

Policy Brief



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Youth Gangs in America: A Critical Need for More Preventative Approaches

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Between 1996 and 2000, America witnessed a steep decline in the number of youth-related gang problems. Since this time, however, the problem has grown to near epidemic proportions (Howell, 2009). As noted in the Table below, although the number of gang-related problems is relatively high in our larger cities, the tremendous growth in gang activity has occurred in our rural and suburban counties. In rural areas, there was a 68% growth in law enforcement agencies reporting gang problems between 2002 and 2005. There was a reported 32% growth in suburban counties.

Law Enforcement Agencies Reporting Gang Problems, 2002 and 2005

Area Type	2002 Total	2005 Total	Percent Change
Rural Counties	53	89	68%
Smaller Cities	178	210	18%
Suburban Counties	143	189	32%
Larger Cities	320	346	8%
TOTAL	694	834	20%

The Growing Taxpayer Cost of Incarceration and the Gang Problem

The growth in youth gang-related problems and our inability to solve these problems is exacerbated by the enormous growth in state corrections-related costs which, according to a recent Pew Charitable Trust (2009) report, have skyrocketed from \$10.6 billion 20 years ago to more than \$44 billion in 2008. The authors of the report write:

America now has more than 7.3 million adults under some form of correctional control. That whopping figure is more than the populations of Chicago, Philadelphia, San Diego and Dallas put together, and larger than the populations of 38 states and the District of Columbia. During Ronald Reagan's first term as president, 1 in every 77 adults was under the control of the correctional system in the United States. Now, 25 years later, it is 1 in 31, or 3.2 percent of all adults.

Furthermore, approximately 700,000 prison inmates and over nine million jail inmates will return to a community somewhere in the United States each year. According to the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC), these returning inmates account for nearly two-thirds of the gang problem in cities and townships throughout the country (Howell, 2009; Pinard, 2008):

The total volume of crime is estimated to cost Americans \$655 billion each year, and gangs are responsible for a substantial proportion of this cost. (For example) A study of admissions to a Los Angeles hospital trauma center found that the costs of treating 272 gang-related gunshot victims totaled nearly \$5 million (emergency room, surgical procedures, intensive care, and surgical ward state), which equated to \$5,550 per patient per day . . . A single adolescent criminal career of about 10 years can cost taxpayers between \$1.7 and \$2.3 million, or \$110 million per 500 boys. (Howell, 2009; p. 133)

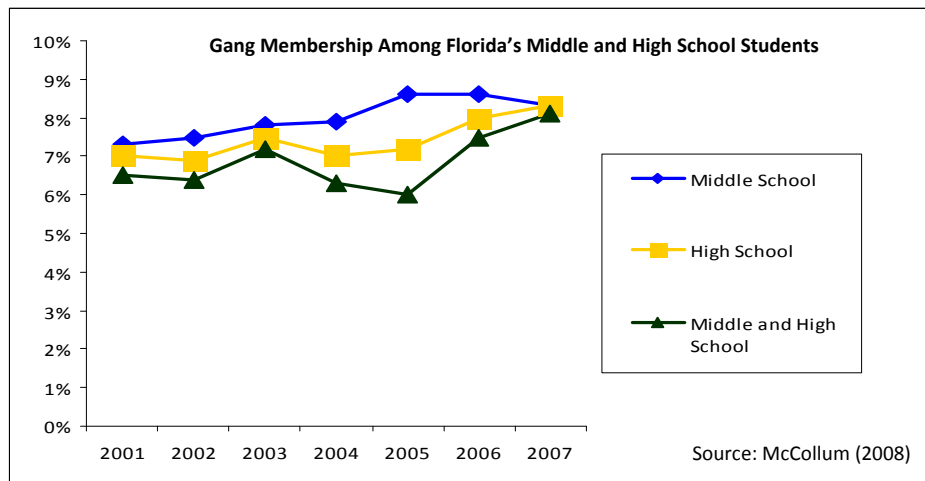
Public Denial

Individual agency efforts to solve gang-related problems is also exacerbated by public denial that there is a problem. For example, in writing about bullying problems (which are closely connected to gang problems) in our school systems, the research by Rogers and O'Bryon (2008) revealed that "many Americans do not understand, accept, or feel the need to change the status quo" (p. 496). Within Florida, Emery Gainey, Director of the Attorney General's Victim Services and Criminal Justice Programs, reported:

We have a serious gang problem that many in Florida continue to deny . . . In the Florida prison system, there is at least one gang representing each one of the 67 counties in Florida, even counties with only a few thousand people. (Florida Courier, March 27, 2009).

Florida: Failed "Get Tough" Policies

Gang-related problems in Florida somewhat mirror national trends (see Figure below). There is a general upward trend in gang problems – most noticeably since 2005. It appears that many of the get tough/zero tolerance (punitive oriented) policies, which gained widespread appeal during the 1980s, are not working. (Howell, 2009; p. 24-25).



Collective and Comprehensive Approaches

The research suggests that we need collective and comprehensive approaches to address gang-related problems that focus on effective intervention and suppression strategies. On the front end, however, there must be a serious focus on prevention so that problems related to intervention and suppression can be mitigated.

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