



DJJ Should Use Evidence-Based Practices to Address Juvenile Gang Involvement

at a glance

Department of Juvenile Justice data indicates that juvenile gang membership has increased steadily over the last five years. Approximately 5% of the youth referred to the department for delinquency offenses have been identified as gang members. While most referred juvenile gang members have not committed serious and violent crimes, they are at increased risk of doing so.

As recommended by the Blueprint Commission on Juvenile Justice, the department is beginning to develop a statewide gang control strategy. National research has identified evidenced-based strategies and programs that reduce delinquency and the risk factors for gang participation. However, the department's current prevention and intervention programs are not targeted at gang members. The Redirection Program is showing promise in reducing offending by identified gang members. The Legislature could consider expanding the criteria for placing youth in this program to include identified gang members who are assessed to pose a high risk to re-offend.

Scope

As directed by the Legislature, OPPAGA examined three Department of Juvenile Justice issues.

- What data are available on the number of juvenile gang members in Florida?
- What is the status of department efforts to address juvenile gang membership?
- What evidenced-based programs are successful in addressing the risk factors for gang membership?

Background

Juvenile gang membership and violence has become an increasing concern in Florida in recent years. The 2007 Blueprint Commission noted that gangs are a serious threat to public safety and the welfare of the state's youth. The Blueprint Commission report made several recommendations for a state Gang Free Initiative. In December 2007, the Attorney General hosted a Gang Reduction Strategy Summit and brought together the heads of the Department of Juvenile Justice and other agencies and advocacy groups to develop a multi-agency gang reduction strategy.

Preventing and reducing juvenile gang membership and activity is critical to any long-term strategy to reduce gang violence. Although juveniles are generally less likely than adults to be involved in the most serious and violent gang crime, most violent adult gang members began their criminal careers and gang involvement as juveniles.

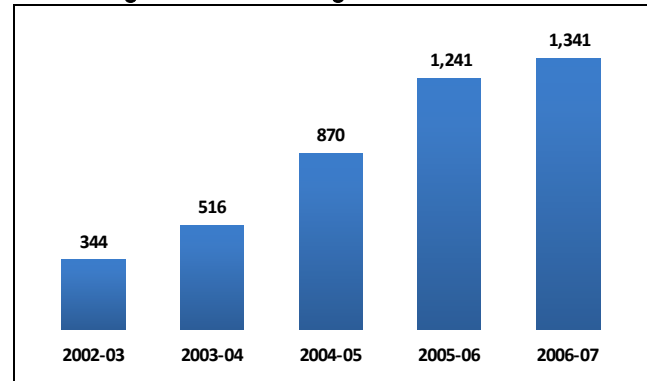
Questions and Answers —

What data are available on the number of juvenile gang members in Florida?

The number of youth identified as gang members is increasing, and a higher percentage of gang members than other delinquents are involved in serious crime. The Juvenile Justice Information System contains information on youth the department has identified as gang members. The department identifies these youth through their self-reporting gang membership, reports by parents and law enforcement, and by observing gang signs and symbols such as tattoos on referred youth. The information system records the names of the youth and the date when identification as a gang member was made.

As shown in Exhibit 1, the number of juveniles in the system identified as gang members has increased steadily over the last five years.¹ The exhibit shows the number of new youth identified as gang members each year. As many youth are referred multiple times, the total number of identified gang members in the juvenile justice system is higher than the number of gang-involved youth identified each year. In Fiscal Year 2006-07, for example, 3,996 youth who had been identified as gang members were referred to the juvenile justice system, whereas only 1,341 youth were newly identified as gang members.²

Exhibit 1
The Department of Juvenile Justice Is Identifying an Increasing Number of Gang Members Each Year¹



¹ Unduplicated count of youth in the juvenile justice system identified as gang members in each of the past five years, by the year of identification.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Juvenile Justice data.

While the number of identified gang members is growing, these youth represent a small percentage of the youth who come into contact with the department. For example, the 3,996 identified gang members referred to the Department of Juvenile Justice in Fiscal Year 2006-07 represent less than 5% of the youth referred to the department that year (see totals in Exhibit 2). However, juvenile gang members are more involved in violent crime compared to other delinquents. As shown in Exhibit 2, juvenile gang members referred to the department in Fiscal Year 2006-07 were roughly four times more likely to have a history of multiple felony and violent felony arrests than non-gang members.

Exhibit 2
Juvenile Gang Members Are More Likely to Have Multiple Felony and Violent Felony Arrests

Measure of Criminal Offending	Gang	Non-Gang
Three or more felony arrests, any type	12.7%	3.1%
Two or more violent felony arrests	8.2%	2.1%
At least one drug felony arrest	10.5%	6.0%
Total number referred in FY 2006-07	3,996	82,151

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Juvenile Justice and Department of Law Enforcement data for juveniles identified as gang members.

¹ Self-identified juvenile gang members and those identified by the Department of Juvenile Justice are not the same as gang members identified by law enforcement. For purposes of prosecution with enhanced penalties, law enforcement gang investigators identify gang members who meet statutory criteria, including arrests and proven criminal activities. The department's current gang data are appropriate for purposes of risk assessment and appropriate placement, but is not based on statutory criteria for prosecution.

² Identified gang members who were completing sanctions in community or residential programs but did not have a new referral in 2006-07 are not included in the total for Exhibit 2.

At the point when they are referred to the department, most gang members (about two-thirds) have not been arrested for a violent felony or multiple felonies of any type. As these youth are at a high risk of becoming involved in more serious crime, it is important for the department to establish effective gang prevention and intervention services to divert them from deeper involvement in criminal behavior.

What is the status of department efforts to address juvenile gang membership?

To date, the department has had a limited role in implementing prevention and intervention programs targeted to gang-involved youth. Effective gang control requires a three-pronged approach. First, prevention and intervention strategies are needed that target high-risk youth and young gang members who are not at the core of a gang. Second, a suppression approach is needed that is focused on arresting, prosecuting, and incarcerating the most serious and violent gang leaders. Third, re-entry strategies are needed to help ensure that gang members returning to the community from juvenile justice commitment programs and prisons do not resume their gang involvement.

Historically, gang control has been the domain of local law enforcement agencies whose strategy focuses on arrest and prosecution. Local law enforcement agencies also have taken the lead in gang prevention by delivering informational presentations to youth and parents and teaching programs such as Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) in the schools. Law enforcement also provides positive recreational opportunities, such as police athletic league teams, for a broad population of youth.

While beneficial, these approaches have two drawbacks. First, they have not been empirically found to reduce gang participation. Second, broadly focused educational programs such as GREAT serve a wide audience of youth who may or may not have risk factors for delinquency and gang involvement. Even in counties with large numbers of juvenile gang members, gang-involved youth are less than 1% of the population of juveniles. Accordingly, broad-based programs may not be cost-effective

as they do not focus anti-gang prevention resources on those most at risk of gang membership.

As the statewide agency responsible for reducing delinquency, the Department of Juvenile Justice should develop a statewide gang prevention and intervention strategy for youth and promote effective interventions in coordination with schools, law enforcement, and other agencies. Until recently, gang prevention and intervention has not been a strategic focus of the department. Aside from a request for funds to continue an anti-gang program in North Miami Beach, the department has not specifically requested legislative funding for gang prevention or intervention services.

The department is beginning to take a more active role in gang strategy development. The Blueprint Commission concluded that the department must take a lead role in reducing gang involvement. The Blueprint Commission report recommended that the department develop a comprehensive gang prevention program with local stakeholders and implement a curriculum for youth at all levels of gang involvement. To respond to this recommendation, the department's Office of Technical Assistance has been adapting a gang-specific education and treatment program in conjunction with the program's developer. The office also has trained detention officers in evidence-based practices, and is developing plans to implement and evaluate this curriculum on a pilot basis in detention centers. The curriculum being developed uses evidence-based cognitive-behavioral methods to address risk factors for delinquency and gang membership, such as anti-social attitudes, impulsivity, and poor decision-making and problem-solving skills.

In addition the Gang Free DJJ Initiative has focused on identifying youth who meet the statutory criteria for prosecution as a gang member. In this effort, the department has appointed a gang liaison for each circuit, a gang coordinator for each region, and gang representatives for all branches of the department. These representatives were trained through the Florida Gang Investigator's

Association. The department also approved changes to its Juvenile Justice Information System to make the system compatible with InSite, the law enforcement gang information sharing system of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. The department also participated, as part of a multi-agency executive council, in developing the Attorney General's Gang Reduction Strategy.³ This group recommended creating a Coordinating Council on Gang Reduction Strategies, to be chaired by the Attorney General, and seven regional task forces to coordinate anti-gang efforts. The prevention/intervention strategy proposed by the Attorney General uses a media campaign to convince youth that gangs are undesirable to belong to, and it encourages local recreational, youth service, and faith-based groups to develop initiatives to provide constructive, educational, and entertaining alternatives to gangs for at-risk youth. The group also recommended using teen courts for juvenile justice intervention.

What evidenced-based programs are successful in addressing the risk factors for gang membership?

Evidence-based programs address the major risk factors for gang membership. While research has not established the direct impact of any particular program on gang membership, a large body of research has identified approaches that are effective in reducing delinquent offending by addressing the risk factors that gang members and other delinquents have in common. National gang experts recommend targeted programs that address the risk factors of high-risk youth as a cost-effective component of gang intervention and prevention strategy.⁴ These programs should focus on youth at high

risk of gang membership and young gang members who are yet not at the core of a gang. Programs that have been shown to reduce delinquency and serious violent offending address the major risk factors for gang membership, such as

- early aggressive and disruptive behavior,
- ineffective parental discipline and monitoring,
- delinquent peers,
- pro-criminal attitudes, and
- early delinquency.

Department data demonstrates that Florida's gang members exhibit these risk factors at a considerably higher rate than other delinquent youth. For instance, reported gang members were three times more likely than other youth referred to the department to exhibit pro-criminal attitudes and were more than twice as likely to experience a lack of parental control and authority and to have only delinquent friends.

Evidence-based prevention programs targeting these risk factors may be effective in reducing gang participation; however, Florida currently has few such programs. One state-funded evidence-based program that shows promise in addressing the risk factors is the Redirection Program. This program has trained a network of therapists in Multisystemic Therapy and in Functional Family Therapy, which have both been shown to improve family communication, discipline, and monitoring and reduce youth involvement with delinquent peers. These two program models are currently serving some Florida gang members. However, the programs are not currently available to gang members unless these youth are being considered for residential commitment, or are returning from residential commitment.

Our recent evaluation of the Redirection Program found that youth who were identified as gang members did as well after the Redirection Program as youth who were committed to longer, more expensive residential programs.⁵ Although

³ Participants included the Florida Highway Patrol, the Office of Drug Control, the Sheriff's Association, the Florida Police Chiefs Association, the Florida Gang Investigator's Association, and the Departments of Corrections, Children and Families, Education, Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, and Law Enforcement.

⁴ Wyrick, Phelan., *Gang Prevention: How to Make the Front End of Your Anti-Gang Effort Work*; United States Attorneys' Bulletin, May 2006, p. 59; Klein, Malcolm and Cheryl Maxson. *Street Gang Patterns and Policies, 2006*, pp. 160-161; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General, 2001*; Thornberry, Terrance et. al. *Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 199-200.

⁵ *Redirection Program Achieves Lower Recidivism and a \$14.4-Million Cost Savings Compared to DJJ Commitment*, OPPAGA Report No. 08-41, June 2008.

the results were not statistically significant due to the small sample size, our analysis showed that 46 gang members who successfully completed Redirection had a lower probability of an adjudication or conviction, or a felony adjudication or conviction following release than comparable gang members who were served in residential commitment.⁶ A larger group of gang members would need to be tracked for a more definitive assessment of outcomes to be reached. Nonetheless, these preliminary results seem to support expert recommendations concerning the potential of programs like Redirection for juvenile gang members.

National research has shown the effectiveness of several other evidence-based program models that the department is using to address the risk factors for gang membership. These programs include Life Skills training, aggression replacement training, and a cognitive-behavioral curriculum called Thinking for A Change that has been shown to reduce criminal thinking. The department should give youth identified as high risk for gang involvement priority for these programs.

Several program models have also been identified as effective in addressing aggressive behavior in elementary school, one of the strongest predictors of violent offending and gang membership.⁷ As discussed in our recent prevention report, these programs could be a valuable part of a statewide anti-gang strategy.

Recommendations

To help address the growing problem of youth involvement in criminal gangs, we recommend that the Legislature expand the criteria for the Redirection Program to include youth on

⁶ A probability score of 0.05 or lower is the commonly accepted standard and is used by OPPAGA for determining statistical significance. The probability score for the reduction in adjudications and convictions was 0.08 for gang members who were served in Redirection, compared to those served in residential commitment, and for felony adjudications and convictions, it was 0.07. Gang membership was identified on the Supervision Risk Classification Instrument.

⁷ These include the Incredible Years Series, Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), and the Seattle Social Development Project which provide training for parents, teachers, and children to prevent, reduce, and aggressive and disruptive behavior.

probation who are identified as gang members and are assessed as high risk to reoffend, whether or not those youth are being considered for commitment. We also recommend that the Department of Juvenile Justice identify current research-based programs that address the risk factors for gangs and focus these programs on serving gang members assessed at high risk for recidivism, and youth at high risk of gang membership and recidivism.

Since research is lacking on programs developed explicitly for anti-gang prevention and intervention, we recommend that the department assess any new programs implemented for this purpose to assure that they use evidence-based components and approaches shown to be effective in reducing juvenile offending and addressing risk factors for gang membership, and implement them on a pilot basis, and evaluate their impact on gang membership and subsequent offending.

We also recommend that the department, in conjunction with the Attorney General's Office, serve as a resource in providing expertise in gang and delinquency intervention research to guide statewide gang strategy. Finally, we recommend that the department develop an interagency committee to coordinate with the Department of Education to plan and implement evidence-based programs to address bullying and aggressive behavior problems in elementary school.

Agency Response

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.51(5), *Florida Statutes*, a draft of our report was submitted to the Secretary of the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice to review and respond. The Secretary's written response has been reproduced in Appendix A.

Appendix A



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE JUSTICE
Charlie Crist, Governor Frank Peterman, Jr., Secretary

September 18, 2008

Gary R. VanLandingham, Director
Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability
111 W. Madison Street, Suite 312
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475

RE: DJJ Should Use Evidence-Based Practices to Address Juvenile Gang Involvement

Dear Mr. VanLandingham:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your report of September 2008 addressing juvenile gang involvement of youth served by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). In general we concur with your recommendations and provide the following responses.

Background

The Gang Free DJJ Initiative began in April 2007 with the formation of a Statewide Steering Committee. Personnel were identified to serve as Regional Gang Coordinators, Circuit Gang Liaisons, and Gang Representatives resulting in very effective and efficient reciprocal lines of communication internally and externally to the Department. A number of workgroups were established to address the education, identification, intervention, legislation and suppression of gang activity. DJJ partnered with the Florida Gang Investigators Association and provided Gangs 101 training to over 200 staff. The Graffiti Abatement Pilot project began in Manatee and Sarasota counties and continues to be recognized for its success. Department representatives have met with local officials and stakeholders throughout the state, introducing the initiative and encouraging their support.

In January 2008, the Blueprint Commission supported and reiterated the strategies identified by the Gang Free DJJ Steering Committee understanding DJJ is in a position to have a considerable influence on a young person's decision or need to become affiliated with a gang.

Recommendation 1 (OPPAGA Report 2008): Legislature expand the criteria for the Redirection Program to include youth on probation who are identified as gang members and assessed as high risk to re-offend whether or not those youth are being considered for commitment.

The Department of Juvenile Justice concurs with this recommendation; however, we have limited availability for services provided by the Redirection Program to youth being considered and eligible for commitment as a cost-savings approach. The recommendation to expand criteria will require additional funding earmarked for the targeted subgroup of the probation population for the purposes of reducing future criminal activity. Furthermore, the Department recognizes additional practices that meet the Department's stringent definition of "evidence-based". These practices have shown similar appreciable effects on reducing recidivism and criminogenic needs.

2737 Centerview Drive • Tallahassee, Florida 32399-3100 • (850) 488-1850
<http://www.djj.state.fl.us>

The mission of the Department of Juvenile Justice is to increase public safety by reducing juvenile delinquency through effective prevention, intervention, and treatment services that strengthen families and turn around the lives of troubled youth.

Evidence-based practices meeting the Department's definition can be implemented at a lower cost to the State (still requiring additional funding), delivered by staff trained to facilitate each specific practice, and feasible to be incorporated at a community-based level.

Recommendation 2 (OPPAGA Report 2008): Identify current research-based programs/pilot implementation of new programs that address risk factors for gangs and focus these programs on serving gang members assessed at high risk of gang membership and recidivism.

The Department of Juvenile Justice will begin piloting Teaching Alternatives to Gangs (TAG): Detention Curriculum (October 2008) with identified Detention centers that utilizes research-based components to address specific risk factors prevalent in high-risk youth. Additionally, the Department will pilot a separate curriculum for Day Treatment that focuses on criminogenic needs and reducing recidivism. The Department plans to evaluate the impact of these curricula during the first quarter of 2009.

Recommendation 3 (OPPAGA Report 2008): The Department of Juvenile Justice in conjunction with the Attorney General's office, serve as a resource in providing expertise in gang and delinquency intervention research to guide statewide gang strategy.

DJJ was a key participant in the development of the Attorney General's Gang Reduction Strategy. Personnel have been identified to serve as Executive Task Force Members and will continue to serve as a resource and provide expertise in delinquency intervention.

Recommendation 4 (OPPAGA Report 2008): The Department of Juvenile Justice should develop an interagency committee to coordinate with the Department of Education to plan and implement evidence-based programs to address bullying and aggressive behavior problems in elementary school.

DJJ will continue to work with the Department of Education and other community stakeholders to support the implementation of programs that address bullying and aggressive behavior problems in the school setting. DJJ will be represented on the Attorney General's Gang Reduction Education Task Force throughout the state.

On behalf of the Department of Juvenile Justice, we look forward to continuing our work in empowering youth served by our Department, and ultimately in the State of Florida, to reject gang affiliation and criminal activity. Should you need additional information or other assistance, please feel free to contact us.

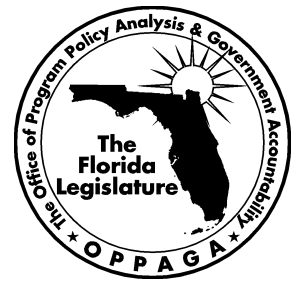
Sincerely,



Frank Peterman Jr.,
Secretary

The Florida Legislature

Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability



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Project supervised by Marti Harkness (850/487-9233)

Project conducted by LucyAnn Walker-Fraser (850/487-9168), Sion Doman, and Jason Gaitanis

Gary R. VanLandingham, OPPAGA Director