

Gang crisis in context: What's the real crisis, and what are real solutions?

"First, we must address the personal, family, and community factors that cause young people to choose gangs over more productive alternatives. The more success we have in prevention, the fewer people we'll have to prosecute for violent activity down the road." Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales, April 21, 2006¹

"It is the same prescription every time they have a major event. Gangs are defined as a crime problem and not a community problem. This is old-fashioned suppression in a new guise, and where is the proof that it has worked?" Malcolm Klein, veteran gang sociologist and USC professor emeritus.²

Background—Rising Youth and Gang Crime? After a nearly continuous 13-year crime drop, crime rates in the U.S. are on the rise. Nationwide, violent crime rose 2.3 percent between 2004 and 2005.³ Based on data in the FBI's Preliminary Semiannual Uniform Crime Report, released in December 2006, the upward trend appears to be continuing in 2006, as violent crime rose 3.7 percent between the first six months of 2005 and the same time period in 2006. While definitely an area of concern, rising crime rates need to be put in their proper context: After experiencing a steady drop in violent crimes since a 1992 peak, crime rates remain near a 30-year low. From the perspective of potential victims, the streets are still much safer today than they were a decade or so ago. According to surveys conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice, the odds of being a victim of violent crime are approximately 60 percent lower today than they were in 1994.⁴

The relationship between the crime change and reported gang activity is complicated. While some have attributed the rise in crime to increased gang activity, and the image of juvenile crime and gang crime have been merged and melded by the media, the true picture of crime trends and their relation to gangs is more complicated. More than 80 percent of the agencies with gang problems in both smaller and rural counties reported *zero* gang homicides in 2004. While cities known to have high levels of gang activity—like Los Angeles—experienced a drop in violent crime in 2006, several Los Angeles neighborhoods continue to face serious gang crime challenges. Just as most young people "age out", or desist from delinquency and crime when they reach adulthood, research on gangs published by the Justice Department found that, *"gang-membership tends to be short-lived, even among high-risk youth...with very few youth remaining gang members throughout their adolescent years."*⁵ Law enforcement estimates of nationwide juvenile gang membership suggest that no more than 1 percent of youth aged 10-17 are gang members.⁶

Incarcerating gang members does not necessarily curb re-offending. There is a growing body of research that suggests that increased imprisonment could negatively impact youth who may otherwise "age out" of delinquent behavior, and aggravate public safety goals.⁷ A 2004 Illinois report on recidivism rates of gang members tracked 2,500 adults prisoners released in 2000, one quarter of whom were gang members.⁸ They found that more than half (55

¹ Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales, April 21, 2006, http://www.usdoj.gov/ag/speeches/2006/ag_speech_060421.html.

² Richard Winton and Patrick McGreevy, "Will L.A.'s strategy to battle gangs work?" L.A. Times, February 11, 2007.

³ FBI Uniform Crime Reports, Crime in the United States, 2005.

⁴ Butts, Jeffrey A. and Snyder, Howard N. Too Soon Too Tell: Deciphering Recent Trends in Youth Violence. (2006). Chicago, Illinois: Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago.

⁵ Snyder, Howard N., and Sickmund, Melissa. (2006). P.83

⁶ Snyder, Howard N., and Sickmund, Melissa. (2006). Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

⁷ Benda, B.B. and Tollet, C.L. (1999) "A Study of Recidivism of Serious and Persistent Offenders Among Adolescents." *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 27, No. 2 111-126.

⁸ Olson, D. E., Dooley, B., and Kane, C. M. (2004). "The Relationship Between Gang Membership and Inmate Recidivism." Research Bulletin, 2(12). Chicago, IL: Illinois Criminal Justice Research Authority. <http://www.icjia.state.il.us/public/pdf/Bulletins/gangrecidivism.pdf>

percent) of the gang members were re-admitted to prisons within a two-year follow-up. A study of youth in the Arkansas juvenile justice system found that prior incarceration was a greater predictor of recidivism than carrying a weapon, gang membership, or poor parental relationship.⁹

“Primary responsibility for developing and operating delinquency-prevention programs should be assigned to an appropriate agency in HHS unless immediate public protection is an overriding concern....Criminal justice agencies rarely evaluate the effectiveness of their programs or activities, while HHS programs are more often evidence-based and subject to evaluation. Delays in adopting proven programs will only cause additional victimization of citizens and unnecessarily compromise the future of additional youth.” Dr. Peter Greenwood, the founder of RAND's Criminal Justice Program, author of *Changing Lives: Delinquency Prevention as Crime-Control Policy*.¹⁰

Education is a protective factor against juvenile delinquency and recidivism. Providing education and employment services have been shown to correlate with lower crime rates. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the U.S. Justice Department’s juvenile justice branch, “If, as research has found, educational failure leads to unemployment (or underemployment), and if educational failure and unemployment are related to law-violating behavior, then patterns of educational failure over time and within specific groups may help to explain patterns of delinquent behavior.”¹¹ Providing education and employment services for at-risk youth to increase graduation rates, as well as wages and employment rates, could greatly reduce crime, benefiting both young people and society as a whole.¹² According to research published in the *Journal of Labor Economics* a 10 percent increase in wages would render a 1.8 percent decrease in the crime participation rate.¹³ Furthermore, the authors found that an increase in wages would have a great effect on young men, who are often the most impacted by wage rates and who commit the majority of crimes.

There are proven programs that work with seriously violent and at risk youth. While the science on preventing gang crime is limited, there are evidence-based practices that work with at-risk and delinquent youth, the same youth who often join gangs. Whether these programs work with gang members depends more on the youth individually than whether he or she belongs to a gang. In addition, studies have shown that evidence-based practices that work with violent and seriously delinquent youth are more cost effective and produce more benefits than traditional punitive measures.¹⁴

The loss of federal funding for juvenile justice programming will make it difficult to continue providing services for youth violence perspective. The President's budget proposal would end the commitment of the federal government to a dedicated effort focused on juvenile justice. The proposal would cut juvenile justice funding by 25 percent, and permanently close the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), which has led national efforts to reduce youth crime and make communities safer for over 25 years. The budget does not make any commitment to continue with the OJJDP’s critical functions, and the loss of the federal role in technical assistance, training, research and support for innovative and proven practices will hamper local efforts to curb juvenile crime and delinquency.

⁹ Benda, Brent B. and Connie L. Tollett. “A Study of Recidivism of Serious and Persistent Offenders Among Adolescents.” *Journal of Criminal Justice* 27 (2) (March/April 1999): 111-126.

¹⁰ Greenwood, P. (2006). *Changing Lives: Delinquency Prevention as Crime-Control Policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. P182

¹¹ Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstatbb/nr2006/downloads/NR2006.pdf> p.14

¹² Raphael, S. and Winter-Ebmer, R. (2001). “Identifying the Effects of Unemployment and Crime.” *Journal of Law and Economics*. Vol. XLIV; Grogger, J. (1998). Market Wages and Youth Crime. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 16(4); Lochner, L. and Moretti, E. (2004). “The Effect of Education on Crime: Evidence from Prison Inmates, Arrests, and Self-Reports.” *The American Economic Review*.

¹³ Grogger, J. (1998). Market Wages and Youth Crime. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 16(4).

¹⁴ Steve Aos, Marna Miller, and Elizabeth Drake. (2006). *Evidence-Based Public Policy Options to Reduce Future Prison Construction, Criminal Justice Costs, and Crime Rates*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

The public supports bigger investments in youth interventions that work. A new poll from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, conducted by Zogby International shows that the public overwhelmingly supports rehabilitation and treatment for young people in trouble, *not* prosecution in the adult court or incarceration in adult jails or prisons. 9 out of 10 people polled believe that rehabilitation and treatment for incarcerated youth can help prevent future crime, and 8 out of 10 thought spending money on rehabilitative services and treatment for youth will save money in the long run.¹⁵

¹⁵Krisberg, Barry and Marchionna, Susan. *Attitudes of US Voters toward Youth Crime and the Justice System* (2007). Oakland, CA: National Center on Crime and Delinquency.