

Gabriella Agostinelli
Fighting Poverty in Buffalo
Professor Magavern
April 25, 2013

Gang Prevention in Buffalo, NY and National Best Practices

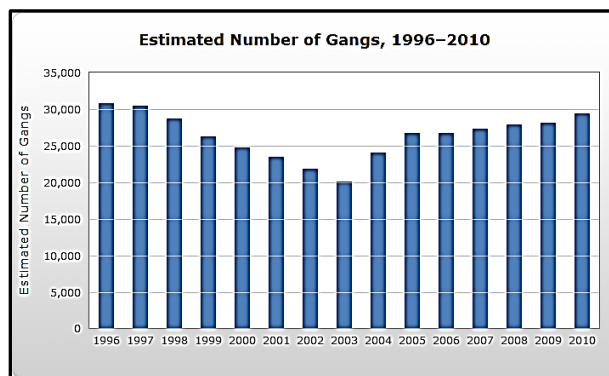
What is a “gang”?

While there is no consensus over a specific definition of “gang,” research has identified a group of characteristics to discern whether a group is a “gang.” According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, these characteristics include:

- 1) formal organizational structure (not a syndicate)
- 2) identifiable leadership,
- 3) identified territory,
- 4) recurrent interaction, and
- 5) engaging in serious or violent behavior.¹

How Many Youth Participate in Gangs?

In the 1970s, only 19 states reported youth gang problems. By the year 2000, all 50 states and the District of Columbia had acknowledged gang activity.²



According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (a nationally representative sample of 9,000 adolescents), 8 percent of surveyed youth across the nation had belonged to a gang at some point between the ages of 12 and 17.³

Gang membership is even greater among youth in high-risk areas of large cities: Seattle, WA (15%); Denver, CO (17%); Pittsburgh, PA (24%); and Rochester, NY (32%).⁴

Gang Demographics?

Race/Ethnicity: According to the 2008 National Youth Gang Survey, half (50%) of all gang members are Hispanic/Latino, 32% are African American/black, and 11% are Caucasian/white.⁵

Certain crimes are often specific to particular racial/ethnic groups. African-American gangs tend to be more involved in drug offenses, Hispanic gangs engage in “turf-related violence,” and Asian and white gangs display a tendency toward property crimes.⁶

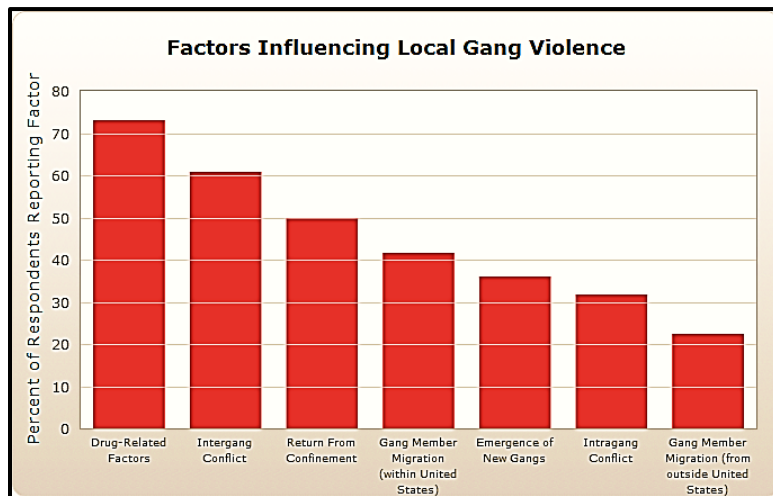
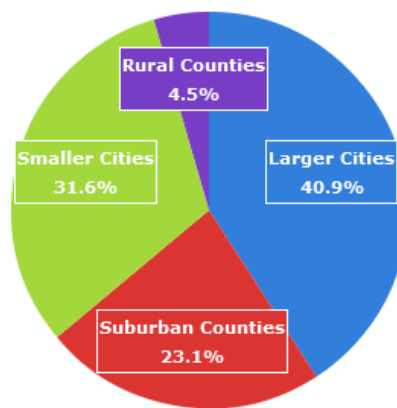
While racial/ethnic groups represent the largest gang membership, they should not be understood as having a certain predisposition towards criminality or gang membership; rather, minorities “tend to be overrepresented in areas overwhelmed with gang activity.”⁷

Age: The average age of gang members is 17 to 18 years old, but tends to be older in cities where gangs have existed longer.⁸ The typical range is 12 to 24.⁹

Gender: A recent study identified 8.8% of boys and 7.8% of girls as current gang members.¹⁰

Risk Factors: The more risk factors present in the life of a young person, the greater the probability they will join a gang. Researchers have developed five “domains” of risk factors for gang membership:

Distribution of Gangs by Area Type, 2010



- *Community or neighborhood risk factors:* access to drugs, availability of illegal firearms, and the local crime rate.
- *Family risk factors:* sibling antisocial behavior, low parental control, and family poverty.
- *School risk factors:* low academic aspirations, low school attachment, and learning disabilities.
- *Peer group risk factors:* association with delinquent peers and/or aggressive peers.
- *Individual risk factors:* aggression or fighting, conduct disorders, and antisocial beliefs.¹¹

How Does Gang Membership Affect Criminal Activity?

Those who participate in gangs are much more likely to commit offenses, especially violent and serious offenses, than non-gang-members.¹² For example, gang members in Denver, CO commit at least three times as many serious and violent offenses as non-gang youths do.¹³ In Rochester, NY, gang members commit seven times more offenses than non-gang members.¹⁴

Even when non-gang members and gang members grow up under similar circumstances, gang members are still “far more likely” to commit certain types of crime.¹⁵ These crimes include “assault, carrying concealed weapons in school, auto and other theft, intimidating or assaulting

victims and witnesses, participating in drive-by shootings and homicides, and using, selling, and stealing drugs.”¹⁶



How Many Gang Members in Erie County? In New York?

A recent report by United States Senator for New York Kirsten Gillibrand found there are around 50,000 gang members in New York State, and about 4,000 of these members live in Western New York.¹⁷ Erie County represents about 500 – 2,499 of those members.¹⁸

What is the Connection between Gang Membership and Poverty?

Communities with the highest concentrations of gang activity are typically those plagued by poverty, joblessness, and poor coordination of prevention services from local agencies and community organizations.¹⁹ Over time, cities have found that the use of law enforcement alone is insufficient to combat community gang presence. Instead, it has proven much more effective to attack the causes of gang affiliation *at its roots*.

Where poverty and unemployment drive gang affiliation, effective prevention programs should provide services like job training/placement to offer an alternative to the gang lifestyle. While it may not be possible to eliminate poverty in the short-term, communities should do what they can *now* to counter the effect of poverty on youth.

What are National Best Practices for Gang Prevention?

Research suggests that successful gang prevention is based on the proper balance of (1) attractive alternatives to gangs, (2) effective support systems for young people, and (3) accountability of young people to their parents, schools, and communities.



Effective partnerships between different community groups are imperative for successful gang-prevention. Police, juvenile courts, schools, prosecutors, faith-communities, and social services/employment agencies must work together to target gang-involved youth and their families. The idea is that by having representatives from all walks of life, each group's experiences and perspectives will create a more holistic understanding of a community issue.

While there are a multitude of programs enacted to address gang prevention in the United States and its cities and towns, generally-accepted best practices flow from the concept that gang-prevention programs are not “one-size-fits-all.” Rather, programs should be designed by bearing in mind a target population's particular set of circumstances.

What are Buffalo's Gang Prevention Efforts?

Buffalo has several ongoing efforts geared towards gang prevention:

The Gang Prevention and Targeted Outreach Program (GPTTO)

- A community effort led by the Boys and Girls Club of Buffalo and the staff at the Buffalo United Charter School.²⁰ Based on a national model, this program involves collaboration between many anti-violence groups in the city who provide youth with positive after-school activities and aim to improve school performance.²¹ Operating under the premise that children join gangs to feel a sense of belonging, the program attempts to provide youth “safe zones” where they can be a part of healthy group activity.²² The program and its specific gang prevention activities are funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs.²³

Peacemakers Gang Intervention Program

- This is Buffalo's newest program. While it is not yet fully developed, it will be modeled after anti-violence/gang-prevention programs in Boston, Providence, and Stockton, California.²⁴ The program will aim to help at-risk youth and build stronger partnerships between community and law enforcement. Mayor Brown has stated that major components of this program will be “intervention, prevention, being proactive, trying to stop incidents before they happen, [and] reaching out to young people and young adults who have gang affiliation.”²⁵

The Gang and Violence Prevention Program

- This program is a youth-driven initiative developed by the Youth Bureau²⁶ and the Northwest Buffalo Community Center. The objective is to educate at-risk youth about the dangers of gangs and how to avoid youth violence. Youth who are interested in the program must apply, and selected youth become responsible for managing “every aspect of the program, including its development, planning process, implementation and evaluation.” After designing the program (its message and how they will spread it to their peers), the youth go to the Youth Bureau's funded agencies and deliver their message to other at-risk youth.²⁷



Buffalo Weed and Seed

- Implements a two-pronged approach where law enforcement agencies and prosecutors work together to “weed out” violent criminals and drug abusers, while public agencies and community-based private organizations collaborate to “seed” much-needed human services: prevention, intervention, treatment, and neighborhood restoration programs.²⁸
- A “community-oriented policing component” brings together the weeding and seeding objectives. Principles of this strategy are collaboration, coordination, community participation, and leveraging of resources.²⁹

- Partnering community-based organizations include: Back To Basics Outreach Ministries, Inc., Lt. Col. Matt Urban Center, Buffalo Niagara YMCA, New Life Residential Center, Inc., Ss. Columba-Brigid Teen Center and the University at Buffalo.³⁰

Pathways Initiative

- The goal of the Pathways program is to help youth and families gain access to health and social services such as “education, recreation, enrichment, substance abuse treatment, tutoring, food clothing and shelter as well as provide violence prevention and intervention.”³¹ This program is run by the City of Buffalo Division of Youth.
- The program serves a “hard to reach” population through a direct, targeted strategy “out on the front lines,” reaching out to youth in trouble, intervening between out-of-control youth and neighbors in fear, negotiating disputes between rival gang members, finding job training programs for school drop-outs and encouraging youth to stay in or return to school.³²

Youth Counseling Program

- Also run by the Division of Youth, this program offers individual, group and family counseling to youth 7-20 years-old who are displaying signs of at risk behavior. The Division of Youth also offers workshops on “gang awareness, violence prevention and conflict resolution and character education to schools community and youth groups throughout the city.”³³

Anti-Crime Program

- Incorporates “education, referral services and community mobilization” as strategies to positively address youth crime prevention. This educational program, also run by the Division of Youth, is designed to assist youth in recognizing criminal activity and its consequences. This program is currently serving about 600 youth.³⁴

What are New York State’s Gang Prevention Efforts?



Rochester: *Pathways to Peace:* A “street level outreach team” that establishes a positive relationship with the city’s violent youth and gang members, evaluates their needs and circumstances, and then provides them resources to prevent youth and gang violence.³⁵ The goal is to work closely with all available community resources, including schools, families, law enforcement, human service agencies and faith-based organizations to improve public safety and quality of life.³⁶

Albany: *The Capital Region Gang Prevention Program:* a coordinated community response to youth gangs in the City of Albany. Involves four main strategies: community building, education, peer mentoring and employment preparedness.³⁷ Objectives of the program include: get the help of the local community to implement strategies regarding gang violence; educate and build awareness among school staff regarding youth gangs; education and build awareness among parents and local community members regarding the impact youth gangs have on the community; and identify at-risk youth and deter gang membership.³⁸

What are Some Successful National Gang Prevention Programs?

Today, our national homicide rate is about 4 per 100,000 people. However, for members of a gang or “neighborhood turf group,” this rate grows exponentially, to as many as 3,000 homicides per 100,000.³⁹ One of the most successful national programs for combating these homicides and gang affiliation has been David Kennedy’s “Operation Ceasefire” model.

Essentially, this program brings together gang members with 1) community members they respect 2) social-services representatives who can help them and 3) law enforcement officials who assure the gang members that they would rather keep the youth alive than arrest them. However, under the model, law enforcement must “aggressively target people who retaliate[.]”⁴⁰



Over the years, this model has dramatically reduced homicide rates in participating cities across the country. Kennedy says his strategies have led to a 35% reduction in gang-related killings in Chicago, a 50-60% drop in the citywide homicide rate in Boston and a 60-70% decline in homicides in the “hardest hit” neighborhoods of Minneapolis.⁴¹ “In city after city, what we see is you may have to do it once or twice, but as soon as the streets believe that that's what's going to happen, they change,” says Kennedy.⁴²

The Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program has been a successful gang-prevention model for youth who may be at-risk for joining a gang in the future.⁴³ This model offers a 13-week-long school-based curriculum in learning communities where gangs may be present. In this program, law enforcement officers teach middle school students the dangers of gang involvement. The lesson content emphasizes “cognitive-behavioral training, social skills development, refusal skills, and conflict resolution.”⁴⁴ The G.R.E.A.T. program is also offered through elementary schools and summer programs in at-risk communities.

Aggression Replacement Training (ART) is a successful intervention tool for incarcerated juvenile delinquents. This program consists of a 10-week, 30-hour cognitive-behavioral program offered to groups of 8-12 adolescents. Throughout the program, participating youth will attend three 1-hour sessions each week on “skill streaming, anger control, and moral reasoning training.”⁴⁵ ART showed positive results when tested with gang-involved youth in Brooklyn, NY. In addition to reducing felony recidivism at a cost-effective rate, the program has “enhanced prosocial skill competency and overt prosocial behavior, reduced the level of rated impulsiveness, decreased the frequency and intensity of acting-out behaviors, and enhanced the participants’ levels of moral reasoning.”⁴⁶

¹ “Gang Prevention” US Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention <http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/progTypesGangPrevention.aspx>

² James C. Howell, “Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs” US Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, at 2 (December 2010)

³ James C. Howell, “Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs” at 2.

⁴ James C. Howell, “Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs” at 2.

⁵ James C. Howell, “Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs” at 3. (according to National Gang Center, 2010)

-
- ⁶ "Gang Prevention" US Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention <http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/progTypesGangPrevention.aspx>
- ⁷ "Gang Prevention" US Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention <http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/progTypesGangPrevention.aspx>
- ⁸ "Gang Prevention" US Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention <http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/progTypesGangPrevention.aspx>
- ⁹ "Gang Prevention" US Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention <http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/progTypesGangPrevention.aspx>
- ¹⁰ James C. Howell, "Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs" at 3.
- ¹¹ Phelan Wyrick, Ph.D., *Gang Prevention: How to Make the "Front End" of Your Anti-Gang Effort Work*, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, United States Attorneys' Bulletin, Vol. 54, No. 3, May 2006.
- ¹² "Gang Prevention" US Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention <http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/progTypesGangPrevention.aspx>
- ¹³ "Gang Prevention" US Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention <http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/progTypesGangPrevention.aspx>
- ¹⁴ "Gang Prevention" US Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention <http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/progTypesGangPrevention.aspx>
- ¹⁵ "Gang Prevention" US Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention <http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/progTypesGangPrevention.aspx>
- ¹⁶ "Gang Prevention" US Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention <http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/progTypesGangPrevention.aspx>
- ¹⁷ "New Gillibrand Report: As Many as 50,000 Gang Members in New York" Kirsten Gillibrand: US Senator for New York (2009).
- ¹⁸ New Gillibrand Report: As Many as 50,000 Gang Members in New York" Kirsten Gillibrand: US Senator for New York (2009).
- ¹⁹ "Strategy: Gang Prevention Through Community Intervention With High-Risk Youth" National Crime Prevention Council (Last visited April 25, 2013) <http://www.ncpc.org/topics/violent-crime-and-personal-safety/strategies/strategy-gang-prevention-through-community-intervention-with-high-risk-youth>
- ²⁰ "New gang prevention initiative in Buffalo" (Dec. 8, 2010) YNN http://buffalo.ynn.com/content/all_news/526207/new-gang-prevention-initiative-in-buffalo/
- ²¹ Id.
- ²² Jackie Lewandowski "Prevention Initiative Steers Youth Away From Gang & Violent Activity" WGRZ (Dec. 9 2010) <http://eastside.wgrz.com/content/prevention-initiative-steers-youth-away-gang-violent-activity>
- ²³ Id.
- ²⁴ "Mayor Brown Details Anti-Gang Program" (Feb. 24, 2013) http://buffalo.ynn.com/content/top_stories/642164/mayor-brown-details-anti-gang-program/
- ²⁵ Id.
- ²⁶ The Erie County Youth Bureau (ECYB) is under the leadership of the Department of Social Services The ECYB "annually grants funding to community based organizations providing positive youth development programs throughout Erie County." ECYB-funded programs include afterschool programs, mentoring programs, literacy programs, technology instruction programs, leadership programs, job readiness training programs, counseling programs, mentoring programs and more. For more info see <http://www2.erie.gov/socialservices/index.php?q=youth-bureau>
- ²⁷ "Gang and Violence Prevention Program" Erie County DSS (Last accessed April 6, 2013) <http://www2.erie.gov/socialservices/index.php?q=gang-and-violence-prevention-program>
- ²⁸ "The Buffalo Weed and Seed Program" City of Buffalo (Last Accessed April 18, 2013) http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/City_Departments/Citizens_Services/Bufferalo_Weed_and_Seed_Program
- ²⁹ "The Buffalo Weed and Seed Program" City of Buffalo (Last Accessed April 18, 2013) http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/City_Departments/Citizens_Services/Bufferalo_Weed_and_Seed_Program
- ³⁰ "Mayor's Weed and Seed is Up and Running with Grant" Buffalo Rising March 5, 2009 <http://www.buffalorising.com/2009/03/mayors-weed-and-seed-is-up-and-running-with-grant.html>
- ³¹ "Youth Services" City of Buffalo (Last Accessed April 18, 2013) http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/City_Departments/CSRP/YouthServices
- ³² Id.
- ³³ Id.
- ³⁴ Id.

³⁵ "Best Practices of Community Policing in Gang Intervention and Gang Violence Prevention" The United States Conference of Mayors: Best Practices Center (2006) at 114.

³⁶ Id.

³⁷ Id at 6.

³⁸ Id.

³⁹ "Interrupting Violence With The Message 'Don't Shoot'" NPR (Nov. 1, 2011) <http://www.npr.org/2011/11/01/141803766/interrupting-violence-with-the-message-dont-shoot>

⁴⁰ Id.

⁴¹ David Kennedy, Author Of 'Don't Shoot,' Says He Has A Cure For Inner-City Gang Violence (Sept. 30, 2011) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/30/david-kennedy-dont-shoot-gang-violence_n_988602.html

⁴² "Interrupting Violence With The Message 'Don't Shoot'" NPR (Nov. 1, 2011) <http://www.npr.org/2011/11/01/141803766/interrupting-violence-with-the-message-dont-shoot>

⁴³ James C. Howell, "Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs" at 13.

⁴⁴ Id.

⁴⁵ Id.

⁴⁶ "Aggression Replacement Therapy" OJJDP <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/SPT/Programs/7>