



OJJDP FACT SHEET

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Highlights of the 2004 National Youth Gang Survey

by Arlen Egley, Jr., and Christina E. Ritz

Annually since 1995, the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) has conducted the National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) of law enforcement agencies across the United States regarding the presence and characteristics of local gang problems. This Fact Sheet summarizes NYGS findings from the 2004 survey. The nationally representative sample included the following agencies:

- ◆ All police departments that serve cities with a population of 50,000 or more ($n=625$) (larger cities).
- ◆ All suburban county police and sheriff's departments ($n=741$) (suburban counties).
- ◆ A randomly selected sample of police departments that serve cities with a population between 2,500 and 49,999 ($n=696$) (smaller cities).
- ◆ A randomly selected sample of rural county police and sheriff's departments ($n=492$) (rural counties).

NYGC asked survey recipients to report information solely for youth gangs, defined 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'." Motorcycle gangs, hate or ideology groups, prison gangs, and exclusively adult gangs were excluded from the survey.

Survey Findings

Of the 2,554 survey recipients, 2,296 (90 percent) responded to the 2004 survey. NYGC estimates that 29 percent of the jurisdictions that city (population of 2,500 or more) and county law enforcement agencies serve experienced youth gang problems in 2004. Within area type, 82 percent of the agencies that serve larger cities, 42 percent of the agencies that serve suburban counties, 27 percent of the agencies that serve smaller cities, and 14 percent of the agencies that serve rural counties reported youth gang problems.

Law Enforcement Agency Reports of Gang Problems, 1996–2004

Area Type	Average Percentage of Respondents Reporting Gang Problems		
	1996–1998	1999–2001	2002–2004
Rural counties	24.3	13.5	12.3
Smaller cities (population 2,500 to 49,999)	36.5	25.9	28.4
Suburban counties	56.0	40.8	40.0
Larger cities (population 50,000 or more)	85.6	77.6	79.8

Note: To account for regular year-to-year fluctuations, 3-year averages are shown.

The table shows the 3-year average percentage of law enforcement agencies, by agency type, that reported youth gang problems from 1996 to 2004. The average percentage of agencies that reported gang problems declined across all area types between the 1996–1998 and 1999–2001 survey periods. Compared with the 1999–2001 survey period, in the 2002–2004 survey period the average percentage of agencies that reported gang problems was slightly higher in smaller and larger cities, slightly lower in rural counties, and virtually unchanged in suburban counties.

Based on survey results, NYGC estimates that approximately 760,000 gang members and 24,000 gangs were active in more than 2,900 jurisdictions that city (population of 2,500 or more) and county law enforcement agencies served in 2004. These estimates, although slightly higher than those in the previous two NYGC surveys, are not statistically large enough to indicate a significant change at the national level. A nearly equal percentage of agencies with gang problems reported an increase (52 percent)



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versus a decrease or no significant change (48 percent) in the number of documented gang members in 2004 compared with the 2002–2003 survey period. Larger cities and suburban counties accounted for approximately 85 percent of the estimated number of gang members in 2004.

The 2004 survey asked about migration of gang members, or the movement of actively involved gang youth from other jurisdictions. Ten percent of responding agencies reported that more than half of the documented gang members in their jurisdiction had migrated from other areas; however, a majority (60 percent) of respondents reported no or few (less than 25 percent of documented gang members) such migrants. Among agencies that experienced a higher percentage of migration, 45 percent reported that social reasons (e.g., members moving with families, pursuit of legitimate employment opportunities) affected local migration patterns “very much.” Drug market opportunities (23 percent), avoidance of law enforcement crackdowns (21 percent), and participation in other illegal ventures (18 percent) were reported as reasons for migration to a lesser degree. Agencies that experienced the highest levels of gang-member migration were significantly more likely to report migration for social reasons.

A total of 173 cities with a population of 100,000 or more reported a gang problem and gang homicide data (i.e., the number of homicides involving a gang member) in 2004. In 2 cities, Los Angeles and Chicago, more than half of the combined nearly 1,000 homicides were considered to be gang related. In the remaining 171 cities, approximately one-fourth of all the homicides were considered to be gang related. In addition, the number of gang homicides recorded in these cities in 2004 was 11 percent higher than the previous 8-year average. More than 80 percent of agencies with gang problems in both smaller cities and rural counties recorded zero gang homicides.

Thirty-six percent of the responding agencies that experienced gang problems in 2004, including 51 percent of larger cities, operated a specialized unit with at least two officers who were primarily assigned to handle matters related to youth gangs. Among gang-problem agencies that did not operate a specialized unit, 31 percent reported that one or more officers were assigned to handle gang problems exclusively.

Fifty-three percent of the responding agencies indicated their youth gang problem was “getting better” or “staying about the same” in 2004 as compared with 2003, and 47 percent said it was “getting worse,” an increase of 5 percentage points over the previous year. Little variation in these numbers was observed across agency types.

For Further Information

For further information about youth gangs, call the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s (OJJDP’s) Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse at 800–851–3420, or contact NYGC at 800–446–0912 or www.iir.com/nygc/.

Arlen Egley, Jr., Ph.D., is a Senior Research Associate and Christina E. Ritz, M.S., is a Research Associate with NYGC, which the Institute for Intergovernmental Research in Tallahassee, FL, operates for OJJDP.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.