

Responding to Gangs, Guns and Youth  
Crime:

Principles from Strategic Problem Solving  
Approaches

Scott H. Decker, Ph.D.  
Professor and Director  
School of Criminal Justice and Criminology  
Arizona State University

## **Executive Summary**

Gang membership and homicide rates both show recent signs of increase. State policymakers concerned about public safety must pay close attention to these increases in order to avoid the problems created by such increases in the 1990's. An effective response to the problems of guns and gangs must be built on a solid understanding of the problem. The magnitude of these problems no longer allows for jurisdictions to use old strategies or speculate about the nature of the problems. Effective responses are built on a well-developed description of the problem, a description that comes from a variety of sources. There is an important role for state's to set in identifying key problems, helping to design policy and institutional interventions, and support the implementation of those interventions. This white paper identifies ways to build an understanding of the youth gang and gun problems that can lead to successful strategies. The white paper recommends the use of a strategic problem solving response to these issues. In addition, the paper lays out a comprehensive strategy that integrates prevention, intervention and suppression. Successful strategies require the integration of these approaches. Promising practices within each of the areas of prevention, intervention and suppression are identified. The following specific approaches are recommended:

- 1) Develop a clear and multi-dimensional understanding of the problem.
- 2) Build a set of interventions that has a balanced approach including prevention, intervention and suppression.
- 3) Employ a strategic problem solving approach.
- 4) The following strategies represent examples of what Governors and other state policymakers can implement to produce results: :
  - a) police gang units,
  - b) school based prevention,
  - c) "lever pulling" with offenders,
  - d) coordinated prosecution,
  - e) Evening Reporting Centers,
  - f) gun focussed policing, and
  - g) community outreach efforts.

### **Overview of Current Trends Related to the Spread of Gangs, the Movement of Guns and Recent Increases in Youth Crime in the United States**

The early 1990's saw a dramatic increase in homicide. This increase was fueled by the increased use of firearms, and largely involved young victims and offenders involved in crack cocaine markets. During this time, many large American cities

recorded record numbers and rates of homicide. This increase was followed by equally dramatic declines in homicide, extending past the turn of the century.

The number of gangs and gang members grew dramatically across the United States at about the same time that homicide rates began to decline. In 1996, the number of gangs peaked at just over 31,000 with nearly 840,000 gang members. In 2000, every state reported the presence of gangs. Since that time, the number of gangs and gang members has declined steadily.

Disturbingly, homicide rates and gang membership have begun to creep up since 2003. While neither issue has reached the magnitude of its peak, these increases have produced the need for more attention by the states. Implementing proven strategies is imperative if states are to address these re-emerging problems successfully. Such interventions can be most effective if they are integrated into a Strategic problem solving framework. This White Paper provides the outline of such a framework and offers a number of concrete recommendations for responding to gangs, guns and youth crime.

We recommend that the following questions (known as “Kennedy’s Rules”) be asked of any intervention:

- 1) How big an impact can we anticipate from our intervention?
- 2) How long will it take to achieve that impact?
- 3) Is the intervention feasible?
- 4) Do we want to engage in the intervention?

### **Challenges to Addressing the Issue**

A central premise of this paper is that problems are local and solutions must be crafted in response to a solid, accurate and complete picture of the local problem. This calls for the implementation of the SARA model, as described by Boba (2003),

<http://www.policefoundation.org/pdf/problemanalysisinpolicing.pdf>

Bynum (2001) (<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/e08011230.pdf>)

Clarke and Eck (2003), <http://www.popcenter.org/learning/60steps/index.cfm?page=Foreword>

and Schmerler, Perkins, Phillips, Rinehart and Townsend (2006).

<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/mime/open.pdf?Item=441>

It is critical in this process to develop a locally relevant definition of what constitutes a gang, what constitutes a gang member and what will be counted as a gang crime. Without a clear and consistent definition, it is impossible to know how extensive the gang or gang crime problems are. Gangs are groups of individuals who have symbols of membership, persist over time, and engage in crime. A successful response requires an appropriate understanding of the problem, coordination, resources and focus. The strategic problem solving process can help to provide there.

### **Recommendations**

Our first recommendation in responding to these problems is to use a model of strategic problem solving that can be built on the SARA (Scanning, Analysis, Response and Assessment) model. To do so, we recommend asking a number of salient questions about gangs in your jurisdiction.

1. What definition do you use in defining a gang, a gang member and a gang crime?
2. How do you track gang crime? Does your agency identify crime that is committed by gangs?

3. What sources of information about gangs are available? Do schools, social service groups, the juvenile court or hospitals track such information? . If your agency participates in the National Youth Gang Center surveys (Egley and Ritz, 2006) what do those data tell you about the nature of the gang problem in your community.
4. How many gangs are there in your jurisdiction? How long have they been around?
5. What is the structure of gangs? How well organized are the gangs in your community? Do gangs have leaders or specialized roles?
6. What are the individual characteristics of gang members including age, gender and race/ethnicity?
7. Do gangs migrate to your city from other cities? Do gangs in your city imitate or copy those in other cities? (See <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/171153.pdf>)
8. What is the role of prison gangs in street gang activity?
9. To what extent are gang members involved in the local and wholesale drug and gun markets?
10. What are the predominant crimes that gang members engage in? What is the role of violence in the gang?
11. What are the major sources of disruption caused by gangs? Where do these disruptions take place? (E.g., neighborhood, school, jail, malls, public gathering places, etc.)

The next step is to construct an inventory of how the specific gang problem is being dealt with and the shortcomings or assets of each approach. This can be done by using the COPS Office website (<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/>), or the website of the National Youth Gang Center (<http://www.iir.com/NYGC/>) through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/>). There are also a number of academic reviews of what works in responding to gangs including Curry and Decker (2003), Decker (2003), Klein and Maxson (2006), Klein (1995), and Spergel (1995).

Identifying sources of information to use in developing a response to gangs is important once questions about local gangs have been determined. Possible sources of information include some combination of the following groups.

- The juvenile court,
- Schools,
- Emergency rooms,
- Information from the Computer Aided Dispatch system (CAD), especially calls for shots fired,
- Data from the Record Management System (RMS), particularly if there is a gang identifier in the system,
- Jails and Prisons,
- The Supplemental Homicide Report data maintained by the FBI as part of the Uniform Crime Reporting program,
- Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) research partners,
- The Youth Firearms Violence Initiative (YFVI) maintained by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives,
- Child Fatality Review Panels.

It is important to know the resources that are available. All of the federal initiatives that exist in a jurisdiction can be accessed at (<http://guide.helpingamericasyouth.gov/>). This excellent resource allows one to quickly access information about every federally funded program in a zip code, city or county, organized

by nature of intervention, target groups served, and the extent to which the service offered fits a best practices model.

There is a large literature on gang responses (Spergel, 1995; Klein, 1995; Curry and Decker, 2003; Decker, 2004) Klein and Maxson, 2006; OJJDP, 2000). One common theme that runs through this literature is the use of Prevention, Intervention and Suppression in an integrated framework. Phelan Wyrick of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has developed a “Response Pyramid” that identifies the nature of the gang problem, its magnitude and a suitable category of response (Wyrick, 2006). This figure illustrates several salient points about gang intervention strategies. First, all of the stages of intervention (prevention, intervention and suppression) must be used in an integrated model to have the best chance for success. Second, the pyramid illustrates that different stages of the problem (which can be present at the same time in communities) need a variety of responses. Third, the magnitude of the problem differs across levels, with the largest group of responses needed for prevention, a smaller problem for intervention, and the smallest segment of the problem needing suppression.

### **Promising Practices**

**Prevention** responses are targeted against the largest segment of the problem, youth at risk for gang membership and youth in the general population. The goal of prevention is to stop youth from joining gangs. As such, prevention is usually targeted at young people, often in elementary or middle schools.

There are two kinds of prevention, and each is important to a successful gang prevention effort. Primary prevention addresses all members of the community, and

offers the broadest of responses to gangs. Prevention can be delivered by school, local government, faith-based organizations, law enforcement or community groups.

Secondary prevention is targeted at youth who are displaying many of the early signs of gang membership, or other problem behaviors that indicate that they are at high risk for involvement in gangs or gang crime. Phelan Wyrick at OJJDP (2006) recommends that secondary prevention include three basic components: (1) the provision of meaningful alternatives to gang membership; (2) effective support systems including family, community and school; and (3) accountability on the part of the juvenile for their behavior.

A valuable resource for communities in identifying appropriate prevention and intervention activities is the federal Helping America's Youth initiative. All agencies in the federal government that address the needs of youth collaborated to agree on a single set of criteria to assess the effectiveness of activities to support youth. More than 180 programs that had been carefully evaluated for implementation and impact were found, and are part of a database on the Community Guide to Helping America's Youth website at <http://www.helpingamericasyouth.gov/>. The database includes information regarding program design, risk factors, target group, evaluation design, outcomes, references, and contact information. The website provides a comprehensive guide to youth programs in a large number of topic areas, as well as information about their impact based on the quality of evaluations.

Three prevention efforts worth including in a response are Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT), School Resource Officers (SRO), and Consent to Search Programs.

- GREAT is a program coordinated through BATFE that brings police officers to schools to provide prevention efforts, gang awareness and resistance strategies to junior high school students. Evaluation results show that this prevention effort has positive impacts.

- SROS have been used in schools throughout the country for over a decade. Evaluation results support their use for prevention of school disorder and improved relationships between police and students.

- Consent to Search has been used successfully in St. Louis to visit the homes of juveniles believed to be at high risk for involvement in violence, either as victims or perpetrators. Police gain the permission of a parent or guardian to search the juvenile's room, and confiscate all firearms, weapons or contraband that was found. <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/191332.pdf>

Another useful source of information for identifying gang prevention and intervention programs is the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC). Their website (<http://www.iir.com/nygc/default.htm>) identifies a number of publications that local communities and police departments can use to match their community needs with potential programmatic interventions. They have developed a Community Inventory Assessment Guide that communities can use to assess the nature of their problem and available resources to provide a foundation for defining and developing interventions.

This can be found at the website <http://www.iir.com/nygc/acgp/assessment.htm> They also recommend the use of a grid to monitor the planning, implementation and performance of prevention (and intervention and suppression) activities. We have included an example of this below. The goals will change from community to community, depending on the nature of the problem, and there will be multiple goals, and multiple objectives for each goal, but generally the format of this grid applies to prevention, intervention and suppression.

**PREVENTION/INTERVENTION/SUPPRESSION ACTIVITY GRID**

**Goal 1:**

**Objective 1:**

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Target Population</b>	<b>Responsible Agency</b>	<b>Existing Program/Resource</b>	<b>Required Program/Resource</b>	<b>Short-Term Activity (6 months)</b>	<b>Long-Term Activity (1 year)</b>

**Intervention** is one of the oldest staples of gang intervention programs has been the use of detached workers or street outreach workers. Street outreach involves the use of individuals who are not employed in the criminal justice system to “work the streets” making contact with youth in neighborhoods with high levels of gang crime and gang membership. These contacts are meant to provide pro-social contacts with youth, engage youth in pro-social activities, link youth services and social systems, and provide a link between youth who are often estranged from the institutions of legitimate society and social institutions.

There are several interventions worth noting.

- In Oakland, the group Teens on Target has the goal of reducing youth and gang violence. Their multi-faceted intervention includes sessions held in the Emergency room to more graphically communicate the consequences of violence.

- The Child Development-Community Policing model in New Haven Connecticut includes the use of Emergency Room and Hospitals as sites to recruit participants into a violence reduction strategy.

- St. Louis piloted an emergency room intervention known as the Trauma Intervention Program (TIP <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/210361.pdf>). The goals were to form a medical team-police partnership, cross-train police and emergency personnel, and provide crisis intervention services to victims of violence.

- The Gang Victim Services Program (Orange County, CA.) provides support for gang members who have become victims of violence.

- Building on the Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) strategy of targeted deterrence and prosecution, a number of jurisdictions have developed Offender Notification Meetings (ONM). The basic premise of this intervention is to provide a targeted deterrence message to offenders at high risk for involvement in violence, recent releasees from prison, and provide them with a realistic assessment of their chances for going back to prison while at the same time linking them directly to the services that may enable them to stay out of prison (Bynum and Decker, 2005). [http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/pdf/Offender Notification Meetings.pdf](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/pdf/Offender%20Notification%20Meetings.pdf)

- An emerging program with considerable promise is the Evening Reporting Center. This intervention emerged in Cook County, Illinois in response to the need for additional supervision of juveniles on probation during the early evening hours. Much research has noted that one of the peak times for delinquency and youth victimization occurs during the after school hours until early evening. In response to this finding, the Evening Reporting Center ([www.cookcountycourt.org/services](http://www.cookcountycourt.org/services)) developed a program where staff works with youth from 4 pm to 9 pm daily, and provide educational, vocational, recreational, and life skills.

**Suppression** is the best known and most practiced of the gang intervention strategies. But despite the fact that it is used most often, even law enforcement groups regard it as less effective than many prevention and intervention strategies.

- There has been a considerable expansion in prosecution efforts to deal with gangs. These have come primarily in the areas of vertical prosecution or specially targeted prosecution. Many state level prosecutors (Cook County, IL, Los Angeles, CA)

have developed specialized prosecution teams that only deal with gang cases. These organizational responses reflect the complexity of prosecuting gang cases.

- Another approach that has gained prominence is the use of Gun Case Prosecution Coordination ( Decker and McDevitt, 2006) [http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/pdf/Gun\\_Prosecution\\_Case\\_Screening.pdf](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/pdf/Gun_Prosecution_Case_Screening.pdf)). Under this strategy, prosecution of gang and gun cases is more effectively coordinated in a process that has come to be known as “smart prosecution”. The premise of this approach is that coordination among law enforcement and prosecution can be facilitated by better communication among law enforcement and prosecution partners including regular meetings of local police, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (BATFE) agents, local, state and federal prosecutors. At these meetings, every gun arrest and gun case in the jurisdiction is reviewed to determine the jurisdiction where the longest sentence can be obtained, as well as to craft a strategic prosecution that most effectively uses resources.

- The longstanding federal involvement in Weed and Seed (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ccdo/ws/welcome.html>) can also facilitate effective interventions.

- By far the best known of the gang specific efforts has occurred in Los Angeles, through the LAPD Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) intervention. These efforts began in the early 1980’s and used tactics such as gang sweeps, identifying and enforcing gang hotspots, increased saturation by police patrols and crackdowns. Some critics (Klein, 1995) have argued that such response models are premised on a flawed understanding of gang crime problems, often exacerbate the problem by increasing gang solidarity, and lead to corruption and abuse.

More promising results can be found in the area of hotspot policing against guns.

- The Kansas City Gun Experiment used directed patrol against gun hotspots in an effort to seize illegal firearms and reduce gun carrying in the targeted (high gun crime) areas of the city. The police department was able to increase gun seizures, and reduce gun crime dramatically in the target area, while no such changes were observed in the control area. Equally important, residents were aware of the increased gun patrols, but negative attitudes toward the police because of their increased presence and aggressive tactics toward guns were not observed.

- The Boston Gun Project (Kennedy, Braga, and Piehl, 2001 NIJ) (<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/188741.pdf>). This project demonstrated success by targeting gun trafficking and gun use by young offenders including gang members. An intervention that emerged from the Boston Gun Project was the use of the Night Light program ([http://www.bostonstrategy.com/programs/12\\_OpNiteLite.html](http://www.bostonstrategy.com/programs/12_OpNiteLite.html)). This collaborative project stemmed from a long-standing cooperation between local probation, state prosecution and local law enforcement and was designed to insure that probationers were meeting the conditions of their probation sentences. The Boston Night Light program became the basis for the development of a Night Watch program in St. Louis for juvenile probationers. Using funds from the Juvenile Accountability Incentive Block Grant program (JAIBG <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/jabg/>) the Juvenile Court partnered with the St. Louis Metropolitan Police department to form two person teams. Perhaps most importantly, an independent evaluation (Curry and Decker, 2005) found that both the

seriousness and frequency of offending of juvenile offending were reduced while in the program.

- The ten city Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative (<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/jr000241d.pdf>).
- Most Violent Offender Lists. These lists are compiled by law enforcement and prosecutors with the goal of identifying the most violent individuals at large in a community, in order to target them in electronic databases so as to enhance officer safety as well as to increase the chances that when they are confronted they will be apprehended. In addition, such lists have been used as part of other “lever pulling” efforts, such as warrant sweeps, probation and parole crackdowns, and enhanced neighborhood sweeps and surveillance. [http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/pdf/Most Violent Offender Lists.pdf](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/pdf/Most_Violent_Offender_Lists.pdf)
- A number of jurisdictions have turned to civil gang injunctions as a response to gang problems. This response has occurred more in California than any other state, though Chicago has attempted to use this tactic. Unlike so many of the potential responses to gangs, civil gang injunctions are targeted specifically against gangs and have been well evaluated. This strategy requires a high standard of proof, with a substantial burden of collecting evidence and documenting gang membership and activity on the part of law enforcement and the prosecutor.
- Gang Task Forces have become used with increasing frequency. Gang units operate in a more autonomous manner than most units in the police department. Such units often do not engage in community policing.

## **Conclusions**

### Implementing Successful Programs

Asking the following questions, not just at the start of a response but on a regular basis (perhaps monthly) will prove fruitful. We recommend putting them down in writing, and revisiting them on a regular basis to note successes, failures and new problems that should be addressed.

What are you trying to change and how are you trying to do it?

What needs to happen in order to do that and when must it occur?

Who is to be responsible for specific activities?

These questions help to maintain focus, and focus is a key to success. It is critical for a response to develop both process and outcome measures. The goal of asking such questions is to change the course of a response that is not successful and help it achieve the desired outcomes. In addition, it is well known that the gang problem, as with other crime problems is highly dynamic. The gang problem of today is markedly different than it was five years ago, and will be in five years. Thus it is important to avoid developing a fixed image of a problem that doesn't change as the problem does.

The failure to understand the nature, dynamics and dimensions of the local gang problem can lead to errors in the development of interventions for gangs, but also in other significant areas of public policy that affect gangs like families, housing, employment, schools and neighborhoods. If we don't understand the local gang problem, we are likely to make errors in policy, practice and programming.

### **Gang Websites**

(JAIBG <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/jabg/>)

<http://www.faculty.missouristate.edu/M/MichaelCarlie/Resources/related%20sites.htm>

[www.ojp.usdoj.gov](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov)

[www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org](http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org)

[www.sonoma.edu/cja/info/infos.html](http://www.sonoma.edu/cja/info/infos.html)

[www.iir.com/nygc](http://www.iir.com/nygc)

[www.fgia.com](http://www.fgia.com)

[www.psn.gov](http://www.psn.gov)

[www.DOJConnect.com](http://www.DOJConnect.com)

<http://faculty.ncwc.edu/TOConnor/301/301links.htm>

[\*\*Chicago Crime Commission 1995 Gang Report\*\*](#)  
[\*\*GangsOrUs.com\*\*](#)

[\*\*Hispanic L.A.-based Street Gangs\*\*](#)

[\*\*National Gang Crime Research Center\*\*](#)

[\*\*National Youth Gang Suppression Report\*\*](#)

[\*\*New York City's \(GIU\) Gang Intelligence Unit\*\*](#)

[\*\*OJJDP Overview on Youth Gangs\*\*](#)

[\*\*StreetGangs.com\*\*](#)

[\*\*Street Gang Dynamics\*\*](#)

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