



A Brief Look at Gangs and the Fairbanks Gang Assessment

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) reports that youth gangs have increased in number, scope, and level of violence over the past 25 years. Following a marked decline in numbers from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, a steady resurgence of gang problems has occurred in recent years. According to the 2008 National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS), there were more than 27,000 youth gangs in the U.S. in that year, an increase of 28 percent since 2002, and about 775,000 gang members. The FBI estimates that gangs account for as much as 80 percent of all crime in the U.S.

The 2009 National Gang Threat Assessment (NGTA) notes that gang migration from urban to suburban and rural areas is contributing to an increase in gang activity. The NGTA also reports that gang members have been found on domestic and international U.S. military installations, and military transfers may result in gangs becoming established in new communities. Alaska's recent increase in gang problems may be related, in part, to the large military population in the state.

In 2010, the first structured assessment of gang activity in Alaska was conducted in Fairbanks by the UAA Justice Center and the Fairbanks Juvenile Probation office of the Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) for the Gang Reduction and Intervention Network (GRAIN). The Fairbanks Gang Assessment (FGA) reported on data from gang member interviews, law enforcement records, and community perception surveys. Selected information from the FGA is presented in this overview along with national data about gang member demographics, gang membership motivation, and problems caused by gangs. A more detailed look at this issue is in "Gangs: National Data and the Fairbanks Gang Assessment" in the *Alaska Justice Forum* Winter 2011 issue.

Gang Member Demographics

- National data from the 2007 NYGS show that nearly half of all documented gang members were Hispanic/Latino, 35 percent were African American/Black, and 9 percent were Caucasian/White. The 2008 NYGS reported that about one-third of gang members were under 18, and 90 percent were male.
- The FGA reported that gang membership in Fairbanks is 56 percent African American/Black, 20 percent Caucasian/White, 8 percent Alaska Native/American Indian, 5 percent Hispanic/Latino, and 1 percent Asian. In Fairbanks, 75% of gang members are 15 to 21 years old, with 31 percent of gang members being under 18 years of age. Ninety-six percent of gang members are male.

Motivations for Gang Membership

- The National Gang Center reports that the two major reasons for youth joining a gang are (1) social – the desire to be with friends/family who are gang members, and (2) protection – the perceived need for the safety a gang provides.
- According to gang members interviewed for the FGA, the top two causes of gang membership are (1) gang members moving into the community from other places, and (2) power. In comparison, the FGA reported that both youth-serving and law enforcement agencies' staff identified the top two causes of gang membership as (1) gang members moving into the community from other places, and (2) having family and/or friends in a gang.

Problems Caused by Gangs

- The NYGS tracks six gang-related crimes nationally: aggravated, assault, burglary/breaking and entering, drug sales, larceny/theft, motor vehicle theft, and robbery.

Gang Crime

- The FGA reported that the top three gang-related problems, as determined by community residents, are the increase in drug crime (70%), increase in violent and weapons crime (54% each), and increased fear (38%). According to youth-serving and law enforcement agencies' staff, the top three problems created by gangs are drug crime (61%), violent crime (57%), and weapons crime (56%).

Table 1. Top Three Causes for Gang Problems in Fairbanks North Star Borough						
Top three causes according to interview and survey participants who believed gangs were a problem in the community.						
Reason	Gang member interviews		Community resident survey		Youth-serving & law enforcement agency survey	
	N = 17		N = 82		N = 249	
	N	% answering "yes"	N	% answering "yes"	N	% answering "yes"
Gang members moving from other places	12	70.6 %	50	61.0 %	141	56.6 %
Power	10	58.8	4	4.9	82	32.9
Family problems	5	29.4	19	23.2	64	25.7
Family/friends in gangs	5	29.4	29	35.4	133	53.4
Poverty	4	23.5	26	31.7	49	19.7
Boredom	4	23.5	18	22.0	60	24.1
Lack of activities	4	23.5	18	22.0	71	28.5
Protection	3	17.6	22	26.8	19	7.6
Police labeling	2	11.8	1	1.2	6	2.4
School problems	0	0.0	15	18.3	12	4.8
Prejudice*	0	0.0	—	—	—	—
To feel loved/sense of belonging	0	0.0	23	28.0	91	36.5

* Only gang members were asked if "prejudice" was a cause of gang problems.

Source of data: GRAIN Gang Member Interviews (2010); GRAIN Community Resident Survey (2010); GRAIN Youth-Serving & Law Enforcement Agency Survey (2010)

Table 2. Top Three Problems in Community Presented by Gangs				
Top three causes according to interview and survey participants who believed gangs were a problem in the community.				
Problems	Community resident survey		Youth-serving & law enforcement agency survey	
	N = 79		N = 249	
	N	% answering "yes"	N	% answering "yes"
Increase in drug crimes	55	69.6 %	152	61.0 %
Increase in violent crimes	43	54.4	142	57.0
Increase in weapon crimes	43	54.4	139	55.8
Increased fear for safety	30	38.0	102	41.0
Public nuisance	23	29.1	55	22.1
School disruption	20	25.3	72	28.9
Fighting	10	12.7	74	29.7
Family disruption	8	10.1	37	14.9

Source of data: GRAIN Community Resident Survey (2010); GRAIN Youth-Serving & Law Enforcement Agency Survey (2010)

As a result of the FGA, GRAIN has received technical assistance from the National Gang Center and has been meeting to create objectives and goals for the community. The Fairbanks community gang task force recently met for the first time and will soon be pursuing their action plan. As more Alaska communities conduct gang assessment studies, a fuller picture of gang activity in the state may be developed. More data will be available for residents, parents, policy makers, youth-serving agencies, law enforcement, and the courts to help youth avoid being drawn into gang activity.

Note: Findings from the Fairbanks Gang Assessment will be presented by Alaska Juvenile Probation Officer Shea Daniels, co-author of the study, at the June 2011 National Gang Symposium in Orlando, Florida.

The Fairbanks Gang Assessment is available on the UAA Justice Center website at <http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/research/2010/1005.grain/1005.fairbanksgang.pdf>. A more in-depth article on this topic appeared in the *Alaska Justice Forum* 27(4), Winter 2011.

Resources:

- Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2009, February 6). *2009 Gang Threat Assessment*. Retrieved January 26, 2011, from http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2009/february/ngta_020609
- National Gang Center. (2009). *National Youth Gang Survey Analysis*. Retrieved January 26, 2011, from <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis>
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- Parker, K., McMullen, J., Rosay, A., & Daniels, S. (2010). *Fairbanks Gang Assessment*. Anchorage: UAA Justice Center. <http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/research/2010/1005.grain/1005.fairbanksgang.html>
- Parker, K., & Daniels, S. (2011). "Gangs: National Data and the Fairbanks Gang Assessment." *Alaska Justice Forum* 27(4): 2–6 (Winter 2011). http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/forum/27/4winter2011/b_fairbanksgangs.html

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