

# FOCUS

Views from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

## Youth in Gangs: Who Is at Risk?

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### *Introduction*

Youth gangs pose a significant challenge for communities across the United States, in urban, suburban, and rural areas alike. Nationwide, 23% of students report the presence of gangs at their schools (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009), and approximately 35% of law enforcement agencies indicate gang problems (such as gang-related crime) in their jurisdictions (Egley & O'Donnell, 2009).<sup>1</sup> Self-reported youth surveys show varying estimates of gang membership, from single digits among a national sample of students to about 30% among high-risk youth in large cities (Howell & Egley, 2009).

For this Focus, NCCD analyzed data from national, state, and local youth surveys and drew on the results of previous gang research to provide a snapshot of youth gangs. This includes a summary of risk factors for gang membership and selected characteristics of gang-involved youth. California, which has faced significant and disproportionate levels of gang membership for decades, serves as a state case study. The local data highlight the San Francisco Bay Area cities of Oakland

and Richmond; both Oakland and Richmond have entrenched gang problems and very high homicide rates.<sup>2</sup>

### *Defining Youth Gangs*

There are varying definitions of what constitutes a youth gang. The National Youth Gang Center (Howell & Egley, 2009) provides the following definition:

“A youth gang is commonly considered a self-formed association of peers having the following characteristics:

- Three or more members, generally ages 12 to 24;
- A name and some sense of identity, generally indicated by such symbols as style of clothing, graffiti, and hand signs;
- Some degree of permanence and organization; and
- An elevated level of involvement in delinquent or criminal activity.”

## Literature Review

Research has found that numerous risk factors can help predict a young person's likelihood of joining a gang. Much of these data come from large longitudinal studies of youth in Denver, CO; Pittsburgh, PA; Rochester, NY; and Seattle, WA.<sup>3</sup> Each study includes a subsample of gang-involved youth, from whom data were collected at various points in time, and the study design allows researchers to determine causal relationships between risk factors and gang membership (Howell & Egley, 2005).

Risk factors for serious and violent delinquency, including gang membership, are grouped into five developmental domains—individual characteristics, family, school, peers, and community conditions. The more risk factors a youth has, the more likely he or she is to join a gang. In addition, experiencing risk factors in multiple domains seems to increase the possibility of gang involvement. Risk factors for gang membership are summarized in Table 1 (Howell & Egley, 2005).

Another key issue examined in gang research is the connection between gang membership and serious, violent, and chronic offending by juveniles. Gang members are responsible for a disproportionate amount of adolescent delinquency and crime. For example, the Rochester youth study found that gang members represented 31% of the study sample but had carried out 82% of serious offenses such as aggravated assault and robbery (Howell, 2003). Youth also tend to carry out more serious and violent acts while in a gang than after leaving a gang. The Denver, Seattle, and Rochester youth studies showed that while gang members' offense rates decreased after exiting a gang, they were still relatively high (Howell, 1998).

Table 1  
Risk Factors for Gang Membership

Risk Factor Domains	Risk Factors
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General delinquency involvement</li> <li>Antisocial/delinquent beliefs</li> <li>Early onset of aggression/violence</li> <li>Authority conflict</li> <li>Hyperactive</li> <li>Poor refusal skills</li> <li>Substance use</li> <li>Physical violence or aggression</li> <li>Violent victimization*</li> <li>Mental health problem or conduct disorder**</li> <li>Illegal gun ownership/carrying</li> <li>Early dating/sexual activity/fatherhood</li> <li>Life stressors***</li> <li>Excuses for delinquent behavior</li> </ul>
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Broken home/changes in caregiver or parent figure</li> <li>Poverty/low socioeconomic status</li> <li>Family history of problem behavior/criminal involvement</li> <li>Siblings who exhibit antisocial behavior/are delinquent or gang involved</li> <li>Having a young mother</li> <li>Low attachment to child</li> <li>Poor parental supervision</li> <li>Low parent education</li> <li>Child maltreatment (abuse or neglect)</li> <li>Parental pro-violence attitudes</li> </ul>
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Low achievement in elementary school</li> <li>Frequent truancy/absences/suspensions/expulsions</li> <li>Identified as learning disabled</li> <li>Low school attachment or commitment</li> <li>Poor school attitude or performance</li> <li>Poorly functioning schools/negative labeling by teachers</li> <li>Low academic aspirations</li> <li>Low attachment to teachers</li> <li>Low parent college expectations for child</li> <li>Low math achievement test score (males)</li> </ul>
Peer Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Association with delinquent or gang-involved peers or relatives</li> </ul>
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Residence in a disadvantaged or disorganized neighborhood</li> <li>Availability or perceived ready access to drugs</li> <li>Feeling unsafe in neighborhood</li> <li>Low neighborhood attachment</li> <li>High-crime neighborhood</li> <li>Availability of firearms</li> <li>Neighborhood youth in trouble</li> </ul>

\*Need for protection is a major reason gang members give when asked why they join.

\*\*Conduct disorder symptoms include bullying, fighting, lying, cruelty toward animals, attacking people, running away from home, fire setting, theft, truancy, and vandalism.

\*\*\*Life stressors consist of failing a course at school, being suspended or expelled, breaking up with a boyfriend/girlfriend, having a big fight or problem with a friend, or the death of someone close.

Source: Howell and Egley, 2005. NCCD is grateful to James Howell for providing an updated table of risk factors, based on a table in this work.

## Methods

To explore the prevalence of gang membership and characteristics of gang-involved youth, NCCD analyzed self-reported data from three youth studies.<sup>4</sup> The national data are from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), which looks at how social context (including relationships with families, friends, and peers) impacts adolescent health-related behaviors. Methods of data collection included surveys and interviews; data were gathered from a nationally representative sample of youth who were in grades 7–12 when the study began in 1994.<sup>5</sup> The California data are drawn from the 2007-08 California Student Survey (CSS), and the local data are from the 2007–08 California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS). Designed to work in tandem, the CSS (for grades 7, 9, and 11) and the CHKS (for grades 5, 7, 9, and 11) are written instruments that measure health-related behaviors and attitudes of students in public schools (Austin & Skager, 2008).<sup>6</sup> CHKS data (not including grade 5) were analyzed from the school districts of Oakland and West Contra Costa County (abbreviated as WCCC in figures and tables); the largest city in West Contra Costa County is Richmond.

## Findings

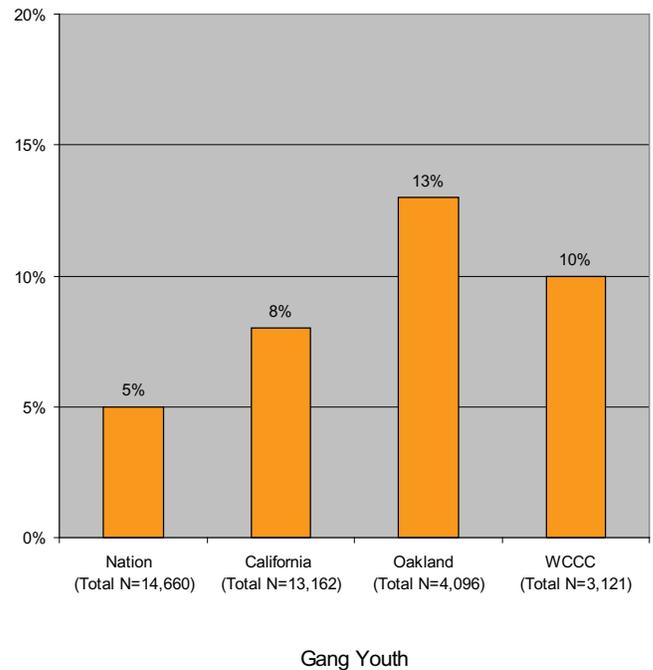
### Prevalence of Gang Involvement

Nationally, 5% of youth report gang involvement.\* These levels are higher in California. Statewide, 8% report that they are gang members, and in Oakland and West Contra Costa County, 13% and 10% of youth, respectively, report gang membership.

Regarding gang involvement, the question varies depending on the data source. The Add Health survey asked youth, “Have you been initiated into a named gang?” Both the CSS and the CHKS asked youth, “Do you consider yourself a member of a gang?”

\*All percentages included in this report have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Figure 1  
Percentage of Youth Involved in Gangs



### Demographic Snapshot of Gang-involved Youth

The national data show that the racial/ethnic groups most affected by gang involvement are American Indians (15%), Hispanics (8%), and African Americans (6%), which are generally the most impacted groups in California as well (Table 2). These percentages represent the proportion of gang-involved youth within each race/ethnicity. An unusual characteristic of the Oakland data is the proportion of gang involvement by Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander youth (16%). Previous research found that Pacific Islander youth have the highest juvenile arrest rate for all racial/ethnic groups in Oakland (NCCD, 2007), which may be related to the comparatively high level of gang membership seen there.

**Table 2**  
Gang-involved Youth within Race or Ethnicity

	Nation	California	Oakland	WCCC
American Indian/Alaskan Native	15%	11%	18%	13%
Asian	5%	6%	8%	7%
Black or African American	6%	12%	17%	13%
Hispanic or Latino/a	8%	9%	14%	13%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	*	5%	16%	7%
White	3%	6%	11%	10%
Other	8%	8%	15%	11%

\*Data were not collected nationally for Native Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders.  
This table shows the proportion of gang-involved youth within each race/ethnicity.

A sizeable proportion of youth who report gang involvement are female. This is seen at the national level (32% female) and is more pronounced in California (38% statewide, 51% in Oakland, 42% in West Contra Costa County) (not shown in the table). Although some national estimates downplay the number of girls in gangs, several surveys indicate that the percentage of self-reported gang members who were female ranged from 8% to 38% (Moore & Hagedorn, 2001).

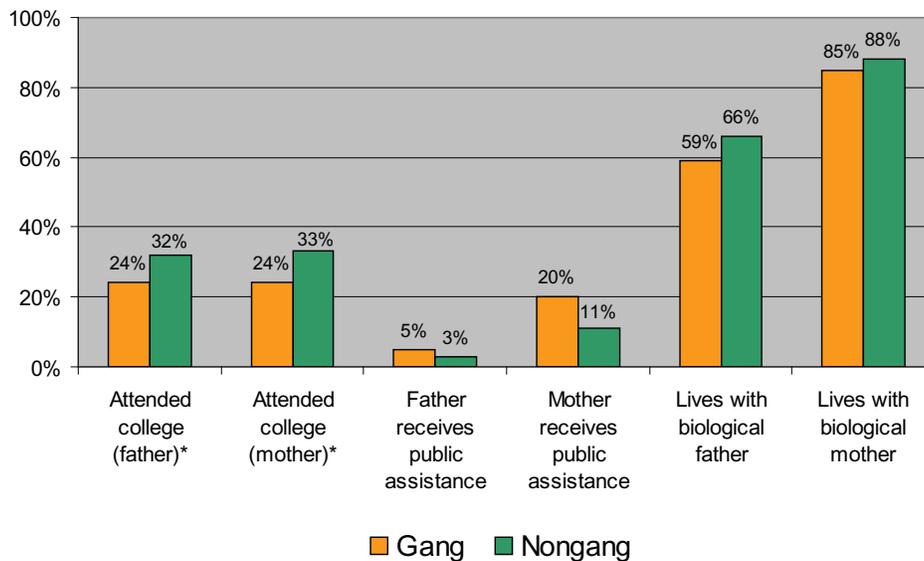
Nationally, the average age of gang-involved youth is 16, while in California, Oakland, and West Contra

County, it is 14. Research has found that youth who join gangs tend to do so by about age 15 (Howell, 2003).

### Family Characteristics

The national data provide insight on various family-related risk factors for gang involvement, including parent education, family socioeconomic status, and parent presence in the home (Figure 2). Gang-involved youth are more likely to have a parent who receives public assistance and less likely to live with a biological parent.

**Figure 2**  
Family Characteristics  
(National Add Health Data)



\*Includes parents who attended college regardless of whether they earned a degree or graduated.

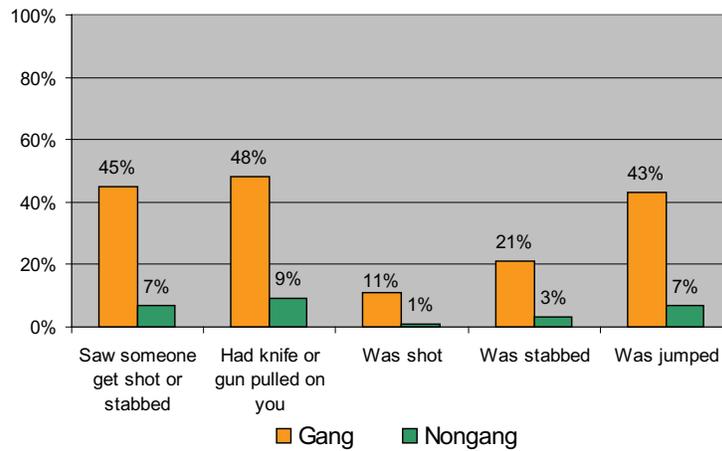
### Victimization

Victimization is a critical issue for youth who are in gangs. Although studies have shown that a key reason youth join gangs is for safety or protection, data indicate that gang members tend to experience considerably more victimization than nongang youth. Researchers suggest that this apparent contradiction may be explained by some youths' perception that a gang offers protection, even if this notion does not match up with reality (Melde, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2009).

There is also a well-documented relationship between victimization and acts of violence or delinquency. One landmark study found that individuals who were abused or neglected as children were more likely to be arrested as juveniles, as adults, and for violent crimes (Widom & Maxfield, 2001). In another analysis, researchers found that a large percentage of adolescents who said they had committed a property or violent offense had also been previously victimized (Wordes & Nunez, 2002). As gang-involved

youth tend to engage in a much higher proportion of violence and delinquency than their nongang peers—and also experience considerably higher levels of victimization, as demonstrated in the data analyzed for this report—these sorts of connections merit further exploration.

**Figure 3**  
Victimization During the Prior Year  
(National Add Health Data)



The percentages indicate the portion of youth who reported being victimized one or more times.

The data show that gang-involved youth nationwide are much more likely to be victimized than their nongang peers, with the differences ranging from 5 to 11 times as much (Figure 3). For example, almost half (48%) of gang youth had a knife or gun pulled on them in the prior 12 months, compared to 9% of nongang youth.

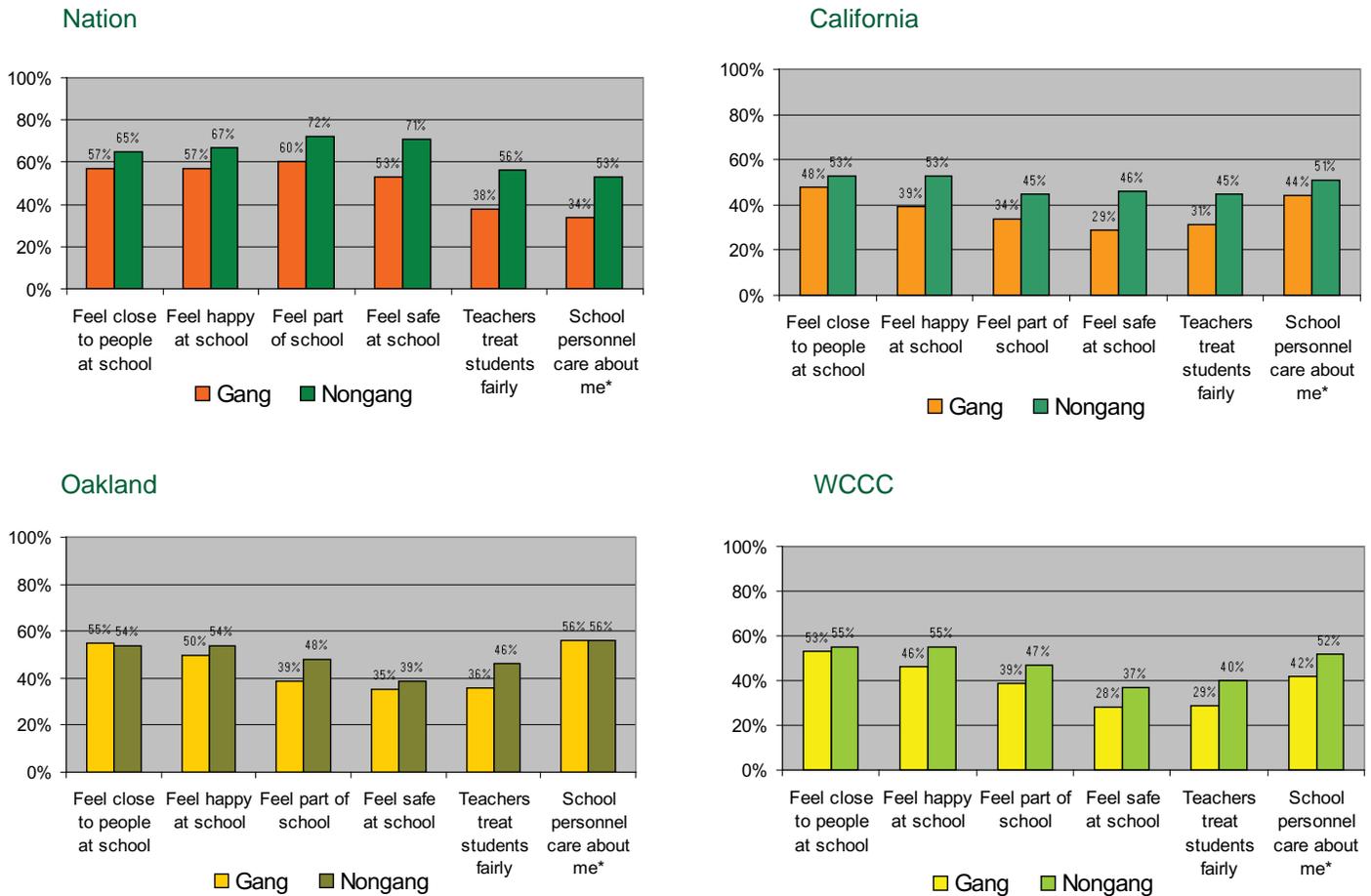
Similarly, gang-involved youth in California are more likely to be victimized (Table 3), although the differences are not as large as at the national level. Some of the greatest contrasts are in being threatened or injured with a weapon at school; gang members are more than three times as likely to report this experience as their nongang peers (26% vs. 7% statewide).

**Table 3**  
Victimization During the Prior Year  
(On school property)

	California		Oakland		WCCC	
	Gang	Non-gang	Gang	Non-gang	Gang	Non-gang
Was threatened or injured with a weapon	26%	7%	29%	9%	25%	7%
Was pushed, shoved, hit, etc.	43%	32%	41%	31%	45%	35%
Had property stolen or damaged	36%	26%	37%	27%	37%	25%
Was harassed or bullied due to race, ethnicity, or national origin	29%	16%	30%	17%	27%	17%

The percentages indicate the portion of youth who reported being victimized one or more times.

Figure 4  
Measures of School Engagement



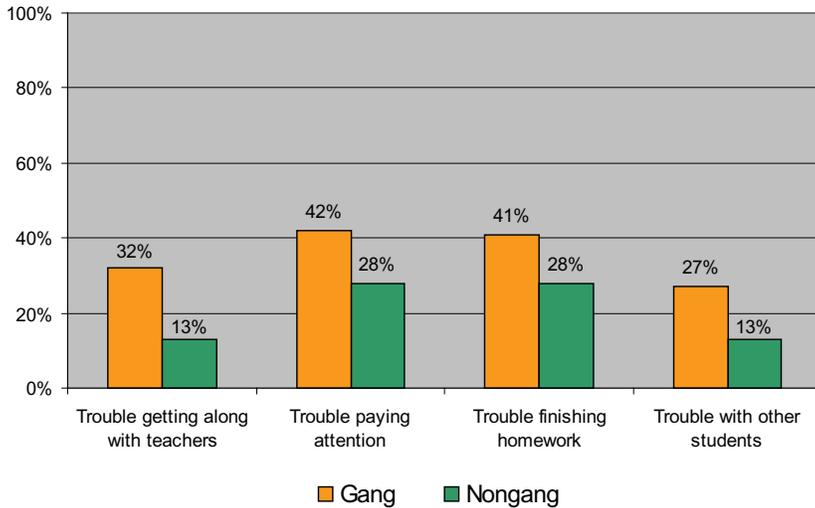
\*The Add Health survey includes only teachers, while the CSS and CHKS include teachers and other adults at school. National percentages indicate the portion of youth who responded “quite a bit” or “very much” to this item, and percentages for California, Oakland, and West Contra Costa County represent youth who responded “pretty much true” or “very much true.” Percentages for all other items in Figure 4 indicate the portion of youth who agree or strongly agree with a statement.

### School Engagement

School engagement—also known as school connectedness or school bonding—refers to students’ connections and relationships with their peers, teachers, and other adults at school. It is also often associated with academic performance (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004). Research shows that students who are engaged in school tend to do better academically and are less likely to drop out (Klem & Connell, 2004). There is also a link between school engagement and self-reported delinquency, with higher levels of engagement related to lower levels of delinquent activity (Le, Monfared, & Stockdale, 2005).

At all levels of the data analyzed by NCCD, gang-involved youth tend to be less engaged in school compared to their nongang peers (Figure 4). Of particular interest are attitudes about school safety, since youth who join gangs often do so for protection. Nationwide, just over half (53%) of gang-involved youth report feeling safe at school. In California this proportion dips to less than one-third (29%) and similar trends are seen in Oakland (35%) and West Contra Costa County (28%). In addition, gang-involved youth report more detachment from teachers and other adults at school, in terms of perceptions of fair treatment by teachers and having caring relationships with school personnel.

**Figure 5**  
**School-related Problem Behaviors**  
 (National Add Health Data)



The percentages indicate the portion of youth who reported that a particular experience occurred about once a week or more often.

Nationally, gang-involved youth report higher levels of school-related problem behaviors, such as trouble getting along with teachers (Figure 5). Similarly, the California data (not shown) indicate that gang-involved youth are more likely to skip school or cut class, compared to their nongang peers.

Finally, gang-involved youth nationwide demonstrate relatively high levels of educational aspirations, an interesting paradox when considered in the context of other school-related data. Three-quarters (75%) report that there is a medium to high chance that they will attend college, compared to 88% of nongang youth.

**Engagement Outside of Home or School**

Gang-involved youth are less likely to have supportive relationships with adults outside of home or school. In California, 67% of gang-involved youth trust an adult outside of home or school, compared to 76% of nongang youth. Other statewide measures of caring relationships with adults outside of home or school are shown in Table 4.

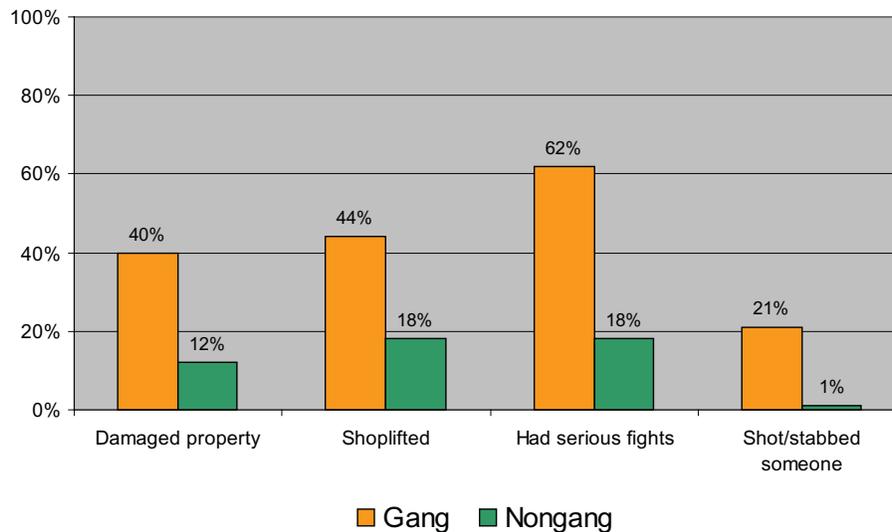
Gang members in California also tend to be less involved in community activities, relative to their nongang peers. Statewide, 43% report it is “pretty much true” or “very much true” that they are part of clubs, sports teams, church/temple, or another group outside of home and school, compared to 54% of nongang youth (not shown).

**Table 4**  
**Caring Relationships with Adults Outside of Home or School**

An adult outside of home or school...	California		Oakland		WCCC	
	Gang	Non-gang	Gang	Non-gang	Gang	Non-gang
Really cares about me	69%	80%	75%	80%	71%	81%
Notices when I am upset	63%	72%	68%	71%	68%	72%
Always wants me to do my best	68%	79%	77%	82%	77%	82%

The percentages indicate the portion of youth who responded “pretty much true” or “very much true.”

Figure 6  
Delinquency and Violence During the Prior Year  
(National Add Health Data)



The percentages indicate the portion of youth who reported committing acts of delinquency or violence one or more times.

### Delinquency and Violence

As noted earlier in this report, gang-involved youth typically demonstrate much higher levels of delinquency and violence than their nongang peers, and this trend is seen in all of the data analyzed by NCCD. For example, gang-involved youth nationally are more likely to engage in activities such as property damage, having serious fights, and shooting or stabbing another person (Figure 6).

### Conclusion

This report refines the emerging picture of youth gangs. The data analyzed here found that gang involvement ranges from 5% nationwide to 13% in Oakland, California; estimates obtained from other sources show that gang involvement is about 30% among high-risk youth in large cities. Gang-involved youth—compared to their nongang peers—are less engaged in school, are less likely to have caring relationships with adults outside of home or school, and tend to participate less in community groups or activities. They also report much

larger proportions of victimization as well as participation in delinquency and violence.

Youth who are at risk of gang membership or who have joined gangs face a variety of challenges, some of which are highlighted in this report. There is no “one-size-fits-all” method to reduce or prevent gang involvement. Successful approaches may combine elements of prevention, intervention, and suppression, based on a particular community’s needs (Howell, 2003). Given the strong association between gang involvement and lack of engagement in school, enhancing school-based gang prevention efforts could significantly impact gang activity, especially at school, but also in the community. Strategies to engage gang-involved youth both inside and outside the classroom may provide directions for future research; the victimization of gang members is another key area for exploration. It may be that current school policies, such as zero tolerance, could even exacerbate the gang problem. For example, increased suspensions and expulsions force already marginalized youth onto the streets and away from prosocial connections at school. Finally, given the proportion of gang members who are female, it would be useful to examine gender-specific strategies.

## Endnotes

1 The 2007 National Youth Gang Survey showed that about 35% of law enforcement agencies reported gang problems; this proportion has generally been increasing since 2001.

2 Data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Uniform Crime Reporting Program) show that the 2007 homicide rate for Oakland was 30.3 per 100,000; it was 45.9 for Richmond. The national and California rates were 5.6 and 6.2, respectively.

3 The Denver, Pittsburgh, and Rochester youth studies are sponsored by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency. Please visit <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/programs/ProgSummary.asp?pi=19> for more information on these studies. Please visit <http://depts.washington.edu/ssdp/> for more information on the Seattle youth study.

4 Sources of data about youth gangs include surveys of law enforcement agencies, surveys completed by youth, and fieldwork conducted by researchers. Hill et al. (1999), in describing the Seattle youth study, note that

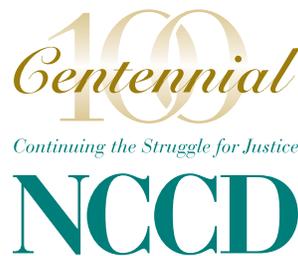
the youth self-report technique has been "used and advocated in similar gang studies and by gang researchers" (p. 306).

5 The data analyzed for this report are from Wave II of Add Health, which took place in 1996. Add Health is a program project designed by J. Richard Udry, Peter S. Bearman, and Kathleen Mullan Harris, and funded by a grant P01-HD31921 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, with cooperative funding from 17 other agencies. Special acknowledgment is due Ronald R. Rindfuss and Barbara Entwisle for assistance in the original design. Persons interested in obtaining data files from Add Health should contact Add Health, Carolina Population Center, 123 W. Franklin Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516-2524 ([addhealth@unc.edu](mailto:addhealth@unc.edu)). No direct support was received from grant P01-HD31921 for this analysis.

6 Both the CSS and CHKS are conducted biennially. The state-mandated CSS is sponsored by the state Attorney General's office with the Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs and the California Department of Education. All California school districts that receive federal or state prevention funds must administer the CHKS.

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