

## INVOLVEMENT OF AMERICAN INDIAN YOUTH IN GANGS

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### ABSTRACT

Virtually nothing is known about the involvement of American Indian youth in gangs. However, recent evidence suggests that a gang culture and gang membership have diffused to many Native American Indian communities. The purpose of this article is to examine the results of a self-report study among American Indian youth from several western states. The results indicate that about 5 percent of males, but less than 1 percent of females reported actual gang membership. In addition, about 10 percent of male and female respondents reported hanging around with gangs. When compared to non-gang Indian youth, level of drug involvement and involvement in delinquent activities was higher for in-gang youth and those who hang around with gangs. Youth who reported hanging around with gangs also reported higher drug use and involvement in delinquent activities than non-gang youth, but lower than those who reported actual membership in gangs. Conditions of poverty, lack of economic opportunities, discrimination, and the erosion of cultural identity provide the structural conditions for the attractiveness of gangs to Indian youth. The actual diffusion of gang culture is dependent on contact between Indian youth and non-Indian youth with knowledge about gangs. The article considers several important areas for research on gang emergence in Native American Indian communities.

### INTRODUCTION

Little has been published about gang membership and gang-related behavior among American Indian youth. One reason may simply be that research on youth gangs has focused almost exclusively on the urban scene, ignoring rural youth in general and in particular specific subgroups who have a sizable proportion of their population living in rural areas. This focus has not been without some justification. Research on gang involvement has found a decided concentration of gangs in America's largest cities (Fagan 1989; Goldstein, Soriano 1994; Miller 1992), although a few researchers have noted the diffusion of youth gangs and gang culture into moderate sized and even small, rural communities (Donnermeyer 1994; Maxson, Woods, Klein 1996; Miller 1992; Spergel 1990; Takata 1994). The purpose of this article is to explore the issue of gang membership and involvement in drug use and delinquency among American Indian youth, based on self-report data collected from in-school youth in several western states.

### GANGS AND INDIAN YOUTH

Another possible reason there is so little in the literature about American Indian youth involvement in gangs is that gangs have only recently emerged in American Indian communities. There is some evidence which supports this explanation. Accounts from the *Albuquerque Journal* (Associated Press 1996; Linthicum 1996a, 1996b) highlight a growing concern among Navajo reservation leaders and local law enforcement officials in several western New Mexico counties and towns over incidents

of gang-related graffiti and violence. A recent University of Minnesota study of 13,000 American Indian youth (State of American Indian Youth Health) indicated that one in every six youth reported membership in a gang (Blum, Harmon, Harris, Bergeisen, Resnick 1992). That study found that these American Indian youth were more likely to be involved in incidents of assault and other violent behavior than other youth in their communities who did not identify themselves as gang members.

Previous gang research has found a clear and consistent relationship between gang affiliation and involvement in substance use, delinquency and violence (Curry, Spergel 1988; Miller 1992; Spergel 1990; Thornberry, Krohn, Licotte, Chard-Wierschem 1993; Winfree, Mays, Vigil-Bockstrom 1994). Existing research on problem behaviors of American Indian youth has focused largely on the issues of alcohol and drug use (Beauvais 1992a, 1992b; Beauvais, Segal 1992; May 1994; Winfree, Griffiths 1983). These researchers consistently find that alcohol abuse and deaths related to alcohol use are major problems for adolescents as well as adults in many Indian communities. When drug use among Indian youth is compared to national rates and rates of prevalence among other minority populations, the overall rates for American Indian youth are higher (Beauvais 1992a). Further, Beauvais (1992a) found that Indian youth on reservations have higher rates of drug use than those living off reservations.

Relatively neglected in the literature is a focus on issues affecting Indian youth other than drug abuse, such as family violence and the perpetration of violence against others,

both of which are associated characteristics of youth who join gangs (Fischler 1985; Shafer, McIlwaine 1992; Yung, Hammond 1994). Shafer and McIlwaine (1992) note that it is difficult to estimate child sexual abuse due to cultural variations among tribes as well as between tribes and the majority culture that complicate definitions of abuse and also create barriers between victims and investigators. However, some evidence indicates that rates of spousal abuse may be twice the national average among American Indians (DeBruyn, Hymbaugh, Valdez 1988; DeBruyn, Lujan, May 1992). In addition, the majority of child abuse and neglect cases reported among Navajo are related to alcohol abuse (Shafer, McIlwaine 1992). The levels of victimization to violence as well as the perpetration of violence among Indian youth reported in the University of Minnesota study are substantially higher for American Indian youth than in a comparable sample of white youth (Blum et al 1992). Beauvais' (1992b) research found a stronger association between under-age drinking and drug use and a host of other risky behaviors, including getting into fights and vandalism, among Indian youth than among a comparative group of white youth.

Research on gang emergence among urban and minority youth suggests a complex set of factors that may have relevancy for examining gang involvement among Indian youth. For example, researchers frequently cite a combination of factors that together make up the structural context in which youth become attractive to and involved in gangs. These factors include poverty and lack of economic opportunities; discrimination; difficulties of acculturation into the majority culture; a weakening of identity with one's own culture; the social disorganization and breakdown of community life; and family disorganization (Goldstein, Soriano 1994; Jankowski 1991; Moore 1985; Oetting, Beauvais 1987; Spergel 1990; Vigil, Long 1990). Youth may be attracted to gangs as a way of acquiring money, self-esteem and a sense of family (Conly, Kelly, Mahanna, Warner 1993). Added to this mix are individual behaviors associated with gang involvement, such as high prevalence rates of alcohol and drug use; poor academic adjustment and school achievement; high rates of dropping out of school; and living in communities with a history and tolerance of family and interpersonal violence (Hagedorn 1988; Huff 1990). Many of these

factors are already frequently present for American Indian youth.

One additional factor is the way knowledge about gangs and gang organization is diffused to groups of vulnerable youth (Donnermeyer 1994; Zevitz 1993; Zevitz, Takata 1992). Warr (1996) notes that some juvenile offenders are transitory in the sense of multiple membership in multiple groups prone to delinquency. From this larger network of delinquent peers comes the mechanism for the diffusion of gang culture. Researchers have noted several ways this diffusion process has occurred among youth who join gangs in smaller towns and suburban communities (Donnermeyer 1994; Maxson et al 1996; Zevitz, Takata 1992). Carriers of gang culture can include incarcerated youth who learn from their large city peers while serving time in a detention center or prison, troubled urban youth who are sent by their parents to live with relatives in rural communities, small clusters of mobile peers who travel to shopping malls and places of entertainment in cities for diversion and excitement and meet up with urban gang members, and families who move from the city to more rural locales in order to remove their sons and daughters from the perceived negative influences of urban life (Donnermeyer 1994). In addition, mass media depictions of gangs can contribute by enhancing the notoriety of gang life, and encouraging a "wannabe" attitude (Vigil 1990). These ways for the spreading of gang culture may also be relevant in American Indian communities.

All gangs have structure and, to at least some extent, exert control over the behavior of their members. Joining a gang thus symbolizes an act of commitment on the part of the individual (Conly et al 1993; Spergel 1990; Taylor 1990). Obviously, for this commitment to occur, there must be opportunities to join a gang near where the young person lives (Zevitz, Takata 1992; Maxson et al 1996). Although many American Indian communities are far removed geographically from urban areas where gangs flourish, often youth move back and forth between cities such as Albuquerque, Detroit, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Phoenix, etc. and their home reservations (Weibel-Orlando 1985; Beauvais 1992c). This movement may be more frequent for youth who have had trouble in their home communities and have been sent to live with extended family. While living in urban areas some American Indian youth would have the opportunity to

**Table 1: Gender and Gang Involvement Among Indian Youth (in percentages)**

	<b>Males</b> (n=393)	<b>Females</b> (n=465)
No gang involvement	84	89
Hangout with a gang	10	10
In gang now	6	1

become affiliated with gangs, and movement back and forth between the city and the reservation could be the primary avenue through which gang activity has spread to more remote American Indian communities.

## METHODOLOGY

The data included in this article were collected between 1989 and 1993 and are derived from self-report surveys of 393 male and 465 female 7th through 12th grade American Indian youth living in and attending school in communities of several western states, including Montana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and South Dakota. The study sites included a metropolitan area, smaller communities with large Indian populations, as well as five reservations. Participation in the survey was voluntary and surveys were administered in a group setting during school hours at their schools. The survey instrument was a version of The American Drug and Alcohol Survey with an insert which included a number of questions about involvement in gangs, delinquency and violence. Gang involvement was determined by responses to the question "Have you ever been in a 'street gang?'" Possible responses were: "Never been in a gang;" "I will never join a gang;" "Used to be in a gang, but not now;" "I will join a gang later;" "Not a member, but hang out with a gang;" and "In a gang now." Very few youth responded that either they had been in a gang and were not now or that they would join a gang later. These categories were dropped from the analysis. The first two categories, indicating no present involvement in a gang were combined, leaving three categories: no gang involvement, hanging out or associating with a gang, and current gang involvement. Although the validity of self-report youth surveys of gang membership could be questioned, previous research by Fagan (1989, 1990), Horowitz (1990), Curry and Spergel (1992) and Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) indicates that self-identification is a satisfactory method for assessing gang involvement. The incidence of delinquent and violent

behavior was also derived from self-report, with response categories of "none," "1-2 times," "3-9 times," and "10 or more times." In various cross-tabulations, these response categories were collapsed in order to yield sufficient cell size for meaningful interpretation.

Analyses of The American Drug and Alcohol Survey include development of a 32-point drug involvement scale ranging from dependence to no current use of drugs and/or alcohol. For the purposes of reporting, this scale was collapsed into three levels of drug involvement. Subjects classified as low involvement included negligible or no use, light alcohol users, and drug experimenters. Moderate drug involvement included subjects classified as light marijuana users and occasional drug users. High drug involvement included heavy alcohol users, heavy marijuana users, stimulant users and multi-drug users. Evidence for the reliability and validity of The American Drug and Alcohol Survey are presented by Oetting and Beauvais (1987). Subscales for individual drugs used in deriving the drug involvement scale demonstrate high reliability (i.e., alpha coefficients ranging from .79 to .96) across various adolescent groups by both age and ethnicity (Oetting, Beauvais 1987). Analyses also include 34 checks for exaggerated and inconsistent answers which result in elimination of invalid surveys from further analyses. Less than 3 percent of surveys were eliminated as invalid.

## FINDINGS

The level of self-reported involvement in gangs in this study (see Table 1) was similar to the results from the University of Minnesota study (Blum et al 1992). About 16 percent of male subjects and 11 percent of female subjects report some gang involvement. However, almost two-thirds of the males and nearly all of the females reporting gang involvement described their association as hanging out with a gang. Only 6 percent of the males and less than 1 percent of females reported actual gang membership. This figure is also close to the 5 percent estimate from the University of Minnesota study of Indian youth who reported that they spend a lot of time in gangs (Blum et al 1992). This level of reported gang involvement also is similar to a study of mostly high risk African-American and Hispanic youth in Denver (Esbensen, Huizinga 1993).

The gender difference in gang

**Table 2: Gang Involvement and Drug Involvement (in percentages)**

Level of Drug Involvement	Males			Females		
	No Gang Involvement (n=329)	Hang Out With Gang (n=41)	In Gang (n=23)	No Gang Involvement (n=416)	Hang Out With Gang (n=45)	In Gang (n=4)
Low	73	51	39	67	40	25
Moderate	19	42	26	26	31	75
High	8	7	35	7	29	--

membership is consistent with research on predominately African-American, Hispanic, Asian and white gangs (Conly et al 1993; Miller 1992; Spergel 1990). Membership in gangs is largely male, and females are considered auxiliary members, "wannabes and floaters" (Goldstein, Soriano 1994; Miller 1992). However, as Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) note, based on results from the Denver Youth Survey, female participation in gang activities is probably higher than previously suspected, and is an issue that has been largely ignored by researchers.

Table 2 shows level of drug involvement broken down by gang involvement and gender. More American Indian youth who indicated they had some involvement with gangs had higher drug involvement than youth who were not involved with gangs. This is consistent with findings by Edwards (1994) in Mexican-American and white populations. Results presented in Tables 2 and 3 should be interpreted with caution, particularly with respect to female gang involvement, due to the low number of females in this category.

Among male subjects, level of drug involvement increased by level of gang affiliation. Three fourths of American Indian males reporting no gang involvement were classified as having low drug involvement; while over 40 percent of male subjects who reported they hang out with gangs scored at the moderate level and over one third of male subjects in gangs were in the high drug involvement group. A similar but more modest difference in drug involvement can also be found between female subjects reporting no gang involvement versus those who hang out with a gang.

Table 3 demonstrates that there was also a relationship between gang involvement and delinquency among these American Indian youth. Among male subjects, those reporting gang membership were several times higher for all seven self-report indicators of involvement in delinquent activities. For

example, 19 percent of males in gangs reported having stolen something expensive (>\$50) three or more times in the past 12 months, compared with only 3 percent of males not in gangs. Stealing less expensive items was also more frequently reported by youth who were gang members than non-gang youth (38% versus 12% for 3+ times during the past 12 months), and an even greater differential was exhibited for buying/selling stolen property (38% versus 6%). Involvement in a gang fight (45% versus 2%), for selling marijuana (37% versus 6%), and for breaking into a building or car (29% versus 5%) were much higher for male gang members than non-gang youth. Finally, a greater proportion of males who identified themselves as gang members reported being arrested three or more times in a 12 month period than non-gang members (27% versus 8%). Those who reported hanging around with a gang likewise exhibited higher levels of involvement in delinquent behavior than non-gang youth, but lower involvement than gang members. Again, these results are consistent with the Edwards (1994) finding about the co-occurrence of delinquent activities and gang membership among Mexican-American and white youth in the southwest.

Since there were only four American Indian females who reported actual gang membership, the results may not be generalizable, although involvement in other delinquent behaviors was evident among these four females. Females who reported hanging around with a gang did report substantially higher involvement in three of the seven indicators of delinquent activities. These included stealing something inexpensive, having broken into a house or car and having been in a gang fight. They were also more likely to report involvement in selling marijuana and having been arrested, but the differences were less pronounced. Females who hang out with a gang were less likely than their male counterparts to

**Table 3: Gang Involvement and Self-Reported Delinquent Behavior Among American Indian Youth (past 12 months) (in percentages)**

	Males			Females		
	No Gang Involvement (n=329)	Hang Out With Gang (n=41)	In Gang (n=23)	No Gang Involvement (n=416)	Hang Out With Gang (n=45)	In Gang (n=4)
<b>Stole Something Expensive (&gt;\$50)</b>						
None	88	71	43	95	93	75
1-2 times	9	15	38	5	7	25
3+ times	3	15	19	1		
<b>Stole Something Cheaper (&lt;\$50)</b>						
None	67	43	33	70	60	25
1-2 times	21	30	29	23	24	25
3+ times	12	28	38	7	16	50
<b>Bought or Sold Stolen Property</b>						
None	80	60	33	95	98	75
1-2 times	15	23	29	4	2	25
3+ times	6	18	38	2		
<b>Broken into a Building or Car</b>						
None	87	65	29	96	84	75
1-2 times	8	25	43	4	16	25
3+ times	5	10	29	1		
<b>Been in a Gang Related Fight</b>						
None	94	53	25	98	68	50
1-2 times	4	35	30	2	26	
3+ times	2	13	45	1	6	50
<b>Sold Marijuana</b>						
None	88	75	53	94	87	75
1-2 times	6	13	11	4	9	25
3+ times	6	13	37	2	4	
<b>Been Arrested</b>						
None	76	61	23	84	75	50
1-2 times	16	27	50	12	26	50
3+ times	8	12	27	4		

engage in each of these delinquent behaviors. These results are consistent with the findings of Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) who found that the relationship between gang involvement and delinquent activity was much stronger for males than females. Overall, these results suggest that for both male and female American Indian youth, gang association and membership co-varied with a higher level of involvement in delinquent activities.

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

It is clear from this and the University of Minnesota study (Blum et al 1992), as well as the anecdotal evidence provided by recent newspaper articles in the *Albuquerque Journal*, that some Indian youth are actively involved as members of gangs, and even more

associate with gangs to some degree. In addition, it appears, based on the authors' personal communications with individuals who conduct research and are concerned about the problem behaviors of American Indian youth, that gangs have only recently emerged in American Indian communities (May, Griffiths, Winfree, Hutchinson, personal communications, 1996). In comparison with urban areas, the relative lag in development of gangs among American Indian youth is similar to the experiences of moderate size cities; middle-class and suburban areas; and small, rural towns (Donnermeyer 1994; Hutchison, Dalke 1993; Spergel 1990; Zevitz, Takata 1992).

The emergence of gang activity among American Indian youth may foreshadow a serious escalation in levels of drug use and

delinquent behavior, especially violence, among Indian youth if the pattern of association between gang membership and other problem behaviors found by researchers among youth of other ethnicities develops similarly among American Indian youth (Esbensen, Huizinga 1993; Thornberry et al 1993). In this study, gang involvement of Indian youth was clearly linked to increased drug use and delinquency.

The evidence of a significant presence of gangs in American Indian communities and for the increased likelihood of drug use and delinquent behavior among Indian youth is far from conclusively established. The potential, however, is high and researchers have already established that various problem behaviors, such as alcohol abuse, must consider the mobility of American Indians back and forth between reservations and urban centers (Beauvais 1992c; Weibel-Orlando 1985; Yung, Hammond 1994). Ominously, the factors that have traditionally been recognized as giving rise to youth gangs (Hagedorn 1988; Miller 1992; Spergel 1990) have long been present in many American Indian communities. Most American Indians live in families whose income is below the poverty level, and those living on reservations have household incomes which are even lower than those of non-reservation American Indian families (Ho 1992; Young 1991). Research has already established a link between poverty and various forms of family and interpersonal violence (Rosenberg, Mercy 1991; Vigil, Long 1990), both of which are associated with youth who engage in a number of other high-risk behaviors, including high drug involvement and gang membership (Spergel 1990; Thornberry et al 1993; Yung, Hammond 1994). Problems of discrimination and cultural identification are coupled with poverty for many minority youth, including Indians (Woods, Griffiths 1995; Yung, Hammond 1994). These conditions not only reduce economic opportunities, but also limit opportunities for participation in the majority culture and increase alienation from society in general (Jankowski 1991; Moore 1985; Oetting, Beauvais 1990-91; Vigil 1990), conditions which are in turn associated with drug use (Edwards 1994) and gang membership (Huff 1990). An added dimension is the erosion of cultural identity among Indian youth in some communities, and the geographic isolation of many Indian communities (Wood, Griffiths 1995; Yung, Hammond 1994).

Conditions of poverty, discrimination, lack of cultural identity and cultural anomie provide the conditions for Indian youth to view gangs as attractive. The relative isolation of many American Indian communities might provide some protection from the diffusion of gang culture if it were not for the fact that many Indian youth, particularly those who have encountered difficulties in their home communities may move among households of relatives, and back and forth between the reservations and urban areas where gang activity flourishes.

Research on gang membership and associated behaviors among American Indian youth needs to proceed at several levels. First, basic descriptive data on the demographic, family and socio-economic status of Indian gang members should be compiled. Variations in prevalence of gang membership and variations in characteristics of American Indian gang members should be examined relative to differences among various American Indian communities, both reservation and non-reservation. Second, does gang membership facilitate involvement in drug use and other serious behaviors among Indian youth to the same extent as it does among youth of other cultures (Thornberry et al 1993)? Results presented in this article suggest that this may be true. Related to this is the issue of how gambling establishments on reservations may influence gang emergence and gang-related activities as traditional economic structures change, the possibility of organized crime becomes greater, and there is increased influx of "outsiders" on reservations. Third, what is the extent to which Indian youth imitate or modify the structure or organization of gangs based on unique features of American Indian societies? In addition, how have the ritualistic and symbolic aspects of gang culture been modified? Is there a synergy or hybridization of aspects of American Indian and urban gang cultures that provide new and attractive and more risky avenues for establishing ethnic identity for Indian youth? A fourth line of inquiry is to determine the ways in which knowledge about gang organization and rituals, graffiti and other gang symbols, diffuse or spread among Indian youth as suggested by the ways in which this has already occurred to majority and minority youth in urban, suburban and rural areas. Related to this issue is whether or not the gang involvement of Indian youth is actually maintained when they return

to reservations or if involvement is primarily while they are in more urban areas. Fifth, at a broader, structural level, how do poverty, social and economic change, and the erosion of traditional cultural values contribute to the emergence and growth of Indian gangs?

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, research devoted to the development of gang prevention strategies for American Indian youth should be initiated. Experiences from other prevention efforts clearly indicate that even subtle variations in the demographic, socio-economic and cultural make-up of individual communities can influence the relative effectiveness of programs (Hawkins, Catalano, and Associates 1992; Oetting, Donnermeyer, Plested, Edwards, Kelly, Beauvais 1995). Traditional approaches to preventing gang involvement may or may not work with Indian youth susceptible to or currently involved with gangs, both on and off reservations. Aspects of American Indian culture may serve as protective factors that, when combined with active prevention efforts, may reduce the detrimental effects of what appears to be the growing cultural phenomenon of gang activity in American Indian communities.

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