

# 3. Collecting the Data

An assessment of the community's gang problem should be based on data, not anecdote. To develop effective gang strategies, the assessment should focus on the level and extent of gang involvement in serious and violent crimes and factors in the community that may be contributing to local youth joining gangs. Ideally, the comprehensive assessment of a community's gang problem will examine five data domains:

**Community Demographic Data:** *General community descriptive and demographic data to provide a context for the assessment as a whole (Chapter 4)*

**Law Enforcement Data:** *The nature and extent of gang crime and characteristics of local gangs (Chapter 5)*

**School Data:** *Descriptive data on the climate of local schools, characteristics of school students who are involved in and/or at risk of involvement in gangs, and perceptions of school staff members (Chapter 6)*

**Community Perceptions Data:** *Data that describes how key segments of the community are experiencing the gang problem, including community members, parents, community leaders, youth, and gang members themselves (Chapter 7)*

**Community Resources Data:** *Current and historical responses to the gang problem, including gaps in and barriers to services (Chapter 8)*

Collecting data across several domains allows for a fuller understanding of local gang problems and the development of possible solutions. Specifically, to implement effective strategies to address gangs, communities need to know:

- What are the community's demographics, racially, culturally, educationally, and economically?
- How has the community changed over time?
- What implications will community demographics have on the community's response to gangs?
- What risk factors are affecting local youth, families, schools, and neighborhoods?
- What crimes are gangs committing?
- Who is committing these crimes?
- Who are the victims of these crimes?
- What is the demographic composition of local gangs?
- What gang issues are affecting local schools?
- What do school staff members and agency personnel say about the local gang problem?
- What do students say about the local gang problem?
- How do community members describe the local gang problem?
- How do local community leaders describe the gang problem?
- How do gang members describe the gang problem?

## Data Guidelines

A thorough assessment of a community's gang problem will include data from official sources and information provided by individuals who have particular knowledge of one or more facets of gang activity in the community—police, probation, service providers, parents, school personnel, community members, and youth themselves. Most commonly, gang crime tends to be concentrated in some

geographic areas more than others. Therefore, identification of target areas/target populations and identification of the gangs most involved in violent crime are two intended outcomes of the assessment.

In general, data collected should be the most recent available in a form that permits analysis below the metropolitan area. While some data will be available through routine reports and recent studies, this may not be sufficient. Certain data, such as gang and nongang crime data, will need to be collected or cross-tabulated in a manner that allows for the observation of patterns such as offense locations, time of day, and demographics of suspects and victims. Where this level of detail is necessary, some archival data collection and/or analysis should be anticipated.

Because of the importance of crime data, especially gang incident data, the law enforcement agency with primary jurisdiction in the area affected by the gang problem must already be collecting youth gang incident data in some form or have the capacity and willingness to do so. In most areas, it has been necessary to adapt an existing data-collection system or introduce a new system to collect meaningful crime data.

Chapters 4 through 8 of this guide provide the information necessary to conduct the assessment. Each chapter provides questions that the assessment is designed to answer, to be discussed in a final assessment report. In some cases, recommended formats for data presentation and examples are included in the chapters.

### **A Step-by-Step Process**

The assessment process should be conducted in an orderly fashion because, ideally, preliminary data sets will drive the collection of later data sets. For this reason, the following step-by-step process is recommended:

#### **Step 1: Identify the Target Community for the Assessment**

In small towns and rural counties, it may be desirable to conduct a thorough assessment for the entire town or county. In large cities and suburban counties, however, the sheer volume of data precludes collecting and analyzing data citywide or countywide.

Therefore, it is recommended that larger communities scan several broad indicators of gang activity to help identify certain areas as possible targets for more in-depth assessments. These data should have the ability to be easily captured in a short period of time for the entire city. Because the primary threat posed by serious gang activity is violence, the initial scan should consider Part I crimes (as defined by the FBI). If several areas of the city appear to have high levels of violent crime, other factors should be used to further identify a gang-affected “community” in which to conduct the assessment. Other indicators to consider are:

- Information on high-gang-crime neighborhoods/areas from intelligence databases.
- Geocoded maps of gang activity across the city.
- Locations or neighborhoods where gang members live and/or congregate.

Throughout this guide, the term “community” is used as a synonym for city, town, village, or even neighborhood. This targeted community will not be a new entity. Most likely, it will have existed for many years, although the population characteristics, businesses, and economic status may have changed over time. The community will probably have geographic boundaries that are commonly understood by residents and others in the city at large but may be poorly delineated; e.g., South Beach, Northeast, or Downtown. In other cases, sections of a city may have neighborhood names but defy easy demarcation. Examples are Nob Hill, North Beach, and The Flats. In addition to sharing geography, residents of a

community will likely have mutual, but not necessarily common interests. These may be thematic (e.g., clean streets, low crime rate). The population does not have to be homogenous.

The scan of the city should identify one or several communities that should be targeted for more in-depth assessment. Once an area is selected, the comprehensive assessment process can begin.

### **Step 2: Engage the Community**

Once the target community has been identified, the membership of the Steering Committee should be scrutinized and potentially revised or broadened to ensure that key members of the target community are included in the assessment process. Members of the Steering Committee should ensure that any new members are brought up to speed on the purpose of the assessment prior to attending meetings. The Steering Committee should also anticipate that members of the target community may have conflicting feelings about some of the key agencies and that historical issues may need to be addressed before moving forward with the assessment. One way that this can be expedited is through defining terms to be used and allowing participants to voice their opinions during this discussion.

### **Step 3: Define Terms**

The terms “gang,” “gang member,” and “gang incident” are emotionally charged, and there is no national consensus or consistency on how these terms are used. For the purposes of the assessment, the Steering Committee will determine what these terms mean and the implications for data collection.

While state or local laws should not be the primary determination on how these terms are defined by the Steering Committee, it should be recognized that these laws will affect key agencies and may impose limitations on the data. These laws should be examined and clearly understood by all members prior to determining definitions. Because many state laws are used to define whether incidents are gang-related or were created for the purposes of enhanced prosecution, they may create a legal standard that is not required for collecting aggregate data for the purposes of assessment. The distinction between these two uses has caused confusion in some communities.

The goal is to determine how much crime is being committed by gangs in the local community, not to identify individuals for enhanced scrutiny and prosecution. Thus, these terms should be defined to be both inclusive of the uniqueness of the community and community perspectives and workable for the purposes of measuring the problem. It may be a relatively simple process to define these terms, or it may take several meetings for Steering Committee members to come to agreement on the ways these terms will be used. However, this is an important step in the assessment process and it should not be short-changed, even if it is challenging. More information on this issue can be found in **Exhibit 2.3** on page 18.

### **Step 4: Create a Data Collection Plan and Appoint the Assessment Work Group Members**

The Steering Committee should determine the types of data to be collected, including crime categories for police incident reports, and designate Assessment Work Group membership. The data will be collected in two separate steps so that the initial data can drive the appropriate collection of later data.

### **Step 5: Data Collection, Part 1**

The Assessment Work Group should begin collecting the data, as follows:

- **Community demographic data.** This process can often be done primarily online, using U.S. Census Bureau data (10–12 hours).

- **Law enforcement data.** This work can be done simultaneously with collecting community data but will take longer. The law enforcement data should be analyzed to ascertain the demographics of identified gang members and the aggregate demographic profiles of suspects/victims in gang incidents. This work will need to be performed by a law enforcement partner (1–4 months, depending on the level and extent of data to be collected).
- **School disciplinary and demographic data.** Demographic and disciplinary data should be collected from target area schools, and the Assessment Work Group should determine what protocols may be required to conduct the student survey in these schools. This also can be done concurrently with Steps 2 and 3 (1–2 weeks to collect and analyze student demographic data; collection of disciplinary data may take longer).
- **Step 6: Plan to Collect the Remaining Data.** Utilizing the data gathered to this point, the Steering Committee should create a plan to collect the remaining data. At this point, the Steering Committee should:
  - Determine where and how community perceptions data will be collected, as well as any possible barriers to collecting this data.
  - Guide collection of additional relevant community demographic data from key agencies on areas of interest, such as substance abuse rates, domestic violence, etc.
  - Create a demographic profile of the types of gang members to be interviewed (using suspect demographics from the law enforcement data) and a plan for conducting these interviews.
  - Create a plan to collect youth (student) and school staff perceptions about gangs. This plan should include a determination of school district policies on student surveys, consent methodology (active or passive), and plans to collect staff perceptions through focus groups, surveys, or interviews.
  - Create a plan for collecting data on current community resources and activities that may serve gang-involved youth and families.
  - Engage a partner to assist with collecting gang member interviews, youth (student) survey data, and school staff perceptions data.
  - Engage partners, as needed, to provide volunteers to collect community perceptions data interviews and/or surveys.

### **Step 7: Data Collection, Part 2**

The Assessment Work Group members should collect the data described above, reporting to the Steering Committee as required and providing updates and requesting assistance as needed. The Research Partner should collect and analyze gang member interviews, school staff perceptions, and youth (student) surveys. Community perceptions surveys/interviews should be collected. If issues arise that may disrupt data collection, the Steering Committee will work to either clear barriers to data collection or design alternative plans (2–6 months).

### **Step 8: Using the Data**

The Assessment Work Group will organize and analyze all of the collected data, being mindful to note areas in which data domains intersect, conflict, and/or correlate. This data, in a user-friendly final product, should be presented to the Steering Committee (1–3 months).

Once the Steering Committee has achieved consensus around the data provided in the Assessment Report, this data can be used for planning purposes and shaping an individualized response to the community's specific gang problems and contributing factors. A discussion of a planning process that can be used for these purposes is found in a separate manual, "Implementing the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model." The remainder of this guide provides a step-by-step process for conducting a comprehensive assessment.