



National Institute of Justice

Research in Brief

Jeremy Travis, Director

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Issues and Findings

Discussed in this Brief: The results of a study to determine the level of street gang involvement in drug sales arrests in two Los Angeles suburban cities from 1989 to 1991. Results are compared with those from an earlier study of gang involvement in cocaine sales based on arrest incidents in south-central Los Angeles between 1983 and 1985. Police departments that participated in this study also provide their views of the findings.

Key issues: The connection between street gangs, drug sales, and violence has been debated in police and academic circles as well as the media. The study assessed the magnitude of gang involvement in cocaine and other drug sales in Pasadena and Pomona, California; compared the characteristics of drug sales incidents involving gangs with the characteristics of drug sales incidents not involving gangs; assessed the generalizability of cocaine-related findings to other drugs, and from urban to more suburban settings; and identified the implications of the research findings for development of law enforcement strategies.

Key findings: The statistical connection between street gangs, drug sales, and violence was smaller than anticipated. Specific findings include the following:

- Gang members were arrested in 27 percent of 1,563 cocaine sale ar-

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Street Gangs and Drug Sales in Two Suburban Cities

by Cheryl L. Maxson

The degree to which street gang involvement in drug distribution presents special and substantial difficulties to law enforcement is a matter of some debate in police and academic circles. Most of the literature emanating from law enforcement sources suggests a strong connection. Gangs are often portrayed as organized entrepreneurs battling traditional drug distributors for dominance of a lucrative business, and increased violence is often attributed to gang involvement in the drug trade.

The academic literature reflects more diversity regarding the scope and nature of the connection between gangs and drug sales. Some authors have reported well-organized drug distribution operations by gangs in California and the Midwest.¹ Other researchers have disputed this characterization of highly entrepreneurial gangs.² A study of gangs in three U.S. cities suggested the causal independence of gangs, drug sales, and violence—some gangs were involved in drug sales while others were not, and some gangs were violent while others were not.³ Interviews with gang members in five recent studies have yielded widely varying reported rates of drug sales involvement—the lowest reported

rate was 30 percent, and the highest reported rate was 95 percent.⁴ Perceptions of a close relationship between gangs, drug sales, and homicides have been challenged by recent studies in Chicago, Boston, and Los Angeles.⁵

The researchers in this study sought to examine this relationship in two suburban cities near Los Angeles: Pomona and Pasadena.⁶ This Research in Brief offers an overview of the context for this project, explains the study's methodology, presents an analysis of the key findings, and concludes with a discussion of policy implications.

The context: Los Angeles street gangs and drugs

The emergence of "rock" or "crack" cocaine in Los Angeles in the early 1980's generated researchers' interest because, almost immediately, police and media reports linked gangs to crack distribution.⁷ In an earlier study, law enforcement arrest, investigation, and gang records were used to investigate the magnitude and nature of gang involvement in cocaine sales arrest incidents in south-central Los Angeles between 1983 and 1985. Despite a dramatic increase in gang-involved cocaine sales (from 9 percent in 1983 to almost 25 per-

Issues and Findings

continued . . .

rest incidents occurring between 1989 and 1991 in two Los Angeles suburban cities.

- Rock or crack forms of cocaine were more often present in gang cases, but most aspects of cocaine sales incidents (e.g., location, firearm presence, and amount of cash) did not vary with gang involvement. Cases with gang members were more likely to include males, younger ages (by about 5 years), and blacks.

- Rates of gang involvement and gang-nongang differences were very similar to those reported for Los Angeles in 1985.

- The presence of identified gang members in arrest incidents for sales other than cocaine was far lower (less than 12 percent of 471 cases). No differences were noted in the incident characteristics of the two types of cases. Higher rates of Hispanics were arrested in other drug cases compared with cocaine sale incidents, but black suspects and younger people were more common in gang cases.

- Lower than expected rates of gang involvement in drug sales coupled with a lack of evidence of special impacts associated with gang involvement suggest a reconsideration of gang specialization in narcotics enforcement. The exception may be in the unusual case of the extremely involved drug-selling street gang. Investigation of homicides and other violent incidents may benefit more directly from the expertise of law enforcement gang specialists.

Target audience: Law enforcement, prosecution, probation, city government officials, social service agency practitioners, and researchers.

cent in 1985), the police recorded no evidence of gang domination of street-level or midlevel sales.⁸ The connection between street gangs, drug sales, and violence appeared to have been overstated by media reports.

The incident and drug features of these cases were quite similar regardless of gang member participation. On the other hand, the participant characteristics displayed marked contrasts between the two groups of cases. These differences mirrored those emerging from prior studies of gang and nongang violent incidents in Los Angeles and elsewhere.⁹ Drug sales involving gang members had greater numbers of younger (by about 5 years), male, and black participants than cases not involving gang members. These data provided no evidence of organized gang incursions into the drug market, and predictions of increased violence or firearm presence in gang cases were not supported.

By the mid- to late-1980's, crack—often reported to be tied to gangs—had appeared in most major cities across the Nation. Also during this period and into the early 1990's, hundreds of midsized and smaller cities and towns experienced gang problems for the first time.¹⁰ Law enforcement informants in the majority of these newer, smaller gang cities reported moderate to heavy gang involvement in drug distribution.

The current study was initiated to assess the generalizability of the Los Angeles findings to smaller suburban cities and to investigate whether sales incidents involving drugs other than cocaine might display different patterns. The research objectives were as follows:

- Assess the magnitude of gang involvement in cocaine and other drug sales in two suburban cities.
- Compare the characteristics of drug

sale incidents involving gangs with drug sale incidents not involving gangs.

- Assess the generalizability of findings on cocaine to other drugs and from urban to more suburban settings.
- Translate the implications of the research findings for law enforcement strategies.

Study methods

Homicide studies, personal interviews, questionnaires, and/or participant observations of gang members were the primary research methods used in the studies cited earlier. A distinguishing feature of the research described here was the use of law enforcement records to assess links between gangs, drugs, and violence in areas characterized by high incidence of both gang and drug sales activity.

Site selection. Pasadena and Pomona were selected as study sites for several reasons. Both are midsized suburban cities (population about 130,000 each). Pasadena is immediately adjacent to the city of Los Angeles; Pomona lies 25 miles to the east but is still well within the metropolitan area. Both cities have longstanding gang problems, and enforcement personnel have reported very active involvement of both black and Hispanic gang members in the distribution of a variety of drugs. Finally, Pasadena and Pomona have well-developed gang units and have maintained gang membership files for several years.

How do Pasadena and Pomona compare with other U.S. gang cities? As shown in Exhibit 1,¹¹ Pasadena reported more gangs than Pomona, and both cities have more gang members and more gang homicides than other midsized cities. Spanning all regions of the country, the comparison group included such cities

as Hartford, Connecticut; Jersey City, New Jersey; Flint, Michigan; Kansas City, Kansas; Lubbock, Texas; Hayward, California; and Las Vegas, Nevada. Three-fourths of the comparison cities had at least 40 percent Hispanic gang members, and about one-third reported a comparable percentage of black gang members. Generally, the Pasadena and Pomona figures fall into the upper midrange compared with these other cities but indicate a greater representation of black gang members. Despite their proximity to Los Angeles, the two study sites are not unique; the research findings are relevant to a number of cities across the country.

Drug sale definitions. Drug sale incidents were defined by the arrest of at least one suspect for a drug sales offense.¹² Computer-generated lists of all suspects arrested for these offenses between 1989 and 1991, along with co-arrestees charged with incident-related offenses, formed the population of drug sales cases. Generally, a sales “incident” was defined by the assignment of a departmental identification number to that case. Incidents were

categorized as cocaine involved or not, and cases including the sales of other drugs in addition to cocaine were placed into the cocaine group.

Gang definitions. Gang cases were defined by the arrest of at least one identified gang member in the drug sale incident. The gang membership files maintained by the gang unit in each department constituted the major source of gang case identifications. The gang units in both cities have maintained their gang files for several years. The criteria for inclusion in a gang membership file for Pomona and Pasadena were approximately the same as the criteria of the other Southern California cities with which the researchers are familiar. They included self-acknowledgment; identification by a known, reliable informant; and corroboration of identification by newer, less known informants. In both Pomona and Pasadena, gang member identifications from patrol or detective sections were reviewed and verified by gang unit personnel. Neither unit had purged its file of inactive gang members.

Gang member identification. In Pomona, an alphabetically ordered printout of about 1,800 entries from the automated gang file facilitated the matching process. Full name, birth date, moniker, and gang name were included. Each name on the arrestee list was checked against the gang roster. Alternative spelling variations (e.g., common misspellings, nicknames, and slight phonetic variations), different name ordering (e.g., a first name that could plausibly be a last name), and any aliases provided on the arrest list were explored. Only minor variations in names or birth dates were allowed, except where there was a clear match on a very unusual name.

The Pasadena gang files were not automated. Membership cards were held in 4 separate boxes or card file drawers: boxes for the 2 major black gang groupings in the Los Angeles area—the Crips and the Bloods—contained about 300 and 700 cards, respectively; the Hispanic gang box held about 700 cards separated into 7 major gang sections; and a box marked “miscellaneous” held about 275 cards (mostly with older dates of entry). Except for

Exhibit 1: Gang Characteristics of Midsized Cities That Reported Onset of Gangs Prior to 1981^a

Gang Characteristic	Pasadena	Pomona	37 Other Midsized Cities ^b
Number of gangs	32	14	24
Number of gang members	2,200	2,000	1,243
Percent black gang members	50%	48%	30%
Percent Hispanic gang members	40%	50%	53%
Number of gang homicides in 1991 ^c	13	7	4.5

^a Population 100,000 to 300,000.

^b Group means for each characteristic are reported. An alternative measure is the range represented by the middle 50 percent of cities: number of gangs, 8–31; gang members, 300–1,100; percent black gang members, 3–48; percent Hispanic gang members, 40–77; gang homicides, 1–7.

^c “During 1991, what was the number of homicides in your jurisdiction that involved gang members?”

the multiple sources investigated, the matching procedures mirrored those used in Pomona.¹³

Selection of samples. This initial check of drug arrestee names in the gang files yielded four groups of cases for sampling: gang and nongang, cocaine and noncocaine. Up to 100 cases in each group were sampled randomly from the lists constructed for each city. Whenever a case was dropped during collection, it was replaced by random selection from the appropriate nonsampled pool. New gang information that surfaced in the drug incident case file material required transfers from nongang to gang status. A clear attribution of gang membership in the case material was considered valid

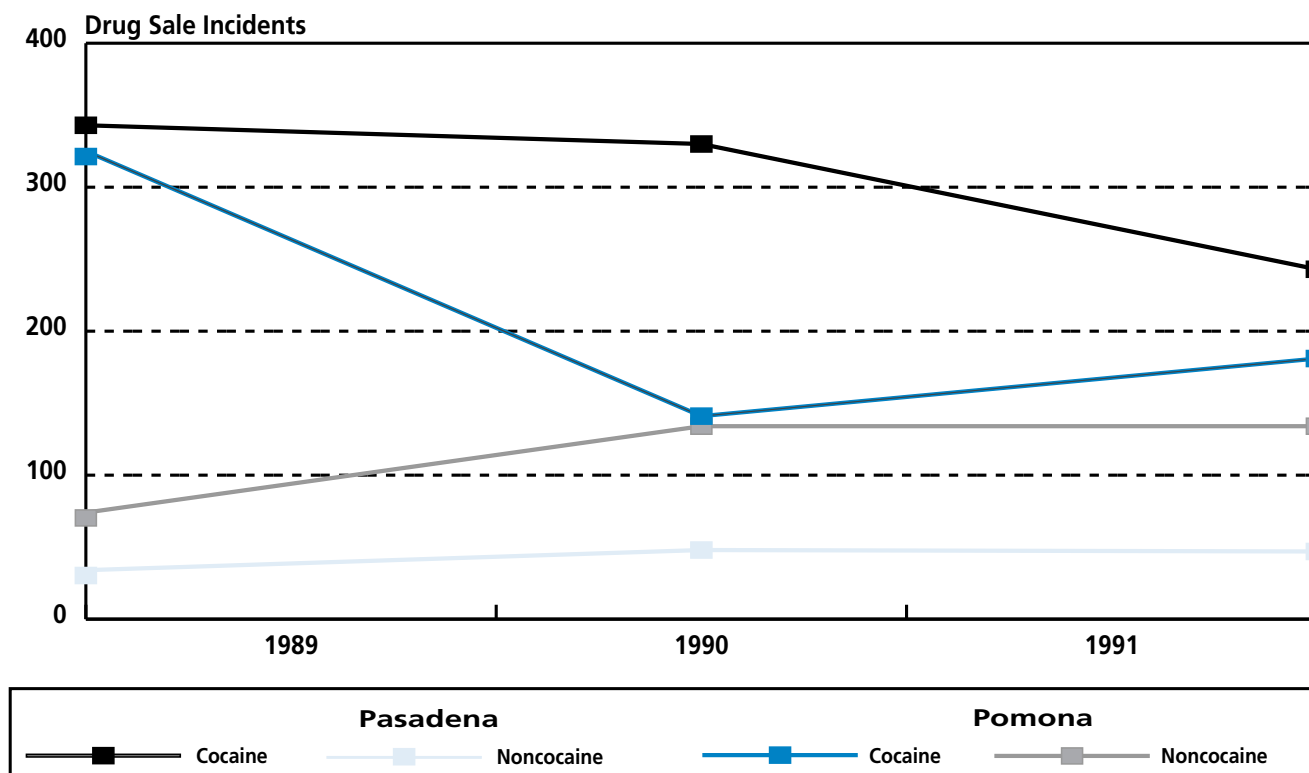
even if the suspect did not appear in the gang files. Also, new arrestees not on the original arrest list and new aliases that emerged during the case review were checked against the gang rosters. Occasionally, drug information that surfaced in the case file required reclassification (e.g., the drug “resembled” cocaine but tested positive for heroin); these transfers were accommodated until the sample goals of 100 cases per group were fulfilled; 14 eligible cases were dropped because the accurate gang or drug information emerged too late to allow inclusion of the case in the correct sampling pool.

Collection and coding procedures. Teams of students, trained and super-

vised by a field coordinator well versed in the ambiguities of law enforcement case file material, extracted information relevant to the incident, police activity, drug sales activity, and participants. The collection form was pretested, and the case file content was reviewed to ensure that the desired information was available in both departments.

As a reliability check, a random sample of 10 percent of the collected cases was drawn for duplicate coding. The overall discrepancy rate was low (2 percent for case level variables, 1 percent for participant variables). The correspondence between the two coding passes was at least 91 percent for all variables.

Exhibit 2: Drug Sale Incidents in Pasadena and Pomona



Departmental differences

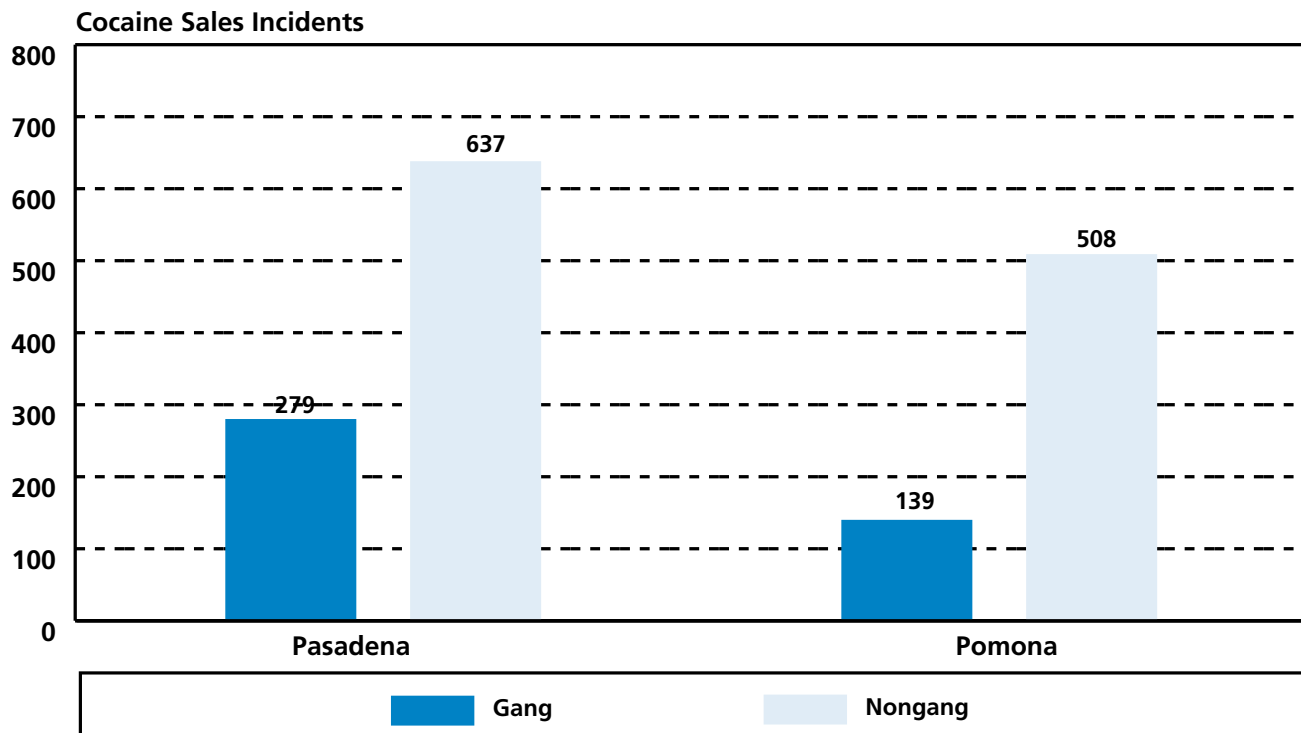
Any multisite study raises concern regarding interdepartmental differences: Variations in gang rostering procedures, the arrest logs from which samples were identified, and the contents of case material could have introduced differences between the two cities. Differences in officer levels and deployment, narcotics enforcement and arrest policies, and recording practices could have influenced the degree to which the arrests reflected the actual level of sales activity in these two cities. Therefore, interviews with key informants and observations in the stations during the data collection period examined quality differences regarding the manner in which

gang and nongang sales activities were handled. Except for the differences in the gang file structures reported earlier, no significant variations between the two departments' narcotic or gang enforcement activities were noted. In both departments, street narcotic enforcement operations involved teams of gang, narcotic, and patrol officers conducting undercover buys and sweeps of visible street-level dealers and well-known sales locations. Gang and nongang cases from both drug groups were combined (328 from Pasadena and 326 from Pomona) to assess the quantitative differences between the two departments.

Very few significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between the two cities

emerged in this analysis. Indications of gang membership in the case files and the number of gang members per case were at similar levels. No location differences (i.e., dwelling versus open-access setting) were noted, but the presence of firearms was slightly higher in Pomona (14 percent versus 5 percent). Amounts of each type of drug taken into evidence were similar, but Pomona incidents were slightly more likely to involve marijuana sale charges (36 percent versus 28 percent) and slightly less likely to involve heroin (5 percent versus 9 percent). The total number of suspects per case and their mean ages did not differ, but Pomona incidents had proportionally more Hispanics (41 versus 16 percent) and fewer blacks (52 versus 78 per-

Exhibit 3: Levels of Gang Involvement in Cocaine Sales Arrest Incidents (1989-91)



cent). Pomona cases yielded slightly higher proportions of male suspects (86 versus 82 percent).

Most of these differences are quite small, and those reaching statistical significance are few. The data from the two cities are combined for all subsequent analyses.

Drug sale incidents

The number of drug sale incidents (see exhibit 2) reflects substantial drug sale activity in both cities. However, as noted earlier, the magnitude of any arrest figures (or in this study, arrest incidents) is always heavily influenced by police enforcement activity.

Drug sale incidents involving cocaine were shown to be far more numerous than those not involving cocaine, particularly in Pasadena. Sales of other drugs in Pomona outnumbered those in Pasadena.

Cocaine sales

Recalling the definition of gang cases as including at least one identified gang member arrested in a sales incident, exhibit 3 displays the level of gang involvement in the 1,563 cocaine sales incidents. The proportion of cases with gang members in Pasadena was about 30 percent (279 of 916 cases), and the proportion in Pomona was slightly higher than 21 percent (139 of 647 cases). The combined rate, 26.7 percent, indicates substantial gang involvement, yet cocaine distribution was hardly dominated by gangs in these two suburban cities. A “one-out-of-four” figure would represent significant gang presence in drug sales for many jurisdictions yet was much lower than estimates offered by the law enforcement officials involved with this study prior to data collection. “Al-

most all” and “upward of 90 percent” were not uncommon estimates from both gang and narcotics experts in Los Angeles. Pasadena and Pomona estimates were more accurate but still ranged from about 30 to 50 percent. It should also be noted that these gang member arrestees might have been individual entrepreneurs. Involvement of the gang might have been minimal.

Scope of gang involvement. This combined rate is quite close to the figure of 25 percent reported for Los Angeles cocaine sales cases in 1985. Thus, the scope of gang involvement in Pasadena and Pomona did not seem to exceed that reported in south-central Los Angeles in the mid-1980’s. Yet, these levels of gang involvement would be more than sufficient to concern law enforcement if gang presence were associated with special features of drug sales. For example, multiple drugs sold in larger amounts or a higher likelihood of firearm presence might suggest increasing law enforcement resources to target gang cocaine sellers.

The gang-nongang comparative data permitted the assessment of this issue. As shown in exhibit 4, the majority of sales occurred on the street or in open access settings and rarely involved violence or even the presence of firearms.¹⁴ The rock or crack form was more prevalent than powdered cocaine. Small amounts were the norm, and sales of multiple drug types were uncommon. The majority of the incidents did not involve “multiple handlers” (i.e., multiple participants engaged in different distribution roles).

Very few of the incident characteristics yielded statistically significant differences. Rock or crack sales surfaced more often in gang cases, but the drug amounts retrieved for evidence were

quite similar and just slightly more than 2 grams. The higher figures for cocaine amounts in any form were attributable to the inclusion of cocaine powder; amounts retrieved in nongang cases were almost double those retrieved in gang incidents.¹⁵ More cash was taken into evidence in nongang cases, although this difference did not reach statistical significance. No differences emerged in the nature of the sales location (including knowledge by law enforcement of prior sales occurring at that site), violence associated with the drug transaction or arrest, or the potential for violence represented by firearms. There was no evidence that the cases with gang members were more serious than other cases.

The pattern of similarity between gang and nongang incident descriptions changes dramatically when examining the participant characteristics (see exhibit 4). Most of the cocaine sale incidents involved male black offenders in their twenties. Although the total number of offenders per case was the same in the two groups, all the demographic descriptors showed marked differences. Cases of gang involvement indicated a greater likelihood of male, black, and younger suspects than cases without gang members. In general, females and Hispanics were not often engaged in cocaine sales in these two cities, but they were even less likely to be involved in gang transactions.

The pattern of participant demographic differences mirrors the pattern that emerged from other studies of gang and nongang homicides and other violent incidents.¹⁶ Participants in gang crimes tend to be younger, male, and either black or Hispanic. The lack of differences in the cocaine sales incident descriptors suggests that gang

Exhibit 4: Characteristics in Gang and Nongang Cocaine Sales Arrest Events

Incident Characteristic	Nongang N = 200		Gang N = 200		p ^a
Location					
Dwelling	21%	(42)	16%	(33)	
Vehicle/open access	70%	(141)	79%	(158)	NS
Other	9%	(17)	5%	(9)	
Violence present	6%	(13)	5%	(10)	NA
Firearms present	10%	(21)	10%	(19)	NS
Mean number of firearms (among cases with firearms)	2.00	1.16	NS		
Cash taken into evidence	48%	(97)	54%	(109)	NS
Mean amount cash (among cases with cash)	\$393	\$235	NS		
Rock/crack form present	75%	(150)	86%	(173)	p < 0.01
Amount rock/crack (among cases with rock)	2.40 grams		2.26 grams		NS
Amount any form cocaine	6.95 grams		3.55 grams		p < 0.05
Other (than cocaine) drug sales charges present	6%	(13)	4%	(9)	NS
Known narcotics sales location	36%	(73)	44%	(87)	NS
Fortifications at location	2%	(4)	1%	(2)	NA
"Multiple handlers" in sales transaction	21%	(42)	24%	(48)	NS
Participant Characteristics^b					
Mean number of offenders	1.68		1.86		NS
Proportion male	0.76		0.91		p < 0.001
Proportion black	0.76		0.92		p < 0.001
Proportion Hispanic	0.20		0.07		p < 0.001
Mean age	28.32		22.48		p < 0.001

^a Probability based upon chi-square or T-tests comparisons of means. NS = p > 0.05; NA = chi-square test not valid due to low cell counts.

^b Participant characteristics were calculated for all suspects charged in case. (Ninety-two percent of all suspects were charged with cocaine sales offenses.)

involvement had only a negligible impact on the nature of these drug transactions. Gang presence was not associated with increased seriousness by any measure.

Examination of the earlier Los Angeles cocaine sales data yielded similar patterns. A comparison of the outcomes of the statistical tests for gang and nongang distinctions on an array of variables yielded the following results.

Location: no difference, both studies

Firearms: no difference, both studies

Cash taken: no difference, Pomona and Pasadena; higher in Los Angeles gang cases

Rock present: gang higher, both studies

Rock amount: no difference, both studies

Other drugs present: no difference, both studies

Fortifications: no difference, both studies

Multiple handlers: no difference, Pomona and Pasadena; higher in Los Angeles gang cases

Number of suspects: no difference, Pomona and Pasadena; higher in Los Angeles gang cases

Proportion male: gang higher in both studies

Proportion black: gang higher in both studies

Proportion Hispanic: gang lower in both studies

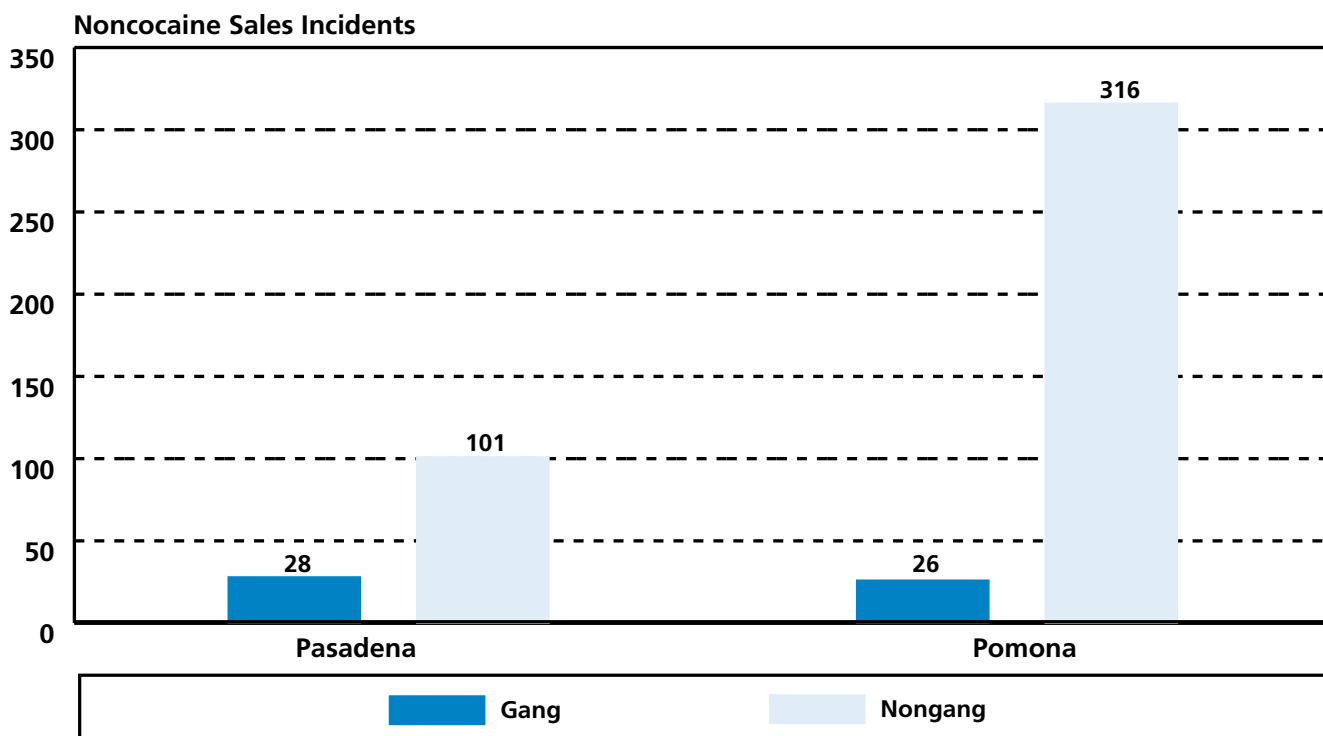
Age: gang lower in both studies

The differences observed regarding whether cash was taken into evidence

in the Los Angeles cases did not emerge in the current study. The higher number of offenders in gang cases in the first project, and the associated greater likelihood of multiple offenders, did not distinguish gang and nongang incidents in the suburban cities. However, these are rather minor differences within the overall context of similarity between the two time periods and locations.

Moreover, the general nature of cocaine sales incidents appears to be remarkably stable across time and city. Characteristically, these incidents have involved street sales of relatively small amounts of the rock or crack form of cocaine. The majority of these drug sellers have been male, black, and in their twenties. Very few incidents of violence were recorded in ei-

Exhibit 5: Levels of Gang Involvement in Noncocaine Sales Arrest Incidents (1989–91)



ther time period, but the more recent cases were less likely to involve firearms. Firearm presence was recorded in about one-fourth of the 1984–85 incidents but displayed a *decreasing* pattern of gun presence over time. A lower rate of about 1 in 10 incidents was observed in Pasadena and Pomona.

Noncocaine drug sales

The design of this study permitted an examination of the magnitude and characteristics of gang involvement in sales of drugs other than cocaine. Law enforcement informants reported that gangs were prominent in the distribution of marijuana, heroin, and PCP, although less so than in the distribution of cocaine. A higher representation of Hispanic gang members in the sale of these other drugs was anticipated.

The approach to identifying gang-involved sales of other drugs and the procedures for collecting data paralleled those adopted for cocaine cases. The level of gang involvement in the 471 noncocaine sales incidents was 11.5 percent, much lower than in cocaine cases (see exhibit 5). Notable differences between the two cities were observed. The total volume of other drug sales activity was almost three times higher in Pomona (342 incidents in Pomona versus 129 incidents in Pasadena), but the number of cases with gang involvement was nearly identical (26 in Pomona versus 28 in Pasadena).¹⁷ Thus, the percentage of gang involvement was three times higher in Pasadena (22 percent) than in Pomona (8 percent). Although the total of nearly 500 arrest incidents indicated considerable sales activity (particularly in Pomona), the rate of gang involvement does not warrant particular concern about gang dealers.

The combined total of just more than 50 gang cases provided an upper limit for the gang noncocaine collection sample; 200 nongang cases were sampled for collection of the incident and participant descriptors from the case file materials.

Even fewer gang-nongang differences emerged in the noncocaine sales cases. *No* significant differences were observed in incident characteristics, and only the proportion of black suspects and mean age distinguished the participants in gang and nongang events (data not presented). The proportion of black and Hispanic offenders was more evenly distributed than in cocaine cases; in other drug sales, gang involvement was associated with a slightly higher proportion of blacks (48 percent) than was nongang involvement (31 percent). Thus, gang cases were about equally likely to involve blacks and Hispanics; nongang sales offenders were more often Hispanic. The pattern of offender ages was similar to that observed in the cocaine incidents.

Drug type comparison. The lack of distinction between cocaine sales cases with and without gang involvement was reflected in noncocaine incidents as well. Gang and nongang cases were combined to test for significant differences between the two drug groups, and few distinctions emerged. Cocaine events were less likely to have cash taken into evidence (52 percent of cases versus 62 percent of the noncocaine incidents), but differences in cash amounts did not reach statistically significant levels. The average number of offenders was slightly higher for cocaine sales (1.77 versus 1.52), and there was increased likelihood of “multiple handlers” (22 percent in cocaine incidents versus 9

percent in other drug cases). The proportion of gang offenders per incident was also higher (39 versus 17 percent).

Perhaps the most interesting distinction between the two drug groups is the ethnic pattern noted above; Hispanics were more involved in the sale of drugs other than cocaine. However, this difference did not appear to affect the character of drug sales activity generally, nor did it seem to introduce differences dependent on whether the sales-involved Hispanics were gang members.

Distribution of drug arrestees within gangs. The case material was inadequate for empirical analyses of “drug gangs.” Typical street gang structures are not supportive of organized drug distribution,¹⁸ but the emergence of drug-selling cliques within typically offense-diversified street gangs is quite plausible. Ethnographic methods are more appropriate to this research question; law enforcement records have limited utility in addressing this issue.

The written narratives in the arrest investigation files did not yield descriptions of recurrent drug-selling groups within gangs, nor did they address the organization of drug distribution within a street gang context. In fact, gang information within the case material was limited to occasional references to membership or to the frequent drug sales activities among certain street gangs. Although some drug dealers were arrested for more than one sales incident over the 3-year time period, no clear gang pattern among these repeat offenders was discernible.

The gang names of the drug arrestees were tallied for both cities. In Pomona, 15 separate gang names were noted among 113 offenders.¹⁹ Members in

Pasadena Police: Changing Drug Scene

Pasadena, not unlike many urban and suburban communities in the mid-1960's, was confronted with an explosion in street corner drug trafficking activity. Transactions routinely involved very small amounts of drugs, generally for the personal use of the buyer. The problem became so chronic that some neighborhoods were literally overrun by street-level dealers.

Responding to that activity, the Pasadena Police Department began an aggressive "street buy" program in 1985, arresting more than 20 "sellers" per week for sales to officers.

Quickly, the sellers, many of whom were gang members/associates, began "hiring" their drug customers to make the "hand to hand" transactions rather than risk arrest themselves. Payment for the service was frequently a small amount of drugs.

Consequently, officers began to see a change in the criminal histories of those arrested for sales of drugs. Most now had backgrounds of robbery, burglary, and theft along with arrests for drug possession for personal use. Clearly, they were not what we would consider to be drug deal-

ers. In postarrest interviews, many confirmed that they were receiving drugs for their personal use in exchange for serving as a street corner courier. As an interesting side note, with many of the department's former robbery and burglary suspects then serving time for drug sales, the department's Part One offenses dropped from 11,430 in 1985 to 8,545 in 1987.

As a result, it becomes extremely difficult to draw a conclusion as to the amount of gang influence in drug trafficking cases. In addition, gang structures and their hierarchy are frequently informal. While many gang members/associates are involved in drug sales, the proceeds from those sales may solely benefit the individual seller. . . . Ms. Maxson put it quite well in the report when she stated, ". . . it should be noted that the role of the gang *per se* in drug sales operations is unclear and requires more assessment."

Jerry A. Oliver
Police Chief
Wayne D. Hiltz, Lieutenant
Field Services Division
Pasadena, California, Police Department

nine gangs had three or fewer arrests, suggesting that most Pomona gangs had very limited involvement in drug sales. On the other hand, 1 gang generated 45 arrests, and 2 others generated about 15 arrests each. Thus, about 70 percent of the gang-named drug offenders were affiliated with just three gangs. Two gang members from the most active gang were arrested together in only four incidents. The data available do not address the role that the gang played in these drug transactions. It is not clear whether the offenders were individual entrepreneurs

working in several small groups or were concentrated within one or two cliques; ethnographic methods would be required to investigate relationship patterns among drug sellers within this high-volume gang.

This pattern of concentration emerged even more dramatically in Pasadena where 18 gang names were recorded for 132 gang suspects. Only 2 gangs generated more than a handful of arrests, but 1 of these yielded 91 arrests; only 9 incidents involved the arrests of 2 members of this gang together.

The gang members arrested for drug sales during this period represented a minority of gang membership, even among the high-volume gangs. There was no evidence of widespread involvement by the membership of either gang and, thus, neither gang can be characterized as a drug gang. The majority of gangs in both cities yielded very few arrests for drug sales during this period. On the other hand, just a few gangs were responsible for most of the gang-involved drug sales in these cities. Although these gangs were logical targets for collaboration between gang and narcotic units, it should be noted that the role of the gang *per se* in drug sales operations is unclear and requires more assessment.

Conclusions and policy implications

Relying on law enforcement arrest records and gang membership files placed some limits on this investigation of gang involvement in drug sales. Few cities would claim that their gang files accurately represent all gang members within their cities. Many gang members fail to come to the attention of police, and some individuals with only marginal or transitory involvement inevitably escape identification through even the most rigorous gang designation procedures. Moreover, drug sales arrests reflect drug enforcement activity (e.g., departmental allocation of resources and officer discretion) as well as the level and visibility of drug sales activity. Many, perhaps most, drug transactions are not detected by police.

The data obtained from law enforcement gang files and arrest records were used to empirically assess the views, held by law enforcement and communicated to the public through

the media, of the scope and nature of gang involvement in drug sales. These data described the proportion of drug sales *resulting in an arrest* that involved *identified* gang members; other sales transactions, and gang members unrecognized by police, were not included. Moreover, this study did not directly address the question of what proportion of all gang members engaged in drug sales. Nevertheless, several conclusions can be derived from these data.

Gang member presence in drug distribution in these two smaller cities can be characterized as substantial but not

overwhelming. Rates of involvement in cocaine sales were of sufficient levels to raise some concern for law enforcement, yet hardly sufficient to cause alarm. The even lower rate of gang presence in transactions involving drugs other than cocaine required little specialized attention by law enforcement.

The degree to which these levels resemble the relative rates of gang involvement in other types of offenses might be instructive. For example, in 1994, gang members were suspects or victims in about 40 percent of all homicides in Los Angeles County.²⁰ Fig-

ures for other offenses were not available, but levels of gang involvement in burglary, vehicle theft, or assault might well have equaled or exceeded the rates found in cocaine sales incidents, particularly in areas with high gang activity.

The data did not support an assessment of whether gang members were involved in individual entrepreneurial activities or drug sales directly related to gang functions. However, the majority of gangs contributed very few arrests; in both cities, significant sales activity was associated with just one gang. No evidence of widespread gang involvement in drug distribution was noted.

Furthermore, little evidence of special impacts associated with gang involvement in drug sales of any type was noted. *Gang cases were not more serious.* Gang cocaine sales involved more young, black males in transactions that more often included crack rather than the powdered form. These gender differences should allay a growing concern about increased involvement of female gang members.²¹ Drug distribution has been overwhelmingly a male enterprise and particularly so in gang cases. Increased likelihood of black and younger offenders has also characterized sales of other drugs by gang members, and Hispanics have been more often involved in sales of drugs other than cocaine. No policy implications based on these differences would appear to be appropriate because there is little that is unique in the gang drug sale settings. The finding that most gangs have contributed few arrests for drug sales suggests that police gang experts should focus their attention on other forms of illegal activity.

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Pomona Police Chief: Relationships of Gangs to Drugs

The research findings affirmed, in many areas, the views and observations of Pomona Police Department gang and narcotic investigators. A survey of these investigators yields the following consensus profile relative to gang and drug trafficking activity in the City of Pomona:

- Drug usage, as opposed to drug sales, is a more dominant aspect of gang involvement.
- Investigators have reported the overwhelming drug of choice among black gangs is rock cocaine. Hispanic gang member involvement with drugs has typically consisted of heroin, PCP, marijuana, and to a much lesser extent, rock and powdered cocaine.
- Both black and Hispanic gangs tend to define themselves and exert their influence based on a geographic identity. In addition to “turf” distinctions, black gangs still hold to either a “Crips” or “Bloods” affiliation as their primary allegiance.
- Investigators have not established a significant relationship between gang mem-

bership and drug trafficking activity in the city. Gang member involvement in drug sales is present, but not to the degree that would suggest that it was an organized function of any particular gang. Investigators did report instances where gangs have coerced money from street drug dealers in exchange for permission to sell drugs in a neighborhood. However, such instances have been rare and are attributed more to opportunity than to an organized gang activity. In essence, the consensus view among investigators was that there may be an increased propensity for drug use and street level trafficking of drugs among gang members, but that these variables were not primarily dependent upon one another. The line of reasoning advanced by investigators was that drug traffickers above the street level depend on their anonymity to avoid arrest and would be less likely to establish close ties to individuals or groups such as gangs that attract high visibility.

Charles M. Heilman
Chief of Police
Pomona Police Department

In fact, the clearest policy implication emerging from this study is the suggestion for narcotics enforcement to move away from gang specialization. The exception may lie in the unusual case of a street gang extremely involved in drug-selling. Here, intelligence-building and sharing between gang and narcotics units may be beneficial. Collaboration in street operations and investigations might also be productive, but caution should be exercised that targeted activities to suppress gangs do not inadvertently build gang cohesion.

Social agency practitioners, particularly those engaged in gang-targeted programs, should be wary about assuming strong ties between gang clients and drug sales. This study indicated that many gang members did not sell drugs, and few were engaged in highly lucrative drug distribution networks. By extension, discouraging reports of job training programs being in competition with vast amounts of drug money are probably exaggerations. Well-conceived gang prevention and intervention programs should be supported.²²

Finally, the findings from the Los Angeles cocaine sales were substantially replicated in two smaller suburban cities, Pasadena and Pomona. Earlier, the resemblance between Pasadena and Pomona and several dozen midsized cities with longstanding gang problems was noted. About 60 percent of the 37 comparison cities reported that local black gang members were heavily involved in drug distribution, most frequently crack cocaine. The figures for Hispanic gang members were somewhat lower yet still substantial. Future research might assess these estimates with methods similar to those used in this study, particularly

in cities outside the Los Angeles area. Law enforcement gang experts in these cities may be overestimating the scope of the problem, as did many in the Los Angeles area. Regardless of the magnitude of gang involvement, this study showed that the rates of gang involvement in drug cases were lower than expected, and the impact of this involvement was not significant. Therefore, the study suggests that narcotics enforcement operations would benefit little from street gang expertise.

Notes

1. Skolnick, J.H., The social structure of street drug dealing. *American Journal of Police*, 9(1990):1–41; Taylor, C.S., *Dangerous Society*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1989; and Padilla, F., *The Gang as an American Enterprise*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992.
2. Waldorf, D., and Lauderback, D., Gang drug sales in San Francisco: Organized or freelance? Alameda, CA: Institute for Scientific Analysis, 1993; Quicker, J.C., Galeai, Y.N., and Batani-Khalfani, A., Bootstrap or noose: Drugs in South Central Los Angeles. Draft report to the Social Science Research Council, 1991, cited with permission of the authors; Decker, S., and Van Winkle, B., “Slingin” dope: The role of gangs and gang members in drug sales. *Justice Quarterly* (1994):583–604; and Hagedorn, J. Neighborhoods, markets, and gang drug organization. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 31(1994):264–294.
3. Fagan, J., The social organization of drug use and drug dealing among urban gangs. *Criminology*, 27 (1989):633–67.
4. Esbenson, F.A. and Huizinga, D. Gangs, drugs, and delinquency in a survey of urban youth. *Criminology*, 31(1993):565–586; Pennell, S., Evans, Elizabeth, Melton, Roni and Hinson, Samantha, Down for the set: Defining and describing gangs in San Diego. Report to the Administration of Children, Youth and Families. San Diego: San Diego Association of Governments, 1994; Spergel, I.A., personal communication regarding current study of gang members in Chicago, September 1993; Decker, S. and Van Winkle, B., op. cit., 1994; Hagedorn, J. Homeboys, Dope Fiends, Legits and New Jacks. *Criminology*, 32 (1994): 197–219. Note that with the exception of the Esbenson and Huizinga work, all studies employed selective samples of gang members.
5. Block, C.B., and Block, R. Street gang crime in Chicago. NIJ Research in Brief, Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice; Miller, W.B., memo to James Howell reporting analysis of violent crimes involving youth gangs in Boston, 1984–94, no date; Maxson, C.L., Klein, M.W., and Cunningham, L.C., Definitional variations affecting drug and homicide issues. Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1992.
6. This research would not have been possible without the cooperation and assistance from the personnel of the Pasadena Police Department and the Pomona Police Department. Permission was provided by Pomona Police Chief Lloyd Wood and Pasadena Police Chief Jerry Oliver and facilitated by numerous people within the command structures. Personnel within the records and computer divisions provided the required case materials and work space. The officers in both gang

units responded to questions and helped with the gang files. Access to records was facilitated by a court order provided by the Honorable Jaime Corral, Presiding Judge, Los Angeles Juvenile Court.

7. See Klein, M.W., & Maxson, C.L., Rock sales in south Los Angeles. *Sociology and Social Research*, 69 (1985):561–65, for our first impressions based largely on these sources.

8. Klein, M.W., Maxson, C.L., and Cunningham, L.C., Gang involvement in cocaine “rock” trafficking. Final report to the National Institute of Justice. Los Angeles, CA: University of Southern California, 1988; and Klein, M.W., Maxson, C.L., and Cunningham, L.C., “Crack,” street gangs, and violence, *Criminology*, 29 (1991):623–50.

9. Maxson, C.L., Gordon, M., and Klein, M.W., Differences between gang and nongang homicide. *Criminology*, 23 (1985):209–222; Klein, M.W., Maxson, C.L., and Gordon, M., Police response to street gang violence: Improving the investigative process. Report to the National Institute of Justice. Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1987; Bailey, Gary, and Unnithan, Prabha, Gang homicides in California. Paper presented to the American Society of Criminology, 1993.

10. Maxson, C.L., and Klein, M.W., The scope of street gang migration in the U.S.: An interim report to survey participants. Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1993.

11. These data were gathered in 1992 in an NIJ-funded study on gang migration (#91-IJ-CX-K004). A survey of law enforcement in over 1,100 U.S.

cities, including all cities with a population of over 100,000, yielded almost 800 with local street gangs. This comparison is limited to cities of comparable size and relatively early onset dates. The 37 cities constitute about one-third of the gang cities in this population range. Only 10 similar-sized cities reported no gang problems.

12. Thirteen sections of California Health and Safety codes pertain to illegal drug sales or possession for sale. A list of these codes is available from the author. Arrested individuals were both minors and adults.

13. It is possible that gang members from other cities were arrested for drug sales in Pasadena or Pomona and yet did not appear in these two cities’ gang files. A check of a sample of 50 arrestees from each department in the countywide GREAT system maintained by the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department suggested that this was not a concern. Only two of the 100 arrests were in GREAT but not the station gang files. Our thanks to Sgt. Wesley McBride, LASD, for facilitating this procedure. A discussion of the inadequacies and limitations of large computerized file on gang membership can be found in the recent GAO report included in the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights of the Judiciary Committee hearings on developing a national gang data base.

14. Group means can be inflated by a few extreme cases. The frequency distributions for all continuous variables were reviewed. A small number of cases were identified, without regard to gang status, as extremes and omitted from the calculation of group means. This procedure had no impact

on the outcome of tests for statistical significance. For example, one nongang case with 23 firearms, if included, would increase the mean number to three guns. The mean amount of cash taken in nongang incidents rises to \$1,416 unless one case is dropped from the analysis. Two cases (one from each group) were deleted from the calculation of the mean amount of rock, generating a decrease of about one-half gram in each group. One incident involved more than 10 kilograms of powdered cocaine and four others had more than 1,000 grams. The deletion of these five cases, all nongang, dramatically lowered the group mean from 195 grams to 7 grams. The difference between these two figures serves as a reminder to be cautious about the well-publicized, dramatic bust; the lower figure is a much more accurate measure of the “average” amount of cocaine in these cases. All five large volume cases were the result of long term investigations by the narcotics units in each department.

15. The group means for drug amounts were calculated among cases with cocaine taken into evidence. Thirty-nine of 400 cases had no cocaine counted, usually because laboratory analysis of the retrieved substance tested negative for cocaine or other illegal drugs. Common bar soap was often used to imitate cocaine rocks.

16. Maxson et al., op. cit., 1985; Klein et al., op. cit., 1991; Maxson, et al., op. cit., 1992.

17. These figures would increase only slightly had the cases with multiple drug types including cocaine been placed here rather than in the cocaine group (see exhibit 4).

18. Klein, M.W., *The American Street Gang*. New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

19. Includes drug sales of all types; multiple arrests of the same offender inflate this figure somewhat. A specific gang name was not available for about 10 percent of the gang offenders. Note that the unit of analysis has shifted from incident to individuals.

20. Provisional data provided by the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department.

21. Taylor, C.S., *Girls, Gangs, Women and Drugs*. East Lansing, MI: State University Press, 1993.

22. An anonymous review suggested this implication from the study findings.

Cheryl L. Maxson, Ph.D., is a research associate with the Social Science Research Institute, University of Southern California.

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Statistics, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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Selected NIJ Publications about Gangs and Drugs

Listed below are some NIJ publications related to the issues of gangs and drugs. These publications can be obtained free, except where indicated, from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS): telephone 800-851-3420, e-mail askncjrs@ncjrs.aspensys.com, or write to NCJRS, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20849-6000.

Please note that when free publications are out of stock, they are available as photocopies for a minimal fee or through interlibrary loan. They are also usually available on the NCJRS Bulletin Board System or on the Department of Justice Internet gopher site for downloading. Call NCJRS for more information.

Ball, R.A. and G.D. Curry, *Gang Crime and Law Enforcement Record Keeping*, Research in Brief, 1994, NCJ 148345.

Block, B. and C.R. Block, *Street Gang Crime in Chicago*, Research in Brief, 1993, NCJ 144782.

Blumstein, Alfred, Ph.D., Research in Progress Seminar, VHS Videotape, NCJ 152235, \$19.

Chaiken, Marcia R., *The Rise of Crack and Ice: Experiences in Three Locales*, Research in Brief, 1993, NCJ 139559.

Coldren, James R., Jr., *Drug Control Task Forces: Creating and Implementing a Multijurisdictional Unit*, Evaluation Bulletin, 1993, NCJ 138332.

Conly, C.H. et al., *Street Gangs: Current Knowledge and Strategies*, Issues and Practices, 1993, NCJ 143290.

Controlling Chemicals Used to Make Illegal Drugs: The Chemical Action Task Force and the Domestic Chemical Action Group, Research in Brief, 1993, NCJ 137862.

Drug Education, Crime File Series, VHS Videotape, 1987, NCJ 104207, \$17.

Drug Testing, Crime File Series, VHS Videotape, 1987, NCJ 104213, \$17.

Drug Testing Resource Package, 1994, NCJ 139307, \$32.

Drug Trafficking, Crime File Series, VHS Videotape, 1987, NCJ 104211, \$17.

Drugs: Addiction, Crime File Series, VHS Videotape, 1990, NCJ 123669, \$17.

Drugs: Asset Seizure, Crime File Series, VHS Videotape, 1990, NCJ 123670, \$17.

Drugs: Community Responses, Crime File Series, VHS Videotape, 1990 NCJ 123671, \$17.

Drugs: Legalization, Crime File Series, VHS Videotape, 1990, NCJ 123676, \$17.

Drugs: Military Interdiction, Crime File Series, VHS Videotape, 1990, NCJ 123672, \$17.

Drugs: Treating Offenders, Crime File Series, VHS Videotape, 1990, NCJ 123673, \$17.

Drugs: Workplace Testing, Crime File Series, VHS Videotape, 1990, NCJ 123678, \$17.

Drugs: Youth Gangs, Crime File Series, VHS Videotape, 1990, NCJ 123674, \$17.

Dunworth, Terence and Aaron Saiger, *Drugs and Crime in Public Housing: A Three-City Analysis*, Research Report, 1994, NCJ 145329.

Finn, Peter, *The Manhattan District Attorney's Narcotics Eviction Program*, Program Focus, 1995, NCJ 153146.

Finn, Peter and Andrea K. Newlyn, *Miami's "Drug Court," A Different Approach*, Program Focus, 1993, NCJ 142412.

Foti, Charles, C., Jr., *The Effect of Drug Testing in New Orleans*, Research in Brief, 1993, NCJ 140090.

Johnson, Claire et al., *Prosecuting Gangs: A National Assessment*, Research in Brief, 1995, NCJ 151785.

Mieczkowski, Tom et al., *Testing Hair for Illicit Drug Use*, Research in Brief, 1993, NCJ 138539.

PAVNET Online User's Guide, NIJ user's guide to anti-violence programs on the Internet, 1994, NCJ 152057.

PAVNET Resource Guide, Volume 1, Promising Programs, About 600 promising programs to prevent and control violence, provided by five federal agencies, including ones targeted to substance abuse issues, 1994, NCJ 150044, U.S., \$17; Canada, \$23, Other countries, \$54.

PAVNET Resource Guide, Volume 2, Information Sources, Funding, and Technical Assistance, about 400 listings from Federal agencies and private associations for information, funding opportunities, and technical assistance to aid in violence reduction projects, including those aimed at substance abuse problems, 1994, NCJ 150045, U.S., \$12; Canada, \$17; Other countries, \$29.

PAVNET Resource Guides Volumes 1 and 2, NCJ 152422, U.S., \$25; Canada, \$36; Other countries, \$79.

Reardon, Judy, Ph.D., *The Drug Use Forecasting Program: Measuring Drug Use in a "Hidden" Population*, Issues and Practices, 1993, NCJ 144784.

Searching for Answers: Annual Evaluation Report on Drugs and Crime, NIJ Report, 1993, NCJ 142975.

Weingart, Saul et al., *Case Studies of Community Anti-Drug Efforts*, Research in Brief, 1994, NCJ 149316.

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