

# 1. Introduction

In 1987, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) began supporting a research and development project to design a comprehensive approach to reduce and prevent youth gang violence. The initial phase of this project was directed by Dr. Irving Spergel at the University of Chicago. The project concluded in the early 1990s and resulted in the development of the Spergel Model of Gang Intervention and Suppression, later renamed the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model. The OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model (Model) calls for five core strategies to be delivered through an integrated approach from a team of community agencies and organizations. The five strategies are (1) community mobilization; (2) social intervention, including street outreach; (3) provision of opportunities; (4) suppression; and (5) organizational change.

In 1993, Dr. Spergel began implementing the initial version of the Model in the Little Village neighborhood of Chicago. The goal of the project was to reduce the high level of violence of gang members in two specific gangs. Called the Gang Violence Reduction Program, the project lasted five years. An evaluation of the project has been conducted with several positive results, including reduction of serious violent and property crimes, reduction of active gang involvement of older gang members, improved educational and employment status, and fewer total violent crime and drug arrests (Spergel, 2007).

In 1995, OJJDP began to test the Model in five selected sites—Bloomington, Illinois; Mesa and Tucson, Arizona; Riverside, California; and San Antonio, Texas. These sites, part of OJJDP's Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Program, participated in a demonstration of the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model in urban and suburban areas. In the process of establishing these sites, it became clear that to successfully implement the Model, the lead agency and its partner agencies must fully understand the Model, the implementation process, and perhaps most important, the nature and scope of the community's gang problems. Experience with these sites reinforced the principle that a thorough assessment of the community's gang problem was a prerequisite to implementation. The evaluations of each site, as well as the evaluation of the Little Village project, can be accessed through the National Criminal Justice Reference Service at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/App/Search/SearchResults.aspx?txtKeywordSearch=Spergel&fromSearch=1>.

The nation's youth gang problem, as tracked by the National Youth Gang Surveys (NYGS), continues to affect a large number of jurisdictions both large and small. Since the early 2000s, not only has every large city (population over 100,000) in the United States experienced gang problems in some form or another, but so have a majority of suburban counties and a sizeable number of smaller cities and rural counties. In fact, it is estimated that more than 3,550 jurisdictions experienced gang problems in 2007, a 25 percent increase over the 2002 estimate. Moreover, during this same period, the number of reported gangs and gang members increased 25 percent and 8 percent, respectively, reaching an estimated nationwide total of more than 27,000 gangs and 788,000 gang members in 2007.

Of course, it is the *activities* of gang members that are of central concern, particularly the gang members' degree of involvement in serious and/or violent offenses within the community. NYGS data reveals a substantially varying pattern of gang crime across the country. In terms of lethal gang violence, NYGS data shows that, with few exceptions, nearly all gang-related homicides recorded annually by law enforcement occur in the largest cities and metropolitan counties. However, the less-populated areas are not without gang crime problems as well. In these communities, gangs are frequently reported to be involved in property and drug offenses. Of further concern, NYGS data reveals recent increases in two

serious gang-related offenses, aggravated assault and drug sales, among a majority of gang-problem jurisdictions nationwide. Data from these survey findings indicate that gangs continue to remain a significant and ongoing problem across the United States.

Responding to the continuing problems of youth gangs and youth gang violence, over the past 10 years OJJDP launched three initiatives based on the lessons learned from the original urban sites' demonstration of the Model.

In 1998, citing recent evidence that youth gangs were emerging in rural areas, OJJDP developed the *Rural Gang Initiative* (RGI), based on the experiences of the urban sites, with a focus on conducting a comprehensive gang problem assessment and development of an implementation plan.

In 2000, OJJDP began the *Gang Free Schools and Communities Initiative*. In this initiative, the *Gang Free Schools Program* seeks to develop a school component to the Comprehensive Gang Model that involves development of projects within the school setting and linking of the school component to community-based gang prevention, intervention, and suppression activities. Sites in the *Gang Free Communities Program* were to demonstrate the Model but were to leverage local resources more extensively.

In 2003, OJJDP launched the *Gang Reduction Program*. This program is designed to reduce gang activity in targeted neighborhoods. The program's goals seek to integrate prevention, intervention, suppression, and reentry activities and use existing community resources to sustain the program.

The next section provides a brief description of the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model. For more information on the research and development of the Model, as well as information about demonstration sites, refer to *Best Practices To Address Community Gang Problems*, pp. 1–4 and Appendix A. This document is available at <http://www.ojjdp.gov/publications/PubAbstract.asp?pubi=253257>. It is also recommended that project staff also review *The Youth Gang Problem: A Community Approach* by Dr. Irving Spergel for a more in-depth discussion of Dr. Spergel's theory (Spergel, 1995) and *Reducing Gang Crime: The Little Village Project* (Spergel, 2007, and Spergel et al., 2006).

## **The OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model**

The terms “youth gang” and “street gang” are commonly used interchangeably and refer to neighborhood or street-based youth groups that are made up substantially of individuals under the age of 24. While youth in this age group are most likely to be engaged in or at risk of committing serious or violent gang crimes, the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model focuses primarily on youth gang members under 22 years of age, based on OJJDP's authorizing legislation. Motorcycle gangs, prison gangs, ideological gangs, and hate groups comprising primarily adults are excluded from the definition.

The OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model holds that “neither social disorganization, underclass, nor poverty theory alone explains the scope and nature of delinquent or criminal gang association and gang crime. Social disorganization or lack of integration of essential elements of a local community system provides the basic stimulus for the formation of youth gangs. Lack of legitimate opportunity and the presence of alternative criminal opportunities are more likely to explain the character and scope of gang behavior” (Spergel, 1995).

Drawing principally on social disorganization theory to frame the development of the Model, Dr. Irving Spergel and a research team from the University of Chicago expected that there were core strategies to address gang youth, their families, and the community institutions that would promote youths' transition from adolescence to productive members of society. With this in mind, law enforcement and other

agency personnel in 65 cities reporting problems with gangs were surveyed. Analysis of that information, in conjunction with site visits and focus groups, led to a mix of five strategies (described below) that address key concerns raised by the theory on which the Model is based.

### **Five Strategies of the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model**

*Community mobilization:* Involvement of local citizens, including former gang youth, community groups and agencies, and the coordination of programs and staff functions within and across agencies.

*Opportunities provision:* The development of a variety of specific education, training, and employment programs targeted at gang-involved youth.

*Social intervention:* Youth-serving agencies, schools, grassroots groups, faith-based organizations, police agencies, and other criminal justice organizations reaching out and acting as links to gang-involved youth, their families, and the conventional world and needed services.

*Suppression:* Formal and informal social control procedures, including close supervision or monitoring of gang youth by agencies of the criminal justice system and by community-based agencies, schools, and grassroots groups.

*Organizational change and development:* Development and implementation of policies and procedures that result in the most effective use of available and potential resources, within and across agencies, to better address the gang problem.

The OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model requires that these strategies be delivered in a focused manner, based on a thorough assessment of the current gang problem in a community, its potential causes, and contributing factors. Although early implementation of the Model specifically and principally involved intervention and suppression, more recent demonstration sites have included prevention as a key component of their projects. The inclusion of prevention activities is based on the premise that focused gang prevention efforts must work in tandem with the other strategies. It is this combination of strategies that ensures both short- and long-term reduction in gang crime and violence, and that the most cost-effective approach, prevention, can have an effect on those most at risk of gang involvement (Wyrick, 2006).

To facilitate implementation of the strategies, the community and its leaders must be willing to acknowledge the gang problem. If denial is present, it must be confronted. Once the gang problem is acknowledged, a thorough understanding of the nature, scope, and dynamics of the problem is required. The problem must be regarded as systemic in the sense that activities of youth in gangs and the community response to the gang problem are interactive. The behavior of youth and community organizations in relation to each other is expected to change in the course of implementation of the Model.

In summary, the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model espouses an approach that includes several essential elements:

1. The gang project is overseen by a steering committee of policy or decision makers from agencies and organizations that have an interest in or responsibility for addressing the community's gang problem. These representatives should not only set policy and oversee the overall direction of the gang project, but they should take responsibility for spearheading efforts in their own organizations to remove barriers to services, and to social and economic opportunities; develop effective criminal justice, school, and social agency procedures; and promote policies that will further the goals of the gang strategy. The steering committee will

also provide general direction to the agencies collaborating in conducting a gang problem assessment.

2. Initial and continuous problem assessment using qualitative and quantitative data. Those with responsibility for addressing the problem—representatives of police agencies, schools, probation, youth agencies, grassroots organizations, government, and others—participate in identifying the gang problem’s nature and causes. The assessment results in an understanding of who is involved in gang crime and where in the community it is concentrated. This, in conjunction with other data and information, enables targeting of a community/neighborhood where gang crime most often occurs and the target populations.
3. Once the problem is described, an implementation plan is developed for coordinating efforts of and sharing appropriate information among those who work with gang youth on a daily basis. Goals and objectives based on the assessment findings should be developed for each of the five core strategies. Rationales for services, tactics, and policies and procedures that involve each of the key agencies should be articulated and then implemented for each of the five strategies. These activities must be closely coordinated and integrated to ensure that the work of collaborating agencies is complementary.
4. An intervention team is a primary component of the Model. The goal of the intervention team is to share information that presents opportunities for all members of the team to engage gang youth and work together to determine appropriate services for the youth. Agencies represented on the team should include police, juvenile and adult probation, street outreach staff, school personnel, social service agency staff, job/employment development representatives, and others who may provide intervention services to youth.
5. Community capacity building for sustainability should be considered and built into the implementation plan at the start of the project. Capacity-building for both short- and long-term issues should be considered, including support from the business community and federal and state funds to develop anti-gang strategies.
6. Ongoing data collection and analysis to inform the process and evaluate its impact. Data about the progress of the project also helps leverage funds and resources and identifies needed changes in the implementation plan.

## Assessing the Gang Problem

America is a nation of problem solvers. We see something that is not working and put our energy into making it right. Often, however, our first idea of what might work does not. This is particularly true if time is not taken to understand the problem in as much detail as possible. Such is the case with gang crime. Too often, because gangs represent a serious threat to the safety of our communities, it is assumed that more police, increased suppression efforts, or tougher legislation alone will counter gangs when research and experience both suggest that a comprehensive approach will be more successful. In many communities, gang crimes are only the tip of an iceberg that includes an array of symptoms, risk factors, and bad outcomes. What makes the problem more complicated is its diversity: white, black, Hispanic, and Pacific-Asian gangs differ, even in the same city. Gangs, even when they have the same names, are different across cities and towns and use a mix of gang cultures and symbols (Starbuck et al., 2001).

Up-front assessment and planning of the gang problem can save both time and resources. It also can prevent other pitfalls such as overstating the scope of the problem, alarming community residents unnecessarily, and wrongly labeling youth as gang members and possibly violating their civil rights.

## **Why Focus on Gangs and Not Juvenile Delinquency?**

For years, youth-related gang crime has been growing, but the extent and nature of crimes committed by gang members are only now beginning to emerge. Are gangs really responsible for increases in crime, or are youth who are similarly at risk but do not join gangs committing just as many crimes? From the earliest to the most recent studies, criminologists have consistently found that, when compared with both delinquent and nondelinquent youth who do not belong to gangs, gang members are far more involved in delinquency, especially serious and violent delinquency (Esbensen, 2000; Battin-Pearson et al., 1998).

Few estimates exist of the proportion of all delinquent acts for which gang members are responsible; that is, although it is known that gang members have a higher rate of offending than nonmembers, the proportion of the total amount of crime that can be attributed to them is unknown. This is an important issue because, if gang members are responsible for a large proportion of all offenses, efforts to reduce the overall amount of crime in society will not be successful unless those efforts include effective gang prevention, intervention, and suppression programs (Thornberry and Burch, 1997).

OJJDP-supported longitudinal studies in Denver, Seattle, and Rochester have shown that gang members are responsible for a large proportion of both violent and nonviolent delinquent acts, as self-reported in each study's sample. Gang members commit serious and violent offenses at a rate several times higher than nongang youth. In Denver, gang members committed approximately three times as many serious and violent offenses as nongang youth. In Rochester, the differences were even greater—gang members committed seven times as many violent acts, and in Seattle, five times as many. These same studies found that youth gang members reported committing a disproportionate share of nonviolent offenses such as minor assaults, felony thefts, minor thefts, drug trafficking, property offenses, and serious delinquencies (Howell, 1998).

In the Seattle sample, gang members self-reported committing 58 percent of general delinquent acts, 51 percent of minor assaults, 54 percent of felony thefts, 53 percent of minor thefts, 62 percent of drug trafficking offenses, and more than 59 percent of property offenses (Battin-Pearson et al., 1998). In the Denver sample, gang members self-reported committing 43 percent of drug sales and 55 percent of all street offenses (Esbensen et al., 1993). In the Rochester sample, gang members reported committing 70 percent of drug sales, 68 percent of all property offenses, and 86 percent of all serious delinquencies (Thornberry, 1998).

## **Purpose of the Assessment**

Research has consistently shown that gang problems differ among and within communities (Howell, 1998). Unless communities explore and clearly understand the nature and scope of their gang problems based on multiple sources of information, they cannot begin to respond effectively or efficiently. A properly conducted assessment of the gang problem will:

- Identify the most serious and prevalent gang-related problems.
- Determine potential factors contributing to gang problems.
- Identify target group(s) for prevention, intervention, and suppression efforts.
- Shape community mobilization efforts and identify community members who should be involved.
- Identify various organizational or systems issues that must be addressed to have a long-term effect on the problem.
- Identify current efforts to address gangs and gang-involved youth.

A comprehensive assessment of the gang problem incorporates the data, the experience of service providers, and the views of parents, youth, and community residents. The problem of youth gang violence must in fact exist, be perceived, and be communicated as a problem or a threat to the community. An assessment is the most important step in the design and implementation of the community's plan to address the youth gang problem. Guided by data, the assessment reliably measures the scope and depth of the gang problem to provide the basic information needed to develop strategic plans.

Sites that conducted a comprehensive assessment found that they were better equipped during the planning and implementation process to design appropriate responses. The assessment process helped sites determine types and levels of gang activity, gang crime patterns, community perceptions, and service gaps. They also were able to better target appropriate populations, understand and explain why those populations merited attention, and make the best use of available resources.

The assessment process consists of three general steps:

- Laying the groundwork: Assembling those individuals who will oversee the entire process and providing direction for data collection efforts
- Collecting and interpreting the data: Collecting and interpreting data on a range of indicators in multiple domains
- Preparing an assessment report: Preparing findings and the final report

This guide describes the data variables and data-collection instruments, as well as sources of data. It also provides suggestions on how to organize and analyze the data and guidelines for preparing an assessment report. Other portions of this guide deal with definitions of gang and gang crime, issues of confidentiality and consent, and other information relevant to conducting the assessment.

Information from the assessment is vital if the community is to spend time and money where it will do the most good. Three compelling reasons for conducting this assessment are that (1) each community is unique and needs customized programs and activities; (2) data bring an objective research-based perspective and help move the discussion from “what we think” to “what we know”; and (3) the data create a baseline against which progress can be measured and documented.

Findings from the assessment will provide local policymakers and practitioners with an unbiased source of information and set the stage for the creation of goals, objectives, and activities. The guide has been developed to assist these stakeholders in assessing and understanding their youth gang problems and developing an integrated plan to reduce gang crime in their communities. It is meant specifically to assist those individuals who will conduct the assessment, as well as those who will oversee the assessment effort and planning process. It draws on the experience of communities that have developed and implemented an anti-gang project but is flexible enough to accommodate community differences. The methodology described here draws from the best of tested techniques, including those described in the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) publication, *Addressing Community Gang Problems: A Practical Guide (1998)* and an earlier version of this manual published in 2002. It includes lessons learned from five years of implementing and evaluating the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model in five urban sites and best practices and lessons learned from replication of the Model in 16 additional sites.

This manual is intended to be a precursor to *A Guide to Implementing the Comprehensive Gang Model*, which, drawing on the information provided by the assessment, will provide a process for developing a comprehensive plan to implement the Model's five core strategies.