



# CSPV FACT SHEET

FS-001

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## Gangs and Youth Violence

- Gang problems in the United States have escalated rapidly since the 1960s. About half of the cities with gang problems today report the emergence of gangs only since 1985.
- Gang problems occur in larger cities; however, many smaller cities do experience gang conflict to a lesser degree.
- Most gangs are home grown, rather than initiated by outsiders, such as gang members who have moved from other cities.
- Gangs tend to be composed of young people, mainly male, with similar ethnic and racial backgrounds.
- Most gangs are loosely organized.
- White gangs have become increasingly rare; most gangs tend to be either African American or Hispanic/Latino.
- Chinese and Vietnamese gangs appear to be oriented primarily toward economic crimes, such as gambling, extortion, drug smuggling, and drug distribution.
- Ethnic conflict is often associated with the emergence of gangs in communities, but most gang conflict takes place between gangs of the same ethnicity rather than between gangs of different ethnicities.
- Drug use and drug selling are common activities among many, but not all, gangs. The relationship between gangs and drug selling is extremely variable.
- There is a difference between drug gangs and street gangs. Drug gangs are typically:
  - smaller,
  - more cohesive,
  - require more group loyalty,
  - composed of older members organized through centralized leadership, and
  - market-defined in terms of group roles and group turf.
- Graffiti is often important in establishing gang identity. It also often acts as a symbolic form of gang conflict.
- Violence associated with gangs is more lethal now than ever before.
- Gang life is very violent compared to life for those who do not belong to gangs; however, considerable variability exists in levels of violence within and between gangs.
- Intra gang violence is more common than inter gang violence or violence directed outside the gang.

- Status problems are a major issue among gang peers, and status threats cause violence problems at both the individual and the group level.
- Gangs appear to become violent as a result of one or more of the following:
  - escalation of ordinary rough-and-tumble behavior, which can turn into an issue of *status*,
  - *competition* with other gangs,
  - *labeling* by others as being violent, and/or
  - *group* cohesion processes which are reinforced via violent behavior.
- When youth (both males and females) are active in a gang, they have higher rates of violent and delinquent behavior compared to when they are not active in a gang.
- Prevalence rates of delinquent and violent behavior for female gang members exceed the rates for non gang males.
- Most youth do not join a gang until their teenage years.
- The lack of economic opportunities for inner-city youth has led many gang members to continue gang membership rather than "growing out" of their gangs and entering conventional adult roles.
- Gang members as individuals often have conventional values and concerns.
- Gang homicides occur more often in the street than non gang homicides, and they often involve unidentified assailants.
- Gang homicides, more often than other homicides, are usually attributed to fear and retaliation.
- Gang homicide offenders and victims tend to be younger than non gang homicide offenders and victims.

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**The information for this fact sheet was excerpted from the following CSPV paper:**

Short, J.F., Jr. (1996, June). *Gangs and Adolescent Violence*. (CSPV-004). Boulder, CO: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado at Boulder.