

TELEMASP BULLETIN

TEXAS LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE STATISTICS PROGRAM

May 1997

Vol. 4, No. 2

Youth Gangs in Texas: Part I

Introduction

Gangs are an ever present part of American society. Sheldon, Tracy and Brown (1997) refer to gangs as intrinsic to American society and "somewhat permanent institutions of large urban areas with a heavy concentration of the poor and racial minorities" (p. 4). Historians provide us with a rich literature on 19th century American gangs (see Spergel 1995 for a brief review). Despite the persistence of gangs, public attention on gangs and gang activity has varied over the years. Today, however, with a rising public concern about crime, in general, and violent youth crime, in particular, gangs are once again at the center of public and media attention. Sheldon and his colleagues (1997) report that public concern about gangs has been on the rise since the 1980s. They also suggest that media coverage on gangs and gang activity has increased, as well, though many who have conducted research on gangs are critical of the media's coverage (see also Hagedorn 1988; Klein 1971). There is also evidence that the public's renewed attention goes hand in hand with the expansion and development of special programs and policies among criminal justice agencies for dealing with gangs. Police departments, in particular, have experienced a growth in the number and types of programs designed to deal with youth gangs.

The purpose of this bulletin is to explore the perceptions of police departments within the state of Texas regarding the number of youth gangs, the seriousness of their activities, the change in numbers over the years, the police response to youth gangs, and the effectiveness of those responses. Although there is disagreement about how the term should be defined, in this bulletin "gang" is referred to as "...three or more persons having a common identifying sign or symbol or an identifiable leadership who continually or regularly associate in the commission of criminal activities" (Texas

Penal Code). A youth gang is composed largely of individuals age 17 and under. Next month's *TELEMASP Bulletin* will examine youth gang characteristics.

Background

Public and criminal justice officials' concern about youth gangs is related to the idea that membership in a gang promotes crime. Some researchers argue that gang membership facilitates or increases the offending rate of its members (Thornberry et al. 1993). There is also evidence that gang members commit a disproportionate amount of crime, including violent crime. In fact, while some U.S. cities have experienced declines in gang-related homicides in the last 15 years, research suggests that gang-related homicides account for approximately 25 percent of all juvenile homicides in 65 major U.S. cities (Spergel 1990).

Given the possible role youth gangs play in overall juvenile crime rates, information on the number and nature of gangs is important for those interested in criminal justice policy. Though it is difficult to assess the number and nature of gangs because of incomplete or inaccurate information, variation in definitions and reporting across jurisdictions, obtaining reliable estimates of gangs and their activities is important for policy-making. A recent National Institute of Justice bulletin reports on two estimates, based on law enforcement reports, of the number of gangs, gang members and gang-related crimes—one is referred to as a "conservative estimate" and the other a "reasonable estimate" (Curry, Ball and Decker 1996). The conservative estimate places the number of gangs in 1993 at 8,625, the number of gang members at 378,807 and the number of gang-related crimes at 437,066. Using this estimate, 1993 saw an increase from

1991 of 76.7 percent in the number of gangs, 51.9 percent in gang members and 84.3 percent in the number of gang-related crimes. As striking as the conservative estimate is, the reasonable estimate of each of these figures is substantially higher. The reasonable estimate of the number of gangs in 1993 is 16,463, with 555,181 gang members and 580,331 gang-related crimes. Using this estimate as a comparison, 1993 saw an increase over 1991 of 241 percent in the number of gangs, 122.7 percent in the number of gang members, and 1,152 percent in the number of gang-related crimes. Whether the conservative or the reasonable estimate is used, the report found a substantial increase in the number of gangs and their activities. The growth in recent years is such that gangs are now believed to exist in all 50 states (Spergel 1990).

The rise in the number of gangs and in their activities is not the only change that has occurred in recent years. Researchers have uncovered other important changes that occurred since the 1950s and 1960s when much of what we now know about gangs was collected. These changes are particularly significant since they indicate an increase in the violence of gang activities, as well as an increase in the stability and organization of gangs. For example, researchers have also found evidence that gang activities are becoming more lethal because of the increased sophistication of their weaponry (Klein and Maxson 1989; Spergel 1990; Miller 1975). Another important change in the nature of gang activity is a growing involvement in drug use and drug trafficking (Klein and Maxson 1990; Fagan 1990). Factors that might indicate an increase in the organizational abilities and stability of gangs include the evidence that youth gangs, once considered a phenomena of large urban areas, are spreading to smaller towns and cities (Hagedorn 1988; Klein and Maxson 1989; also Spergel 1990; Curry, Ball and Fox 1994). Studies also show that more and more gang members are remaining in gangs well into their adult years (Klein and Maxson 1989; Hagedorn 1991) rather than "aging out" as in previous years. Finally, Spergel (1990) reports that "...mixed race/ethnic membership patterns are not uncommon in many states although black gangs tend to be all black" (pp. 212-213).

Over the years, a wide range of activities developed as the public and the criminal justice system responded to the problem of youth gangs. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a revival of many youth gang programs and an increase in their numbers and diversity. Spergel and Curry (1990) list five strategies that have been employed to deal with gangs: *community organization or neighborhood mobilization*; *social intervention* involving youth outreach and street work counseling; *opportunities provision* involving jobs, job training and education; *suppression* involving arrest, incarceration and supervision; and *organizational development* which adapts operations such as police gang units. Their study of 45 cities found suppression to be the most common police

response to gangs, yet it was not perceived as the most effective by the community.

Since the police deal most directly with gangs, their response is of critical importance. While there is information on police strategies used against youth gangs, little is known about the effectiveness of those strategies (Spergel 1995). Spergel (1995) identifies three traditional tactics used by the police. First are those that focus on organized police operations such as the gang detail or gang unit. Second are those that involve the development of specialized information systems used by multi-agency law enforcement task forces. Finally, anti-gang tactics such as street sweeps, saturation policing, selective enforcement, implementation of nuisance abatement campaigns, and anti-graffiti units are commonly used tactics.

While suppression or organizational development remains the dominant form of police response to youth gangs, Spergel (1995) also notes that some agencies are developing new approaches which involve community problem-oriented policing.

This more complex, multidimensional, citizen-involved, and not always police-directed approach is not as widely accepted or practiced as the traditional police suppression approach. The newer strategy or set of strategies assumes that an arrest and lock-em up strategy is not sufficient (Spergel 1995:199).

The community-oriented policing strategy involves new police structures and programs, as well as an expanded police officer role.

The Survey

The rising growth of youth gangs and the police response to them prompted this month's bulletin. Questionnaires were received from 38 police agencies in Texas.

Community and media attention. Since the police are largely reactive regarding crime control, the first set of questions focused on the amount of media and community attention given to gangs. Specifically, respondents were asked to estimate the monthly number of youth gang-related questions their agency receives from the media and the community, as well as the number of complaints received each month from the community. The results are displayed in Table 1.

Agencies reported an average of 16 questions per month received from the media. There was, of course, a wide variation in the estimates depending on the size of the jurisdiction. Estimates varied from zero, in the Addison,

College Station, Mesquite, and Rosenberg police departments, to 100 in the Pasadena Police Department.

Questions and complaints from the community. On average, respondents estimated that their agency received 116 questions per month from community members. As with questions from the media, there was a wide variation across the departments. There were not any departments that reported receiving no monthly questions from the community. Interestingly, the El Paso County Sheriff's Department estimated two questions per month, while the El Paso Police Department placed their estimate at 2,500.

On average, respondents estimated that their departments received 49 complaints per month concerning youth gangs. There was a range from two complaints per month in the Deer Park and Plano police departments to 200 per month in the Austin, Irving and Pasadena police departments.

Although there was a great deal of variation across departments, on average the police departments represented in the survey received a substantial number of youth gang-related questions and complaints from the public. If media and community perceptions reflect the true nature of youth

Table 1

Community and Media Attention to Youth Gangs

Agency	Monthly Queries from Media	Monthly Queries from Citizens	Monthly Number Complaints
Abilene Police Department	2	10	10
Addison Police Department	0	5	50
Amarillo Police Department	10	40	50
Arlington Police Department	7	30	100
Austin Police Department	2	100	200
Bryan Police Department	2	30	17
Carrollton Police Department	5	20	10
Cleburne Police Department	10	50	20
College Station Police Department	0	3	2
Dallas Police Department	50	100	100
Dallas County Sheriff's Department	99	12	99
Deer Park Police Department	4	12	2
El Paso County Sheriff's Department	1	2	17
El Paso Police Department	60	2,500	150
Eutaw Police Department	1	30	30
Fort Bend County Sheriff's Department	15	100	50
Fort Worth Police Department	15	150	100
Galveston Police Department	--	---	---
Garland Police Department	20	80	70
Grand Prairie Police Department	2	77	37
Harris County Sheriff's Department	3	35	30
Irving Police Department	5	200	200
Jefferson County Sheriff's Department	10	50	30
Lubbock Police Department	2	10	12
Mesquite Police Department	0	80	40
Midland Police Department	10	25	35
North Richland Hills Police Department	3	17	3
Odessa Police Department	5	25	50
Orange County Sheriff's Department	99	20	10
Pasadena Police Department	100	200	200
Plano Police Department	1	8	2
Richardson Police Department	1	60	5
Rosenberg Police Department	0	7	6
San Antonio Police Department	10	15	20
Texarkana Police Department	2	4	4
Tyler Police Department	20	100	50
Victoria Police Department	20	100	20
Wichita Falls Police Department	10	20	30

gangs in their jurisdiction, the number of questions and complaints indicate that some of the surveyed agencies have serious problems with youth gangs. In the next section, police perceptions of the prevalence and nature of youth gangs is explored.

Prevalence of youth gangs and seriousness of youth gang activity. The second series of questions asked respondents to report on the prevalence of youth gangs and the seriousness of youth gang activity in their jurisdiction. Findings concerning the prevalence of youth gangs are reported in Table 2. All surveyed agencies reported that youth gangs had been identified within their jurisdiction. However, there is a great deal of variation in the number of youth gangs depending on the jurisdiction's size. While the average number of youth gangs per jurisdiction is 49, the number ranged from two in the Rosenberg Police Department to 797 in the San Antonio Police Department. Of course, some variation is attributable to definitional issues. Approximately one-third of the agencies reported 10 or fewer youth gangs, another third reported 13 to 37, while the remaining third reported over 50 youth gangs in their jurisdiction.

Figures 1 and 2, and Table 3 display the results to a series of questions concerning the seriousness of youth gang activity and the change in numbers and activities over the past five years. Respondents were first asked to indicate the percent of all juvenile arrests that involved a member of a youth gang (Figure 1). Eighteen percent of the respondents reported that gang members represented 0 to 10 percent of all juvenile arrests, and 32 percent reported that they made up 11 to 25 percent. Another 42 percent reported youth gang members accounted for 26 to 75 percent of all juvenile arrests, while only 3 percent reported gang members representing 76 to 100 percent of all juvenile arrests in their jurisdiction. When asked how serious a problem youth gangs are in comparison to other crime problems in their jurisdiction, 29 percent of the respondents indicated that youth gangs were a "very serious" problem, 55 percent said they were "serious" and 11 percent indicated that they were "not serious at all" (Figure 2). Thus, 84 percent of the responding departments perceived youth gangs to be a serious community problem.

In the third set of questions, respondents were asked to report on the change in youth gangs and their activities over the past five years (Table 3). Eighty-four percent reported that the number of crimes committed by youth gangs in their jurisdiction had increased, 11 percent reported a decrease and 5 percent reported that the number of crimes committed by youth gangs had remained the same over the past five years. Regarding changes in the seriousness of youth gang activity, 82 percent of the respondents reported that the last five years had shown an increase. Conversely, 13 percent reported the seriousness level had decreased, and 5 percent said it had remained the same.

Table 2
Prevalence of Youth Gangs

Agency	Number of Gangs
San Antonio Police Department	797
El Paso Police Department	471
Fort Worth Police Department	280
Harris County Sheriff's Department	250
Garland Police Department	231
Arlington Police Department	145
Euless Police Department	135
Pasadena Police Department	69
Fort Bend County Sheriff's Department	85
Dallas Police Department	77
Grand Prairie Police Department	74
Austin Police Department	73
El Paso County Sheriff's Department	37
Irving Police Department	35
Amarillo Police Department	28
Bryan Police Department	27
Richardson Police Department	24
Midland Police Department	23
Odessa Police Department	21
Jefferson County Sheriff's Department	20
North Richland Hills Police Department	20
Tyler Police Department	20
Texarkana Police Department	15
Victoria Police Department	15
Wichita Falls Police Department	13
Lubbock Police Department	10
Plano Police Department	7
Carrollton Police Department	6
Deer Park Police Department	6
Cleburne Police Department	5
Orange County Sheriff's Department	5
Addison Police Department	4
Abilene Police Department	3
College Station Police Department	3
Rosenberg Police Department	2
Dallas County Sheriff's Department	--
Galveston Police Department	--
Mesquite Police Department	--

The responses to these questions suggest that a majority of the agencies surveyed perceived youth gangs to be a serious problem in comparison to other crime problems in their jurisdiction. The findings also suggest that youth gangs in Texas, as in many other states, are increasing in size, activities and seriousness. The next section addresses police response to this growing problem.

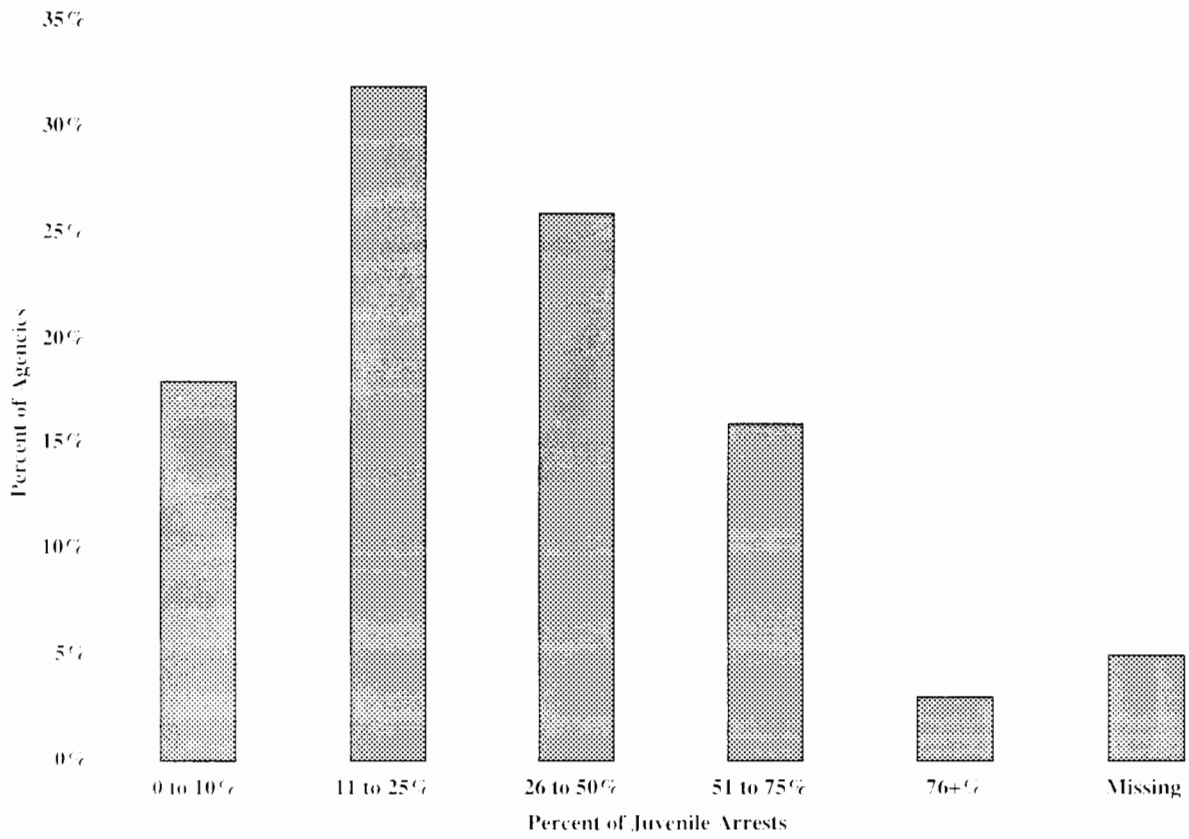


Figure 1. Percent of Juvenile Arrests Involving Members of a Youth Gang

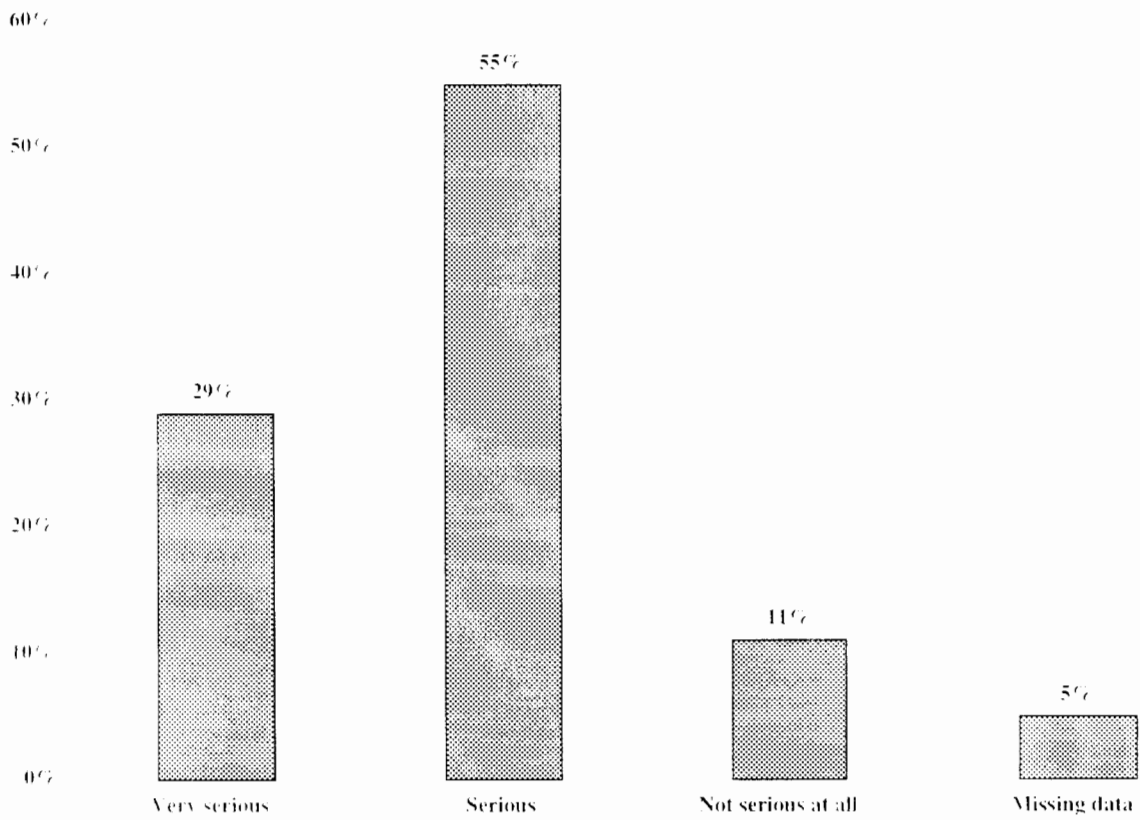


Figure 2. Seriousness of Youth Gangs Compared to Other Crime Problems

Table 3
Trends in Youth Gang Crime

Jurisdiction	# Crimes by Youth Gangs in Last Five Years	Seriousness of Crimes by Youth Gangs in Last Five Years
Increased	84%	82%
Decreased	11%	13%
Unchanged	5%	5%

Jurisdictional Responses to Youth Gangs and their Effectiveness

Though traditional police practices center around suppression and organizational development, the perception of recent growth in gangs and their activities has led to an expansion in the number and types of programs the police use. This section explores police response to gang problems beginning with the gang officer or gang unit. The analysis then explores other, less traditional, ways of responding.

Gang officers/units. Tables 4 and 5 display the results to a series of questions regarding the establishment of police department gang officers or units. Findings from the survey suggest that, in Texas, the development of special gang units is a common police response to youth gangs. Eighty-two percent of the agencies reported having either a unit or an officer. Of those who reported having a special unit, the average number of assigned officers is eight. Once again, however, there is a great deal of variation with answers ranging from a single officer in the Amarillo, Euless, Plano, Victoria police departments and El Paso County Sheriff's Department to 40 in the El Paso Police Department. All agencies having a special gang unit reported establishing the unit more than six months ago. The majority (55%) established the unit between two to five years ago, with 32 percent having a gang unit for more than five years. Thus, a specialized unit is not only a common response to gangs but one that developed early on.

Table 5 also shows differences in the receipt of special funding for gang units. Of the departments that have gang units, 32 percent receive external funding. Two departments received funding as early as 1992, one in 1993 and 1995, and three in 1994 and 1996. Six departments reported the funding to last one year, and four departments said the funding lasted more than three years. Though not reported in Table 5, respondents indicated a great deal of variation in the amount of funding received, with funding ranging from \$21,565 to \$750,000.

Additional responses. Today, police response to youth gangs goes beyond the development of specialized units. Innovative programs are also used by police to broaden their approach to gang problems. Respondents were asked to report on any programs the department uses and perceives to be effective. They were then asked specifically about three additional responses to youth gangs—"GREAT" (Gang Resistance Education and Training), graffiti abatement programs and curfew ordinances. The results are found in Tables 6 and 7.

Respondents were asked to report on any other programs their department had that they perceived to be effective in dealing with gangs. Twenty-four respondents (63%) reported that they had other programs for dealing with gangs that they believed to be effective. These programs are listed in Table 6 and displayed in terms of five different categories including traditional police responses involving suppression and organizational development, and non-traditional responses centering around community, school, family and youth activity programs.

As Table 6 shows, there are a wide range of youth gang programs that police departments perceive as effective. The most common traditional police-based program is participation in a multi-jurisdictional task force. There are, however, indications that police departments in Texas are also developing non-traditional programs. Community-based programs have also been initiated, the most common being a version of a gang awareness program. Community-based programs also consist of non-traditional and innovative programs including police store front officers, resident officer programs, neighborhood watches and juvenile crime coalitions. Police departments are also developing a number of school-related programs, the most effective being the school resource officer, followed by DARE and other programs that present anti-gang messages. While family-based programs were rare, there was a gang awareness and education program mentioned involving the police with the parents. Finally, youth-based activity programs were popular, with the most common being the police athletic league.

Of the three specific programs respondents were asked about, the least common was the school-based gang prevention program called "GREAT" (see Table 7). Only 21 percent of those agencies surveyed reported that their department has a "GREAT" program. Of those, 43 percent perceived it to be very effective, while 57 percent perceived it to be somewhat effective. No respondent viewed the program as completely ineffective. More common among the respondents was a graffiti abatement program. Although 53 percent reported having one, when asked about the program's effectiveness, only 34 percent considered it as very or somewhat effective while 62 percent reported it was not effective at all. Finally, 76 percent of the respondents

Table 4

Gang Unit Staffing

Agency	Number of Designated Officers
El Paso Police Department	40
Fort Worth Police Department	37
Dallas Police Department	34
San Antonio Police Department	20
Austin Police Department	17
Garland Police Department	13
Wichita Falls Police Department	13
Arlington Police Department	7
Grand Prairie Police Department	6
Pasadena Police Department	6
Harris County Sheriff's Department	5
Irving Police Department	5
Lubbock Police Department	5
Mesquite Police Department	4
Orange County Sheriff's Department	4
Addison Police Department	3
Jefferson County Sheriff's Department	3
Midland Police Department	3
Texarkana Police Department	3
Tyler Police Department	3
Bryan Police Department	2
College Station Police Department	2
Fort Bend County Sheriff's Department	2
North Richland Hills Police Department	2
Odessa Police Department	2
Amarillo Police Department	1
El Paso County Sheriff's Department	1
Eules Police Department	1
Plano Police Department	1
Victoria Police Department	1

Table 5

Characteristics of Gang Unit

Characteristics	
Year Office or Unit was Created:	
Between two to five years ago	55%
More than five years ago	32%
Between six months to a year ago	7%
Between one year to two years ago	7%
Less than six months ago	0%
External Funding of the Unit:	
No	68%
Yes	32%
When the Agency First Received External Funding:	
1996	30%
1994	30%
1992	20%
1993	10%
1995	10%
Funding Duration:	
One year	60%
More than three years	40%
Less than one to three years	0%

reported that their jurisdictions had curfew ordinances. Of those, 35 percent perceived a curfew ordinance to be very effective, 65 percent somewhat effective and none reported the ordinance to be completely ineffective. Thus, of the three programs, graffiti abatement programs are common but are not perceived to be effective. On the other hand, "GREAT" programs are relatively uncommon, but perceived to be relatively effective. The most common of the three programs, and the most effective according to the respondents, are curfew ordinances.

The Juvenile Crime Coalition program, used by the Tyler Police Department, is a group consisting of community leaders, individuals from criminal justice agencies, the juvenile court, local school districts, local public service agencies and the news media. The group's primary responsibility is to organize all aspects of the local community to intervene and interact with youth crime as well as to develop resources to aid in directed special efforts.

Table 6

Additional Police Responses to Youth Gangs

Traditional Police-Based Programs

Participation of a multi-jurisdictional task force

Crime enforcement patrol detail

Community liaison

Drive by shooting response team (DSRT)

Serious habitual offenders' comprehensive action program (SHO-CAP)

Nostros Unidos --gang intervention

Impact program -- officers meet on a regular basis with members of all gangs

Patrol officer training -- patrol officers' training to assist in dealing with gang members by building rapport and communication skills

Computerized unit database listing gang members

Violent crime task force units

Crime enforcement during evening hours of school year -- sergeants and one sergeant assigned to patrol youth-frequented areas

GRIPS (gang related incident tracking system)

SID (suspect image database) -- Houston PD and Harris County Sheriff's Department share information

Mandatory detention on all arrests

Community-Based Programs

Gang awareness program -- aimed at PFA, teachers, civic groups

Police store front officers

Resident officer program

Neighborhood Watch

Victim support

School-Based Programs

(SRO) School resource officers

DARE (drug abuse resistance education)

Gang in-service training for school staff and administration

Arlington ISD mentor program

Slama bama jama—school presentations

LETS (law enforcement teaching students)—drug prevention at 5th grade level

Safety officer—provides programs for elementary school kids

School services officers – assists in identifying gang members and performs education-based intervention with younger children

Family-Based Programs

Gang awareness parent education

Parenting training

Referral letter sent to parents of at-risk youth informing them of their child's contact with police and offering to meet with them to assist in working with the child

Counseling on a one-on-one or family basis

Youth Activities-Based Programs

PAI (police activities league)

Police-sponsored youth boxing club

Boys and girls clubs

Mentoring program

Evening with a cop (companion to ROPES) day camp

Police explorers (Boy Scouts of America)

SNAP (supporting neighborhoods and parents) – summertime youth activity program focused on building relationships between police and youths in high-risk areas

Midnight basketball

Table 7

**Jurisdictional Responses to Youth Gangs:
Additional Programs**

Program	Percent
"GREAT" Program	
No	79%
Yes	21%
How Effective is GREAT?	
Somewhat effective	57%
Very effective	43%
Not effective at all	0%
Graffiti Abatement Program	
Yes	53%
No	45%
Missing	2%
How Effective is Abatement?	
Not effective at all	62%
Somewhat effective	29%
Very effective	5%
Curfew Ordinance	
Yes	76%
No	24%
How Effective is Curfew?	
Somewhat effective	65%
Very effective	35%
Not effective at all	0%
Other Programs	
Yes	63%
No	37%

The Mesquite Police Department uses the ROPES Challenge Adventure Course to gain a positive understanding with the youth, to provide a positive role model to build and reinforce self-esteem and to relate to youths as partners in life and leaders of tomorrow. This program allows youth to see another side of police officers and allows them to communicate in a relaxed atmosphere. Youth leaders, as well as at-risk youth, are selected to participate with police officers and city and civic leaders in a rustic day camp, cookout and ROPES course experience.

Conclusion

While youth gangs are not a new phenomena, the 1980s and 1990s brought an increase in public concern about gangs and their activities. The concern was concurrent with important changes in gangs and their activities. The findings from this survey suggest that youth gangs in Texas are going through many of the same changes seen throughout the country. All of the respondents indicated that they had gangs within their jurisdiction, with the overwhelming majority perceiving them to be a serious crime problem. Although not true for every jurisdiction, there was a strong indication that over the past five years there has been an increase in the number of gangs and in the seriousness of their activities.

Additionally, the findings suggest that police departments in Texas are responding to gangs in ways that mirror national trends. The most common approach is the traditional one—establishment of specialized units and membership in multi-jurisdictional task forces. There are also indications, however, that departments are developing and using a wide range of non-traditional techniques that they view as effective. These non-traditional programs directly involve officers in the lives of at-risk youths through police activity leagues and encourage connections with the community, school and family.

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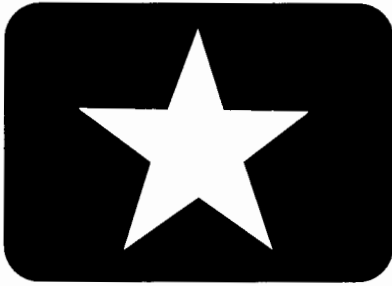
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Thank you to the following agencies for participating in this month's bulletin.

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ISSN 1075-3702, are produced
under an agreement with the

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This bulletin was authored by Dr. Ruth Triplett, an
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tice at Sam Houston State University. Her research
interests include causes of juvenile delinquency
and youth gangs.



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