

## Youth Gangs of Rural Texas: College Students Speak Out

by

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### *Abstract*

*This study compares youth activities and juvenile behavior in urban areas to the activities and behaviors of juveniles in rural areas of Texas. The purpose of this research is to examine the activities and characteristics of juveniles in Texas and whether their activities are gang related. Information was gathered and statistical percentages were gathered from the review of the literature and classroom questionnaires at an accredited university's undergraduate and graduate students from areas with a population of <100,000. The findings from this study were as follows. First, gangs do exist in rural areas of Texas. Second, there is no consensus as to the nature of gangs relative to ruralism and urbanism as factors in the creation and development of gangs. Urbanization appears to be the dominant factor. Third, results from surveys of university students confirm that gangs exist in rural areas of Texas.*

### *Introduction*

There is an increasing prevalence of young people drawn into gangs and engaged in gang-like behavior. A common misconception about gangs and gang activity is that it can be found exclusively in urban areas. Research studies have historically shown the existence of gangs and gang activities in major cities in the United States, however, the existence of gangs in rural areas more specifically rural areas in Texas have been an unexplored area. Additionally, the effects of gang activity on the social lives of youth in these areas are also relatively unexplored. It is imperative for law enforcement, criminologist, child psychologist, sociologist and educators to study the existence of gangs in rural areas. Knowledge gaps may exist because of the lack of a variety of theoretical and methodological procedures utilized in order to develop an adequate knowledge base about gangs in rural areas. Nevertheless, there is an indication that gangs do exist in rural areas in the United States.

Gangs are comprised differently in various places, and they are not monolithic in their perspectives and goals. In some cases, gangs are made of members who share some common traits, such as race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, or class. For example, some gangs are exclusively Anglo American, African American or Hispanic American. Other gangs are made of members who do not share such common features. In such case, they consist of a hodge-podge of demographic characteristics such as race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age or class. For example, certain gangs include black, brown and white males and females. In densely populated areas, gang members may belong to several gangs at one time in different parts of the city. These members may range in ages from pre-teen to adult.

Gang activities were once perceived to be in the domain of adults. Today, however, these activities are thought to be more common in the age group of youths. This is especially true when addressing violent activities. Youths who are involved in violence and juveniles who are associated with gangs are getting younger. Violent gangs are found in elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the United States. Since the mid-1980s, youth gangs have existed in some small and mid-sized cities throughout the nation.

### ***Purpose of Research Study***

The purpose of this study is to examine the activities and characteristics of youths and their involvement in actual gangs in rural areas of Texas with population sizes <100,000. These gangs are compared to youth gangs found in urban areas throughout the United States in order to determine their legitimacy. Therefore, a comparative analysis was conducted utilizing data collected from the review of the literature and college students of an accredited university in south Texas. The extent to which gangs of rural areas in Texas exist is determined by testing whether they possess the same profile of gangs (gang names, colors, symbols and activities) found in large urban areas.

The review of the literature helps to establish a theoretical framework on the nature of gangs and the relationship between existence of gangs and urbanization in the formation of attitudes of gang members and behavioral patterns of gangs. It also provides pertinent published information about gangs and gang activities in rural areas of Texas. Consequently, this supports the argument that gangs do exist in rural areas, more specifically rural areas of Texas.

### *Review of the Literature*

The youth gang phenomenon has long been the topic of lengthy discussions among early and current sociological theorists and researchers. Juvenile delinquent gangs have been traditionally linked to urban areas and few scholars have given attention to juvenile gang behavior in rural areas. This study examines the existence of gangs and gang activities in selected rural areas of Texas.

### *What is a Gang?*

The controversial issue on how to define a gang and the characteristics of a gang is problematic. For example, if the term gang is not clearly defined or described, it is unlikely that the issue of gangs can be debated properly. Essentially any discussion about gangs without a commonly agreed definition is insignificant and unmeaningful. The difficulty in meeting a definition or description by scholars causes some trepidation. Definitions offered by scholars appear so relative and varied, that they pose problems in terms of whether those debating are arguing the same point. When the difference between the concept gang and gang-like are not clearly made, there is further confusion

Merry Morash used the term ganglike without reference to delinquency because “Morash wished not to lose the chance to investigate the group members’ delinquency independent of their gang affiliation” (Spergel, 1995, p. 25-26). Klein and Cheryl L. Maxson (1989) stated that definitions of gang in the 1950s and 1960s were etiological and based on liberal social reform perspectives. From 1970s to 1990s, definitions of gangs were more descriptive, more reflective of greater community fear, and more socially conservative.

Catherine H. Conly (1993) advocated the abandonment of the term gang altogether because it is not used commonly by youth themselves. According to Conly, it is a meaningless label thrown about by the adult community. Maurita Harney (1984) did not advocate abandoning the term gang even though Harney pointed out that logically gang is identified by pointing at it. G. Larry Mays (1997) stated that “I can’t define ‘gang’, but I know one if I see one” (p. 4).

Defining the term gang, based on different political philosophies, creates descriptive problems. Nevertheless, there is some consensus on how a gang behaves. Sandra Gardner (1993) indicated that it is unanimous that delinquency distinguishes a gang from other organizations of young people. A gang participates in activities that violate the law.

When ideologies, such as conservatives, liberals, and moderates, are used to define gangs, confusion is compounded. The literature not only indicates that there is a lack of consensus of the definition; it also suggests a dividing of the mind on the understanding of the origin and definition of gangs. Finally, if gangs can be defined by a concrete definition, rather than by “knowing one if you see one,” then an attempt to provide an understanding of the nature of gangs is not frivolous. This study uses Malcolm W. Klein’s (1971) technical definition of gang, by which a gang refers to

*any denotable... group [of adolescent and young adults] who are (a) generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of [illegal] incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or enforcement agencies (p. 1428).*

### ***Characteristics of Gangs***

Numerous scholars have made contributions to the study of youth gangs by focusing on the socio-demographic characteristics of gangs. According to Gardner (1993), you can not thoroughly study gangs without examining the issue of age. Similarly, Ball and Curry (1993) maintained that there is a general consensus that gangs are characterized by a unique set of characteristics; however age is a significant characteristic and influence on youth and juvenile gang behavior.

L.T. Winfree, T.V. Bäckström and G.L. Mays (1994) adopted social learning theory to explain youth gang behavior. They suggested that the use of sanctions at early ages was important in developing normative youth behavior. Accordingly, certain behaviors were rewarded and punished. This theory has been used by a number of scholars to explain adolescent behavior concerning smoking, drug and alcohol use (Akers et al., 1979; Winfree and Griffiths, 1983; Winfree, Griffiths & Sellers, 1989).

I. Spergel (1989) and a number of other scholars have identified age as an important variable explaining youth gangs (1989: 56). Today, gang activity is perceived to be primarily or almost exclusively a teenage, if not a juvenile, phenomenon. C. Covey, S. Menard and R. Franzere, (1992) and Miller (1975, 1982) found that the traditional age range of gangs members in most cities was 8 to 21 or 22 years. Shelden, Tracy and Brown (1997) addressed both issues of gang age and duration. They believed the length of time a particular gang exists was a function of youth. Vigil (1988), in his research on the duration on gangs, concluded that there is very little research on why gangs cease to exist or why a particular youth leaves a gang at a particular time.

Most studies suggested gang members simply matured out through a process of gradual disaffiliation. Likewise, James R. Lasley (1997) examined whether youth gang members were getting older, and thus, were becoming adult gang members. To test this notion, Lasley gathered self-reported data from 445 active street gang members in Los Angeles. Lasley found that most of the members were adolescents, not adults. Street gangs were primarily youth gangs. Most gang members matured out of the gang before adulthood; therefore, age was a significant factor of gang behavior (p. 434-451).

### *Gangs and Urbanization*

Sociologists have always been interested in the issue of urbanization and ruralization, and city and country life. Urbanism and ruralism have often been associated with polar types that represented different qualities of life. For example, early urban theorists of Europe developed ideal types of societies after rural and urban societies. Many of the theorists had unfavorable views about the impact of urbanization on city life. For instance, Ferdinand Tonnies maintained that society evolved from “*gemeinschaft*” (rural) or community based primary relationships to “*gesellschaft*” (urban) or societal based secondary relationships with worsening social problems. American scholars, such as Charles P. Loomis, had detailed discussions about how urbanization predominated and contributed to an increasing loss of community. Still others, such as Mark Gottdiener and Ray Hutchinson (2000), portrayed society as evolving from rural (stable family traditions) to urban (unstable family styles) and associated the city with subcultures of violence, and it provided breeding grounds for deviant gangs and activities (p. 208).

Some scholars provided less negative views about the city. Parks, Burgess, and McKenzie believed a “city is a state of mind” (cited in Palen, 1997, p. 8). Wirth (1938) defined urbanism as “a way of life” (p. 8). Thus, if a city is a state of mind (attitudinal) and urbanism is a way of life (behavioral), rural residents who are inundated with these dominating are urban personalities living in rural geographical locations. As John J. Palen (1997) indicated, members of society are the products of the social patterns and behaviors of urban environment. Accordingly, Palen seems to have suggested that there may exist an urban area schizophrenia, which is represented by simultaneous economical success and personal alienation and a broad range of ills that portray “the crisis of the city” (p. 10). As argued previously, the urban features of dominant cities may very well be found among rural dwellers of subordinate localities too. Hence, Gottdiener and Hutchinson (2000) devel-

oped a notion that gang-like activities might be a by-product of urban influence in both cities and rural areas. Furthermore, there is irrefutable literary evidence that indicates that youth gangs are popular in urban areas and that they are becoming, to a lesser degree, recognizable in rural areas. Therefore, an urban influence spreads and gangs or gang-related activities are likely to be found in rural areas and small cities as well.

### *The Influence of Urbanization on Youth Gangs*

“What is meant by urbanization?” The question has been addressed by a number of scholars. According to Palen (1997) urbanization is a relatively new invention that through industrialization brought us from ruralization and came to predominate the world. John J. Macionis and Vincent N. Parrillo (1998) maintained that urbanization is the growth of cities and the influence cities has on human life (p. 2). In short, urbanization is a dynamic process that seems to influence life everywhere and it intoxicates life that consumes it. The urban-oriented process and the rapid transformation from a rural to an urbanized world has been much more “dramatic and spectacular” than the population explosion (p. 3). The new urban world provided theorists a rationale for dichotomizing the world into urban and rural societies called “ideal types” or polar models. Today, however, the types may be primarily theoretical and differ more in degrees than in kinds with regard to quality of life, because urbanism as a way of life is prevalent not only in large urban areas and big cities, but also in rural areas and small cities. The rural-urban dichotomy is rapidly becoming obsolete in the United States today.

What is rural life? Robert Redfield (1947) stated that urban life was the opposite of folk society. Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (1996) defines rural as “relating to the country, country people or life, or agriculture” (p. 1026). Urbanization dominates American life. Rural areas are immersed into big city ways because urbanism has not been confined to urban city limits. Therefore, the existence of juvenile delinquent gangs as by-products of urbanization is probable in rural areas.

### *Gangs and Their Activities*

The nature of gangs, their origins, and developments are complex. Many scholars have acknowledged that it is difficult to deal with the concept of gangs. Among these are Walter Miller (1975), Irving A. Spergel (1989) and Ruth Horowitz (1990). Richard A. Ball and G. David Curry (1997) stated that the concept of gangs is according to its user. For example, Curry, Ball and Richard J. Fox (1994) point out more than half a dozen definitional methods of gangs. L. Thomas Winfree Jr., Kathy Fuller, Teresa Vigil, and G.

Larry Mays (1997) and Horowitz (1990) use certain criteria to define and describe youth gangs. They associate gangs with names, identifiable leadership, initiation rituals, identifiable colors, and visual communication. Randall Shelden, Sharon K. Tracy and William Brown (1997) compare gangs to cliques. Influenced by Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (1942), they noted that the most common type of delinquent groups is small companionship group, consisting of two or three boys (Mays, 1997).

### *Theoretical Framework*

What do some of the dominant theories of deviance, such as Howard S. Becker's labeling theory, have to say about gangs? Labeling theory explains how one becomes deviant when some members of a group or society label one as deviant. Becker (1991), a labeling theorist, stated that:

social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying these rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender". The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label (p. 9).

Labeling theory explains how one becomes deviant when some members of a group or society label one as deviant. Shepard (1999) maintained that labeling is all that is required for an act to be deviant. Labeling theory explains the formation of secondary deviance and other forms of delinquency. According to Becker and Shepard, gangs, as a product of labeling, are a creation by others as well as the gang members (1991; 1999). The implication is that society or members of society, as the primary players in the development of gang activities, must be more circumspect and judicial as they toss about the concept gang and gang activities. Also implied is that society and its members are as responsible or more responsible for the creation and spreading of the youth gang phenomenon when they get into the practice of labeling. If labeling is a creation of the mind, then societal members who produced gangs by perceiving them must in reverse foster situations and energy that create more positive views and perceptions about youths. In doing so, youth gangs and gang activities might be curtailed, if not virtually eliminated.

The question of social origin of gangs has engendered a number of theoretical developments. Kai Erickson (1966), another functionalist, took the

Durkheimian view when he used the Puritan experience to enhance the general understanding of deviant behavior. Erickson predicted three things: 1) when a community's definition of itself is threatened, the types of behavior considered deviant will change; 2) the amount of deviance in a community is likely to remain fairly stable over time; 3) all societies have one or more "deployment patterns" by which they regulate the needed supply of deviant persons; and 4) deviance can contribute to the stability and order of society.

Another dominant theory of deviance is the Composition Theory. Composition and sub-cultural theories are unique functionalist perspectives that argue that social disorganization results from the breakdown of the primary group. Composition theory was advanced by Wirth (1938), of the Chicago Schools of Urban Sociology, in an essay entitled "Urbanism as a Way of life." Composition theory provided an explanation for the relationship between urban life styles and environment of particular neighborhoods. Claude Fischer (1975) claimed that the compositional view neglected the special role of cities in social interaction. Life in the city intensified local culture and subcultures. While there was no intrinsic reason that urban life should produce social problems, cities might have a negative effect on individual behavior. Gottdiener and Hutchinson (2000) maintained urbanization itself did not lead to social disorganization. Urbanization increased opportunities that were also exposed to those who committed deviance and to those who had negative effects on one's behavior.

Albert Cohen (1977) explained why gang delinquency occurred most often among lower class youths. The lower class youths rejected rules of success and self-worth from the middle class. The youths created their own status standards that they were able to achieve.

Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1966) suggested that deviance did not always result from the strain created by a discrepancy. They pointed out that deviant behavior was learned through interaction with and observation of others. Youths had the opportunity to learn how to be juvenile delinquents. Although strain theory helped explain delinquency, it did not explain mental illness or drug abuse. Travis Hirschi (1972) advocated control theory based on Durkheim's functionalist view of deviance. Hirschi's theory was founded on the idea that a strong bond between individuals and society exist of fears that deviance will harm the relationships they have with others.

According to Vigil (1998), youth gangs today differ from past gangs based on ethnicity. Mexican and Asian gangs have replaced Polish and Italian ones, and the recent youth gangs have become more lethal and dangerous. Hutchinson and Kyle (1993) maintained that gang identity is important. Gangs often acquired their names from local neighborhoods, streets, or turfs.

Although gangs were often identified by racial or ethnic terms they are sometimes racially or sexually mixed. Gangs who were territorial carried this mentality into the school. Identity through the use of graffiti, colors and symbols are characteristic of youth gangs (Cummings and Monti, 1993).

### ***Methodology***

Data used for this study come from the survey of college students from a university in Texas in 2000. The surveys deal with the existence of youth gangs and gang activities in Texas. The study includes definitions of terms, the use of research questions, research design, data collection instrument, sampling procedure, and data analyses. Important terms are operationally defined. "Gang" is a group or collectivity of persons with a common identity whose members interact on a fairly regular basis in a clique or sometimes as a whole group. "Rural and small city (town) areas" are defined as locales with populations of less than 100,000 people. For the purpose of this study "Urban" is defined as an area larger than 100,000 people. The research questions posed in this study were: (1) Do gangs exist in your community? (2) Is there a relationship between the population size of given areas and the frequency of gang activities? (3) Has the presence of gangs in rural areas and small cities of south Texas changed over time?

### ***Sampling Procedures***

The participants in this study included forty-eight students of undergraduate levels, and of graduate master's degree level from a major university were used in the study. The targeted college students sample involved several college classes composed of all student classifications from freshmen to master degree graduate students. The students were selected if they lived in areas <100,000 population size. The areas were sub-divided into populations of <12,000; 12,001-24,000; 24,001-100,000.

### ***Data Collection Instrument***

The three survey questionnaires, "College Student Survey," "Gang Characteristic Survey," and "1995 National Young Gang Survey" were used as instruments to collect data. The researcher constructed two of the questionnaires. The survey enabled the researcher to gather information such as names of gangs, number of gang members, symbols of gangs, activities of gangs, agency names, cities/towns, counties, ratings of the gang problems, and gang prevention tactics, etc.

### *Data Analysis*

The findings from the data that were gathered from the survey of the literature and selected college students from a major university were analyzed. Data from the literature and college students' surveys were recorded, tabulated and reported. The SPSS program was used to compute percentages concerning gang characteristics. A coding book was designed to organize the information collected. Variables concerning nine entities: cities, counties, populations, number of gangs in city, gang names, number of gang members, gang colors, gang symbols, and gang activities, were used in statistical analysis.

### *Results and Discussion*

In order to validate whether youth gangs and gang activities exist in rural areas in Texas, perceived youth gangs in these areas are compared to established juvenile gangs in urban areas. Data gathered from the survey of the literature, survey of college students and accompanying tables are used to answer three research questions that have been used to guide the research.

#### ***Result: Are there youth gangs in the rural areas and small cities in south Texas?***

The existence of gangs in the area is analyzed on the basis of findings from a survey of college students. Students were given the same survey questionnaires that were administered by mail to selected police departments and law enforcement agencies in rural and small cities areas of south Texas. The purpose for this was to get perspectives on gangs and gang activities from those who are not directly associated with law enforcement agencies. Since law enforcement agencies probably have a particular bent on crime and delinquency, the forty-eight students who were categorized by classifications participated in this survey in order to get a more diverse and balanced view on youth gangs. There were ten freshmen, nine sophomores, nine juniors, ten seniors, five graduates and five N/A's (students who did not answer or who answered only sometimes). These students were also identified with the population sizes to which they reside, <12,000; 12,001-24,000; or 24001-100,000.

Results from composite responses and findings based on students' classifications and sub-population sizes show that a large number of students from all classifications believe there is a prevalence for gangs in their areas.

There is a difference in students' perceptions about gang existence based on the size of the population of their permanent residence. The smaller the rural and city areas of south Texas, the greater the percentage decreases from

college students who perceive that gangs exist in their communities. The larger the areas, the greater the percentage from students who believe that gangs exist in their communities. The results show most college students from population size <12,000 do not perceive gangs to be very prevalent in their vicinities.

The final results indicate that most student in these residential areas do not believe that gangs and gang activities exist in the areas. One might conclude that there is either no prevalence for gang activities in these areas or that gang activities could exist but does not register highly among the citizens of these vicinities (see Appendix A).

As anticipated, students from residential areas of 12,00-24,00 compared to students from areas <12,000 would have a higher percentage of those who believe gangs existed than those who did not believe there was gangs presence in the areas. The reverse is true in this case. On the other hand, twenty-eight students from all college classifications who are in population areas of 24,001-100,000 represent a strong majority of student, except for freshmen, who believe gangs exist in their areas. However, college students, as a whole, perceive gang activities to exist in their community, with a weaker majority than the law enforcement agencies do. After an analysis of the data, it is concluded that there is a strong consensus based on the findings of the two data resources (the literature and students) that there is prevalence for gangs in rural areas and small cites of south Texas.

***Result: Is there a relationship between the populations size of given areas and the frequency of gang activity?***

From the student surveys, population size seems to have relevance to youth gang activities. The larger the population size in which the students reside, the higher the percentage of students who perceive that youth gangs exist. The only small city area where more students did not perceive gangs to exist is in the smallest population area size of <12,000. Students in all the other population categories perceive that youth gangs existed at more than 50%. These results seem to substantiate the fact that population size of the students' residential areas is related to the perception students have about the existence of gangs. It appears, therefore, that the larger the population size which the students reside, the more likely they will perceive gang activities to exist in their communities. Conversely, the smaller the population size of the students' residents, the less likely they will perceive gangs to exist in their areas (see Appendix A).

The statistics show that in population areas <12,000, most college students do not perceive gangs and gang activities to be very prevalent in their

vicinities. (Table 1.1) shows both student responses by classification and population sizes, and composite student responses and population sizes show consistency with the idea that the smaller the population, the less likely the students will perceive gangs to exist in their place of residence. On whether gangs exist, thirty-one percent of students said gangs do exist, and sixty-nine percent said they do not.

When college students are analyzed based upon classification and population size concerning gangs and gang activities, sixteen students from population areas <12,000 responded. Most freshmen (60%) believe gangs exist in their community. Although the sentiments of the freshmen are high in the affirmative, their perception about gang existence was much less than the beliefs of sophomores (100%) who believe gangs exist in their areas. It is interesting to note that one hundred percent of junior students had just the opposite view of the sophomores. All the juniors believed that no gangs and gang activities existed in their population areas. The senior students who lived in the population areas <12,000 were split half and half in their perception of gangs and gang activities existing in their geographic locations. The perceptions of seniors are more aligned with the views freshmen have on this issue. The six graduate students in population areas <12,000 perceived that gangs or gang activities existed in their hometown areas at a one hundred percent. This percentage may not have much relevance since only one senior responded. Nevertheless, one senior perceived gangs to exist and that can not be dismissed. Also, one student in population areas <12,000 gave a no response as to whether gangs and gang activities existed in its location. It is known whether the student did not know the answer to the question or whether the student knew and chose not to reveal its belief.

In summary, the two of the literature and students, show that population size is related to frequency of youth gang and gang activities. The larger the size of the population, the higher the rate of respondents who believe gangs and gang activities occur.

***Result: Has the presence of gangs in rural areas and small cities Of south Texas changed over time?***

It is difficult to conclude what the college students imply concerning the question whether prevalence for gangs in south Texas change over time. First, the question was not directed to the students per se. However, some implications of a time frame might be determined.

It is commonly accepted that the classification level of students tend to suggest time and age. For example, freshmen tend to be the youngest age cohort and graduate students tend to be the oldest age category. Accepting

this apparent fact, the perception of freshmen would reflect the view of the most recent years. The belief of graduate students would be a reflection of earlier years with the intervening classifications, e.g., sophomores, juniors and seniors representing intervening years and changes. The perceptions of the different classifications of students are concomitant with change over-time. Thus, a timeframe is created about gangs and gang activities. In this regard, it could be stated that the perception of youth gangs change over time because of the view of the student classifications, or age groupings reflect a change in their perceptions. The older the students are and higher the classifications, the more or stronger the view that youth gangs exist. The lower the classifications, the weaker the sentiments regard in gang prevalence or the less likely the students will think that gangs exist in their communities. However, the data concerning population sizes <12,000 leaves a very ambiguous pattern for interpretation.

Student respondents of all classifications are in population areas of 12,001-24,000. No freshmen responded, therefore, no interpretations could be made. The sophomore students did not respond either. The junior students answered the question in the affirmative that gangs or gang activities existed in the area. There are no senior students respondents. One graduate student said that gangs and gang activities existed in the vicinity, and one student who was not classified did not respond to this question.

The remaining questions of the population subdivisions and of the students reveal the same pattern of response as above. The questionnaire items are: "Can you identify any gangs by name? Is there any gang activity in your community? Are gangs in your community identified by a particular color or symbol?" Raw data are indicated in (Table: 1.2).

Twenty-eight students of all college classifications in population areas of 24,001-100,000 responded. Student classification, which has some relevancy to age, reflects significant results. Fewer freshmen (40%) believe gangs and gang activities exist in their areas than not (60%). Sophomores (83%) strongly believe gangs exist. Only seventeen percent do not think this is the case. Juniors (75%) also strongly believe gangs exist in their areas, and only (25%) do not believe this. Seniors (100%) have an even stronger belief than sophomores or juniors that gang exist in their areas. The graduate students, two to one (67%), believe gangs exist in their communities and thirty-three not think so. The two students labeled non-applicable (N/A) in this population group answered 50-50% that gangs exist in their vicinities. Freshman students had the lowest percentage of those who believe gangs and gang activities existed in the areas. However, students from all populations combined have a very high percentage of those who believe gangs

exist and change over time (Table: 1.3).

### **Summary**

A comparative study was done on youth gangs and gang behavior in order to examine the prevalence of gangs and gang activities in rural areas and small cities in Texas. By selecting the definition of Klein (1971) from a long list, characteristics were more clearly delineated that included gang names, members, colors, symbols and activities. Youth gangs were studied by surveying the literature and surveying college students. The surveys of the college students covered an accredited university in south Texas, respectively. An analysis of gangs and gang-like activities was based on data collected from the literature and surveys. The statistical measurement used was percentages calculated with the SPSS program. Tables were provided with the findings.

Although youth gangs have some common characteristics, such as violence, they were otherwise diversified by age and duration, race and ethnicity, sex, gender, status, and class. Violent gang members were becoming younger, and they were even found in elementary schools. Youth groups and activities that fit the definition of Klein for youth gangs actually existed in small cities and rural areas of Texas. Data collected from the two surveys (literature and college students) provided pertinent information that verifies this.

This study indicated that young people "hanging out" was not comparable to gangs and gang activities. The study also found that gang and gang-like violence was not exclusive to urban areas. This myth was perhaps supported by data shortage that may be related to a lack of accurate mass media reporting, half-hearted federal government interest, skewed vision of local law enforcement, and limited existing research and theory.

The review of the literature provided two things: first, a description of the previous research which was relevant to the study; and second, the development of theoretical models to form arguments in this comparative study. For example, sociological and anthropological theorists offered explanations on the origin and development of gangs relative to large cities and urban areas and of small cities and rural areas. Subcultural theorists, who explained the linkage between urban living and social disorganization, related to social life of the urban areas to family traditions turning to alcoholism, robberies, child abuse, and prostitution. To some theorists, the city represented alienation, atomization, social isolation and stress that produced juvenile delinquency in the form of gangs and gang activities. For other theorists, the city was favorably portrayed. This study however, focused on the unfavorable aspect of urbanization and its dominating influence on gangs and gang ac-

tivities in rural areas. The study was somewhat unique because it focused on youth gangs in areas of Texas that had not been studied from the view points of literature and college students in one study. Concerning youth gangs and gang activities in rural areas and small cities in south Texas, three crucial themes were addressed: basic patterns and gangs, relationship between city size and the existence of gangs, and gangs and change over time. In addressing these questions, previous studies were researched and theoretical models were developed. Data were analyzed and the basic themes were considered. Themes one and two were answered in the affirmative. Question three, gang activities were a relative new phenomenon in Texas comparatively speaking.

### *Conclusion*

Throughout the United States there has been a growing concern about the prevalence of gangs and gang activities flourishing as a way of life for far too many young people. This concern was also about perception and reality of youth gangs and gang-like behaviors in society. The difficulties related not only to what was perceived to be unacceptable behavior of a growing number of juveniles, but also to the problem of clearly recognizing and defining what gangs and gang activities really were. Youth gangs and gang activities are becoming more frequent and dangerous to society in general and to youths themselves in particular in both rural and urban areas.

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