

## Understanding Gangs in New Jersey

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Gangs and the spread of gang culture are a serious threat to municipalities in the State of New Jersey. In assisting policy makers to understand the depth of gang involvement and the environment in which gangs operate, the New Jersey State Police has collected detailed information about gangs from virtually every municipality in the state. Most recently, their 2007 survey marks the third gang survey in the past six years. The report, issued by the New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety's Division of the New Jersey State Police Intelligence Section, suggests that a wider awareness of New Jersey's gang environment is a crucial prerequisite in mobilizing support for a broad array of long overdue policies aimed at addressing the causes, symptoms and effects of gang presence in our communities. Current and accurate information is a key aspect of gaining acceptance and support for government action.

The 2007 Street Gang Survey contains responses from 562 of New Jersey's municipalities regarding a gang presence or absence in their communities. The following narrative captures a portion of the report. You can read the report in its entirety at: [www.njsp.org/info/pdf/njgangs-survey-2007.pdf](http://www.njsp.org/info/pdf/njgangs-survey-2007.pdf).

The reported gang presence in New Jersey is on the rise. In the 2004 survey, 33% of respondents reported the presence of street gangs, while in 2007, that number increased to 43%. Almost six New Jersey municipalities of every ten (58%) reporting a street gang presence stated that gang activity had increased within the past twelve months. The gang with the largest majority in the State was the Bloods street gang, with 87% of municipalities reporting this particular gang in their jurisdiction. Other gangs with a significant presence throughout New Jersey were the Latin Kings, Crips, MS-13, Pagans Motorcycle Club and Neta.

Although there is a perceived notion that gangs are an urban problem, this was not supported by the municipal law enforcement agencies that responded to the survey. Gang presence is reported in dozens of rural and suburban municipalities throughout the State. According to survey results, almost seven out of every ten New Jerseyans live in a municipality where gangs can be found. The belief that gangs and gang violence only occurs in our cities can be detrimental in generating support for anti-gang initiatives.

Another misconceived notion is that gangs are associated with violent crime. In fact, dramatic or extremely violent gang crime constitutes a small proportion of total crime attributed to gang members in New Jersey. Most of the crimes attributed to gang activity involve crimes of opportunity and emotional impulse: such as simple assault, shoplifting, burglary and auto theft. Out of the 32 municipalities that reported occurrences of gang homicides within the past year, most reported one or two incidents. However, the municipalities that reported gang homicides were more likely to: be cities, report the presence of several gangs, report large numbers of gang members and report a wide variety of gang crime.

An additional aspect noteworthy for planning municipal anti-gang initiatives was the identification of three inter-county gang clusters throughout the State. The clusters showed groups of contiguous municipalities with a reported gang presence. Survey results showed that New Jersey has three sizable cross-county clusters of gang presence. The largest cluster stretches diagonally across the State from Cumberland County in the South Region to Union County at the northern fringes of the Central Region. It flanks the I-295/I-95 highway corridor and encompasses northern Cumberland County, the north and east of Gloucester County, almost all of Camden County and western Burlington County in the southern portion of the State. This cluster connects to northern New Jersey through a chain of municipalities in southern Mercer County, eastern Somerset County, virtually all of Middlesex County and southern Union County. It also extends eastward in the Central Region from Middlesex County to the Bayshore region of Monmouth County and from northeastern Burlington County to southern Monmouth and northern Ocean counties.

The second large cluster of gangs is centered in the North Region, spanning portions of southeastern Essex County, southern Hudson and Bergen counties and eastern Passaic County. According to the report, for all practical purposes the cluster is linked with the South and Central Region clusters described above via the City of Elizabeth in Union County. The North Region also contains a smaller cluster of municipalities with gangs, centered at the juncture of Morris, Warren and Sussex counties. The inverse of the gang clusters are areas where no presence of gangs was reported within the jurisdiction. All of those areas were predominantly rural or exurban areas of New Jersey.

The mention of gang clusters throughout the State further illustrates the importance of sharing services and sharing information with neighboring municipalities to bolster the efforts of eliminating gang presence. Law enforcement planning for anti-gang initiatives should extend beyond current municipal and county-wide programs in the event that gangs in New Jersey become better organized and link with neighboring municipalities and counties.

The Bureau of Justice Assistance, through the U.S. Department of Justice, has two noteworthy grant programs to assist municipalities with gangs and gang related crimes. The first is the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program. G.R.E.A.T. is a school-based, law enforcement officer instructed classroom curriculum, and its primary objective is prevention, as it is intended as an immunization against delinquency, youth violence and gang membership. G.R.E.A.T. lessons focus on providing life skills to students to help them avoid delinquent behavior and violence as a solution to problems. The previous solicitation for funding was released in October of 2007. When it becomes available, the next application period for funding will be posted at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/grant/great.html](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/grant/great.html). Until then you can learn more about the G.R.E.A.T. program at [www.great-online.org/](http://www.great-online.org/).

The second program offered through the Bureau of Justice Assistance is Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN). This is a nationwide network designed to create safer neighborhoods by reducing gun violence and gun crime, and sustaining that reduction. Collaborative task forces of federal, state and local law enforcement, along with community members, implement PSN initiatives within their district. Within the PSN program, there is dedicated funding to support new and expanded anti-gang prevention and enforcement efforts. Anti-Gang Initiative funds enhance PSN task force efforts to combat gangs by building on the effective strategies and partnerships developed under PSN. The latest solicitation for funding was in May of 2007. For more information you can visit their website at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/grant/psn.html](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/grant/psn.html).

Municipal leaders concerned with gang related problems in their community should also visit the National Youth Gang Center's (NYGC) website at [www.iir.com/nygc/](http://www.iir.com/nygc/). The NYGC lists best practices to address community gang problems and provides information on understanding the local youth gang problem along with its origins, potential causes and contributing factors. This information assists in the development and implementation of effective gang prevention, intervention and suppression strategies.

It's important for the health of your community to get all the facts on gangs and gang violence in your municipality as well as in neighboring municipalities. Eliminating misconceptions and understanding current trends is imperative in developing successful anti-gang initiatives and programs. For more information on New Jersey's Gang Awareness Initiative, visit the Office of the Attorney General, Juvenile Justice Commission's website at: [www.nj.gov/oag/jjc/gangs.html](http://www.nj.gov/oag/jjc/gangs.html).

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