

## THE IMPACT OF GANGS AND GANG VIOLENCE ON CONTEMPORARY YOUTH: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE PROBLEM IN COLORADO SPRINGS

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### ABSTRACT

Focus groups were conducted with adolescents (n=62) in four high schools and one middle school to assess the impact of gangs on nongang youth. Findings reemphasize the importance of analyzing the youth gang phenomenon in specific social contexts that take into account immediate ecological factors. Locally, nongang youth have developed a capacity to adapt to the presence of gangs, with variations in responses contingent upon the geographic proximity to specific types of gangs and student age. Students demonstrated a critical awareness of gangs and considerable self-confidence in their ability to handle encounters with gang members. Nongang youth singled out wannabes as more prone to violence than known gang members. This analysis suggests that future studies on the impact of gangs on everyday, nongang youth may yield more fruitful results if they employed alternative conceptions and definitions of gangs and gang membership. In addition to emphasizing practical education concerning gangs, preventive programs should be directed toward middle school students, and special attention must be directed toward wannabes. Adolescent attitudes toward authority may represent a significant obstacle to the development of new programs.

### INTRODUCTION

The emergence of youth gangs in towns and smaller cities across the United States since 1980 reflects the growth of what is commonly called the "gang problem." Surveys have indicated an alarming number of law-violating youth gangs in suburbs and non-metropolitan areas (Bastian, Taylor 1991; Miller 1981; Needle, Stapleton 1983). In the Pikes Peak region, a recent large-scale survey of junior high and high school students in Colorado Springs showed that as many as 15 percent of local adolescents are now involved directly or indirectly in gangs (Dukes, Martinez, Stein 1995).

As youth gangs developed into a major social problem throughout the United States, gang members have been increasingly connected to criminal violence, drug use, and drug dealing in news stories as well as in the perception of the general public. Addressing the youth gang phenomenon has become a major concern among politicians, law enforcement agencies, and educational institutions at all levels of society.

Sociologists have responded with more intensive research examining the relationship between youth gangs, violence, and drugs. Gang members are more likely to commit criminal offenses than nongang members, especially serious and violent offenses (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Chard-Wierschem 1993). Nonetheless, gang research suggests that violence can have different origins and meanings within specific social contexts, serving a variety of distinct functions (Fagan 1989; Hagedorn 1988; Horowitz 1987; Klein, Maxson 1989; Moore 1978; Vigil 1988). Likewise, while the relationship among drug use, drug dealing,

and youth crime remains strong, gangs are diverse and shifting organizations whose members participate unequally in substance abuse (Dolan, Finney 1984; Elliott, Huizinga 1984; Fagan 1989; Hagedorn 1988; Klein, Maxson 1989; Spergel 1989). While most studies on youth gangs have focussed on the inner-city youth of major metropolitan areas, as gangs and gang activity have emerged in smaller towns and cities, sociologists have begun to conduct research in such communities (Winfree, Fuller, Vigil, Mays 1992; Zevitz 1993; Zevitz, Takata 1992).

Yet the "gang problem" concerns not just members of these gangs; it also concerns youths that are not involved with gangs. In what ways do the existence of gangs affect the youth in a community? How do young people respond to the challenge of gangs? And how are youths affected by a community's effort to confront a gang problem? Answers to these questions are important to understanding the nature and meaning of the youth gang phenomenon for smaller American towns and cities. Thus far, research has concentrated on the culture and social structure of gangs and gang members. Surprisingly little is known about reactions to gangs and gang activity by nongang members, even among the youth of major U.S. cities where most studies have been conducted. Colorado Springs is a smaller city with a growing gang presence, and it offers an ideal opportunity for gauging the impact of gangs on everyday youth. The present study represents an exploration of the general impact of gangs and gang activity on area youth, thus identifying factors that should be considered in developing gang prevention programs for these youths.

**Table 1: Demographics of Focus Groups**

	North	East	Central	South	Middle	Total
Male	6	11	4	8	5	34
Female	5	12	3	4	4	38
White	4	16	5	4	9	38
African-American	4	4	2	4	--	14
Hispanic	3	3	--	3	--	9
Other	--	--	--	1	--	1
Senior	9	--	--	--	--	9
Junior	1	--	--	--	--	1
Sophomore	1	10	--	--	--	11
Freshmen	--	13	7	12	--	32
8th Grade	--	--	--	--	3	3
7th Grade	--	--	--	--	3	3
6th Grade	--	--	--	--	3	3

be overlooked or forgotten by the participant in an individual interview, resulting in a greater range of relevant opinions and responses. Consequently, the group interview generally yields a more diverse array of information and affords a more extended basis both for suggesting interpretations grounded in experiences of given situation as well as for designing systematic research on the topic (Merton, Fiske, Kendall [1956] 1990).

Despite its social-scientific origins, the use of focus groups in the academic community has remained rare, if not scorned altogether. Merton recently has cited its extensive use and misuse in marketing as a significant cause for the reluctance to use focus groups as a means of gathering scientific data (Merton, Fiske, Kendall [1956] 1990). Nonetheless, many researchers agree that results can be cautiously generalized to a similar population, despite the fact that focus groups are seldom chosen at random. As Staley (1990) argued, the validity of a focus group research study may be increased by continuing to conduct groups until the responses of participants become predictable and no new information surfaces. Usually this point is reached after four or five sessions have been conducted on the same topic.

## **METHODS**

### **Focus Group Sample**

The interpretations presented here draw upon qualitative data gathered in five focus groups from different schools in Colorado Springs. The focus group study was reviewed

and approved by a departmental human subjects committee at Colorado University, Colorado Springs, and interviews were conducted between November, 1994 and May, 1995. The four high schools and one middle school represented a cross-section of the demographics and social ecology of Colorado Springs, the largest city in the Pikes Peak region. The first high school was located on the city's north side, a middle-class area; the second and third high schools were located in a transitional zone from the the city's north side to the south side; the fourth high school was located on the city's south side, a lower middle-class/working class area. The middle school was located in the transitional zone between the city's north and south sides. For purposes of convenience and anonymity, the high schools will be referred to as North, East, Central, and South High Schools.

The schools assumed responsibility for selecting 10-12 students to participate, and securing parental consent and student assent. Four of the schools chose students who would participate actively, based on recommendations from teachers and counselors; the fifth school randomly selected every twentieth ninth- and tenth-grade student. All students were informed prior to the focus groups that they would be asked to discuss the issue of gangs in Colorado Springs. In no case were students chosen because of any suspicion that they were gang members. No students in the groups evidenced gang membership, and comparatively few appeared to be "at risk" youths. Anonymity was ensured in that the school staff

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The great diversity among gangs and gang members – the nature of their affiliation, their social organization, and their involvement in delinquency and violence – represents a significant challenge to contemporary social research. This is especially true in light of ecological approaches that have identified specific social and economic characteristics of communities which contribute to a greater likelihood of gang involvement and delinquency. Such factors as population density, ethnic composition, poverty, transience rate, housing patterns, and land use offer renewed insight for explaining the geographical distribution of gangs and gang activity (Bursik, Webb 1982; Curry, Spergel 1988, 1992; Reiss, Tonry 1986).

In shifting the focus of research from these major urban areas to smaller towns and cities, two potential analytic dangers arise. First is the possibility of theoretical overdetermination with its consequent ontological commitments. Earlier studies of youth gangs in non-metropolitan areas have tended to interpret their findings in a framework derived from large-city gang research (Rosenbaum, Grant 1983). As a result, small-city gang research risks overlooking important distinctions that may exist in the organizational structures and activities of youth gangs in different settings.

The second analytic danger concerns the extent to which major metropolitan gangs influence the growth of youth gangs in smaller communities, potentially causing an underestimation of the development of youth gangs independent of external recruitment. Earlier research by Hardman (1969) and Rosenbaum and Grant (1983) suggested that the size, structure, organization, and delinquent behavior of youth gangs in smaller cities resulted from the influence exerted by metropolitan gangs in nearby major cities. While one study described a high level of geographic mobility among gang members in establishing drug distribution connections, subsequent studies concluded that the diffusion of gangs from large urban centers only minimally affected gang formation in smaller communities (Hagedorn 1988; Huff 1989; Maxson, Woods, Klein 1995; Zevitz, Takata 1992).

Beyond issues related to differences between youth gangs in major metropolitan areas and elsewhere, one area largely overlooked in gang research is the impact of youth gangs on society at large, and upon everyday

youth in particular. A preoccupation with gangs may neglect the majority of youth who are neither involved in gangs nor delinquency, but are affected nonetheless by the influence of youth gangs.

Initial efforts have been made to gauge this impact upon everyday youth. As a part of their studies on public perceptions of the youth gang problem, Takata and Zevitz (1990) and Pryor and McGarrell (1993) surveyed both youths and adults that yielded important relevant findings. Both studies concluded that youths have different perceptions about gangs than adults. Perception of gangs by adults were shaped largely by media portrayals, but youths were more likely to be aware of gang activity in their own and other neighborhoods to give larger estimates of the number of gang members in their communities, and to perceive gangs as more mixed in terms of ethnicity and age. Furthermore, Takata and Zevitz found that youths were less likely than adults to describe the threat of gangs as very serious, but they were more likely to perceive gangs as active in their own neighborhood. Pryor and McGarrell indicated that perceptions of the youth gang problem differed from neighborhood to neighborhood, dependent upon exposure to gangs and the media's identification of the gang problem with specific neighborhoods.

While the survey method used in these studies is useful in tracking trends, it is less useful in exploring the perception and impact of gangs, drugs, and delinquency on youth in general, or in discovering what factors should be considered in developing programs for everyday youth (McConnell 1994). To obtain such qualitative information, focussed group interviews were conducted among junior high and high school students in Colorado Springs.

Focus groups have a number of advantages over individual interviews, especially when participant observation, a complementary method, is not a viable alternative. Merton, whose *The Focused Interview* provided the foundations for this method, has argued that social processes inherent in a group often uncover a greater depth of cognitive ideas, sentiments, fears, anxieties, and symbolism than individual interviews. As each group member introduces personal comments within a relatively unstructured context, implicit standards are set for others to flow toward a progressive release of inhibitions and subjective experiences. Such group interaction also prompts individuals to recall details that might

Table 2: Perceived Problems Facing Youth in Colorado Springs\*

	North		East		Central		South		Middle		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Drugs and Alcohol	6	30	10	32	7	35	7	54	7	29	37	34
Gangs	2	10	5	16	5	25	2	15	5	20	19	18
Crime and Violence	2	10	4	13	3	15	2	15	6	25	17	16
Peer Pressure	3	15	3	10	2	10	1	8	6	25	15	14
Sex and Pregnancy	3	15	4	13	--	--	--	--	--	--	7	6
Future Employment	2	10	1	3	--	--	--	--	--	--	3	3
School	1	5	2	7	1	5	1	8	--	--	5	5
Other	1	5	2	7	2	10	--	--	--	--	5	5
Total Responses	20	100	31	100	20	100	13	100	24	100	108	100

\*Students (n=62) were asked what they considered the three biggest issues facing young people in Colorado Springs. Many students listed only one or two issues.

knew nothing of what was said in focus groups. Furthermore, the group moderators did not know any personal information about the youths. The groups were representative of the student bodies in terms of gender and ethnicity, but younger students were overrepresented (For the demographics of each group, see Table 1).

#### Focus Group Format

One session of up to two hours was conducted with each group. Since the discussion topic included gangs and drugs, the use of recording media may have inhibited candid responses from our participants. Therefore, the focus groups were conducted with a moderator who guided the discussion, a notetaker to record comments, and an observer to follow significant interactions. Otherwise, procedures outlined by Greenbaum (1993) and Staley (1990) were used as a guide.

The sessions followed a standard question-answer-discussion format. At the outset, the moderator stated that the purpose of the group was to explore the concerns and problems local teenagers were facing, assuring that the group members would remain anonymous. To initiate the group interview and encourage the participants to structure the discussion, as prescribed by Merton et al ([1956] 1990), students were asked simply to list what they considered to be the three biggest issues facing young people in Colorado Springs. These responses were collected and tabulated for the respondents (Table 2). Their answers formed the basis for the following discussion of problems. Students were then asked to describe in writing what the ideal program would be to handle these important problems. Again responses were discussed among the

group.

To provide a baseline for the analysis of discussion data, a brief set of five questions was distributed for students to fill out following these first two discussions. Three general questions asked: "Tell us what concerns (if any) do you have for your own safety?" "What do you think the schools and police can do to help to take care of these concerns?" and "What would you do if someone you knew came up to you and offered you drugs? Please be specific." Furthermore, while the relatively unstandardized format of a focus group is not the appropriate tool for establishing systematic counts measuring the frequency of designated responses (Merton et al [1956] 1990), to provide a succinct corroboration of focus group findings, the questionnaire also included two quantitative questions, with responses recorded on a 5-point scale: "How often (if ever) are you ever afraid for your personal safety?" and "Some people say that gangs are the biggest problem in Colorado Springs facing people of your age. Are they?" The answers were collected but not discussed among the group (see Tables 3 and 4).

Finally, the groups discussed three local programs for youth: D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), P.A.L. (Police Athletic League), and Teen Night.

The focus group findings reflected the group consensus, as recorded by the notetaker and observer. They provided a means for obtaining a preliminary assessment of the impact of gangs and gang activity on area youth. Also, results identified factors that should be considered in developing programs for these youths. Individual statements quoted below are representative of statements made during the focus group sessions.

**Table 3: Perception of the Gang Problem**

Some people say that gangs are the biggest problem in Colorado Springs facing people your age. Are they?

	North		East		Central		South		Middle		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Yes, for sure	--	--	1	4	1	4	1	8	--	--	3	5
Yes, probably	1	10	7	30	3	43	6	50	4	44	21	34
Maybe	4	36	11	48	3	43	3	25	5	56	26	42
No, probably not	4	36	3	13	--	--	2	17	--	--	9	15
No, for sure	2	18	1	4	--	--	--	--	--	--	3	5

**FINDINGS****The Gang Problem in Colorado Springs**

Each focus group expressed concern with the growth of gangs in Colorado Springs. As one student from South High expressed it, the gang problem "is growing faster than anyone thinks." Students at North High, however, said that the threat of gangs has been "blown out of proportion" by negative media coverage. Students could identify eleven active youth gangs in Colorado Springs. Students from all four high schools concurred that gangs were most active on the south side of the city. As one North High student put it,

It's not all that right to be alone on the south side.  
That's when I begin to wonder about my safety.

While each group expressed concern about the gang problem, this concern varied according to the school's location in the city (Table 3).

Students believed that most gangs were neighborhood gangs rather than city-wide, and that neighborhood boundaries were the principal determinant in the composition of gangs. They said that each neighborhood was like a separate little town, and that within these neighborhoods gang affiliations could be determined by graffiti that denoted ethnicity and territorial boundaries. They believed that gangs were segregated along ethnic lines, but some gangs had mixed membership.

Gang activity inside schools reflected the geographic concentration of gang activity on the south side of the city. At South High, students cited gang graffiti and students armed with switch-blades and guns as constant reminders of the gang presence. While students at East High did not believe that there was a gang problem in their school, seven students in the focus group knew of gang members in their school, and four students knew gang members personally. Students at Central High stated that there were gang members at their school, but that most gang-related activity

occurred outside of school. At North High, students said that there was not a gang problem at their school, believing that there were no real gang members among the students. Instead, self-proclaimed gang members were actually "wannabes," and they could be identified by their lack of specific knowledge about gangs.

All focus groups agreed that wannabes posed a special problem. Wannabes were perceived as more dangerous and more likely to start trouble than regular gang members. This is because of their desire to "advertise" themselves as "bad" to the real gang members. Some students also believed that wannabes were the most likely to get hurt.

Participants stated that gangs in Colorado Springs did not actively recruit young people to join them. Only occasionally did gangs ask someone to join them. Students agreed that if someone turned down gang membership, there was no pressure or retaliation from the gang upon refusal to join. One student stated that he had been offered gang membership, and his decision to decline was respected by the gang. Instead, a prospective member usually will ask to become a gang member. Prior to this request, prospective members will begin to hang around a gang and wear that gang's specific clothing. Some students also claimed that upon joining a gang, a person usually is "jumped" into a gang, meaning the initiation is to be beat up by the gang members.

The presence of gangs has increased concern for personal safety among students in the Pikes Peak region, especially among freshmen and sophomores at Central and East High Schools. Some students expressed these concerns in the general terms of being shot or stabbed. Others, however, explicitly made a connection between gangs and concern for personal safety. One student wrote,

My concern is that I might get killed or injured in a gang-related activity

they cited the south side as a center of gang activity, they also mentioned the southwest and northeast as other locations. Not surprisingly, these students' estimates of "students in gangs" at Middle High school ranged from 100 to 250 students, figures that must be considered excessively high.

Like the high school students, the Middle School students did not believe that gangs actively recruited their members. Instead, as one student put it, "You have to impress them first." These students also went into great detail concerning gang initiations. For example, one girl said that to join a gang, "you have to have unprotected sex with a lot of guys at once." They also considered gang membership to be a lifetime commitment.

#### **Authority, Alienation, and Prevention**

Many students, in both the high schools and the middle school, expressed anxiety and doubt with regard to their future prospects, and most felt that the problem of gangs could not be alleviated in the near future. Almost all of the students believed that police and school authorities can do little to prevent drug use and gang activity. Consequently, students expressed resignation, powerlessness, and a lack of control over their circumstances.

Students in each of the focus groups also exhibited considerable ambivalence toward, and a lack of trust in, the police and school authorities. Many students in these schools believed that policemen viewed them generally with suspicion, and often harassed them because of their age or their ethnicity. At the same time, students at Central High pointed out that the police in the school's neighborhood normally would ignore a group that exhibited characteristics of gang membership, and instead, they would approach and "pick on" individual youths.

A similar view prevailed concerning school administrators. As one student said, "They watch everything you do. They think everything is gang-related." Many students also expressed considerable indifference toward administrators who ran youth-oriented programs in schools. Youth workers and counselors, for instance, were considered out of touch with teenage concerns. Students at Middle School exhibited even stronger negative opinions toward school authorities, whom they complained would "call the cops for the littlest things." Consequently, these students claimed that they were required to make

unnecessary court appearances, pay fines, and do community service.

These attitudes toward authorities emerged most strongly in a discussion of "colors," especially at East High where all hats recently had been banned. The students felt that the "no hat policy" was an over-reaction, since very few hats were actually gang related, and they were angry that they could do nothing about it. This group agreed when one summed up the entire issue by saying, "A hat never shot anybody." Instead, these students expressed concern for their safety only when wearing certain colors in public.

Nonetheless, many students suggested that the authorities should take stronger measures against gangs. One student even suggested that the only solution would be to "lock them all up." A student from East echoed this sentiment by saying,

The police and the court systems should give them more than a slap on the wrist.

Many students also indicated that a lack of rapport with their parents increased the sense of uncertainty concerning the problem of drug use and gangs. Many students come from families where both parents worked, and often these teens came home to an empty house every day with nothing for them to do in the afternoon. For example, one student mentioned that parents who themselves abuse drugs and alcohol make poor role models for their children, and that "they need to quit if they want us to quit." Another student stated that "peer pressure to use drugs was especially strong when one's home life is bad."

Given such distancing between school and police on the one hand, and home and family on the other, it is not surprising that students cited both reasons for and against joining gangs. Students from North, East, and Central High Schools generally emphasized the positive aspects of gang membership. These students emphasized that gangs are "like a second family" to their members. Young people join gangs because they get more attention from gangs than from family members or because gangs offer a safe haven from problems at home. Likewise, gang membership provides participants with a greater feeling of acceptance and self-esteem. In general, the students believed that if you were experiencing problems, your gang would be there to help you. Finally, gangs provide

**Table 4: Concern for Personal Safety**

	How often (if ever) are you ever afraid for your own personal safety?											
	North		East		Central		South		Middle		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Never	5	46	4	17	--	--	4	33	2	22	15	24
Rarely	3	27	10	44	5	71	2	17	3	33	23	37
Some days	3	27	8	35	2	29	5	42	4	44	22	36
Most days	--	--	1	4	--	--	1	8	--	--	2	3
Every day	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	0	0

while another connected a fear for safety with the perceptions that gangs "travel in herds" and "think they can do anything."

While freshmen from South High expressed similar concerns for personal safety, these students did not express a specific fear of gangs, though feelings of uncertainty were more prevalent because students came from different neighborhoods. During their group discussion, they believed they were safe as long as they "minded their own business" and avoided contact with gang members. As a consequence, they were constantly on alert when at school.

Either due to their age or where they lived, seniors at North High expressed the least concern with violence or gangs in their neighborhood. For example, one student wrote,

I fear getting in a car accident more than I fear a violent act inflicted upon me.

These qualitative findings are corroborated by the focus group survey data (Table 4).

Students in each group considered the problem of drugs as largely separate from that of gangs, despite awareness that drug sales offer gang members the chance to make money. Students at Central High, for example, believed that gang members did not necessarily do more drugs than non-gang members, emphasizing that some gangs did not even use drugs. Indeed, as a separate issue, drugs and alcohol were listed in each focus group as a greater concern than gangs, crime, and violence (Table 2).

According to the students, drugs are readily available, especially marijuana and alcohol, and peer pressure was cited as the most important cause for the use of drugs. Furthermore, the students made a strong distinction between "hard drugs" and other drugs. One student wrote:

If someone offered me alcohol or a cigarette I

would probably immediately accept it. If it were an illegal drug, such as marijuana, I don't think I'd do a drug like that. Marijuana maybe, because it's not that harmful.

### Gangs and the Middle School

The students of Middle School present an interesting study in contrasts. These students argued that the media has exaggerated the violence of gangs and has made gangs in "scapegoats." They argued that kids knew more about gangs than the police, and many of their statements proved relatively informative. In their opinion,

the more you know about gangs, then you have less to fear—especially if you know the signals.

Yet much of their information was based on hearsay and rumor; often they would beg assertions with "a friend of mine told me." Consequently, many of their statements demonstrated a lack of direct experience with gangs. The findings from this focus group were therefore more indicative of the psychological impact of gangs on area youth than they were of gangs themselves.

In general, the nine students from Middle School expressed concern with the growing gang problem. Unlike the older students, however, they held an altogether negative opinion of gangs. In their opinion, gangs were more of a show than a threat. However, these students had a greater difficulty distinguishing between gang and non-gang members than the high school students. For example, some students considered "skaters"—"grunge types" who ride on skateboards—to be a type of gang.

In discussing the city's gang problem, these students made numerous references to local members of Crips and Bloods, as well as to the Sons of Silence and the Hell's Angels motorcycle gangs. Furthermore, these students had difficulty in identifying the locality of gangs in the Colorado Springs area. Why

protection to their members in that gang's neighborhood.

Students from South High, as well as some from Central and East Highs, expressed the opposite opinion. They believed that gangs basically "want to gain control," and they emphasized that the purposes of gangs included acquiring drugs and money. They said that gangs provide greater freedom because their members can make more money through illegal activities than they can through employment.

Most of the participants expressed the opinion that the answer to the gang problem was education. However, they believed prevention programs like Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) were ineffective. Virtually all of the focus group members had participated in the program, and they explained that it was ineffective because the program was "too repetitive," providing insufficient information with which "to make decisions." They stated that they would prefer to have the curriculum delivered by peers with "real world experience" rather than a police officer. Furthermore, these students believed that both drugs and gangs were a part of growing up, and that these issues needed to be addressed throughout junior high and high school.

## DISCUSSION

### The Impact of Gangs on Youth

Findings suggest that specific neighborhoods determine the distribution and structure of gangs and gang activity. Based on student statements concerning gangs within their schools and neighborhoods, as well as elsewhere in the city, the typology developed by Feldman, Mandel, and Fields (1985) appears the most useful in differentiating gang activity in Colorado Springs. According to this typology, the majority of gang activity in the region can be defined in terms of neighborhood social or fighting gangs rather than entrepreneurial gangs with national affiliations (Feldman et al 1985).

In sections of the city characterized by lower levels of socioeconomic status, like those where South High is located, fighting gangs have emerged. These are the gangs whose names were well known and linked by focus group participants to those neighborhoods that local police officials have identified as the core of gang activity. Antagonistic toward other gangs and often engaged in drug use and selling, fighting gangs are the most

territorial type of gangs (Feldman et al 1985). This finding is consistent with Zevitz's study of Kenosha gangs (1993). Despite the existence of fighting gangs, incidents of gang violence appear to be comparatively isolated and sporadic. This finding is supported by Hughes and Dukes (1997). Gangs in more affluent sections of the city, however, are predominantly social gangs. Gangs in neighborhoods like those where North High is located are brought together for the purpose of engaging in largely recreational activities, with little or no evidence of fighting or violence, a finding consistent with the social type of gang (Feldman et al 1985).

Likewise, the data suggest that gang activity and violence have not been linked specifically to the sale and distribution of illegal drugs by broader-based, entrepreneurial gangs. Entrepreneurial gangs are concerned with attaining status by means of money through such illegal activities as drug dealing or theft. These gangs exhibit a higher degree of organization and their use of violence is more often instrumentally tied to the control and distribution of drugs and money (Feldman et al 1985). The lack of entrepreneurial gangs is also suggested by the fact that the focus groups sharply distinguished gangs and drug use as distinct problems; in each focus group, the students rated drugs and alcohol as the greater problem, and in three schools they did so by at least a 2-1 margin. (The local police department has also concluded that local drug sales are not controlled by gangs, as is often the case in other cities.) The lack of the entrepreneurial type of gang, with its need for carriers and lookouts, may help to explain the lack of active recruiting practices among gangs in the Pikes Peak region. While local gangs may use drugs, this use is not yet dependent upon gang activity. This pattern is in sharp contrast to gang activity in Chicago as described by Kotlowitz (1991).

In general, these findings reemphasize the importance of studying youth gangs and gang activity in specific social contexts that take into consideration local ecological factors, in both major urban areas and smaller towns and cities, as suggested by Curry and Spergel (1988, 1992). The differentiation of gangs in Colorado Springs, with fighting gangs emerging on the south side of the city, reflects social stratification processes that create poor, disenfranchised communities that are subjected to stigma and repression in a systematic fashion (Moore 1991; Padilla 1992; Vigil



1988).

Against this atmosphere of uncertainty, the focus group findings suggest that many area youths have nonetheless developed a capacity to adapt to the gang presence and to respond positively to the challenge presented by growth of gangs. Youths appear to be learning factually about gangs and how to deal with them. In general, students demonstrated that: 1) they had acquired a substantial amount of specific, everyday knowledge about gangs in the Pikes Peak region; 2) while students expressed concerns about being victims of violence, they did not specifically connect this fear with gangs; and 3) they showed considerable self-confidence in their ability to handle encounters with gang members.

Variations in these responses to the impact of local gang activity seem contingent upon geographic distribution of gangs and student age. The students at North High School, the only group composed primarily of seniors, believed that the threat of gangs has been exaggerated, and they disagreed most with the statement that "gangs are the biggest problem" for area youth (Table 3). Of all the groups, they demonstrated the most factual knowledge about gangs and the types of gang association, and they exhibited the greatest confidence in handling gang encounters. Perhaps most significantly, they displayed a strong desire to educate other youths concerning the dangers involved with gangs and drugs.

At the same time, the freshmen of South High School demonstrated comparable experience. Despite the location of their school within neighborhoods where gang activity is most pronounced, these students did not express a specific fear of gang violence. On the contrary, because of their first-hand knowledge of gangs and gang members, they considered themselves safe so long as they "steered clear" of gangs. Despite being younger than students at North High, these freshmen showed self-confidence in dealing with encounters involving gang members that was at least equal to that of the seniors at North.

In some respects, it is in the neighborhoods where Central High, East High, and the Middle School are located that the psychological impact of gangs apparently are felt most. These schools are located in a transitional zone between the south side neighborhoods where fighting gangs have emerged and the more affluent northern neighborhoods where social gangs are the dominant type. In

this part of town, the social gang continues to be predominant, but there is evidence of a growing influence and impact of fighting gangs. These neighborhoods are under the influence of two different types of gangs, with their different patterns of behavior and action. Consequently, unlike their peers at South High, the freshman and sophomores of Central and East High considered gangs to be a growing problem. They voiced the greatest concern for personal safety, and they most often specifically connected this fear to gangs. Finally, they demonstrated the greatest uncertainty about how to deal with gang situations.

Students at Middle School proved to be the least knowledgeable about gangs. These students were the least precise about the geographic location of gangs, had great difficulty distinguishing between gang and non-gang members, and often did not distinguish between youth gangs and older, motorcycle gangs. Not surprisingly, they exhibited the greatest apprehension at the thought of having to deal with gang members.

The data from these focus groups complement and advance findings in related studies on the perceptions of everyday youth toward gangs and gang activity. In some respects, the present analysis seems to confirm the findings of Takata and Zevitz (1990) and Pryor and McGarrell (1993). In general, the youths in our study identified gangs in their own neighborhood and other neighborhoods, had personal interactions with gang members, and identified differences in age and ethnicity among gangs. Similar to youths in Takata and Zevitz's Racine study (1990), the focus group participants seemed more sure about their knowledge of gangs in their own immediate school or neighborhood. And like Pryor and McGarrell (1993), exposure to gangs and gang activities in local neighborhood contexts seemed to decrease a youth's appraisal of potential gang-related danger, consequently leading to a less serious perception of a gang problem.

These findings, however, appeared varied according to age and to exposure with gangs that differed according to the type of gang and geographic location. While it is impossible to discriminate between these two effects within the limits of this study, the data draw attention to differential responses based on the youth's age and especially their definition of gangs and gang members, neither of which are fully accounted for in the two related

studies cited above. In their study, Takata and Zevitz (1990) concluded that youth's perceptions of gang members are much more "amorphous" when compared to the stereotypical adult perceptions reflecting "official" definitions of local authorities and the media. Their data illustrated how most young people observe collective delinquent behavior as more of a near-group occurrence, and how young people may find it easier to recognize certain activities as gang-related because they see the gang as an ephemeral group.

Based on the present analysis, however, these "amorphous" perceptions may actually reflect a greater understanding of different types of gangs, gang members, and gang activities – an understanding that appears in stark contrast to the monolithic conception of gangs implied by local authorities and the media, a conception that these students rejected on the basis of their personal experiences. This analysis suggests that future studies on the impact of gangs on everyday youth may yield more fruitful results if they employed alternative conceptions and definitions of gangs and gang membership.

#### **Policy Implications**

Further growth of gangs in Colorado Springs may result in the transformation of social or fighting types of gangs into the entrepreneurial type with stronger affiliations to national gangs. Findings suggest that gangs and gang activity represent a challenge not only to police or school administrators, but to entire communities regardless of size and demographics. Programs to reduce the impact of gangs on area youth should most immediately address issues of practical education regarding gangs, alcohol and drugs, disarmament of youth, and improving police-youth relations. Programs should also emphasize the role of knowledge and education, both as a meaningful experience and as the power to advance up the socioeconomic ladder. Programs should emphasize the development of vocational skills and the creation of future job opportunities that will strengthen the economic self-support of youth and provide recreational opportunities that offer a positive alternative to the perceived "benefits" of gang membership. Above all, policy directed at both gang and nongang youthful offenders must consider the finding that emphasizing education can insulate youth from gangs and from deviance. Education provides opportunities

for achievement, promotes an identity as a valuable member of society, and can preclude involvement in serious deviance, delinquency and crime (Dukes et al 1995).

Data from this and related research suggests that special attention needs to be directed toward wannabe gang members, not only because they provide the basis for the rapid growth of gangs in the region, but also because wannabes are a significant problem in their own right. While many of the focus group participants demonstrated considerable self-confidence in their ability to handle encounters with gang members, they exhibited less confidence concerning wannabes. In fact wannabe gang members emerged as a distinct variation of the gang problem in Colorado Springs. Students in each school stated that wannabes are more likely to engage in violence. Consequently, the students believed that wannabes represented a greater threat than gang members. This inference may be of special interest to research on gangs in smaller communities where the lack of a criminal subculture discourages the emergence of more organized gangs.

This finding also supports an interpretation of why wannabes are more deviant than nonmembers, though not as deviant as active gang members, as indicated by a survey of area youth (Dukes et al 1995). As part of a process of anticipatory socialization, wannabes attempt to gain respect from gang members or to cultivate the style of life and behavior necessary to prepare them for gang membership. For this reason, wannabes may engage in specific and openly public displays of deviance, thus conveying the impression to nongang youth that they are unpredictable and prone to violent, criminal activities, and so represent a higher risk of personal injury than do active gang members. By contrast, active members may no longer need to engage in such dramaturgical performances for the benefit of fellow gang members. Further research is required, however, to better specify the role wannabes have as a part of the overall impact of gangs and gang violence on everyday youth.

More immediately, practical education concerning gangs should be directed toward middle-school students. Data from this focus group research indicate that area high school students have already developed a degree of "street smart" knowledge that has allowed them to cope with the impact of gangs and gang activity. Inevitably, such knowledge

learned from practical experience has both its strengths and its weaknesses. As this study suggests, middle-school students demonstrate a growing but very incomplete knowledge of gangs on the one hand, and a nearly universal negative opinion about gangs on the other. This combination may provide an ideal point to intervene with a preventive program that can build upon, focus, and direct the "street smart" learning that the region's youth is already acquiring in their everyday experience.

A caveat to any policy recommendation must be the apparent distancing effect between students and authority. In marked contrast to their self-reliance concerning gangs, students in the focus groups exhibited a considerable lack of trust toward local police and school officials, believing that neither group could (or would) effectively confront the growing problem of gangs. They particularly felt harassed when police mistook them for gang members or when school authorities "clamped down" on gangs or "gang-related" stuff. It also is clear from the focus group discussion that interactions between local teens and police frequently produced resentment. Here their reliance upon their everyday knowledge and experience of youth gangs may contribute to a distrust of authority, a distrust that is also evident in their belief that even youth counselors are out of touch with teenage concerns. These students emphasized that, to be effective, any preventive educational program must be presented by persons who have actual experience with gangs, drugs, and violence.

The extent to which this resentment is directed toward all adult authority figures is unclear. In general, these students demonstrated a contradictory attitude toward authority. (Ironically, despite resentment toward police and educational administrators, a majority of students suggested that federal and local governments should increase their police force and punish gang members more severely. Thus, these students appear to have made a distinction between the abstract level of government, which should enact more policies aimed at confronting the gang problem, and the immediate level of everyday experience with local policy enforcement, which was viewed as ineffective and often the source of harassment.)

Consequently, middle-school programs concerning gang awareness should involve senior high school students to present important portions of the curriculum. This approach

to a preventive program is supported by the stated preference for peers as mentors by students in the focus groups. Such an interactive education would also reinforce the social responsibility of senior high school students by enabling them to act as role models for other students. This recommendation is supported by research that has concluded that the most successful drug education programs for adolescents are those "interactive" ones in which older adolescents present the curriculum (Tobler 1986).

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