

Examining the Demographics of Street Gangs in Wichita, Kansas

by

Dr. Gregg W. Etter Sr. ,Ed.D.

and

Warren G. Swymeler B.S.

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Abstract:

There has been much supposition about just who is a gang member. In this study, the demographic characteristics of known gang members in a large mid-western city are examined to determine gang affiliation, race, sex and age of gang members. By obtaining this knowledge it is hoped that better prevention strategies can be developed.

Introduction:

The concept of who is participating in a gang and the times during their lifetime that they participate in this type of criminality has been the basis of much study by criminologists over the last century. Most criminologists and other researchers that study gangs would make the argument that most gang members fall into the age range of 12-25 with gang recruitment dropping to ages as young as 9 or 10 (Mallory, 2007; Sheldon, Tracy & Brown, 1997; Huff, 1996; Klein, 1995; Goldstein, 1991). This has been the traditional view since Frederick Milton Thrasher's 1927 study of gangs in Chicago. Thrasher (2000) observed that while a few gang members were in the 6-12 age range (1.48%), the majority of the gang members were in the 12-25 age range and gang membership dropped sharply after the age of 25 (3.13%). Thrasher

argued that there was an evolution from gang child to gang boy to gang man (pg. 25). Knox (2006) observed that while many of the gang members were adolescents, the leaders and many of the members were adults.

In studying the gang problem in America, Huff (1996) noted that:

“Several themes in recent gang research stand out: (a) the number of gangs in this country has increased rapidly in the recent past; (b) gang membership has become more diverse; (c) most gangs are neither very stable in membership or very cohesive; and gangs change, in these and in other respects; (d) the age spread of gang members has increased; (e) drug use and selling by gang members has increased and the impact of drugs on gangs and on communities has been profound; and (f) gang violence, always a problem, has become more widespread and more lethal” (pg. xi).

Wichita, Kansas and Gangs:

Wichita, Kansas is the county seat for Sedgwick County. It is an urban manufacturing community with a population of 344,284 residents according to the 2000 U.S. Census data. The population is somewhat diverse, but largely Caucasian (Caucasian 75.2%, African American 11.4%, Hispanic 9.6%, Asian 4.0%). (<http://www.census.gov/>) The community is served by the Wichita Police Department and the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Department.

Wichita is located on the I-35 corridor that runs from Laredo, Texas; Wichita, Kansas; De Moines, Iowa to Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. U.S. Highway 54 also runs from El Paso, Texas to Chicago, Illinois through Wichita. Because of its' geographical location, available airports, and highways, Wichita has become a frequent route for those that traffic in illegal goods and services. Thus, like many places in the United States, Wichita developed a drug problem. Along with drugs came the people who transport or sell them. During the 1980's, gangs began to be a major factor in the crimes that occurred in Wichita. A 2005 study conducted by the National Drug Intelligence Center and the Midwest HITA found that:

“The distribution and abuse of methamphetamine and crack cocaine are the most significant drug problems in Wichita, and are often associated with violent and property crime.”

They went on to state:

“Hispanic and African American street gangs and local independent dealers are the principal retail distributors of illicit drugs in Wichita, and they often commit violent crimes to protect drug supplies and distribution territories.”

In order to investigate gang related crimes, it was necessary to identify gang members. A reliable method of identification of suspected gang members was needed to develop a knowledge base to investigate the complex relationships in an organized crime or gang crime case to develop probable cause in conspiracy and R.I.C.O. type investigations. Therefore specific criteria were adopted by the Wichita Police and the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Department that must be used before a suspect can be classified as a gang member. The criteria are as follows:

Criteria for Gang Member Identification and Other Groups:

“Note: An individual must meet two (2) of the following criteria to be documented as a gang member. Same applies to other hate groups.

1. When an individual admits membership to a gang/hate group and displays knowledge of gang activities consistent with such membership.
2. When reliable informant identifies an individual as a gang member/hate group.
3. When an informant of previously untested reliability identifies an individual as a gang member and it's corroborated by independent information.
4. When an individual resides in or frequents a particular gang's area and affects their style or dress, use of jewelry, symbols or tattoos.
5. Individual, who has not been previously identified as a gang member/hate group, has been arrested several times in the company of identified gang/hate group members for offenses which are consistent with gang activity.
6. When there are strong indications that an individual has a close relationship with a gang but does not exactly fit the above criteria, he/she shall be identified as “gang/hate group associate.” (SGSO Form PS-1356)

Both the Wichita Police Department and the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Department joined with local school officials to develop strategies to combat the spread of gangs in the school system. D.A.R.E. programs were implemented in almost all elementary schools and school resource officers (S.R.O.'s) were assigned to both middle and high schools. Uniforms were adopted by some middle schools in an effort to eliminate gang colors being worn.

Research Questions:

1. What are the demographic characteristics of identified gang members in Wichita, Kansas?
2. How have these characteristics changed in the ten year period between 1996-2006?
3. Are gang members staying in gangs over a long period of time?
4. What are the implications of any changes in the demographics of gang membership in Wichita?

Methodology:

This is a descriptive study. Master gang lists of identified gang members compiled by the Wichita Police Department and the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office, were examined for the years 1996 and 2006. In order to be placed onto the master gang list, a suspect had to meet established criteria. Gang members who showed no activity for three years were purged from the list. Only identified gang members were counted; no gang associates were included in the count. The data obtained from these lists was used to form the basis for a demographic comparison of identified gang membership in the years 1996 and 2006.

Results:

Identified Gang Members:

Gang	1996	# SETS	2006	#SETS
Crips- LA Based	572	39	555	20
Bloods- LA Based	103	15	364	13
Folk- Chicago Based	399	11	574	11
People- Chicago Based	12	3	38	5
Hispanic- Independent	41	4	212	8
Asian- Independent	57	11	96	12
Local White	177	7	162	9
Supremacist	4	3	19	1
Totals	1,365	93	2,020	79

Identified Gang Members: Sex

Gang	1996-Males	1996-Females	2006-Males	2006-Females
Crips- LA Based	548	24	544	11
Bloods- LA Based	99	4	363	1
Folk- Chicago Based	381	18	545	29
People- Chicago Based	12	0	34	4
Hispanic- Independ- ent	41	0	197	15
Asian- Independ- ent	52	5	95	1
Local	177	0	161	1
White Suprem- acist	4	0	19	0
Totals	1,314	51	1,958	62

Identified Gang Members: Age

Gang	Range of Ages 1996	Average Age 1996	Range of Ages 206	Average Age 2006
Crips- LA Based	12-31	20.47	15-41	28.09
Bloods- LA Based	14-26	19.69	17-38	26.03
Folk- Chicago Based	12-33	18.51	15-38	24.59
People- Chicago Based	17-24	19.58	19-46	27.63
Hispanic- Indepen- dent	14-25	18.59	16-36	21.51
Asian- Indepen- dent	15-27	20.59	16-37	25.34
Local	15-30	21.46	17-43	32.47
White Suprem- acist	17-22	19.50	20-47	31.15
Totals	13-33	20.03	15-41	26.59

Identified Gang Members: Race/Ethnicity 1996

Gang	African American	Asian	Native White Amer.	Hispanic	
Crips- LA Based	481	38	1	45	7
Bloods- LA Based	103	0	0	0	0
Folk- Chicago Based	154	2	1	35	207
People- Chicago Based	2	0	0	3	7
Hispanic- Indepen- dent	0	0	0	0	41
Asian- Indepen- dent	0	56	0	0	1
Local	172	0	0	4	1
White Suprem- acist	0	0	0	4	0
Totals	912	96	2	91	264

Identified Gang Members: Race/Ethnicity 2006

Gang	African American	Asian	Native Amer.	White	Hispanic
Crips- L.A. Based	473	37	3	39	3
Bloods- L.A. Based	349	1	0	13	1
Folk- Chicago Based	234	3	4	37	296
People- Chicago Based	5	0	1	16	16
Hispanic- Independent	2	1	0	8	201
Asian- Independent	0	96	0	0	0
Local	156	1	0	4	1
White Supremacist	0	0	0	19	0
Totals	1,219	139	8	136	518

Five Largest Gangs in Wichita in 1996:**1996 Top Five Gangs, Their Affiliation and Membership Size**

Ranking	Gang	Affiliation	1996 Membership
1	Neighborhood Crips	Crips	222
2	Vato Loco Boys	Folk	198
3	Insane Crips	Crips	132
4	Junior Boys	Local	93
5	Black Gangster Disciples	Folk	82

Five Largest Gangs in Wichita in 2006:**2006 Top Five Gangs, Their Affiliation and Membership Size**

Ranking	Gang	Affiliation	2006 Membership
1	Neighborhood Crips	Crips	277
2	Vato Loco Boys	Folk	249
3	Black Gangster Disciples	Folk	129
4	Original Wichita Villain Bloods	Bloods	121
5	SUR 13	Hispanic	108

Findings:

1. Gang membership is growing in Wichita. The overall membership of gangs in Wichita increased by 47.98% over a 10 year period from 1,365 to 2,020 identified gang members.

2. While gang membership is increasing, the actual number of gang sets decreased from 93 in 1996 to 79 in 2006. This represented a decrease of 15% in the number of sets. However, this mainly represented a consolidation as the average number of members in a set increased from 14.67 per set in 1996 to 25.56 per set in 2006.

3. Gangs are changing. As a result of this consolidation and other unrelated factors, some sets decreased in membership (i.e. Insane Crips from 132 to 68, Junior Boys from 93 to 47). Some sets disappeared entirely. A few new sets popped up to take their places.

4. The average age of gang members in Wichita increased from 20.03 years old to 26.59 years old. These findings are consistent with the National Youth Gang Center Survey (2006) which observed that: "Law enforcement agencies report a greater percentage of adult (18 and over) gang members compared to juvenile (under 18) gang members." In 2006, 476 (34.87%) of

the original 1,365 identified gang members remained active in gangs. However 61 of the 476 (12.81%) had changed the gang that they were a member of the group that changed memberships between sets was evenly split between staying in a set with the same affiliation (i.e. crips, bloods, folk, people, etc.) (n=30) or changing to a set with a different affiliation (n=31).

5. Identified Gang Members are overwhelmingly males. While the number of identified male gang members increased between 1996-2006. The number of identified female members remained static. There were a couple of all female sets, but their overall numbers were very small. These findings are also consistent with the NYGC Survey (2006).

6. Although all racial groups are represented, gang membership in Wichita does not reflect the demographics of the community at large. The findings are consistent with data collected from the National Youth Gang Center Survey (2006) as to racial distribution of gang members. The NYGC Survey found that: "Across all area types, the majority of law enforcement agencies report that African American/Black and/or Hispanic/Latino youth predominate among documented gang members." (NYGC, 2006).

Limitations of the Study:

1. Only identified gang members were included in this study.
2. No access to criminal records was available for this study.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations:

Gangs continue to be an increasing problem in Wichita, Kansas. Gang membership is increasing. The actual number of gang sets appears to be lowering as the gangs consolidate membership. A substantial number of gang members (34.87%) are remaining active in gangs for over 10 years. The affect of the large amount of parolees and probationers being assigned to Sedgwick County by the State of Kansas on gang membership is unknown, but would be the object of further study.

In the period from 1996 to 2006, the strategies adopted by the Wichita Police Department, Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office and local boards of education in relation to anti-gang activities appear to be working up to the middle school level (children >15). At the high school level (children >15), the strategies begin to have much less affect on youth joining gangs. New anti-gang strategies need to be examined in these areas. The fight against gangs and gang crime can only be successful with continued cooperation and open communication between all of the agencies involved. Adding additional S.R.O.'s in the high schools and the addition of such programs as G.R.E.A.T. should be considered. Funding for these additional S.R.O.'s

could be negotiated with the school boards, who have proved to be receptive of this type of cooperation in the past.

With the high percentage of gang members remaining active in the gang for ten years or more (34.87%), it becomes evident that these older members are providing adult leadership to what many have viewed as a youth problem. Therefore, law enforcement would do well to consider targeting these older gang members for attention by not only the gang unit, but the career criminal unit as well. After ten years of criminality, a large number of such individuals would have the prerequisite felony convictions to warrant such attention.

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About the Authors:

Dr. Gregg W. Etter Sr. Ed.D. is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Central Missouri in Warrensburg, Missouri. He served for 29 years with the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office in Wichita, Kansas, retiring as a Lieutenant. Dr. Etter earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Wichita State University. He earned his doctorate degree from Oklahoma State University. He is rated as a gang expert by the National Gang Crime Research Center.

Warren G. Swymeler B.S., is a graduate student at the University of Central Missouri. He earned his Bachelor's degree from Truman State University and is currently working on his Master's degree at the University of Central Missouri.