

York County Gang Prevention Initiative

Fall Needs Assessment

2008

Penn State York Community & University Partnership



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Introduction

In 2007, a group of concerned citizens, together with representatives of law enforcement agencies, human service agencies and volunteer organizations met a number of times over the next twelve months to investigate the feasibility of facilitating community-based services and interventions designed to reduce youth gang activity in York County, Pennsylvania. This group, The York County Gang Prevention Initiative agreed that an initial assessment of existing conditions should be carried out to determine: 1.) perceptions of need in regard to the prevention and remediation and, 2.) the gaps, if any, between perceived need and current services available in York County.

The group secured funding for the project from the Route 222 Corridor Anti-Gang Initiative, and commissioned the Penn State York Community & University Partnership to conduct the assessment.

Method

The committee agreed that for the purposes of the assessment, the presence of youth gang issues in the County could be assumed. For the purposes of this project a “gang” refers to a street-based group of more than two adolescents or young adults whose identity includes engaging in illegal activities. Further, the committee agreed that in the presence of limited time and resources, the assessment should be somewhat sharp, narrow, and focused on the questions of community perceptions and the availability of appropriate services and programs. The assessment contains two major components. The first part consists of a series of semi-structured key informant interviews with a wide range of persons. These persons include members of police agencies, human services staff, clergy, public school personnel, community service agency representatives, and other persons who have direct professional experience with gangs and gang activity. These persons were asked to provide their perceptions of gang issues in the community and the availability of services and programs designed to prevent or reduce the existence and impact of youth gangs in the community. It is important to note that several segments of

the population were not sampled. Community residents, parents, and youth were not included in the survey. The perceptions and opinions of these very important groups should be assessed at a later time when resources become available.

The second part of the assessment consists of a survey of existing services and programs. These activities include specific gang-related programs, agency collaborations and connections, law enforcement and court-connected services, and community volunteer activities. The survey will also include information about programs that may indirectly operate to reduce and prevent gang activity among community youth. At this point in time the list is not exhaustive, but represents programs that, in the best opinion of the interviewees, are most active and viable in York County. Interviews began on September 22, 2008 and continued through November 30, 2008.

Instruments

Two survey instruments were used as scaffolds for the interviews. The *Community Leader Interview (CLI)*, and the *School Staff Perceptions Interview (SSPI)* are measures developed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) as part of the assessment phase of their Comprehensive Gang Model. In addition to the two survey forms, two additional data gathering instruments from the OJJDP model were used. Responses to the *Community Resource Inventory*, and the *Justice System Program Inventory* included program information from both community and law enforcement agencies.

These instruments were chosen for their ease of use, type of information sampled, and the possibility that further assessment using the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model would be undertaken. If the decision is made to broaden the assessment, the results from these components will fit easily in the expanded evaluation. Copies of all four instruments may be found in Appendix A. Percentage distributions for the CLI and SSPI results are found in Appendices B and C respectively.

Results

The committee met and generated a list of 124 possible contacts for the key informant survey. The criteria for inclusion on the list were broad and consisted mainly

of the opinion that the identified participant would be knowledgeable about youth gang issues within her sphere of expertise. The suggested participants were assigned to categories based on the likely frequency of their day-to-day involvement with youth gang issues, and were invited to participate in the survey through a series of telephone calls from the researcher. The interviews were held in person, and a moderately high degree of confidentiality in responses was pledged. A total of 41 persons from various agencies and backgrounds participated in the assessment.

Community Leader Interview Results

The first item in the Community Leader Interview (CLI) asks whether or not the respondent believes that youth gangs are a problem in the community. Some committee members expressed concern that the level of awareness among the participants would be low. All respondents to the CLI replied in the affirmative; that gangs presented a significant problem for the community.

The second item in the CLI asked the participants to list three specific problems caused by gangs within the community. Each respondent offered three choices, chosen from an array of possible problems listed in the CLI. In addition, respondents were asked to rank their choices: listing the most important problem first, the next most important problem second, and the third most important problem last. The percentage total of all responses from all participants are listed in Figure 1.

Family disruption and school disruption are the problems most mentioned by all respondents. Overall, increases in weapons crimes and crimes against persons were mentioned least often, while concerns about increases in vandalism, graffiti, fear in the community, and property crime occupied the middle ground. Several participants indicated that public awareness varies with time and circumstance. Some respondents suggested that public awareness increases during times of increased criminal activity, but decreases during relatively quiet times.

What kinds of problems to gangs present in your community?

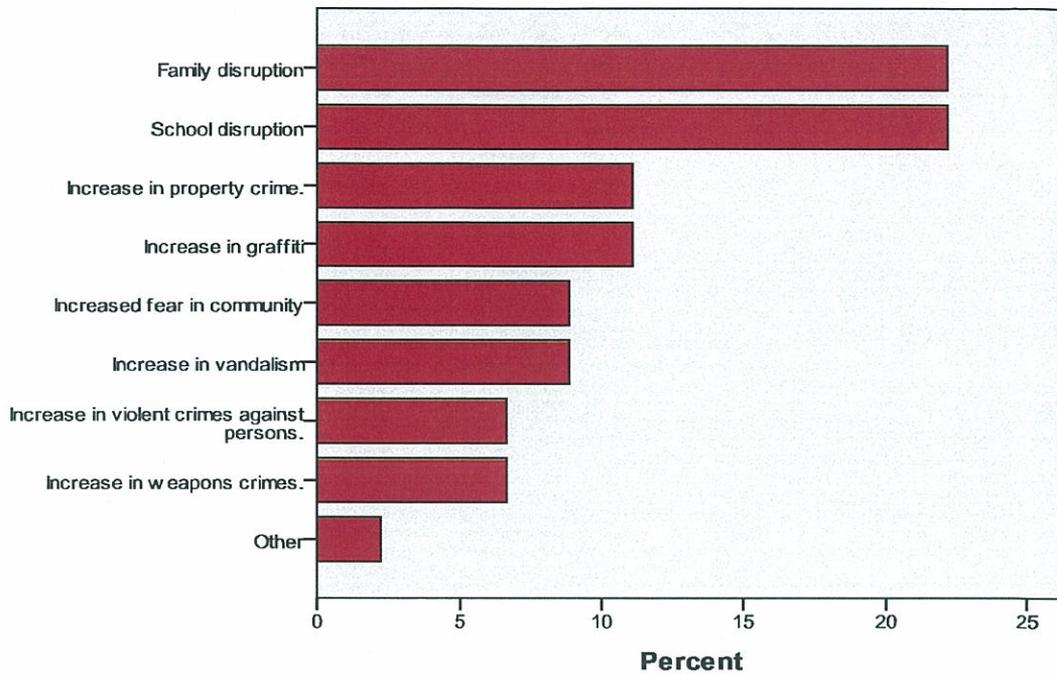


Figure 1.

The distribution of responses that participants ranked as the most important (shown in Figure 2.) are congruent with the distributions of responses reported above.

What kinds of problems to gangs present in your community? (First Rank)

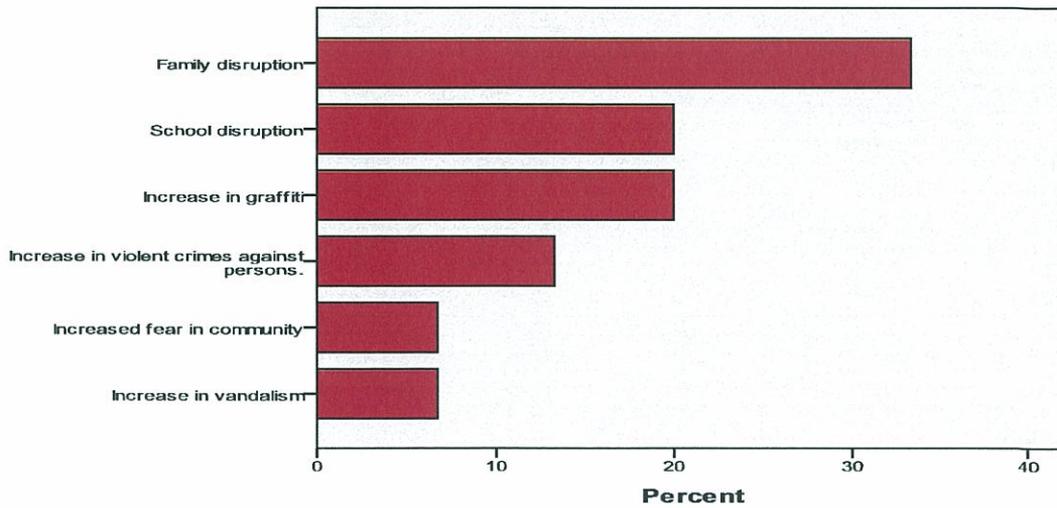


Figure 2.

Again, respondents chose family disruption and school disruption, together with and increase in graffiti as the most important problems posed by gang activity.

Then, in Item 2, the participants were asked to choose the most likely antecedent conditions in the community that might account for gang activity; or produce an environment that would encourage and support the development of gangs. Once again, the respondents were asked to choose three most important reasons, and then rank them according to importance. The percentage total for all responses from all participants are shown in Figure 3.

What reasons account for the presence of gangs in your community?

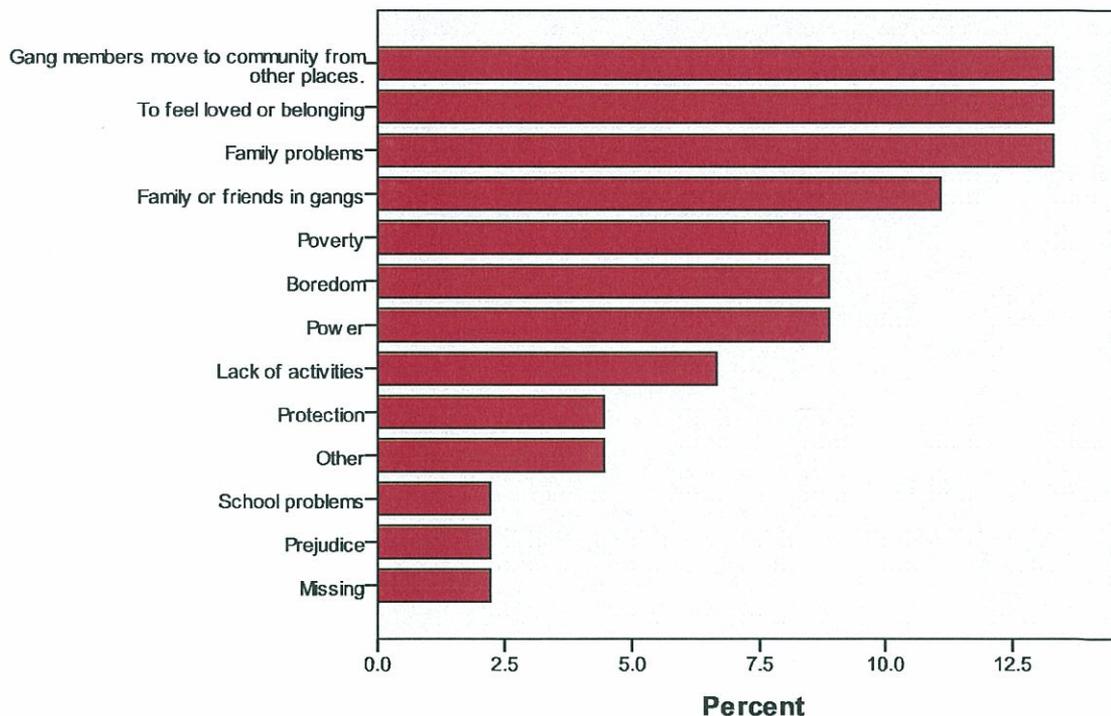


Figure 3.

The three reasons accounting for the presence of gangs in the community most often mentioned by participants were family problems, gang members moving in from other places, and the need to feel loved or belonging. Having family or friends in gangs

also contributed to the success of gang development in the community. Poverty, boredom, the attraction of power, as well as the lack of alternative activities were also seen as affecting the spread of gang activity.

The most important reasons listed by participants include the need to feel loved or belonging, followed closely by poverty and family problems (Figure 4.). Other contributing factors were seen to be less important; suggesting that participants are more likely to believe that a lack of financial and emotional resources lead a young person to choose gang affiliation as a viable way to meet those needs.

**What reasons account for the presence of gangs in your community?
(First Rank)**

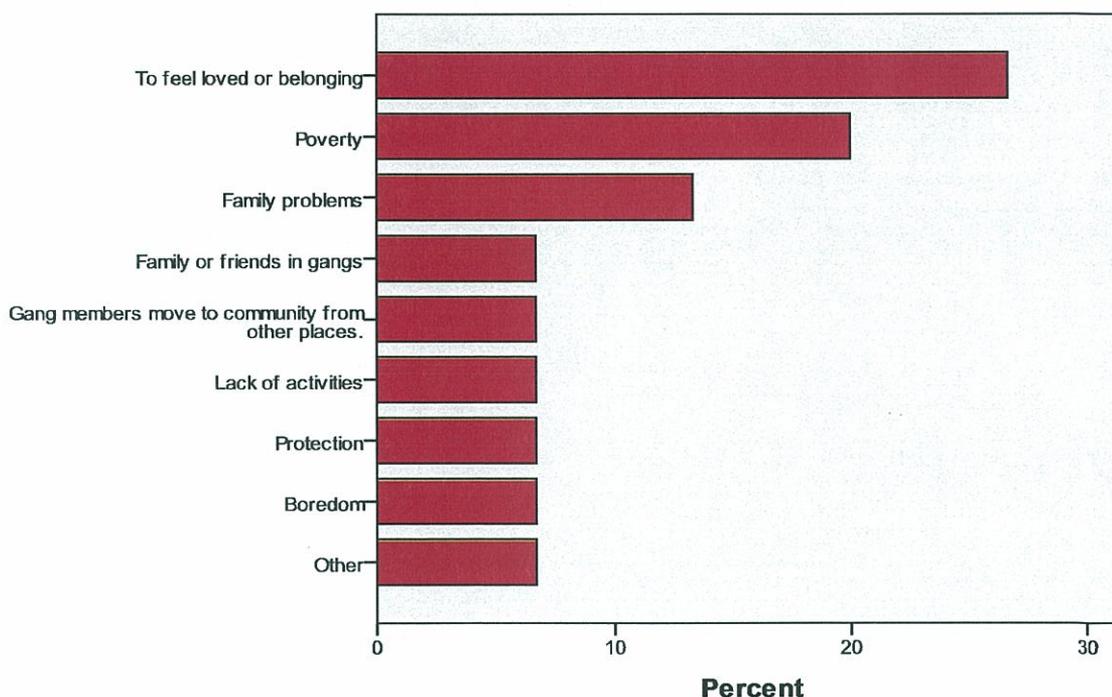


Figure 4.

Participants were asked to comment on the way the community typically responds to the presence of gangs. Some respondents offered many observations, some only a few. All responses were included in the analysis. Informants' perceptions of typical community response was quite varied (Figure 5.) Virtually all participants expressed frustration with the community response, but attributed the reasons to varying reasons. Most respondents indicated that the principal form of response is one of denial. Many of

the respondents used the phrase “head in the sand” to describe their perceptions of community response to gang issues. Participants varied somewhat in their perceptions of community awareness of the problem. Many indicated that community members were aware, but felt unable to have any impact. Others believed that the overall lack of programs and financial resources presented a significant impediment to reducing gang influence.

What is the general community response to gangs?

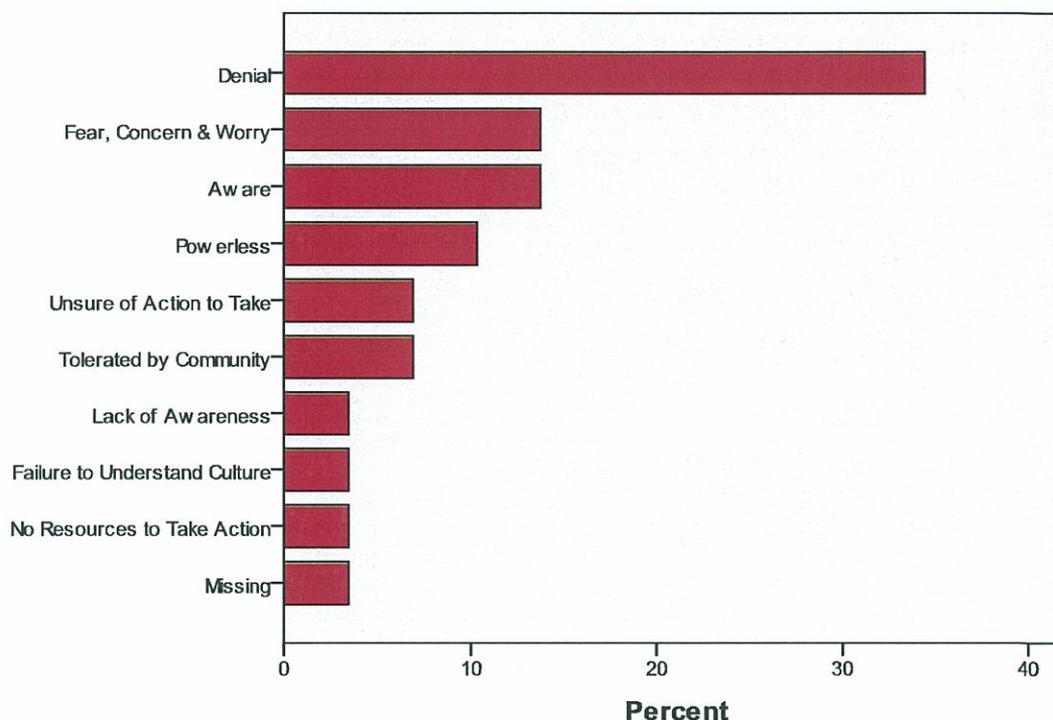


Figure 5.

Participants’ perceptions of community reaction to the presence of gangs are notably negative. Although respondents acknowledge that community residents are aware of gang issues, they perceive that members of the community seem to be unable to take any meaningful action. Throughout the interview process, many of the participants stated that the community as a whole seemed to be unable to respond effectively to the gang issue.

Participants were then asked what might be done to reduce the problems presented by gangs in the community. The majority of those interviewed expressed a

desire for more parental involvement in the lives of their children. Mentoring programs were also seen as a means to provide pro-social role models for children. In addition to the suggestions for specific programs, respondents often mentioned the need to begin providing services for at-risk children at a very early age. The results of Item 5 are summarized in Figure 6.

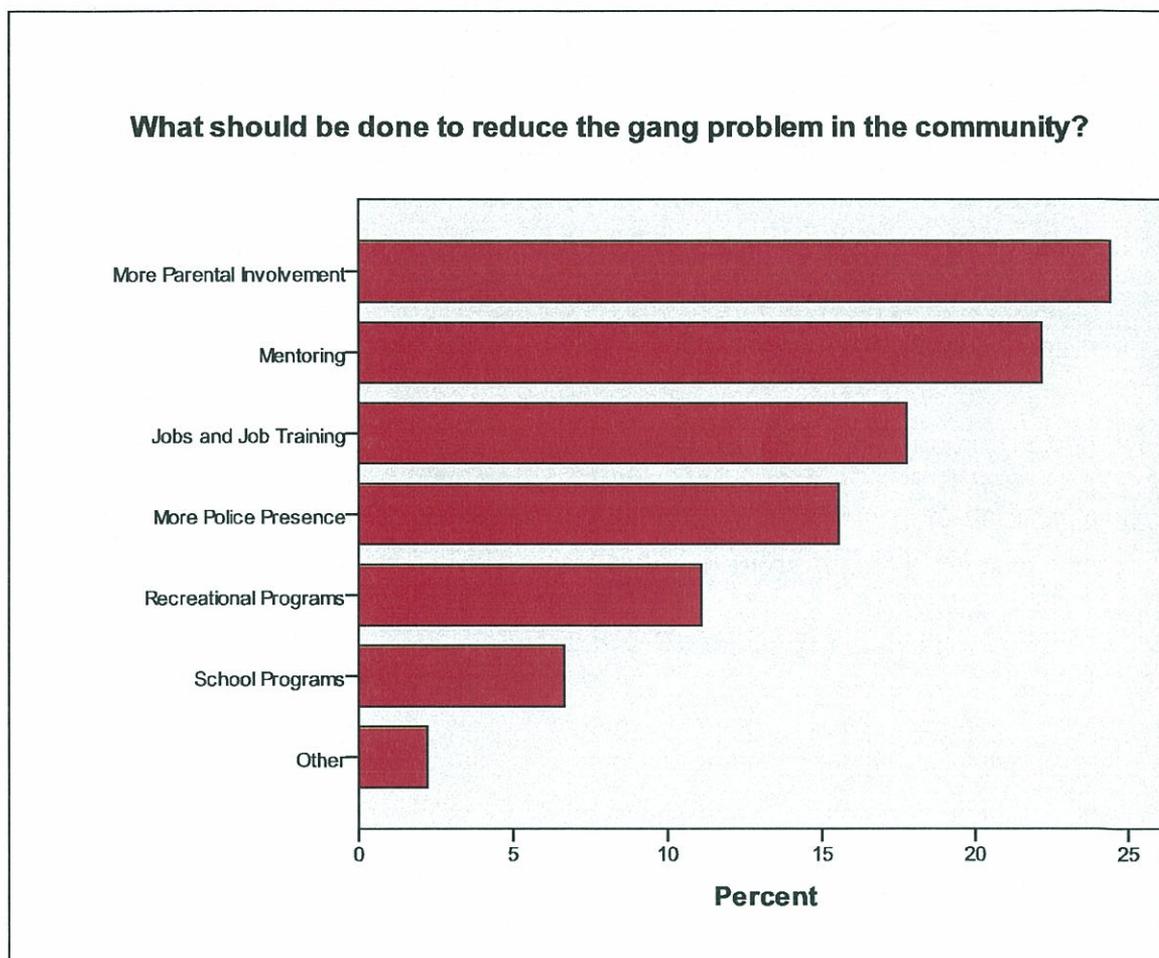


Figure 6.

Although job training, increased police presence, and opportunities for outside programming are mentioned by respondents, an overarching theme of the children of the community form adequate, reciprocal, pro-social relationships emerges from these suggestions for addressing the problem of proliferating gangs.

Two of every three respondents (67%) reported personal experiences with gang members. Two participants had been attacked by groups of youth wearing gang colors.

One person had family members who were involved in gang activity. Three respondents knew shooting victims personally, and one person had a family member attacked as part of a gang initiation. Two of those interviewed are in the position of having to transport clients to and from school in order to avoid confrontation by gangs recruiting members.

In summary, the persons surveyed using the Community Leader Interview presented as a group of knowledgeable professionals and community members who are often involved with gang affected clients, patients and offenders. Many expressed frustration with the lack of coordination among agencies and organizations that are most likely to be involved with prevention, interdiction, and treatment. In particular, 80% of those completing the CLI expressed dissatisfaction with the current response to gangs county-wide. Many also expressed the belief that, at the present time, law enforcement agencies throughout the County are doing the best job of sharing information and coordinating anti-gang suppression efforts. As mentioned above, every person interviewed confirmed that youth gangs present significant problems for York County. However, with the exception of law enforcement representatives, many respondents did not believe that their opinions were shared by members of other agencies. In addition, during that segment of the interviews dealing with the survey of existing programs, participants proved to be very knowledgeable about programs available through their own organizations, but were typically less aware of programs available through other agencies.

School Staff Perceptions Interview

Since the majority of youth gang members and affiliates are of school age, school staff represents an important source of gang-related information. School staff provided a somewhat wider range of impressions than those sampled using the Community Leader Interview format. In addition, the SSPI form does not suggest responses. The responses of the participants are more open-ended and variable. Responses were coded for content in an effort to reduce that variation.

Since the CLI participants were more likely located in the County's population centers, their perceptions had a high degree of similarity. School districts however, are located throughout the County, and their experiences with gang issues varied a bit more widely.

In general, the closer the school district was to the City of York, the more likely staff was to identify active gang issues. Also, the closer the school district was to the Interstate 83 corridor, the more likely staff was to identify active gang issues. That is not to say that outlying districts were unaffected by youth gangs; but the staff tended to perceive gang problems as less apparent. However, staff members of outlying districts were very interested in participating in awareness raising activities. Staff members from all districts were of the opinion that it is simply a matter of time before youth gang problems appear in their districts to a significant degree.

The first item in the School Staff Perceptions Interview (SSPI) asked if the respondent believed that gangs presented a problem in their schools. All but one participant answered in the affirmative. One person interviewed mentioned that she had gathered information from building staff prior to the interview and learned that a gang related incident had taken place just that morning. It was the first gang-related incident that had been brought to her attention, and she had been in the same district for many years.

The second item queried staff members about the existence of specific signs of gang presence in their schools. Participants' responses varied in number and type. All responses were included in the analysis. The results are summarized in Figure 8.

What signs do you see that lead you to believe that gang members are present in your school?

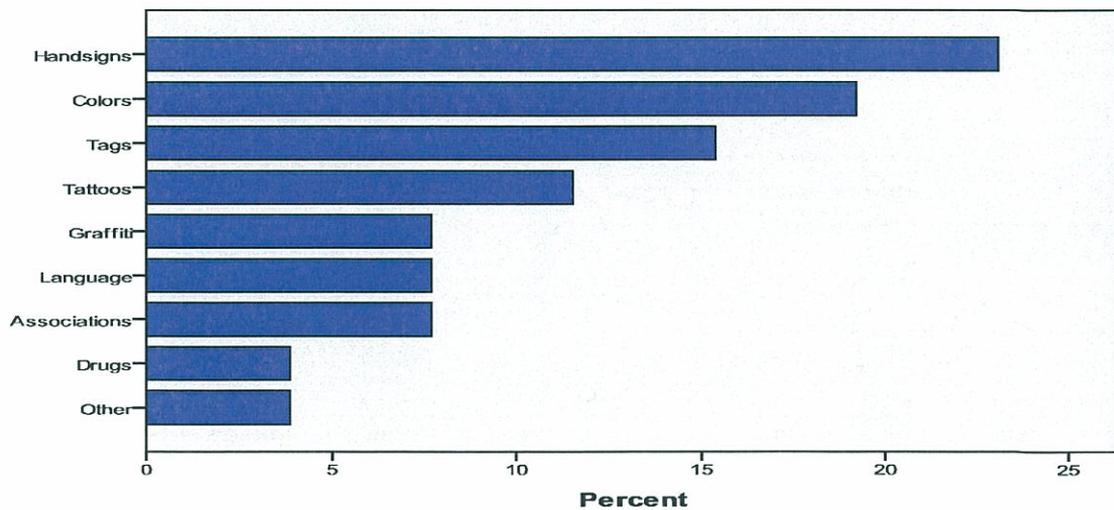


Figure 8.

According to school staff the most noticeable indicators of gang presence are handsigns, colors, tags and tattoos. Many group pictures in local high school yearbooks contain students flashing signs. Most schools respond quickly to the presence of tags and graffiti on school buildings, and many have dress codes that limit the wearing of characteristic clothing and colors. Nevertheless, students are able to display gang affiliation in subtle ways.

SSPI participants were asked about the kinds of problems that gangs caused within their schools. The results are shown in Figure 9.

What types of problems do gang members present in or around your school?

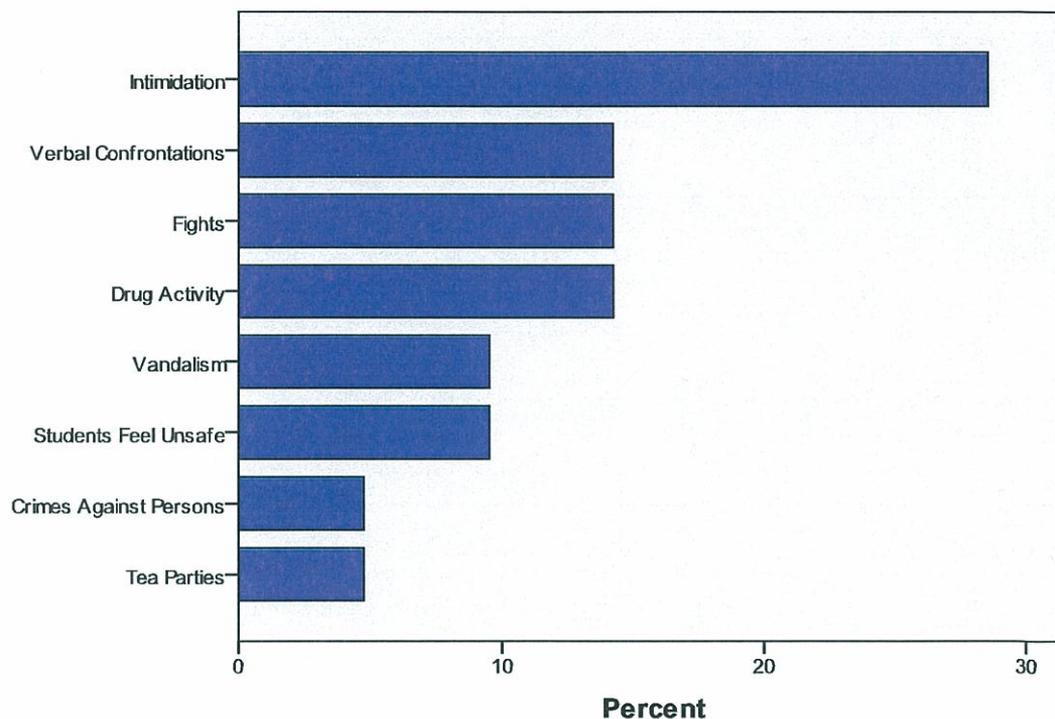


Figure 9.

Intimidation is viewed by virtually all respondents as a common problem associated with the presence of gang members in school. Verbal confrontations, fights, and suspected drug activity are also listed as important. Typically, problems that occur tend to happen during afternoon hours; often after dismissal. Those problems that occur in the school building tend to happen in the hallways, stairwells, and cafeteria during

unstructured time and in the absence of a high degree of supervision. This result is not unexpected, since most discipline difficulty in school takes place during that period of time and under those same circumstances. The SSPI does not suggest problems to the participants; the problems listed come directly from their experience and not from cues provided by the interview. The relatively narrow range of responses to the survey's open-ended questions suggests a good level of validity in the information.

When asked what circumstances might account for the apparent increase in youth gang activity in the schools, staff members indicated that family problems and the need to feel a sense of belonging were significant factors in facilitating the growth of gangs (Figure 10.).

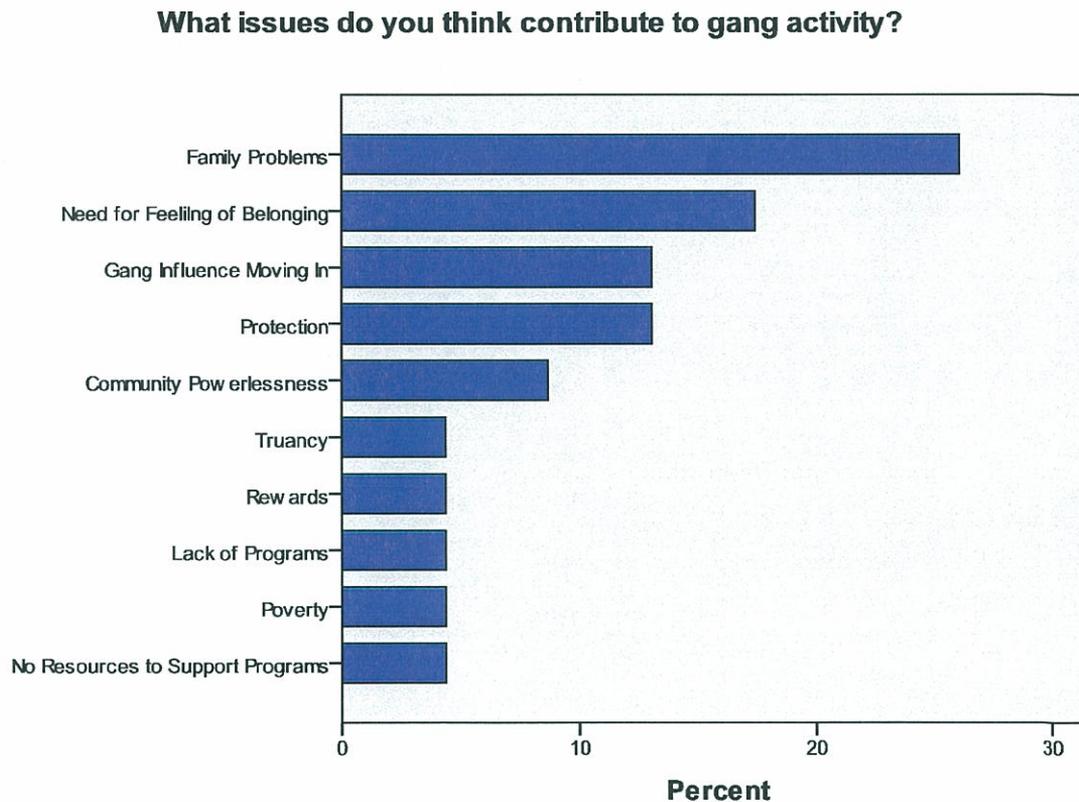


Figure 10.

When asked whether gang activity had increased, decreased, or stayed the same, virtually all school personnel reported an increase in perceived activity. One person reported that activity had seemed to decline somewhat in response to an in-school

awareness program. None of the school staff had an established system of data collection that was specifically designed to track gang activity.

The close similarity between the responses of participants in the Community Leader Interviews and the School Staff Perception Interviews suggests that those persons in frequent contact with gang issues and gang members share parallel views of gang presence, antecedents to gang growth, and possible effective interventions designed to prevent and suppress gang activities. A large majority of participants in both interviews expressed the opinion that awareness of gang problems within the County was low. However, the data indicate that awareness is high across the County, and further, that there is a great deal of congruence across persons and agencies in regard to antecedent conditions and appropriate methods of remediation.

Anti-Gang Programs in York County

There are few programs available in York County that specifically target gang issues and gang members. Most programs are designed for at-risk youth; many of whom are also at high risk for gang membership and affiliation. This list was synthesized from the responses of interviewees and is neither exhaustive, nor meant to include every program that might have a beneficial effect in preventing gang affiliation. Some of the programs most likely to reduce gang involvement are listed below.

Law enforcement programs that are currently active in York County include the following:

- Anti-Gang Task Force - A local multi-jurisdictional interdiction program supported by the Office of the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District.
- Route 222 Corridor Project – A gang intelligence gathering and sharing program also supported by the Office of the U.S. Attorney.
- York City Police Dept. USA/CPO Team – A multi-purpose team combining suppression and interdiction activities with prevention activities in neighborhoods affected by gangs.
- School Resource Officer - A program furnishing in-house police officers stationed at school buildings to provide a quick response to

student safety and legal issues. Not all school districts have an SRO program.

Juvenile and Adult Court Programs include:

- Gang Resource Officer - Probation Officer position dedicated to supervising gang affiliated offenders and engaging in gang prevention and intervention activities.
- Multi-Agency Gang Need and Eradication Task Force (MAGNET) A program offering intense supervision, programming, and treatment for identified gang-affiliated offenders.
- Triage Program - A team based support program for at-risk youth offenders who have been removed from their homes. Focus of treatment is both the youth and the family.
- Work Crews and Community Service - Mandated service as a result of conviction and sentencing. Some mentoring and supervision programming is available.

Community Based programs include:

- Temple Guards of York - A mentoring program offering supervision and support through membership in a community-based drill team. Membership is contingent on the maintenance of a number of pro-social behaviors and accomplishments.
- Quantum Opportunities - An after-school tutoring program based at the YWCA of York. Students identified as at-risk are eligible to study and drill using the "Plato" educational support software package. SAT training is also provided.
- Crispus Attucks Curfew Sweep Program - A program located at the CA facility in York that provides temporary shelter,

intake, and referral services for youth who are detained by local authorities for violating curfew.

- Tiger's Action Plan - A character development program designed by The Tiger Woods Foundation. The plan is administered in York County by the Community Progress Council.
- Block Watch - A community-based program training neighborhood residents in crime awareness.
- Youth Advocate Program - A mentoring program providing supervision and support for young at-risk men and women.

Public Education-based programs include:

- Truancy Prevention Program - Children & Youth case workers and specialists are stationed at local school district buildings for the purpose of reducing truancy through family interventions.
- Gang Resistance Education And Training (GREAT) - A prevention program taught by police officers to younger students on-site in the school environment.
- Head Start - An early intervention program designed to increase a child's readiness to learn by providing auxiliary instruction prior to entering Kindergarten.
- Project Harmony - A school-based program celebrating diversity, tolerance and inclusion. Project Harmony has several chapters throughout the County.
- Strengthening Families - A program initiated by the Agency for Children and Youth focused primarily on the reduction of drug and alcohol involvement.
- YouthBuild Charter School - A charter school operated by Crispus Attucks and serving the children of the City of York.

- New Hope Academy Charter School
- Manito Alternative Education Center
- Challenges Alternative Education Center

In addition to these programs, there are other programs that address the conditions that engender gang affiliation and membership. The York County Human Services Division contracts with over two hundred and thirty separate providers to make available a wide variety of services to York County residents.

Effective gang prevention models require specific components. First, the model must contain a prevention strategy. The prevention strategy must include primary, secondary, and tertiary sub-strategies. Primary prevention targets the entire population in question; in the case of youth gang prevention, the entire population of an at-risk area including adults. Primary prevention strategies tend to be focused on strengthening families and developing neighborhoods and communities. Secondary prevention is targeting youth who have a high likelihood of becoming gang members. Programs include mentoring, provision of pro-social activities, training in positive decision making, and so forth. Tertiary prevention provides programming to youth who are already involved in gang activity and providing opportunities and motivation to disengage. The second component involves re-entry programming for gang offenders who have been arrested, convicted, and ordered to prison or residential treatment. The third component involves aggressive suppression by law enforcement agencies. The goal of the third component is to remove recalcitrant offenders from the community.

Conclusions

The sample of participants surveyed by the CLI and the SSPI are clearly aware that youth gangs are a significant problem in the community and in the schools. As a group, they express frustration and exasperation (and in some cases, anger) at the perceived inability or unwillingness of the community at large to respond effectively to gang growth. Although the respondents represented different factions and functions, their awareness of the problem, its antecedents, and likely methods of remediation were quite similar.

As a group, the participants are willing to learn and do more to reduce the growth of gang related activities in the community. Furthermore, they acknowledge that there is a current lack of leadership and coordination in this regard. The lack of coordination, communication, collaboration and follow-through is viewed as a fundamental flaw in gang reduction efforts to date. Most acknowledge that police agencies are quite effective in coordinating efforts within their spheres of influence, but that situation does not extend to programs offered by volunteer, service, or community-based agencies. Cooperative planning between agencies and organizations under single leadership is desirable.

The array of programs available to apply to gang issues appears to be adequate. However, many programs target individuals rather than groups. In most cases, the target population is composed of at-risk youth, or persons who have already been identified as gang affiliated. These programs, although effective, tend to be resource intensive. At the present time, services are available to a maximum of 45 individuals in the MAGNET or the Triage programs combined. Many participants indicated the need for an effort to involve neighborhood residents directly in every contemplated assessment, planning, or implementation phase of anti-gang programming

In general, participants tended to agree that the most immediate need in reducing gang influence and activity is the establishment of a central mechanism for coordination, communication, and collaboration between agencies delivering services. The support and involvement of neighborhood residents in gang reduction programming is also essential. Participants agreed that a good foundation of programming exists in York County, but delivery is hampered by the lack of coordination among agencies.

Appendix A

Exhibit 8.3

School Staff Perceptions Interview

1. Do you believe gangs are a problem in your school?

- Yes No
 Do Not Know No Response

If so, what signs do you see that lead you to believe that gang members are present in the school?

2. When were you first aware of gang problems in your school?

3. What types of problems do gang members present in or around the school?

4. When and where are the gang activities occurring most frequently in and around the school? (time of day, classroom, outside classroom, etc.)

5. What issues do you think contribute to gang activity?

6. Do you believe gang activity is increasing, decreasing, or staying about the same level in your school as in previous years? Why?

- Increasing
 Decreasing
 Staying the same

Exhibit 9.1

Community Leader Interview

1. Do you believe gangs are a problem in your community?

- Yes
- No
- Do Not Know
- No Response

If so, what kinds of problems do gangs present in your community? Please choose your top three problems.

- Increase in property crime
- Increase in vandalism/graffiti
- Increased fear in community
- School disruption
- Increase in drug crimes
- Public nuisance
- Family disruption
- Increase in violent crime against persons
- Increase in weapon crimes
- Increased fear for safety
- Other, please specify _____

2. Why do you believe there is gang activity in your community? Please choose your top three reasons.

- Poverty
- School problems
- Police labeling
- Gang members move to community from other places
- Boredom
- Family problems
- Power
- Protection
- Lack of activities
- Prejudice
- Family/friends in gangs
- To feel loved/sense of belonging
- Other, please specify _____

3. What is the general community response to gangs by (law enforcement, parents, educators, other community leaders, etc.)?

4. What should be done to reduce the gang problem in the community? Please choose your top three choices.

- Jobs and job training
- Tutoring
- Mentoring
- Recreation programs
- School programs
- More police presence
- More parental involvement
- New laws/ordinances
- Other, please specify _____

5. Are you satisfied with the current response to gangs by law enforcement, social service agencies, schools, etc.?

6. Have you had any personal experiences with a gang member? Please specify.

7. How can you help to improve the community's response to gangs?

Exhibit 10.1

Community Resource Inventory (Complete for each agency/organization surveyed)

1. Program Name: _____

2. Agency Name: _____

3. Address: _____
(Street) (City) (State) (Zip Code)

4. Phone Number: (____) ____ - _____, Extension: _____

5. Program Purpose:

6. Service(s) Provided:

7. Target Population:

8. Eligibility Criteria:

9. If risk assessments are conducted, do they include gang membership?

Yes No

10. Program Capacity:

11. Service Area:

12. Does the program focus on gang-involved youth?

Yes No

13. Does the program focus on youth at risk of gang involvement?

Yes No

14. Funding Sources:

15. Total Annual Program Budget:

Exhibit 10.2

Justice System Program Inventory (Complete for each agency/organization surveyed)

1. Agency Name: _____

2. Program Name (if any): _____

3. Program Purpose:

4. Service(s) Provided:

5. Target Population:

6. Eligibility Criteria:

7. Program Capacity:

8. Service Area:

9. Does the program focus on gang-involved youth?

Yes

No

10. If risk assessments are conducted, do they include gang membership?

Yes

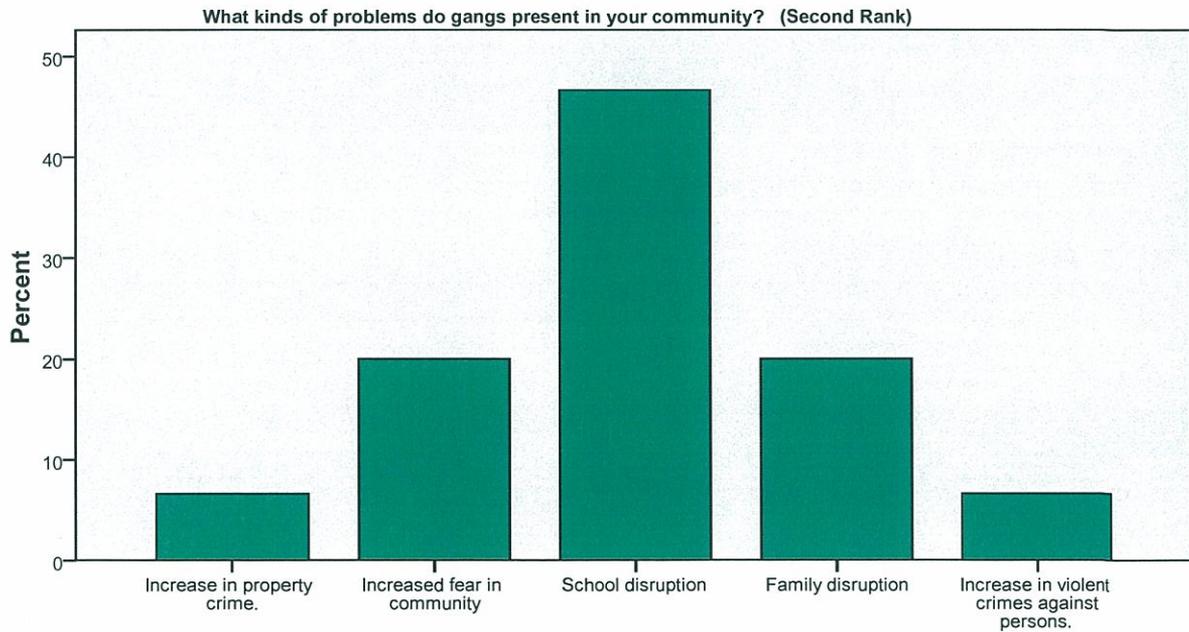
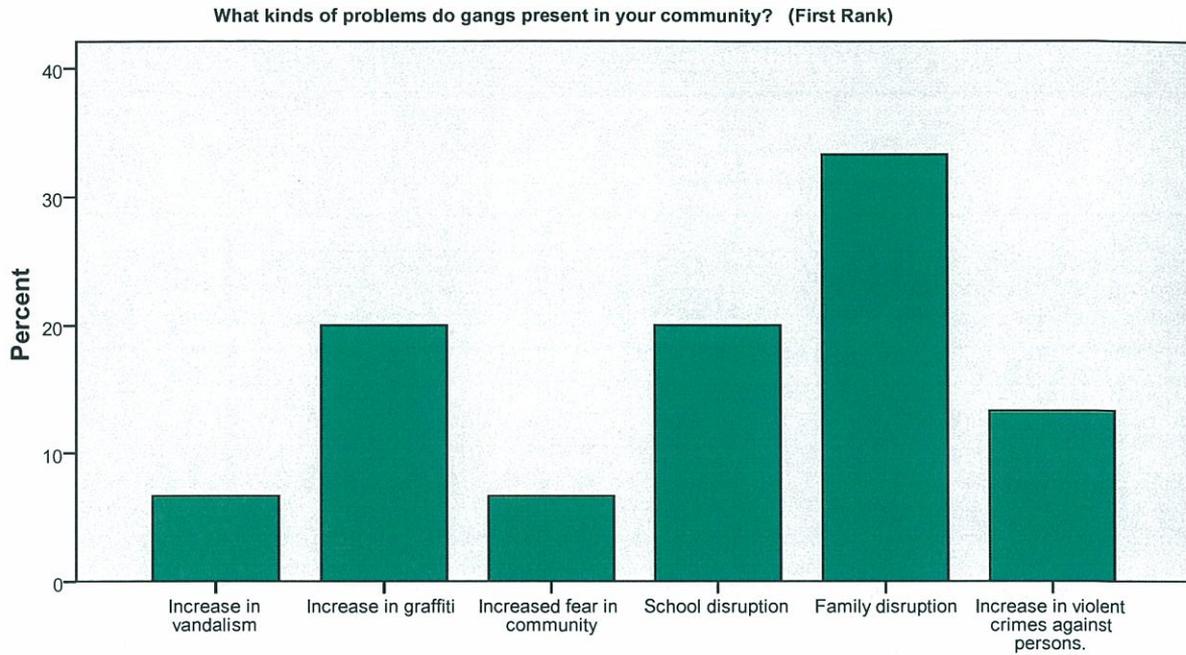
No

11. Funding Sources:

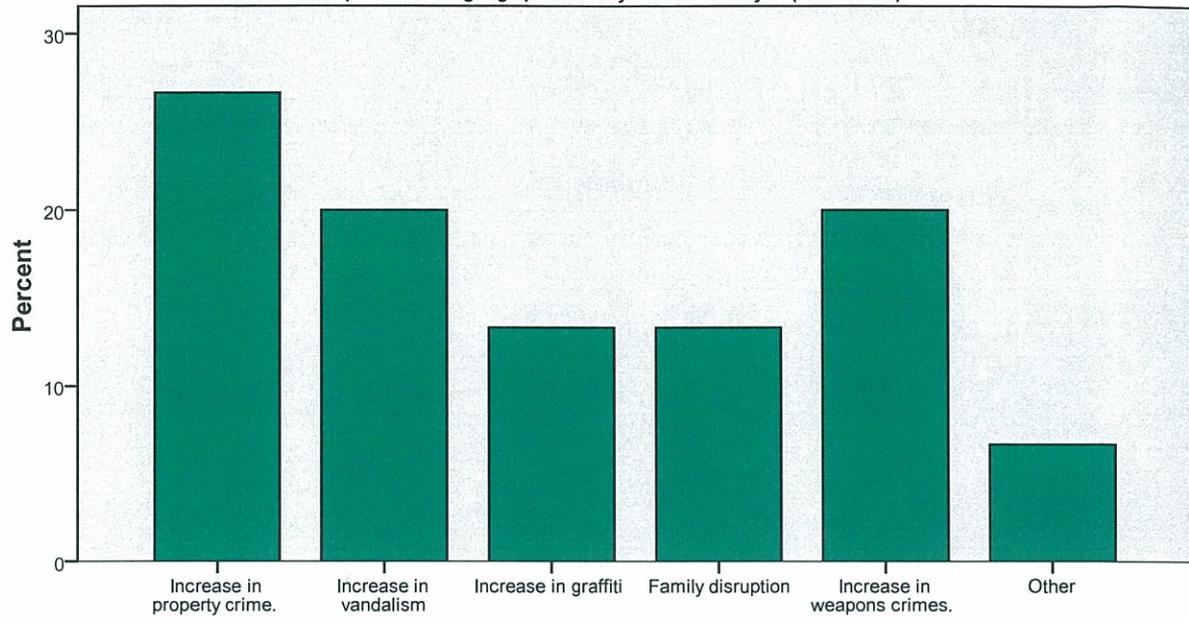
12. Total Annual Program Budget:

Appendix B

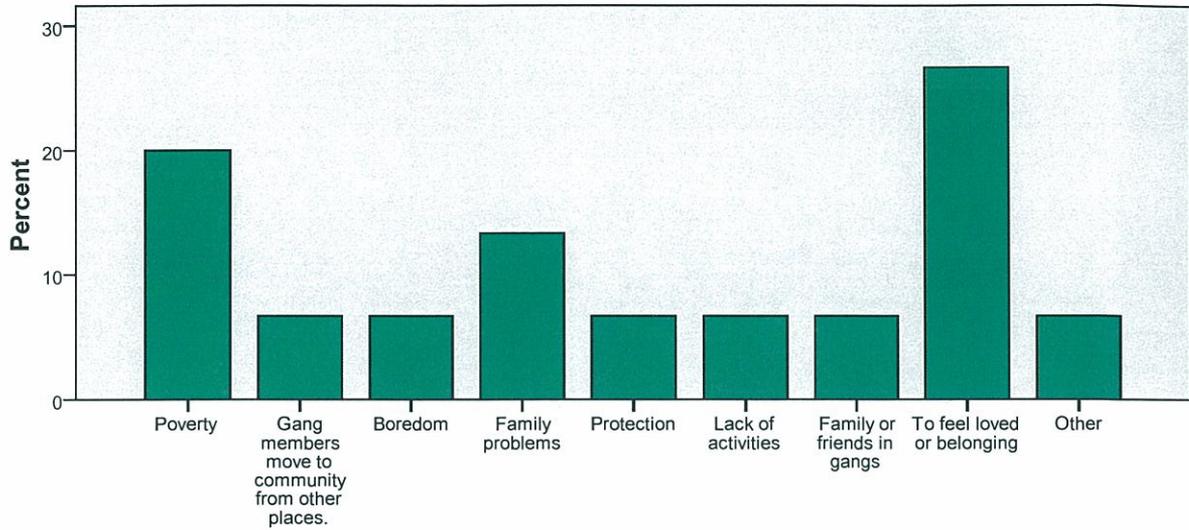
Community Leader Perceptions by Rank



What kinds of problems do gangs present in your community? (Third Rank)

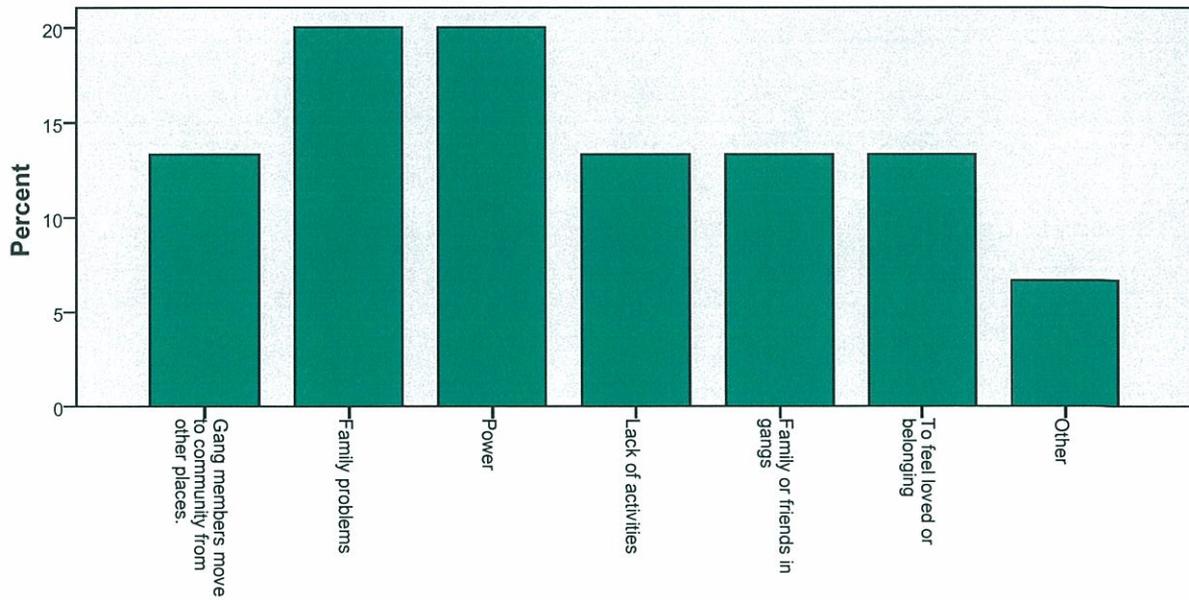


What reasons account for the presence of gangs in your community? (First Rank)

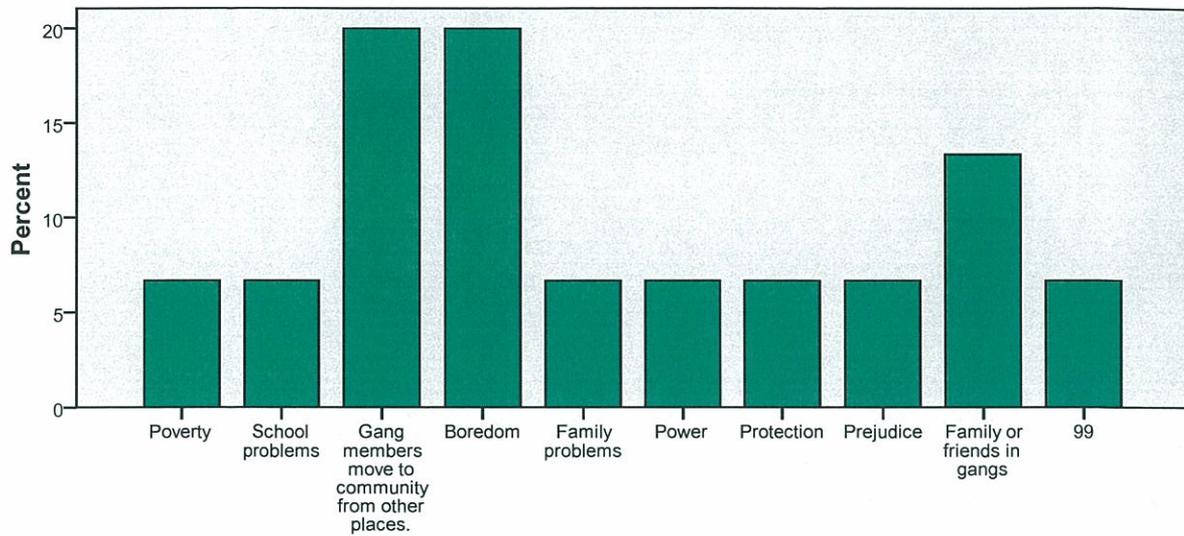


What reasons account for the presence of gangs in your community? (First Rank)

What reasons account for the presence of gangs in your community (Second Rank)

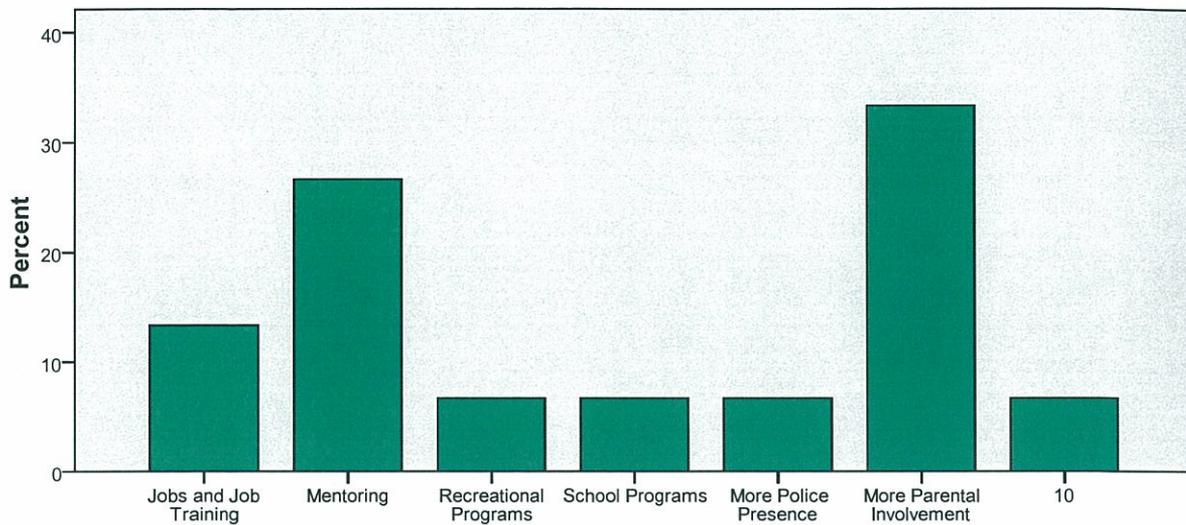


What reasons account for the presence of gangs in your community? (Third Rank)



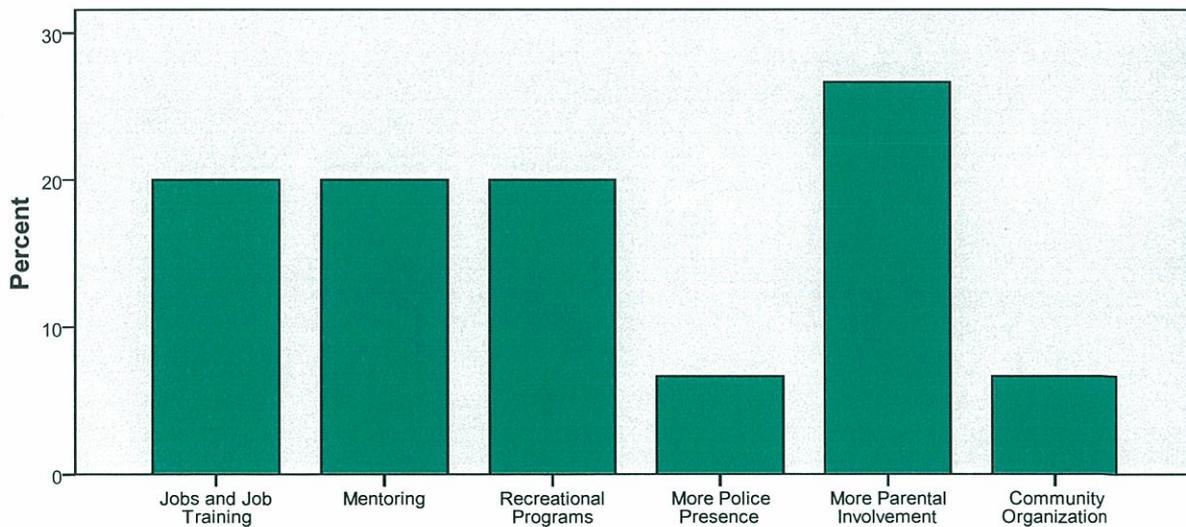
What reasons account for the presence of gangs in your community? (Third Rank)

What should be done to reduce the gang problem in the community? (First Rank)



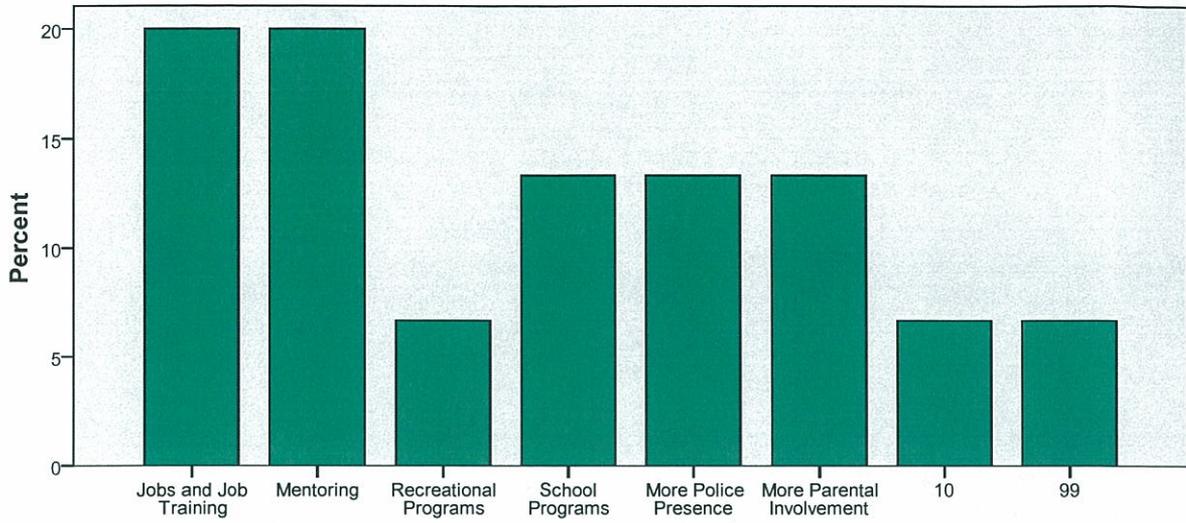
What should be done to reduce the gang problem in the community? (First Rank)

What should be done to reduce the gang problem in the community? (Second Rank)



What should be done to reduce the gang problem in the community? (Second Rank)

What should be done to reduce the gang problem in the community? (Third Rank)

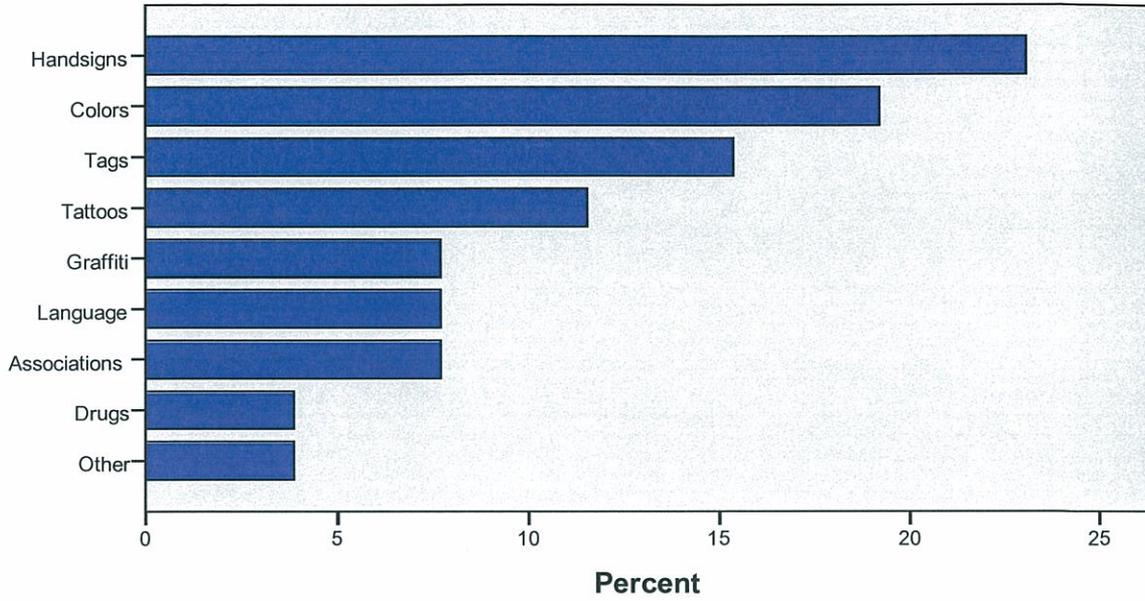


What should be done to reduce the gang problem in the community? (Third Rank)

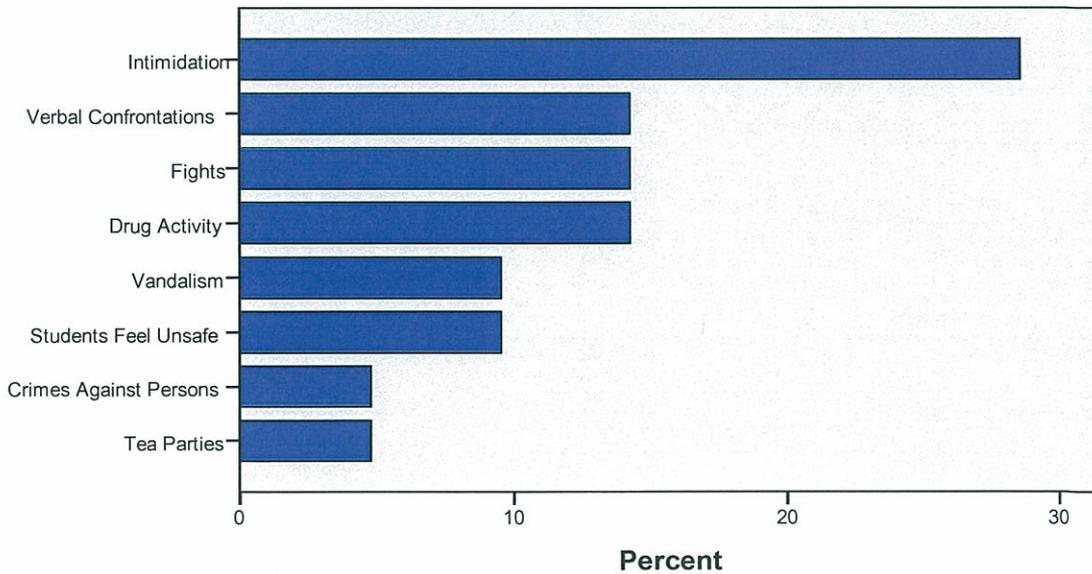
Appendix C

School Staff Perceptions

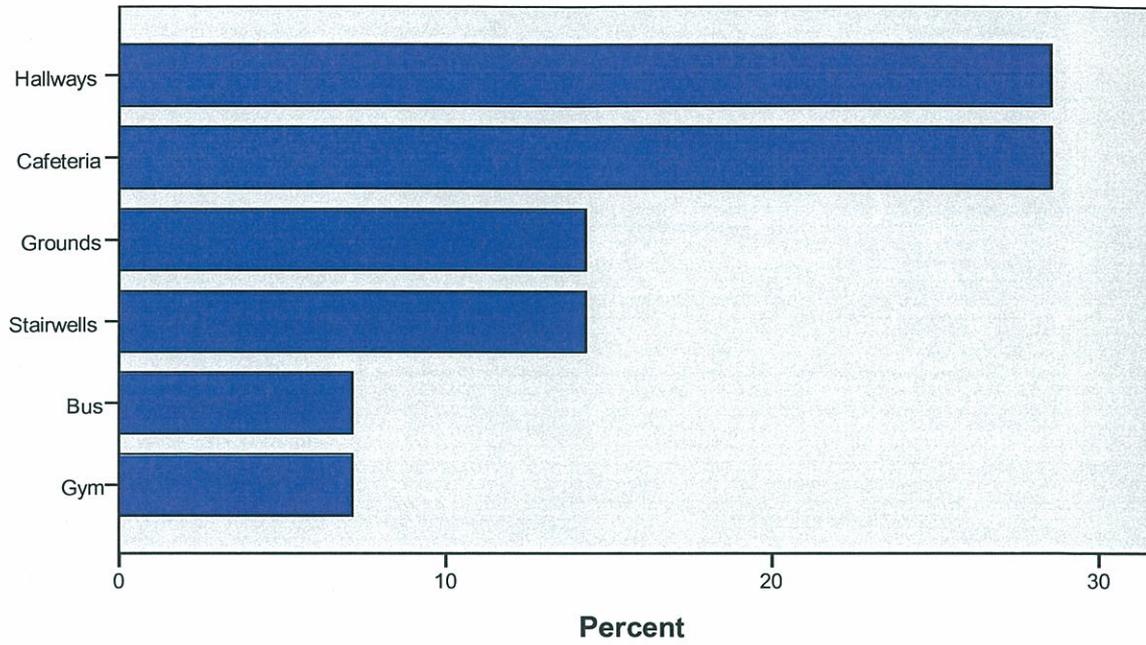
What signs do you see that lead you to believe that gang members are present in your school?



What types of problems do gang members present in or around your school?



Where are gang activities occurring most frequently?



What issues do you think contribute to gang activity?

