# POLICY BRIEF 7

## Responding to Gangs In Missouri

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**Cities may be unwilling to admit the existence of gangs….**

Responding to gangs is a difficult process for most cities. In part, this is because recognizing gangs is a difficult process. In his review of the process by which cities recognize gangs, Huff (1991) observed that there are typically three distinct phases in the process of recognizing gangs. These phases include denial, recognition, and over-reaction. Huff notes that most cities begin by denying the existence of gangs. This is not unexpected; after all, recognizing that groups of young men and women are beyond the control of the police, the schools and their parents is an admission of failure. In addition, cities may be unwilling to admit the existence of gangs owing to concern over the impact that such admissions may have on tourism, economic development, and neighborhood investment.

Cities typically move from the denial of the existence of gang problems to recognition of such issues when a specific incident occurs, such as the victimization of a prominent individual. This occurred in Columbus, Ohio when gang members victimized the Governor's daughter. Other incidents that can spark recognition of gangs come from law enforcement, schools, community outrage or social service groups. Once cities recognize the existence of gangs, it is imperative that they take appropriate steps to respond to those gangs. But this can only be done if a solid, objective base of knowledge about gangs, their members and their behavior exists. Unfortunately, the phase in which cities recognize gangs is short-lived. It is often quickly replaced by a succeeding phase.

The third phase, one that comes all too quickly after recognition, is over-reaction. In this phase of recognizing gangs, jurisdictions over-react to the problem of gangs. Part of this over-reaction is the identification of many more young people as gang members than is the case. Indeed, the hallmark of over-reaction is the identification of virtually every minority male in poor neighborhoods as a gang member. This is a very dangerous step for cities, as such a process serves to penalize those individuals – young, minority, males – who have the greatest difficulty achieving entry into the economic, political and academic mainstream of society.

## Gangs in Missouri

How many gangs are in Missouri? What cities have gang problems? What can the cities and state do about the problem?

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the research and program development arm funds the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) for juvenile justice in the U.S. Department of Justice. One of the tasks of the NYGC is to conduct an annual survey of law enforcement to determine the number of gangs, gang members, and a host of related information. This data is available for a number of Missouri cities, selected for inclusion in the survey process for a variety of purposes.

In this report, data from the NYGC survey for Missouri cities are reported for 1999. Seventy-nine jurisdictions were

sampled in that year. Of those, fifty-one reported that they did not have gangs. Twenty-one jurisdictions reported that they had gangs, while five did not respond, and two responded that they did not know. This Policy Brief reports on the results from those twenty-one jurisdictions that indicate the presence of gangs in Table 1 below. Three distinct indicators about gangs in these jurisdictions are presented. The first is the number of *active gangs* reported for calendar year 1999. The second indicator is the number of *gang members* in the jurisdiction. The third indicator reflects *changes in the gang problem*, whether the gang problem is getting worse, staying the same, or decreasing. If the problem is getting worse a "+" is listed in the table, if the problem is decreasing a "-" is listed, and the problem staying the same an "=" is listed. NR stands for Not Reported.

Table 1. Missouri Cities with Gangs. The Number of Active Gangs, Gang Members and the Change in the Gang Problem from 1998 to 1999.

| | # Active Gangs | # Gang Members | Change |
|---|---|---|---|
| 37th Judicial Circuit-Juvenile Division | 8 | 180 | NR |
| Blue Springs Police Department | 4 | 0 | = |
| Festus Police Department | 5 | 250 | + |
| Gladstone Public Safety Department | 1 | 30 | + |
| Independence Police Department | 9 | 50 | + |
| Jefferson City Police Department | 2 | 20 | NR |
| Jefferson County Sheriff's Department | 8 | 50 | + |
| Joplin Police Department | 1 | 8 | - |
| Kansas City Police Department | 75 | 2500 | = |
| Miller County Sheriff's Department | 1 | 8 | NR |
| North Kansas City Police Department | 2 | 22 | = |
| Pulaski County Sheriff's Office | 3 | 30 | NR |
| Raytown Police Department | 3 | 20 | - |
| Scott County Sheriff's Department | 4 | 50 | NR |
| Springfield Police Department | 10 | 90 | + |
| St. Charles County Sheriff's Department | 12 | 60 | = |
| St. Francois County Sheriff's Department | 5 | 40 | NR |
| St. Joseph Police Department | 3 | 15 | = |
| St. Louis County Police Department | 259 | 3758 | NR |
| St. Louis Metro Police Department | 210 | 3000 | + |
| University City Police Department | 6 | 40 | = |

| | |
|---|---|
| 79 | Total respondents |
| 51 | No gangs |
| 21 | Gangs |
| 5 | No response |
| 2 | Don't Know |
| | |
| 2 | Problem Getting Worse |
| 6 | Problem Stating the Same |
| 6 | Problem getting better |
| 6 | No response |

## Conclusions

The findings from the NYGC survey of Missouri law enforcement agencies suggests that Missouri is a state that is still in the process of moving from denial to recognition of its gang problems. This suggests that the state has the opportunity to implement a variety of appropriate measurement and intervention steps to address the problem in a manner that may produce positive results.

In 1993, Spergel and Curry identified five basic gang intervention strategies from survey responses received from 254 law enforcement and social service agencies nationwide. The five strategies include suppression, social intervention, organizational change, community mobilization, and social opportunities provision. Respondents to the survey concurred that providing social opportunities such as jobs and job training were the most promising strategies, and that suppression (arrest, prosecution and imprisonment) was the least likely strategy to reduce gang problems. Despite this, suppression remains the most prevalent gang strategy.

**Twenty-one jurisdictions reported that they have gangs….**

Because most Missouri jurisdictions that reported to the NYGC are emerging gang cities with few gangs and gang members, it is important that policy interventions reflect this state. With the exception of St. Louis city, St. Louis county and Jackson County, gang problems in the remainder of Missouri cities are small and at an early state. This suggests that interventions must reflect the character of the gang problem and focus on a balanced intervention strategy that emphasizes providing social opportunities, with the judicious use of suppression approaches.

## REFERENCES AND MATERIAL FOR FURTHER READING

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LIVABLE communities don't just HAPPEN.
They are CREATED by the PEOPLE who LIVE in them.