

Social Programs to Combat Gangs Seen as More Effective Than Police

Area Officials Advocate Mix of Prevention and Enforcement

By Tom Jackman
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When it comes to fighting gangs, there's the [New York City](#) approach, and there's the [Los Angeles](#) approach, according to the Justice Policy Institute. And one statistic dramatizes the difference:

Two years ago, [Los Angeles police](#) reported 11,402 gang-related crimes; [New York police](#), 520.

In a report being issued today, "Gang Wars," the Washington-based institute says it found overwhelming evidence that cities such as New York and suburbs and rural areas that use extensive social resources -- job training, mentoring, after-school activities, recreational programs -- make significant dents in gang violence. Areas that rely heavily on police enforcement, such as Los Angeles, have far less impact.

The institute analyzed dozens of academic reports on combating gangs and conducted research on the best ways to reduce gang violence. The report does not discuss gangs in the Washington area or its suburbs, partly because extensive investigations have not been performed in the region.

"Nobody we talked to thought that D.C. had a real gang problem," said Kevin Pranis, one of the report's authors. "Which is good news."

Institute officials say they hope the report will persuade legislators, in Washington and across the country, to allocate more money to proven social programs that target illegal gang behavior and less for large-scale arrest-and-imprison initiatives that often show short-term gains but make gang problems worse.

Officials in the District and its suburbs often stress the importance of both prevention and enforcement. In 2003, then-D.C. police chief [Charles H. Ramsey](#) launched the Gang Intervention Partnership Unit, working with schools,

neighborhood groups and resident activists to reduce violence.

An independent report issued last year, looking at the unit's effects on the city's Latino population, gave a resounding endorsement: The number of Latino gang-related homicides in the city dropped from 21 between 1999 and 2003 to zero between 2003 and 2006.

"Suppression [enforcement] alone, that doesn't work," said Sgt. Juan Aguilar of the D.C. police. "That's only a Band-Aid. You've got to get to the root of the problem. It's social."

Similar sentiments were expressed by officials in [Arlington](#) and [Fairfax](#) counties, who said their police departments work closely with a variety of social service providers. In 2005, after a spate of gang violence in [Northern Virginia](#), Fairfax launched a Coordinating Council on Gang Prevention and required several county service providers to participate.

Last year, Arlington launched its "Attention to Prevention" initiative to provide mentoring, leadership training and tutoring for youths. Police spokesman [John Lisle](#) said, "It's clear to us, to reduce the impact of gangs, it's not just a matter of locking people up."

The Justice Policy Institute describes itself as a think tank dedicated to ending society's reliance on incarceration and promoting effective solutions to social problems.

Statistics show that youth crime in the United States is at its lowest levels in 30 years and that gangs are responsible for a relatively small share of crime. In addition, according to a national [Justice Department](#) survey of police departments, gang membership declined from 850,000 in 1996 to 760,000 in 2004.

But occasional outbursts of violence prompt the media and politicians to seek immediate answers, said the report's authors, Pranis and Judith Greene.

"And it's more about politics than it is about serious efforts to do something," Greene said yesterday. "It's frustrating to see officials come forward with money for mass arrests, when the money is so sorely needed in programs that are tried and true and can really work."

In New York, the use of social programs to prevent gangs started in the 1950s, and the programs have continued to receive funding throughout the cycles of gang activity, the new report says. Street-level social workers, gang intervention programs and job training have been used for decades. "New York really doesn't have a chronic gang problem," said Greene, a New York resident.


Los Angeles, on the other hand, "retains the dubious honor of being the gang

capital of the world," the report says. A 25-year anti-gang effort has cost taxpayers billions of dollars but has resulted in six times as many gangs and twice the number of gang members, because Los Angeles has not adequately funded social programs, the report says.

"There are very little services," said Luis J. Rodriguez, a former Los Angeles gang member who is a member of that city's Ad Hoc Committee on Gang Violence and Youth Development. He said the city has 61 gang intervention workers to handle about 40,000 gang members.

"We need substantial, root-based work, ways for people to get out of gangs," Rodriguez said. "But there are no jobs, rehabilitation or treatment, and schools and services do not work with gang kids."

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