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**Gangs and Gang Activity in a Non-Metropolitan Community: The
Perceptions of Students, Teachers, and Police Officers**

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Presented to the Western Kentucky University Honors Program

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Abstract

In recent years, both the media and the research literature have noted an increased presence of street gangs in non-metropolitan and rural communities. An initial step in the investigation of this phenomenon is to gauge how the members of these communities react to increases in gang activity. This study was conducted in a small (approximately 20,000 citizens) Kentucky town identified by its police force as having a sizable gang population. Individuals from three groups within the community who have frequent, direct contact with gang members (police officers, teachers, and students) took part in the study. Participants completed questionnaires designed to measure their general perceptions of the gangs, the factors associated with gang development, and the community's response to the gang presence. Perceptual differences and similarities regarding these topics were found between the groups. These differing perspectives may provide greater insight into possible strategies for combating gang-related delinquency and diverting children away from the negative aspects of gang involvement.

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Introduction

For much of this century, street gangs have garnered the attention of social-science researchers. Through the use of varying methodologies and theoretical approaches, these researchers have provided the public with a wealth of relevant information concerning the development, structure, and behavior of street gangs in the United States (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Hagedorn, 1990; Huff, 1990; Klein, 1995). The pioneers of gang research, influenced by the "Chicago School" of the early 1900's, favored direct observation of, and interaction with, their subject matter. Perhaps most influential was Frederick Thrasher (1927), whose direct observation of 1,313 gangs in Chicago set the standard for qualitative gang research. Thrasher and colleagues Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (1942) conducted their research under the assumption that juvenile and gang delinquency are products of the poor, highly disorganized urban areas in which delinquents live.

Other sociologists followed the example set by these individuals in the decades following the publication of Thrasher's classic work *The Gang*. Theoretical contributions such as Cohen's (1955) delinquent subculture theory, Miller's (1958) theory of lower-class focal concerns, Cloward & Ohlin's (1960) illegitimate opportunity theory, and Yablonsky's (1959) concept of near groups have provided invaluable insights into why gangs form, why young people join such gangs, and what these gangs do when they are together. The insights of these and other pioneering gang researchers remain relevant to current investigations of the urban gang phenomenon (for a discussion of these theories, see Bursik and Grasmick, 1993 or Hagedorn, 1990).

Interest in gang research waned somewhat during the 1960's and 70's (Brantley and DiRosa, 1994; Siegel and Senna, 1994), but was rekindled in the 1980's when the United States experienced a nationwide increase in gang activity and violent, gang-related crime (Klein, 1995; McCort, 1996). The social scientists who sought to explain this increase used statistics, collected by law enforcement and social service agencies, as well as survey techniques and the qualitative methods of their predecessors (McConnell, 1994). With the inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative data, researchers have been able to measure--with reasonable accuracy--the expansion of urban gangs nationwide and chronicle recent trends in gang activity (Spergel and Curry, 1995). One of the foremost experts on contemporary trends in street-gang activity, sociologist Malcolm Klein, has found that the number of street gangs in the United States has increased more than 300% since 1961. Whereas there were 54 cities with a gang population in 1960, his survey of law enforcement agencies across the nation indicates that street gangs can now be found in approximately 800 cities across the nation (Klein, 1995).

Many contemporary gangs do not reside in urban communities but rather in towns once thought to be immune from gang influence (Brantley & DiRosa, 1994; Klein, 1995; McCormick, 1996; McCort, 1996). In light of this finding, it is essential that research address two facets of the current street-gang situation in the United States. First, the vast majority of studies have focused on urban gangs, both describing their nature and providing uniquely urban explanations for their development. Such a focus on metropolitan areas has created a dearth of information regarding the emergence of gangs outside of our nation's cities--especially in its semi-rural and rural towns. Second, few attempts have been made to study the impact of gang development on smaller communities and their citizens. The present research attempts to address this latter issue.

The research literature indicates that one way to effectively gauge how social phenomena affect individuals and groups is to measure their perceptions of those phenomena (Braungart, Braungart, & Hoyer, 1980; Parker, 1988; van der Wurff, van Staalduinen, & Stringer, 1989). Several studies have used this method to examine the responses of citizens to the gang presence in their communities. One such study, conducted by Takata and Zevitz (1990), asked adults and students living in Racine, Wisconsin, to share their perceptions of the gangs located in that city. They found that students' perceptions were generally less negative than those of adults, with students being less likely to perceive the existence of a serious gang problem in the community. The students were more likely, however, to believe that the influence of gangs was widespread. A higher percentage of students than adults agreed that there were gangs present both in their neighborhoods and in other neighborhoods throughout the city. In addition, students were somewhat more likely to estimate that a large number of gang members reside in Racine.

Takata and Zevitz attributed these findings to the overall way in which the participants viewed gang activity. They found that the students tended to view gangs as unorganized groups with fluctuating memberships and a limited amount of cohesion. This view contrasted with the adults' perceptions, which often defined gangs as tightly knit, organized groups of young people with similar goals. Using the theoretical framework first advanced by Yablonsky (1959) in his discussion of gangs as near-groups, Takata and Zevitz concluded that these perceptual differences were influenced by the nature of the respondents' interactions with the gangs. Adults' perceptions were likely to be influenced by secondary information sources, such as the media, and by stereotypes about the gangs. Students' perceptions, on the other hand, were more often shaped by their direct contact with gang members.

A similar study, conducted by Pryor and McGarrell (1993), asked a random sample of residents living in Indianapolis, Indiana, to rate the seriousness of youth

gang crime and trends in gang crime both in their own neighborhoods and in other neighborhoods in the city. In addition, respondents were asked to compare their neighborhood to other neighborhoods in terms of the dangers of youth gang crime. This study found that individuals consistently rated gang crime as more serious and more of a threat in neighborhoods other than their own. Also, participants were more likely to believe that gang crime was increasing in other neighborhoods than in their own neighborhoods. Pryor and McGarrell discovered a number of variables related to peoples' perceptions of gang crime in their own neighborhoods as well. Young people, those who lived in areas identified as having a large amount of gang activity, and those who had discussed the gang situation with others perceived a greater amount of serious gang crime in their neighborhood. In addition, individuals who had been victims of gang crime were much more likely than non-victims to perceive gang crime as serious, increasing, and dangerous in their own neighborhoods.

While these studies are very useful in determining how citizens react to gangs and gang activity in metropolitan areas, they do not address the impact of gang formation on smaller towns. It is possible that these newly developed gangs are qualitatively different than their "big city" counterparts. Given this, they may influence their surroundings in a different way than traditional metropolitan gangs. It is for this reason that we chose to investigate the perceptions of residents living in a non-metropolitan area.

This study was designed to explore how groups of individuals residing in a small community feel about the gangs that exist there. The three groups that took part in the study (police officers, teachers, and students) were selected because of their differing relationships with the local gang members. Whereas we assumed that the adults' relationships with gang members were primarily authoritative or punitive, we assumed that the students' relationships were varied in nature because

of the many settings (e.g. home, school, social activities) in which they might interact with gang members. We measured their perceptions regarding what the gangs do, why children join them, and how and why they formed. In addition, we asked our participants questions concerning the community's efforts to help gang members and/or eliminate the gangs. We were interested in discovering perceptual differences between the groups in the hope that their differing perspectives on the nature of gangs could assist authorities in the town in developing innovative and effective ways of dealing with them.

Methods

Community

This study was conducted in a small Kentucky town located between a major metropolitan area, approximately 40 miles to the north, and another small city located 13 miles to the south. These and other cities are accessible via nearby interstates and highways. In addition, the community is directly adjacent to a United States military base, which exerts considerable influence on both the economy and population of the town. According to 1990 census data, the town has a population of 19,772 people. There are slightly more females (51.21%) than males (48.79%) in the community. With 78.82% of its residents under the age of 45 and 44.44% of residents under the age of 24, the town has a relatively youthful population. With regard to the racial makeup of the town, the community is predominately Caucasian (72.22%), with African-Americans making up the largest racial minority (19.50%). Hispanics and Latinos make up 3.94% of the population, while Asians and Pacific Islanders account for 3.86%. The per capita annual income for the community is \$10,822, and the unemployment rate for the town is 13.1%. The percentage of individuals with incomes below the poverty line is 13.2% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990).

Participants

The three sample groups participating in this study were all drawn from within the community. Two hundred forty-three students from grades nine through twelve were selected at random from the student body of the local high school. Seniors and sophomores made up the majority of the sample, with

approximately 32% each. Juniors comprised 24% of the sample, while freshmen made up only 12% of the sample. Of the sample, 48.6% were females, while 51.4% were males. The majority of students were Caucasian (56.2%), with African-Americans (24.3%), Hispanics (5.1%), Asians (4.3%), and those classifying themselves as "other" (10.2%) making up the rest of the student group.

The sample of teachers and school personnel was also drawn from the city high school. Thirty-four teachers took part in the study. With regard to gender and race, the teachers were less heterogeneous than the students. The majority (61.8%) of the respondents were women. In addition, all of the participating teachers were Caucasian. The mean age for the teachers was 37.74 years.

The third group that took part in this study consisted of employees of the city police department. Of the 20 police officers who participated in this study, 80% were male. As was the case with the teachers, this group was also predominately Caucasian, with only one African-American respondent. The mean age for the police officers was 36 years.

Questionnaire

As this was an exploratory study, our purpose was to examine our participants' perceptions on a wide range of topics. The questions were designed to address the following basic areas of interest: perceived gang demographics, perceptions of gang formation and membership, the perceived impact of gangs on the community, and perceived community response to the gangs. Initial items for the questionnaire were derived from a questionnaire developed by John M. Hagedorn (1988) for interviewing gang members in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. From these initial questions, the primary researchers revised the questions to "fit" a small-town setting. Additional questions were then added to address those issues which we felt needed more coverage (see appendix A).

Procedures

The initial step of this study involved establishing communication between the researchers and the potential participants. We first obtained permission from the local police department, the city high school, and the county school board to include the police officers, teachers, and students in this study. Once this was done, questionnaires were distributed to the adult participants in their place of work. For both the police officers and the teachers, a sealed, ballot-style box was provided to ensure that the information on their completed questionnaires remained confidential. These boxes were picked up directly from the school and the police station by the primary researcher. For the students, the questionnaires were distributed in classes that had been selected at random. These classes were analogous to "homeroom" classes and were organized by the students' last names and not according to subject or the students' academic abilities. The students' questionnaires were collected immediately following their completion.

Data Analysis

Data collected in this study were analyzed using SPSS version 6.1 for Microsoft Windows. One-way analyses of variance were used to analyze between-group differences on Interval/Ratio level variables. To compensate for the disparity in sample sizes between the three groups, the harmonic mean for the groups was used in place of n when calculating the Tukey Honestly Significant Difference post-tests. For items of the "check all that apply" and open-ended varieties (in which the participant's answer could include several components) frequency distributions were computed for each component within those items (see Appendix A for clarification). For open-ended items, each questionnaire was examined prior to data analysis, and general categories based on participants' responses to these items were

created (see Appendix B for a list of these categories). Responses to each open-ended question were then collapsed into one or more of these categories, and the categories were analyzed in the manner described above.

Results

Perceived Gang Demographics

Several items on the questionnaire addressed demographic aspects of the gangs. One such item asked participants to indicate the age range at which they believed young people become involved in gangs (see appendix A, question 11). For all groups, the bulk of the responses fell in two categories: twelve-to-thirteen years and fourteen-to-fifteen years. Overall, these two categories accounted for 61.8% of the students' responses, 73.6% of the teachers' responses, and 65.0% of the police officers' responses. For students (37.0%) and teachers (47.1%), the category chosen most often was twelve-to-thirteen years of age, while the most frequently chosen category for police officers was fourteen-to-fifteen years (35.0%). All groups were also in close agreement in their estimates of the average age of a gang member, with mean estimates of 15.70 years by students, 16.09 years by teachers, and 16.30 years by police officers. A one-way ANOVA indicated that the mean scores for each group on that item did not differ significantly, $F(2, 274) = 1.1037, p = .3331$.

Another item on the questionnaire displayed a list of five racial categories: Caucasian, African-American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian, and "Other." Participants were asked to check all categories that were, in their opinion, represented in the membership of the local street gangs. As shown in table one, all groups provided similar answers, selecting African-Americans with the greatest frequency, followed by Caucasians, Hispanics, Asians, and "Other" in order from most frequently chosen to least frequently chosen. Students were, however, less likely to select the Caucasian category than were teachers or police officers. Also, police officers were much less likely to select the "Hispanic/Latino," "Asian," and "Other" categories than were teachers or students.

Table 1
Perceived Racial/Ethnic Makeup of the Gangs by Group

<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Students</u>	<u>Teachers</u>	<u>Police Officers</u>
African-American	91.8%	100.0%	95.0%
Caucasian	73.2%	84.4%	85.0%
Hispanic	70.0%	75.8%	50.0%
Asian	46.8%	48.5%	35.0%
Other	12.3%	6.1%	5.0%

We also asked the respondents if they believed that gang members are residents of certain neighborhoods or if they come from neighborhoods throughout the community. Again, all three groups provided similar responses. The majority of students (82.25%), teachers (90.32%), and police officers (85%) felt that gang membership is not restricted to those who live in certain neighborhoods, thus indicating that all young people are subject to the influence of gangs. These findings are displayed in table two.

Table 2
Responses to the question "Do gang members come only from certain neighborhoods in the community?" by group

<u>Group</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Students	17.75%	82.25%
Teachers	9.68%	90.32%
Police Officers	15.00%	85.00%

Perceptions of Gang Formation and Membership

When asked in an open-ended format to provide reasons for why gangs developed in the community, the most common answer (42.8%) given by students was the lack of positive activities for young people. This view was a popular one among the students, who repeatedly indicated that they found the town to be boring.

One student stated that gangs formed because "there is nothing to do—people create their own excitement." Another high-school senior noted that "kids are bored so it's only natural for them to form a gang." Although these statements were typical of the student responses, students also attributed gang formation to other factors, such as the need for support among young people (19.7%) and recruitment efforts by gangs from other areas (15.6%).

Teachers also felt that gangs formed because of a lack of activities for young people (65.5%) and adolescents' need for support (37.9%); however, they included the belief that poor parental guidance (58.6%) had played a significant role in gang development. The majority of teacher responses in the "other" (41.4%) category discussed the transient nature of the community because of economic instability and the movement of military families in and out of town. These responses can best be summarized by the comments of one teacher who stated that "the influx of young people from other areas introduced the local teenagers to elements of gang culture."

The police officers, like the students and teachers, believed that a lack of activities (26.7%), the recruitment efforts of outside gangs (20.0%), adolescents' need for support (20.0%), and poor parenting (33.3%) played a role in gang development. They differed from the other groups, however, by specifically citing the influx of military personnel (33.3%) as a factor in the development of gangs. This differs from the transience described by the teachers in that it does not include the movement of civilians into the community.

One issue that we addressed in the questionnaire was that of outside gang influence. Responses to the question "To what degree do you think that 'big' city gangs have influenced the gangs here?" were similar across all groups. Mean responses for teachers (3.70) and students (3.64) indicated that they saw metropolitan gangs as exerting a "moderate" to "fairly high" amount of influence on the town's gangs. The mean score for police officers (4.20) was a bit higher, indicating that they

perceived a "fairly high" degree of metropolitan gang influence among the local gangs. A one-way analysis of variance for this item found no significant differences between these means, $F(2, 287) = 2.2708, p = .1051$ (see table seven). We also asked each group of participants if they believed the founders of the gangs were natives of the area. The majority of respondents in each group answered "no" to this question. Adults were most likely to respond this way, with 95.0% of the police officers and 85.3% of the teachers claiming that the gang founders were not natives of that community. Similarly, the majority of the students (78.2%) did not feel that the founders were originally from that town.

Two items on the questionnaire concerned the factors associated with becoming a gang member. The first of these items asked individuals to indicate ways in which they felt children are introduced to gangs and gang culture. For each group, friends and gang recruitment were seen as the first and second most common forms of gang socialization, respectively. While the third most popular choice for students and police officers was that youths are "approached by gang leaders," the teachers' third choice was that family members introduce young people to gang culture. In addition, it is interesting to note that students were more likely to feel that young people approach the gangs (37.2%) than were teachers (29.4%) or police officers (30.0%). These results are displayed in table three.

The second item dealing with gang membership was also in a check-all-that-apply format. This item measured respondents' perceptions regarding why adolescents and children join gangs. The top reasons given by each group were "friendship/acceptance" and "status/popularity." The remaining top responses varied by group; however, all groups considered family problems and adolescents' desire to rebel against authority as primary reasons why young people join gangs. Furthermore, the adult respondents were much more likely than were students to feel that a lack of role models contributes to gang membership. The reason "they are

'bad' by nature" was second only to "other" as the most infrequent reason given by each group. This indicates that the participants were reluctant to attribute gang membership to the personal characteristics of the member. The responses to this question for each group are displayed in table four.

Table 3
By group, the most frequently checked responses (in percentages) to the question "How are young people introduced to gangs and gang culture?"

Activities	Students ^c %	Teachers ^c %	Police Officers ^c %
Friends	88.3	94.1	90.0
Recruited	58.2	70.6	80.0
Approached by Leaders	44.8	23.5	40.0
They Approach the Gangs	37.2	29.4	30.0
Family Members	29.7	38.2	35.0
Other	5.90	2.90	0.00

Table 4
By group, the most frequently checked responses (in percentages) to the question "Why do you feel that children and young adults join gangs?"

	Students ^c %	Teachers ^c %	Police Officers ^c %
Friendship/ Acceptance	75.60	100.00	90.00
Status/ Popularity	66.50	97.10	90.00
Family Difficulties	65.70	85.30	70.00
Rebellion	* 60.70	82.40	85.00
Lack of Role Models	46.90	91.20	75.00
Fun/ Excitement	54.80	91.20	35.00
Making Money	57.30	41.20	35.00
Frustration with Life	54.80	67.60	35.00
They are "Bad by Nature"	* 38.50	17.60	10.00
Other	13.40	5.90	10.00

Perceived Impact of Gangs on the Community

To determine if the participants perceived gang activity as widespread throughout the community, we asked them if the gangs congregate or "hang out" only in certain neighborhoods in the town. Responses to this item showed that the majority of the students (70.3%), teachers (71%) and police officers (80%) felt that gangs assemble in specific areas. Thus, even though gang members are thought to come from every area of the community, the citizens believed that they conduct their affairs only in certain neighborhoods. These findings are displayed in table five.

A number of one-way analyses of variance were conducted to investigate perceptual differences among the groups on items addressing the impact of gangs on the community. One of these items asked respondents to rate their level of agreement with the statement "The gangs here are a problem" on a five-point Likert scale. Scores on this scale could range from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). This item was designed to clarify how the individuals in this study feel about the gangs in their town. A one-way ANOVA comparing the mean responses for each group was significant, $F(2, 278) = 38.094, p < .0001$. A Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean rating for students (3.04) was significantly lower than the means for teachers (4.22) and for police officers (4.70) at the .01 level. The mean ratings for teachers and police officers did not differ significantly from one another. These results indicate that the students were, on average, unsure or uncertain about whether the gangs were a problem. Adults, on the other hand, clearly agreed that the local gangs presented a problem for the community.

One of the most troubling characteristics of contemporary American gangs is the amount of violence that some of these gangs inflict upon others. While not all gangs commit criminal or violent acts, gang-related violence is usually a major concern for the citizens of any city or town with a gang population (Hagedorn, 1988).

To determine if our participants perceived the gangs in their community as violent, we asked them to rate their level of agreement with the statement "The gangs in this area are violent" on a five-point Likert scale. A one-way ANOVA comparing the average ratings of each group was significant, $F(2, 288) = 7.563, p < .0006$. A Tukey HSD test, conducted at the .05 level, indicated that the mean for the students (3.08) was significantly lower than the means for teachers (3.62) and police officers (3.75), which did not differ from one another. This relationship disappeared, however, when an alpha level of .01 was used for the Tukey HSD test. While the mean responses for each group fell between ratings of "uncertain" and "agree," these findings show that students were less certain that the gangs are violent than adults were.

Another issue that we wanted to address was the criminality of the gangs. To get a general sense of the participants' perceptions regarding this matter, we asked them to respond to the question "How criminal do you feel the gangs are?" Possible answers ranged from 1 (not criminal) to 5 (very criminal). A one-way ANOVA comparing each group's mean response was statistically significant, $F(2, 287) = 16.397, p < .0001$. A Tukey HSD test indicated that the average score for the police officers on this item (4.25) was significantly higher than the mean scores for teachers (3.24) and students (2.95) at the .01 level. Mean scores for teachers and students did not differ statistically. These results show that the police officers felt that the gangs are fairly criminal, whereas the teachers and students saw the gangs as only moderately criminal.

To further investigate the issue of gang criminality, we asked respondents to rate their level of agreement with a statement that the local gangs are involved in the sale of drugs. Again, responses to this item were ranked on a five-point Likert scale. A one-way ANOVA comparing the relationship between the mean responses for students, teachers, and police officers was found to be significant, $F(2, 288) =$

16.332, $p < .0001$. A Tukey HSD test, calculated at the .01 level, indicated that the mean response for students (3.60) was significantly lower than the mean for teachers (4.45) and police officers (4.55), which did not differ from one another. Students, then, were less likely than adults to believe that gangs in the community engage in drug sales. Students responses fell between the "uncertain" and "agree" categories while teacher and police officer responses tended to fall between the "agree" and "strongly agree" categories. Means and standard deviations for these variables are displayed by group in table seven.

Perceived Community Response to the Gangs

In order to gauge the current efforts of the community to help its youth and, more specifically, to curb gang activity, we asked the respondents if they were aware of any programs in existence that sought to divert children away from gangs or help gang members. The majority of the respondents replied that they knew of no programs with those goals. Likewise, the majority of people in all three groups did not know of any programs designed to address the gang situation in the town. Students, who presumably have the greatest need for such programs, were least likely to report knowledge anti-gang programs, followed by teachers and police officers. These findings are shown in table six.

Table 6
Between-group comparisons of responses to the question "Are you aware of any programs that attempt to divert children away from gangs or help those who are in gangs?"

<u>Answer</u>	<u>Students</u>	<u>Teachers</u>	<u>Police Officers</u>
Yes	23.3%	36.4%	36.8%
No	76.7%	63.6%	63.2%

Participants also responded to two items that measured their perceptions of the community's response to the emerging gang presence. The first of these rated their level of agreement with the statement "The community is doing an effective job of preventing and/or getting rid of the gangs." A one-way ANOVA comparing the mean responses of students (2.06), teachers (1.85), and police officers (2.40) was not significant, $F(2, 288) = 1.723, p = .1803$. Thus, mean scores for all three groups fell into the "disagree" category.

The second item asked participants to rate their level of agreement (on a five-point Likert scale) with the statement "The community is doing enough to help young people (including gang members) with their problems." A one-way ANOVA again showed no significant relationship between respondents' answers and their group membership, $F(2, 278) = .0597, p = .9420$. Mean responses for students (2.03), teachers (2.03), and police officers (1.95) indicated that each group disagreed with the statement. Means and standard deviations for each item are displayed in table seven.

At the end of the questionnaire, all participants were given the opportunity to explain what they feel should be done to help the gang members and other young people in their community. Students' comments covered a wide range of topics. Some advocated harsh punishments for delinquents and gang members, while others suggested that adults simply ignore the gangs and take no action toward them. Many students recommended that the community provide more activities and diversions for its adolescents. This view was expressed in comments from students like "bring people together to play some sports," "build more parks," and "give us a place to play ball." These types of responses were most frequent for students. In fact, their most common suggestions were to sponsor activities in the community for young people (39.2%) and provide a center where teenagers may gather for fun (24.8%).

Table 7
Means and Standard Deviations for Selected Items

Item	Students		Teachers		Police Officers	
	\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD
How much have gangs from large cities influenced the local gangs? <u>c</u>	3.645	(1.150)	3.697	(.952)	4.200	(.952)
Gangs here are a problem. <u>b</u>	3.039**	(1.110)	4.219	(.659)	4.700	(.470)
Gangs in this area are violent. <u>b</u>	3.076*	(1.030)	3.618	(.922)	3.750	(.966)
How criminal do you feel the gangs are? <u>a</u>	2.945	(.998)	3.235	(1.017)	4.250**	(.910)
Gangs are involved in the sale of drugs. <u>b</u>	3.597**	(1.066)	4.455	(.794)	4.550	(.945)
Community is doing enough to help its young people. <u>b</u>	2.026	(.964)	2.029	(.171)	1.950	(.826)
Community is doing an effective job of eliminating the gangs. <u>b</u>	2.063	(1.062)	1.853	(.821)	2.400	(1.188)

* Mean differs significantly from all other means, $p < .05$

** Mean differs significantly from all other means, $p < .01$

a Possible answers ranged from 1 (not criminal) to 5 (very criminal).

b An item designed to measure the participant's agreement with the statement. Possible answers ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

c Possible answer ranged from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a very high degree).

The responses of the teachers to this question were also varied. They were similar to the students in that they believed there should be more activities for children and teens (48.0%) and that a recreation center should be provided for them (36.0%). They also indicated that there should be stiffer penalties enacted for juveniles who commit criminal offenses (36.0%). In line with this view, a number of teachers recommended that the town enforce a curfew that would prohibit juveniles from being on the streets after a certain hour. Another popular solution suggested by the teachers was to encourage parents to take a more active role in their children's lives (28.0%).

As one might expect, the police officers favored the enactment of tougher penalties for juveniles (33.3%). This was not, however, the most common suggestion made by that group. The top recommendation from the sample of police officers was that "anti-gang" education programs be provided for young people (46.7%). Furthermore, many police officers were in agreement with the teachers and students in their belief that more activities should be available for young people in the community (40.0%).

Discussion

The three groups that took part in this study held very similar beliefs about the demographic characteristics of the gang members. The majority of students, teachers, and police officers perceived individuals as falling into gang activity during adolescence (between the ages of 12 and 15) and believed that most gang members in the community were around 16 years of age. In addition, all participants felt that African Americans are the largest racial group represented in the gangs. They did, however, believe that the gangs are racially diverse, with both minorities and Caucasians as members. While previous research has indicated that adults are more likely than students to perceive gang members as minorities (Takata and Zevitz, 1990), this study revealed only slight perceptual differences between adults and students about the racial makeup of the local gangs.

Respondents also believed that gang members reside in many different parts of the town. This indicates that gang members aren't perceived to be just from "the wrong side of the tracks" or the "bad part of town." Our respondents indicated that any youth, from any part of the city, has the potential to become a gang member. This points to what may be a key difference between traditional urban gangs and gangs emerging in towns like the one in which this study was conducted. Gangs have long been thought of as a poor, minority phenomenon. Traditionally, people have associated gang membership with poverty-stricken or high crime areas in large cities. Since the majority of our participants feel that the gangs are composed of a heterogeneous mixture of youths, we can infer that they are not likely to attribute gang membership solely to race or socio-economic status. While we cannot infer from this study that their perceptions reflect the actual gang situation in that

community, these findings support the notion that small-town gangs are different from their metropolitan counterparts.

Responses to the question "Why did gangs develop in this community?" indicate that the participants perceive a number of factors as having influenced the growth of gang activity. Perhaps the most unconventional of these perceived factors was that young people do not have access to positive recreational activities. This is quite different from the notion, accepted by social scientists and lay persons alike, that children join gangs because of adverse life circumstances. While this concept makes logical sense and is supported in the research literature (Miller, 1958; Thrasher, 1927), it is not a universal truth. Perhaps the students, who are the ones affected by the shortage of entertainment, have a valid point when they state that gangs provide excitement for certain individuals. This alternate perspective should at least be considered when formulating a community response to the gang "problem." Perhaps providing safe, enjoyable activities for young people could greatly reduce the possibility that they would turn to gangs to alleviate their sense of boredom.

It is clear that members of the community feel that gang development can be attributed at least in part to external influences. One popular theory for explaining small-town gang formation contends that gangs from major cities like Chicago "colonize" small towns in order to spread that gang's influence and expand its power base. This is an idea that has gained some popularity with law-enforcement agencies and the public (Bunker, 1996; McCormick, 1996) but is not supported by sociological research (Hagedorn, 1988; Klein, 1995). The fact that the majority of respondents believe that the founders of the gangs were not natives of the area, coupled with their perception that "big city" gangs have exerted an influence on the local gangs, indicates that many community residents support this theory. When

considering these findings, however, one must look at other factors that may complicate this conclusion.

Because the town is located next to a large military base, there is a symbiotic relationship between the town and the base. Children who move from other places, including large cities, because one or both parents are in the military may settle in the town. It is possible that some of these youths have brought information about gangs with them and shared this information with the young people in the community. This possibility does not indicate a diabolical plot to extend the reaches of big city gangs, even though it does indicate outside gang influence. The only way to know for certain how and why the gangs formed is to ask the gang members, leaders, and founders directly. The interview method has been used successfully in metropolitan areas by researchers such as John Hagedorn (1988). Future studies on rural gangs using qualitative research methods could provide the public with a wealth of information regarding their development and growth. In addition, an investigation of the relationship between military bases and gang development in the areas surrounding them would also be worthwhile.

What is apparent from our findings is that adults are more likely to see gangs as a negative force within the community than were students—a finding that is consistent with previous research (Pryor & McGarrell, 1993; Takata & Zevitz, 1990). Teachers and police officers perceived the gangs as being more of a problem, more involved in the sale of drugs, and slightly more violent than did the students. In addition, police officers were more likely than either the students or teachers to perceive the gangs as criminal. It is possible that these differences are the result of the type of exposure each group has to the local gangs.

Police officers are more likely to interact with gang members (or non-gang youth, for that matter) when those youths have committed a crime. By contrast, it is not the primary role of the teacher to punish offending gang members, although he

or she may have to adopt a punitive stance at school from time to time. Perhaps these differing contacts with gang members help to explain why both teachers and police officers view the gangs as more negative than do the students and why police officers hold the most negative perceptions of the three groups.

As stated in the introduction, students may interact with gang members in a number of different ways. Gang members may be the students' neighbors, friends, rivals, relatives, or classmates. In addition, they may occupy more than one of those roles at any given time. Perhaps this greater degree of variability in the students' relationships with the gang members gives the students a more accurate indication of what the gangs are really like. If this is the case, then the students' tendency to perceive the gangs as less harmful than the adults could reflect the gangs' true nature. Perhaps future research will shed new light on this issue by collecting accurate information on the gangs themselves.

The fact that adults believe that the gangs are a problem and are criminal could have serious ramifications for the gang members in our community of study. It has been argued that individuals "react to their perceptions of social problems rather than to the problems themselves" (Conklin, 1975 p. 75). If there is truth to that statement, then those adults who have the ability to design and implement gang-intervention programs might do so based on very negative perceptions. This could possibly lead to the implementation of programs that focus on deterrence and punishment rather than prevention. It is doubtful that such programs would be as effective as those that are based upon careful examination of the gang situation. Because of this, researchers must continue to study the gangs in that community and others like it so that we may better understand the dynamics of gang formation and growth.

The responses that were collected during this study suggest a number of possible strategies for future policy formation. That most of our respondents knew

of no programs in the area that assist gang members or attempt to divert children away from gangs indicates a serious need for intervention efforts on the part of the community. Clearly, all three groups do not feel that enough is being done to slow the spread of gangs or address the needs of the children and young adults in the town. A first step in remedying this problem might involve publicizing what resources, if any, are available to young people. These programs can only be effective if individuals are aware of them and if they are readily accessible.

With regard to the formation of new gang-intervention programs, there are a number of directions in which those who have authority (e. g. police officers, teachers, elected officials) can go. The suggestions by police officers and teachers that are reported in this study reflect a variety of possible techniques that the community may use to impede the growth of street gangs. It is our belief, however, that the most salient policy suggestions are those of the students. Not only are the students in a position to know what programs would be effective, but they also are the group that would be directly affected by these programs if put into practice. It is apparent that these individuals perceive a lack of resources available to help adolescents. Perhaps, then, the community should begin to address the gang issue by focusing on the needs of its young people. An excellent "first step" in this process might be the creation of recreational facilities and activities for area youth, a strategy was suggested by participants in all three of the groups represented in this study. In addition, community leaders could solicit the input of students when developing programs or policies that will have an impact on them. Future research must examine the effectiveness of any tactics that this community and other non-metropolitan communities adopt to deter local gang activity.

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Appendix A: Research Questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of a study being conducted by representatives from the Department of Psychology at Western Kentucky University. The purpose of this survey is to determine the feelings and opinions of members of the community regarding gangs in this area. To ensure that you remain anonymous, please **do not** put your name on this questionnaire. Your answers will be kept confidential and will only be seen by the researchers who are conducting this survey.

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions; we ask only that you give the most honest answers possible in your responses. You may skip any questions which you do not want to answer or cannot answer. You do not have to complete the questionnaire and can stop answering the questions at any time. If you have any questions, please ask the research assistant who handed out the questionnaires to your class. We thank you for taking the time to help us with this research project.

1. Age: _____
2. Gender: (Check one)
Male _____
Female _____
3. What grade are you in? (Check one)
9 _____
10 _____
11 _____
12 _____
4. What is your ethnic background? (Check one)
Caucasian _____
African-American _____
Hispanic/Latino _____
Asian _____
Other _____
5. What is/are the occupation(s)/profession(s) of your parent(s) or legal guardian(s)?

6. How far did your mother and father go in school? (Check one for each parent)

	Mother	Father
Less than 8th grade	_____	_____
Finished 8th grade	_____	_____
Some high school	_____	_____
Finished high school	_____	_____
Some college or technical school	_____	_____
Finished college or technical school	_____	_____
Professional or graduate degree	_____	_____

Appendix A: Adult Demographics

Age: _____

Gender: (Check one)

Male _____

Female _____

What is your ethnic background? (Check one)

Caucasian _____

African-American _____

Hispanic/Latino _____

Asian _____

Other _____

What your occupation/profession? _____

What is the approximate annual income for your household? (Check one)

Under \$10,000 _____

\$10,001-\$20,000 _____

\$20,001--\$30,000 _____

\$30,001--\$40,000 _____

\$40,001--\$50,000 _____

\$50,001--\$60,000 _____

\$60,001--\$70,000 _____

\$70,001--\$80,000 _____

\$80,001 or greater _____

7. In your own words, briefly define the term **gang**: _____

8. What is your estimate of the racial ethnic makeup of the gangs in this area?
 (Check all that apply)

- Caucasian _____
- African-American _____
- Latino/Hispanic _____
- Asian _____
- Other _____

9. In your opinion, in what activities do gang members frequently engage? (Check all that apply)

- | | | | |
|-------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| Partying | _____ | Fighting | _____ |
| Committing crimes | _____ | 'Hanging out' w friends | _____ |
| School activities | _____ | Using drugs | _____ |
| Selling drugs | _____ | Working | _____ |
| | | Other | _____ |

10. What do you think is the average age of a gang member? _____

11. What do you think is the average age at which young people become involved in gangs? (Check one)

- Under 8 _____
- 8-9 years _____
- 10-11 years _____
- 12-13 years _____
- 14-15 years _____
- 16-17 years _____
- 18 or over _____

12. How are young people introduced to the gangs and gang culture? (Check all that apply)

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|-------|---------------------------------|-------|
| Friends | _____ | They are recruited by the gangs | _____ |
| Family members | _____ | Approached by gang leaders | _____ |
| They approach the gangs | _____ | Other | _____ |

13. By your estimate, how many gangs are there in the area? _____
 How many gangs are there on the military base? _____

14. Why do you feel that children and young adults join gangs? (Check all that apply)

- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-------|-----------------------------|-------|
| Family problems | _____ | Fun excitement | _____ |
| Friendship/acceptance | _____ | Rebellion against authority | _____ |
| Making money | _____ | They are "bad by nature" | _____ |
| Lack of role models | _____ | Frustration w life | _____ |
| Status popularity | _____ | Other | _____ |

15. In your opinion, how strong is the influence of gangs among the young people in the town? (Check one)

- Not strong
- Slightly strong
- Moderately strong
- Fairly strong
- Very strong

16. How criminal do you feel the gangs are overall? (Check one)

- Not criminal
- Slightly criminal
- Moderately criminal
- Fairly criminal
- Very criminal

17. To what degree do you think that gangs in "big" cities have influenced the gangs here? (Check one)

- Not at all
- To a slight degree
- To a moderate degree
- To a fairly high degree
- To a very high degree

18. How strong do you feel the gang influence is among young people on the military base?

- Not strong
- Slightly strong
- Moderately strong
- Fairly strong
- Very strong

Please circle Y (yes) or N (no) to indicate your answer to the following questions.

19. Do you have any direct contact with gang members right now? Y N
- If yes, what is your relationship with these gang members? (This is optional) _____
- _____
- _____
20. Are you a native of Hardin County? Y N
21. If no, did you have any exposure to gangs in the area(s) where you had previously lived? Y N
22. Do you think that the members of local gangs come a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds? Y N
23. In your opinion, do the gangs "hang out" only in certain areas or neighborhoods within the community? Y N

24. Do the members of a gang come only from certain neighborhoods (instead of coming from many different neighborhoods or areas)? Y N
25. Do you feel that most members of the gangs are natives of the County? Y N
26. Do you feel that the people who started the gangs were natives of this area? Y N

If no, where do you think those individuals came from? _____

27. Are you aware of any programs in the community that attempt to divert children away from gangs or help those who are in gangs? Y N

If yes, please identify some of these programs. _____

In the questions below, please circle your level of agreement with the following statements.
 [1=Strongly Disagree(SD) 2=Disagree(D) 3=Uncertain(U) 4=Agree(A) 5=Strongly Agree(SA)]

	(SD)	(D)	(U)	(A)	(SA)
28. Gangs do not engage in criminal behavior for the sake of profit.	1	2	3	4	5
29. Forms of entertainment (including TV, movies, and music) have played a role in the rise of gang activity in this area.	1	2	3	4	5
30. There is a strong gang presence in the county schools.	1	2	3	4	5
31. Gangs in the community are not involved in the sale of illegal drugs.	1	2	3	4	5
32. A large number of gang members own guns or other weapons	1	2	3	4	5
33. The community is doing an effective job of preventing and/or getting rid of the gangs.	1	2	3	4	5
34. There is a strong gang presence in the military schools	1	2	3	4	5
36. Being a gang member is usually a positive experience.	1	2	3	4	5
37. The gangs in this area are violent.	1	2	3	4	5

If you agree or strongly agree that the gangs are violent, to whom is this violence directed? (Check all that apply)

- | | | | |
|--------------------------|-------|-----------------|-------|
| Members of the same gang | _____ | Non-gang youth | _____ |
| Members of other gangs | _____ | Family members | _____ |
| Police officers | _____ | Adult civilians | _____ |
| Teachers-school workers | _____ | Other | _____ |

38. The community is doing enough to help its young people (including gang members) with their problems 1 2 3 4 5

39. The gangs here are a problem. 1 2 3 4 5

If you agree or strongly agree that gangs are a problem, why do you see them as a problem?

40. List below reasons why you think gangs developed in this community: _____

41. In your opinion, what should be done to help the young people in this area, particularly those in gangs?

42. Is there anything else that you would like us to know? _____

Thank you for completing this survey.

Appendix B: Response Categories for Open-Ended Questions

7. Briefly define the term "gang"

1. A GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE SIMILAR INTERESTS OR GOALS.
2. A GROUP THAT REBELS AGAINST CONVENTIONAL SOCIETY.
3. A GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO SOCIALIZE WITH ONE ANOTHER FOR FUN AND EXCITEMENT.
4. A GROUP THAT ENGAGES IN ANTI-SOCIAL, CRIMINAL AND OR VIOLENT BEHAVIOR.
5. A GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS THAT BAND TOGETHER FOR SAFETY AND PROTECTION.
6. A GROUP THAT ENGAGES IN CRIME FOR PERSONAL GAIN.
7. GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO PROVIDE FRIENDSHIP AND ACCEPTANCE FOR ONE ANOTHER.
8. A GROUP THAT IDENTIFIES ITSELF BY TAKING ON A NAME AND ADOPTING SPECIFIC IDENTIFYING BEHAVIORS.
9. INDIVIDUALS WHO BAND TOGETHER TO GAIN POWER
10. GROUP OF PEOPLE LACKING IN INTELLIGENCE OR DEFICIENT IN OTHER BASIC HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS.
11. A GROUP THAT IS GIVEN THE TITLE OF "GANG" BY OTHERS.
12. OTHER

19. What is your relationship with the gang members?

1. FRIENDS
2. CLASSMATES
3. SIBLINGS
4. OTHER RELATIVES
5. STUDENTS
6. NEIGHBORS
7. ACQUAINTANCES
8. PROFESSIONAL OR WORK-RELATED
9. FELLOW GANG MEMBERS

26. Where did the founders of the gangs come from?

1. CHICAGO
2. METROPOLITAN AREAS IN KENTUCKY
3. DETROIT
4. NEW YORK
5. OTHER METROPOLITAN AREAS (INCLUDES ALL CITIES IF A SPECIFIC CITY ISN'T NAMED)
6. OTHER STATES
7. OTHER COUNTIES
8. INFLUX OF MILITARY PERSONNEL
9. OTHER

27. Are you aware of any programs that attempt to help young people?

1. EDUCATION PROGRAMS BY THE POLICE
2. SCHOOL-RELATED ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES
3. CHURCH-RELATED PROGRAMS
4. EDUCATION PROGRAMS BY THE SCHOOLS
5. YOUTH PROGRAMS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY
6. OTHER

39. Why do you see the gangs as a problem?

1. THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES
2. THEY COMMIT ACTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST OTHERS
3. GANGS INFLUENCE YOUNG PEOPLE IN NEGATIVE OR HARMFUL WAYS
4. GANGS DAMAGE AND VANDALIZE PROPERTY
5. THEY SHOW A LACK OF RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY
6. THEY ARE A DISRUPTIVE PRESENCE IN SCHOOLS
7. GANG MEMBERS INTIMIDATE AND OR HARASS OTHER CITIZENS
8. OTHER

40. Reasons why gangs developed in the community.

1. LACK OF SEVERE PENALTIES FOR JUVENILE OFFENDERS
2. LACK OF POSITIVE ACTIVITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
3. GANG MEMBERS FROM OTHER AREAS COMING TO TOWN TO RECRUIT
4. INFLUX OF MILITARY PERSONNEL
5. NEED FOR SUPPORT AND ACCEPTANCE WITHIN ALL YOUNG PEOPLE
6. LACK OF PARENTAL GUIDANCE – POOR PARENTING
7. DENIAL OF PROBLEM AND OR ITS SEVERITY
8. MEDIA INFLUENCE (INCLUDING MUSIC, TV, AND MOVIES)
9. TEENS' FEELINGS OF NEED FOR PROTECTION AND SAFETY
10. ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE
11. ETHNIC RIVALRIES WITHIN THE AREA
12. SEE GANGS AS A WAY TO MAKE MONEY ESCAPE POOR LIFESTYLE
13. LACK OF APPROPRIATE ROLE MODELS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
14. GANGS ARE A SOURCE OF FUN AND EXCITEMENT
15. TO ACHIEVE STATUS
16. OTHER

41. What can be done to help the young people in the area?

1. PROVIDE A YOUTH CENTER WHERE TEENS MAY GATHER FOR FUN
2. SPONSOR ACTIVITIES IN THE COMMUNITY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
3. PROVIDE COUNSELING FOR THOSE WHO ARE IN NEED OF HELP
4. INITIATE PROGRAMS INVOLVING POLICE INTERACTION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE
5. "ANTI-GANG" EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
6. PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR EVERYONE IN THE COMMUNITY
7. STIFFER PENALTIES FOR CRIMINAL OFFENSES COMMITTED BY JUVENILES
8. ENCOURAGE A UNIFIED COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO THE GANG PROBLEM
9. ENCOURAGE GREATER PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND GUIDANCE IN THEIR CHILDREN'S LIVES
10. IMPROVE THE ECONOMY OF THE TOWN/PROVIDE JOBS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
11. PROVIDE TRAINING FOR TEACHERS, POLICE, AND OTHERS WHO ARE INVOLVED WITH GANG MEMBERS
12. PROVIDE A REFUGE WHERE GANG MEMBERS AND OTHER TEENS CAN FEEL SAFE AND/OR RECEIVE PROTECTION
13. ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION IN RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES
14. DO NOTHING - LEAVE GANGS ALONE
15. OTHER