

**A Comprehensive Literature Review
of Rural Youth Gangs**

by

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Abstract

Although research on the subject is limited, gangs are now known to exist in rural communities. A comprehensive review of the literature was conducted to determine the prevalence of rural gangs and characteristics that differentiate rural and urban gangs. The origins of rural gangs were also considered. The results indicate that the larger the rural population the more likely gangs are present. Results also show that there are characteristics specific to rural gangs and that the primary origin of the groups is through diffusion of urban members into rural areas.

For decades researchers have been studying youth gangs. Until recently, the issue has been examined as an urban phenomenon. Gangs were thought to be a product of urbanization and big city life (Green, 2005). Researchers have now begun to recognize that gangs are not strictly an urban entity, but are emerging as part of the rural landscape. Police departments, school personnel and others are now recognizing that the safety of rural communities is compromised by youth gangs and research specific to the rural setting is warranted.

Although gangs are now known to exist in rural areas, very little empirical research has been conducted to study this issue. In fact, Evans, et al. (1999) were the first to look specifically at the problem by incorporating a rural and urban sample of male and female gang members into their study (Dukes & Stein, 2003). Research on gangs in small cities and rural areas has been sparse and incomplete and to date, there is no

body of systematic field evidence about gangs in rural communities (Wells & Weisheit, 2001). Even with the lack of formal research, there is emerging evidence that rural gangs exist and that they may be different than their urban counterparts. American street gangs may share some universal characteristics, but they also have regional personalities and behaviors (Valdez, 2001).

It is now apparent that rural America is not escaping the historically urban problems associated with adolescent violence, drug use, and gangs (Evans, Fitzgerald, Weigel & Chvilicek, 1999). For some rural communities the gang activity comes in the form of property destruction from tagging and graffiti or crimes such as drug abuse and theft. For example, the citizens of Hall County Georgia have reported that gang graffiti has caused more problems and cost more money for clean up than ever before (Holmes & Amerling, 2003). However, some rural areas do report serious violence. In 1991, Brent Cooper was murdered in a gang related incident in front of the Dekalb County courthouse. From 1991 to 1996 this once peaceful rural county reported four crack houses, three drive by shootings and two gang retaliation murders (Coghlan, 1998).

The purpose of this study is to systematically review the empirical research to identify characteristics of rural gangs. The study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) What is the prevalence of rural gangs? 2) Are there any characteristics that differentiate rural from urban gangs? 3) What are the origins of rural gangs?

METHODS

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to answer the research questions. The review was limited to peer reviewed journal articles and did not include dissertations, newspaper articles, textbooks, editorials or other sources. Sources included were limited to works in the English language and no specific time line was identified. Six databases were searched: Social Services Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Psych Info, Academic Search Premier, and National Criminal Justice Reference Services. The keywords used included rural gang, rural gangs, and "rural gangs." The search of these databases produced 247 initial results. Abstracts and titles of each result were reviewed for relevance to the topic and nine articles were found to meet the criteria. Data was then extracted from those nine articles and recorded on a form created by the author.

RESULTS

The findings of the review are summarized in Table 1 where the categories were derived from the research questions. In the nine studies reviewed, research designs and sampling methods varied. Some projects surveyed students, others questioned police or teachers; each in an attempt to find out more about gangs in rural communities. In most cases the sample size was small.

There was some commonality of theoretical framework. Social disorganization theory, social learning, ecological models and issues of delinquency were drawn upon by several authors. These frameworks provided a foundation for various methodologies.

All of the studies relied on self report questionnaires or a telephone interview with the exception of two. Stoneall (1997) approached the research by conducting interviews using the “snowball” effect. In contrast Wells and Weisheit (2001) compared existing data sources to obtain information. Various statistical analyses informed each study.

Prevalence of rural gangs

Most of the research addressed the prevalence of rural gangs in some way. Of the studies that surveyed high school students, the responses to the questions about the prevalence of gangs varied. After completing their project, Dukes and Stein (2003) found that gang membership was lower for rural school districts. The works by Evans, et al., (1999) found the opposite in that 22% of their rural students reported being in a gang and only 19% of urban students said they were members. Swetnam and Pope (2001) concluded that students were uncertain if gangs were a problem in their own communities. But in rural South New Mexico Mayes, Fuller and Winfree (1994) reported that, of all the students surveyed, rural and urban together, one in five claimed gang membership and one in four expressed interest in gangs.

When police officers were surveyed or interviewed the results also show variation. Swetnam and Pope (2001) discovered that of the 20 police officers who completed their survey, the majority clearly felt that gangs were a problem in their rural community. Weisheit and Wells (2001) conducted telephone interviews with 216 police agencies across 39 states. To be included in the study the agency had to have reported the presence of gangs on the 1997 National Youth Gang Survey. They found that 40% of the police agencies who reported gangs in 1997 still reported gangs three years later. Results from the telephone interviews were broken down by town size. In towns with populations of 20,000 or more,

51 of 88 agencies reported gangs. In towns with populations of 2,500 to 19,999 31 of 97 agencies reported gangs. In communities with populations of less than 2,500, four of 28 agencies reported gangs in their communities. In a separate study Wells and Weisheit (2001) looked at data from the 1996, 1997 and 1998 National Youth Gang Survey and found that the percentage of non-metropolitan police reporting gangs decreased over a three year period. In 1996, 36.9% of non-metropolitan police reported gangs. One year later it fell to 35.3% and for 1998 it decreased again to 29.9%.

In 2003, Green surveyed police and found that in towns of less than 12,000, six officers said gangs exist in their community while two said gangs do not exist. In towns of 12,000 to 24,000 all of the officials reported a presence and in communities with populations of 24,001 to 100,000 nine of ten law enforcement officers acknowledged gang presence (Green, 2003). In her most recent study, Green determined that the larger the rural populations, the higher the rate of individuals who believe gangs and gang activity occur (Green, 2005).

Stoneall (1997) approached the issue by combining responses of students and police about gang prevalence. The project looked at various rural school districts and asked interviewees to estimate the number of gang members in their area. The estimates ranged from just a few to as many as 90 gang members. The study also reported that 80% of police interviewed believed that gangs were present and active in their jurisdictions.

Characteristics of rural gangs

Seven of the nine articles identified characteristics specific to rural gangs. Dukes and Stein (2003) reported that male gang members from rural areas reported lower bonds with school than urban counterparts and females reported a greater use of common drugs than did urban peers. Rural male members indicated increased use of hard drugs and greater possession of guns and other weapons and, adolescents both in, and out of gangs, indicated being less afraid of violence than urban teens. Additionally, rural females indicated more self derogation than urban girls. Finally, the use of hard drugs was found to be higher overall in rural gang members.

Evans et al. (1999) conducted a survey questionnaire of rural and urban 7th to 12th grade students. They discovered that overall, urban students had more friends involved in gangs, felt more threatened, reported more concern for their personal safety and noted more violence

in their schools. When the results were separated for gender it was found that rural female gang members were less likely to be in a minority, reported more friends in gangs, had a higher level of school involvement and significantly more emotional stability than their urban counterparts. Rural male gang members reported having more friends in a gang, being in more physical fights, having fewer minority members and being more likely to live in biological and/or step parent homes than the urban male gang members.

Wells and Weisheit (2001) compared sets of existing data from the police responses to the National Youth Gang Survey over three years time. Metropolitan police jurisdictions indicated a stable *presence* of gangs whereas non metropolitan jurisdictions indicated a stable *absence* of gangs. Metro areas had an association between the presence of gangs, changes in the unemployment rate and the percentage of manufacturing jobs. These factors were not found in the non-metro areas. Economic deprivation had empirical support in accounting for metropolitan gangs but non metropolitan gangs were actually more strongly linked to economic prosperity. The percentage of Hispanic population was important in metro areas but was less related to non metro areas and the presence of more high school graduates actually increased the likelihood of gangs in rural communities. In another study, Wesheit and Wells (2001) reported again that urban gangs are usually associated with economic decline whereas, economic growth and prosperity encouraged the appearance of gangs in non-metropolitan areas.

Mayes et al. (1994) surveyed high school students to identify specific characteristics of rural gangs. They found that the urban school district had higher rates of vandalism and other crimes than did the rural school district. Stoneall (1997) reported that rural police saw the gangs in their area as different from urban gangs in that they did not see gang related murders and that their problems were not as bad as the gang problems in the city. Whereas Green (2003) surveyed 21 rural law enforcement gang units and found that police reported similarities in rural and urban gang activity including tagging, vandalism, graffiti, burglaries, criminal mischief, drug trafficking, assaults, drive by shootings, and murder. The study noted that the difference between rural and urban gangs may be the decreased frequency of these activities occurring in rural areas.

Origins of rural gangs

Five of the nine studies identified possible origins of rural gangs. Evans et al., (1999) found exposure to satellite TV and the internet accelerated the influence of urban culture on rural adolescents, thus exposing them to gang ideology. The study also reported that there did not seem to be a significant difference in how long the rural and urban students had lived in their communities, discounting the idea that transplanted urban gang members are the main origin of rural gang activity. Similarly, Wells and Wesheit (2001) found the most consistent indicators of gangs in non-metro areas to be the social stability and the composition of the population. Modest support for the idea that gangs spread into rural areas by diffusion was reported. And, interestingly, they noted that areas with the most residents working outside the county were less likely to report a presence of gangs, concluding that people who are willing to drive to another county to work are highly invested in, and committed to, their home community. Because of that stability gangs were not likely to occur (Wells & Wesheit, 2001).

Swetnam and Pope (2001) determined the origin of rural gangs by surveying students, teachers and police. They found that 42% of students felt gangs developed because of a lack of positive activities in the community for young people, 19.7% felt they developed because of a lack of support for young people and 15.6% of students felt gangs developed because of recruitment efforts by gangs from other areas. Of teachers surveyed, 65.5% felt that gangs developed from a lack of positive activities and 58.6% felt it was because of poor parental guidance. Similarly, 27.7% of police indicated that gangs form due to a lack of positive activities, 20% felt it was due to recruitment from outside gang members, 20% believed the cause was kids need for support and 33.3% felt gangs develop because of poor parenting. All three groups believed that the main reason kids join gangs is for friendships/acceptance and status/popularity.

When Weisheit and Wells (2001) interviewed 216 police agencies by telephone they found mixed results regarding why gangs were developing in rural areas. A few of the jurisdictions interviewed felt that all gang members were from other towns, but in the strictly non-metro areas the majority felt gang members were local kids. When police were asked to rank why gangs members might move into rural areas results showed that 86% believed they came with family, 46% felt it was to avoid the police and 41% said they felt gangs moved in to expand their drug market. Whereas, 33% of police believed gangs moved in to engage in

other illegal activities and 30% felt the origin was from urban gang members trying to escape the city gangs by moving to a rural area. Another response recorded was the belief that the local youth learn from urban youth about gang culture.

In 1997, Stoneall identified three essential origins of rural gangs. The first being diffusion. The study indicated that 33% of the police interviewed felt that gangs chose the rural territory, 42% felt that the gang members or their families were trying to escape urban gangs and thus migrated to rural areas and 9% felt they had been forced out of other areas. The study indicated that 33% believed the origin of gangs in the county was due to placement of gang members in local foster homes and 33% felt it was due to increased mobility through cars. The second significant reason given for the development of gangs was structural origin of the community. Thirty three percent of the police from the county felt gang development was due to a population increase and 33% felt it was due to industrialization. Interestingly, 42% saw the origin as an influx of Hispanic residents in the community. Finally, the third factor associated with the origin of gangs was other community influences. Notably 42% of the police felt gangs developed in the community because of poor parenting or bad homes, 33% felt it was because of a lack of activities for kids to do, 25% said it was because the courts and schools don't do enough to curb the problem and 25% felt it was due to a media influence.

DISCUSSION

The current evidence is limited by small sample sizes. It is clear that larger scale studies and broader samples would add to the level of scientific evidence available. Furthermore, limited geographic areas were investigated for evidence about rural gangs. With the exception of two studies (Wesheit & Wells, 2001, Wells & Wesheit, 2001), the samples did not include data from the Midwestern or Eastern regions of the United States. Additionally, limitation is noted in that the studies used interviews and surveys to collect data. This allows for the potential risk of generating misleading information. Among those risks are; the tapping of only respondents who are accessible and cooperative, the possibility of respondents feeling special and thus giving artificial responses, the proneness of subjects to agree with positive statements, vulnerability of surveys to over-rater or under-rater bias, tendency for some respondents to give consistently high or low ratings and the potential for biased reactions based on the interaction, positive or negative, between the interviewer and the respondent (Isaac & Michael, 1997).

Finally, the evidence is limited without a clearly identified theoretical perspective from which to study the issue (Wells & Wesheit, 2001). Progress is being made in understanding the problem and research about rural gangs is being conducted. The evidence from this study indicates that gangs are present in rural areas and have specific characteristics which differentiate them from urban counterparts. Rural gangs appear to originate primarily from diffusion of urban members into growing rural regions. Reasons for the diffusion vary and need to be further explored.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

Three studies (Swetnam & Pope, 2001; Green, 2005; Green 2003) agreed that the larger the rural population size, the higher the prevalence of gangs and gang activity. However, two studies (Wells & Weisheit, 2001; Weisheit & Wells, 2001) suggest that gangs in rural areas do not remain stable over time. Certain characteristics are now identified which differentiate rural from urban gangs. Finally, the primary origin of rural gangs was found to be diffusion, for various reasons, of gang members from urban areas to rural communities (Evans et al.,1999; Wells & Weisheit 2001, Swetnam & Pope, 2001; Stoneall, 1997).

The problem of youth gangs in rural areas should be taken seriously. It can affect the community at many levels. At the individual level the gang member and their victims are affected. Families are impacted as they struggle to manage their children who are involved in a gang. At a broader level, schools, law enforcement agencies, juvenile justice systems, social service agencies and the courts are all involved in addressing the problem. In short, an entire community can suffer when youth gangs take hold. Rural communities need to be aware of the issues surrounding gang activity and membership so they are prepared to suppress and/or prevent the problem.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this review indicate that gangs are no longer a strictly urban problem. Individuals in rural areas need to understand gang related issues and interventions, just as their urban counterparts. Additionally, the need for further research into rural gangs is evident. While it is a long standing social problem, it is a relatively new phenomenon in many parts of rural America. Practitioners need to understand the issues, policy makers need to recognize the problem, and researchers need to focus on identifying the differences between rural and urban gangs so specific intervention strategies can be developed and tested in rural areas.

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