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## **GANG RECRUITMENT**

Gangs recruit children and adults, professionals and non-professionals, military members, males and females, those in urban and rural communities and all races and ethnicities. Gangs seek power through the size of their membership.

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The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development (The Institute) is a partnership of nine colleges and universities in the Scranton/ Wilkes-Barre/ Hazleton Metropolitan Statistical Area. The Institute’s managing partner is Wilkes University.

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<http://www.operationgangup.com>

## **Executive Summary**

This white paper reviews the modern trends and methods of gang recruitment. Research shows that gang member migration is not an adequate excuse for gang problems. Gang-afflicted areas typically have indigenous gangs for at least one year before migration takes place. Therefore, local recruitment must be recognized and understood as the primary source of gang proliferation. Gangs work to increase their size. The bigger they are, the more powerful they are.

It should also be understood that northeastern Pennsylvania, like other regions have a presence of both local gangs and nationally known gangs. Some local gangs are independent and others are affiliated with the nationally known gangs.

At-risk youth exhibit a few common characteristics. They have often recently experienced critical life events, exhibit anti-social or risky behavior, have been exposed to delinquent beliefs, weak parental monitoring, peer delinquency, and/or negative peer influence. Those between the ages of 13 and 15 seem to be a primary target --although a variety of ages, including even college age students and professionals, can become gang recruitment targets. Females continue to play only a minor role in gangs across the country. Racially, gangs are primarily composed of African Americans and Hispanic or Latinos, but gangs become more diverse in race and gender in rural areas and smaller cities and Caucasian participation has increased tremendously over the past decade.

The influence of gangs has begun to spread with the use social media. Some research shows that gangs have used social networking sites to recruit rural members. Gangs infiltrating the military and the professional worlds have begun to worry law enforcement officials. To fund their operations, larger gangs, requiring greater finances, have turned to white collar crime -- such as mortgage fraud -- in addition to the drug trade. This means that non-traditional targets are being pursued.

## **Research Methods and Limitations**

The research methods for this study are a combination of data "mining" and personal interviews. With data mining, the data will be taken, analyzed, and synthesized from many sources in order to gain a better understanding of the issue. Data were gathered from sources including, but not limited to, scholarly articles and journals, publications by local, state, and federal agencies, online bulletins, law enforcement publications, news media, and other sources. In addition to data mining, personal interviews were conducted with criminal justice professionals with expert knowledge of gangs. By collecting and summarizing this data, researchers and viewers can better understand gang recruitment, how it occurs, and the totality of their targets.

It must be noted that the professionals who were interviewed hold conditions upon the use of their knowledge and identity. A corrections officer in the interview wished to remain anonymous, being known only by his occupation and rank. Dr. D. Darell Dones, with the Behavioral Science Department of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), is named and quoted directly in the paper. Dr. Dones' statements do not reflect the opinions or perceptions of the FBI.

Charts and data on gang demographics are taken directly from the National Gang Center's website, which report findings of its National Youth Gang Survey. The survey involves more than 2,500 law enforcement agencies serving a variety of municipalities across the country. The sample ranges from large cities to rural areas.

One limitation of the data gathering methods is the potential research bias any time a study is referenced for third party use. When non-scholarly or non-peer reviewed works are cited, there is a possibility of a media bias, as the work is not "scientific" and merely informative. When conducting an interview, there is a possibility for the researcher to misinterpret the information being provided by the professional.

## **Literature Review**

It is often a common practice among the media and politicians to blame increased gang activity on an influx of gang member migration from nearby metropolitan areas. However, this perception has not only been proven misguided, but also takes attention away from the community's own mistakes and ignores the greater problem of gang recruitment.

In *Crime and Public Policy*, Cheryl Maxson, an associate professor in the Criminology, Law and Society Department at the University of California, Irvine, references research conducted in the late 1990s involving law enforcement experts in over 200 cities. Such research shows that "the majority had indigenous local gangs at least one year prior to the first arrival of gang migrants." Thus, gang activity is not typically a result of migration, but rather migration is a symptom of pre-existing gang activity. Established gang activity is the result of successful local recruitment efforts.

Maxson notes six risk factors for youth gang recruitment that are consistently supported by empirical research on the topic:

1. Critical life events, such as serious illness or injury; disruption in intimate relationships
2. Non-delinquent problem behaviors, such as risk-taking, impulsivity, and anti-social

tendencies

3. Delinquent beliefs, such as acceptance of antisocial behavior and neutralization guilt over offending
4. Weak parental monitoring
5. Peer delinquency
6. Negative peer influence

Youth experiencing any of the above situations should be recognized as at-risk for gang recruitment. Maxson writes that children between the ages of 13 and 15 are the most typical recruits. However, Kara Leva, an Assistant Professor at Rowan University who performed research on the topic, reports that students as young as nine years old are targets for gang recruitment. According to Leva, young students appeal to gangs because they have more years remaining before they can be tried as adults in the legal system.

Lisa Taylor-Austin has served as expert witness in legal actions involving gangs for 13 years. Her experience of over 20 years as a school counselor has led her to become familiar with the gangs and recruitment targets. Taylor-Austin says prospects are either attracted “toward something they perceive as positive-- money, friendship, drugs or status-- or pushed from other issues in their life -- divorce, abuse, difficulty in school or peer relationships.” Once a student is tempted by gang membership, Taylor-Austin says, “You have three to six months to help them change their mind.”

### **Gang Recruitment**

According to the FBI’s 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment, there are approximately 1.4 million active gang members that make up over 33,000 gangs nationwide. With a growing number of gangs, the struggle for power and dominance also grows, and essential to the survival of a gang is the recruitment of new members. Traditionally, gangs have had relatively standard targets for recruitment, however more and more gang-experts are noticing a shift in the new members that gangs are attracting.

Gangs are becoming smarter and more adaptable in not only the crimes they commit, but also the individuals they recruit. Additionally, the Internet and social media have fostered in a new era of gang expansion. Gangs grow from the ground up, and expand in size and scale. Similar to a business, the larger a gang becomes, the larger its income base must be to support it. Small-scale, local gangs will generally not be involved in large-scale criminal business ventures.

### **Recruitment Framework**

The operation and size of a gang largely determines who it recruits. According to Dr. D. Darell

Dones of the FBI's Behavioral Science Department, the common thread in all gangs is that they're all about making money, and they recruit to serve that purpose. To discover who a gang is recruiting, the gang's criminal enterprise must be examined. The need of the gang is based upon the direction in which it wishes to expand, with respect to its criminal pursuits. "Recruitment is based off of criminal demographics," states Dr. Dones.

Dr. Dones goes on to explain that gang recruitment serves to support two functions: integration and expansion. Gangs look to integrate new members to support overall gang expansion. To expand a gang's criminal enterprise, there has to be both a market and people for support. For example, as with expanding any business, people with the knowledge of an enterprise that an organization wishes to expand into are sought after.

### **Juveniles**

As a Corrections Captain and gang expert stated; "Gangs are looking for individuals in different industries; basically recruit whoever you can — then figure out their role after." Increasing a gang's size increases its power.

However, gangs have begun recruiting unsuspected juveniles, who are valued for multiple reasons. They bring knowledge that traditional gang members may not have, such as mathematics, business and accounting. Also, they generally will not draw the attention of educators as easily as traditional gang members. This, combined with the trend of many gangs avoiding unwanted attention by not displaying signs, colors or other traditional identifiers, poses a much greater challenge for law enforcement and the community to identify and solve gang-related problems.

In June 2013, *The Citizens' Voice* reported Hazleton law enforcement claimed that students as young as fifth graders were being recruited by gangs.

### **Academia and Professional**

Even locally, there have been cases of gangs sending members to college campuses specifically for the purpose of furthering the gang's criminal enterprise. Often, gang members will maintain status in social circles to distribute drugs and actively recruit others. Similar to recruitment of high achieving high school students, college students are also a valuable target for their knowledge and future access to professional services.

A demographic study of one inner city gang by Levitt and Vanketesh showed that 17.4% of gang members had some college education, while 4.7% held a Bachelor's degree or higher. The same study showed that nearly 50% of gang members had less than a high school diploma. With reports showing an educational structure observed by Levitt and Vanketesh, it can be expected that gangs will continue to pursue those who have achieved higher levels of education.

Dr. D. Darell Dones believes that professionals are recruited into gang activity largely by their own naivety. They often do not realize that they are becoming involved with a gang until it is too late. A gang looks for interest and uses that as a way to socially engage the person. Gangs often cater to the person's interests and provide some goods or services to the individual that can later be used to claim the individual is indebted. While engaging the individual, they look to find out as much information about that person as possible. "Once they 'dirty you up' then they will ask for favors, and if the individual refuses then they begin to threaten: first with exposure, then with violence," added Dones.

### **Military**

The 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment identified over 53 gangs whose members have infiltrated at least one branch of the military. Gang members serving in the armed forces pose not only a security threat, but also a threat to law enforcement upon their return from service. Many police departments don't have the knowledge and training that gang members possess, making recruitment of other service men and women even more of a threat than other recruitment methods.

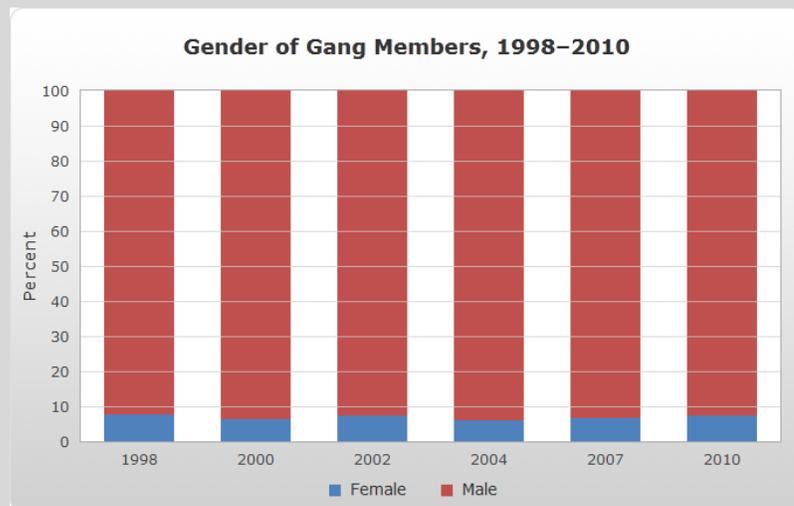
Gang infiltration into the armed forces opens up world of resources normally unavailable. Gang members have been responsible for a multitude of thefts of military equipment, from assault rifles and artillery rounds, to helmets and body armor. The problem of gang activity isn't contained to gang members who simply join as members; it expands when such members actively recruit fellow servicemen and women. In 2005, a 25-year-old Army Sergeant died in his bed after a brutal nine-person initiation beating, which occurred on base. Signs of gang activity within the military have been reported in the streets of Iraq, when gang affiliated graffiti began to appear where troops were stationed.

### **Females**

From support functions, to prostitution, to entirely female gangs, women are just as susceptible to gang recruitment as males. In an article by Shirley Henderson for EBONY magazine, several women discussed their gang involvement. One woman stated that she joined the gang because she was born into it (her parents were former gang members) and gang members were labeled "outsiders" at school and she identified with that. While another said she joined the gang because she felt a connection with the gang members she knew from her neighborhood, despite growing up in a two parent home and attending private school. Often women become gang members by way of proxy with some male relation, be it a family member or boyfriend. While some females are recruited into the gang to provide support functions, such as driving getaway cars or holding drugs and money, others become fully active members who adopt the same roles as male members.

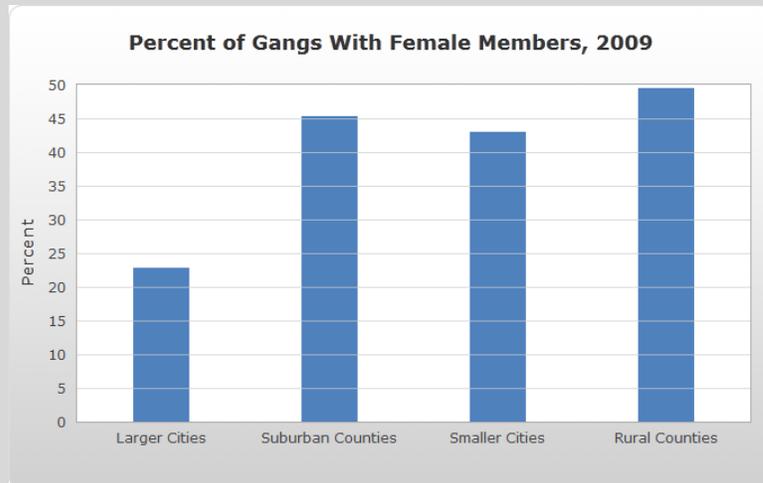
Some gangs have developed systematic methods of recruitment into their prostitution rings. While not faced with the same circumstances that would traditionally drive an individual into gang involvement, young women from middle-class, suburban homes have been drawn to gangs by the allure of money, drugs, and the excitement of gang life. Similar to other recruitment methods, gangs sponsor parties and scout for suitable recruits. Once it finds a young woman who fits its need, the gang discloses its gang status, promises protection and proceeds to give the individual gifts — further building a social bond. Dr. Dones believes that white females with unsuspecting backgrounds are particularly attractive targets, as they do not traditionally fit any gang-member stereotypes.

Women make up nearly 10% of all gang members. The number of female gang members has had minor fluctuations since 1998, hitting a low in 2004 and then increasing in 2010 to 1998 levels.



Source: National Gang Center

Female gang participation is higher in rural and suburban counties and smaller cities as opposed to larger cities. This is most likely due to the higher number of gangs and gang members in larger cities compared to smaller cities and suburban and rural counties.



Source: National Gang Center

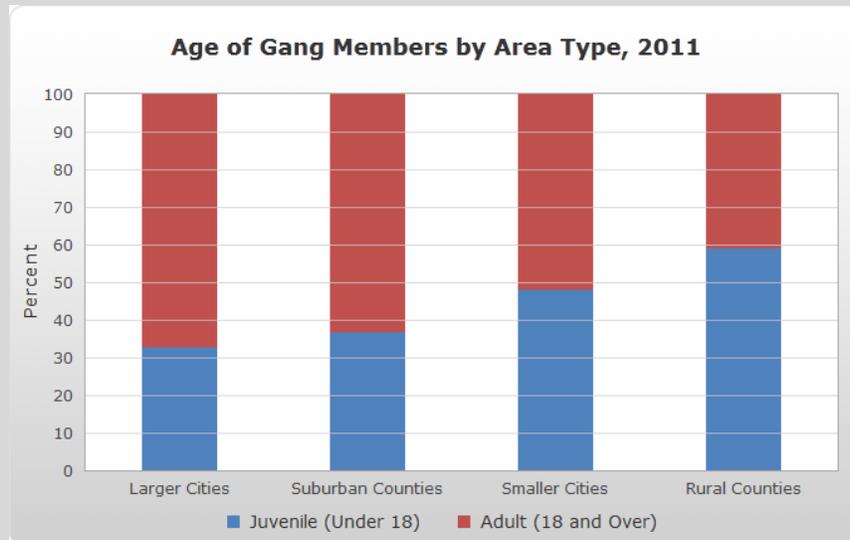
### Rural Youth

It was once believed that gangs were strictly an urban problem and that rural areas were safe zones. On the contrary, rural areas are attractive to gang members because they allow faster gang advancement through less competition and untapped drug markets, and provide gangs with the ability to avoid conflict with other gangs in more urban areas.

Even rural juveniles can be attracted to gang culture through media. The use of social media and the Internet makes it easier for gangs to move to rural areas to recruit members. One gang leader from Dallas, Texas, is quoted in the *New York Times* as saying; “You recruit a couple of farm kids, and you're an instant jefe (boss).” According to one Corrections Captain “wanna-bes” can achieve legitimacy by joining real gangs, and that’s one thing gang members look for in new recruits.

In the *New York Times* article *Hillbangers*, it is noted that migrant workers and their children are largely susceptible to recruitment by Hispanic gangs. In rural areas, many migrant workers are left without a sense of identity, which gangs seek to fill with membership.

Juvenile gang members are a bigger percentage of gang composition in rural and suburban counties and smaller cities as opposed to larger cities. Since larger cities have more gangs and more gang members, juveniles tend to represent a smaller segment of overall membership.



Source: National Gang Center

## Race and Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Larger Cities	Suburban Counties	Smaller Cities	Rural Counties
Black or African American	39.0%	32.7%	20.3%	56.9%
Hispanic or Latino	45.5%	51.0%	53.8%	24.8%
White	9.7%	9.1%	14.6%	14.9%
Other	5.8%	7.2%	11.3%	3.4%

Source: National Gang Center

The National Gang Center reports that gang members across the country are mostly Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino. The chart indicates that the gang presence in smaller communities and rural areas possess a percentage of Caucasian gang members.

## Media Influence

It is suspected that media outlets such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are directly exposing juveniles to gang culture more so than television or gangster rap ever could. Many gangs have their own Facebook pages and consistently post videos on YouTube. Such media outlets aid in the recruitment process in multiple ways. First, they allow gangs to form in ways not limited by geographic boundaries. Next, the use of social media outlets is useful for gangs to operate on under a franchise model, where one national gang operates many different local “sets.” From there, gangs can appear in areas with no previous or neighboring gang problems.

Gang members have been reported to use social media to contact potential members and coordinate gang activities from their homes. This is an especially useful tool to gang members who may be on house arrest, and can't partake in traditional street activity. Law enforcement officers have witnessed gang members using social networking sites to identify and contact potential members, and even discover where recruits physically are and meet with them face to face for recruitment.

According to Dr. D Darell Dones, curiosity is a huge factor that draws individuals towards gangs online. To win over the minds of individuals, gangs will present themselves in a positive light online; they will give the appearance that they are simply misrepresented. Their online presence will show their colors and signs with images of them socializing, in an attempt to break down negative preconceptions.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Gang recruitment is a central focus of any anti-gang initiative. It is the life source of all enduring gangs. By gaining a better understanding of the problem, we are better prepared to combat it. Knowing the targeted age groups, risk factors for youth, and new areas in which gang influence is expanding is critical to the fight against modern gang recruitment. Gang targets are becoming more and more diverse. The Internet and mass media have helped to aid in the spread of not only gang literature and propaganda, but also in their ability to pique the curiosity of those not normally exposed to such culture. Through the Internet, gangs are able to transcend traditional geographic boundaries. Spreading more information on gangs and gang recruitment to the public through programs like Operation Gang Up will continue to play positive role in reducing crime in the area.

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