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Journal of Adolescent Health

Volume 56, Issue 4, April 2015, Pages 414-419

Original article

Gang Membership Between Ages 5 and 17 Years in the United States

David C. Pyrooz Ph.D. ^a ... Gary Sweeten Ph.D. ^b

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.11.018>

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Abstract

Purpose

This study determined the frequency, prevalence, and turnover in gang membership between ages 5 and 17 years in the United States.

Methods

Data were from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, which is representative of youth born between 1980 and 1984. Age-specific patterns of gang joining, participation, and leaving are estimated based on youths ($N\hat{A} = 7,335$) self-reported gang membership at the baseline and eight subsequent interviews, which were combined with population age estimates from the 2010 U.S. Census to produce national estimates of gang membership. Sampling variance-adjusted bounds were estimated based on

assumptions about missing cases and survey design effects. Demographic and socioeconomic variables are used to compare differences between gang and nongang youth.

Results

Youth gang members were disproportionately male, black, Hispanic, from single-parent households, and families living below the poverty level. We estimated that there were 1,059,000 youth gang members in the United States in 2010 (bounds ranging from 675,000 to 1,535,000). The prevalence of youth gang membership was 2.0% (1.2%–2.8%), peaking at age 14 years at 5.0% (3.9%–6.0%). Annually, 401,000 (204,000–639,000) juveniles join gangs and 378,000 (199,000–599,000) exit gangs, with a turnover rate of 36%.

Conclusions

We discovered that significantly more people are involved with gangs than previous estimates would suggest. Clinicians and policy makers must recognize that youth gang members may not conform to popular perceptions of gang demographics. The patterns of youth gang membership observed in this study support prevention programs aimed at children before the teen years. This strategy is more likely to succeed than gang intervention or suppression strategies aimed at teens.



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Keywords

Gang membership; National estimates; Sampling variance-adjusted bounds; Population turnover; NLSY97

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