worked with local residents to stay apprised of the latest developments and to keep the community up-to-date on gang incidents (for a modern example of a police-media outreach campaign see O'Shea, 2007). In sum, well over 40 community organizations and businesses had contributed to the anti-gang initiative in DeKalb County.

However, no outcome data or evaluations studies could be located on the interagency partnership, nor any studies of a similar nature in other rural or small-town jurisdictions. Historically, the criminological literature has focused on high-crime urban areas, while rural areas tend to be neglected; this is especially true of rural gang research (Wells & Weisheit, 2001; Wilson, 2008).

## **URBAN AND RURAL/SMALL-TOWN COMPARISONS**

Like urban gang members, gang-affiliated individuals in rural and small town areas at the micro-level may use specific clothing, hand signs, colors and graffiti to announce their presence. Clothing can be used discretely in a variety of ways to communicate gang affiliation and may include wearing specific brands or modifying the clothes in a specific way. Commonly the combination of specific colors, names, initials, logos and/or numbers may be used. Also, alterations to clothing such as initials written on the inside of a hat may be a sign of gang affiliation. Finally, shirts with *por vida* ("for life") or RIP ("rest in peace") may be worn to recognize fallen gang members (Arciaga, Sakamoto, & Jones, 2010). Finally, increased spikes in local violence and the presence of graffiti may also serve as signs of gang issues. These characteristics may be accompanied by other macro-level problems such as an influx or migration of individuals into the area seeking employment opportunities (Wells & Weisheit, 2001).

Nevertheless, gangs in rural areas have been found to differ from their urban counterparts in several fundamental ways. For example, they are often less stable due to the smaller populations. An arrest of a prominent gang member has the potential to cause greater disruption in rural area gangs than in urban areas. In addition, street gangs may form

briefly and then dissipate without formal responses. On the other hand, formal responses may have the unintended consequence of escalating the gang problem and fostering gang cohesion by reinforcing a gang identity (e.g., excessive media attention). Urban youth gang members tend to be most active in the ages between 14-24, predominantly male and African American or Hispanic (i.e., northeast vs. southwest) (Howell, 1999; Howell & Moore, 2010). That is not to deny or otherwise neglect the issue, presence, or impact of other gangs (e.g., Asian, female) (e.g., Chin, Fagan, & Kelly, 1992; Curry, 1998). Rural youth gang members, on the other hand, tend to be slightly older (ages 18-24), male and white and possess weaker bonds to academia (Wilson, 2008). Urban youth are likely to possess more anti-social gang-affiliated peers but in both cases females comprise about one-third of the gang's membership and crime is mostly intra-racial (Curry, 1998; Dukes & Stein, 2003; Evans, Fitzgerald, Weigel, & Chvilicek, 1999).

## **CONCLUSION**

At the time of Wilson's (2008) systematic review on gangs in rural areas, only nine relevant empirical articles were available. Clearly, the issue and prevalence of rural youth street gangs has not been adequately studied. Nor have approaches to dealing with gangs in rural areas or small towns been sufficiently documented. However, while

there are some distinct differences there are many similarities as well. Agencies within rural areas should take care to ensure that there is a real gang threat in their jurisdictions before engaging in any large-scale interventions (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 2010). As Coghlan (1998) has demonstrated, multi-agency collaborations that bring together justice agencies, community- and faith-based organizations and private businesses can be mobilized in rural areas in a manner similar to that done through urban interventions such as Ceasefire and PSN (Braga et al., 2001; Papachristos et al., 2007), which have demonstrated some successes in reducing gang violence.<sup>4</sup> Jurisdictions seeking guidance should consult the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model (Howell & Egley, 2005; OJJDP, 2010), the Bureau of Justice Assistance's (BJA) SARA (Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment) Model (BJA 1997, 1998), and the American Probation and Parole Association's (APPA) C.A.R.E. (Collaboration, Analysis, Reentry, Evaluation) framework (DeMichele & Matz, 2010, 2012; Matz, DeMichele, & Lowe, 2012; Matz, Lowe, & DeMichele, 2011) for further guidance. ▷▷▲

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> 1000-1500 word submissions (otherwise follow Perspectives' submission guidelines) for consideration in the PSN Update are welcome and encouraged. To be considered papers must be relevant to community corrections (probation/parole) and concern interagency collaboration (e.g., police-probation/parole partnerships), Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), gangs, and/or gun violence. Please direct PSN Update manuscripts to [amatz@csg.org](mailto:amatz@csg.org).

<sup>3</sup> Boston's Ceasefire is the only program that remains promising, with the others essentially deemed to have limited or no substantive impact on homicide (Rosenfeld et al., 2005).

<sup>4</sup> A brief discussion of definitional issues is warranted. Academically, the European definition summarized by Klein (2005) is the most widely accepted for research purposes, "...any durable, street-oriented youth group whose own identity includes involvement in illegal activity" (p. 136). The federal government's legal definition shares similar qualities, albeit with more nuanced parameters. Local definitions vary. Differences in definitions can lead to discrepancies in how gang offenses are calculated and distinctions between gang-motivated crimes and crimes committed by individual gang members may become indistinguishable. In small towns and rural jurisdictions where gang activity is not well documented, definitions may be especially ambiguous.

<sup>5</sup> For an example of how an interagency collaboration aimed at street gangs may have the unintended effect of increasing gang cohesion see Pittsburgh's One Vision One Life (Wilson & Chermak, 2011).

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**ADAM K. MATZ**, M.S. and **MARY ANN MOWATT**, M.S. are Research Associates with the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA), Council of State Governments (CSG).