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Gangs and Public Safety

Hosted by the NGA and NCJA

November, 2018

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Elise Simonsen: Hello, my name is Elise Simonsen, I'm a policy analyst at the National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices in the Homeland Security and public safety division.

Elise Simonsen: Oh our public safety team, we support two networks of governor staff, first is the criminal justice policy advisors, and they're individuals that may be cabinet secretaries, members of the governor's legal team or policy staff.

Elise Simonsen: Every state has a CIPA. Our second networking is our Public Safety Consortium, and this is in about 32 states. This is for governor appointed cabinet secretaries, commissioners, directors or public safety czar and they're the central authority overseeing an array of public safety functions within the executive branch.

Elise Simonsen: We partner with the criminal justice association, and their member's lead criminal justice agencies in the states and are typically appointed by the governor and work for the governor's policy advisor, or are located in the department of public safety. So today, I will be providing a webinar on gangs and public safety. Here at NGA, we just wanted to say a big thank you to the National Criminal Justice Association and the bureau of justice assistance at DOJ for inviting us to present this webinar.

Elise Simonsen: In this webinar today, there will be three key themes, first is just to define what is a gang, then go over gang prevalence, and then programs and statewide implementation.

Elise Simonsen: First up, as I mentioned is defining a gang. A gang is a broad term. There are biker gangs, street gangs, prison gangs and so on. But the focus of this webinar is really street gangs and youth gangs in the United States. Often we think of a gang as a group that has long term roots in large metropolitan cities. But gang history in the United States for serious gangs actually dates back to the early 1800s on the East coast. It wasn't really a problem until the late 1800s that we saw the emergence of a serious gang problem in Midwest like Chicago, and it was another half century later, full century from East coast that we saw the development of serious gangs on the West coast.

Elise Simonsen: However, these are just three geographic areas, predominately really New York city, Chicago, and L.A., but they're only regions that experience problems or gang related crime. Gang activity really occurs throughout the United States.

Elise Simonsen: To get now that we have a history of when gangs started in the United States, or more of a serious problem with gangs, what is a gang? In everyday practice, law enforcement agencies often define a gang as one, a group that hangs out together, which 35 states refer to in this way as a group that has an organization

Webinar Transcript

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association or a group. Two, that they commit crimes together, and 33 states statutorily require this, and that's three or more individuals come together to commit crime, and three that it has a name. 26 states actually references this as a requirement, and 26 states go beyond that, in that they have a common name, identifying sign or symbol or identifiers of gangs in their definition. And beyond that sometimes gangs can include things that they may have a leader, they claim a turf, and as mentioned they may display common colors or symbols.

Elise Simonsen: Moving from what is a gang to gang prevalence. Now that that baseline's established, I want to review a little bit further. I'm going to be going into myths regarding prevalence, as well as prevalence of gang violence at a city level. However, before reviewing those points, some general concepts related to prevalence should be reviewed.

Elise Simonsen: There have been four large scale longitudinal studies that examine the causes and correlates of gang involvement in the United States. Those four locations that there were studies is Rochester New York, Denver Colorado, Seattle Washington, and Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. There's been many findings that have come out of those four cities. They've really informed a lot of current gang research since they've been conducted. But out of the Rochester study it revealed that gang involvement really is what they term a transient phenomenon, in that in that study half of the boys and two thirds of the girls reported being a gang member for one year or less. We really see that short term prevalence is relatively high, but there are gang members that are in gangs much longer. And that's really referred to as embeddedness in the gang. In this concept, embeddedness, really refers to the frequency of contact with the gang, position in the gang, importance of the gang to the individual so how the individual feels or rates how important the gang is. And proportion of their friends in the gang, as well as frequency of gang related assaults or crimes.

Elise Simonsen: Studies show, or studies are accumulating showing that distance is delayed among those embedded members. The more embedded you are, like I just mentioned having more friends, having the gang be really important to you, the more embedded you are it is harder to get out, or you end up being in the gang much longer, but as the Rochester study showed it often really can be a transient phenomenon.

Elise Simonsen: All right, so getting into gang prevalence. I wanted to start by discussing myths regarding gang prevalence. There are many myths regarding gang prevalence and there's been books written on this. Dr. Howell's Gangs in America's Communities book discusses many myths, but I just wanted to highlight two here specific to gang prevalence. Referring to prevalence, first and foremost this

Webinar Transcript

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really started in the 1980s regarding gang migration across the United States. This is sometimes, one of the theories for this is referred to this as the Big Gang theory. In criminology this is discussed as the exaggeration of size and danger of youth gangs.

Elise Simonsen: Marcus [Felson] theory of why this occurs is because they need to appear more dangerous than they actually are to provide themselves maximum protection, and themselves being the gang members. So gang members are portraying themselves as criminal organizations to profit from drugs or more specifically at the time, what was known as the crack cocaine epidemic.

Elise Simonsen: And at that time, gang involvement was really overstated. Gangs wanted to seem like they were criminal operations that were expanding across the country, but for the most part, this just wasn't the reality. However, that myth really was perpetuated.

Elise Simonsen: So further on that point though, smaller youth games often adopt the name of big city gangs such as the Bloods and the Crips, however it is highly unlikely that long term embedded Blood Crip or even Latin Kings from L.A. will come to a small town in the middle of the country to establish a hierarchal youth street gang. Really, that's not what's occurring, in reality what's happening is a youth street gang, individuals of three or more that are getting together and participating in anti-social activities, they're giving themselves the name Bloods or Crips, but they're not actually related to these larger gangs out of L.A., New York, Chicago as you think of classical gangs.

Elise Simonsen: The second myth regarding prevalence, and also kind of related is the current myth related to MS-13 and that they're well organized. MS-13 was started in L.A. and is comprised mostly of individuals from the northern triangle, and that refers to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. When fleeing Latin America and coming to the United States MS-13 was created and established separate from L.A. gangs, so there were currently Bloods and Crips as well as Mexican American gangs. MS-13 was created separately from those current organizations. According to the department of justice organized crime and gang section, MS-13 is presently in 46 states and DC, and their membership is estimated between eight and 10,000 individuals, but those numbers are as of 2015.

Elise Simonsen: Certainly not to downplay the violent nature of crimes committed, but the portrayal of solidified hierarchal organizations is again just not accurate as that first myth the gang migration. These individuals are coming to separate states with their families that are migrating there. Really, what they're bringing to those locations is a pervasive gang culture, but not actual organization. So there

Webinar Transcript

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November, 2018

www.ncja.org

is a distinction there. There is no indication that estimated 10,000 members are really part of one large gang.

Elise Simonsen: So moving from myths regarding prevalence to actual violent statistics related to the prevalence of gang violence in America. There are two images on the screen that are really both telling a similar story. There was a study that was conducted over 17 years, that observed a number of gang related homicides in cities that have populations of over 100,000 individuals.

Elise Simonsen: So plotted here, on the right side of the screen is 240 cities that are included in the trajectories. On the image on the left, you'll see five different groups or trajectories that are color coded.

Elise Simonsen: For example, the trajectory group one that is that orange-ish color, those are cities that are at the lowest percentages of gang related homicides in cities that are populations of great than 100,000. Then going all the way up to that brown-ish color, in trajectory five there's only three of those. Those are cities that have very high percentages of gang related homicides, again in cities that are over 100,000.

Elise Simonsen: Moving from the graphic display of where those locations are in those trajectory groups, on the right hand side, you will see the plotting of those trajectories. Although, this is a little bit longer, this goes until 2012, as opposed to the United States map, which goes through 2009. Up through 2013 you can see the plotted level or percentage of gang related homicides.

Elise Simonsen: Again, in that T-1, or trajectory group one, those are the 41 cities that have really low homicide rates. As opposed to trajectory five, which it should be noted again that there's only three cities there, but they have really high gang related homicides, as opposed to as I mentioned T-1, which has very low. But interestingly, if you look in groups like two, three, and four, you can really observe a pattern of persistence. In T-3 toward the end around 2009 there's actually an uptick in prevalence of these gang related homicides. Most interestingly would be those cities in T-4, which there's 54 of those cities or 21% of this group that really has a pervasive or persistent gang problem. Throughout from 1995 through 2012 we can see that the level of gang related homicide is remaining consistent. What you can deduce from that, is that there is really a persistent group of violent gang crimes in those cities that are in trajectory four.

Elise Simonsen: What you can learn out of these, or its use really for governor's offices or state administering agency directors if you see that cities in your jurisdiction fall within this, you may want to consider some of the evidence based programs that we'll be talking about in just a couple of slides.

Webinar Transcript

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www.ncja.org

- Elise Simonsen: All right, so going to programs and statewide implementation. There are several programs or approaches that have been really applied at the city or county level, but can be applied state wide. Some of those approaches are the Comprehensive Gang Program, the Group Violence Intervention and Cure Violence. These are all programs or really approaches that do have evidence based research indicating that they may help reduce gang populations in those counties or cities. I'll be going over one of these approaches in more detail. Also, there are programs like GREAT, Gang Resistance Education and Training that states may want to consider as they also have implications for more on the preventative end for resisting joining a gang for youth.
- Elise Simonsen: As I mentioned one of the models is the Comprehensive Gang Program model. This is really the administrative structure to the model. There are forward facing documents that localities can use to implement this model. This model is out of the office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the National Gang Center. The National Gang Center has resources and manuals available that provide a deeper dive into the model, but I just wanted to go over it briefly. There's steps for this comprehensive gang model. First really and foremost would be to acknowledge that a gang problem exists. The second would be, what is in this model is to convene a steering committee, which means just having representatives of key organizations and other community leaders to target a specific area that may have a gang problem.
- Elise Simonsen: Moving beyond the steering committee though would be to conduct a comprehensive gang assessment. Really, what you need there is a research partner, project coordinator and an agency lead within that. Then you need to organize a data driven continuum of services and activities. And that can be convening an intervention team for case management of targeted gang members, really so you have prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies that all move toward that target population. And then continue to collect data and information to inform programming and evaluate outcomes. That research partner could help with that initiative to make sure that you're moving the needle in an appropriate manner and in the right direction.
- Elise Simonsen: Although results vary by sites and across outcomes, the projects reduce violence at all three impact levels. Research supports that it impacts it at the individual level, the group level, which would be the gang, as well as the community level.
- Elise Simonsen: Evaluations also suggest that youth outreach or social intervention strategies may be more effective in reducing violent behavior of younger less violent gang use, and then a combined youth outreach as police depression strategies appear to be more effective with the older, more criminally active and violent gang use particularly in respect to drug related crimes.

Webinar Transcript

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Elise Simonsen: From this model you can see that interactive and collaborative efforts combine with preventions, suppression, social support, and provisions for social services really can be the most effective for changing criminal involvement of gang members.

Elise Simonsen: Finally, I just wanted to highlight one state-wide program. There's many counties across the nation that are applying gang models, however not many are taking a state-wide approach. Just one state that is doing this, that is using state level funding levers is Massachusetts. Massachusetts is using local resource partners and state-wide research partners. This Grant program here the Shannon Community Safety Initiative is administered by EOPSS, and it's to support regional and multi-disciplinary approaches to combat gang violence through coordinated programs for prevention and intervention. This model, this Shannon Community Safety Initiative is actually based on the OJJDPs comprehensive gang model that was just reviewed on the previous slide.

Elise Simonsen: There are four, excuse me there are five core strategies that are adoptable and can vary in application from county to county and that's how it's applied in Massachusetts, it's really they allow the county to steer these core strategies and the certain order they may need to occur in. A detailed review of these five strategies actually can be found on the National Gang Center's website, but just to go over them briefly, social intervention. So that's providing access to social intervention services to associates of the targeted gang members, because really the peers may contribute to the targeted youth gang involvement. If their friends are still doing it, it's less appealing to move out, so it's really a social intervention effort.

Elise Simonsen: The next one in the CSI or within these five core strategy is suppression. Gang suppression activities expand really traditional roles of policing to include informal contacts with the target youth, their families and other community members.

Elise Simonsen: And then opportunity provision is really special access to economic opportunities between the local and wider community provided to the youth. This can be things like education and other trainings.

Elise Simonsen: And the last two points, the organizational change and community mobilization, those both relate back to the development of the steering committee mentioned on the previous slide.

Elise Simonsen: So Massachusetts is one of the few states, or really the only states doing a state-wide comprehensive approach to gang control using this comprehensive gang model.

Webinar Transcript

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www.ncja.org

Elise Simonsen: That is all we have today for this gangs and public safety webinar. Thank you so much for joining us.