

**STATE OF NEW JERSEY
DEPARTMENT OF LAW AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

YOUTH GANG INITIATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years law enforcement in New Jersey has taken a number of steps to deal with youth gangs as part of the Attorney General's emphasis on youth. Department of Law and Public Safety programs such as Weed and Seed and the Police Community Partnership Initiative, designed for law enforcement to assist communities to help themselves to improve the quality of life for children and families, clearly have had a effect on youth gangs.

Other programs have been initiated to directly impact on youth. These include the Drug Free School Zone program which has been expanded to include weapons in schools. The agreements for cooperation between schools and law enforcement which currently focus on drugs and weapons are in the process of being extended to bias incidents. The Law and Public Safety Office of Bias Crime and Community Relations within the Division of Criminal Justice is also working on training for school administrators in the handling of bias incidents and other education programs to reduce prejudice and bias crime. The DARE program brings police into the schools with an anti drug message and promotes positive relationships between the officers and students as does the Trooper Youth Week Program. Eighty eight staff from the Department of Law and Public Safety, including State Troopers, lawyers and investigators are serving as mentors to students at inner city Trenton schools.

The Attorney General, as Chair of the Governor's Cabinet Action Group on Juvenile Justice, led the successful initiative to improve the State's youth correctional system by moving the Division of Juvenile Services from the Department of Corrections to the Department of Human Services, thereby increasing the potential for rehabilitation of youthful offenders and providing coordinated services for other youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system. Other areas of Department emphasis on youthful offenders are an ongoing program to reduce juvenile auto theft and a directive to fingerprint juveniles who commit serious crimes which balances protecting the confidentiality of the juvenile and the need to identify serious repeat offenders.

The 1993 Youth Gang Initiative is intended to serve as a foundation for renewed law enforcement efforts to address New Jersey's youth gang problem. There is an emerging recognition of the increase in violence in our society. Of particular concern are the indications of growing youth violence. An August

1992 FBI study of Americans between 10 and 17 years old begins with the statement:

"Nationwide, there is a growing concern over an escalation in juvenile delinquency, a perception supported by the unprecedented level of juvenile violence confronting the nation. Historically, the youth of America has had proclivity toward property related crime, such as motor vehicle theft, larceny, and arson. During the 1980's, however, crimes related to violence became a more significant component of juvenile crime, not only involving disadvantaged minority youth in urban areas but evident in all races, social classes, and lifestyles."

The study reflected that murder by the young increased 332% from 2.8 per 100,000 in 1965 to 12.1 per 100,000 in 1990. The number of murders committed by youth with firearms rose by 79% in the 1980's.

According to the Juvenile Delinquency Commission, New Jersey ranks 6th nationally in the number of juvenile arrests and 4th in the juvenile arrest rate for violent index offenses. The recently published New Jersey Department of Education report, 1991-1992 Violence, Vandalism and Substance Abuse in New Jersey Schools states that substance abuse and vandalism have not changed significantly. However, the level of violence in New Jersey's schools has increased in each of the last two years, up 31% between 1991 and 1992, and 95% from 1990 to 1992. There were 187 reports of assault with a weapon in 1990, that rose to 602 in 1992. Possession of a weapon reports rose from 299 in 1990 to 597 in 1992.

There is a relationship between the increase in youth violence and the emerging problem of youth gangs. Law enforcement is reporting that collective youth violence is growing nationally. While New Jersey does not have the gang problems of areas like Los Angeles, we do have increasing reports of loosely knit delinquent groups as well as active gangs in some parts of the State. The State Commission of Investigation surveyed law enforcement and other community agencies in the spring of 1993 and concluded that there are a minimum of 700 gangs in New Jersey with at least 14,000 members. While the actual number of gangs and gang members can only be estimated, it is clear that it is time to take steps to prevent the increase and spread of violence by youths joining together and to reduce the incentives for youth to become gang members.

A recent survey of the New Jersey Prosecutors demonstrated an emerging awareness of and interest in youth gangs. The Prosecutors in Camden and Monmouth Counties have established comprehensive programs to deal with youth gangs. Other prosecutors see the problem as growing and are taking stock of the gangs in their counties and developing strategies such as working cooperatively with the schools to monitor gang activity, hiring investigators who can relate to the different ethnic groups which make up the gangs, and establishing countywide task forces to share information.

The Department of Law and Public Safety's Youth Gang Initiative sets forth two overriding goals:

- for the present, to control existing youth gangs while disrupting their capacity to engage in criminal activity; and,
- for the future, to prevent the expansion of gang culture and gang identification among New Jersey's young people.

To achieve this, the Gang Initiative proposes a series of interim objectives which will serve as milestones to measure progress toward our goals. The objectives are accompanied by specific recommendations further refining the means by which each step in the process is to be accomplished. The objectives are:

- to increase awareness and recognition of the youth gang problem in New Jersey;
- to accurately identify New Jersey youth gangs: their location, membership, and criminal activity;
- to assess the characteristics of the local youth gang problem in each jurisdiction;
- to prioritize law enforcement response to the gang problem based on local community conditions and resources;
- to develop youth gang action strategies tailored to local conditions and resources and using existing institutions;
- to periodically evaluate the effect of local youth gang action strategies; and,
- to mobilize law enforcement, education, and community resources in order to counteract the influence of gang culture in New Jersey.

The majority of these objectives are designed to support the Youth Gang Initiative's first goal: to control youth gangs and their criminal activity through concerted law enforcement and community action. The final objective is designed to promote our second, more far-reaching goal: to prevent the spread of gang culture in New Jersey by altering the environment in which it flourishes. Taken together, the objectives of the Youth Gang Initiative provide the basis for informed and effective law enforcement and community action.

THE PROBLEM: YOUTH GANGS, VIOLENCE & CRIME:

While youth gangs have existed in New Jersey's urban centers since at least the 1950's, the scope and seriousness of the problem have expanded in recent years: juvenile gangs are now present in areas lacking a previous history of gang activity. At the same time, the nature of gang crime has changed as well. The traditional crimes – vandalism, petty theft, and fistfights – have been eclipsed by drug distribution, auto theft, carjackings, extortion, weapons trafficking, and homicide. Guns and knives are now commonplace in some New Jersey schools, as sometimes even the "good kids" perceive the need to arm themselves for protection from gang violence.

The phenomenon of youth gangs and gang violence is not unique to New Jersey or its urban communities; similar problems exist in suburban Maryland, rural Texas, and in each of the remaining 47 states. The widespread presence of these gangs in the United States is an indication that the essential conditions for their existence can be found almost anywhere. There are many definitions of gangs although most have similar elements. Below is a working definition which is used by the New Jersey State Police.

GANG: A GROUP OF PEOPLE THAT FORM A MUTUAL ALLEGIANCE IN RESPONSE TO VARIOUS SOCIAL NEEDS, AND ENGAGE IN ACTIONS HARMFUL TO PUBLIC HEALTH, SAFETY, AND MORALS. A YOUTH GANG IS SUCH A GROUP COMPOSED PRIMARILY OF JUVENILES.

The fact that gang members band together "in response to social needs" has been documented in numerous studies of gangs and delinquency. Youth gangs are present in places where the community is undergoing social stress and upheaval. The stress can be caused by a variety of factors: poverty; lack of opportunity; racial and cultural antagonism; failure of local institutions (schools, families, churches, or government); economic uncertainty associated with widespread unemployment and plant closings; or, in rapidly expanding suburbs, tensions accompanying the influx of large, newly-settled populations.

The specific combination of conditions conducive to gang formation vary from place-to-place, just as youth gangs themselves vary in size, composition, and activity. The common element in each is that the gangs provide what society does not: they furnish their young members with access to a functioning social structure otherwise lacking in the neighborhood. Gang membership provides a sense of solidarity, mutual security, and control over one's own destiny.

In places where this alternative social structure has become entrenched, gang members have developed their own culture, complete with modes of verbal, musical, and artistic expression ("gangsta rap" and graffiti). Disseminated by film, video, and radio, the gangsta message articulates the

anger and disaffection of alienated youth, striking a responsive chord among troubled young people of every race, economic background, and social strata. Little wonder that youth gangs can be found in the suburbs of Monmouth County or the rural towns of New Jersey's Skylands.

Given these basic social realities, it is clear that the problem of youth gang crime cannot be addressed by law enforcement action alone. To propose such an attempt would be the equivalent of asking a physician to treat only the symptoms of disease rather than curing the disease itself. Instead, both the causes and effects of youth gang activity must be confronted. Consequently, New Jersey's Youth Gang Initiative has two strategic goals:

to control existing youth gangs while disrupting their capacity to engage in criminal activity;

to prevent the expansion of gang culture and gang identification among New Jersey's young people.

The first goal might perhaps be accomplished by law enforcement alone, but can be more readily attained with active community participation. The second goal cannot be accomplished by law enforcement, requiring instead the vigorous involvement and concerted effort of social service agencies, community-based groups, and grassroots organizations. These twin goals, therefore, require development of a two-pronged approach to the problem: both law enforcement agencies and community service organizations must become engaged in the process.

Intended primarily as a planning document for the New Jersey Department of L&PS, the 1993 Youth Gang Initiative will, therefore, concentrate on outlining steps to achieve the first goal through law enforcement action, while offering suggestions on ways that State government can approach planning for the second goal. To reach these goals, the Gang Initiative sets forth a series of objectives designed to ensure an incremental, coordinated response on the part of New Jersey's law enforcement agencies. In the following section the purpose and rationale for these objectives is explained in greater detail.

PLANNING A COORDINATED RESPONSE:

The Attorney General will take the leadership in the implementation and coordination of the Youth Gang Initiative. The Department of Law and Public Safety will provide training, technical assistance and expedite communication among the counties. This initiative reinforces the emphasis which the Attorney General has placed on youth and the recognition that focusing on youth is society's best hope for the future.

As noted earlier, local conditions strongly influence the nature of the youth gang problem in New Jersey's varied communities. No single plan can adequately address the wide range of gangs and gang activities present in the State. Consequently, our efforts will focus on youth and our search for solutions should draw on the talents and experience of local institutions and organizations in tailoring specific strategies to the specific circumstances of each community.

The 21 county prosecutors, as the chief law enforcement officers within their respective jurisdictions, will have primary responsibility for formulating a strategy to address the youth gang phenomenon as it exists in their counties. To guide their efforts, the Youth Gang Initiative delineates a series of objectives, performance benchmarks which direct development of youth gang strategy along the most efficient path. Each objective is accompanied by **Recommendations** which suggest specific ways of approaching the tasks outlined by the objective. The **Recommendations** are not required steps, nor are they intended to limit the range of options available to each county prosecutor. Instead, they are meant to improve the efficiency of strategic planning. The end result – a coherent and effective local and statewide youth gang strategy -- is what matters.

OBJECTIVES:

An obstacle to achieving an effective Youth Gang Strategy is denial that the youth gang problem exists in specific communities. Although it is not clear that every county has a gang problem, all too often, denial of the problem is paired with a denial of responsibility to participate in the solution. In such circumstances, the first step in planning a strategic response to New Jersey's youth gangs must be to recognize the communities where the problem exists and to take responsibility for correcting it.

OBJECTIVE 1: TO INCREASE AWARENESS AND RECOGNITION OF THE YOUTH GANG PROBLEM IN NEW JERSEY.

Recommendation 1.1:

The Division of Criminal Justice and the Division of State Police will develop a series of Gang Awareness training sessions. This will include an initial session to bring together prosecutors and law enforcement executives to be trained in gang awareness, followed by "train the trainer" sessions for representatives of county and local law enforcement agencies.

Recommendation 1.2:

After the participation of staff in the State train the trainer program, each county prosecutor should provide access to gang recognition training and materials for every law enforcement agency in his/her jurisdiction.

Recommendation 1.3:

Each county prosecutor should utilize existing relationships with social service agencies and community-based groups to increase public awareness of youth gangs and their identifying characteristics.

In order to plan effectively, the full scope of the problem must be known. While some jurisdictions are only too aware of the youth gang presence in their communities, others have yet to recognize the severity of the threat. Accordingly, an initial priority of our response after training the appropriate local staff in gang awareness techniques is to determine where in New Jersey youth gangs can be found and how they can be identified.

OBJECTIVE 2: TO ACCURATELY IDENTIFY NEW JERSEY YOUTH GANGS; THEIR LOCATION, MEMBERSHIP, AND CRIMINAL ACTIVITY.

Recommendation 2.1:

Each county prosecutor and local police chief shall designate a specialist to become trained and knowledgeable in gang activity. This specialist should train other law enforcement officers in gang awareness.

Recommendation 2.2:

Each county prosecutor should undertake a census of youth gangs in his or her jurisdiction. Some prosecutors may choose to use the 1993 SCI Gang Survey as a frame of reference against which the results of their own census can be evaluated.

Recommendation 2.3:

The Department of Law and Public Safety will ask a group of experts including representatives of the Division of State Police, the Division of Criminal Justice, and selected prosecutors to address the issue of information sharing about gang activity between counties. The group will discuss and report on the advisability of a standardized information system.

Youth gangs are as different as the communities they inhabit. No single strategy can adequately address the broad variety of youth gang types and activities. Gangs which engage in vandalism and bias crimes require a different approach from those which specialize in drug distribution or auto theft, as methods appropriate for one type of gang may not be successful when applied to others. Therefore, local jurisdictions must take care to note the differences in their youth gangs as well as the similarities.

OBJECTIVE 3: TO ASSESS THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LOCAL YOUTH GANG PROBLEM IN EACH JURISDICTION.

Recommendation 3.1:

In evaluating the results of the gang census, each county prosecutor should identify the significant features of the gang problem in his/her jurisdiction:

- the age and education status of gang members;
- the size(s) of gang membership and level of commitment to the gang among its members;
- the type and severity of criminal activity engaged in; and,
- the adverse impact of the gang on its own or surrounding communities.

Recommendation 3.2:

The Division of Criminal Justice and the Division of State Police will provide assistance to the county prosecutors and local police departments in prioritizing collective youth violence.

Recommendation 3.3

Proper staffing of juvenile units in prosecutors offices and local police departments will be encouraged, as well as increased training and the fostering of communication by supporting county and state juvenile officers associations. Also, dealing with juveniles and gangs will be added to the curriculum for pre-service police training.

Recommendation 3.4:

County prosecutors who have developed aggressive investigative techniques, such as Monmouth and Camden, will be asked to share their programs and expertise with other counties.

In some areas, particularly in New Jersey's older cities, widespread and chronic gang activity may exceed the capacity of existing law enforcement resources to deal with the problem in a comprehensive fashion. Elsewhere, the youth gang phenomenon may be such a recent development that local law enforcement has not yet had time to respond to the challenge. In either case, it is critically important to first deploy scarce assets according to the most pressing needs of the local community, leaving secondary problems for later resolution.

OBJECTIVE 4: TO PRIORITIZE LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE TO THE GANG PROBLEM BASED ON LOCAL COMMUNITY CONDITIONS AND RESOURCES.

Recommendation 4.1:

Using the results of the gang census, each county prosecutor should rank the various youth gangs within his or her jurisdiction according to the need for priority action.

Recommendation 4.2:

County prosecutors who have developed aggressive prosecutorial techniques for gang members who commit crimes, such as Camden, Middlesex and Monmouth Counties, will be asked to share their programs and expertise with the other counties.

Recommendation 4.3:

The basis for priority ranking should be developed by each county prosecutor in consultation with the communities affected and their municipal police departments.

When these priorities have been established, the actual process of strategy formulation can begin. Typically, gang response strategies employed elsewhere in the United States have fallen into one of four basic groups:

- the Suppression strategy, in which standard law enforcement tactics such as surveillance, arrest, imprisonment, and supervisions are used to temporarily remove gang members from the community;
- the Social Opportunity strategy, in which remedial education, job training, work incentives, and employment referrals are used to reintegrate gang members into mainstream society.

- the Social Intervention Strategy, which relies on crisis intervention, youth and family counseling, and systematic referral to social service agencies to address root causes of gang membership; and,
- the Community Mobilization strategy, which stresses collective policy and program development by involving neighborhood organization, grassroots groups, and law enforcement agencies in a collective effort to improve communication and planning.

Each of the above approaches has both strengths and weaknesses. Depending on local conditions, a successful program may require adoption of elements from two or more of the basic strategy groups: a combination of social intervention, social opportunity, and suppression strategies may be more effective than suppression alone. Trenton's Weed and Seed Program is an example of this approach. In other communities, a different tack may be appropriate. The key element in strategic planning, however, is that the final strategy must be relevant to the local problem.

OBJECTIVE 5: TO DEVELOP YOUTH GANG ACTION STRATEGIES TAILORED TO LOCAL CONDITIONS AND RESOURCES.

Recommendation 5.1:

Each county prosecutor should develop a strategic plan for addressing the young gang problem in his or her jurisdiction. Such a plan should consider inclusion of the following elements:

- enhanced communication with community organizations, educators, religious groups, etc.;
- improved coordination of police and social service agency activity;
- outreach programs among the local business community to generate job opportunities; and,
- added emphasis on community policing in the areas affected by youth gang activity.

While the problems presented by youth gangs are serious and will require concerted effort, government can ill afford to respond by creating unwieldy bureaucracies. Instead, we must rely on improving communication and coordination among agencies, organizations, and private sector groups. Such an approach is far more likely to encourage an effective and flexible response to the youth gang problem.

OBJECTIVE 6: TO IMPLEMENT LOCAL YOUTH GANG ACTION STRATEGIES USING EXISTING INSTITUTIONS AND RESOURCES.

Recommendation 6.1:

To the extent possible, each county prosecutor should incorporate existing gang initiatives and programs into the overall county youth gang strategy.

Recommendation 6.2:

Where appropriate, county prosecutors are encouraged to set up countywide task forces including local police, schools and social agencies to implement gang action strategies.

Recommendation 6.3:

Each county prosecutor should execute written agreements or memoranda of understanding with every agency or group participating in the county youth gang action strategy clearly specifying the responsibilities and obligations of each participant.

Recommendation 6.4:

The Office of the Attorney General should take the lead in obtaining cooperation from appropriate State agencies, to actively assist the 21 county prosecutors in aspects of their youth gang action strategies. Examples of State agencies which might be asked to become involved include the Office of the Governor, the Public Advocate, the Administrative Office of the Courts; and the Departments of Education, Labor, Community Affairs, Commerce & Economic Development, Corrections, Health, and Human Services.

Recommendation 6.5

The Division of Criminal Justice will provide support for local law enforcement by assisting designated gang specialists and juvenile officers in developing techniques to deal with local gangs, including police school relationships and policies, procedures and training to deal with the current realities of increasing youth violence.

Every strategy, no matter how carefully conceived, is no better than its results. While each county youth gang strategy will be designed with local conditions in mind, conditions will change -- often as a result of specific programs pursued under the strategy itself. Consequently, each strategic plan should incorporate a self-evaluation component in order to provide early warning of any need for corrections, adjustments, or changes in emphasis.

OBJECTIVE 7: TO PERIODICALLY EVALUATE THE EFFECT OF LOCAL YOUTH GANG ACTION STRATEGIES.

Recommendation 7.1:

Each county prosecutor should establish a set of criteria by which the effectiveness of the local action strategy can be judged. Such criteria might include:

- change in juvenile arrest statistics or in crime reports involving juveniles;
- take periodic census of youth gangs and compare for indications of reductions in gangs and members; and,
- improvement in school system graduation/dropout rates.

Recommendation 7.2:

Each county youth gang strategy should include a timetable for evaluation and reassessment of the original strategic plan. Results of this evaluation should be made available to all groups, organizations, and agencies participating in the county's youth gang initiative.

The objectives detailed above are intended to support progress toward our first goal: that of controlling New Jersey's youth gangs and curbing their criminal activity. Planning a response to obvious symptoms of the present crisis, however, is not enough. As noted earlier, the seeds of the gang problem exist throughout New Jersey and are often nourished by the strident message of disaffected gang culture heard blaring from radios, televisions, and movie screens across the State. Clearly, our current efforts will be wasted unless we plan for the future as well.

The second goal of New Jersey's Youth Gang Initiative does exactly that: it aims to preclude the possibility that existing youth gangs will be able to replenish their ranks with new recruits when gang action strategies begin to have their desired effect. To do so, a longer-term approach is necessary, one which sets out to diminish the appeal of gangs by mitigating those factors which contribute to their success. In addition to attacking the symptoms which result in the growth of gangs -- crime, graffiti, and hostility -- we must address the conditions which gave rise to them. In this effort, law enforcement must play a distinctly secondary role, working together with other community institutions, to rebuild neighborhoods in crises.

OBJECTIVE 8: TO MOBILIZE LAW ENFORCEMENT, EDUCATION, AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES IN ORDER TO COUNTERACT THE INFLUENCE OF GANG CULTURE IN NEW JERSEY.

Recommendation 8.1:

The Office of the Attorney General will survey the country and the State to develop descriptions of model programs which have demonstrated promise in reducing and redirecting youth gangs. Information about these programs will be made available to the counties through mailing and periodic training sessions as well as specific technical assistance.

Recommendation 8.2:

The county prosecutors, with assistance as appropriate from the Office of the Attorney General, will develop community programs and strategies to reduce the incentives for youth to become involved in gangs. These include:

- making available examples of model gang prevention programs, such as midnight basketball;
- assisting, through the Office of Juvenile Justice in the development of programs bringing law enforcement officers into the schools with an anti gang message similar to the successful DARE program or the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) Gang Resistance Education And Training Program;
- developing a model curriculum to increase self esteem and decrease incentives to participate in gangs;
- developing programs to reduce auto theft;
- encouraging the exchange of program information and other ideas among counties. This can be accomplished through regular meetings of the Juvenile Officers Association;

- encouraging the development of mentoring programs; and,
- involving human relations commissions in anti-gang activities.