



Focus On: Youth Gangs

DANE COUNTY YOUTH ASSESSMENT

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These Focus on: reports provide an in-depth analysis of specific topics/issues on data from the 2005 Dane County Youth Assessment of 7th-12th graders in 14 Dane County school districts.

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Youth Gangs in Dane County

This issue of *Focus On* explores Youth Gangs in Dane County. In 2005, as in past Youth Assessments, students have been queried about gang participation. The following report will explore the characteristics of youth who report gang affiliation, make comparisons to national data, and offer some topics for further discussion.

Overview of Youth Gangs

Although no consensus exists on what constitutes a youth gang (U.S. Dept. of Justice, *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, Aug. 1998), most definitions include the following characteristics (Curry & Decker, 1998 and Miller, 1992):

- 1) Self-formed group, united by mutual interests, that controls a particular territory, facility or enterprise;
- 2) Uses symbols in communication;
- 3) Collectively involved in crime or anti-social activity

Since the 1970s, the presence of gangs in our communities (and, in particular, youth gangs) has grown dramatically.

Although once thought to be an inner-city problem, gang violence has spread to communities throughout the United States. At last count, there were more than 24,500 different youth gangs around the country, and more than 772,500 teens and young adults were members of gangs. (Egley, A. & Arjunan, M., 2002, 2000 National Youth Gang Survey)

In the 1970s, when gang measurement first began, 40% of all county populations reported some gang problems. By the late 1990s, that figure had grown to 90% of all counties. (Miller, 2001)

Also, teens who are gang members are much more likely than other teens to commit serious and violent crimes. For example, a survey in Denver found that while only 14% of teens were gang members, they were responsible for committing 89% of the serious violent crimes. (Huizinga, D. 1997).

Nationally, youth gang members range in age from 12–24 years old with the average member being 17–18 years old. Over half of youth gang members are aged 19 to 24—and these older youth are the most violent (Egley, A. 2000). Typically, more than 90–95% of gang members are male.

“Gangs as youth groups develop among the socially marginal adolescents for whom school and family do not work.”

*J.W Moore (1991)
Going Down to the Barrio*

The strongest predictor of “sustained gang affiliation” is a high level of interaction with antisocial peers and a low level of interactions with pro-social peers.

(Battin-Pearson, 1997)

Gangs can be organized in a variety of ways for different purposes. Specialty gangs (e.g., around drug trafficking) may number 25 members whereas large-city gangs can have thousands or even tens of thousands of members. Some youth gangs may band together to commit crime, others to simply commit property damage and delinquent behavior, and others may be extensions of adult criminal organizations (Gordon, 1994).

What attracts youth to become gang members? Surveys of youth have shown a variety of reasons:

- Prestige or status among friends
- Making money
- Protection from other gangs
- Sense of identity
- Intense recruitment from family, peers, friends

In the August 1998 *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* (published by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention) is a comprehensive list of risk factors (summarized below) gleaned from twenty years of gang research:

Risk Factors for Youth Gang Membership	
Domain	Risk Factor
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Social disorganization, poverty, residential mobility ○ Presence of gangs ○ Availability of drugs ○ Availability of firearms ○ Feeling unsafe in a neighborhood
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Troubled families, drugs/alcohol, family violence ○ Lack of role models
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Academic failure ○ Lower education aspirations ○ Few teacher role models ○ Identification as LD
Peer Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ High commitment to delinquent peers ○ Low commitment to positive peers ○ Friends who use drugs and are gang members
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Aggression ○ Proclivity for excitement, trouble ○ Early or precocious sexual activity ○ Alcohol and drug use ○ Victimization

Dane County Gang Data

How are profiles of local youth different from national profiles? (DCYA 2005 data)

- 1) **Higher percentage of white kids in gangs.** Of youth reporting gang affiliation in Dane County: 49% were white, 18% African-American, 11% mixed race, 7% Hispanic and 3% Hmong.
- 2) **More females.** National profiles show females are around 8% of most gangs. Locally 24% are female with the highest percentages in grades 7-9.
- 3) **Less urban.** Although national growth in youth gangs has been in smaller communities, the majority of kids in gangs are in larger urban areas. However, in Dane County, 46% of students who say they are gang members live outside of Madison.

According to Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction tallies, there are over 33,000 public school students in 7th-12th grades in Dane County in the 2005-2006 school year. A little more than 4% of the students surveyed in the 2005 Dane County Youth Assessment (DCYA) said they were currently gang members. Extrapolating these data we could project 1300 gang members in Dane County. The 1995 DCYA also reported 4% of students in gangs—but of a significantly smaller population (25,000 students). In 1995 there would have been about 1000 students in gangs. **This means that while the percentage of 12-18 year-olds in gangs has remained at 4% over the past decade, the number of gang-involved youth has increased 30% (300 youth) over that time period.**

A Profile of Dane County Youth Gangs

The profile of youth who say they are currently gang members is quite different from the profile of the entire 7th-12th grade population (DCYA 2005). Yet the local gang profile is also different than the U.S. data. (Note: All data below is for 7th-12th grade students responding to the DCYA 2005 survey.)

Youth who are gang members have significantly fewer positive influences in their lives. They are more likely than the overall youth population to . . .

- Spend less time with family
- Spend more time watching television
- Have been physically abused by an adult
- Have an adult family member charged with a crime

Youth in gangs also tend to have negative feelings about education. They are more likely to . . .

- Say they won't graduate from high school
- Feel discriminated against at school
- Get much lower grades

They are also involved in more risky behaviors like . . .

- Many sexual partners
- Daily marijuana use
- Frequent alcohol use

And finally, gang members are far more likely to be involved in violent activities such as . . .

- Fights with weapons
- Bullying other kids at school
- Bringing weapons into the school

(See Appendix A for more details)

A Historical Look at Gangs in Dane County

As noted above, the percentage of students saying they are gang members has stayed constant from 1995 to 2005 but the total number of youth involved in gangs has probably grown at a rate similar to the student population county-wide.

Looking closely at DCYA gang data for these years shows a few positive trends with violence and crime. In 2005, 27% of self-reported gang members say they have **never** shoplifted compared to only 15% in 1995; in 2005, 58% said they have never brought a weapon to school compared to 39% ten years ago; and in the recent survey, 38% say have never had a fight with weapons compared to 22% in 1995. In fact, **all survey items related to violence and crime saw a decrease from 1995 to 2005.** (See the tables in Appendix B for more details)

Gang data from 1995 and 2005 show some surprising similarities over a ten-year period:

- Youth who say they are gang members comprised about 4% of all students surveyed both times.
- Females were roughly one quarter of the group in both '95 and '05.
- Nearly one-half of these youth say they live outside of the Madison metro area—though there is a slight trend toward a “metro” group (those living outside Madison was 52% in '95, down to 46% in '05).
- In '05, 37% of youth who say they are gang members feel they are treated unfairly in school because of their race – similar to 34% in '95.

In contrast, some percentages changed dramatically over that ten-year period:

- In 1995, 68% of youth in gangs said they were white. Now in 2005, 49% are white with growth coming in Hispanic and mixed race groups.
- About 30% of gang youth said they didn't think they would finish high school in 1995, in 2005 only 12% say they won't finish.
- Marijuana use is much higher, with 27% smoking daily in 2005, up from 17% in 1995.
- Also, binge drinking 5 or more days per month is up from 25% (in '95) to 29% (in '05).

Key Findings

According to DCYA data, Dane County youth gang numbers have grown since 1995. Because they tend to indulge in more risky behaviors more often, these youth create societal costs that are much greater than their numbers. This is why it is so important to develop effective prevention strategies that reduce gang involvement.

The DCYA 2005 data, summarized in this report, provide important (and sometimes surprising) findings that will help our community develop policies and strategies to confront youth gang issues. The key findings that have emerged from this analysis of youth gangs are as follows:

- While youth of color represent 25% of middle and high school students, they represent 50% of youth gang members in Dane County.
- Compared to national youth gang data, Dane County's youth gang members include more females (24%), more non-urban youth (46%), and more white youth (49%).
- While the use of alcohol and other drugs has declined in the general youth population over the past decade, gang members report an increase in the use of drugs (especially marijuana) and alcohol.
- Significant numbers of youth who report gang affiliation get good grades (43%); live in two-parent families (46%), and have college educated parents (50%).

Even though kids in gangs make up only 4% of all youth surveyed, they are a large proportion of what many consider “at risk” groups:

- 38% of all students who say they won't finish high school
- 35% of all students who say their grades are mostly below “D”
- 36% of all students who have been in more than one fight with weapons in the past year
- 46% of all students who have carried weapons to school six or more days in the past month
- 35% of youth who smoke marijuana daily

Recommendations

In the DCYA 2005 data, kids in gangs said they needed certain help or resources in proportions higher than other youth:

Nearly 93% worry about getting good grades

More than 32% worry about parent drug and alcohol problems

About 45% said they needed help finding summer or part-time jobs

62% say there are not enough resources for youth employment

52% said they needed more resources for community social activities

Over 50% worry about getting pregnant or contracting an STD

1. The data show that many youth who are involved in gangs live in stable families and/or get reasonably good grades in school. **The Youth Commission recommends that community prevention strategies focus on both "at-risk" youth who fit the profile for potential gang involvement and "low-risk" youth who do not fit that profile.**
2. **The Youth Commission recommends that schools, community organizations and governmental entities join together to address issues related to gang involvement on the part of rural youth, girls and youth of color.** Such programming may include youth resource centers, after-school athletics, culturally specific academic and social support programs, and library activities.
3. **The Youth Commission recommends that schools, community organizations and governmental entities join together to address youth issues related to gang involvement on the part of rural youth, girls and youth of color.** These demographic groups are either increasing and/or disproportionately high when compared to the county population or national trends.
4. **The Youth Commission recommends that schools and community organizations emphasize creative and innovative personal outreach efforts to parents as an integral strategy in education, prevention and youth development programs.** Because parents have such a strong influence on the values and behaviors of their children, they must be actively involved in all efforts to prevent youth gang involvement.
5. **The Youth Commission recommends that middle and high schools join with community organizations to develop innovative approaches to the issues of teen sexual responsibility and use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, especially marijuana.**

References

Some youth who said they were currently gang members did not fit either the national or local gang profiles.

These students are getting mostly A's and B's in school, live primarily in two-parent households, and the majority has parents with college degrees.

Yet, looking at the "A/B students" in gangs, there is a high percentage (33%) that bring weapons to school regularly, 29% are hard drug users (compared to 3% for all students) and a majority have had fights with weapons.

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Appendix A

Dane County Youth Gang Profile – 2005

DEMOGRAPHICS (% of group)		<u>Youth in Gangs</u>	<u>All Youth</u>
Gender	Male	76%	50%
	Female	24%	50%
Race or Ethnic Group	Native American	3%	1%
	Black	18%	6%
	Hispanic	7%	4%
	Hmong	4%	2%
	Asian (not Hmong)	3%	3%
	White	49%	76%
	Mixed Race	11%	6%
	Other	4%	2%

EDUCATION (% of group)		<u>Youth in Gangs</u>	<u>All Youth</u>
Plans After High School	Won't Finish HS	12%	1%
	Will go to 4-year college	35%	62%
Grades	BC or below	57%	28%
Special Education	Yes	27%	12%
Rules in my school are fairly enforced	Strongly Disagree or Disagree	55%	33%
Adults in my school treat me unfairly because of my race. <i>(Data only for students of color)</i>	Strongly Agree or Agree	36%	21%

APPENDIX A—CONTINUED

FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS (% of group)		<u>Youth in Gangs</u>	<u>All Youth</u>
Parents Marital Situation	Parents married, never separated or divorced	48%	67%
Education of Parent #1	High school grad. or less	32%	20%
Hours per week with family	None to less than 1 hour	39%	21%
Family member charged with a crime	Yes	44%	14%

MISCELLANEOUS DATA (% of group)		<u>Youth in Gangs</u>	<u>All Youth</u>
Alcohol use	Any alcohol in the last 30 days.	60%	25%
Marijuana use	Daily marijuana use	27%	3%
How many partners for sexual intercourse (lifetime)	5 or more partners	53%	13%
Ever been physically abused by an adult	Yes	30%	11%
Fight with weapons at least once	Yes	63%	10%
Carrying a weapon in school last 30 days	At least one day	43%	5%
Bullying Others (Espelage scale)	5 or more times in the past 30 days	28%	2%
Internet Access	None	8%	18%

Appendix B

Dane County Youth Gang Comparison – 1995 to 2005

DEMOGRAPHICS (% of group)		<u>Youth in Gangs</u> 1995	<u>Youth in Gangs</u> 2005
Gender	Male	78%	76%
	Female	22%	24%
Race or Ethnic Group	Native American	3%	3%
	Black	14%	18%
	Hispanic	4%	7%
	Hmong	4%	4%
	Asian (not Hmong)	2%	3%
	White	68%	49%
	Mixed Race	N/A	11%
	Other	5%	4%

EDUCATION (% of group)		<u>Youth in Gangs</u> 1995	<u>Youth in Gangs</u> 2005
Plans After High School	Won't Finish HS	30%	12%
	Will go to 4-year college	38%	35%
Grades	BC or below	62%	57%
Special Education	Yes	24%	27%
Rules in my school are fairly enforced	Strongly Disagree or Disagree	62%	55%
Adults in my school treat me unfairly because of my race. <i>(Data only for students of color)</i>	Strongly Agree or Agree	28%	36%

APPENDIX B—CONTINUED

FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS (% of group)		<u>Youth in Gangs</u> <u>1995</u>	<u>Youth in Gangs</u> <u>2005</u>
Parents Marital Situation	Parents married, never separated of divorced	45%	48%
Education of Parent #1	High school grad. or less	43%	32%
Parents know what I'm doing after school	Never/Rarely	42%	23%
Family member charged with a crime	Yes	52%	44%

MISCELLANEOUS DATA (% of group)		<u>Youth in Gangs</u> <u>1995</u>	<u>Youth in Gangs</u> <u>2005</u>
Alcohol use	Any alcohol in the last 30 days.	62%	60%
Marijuana use	Daily marijuana use	18%	27%
5 or more drinks at one time, past 30 days	More than 5 times	25%	29%
Ever been physically abused by an adult	Yes	43%	30%
Fight with weapons at least once	Yes	78%	63%
Carrying a weapon in school last 30 days	At least one day	62%	43%
Ever Shoplifted	Yes	85%	63%