Statewide Gang Response Mapping

Local government and community response to criminal gang activity

June 2011
Highlights

Gangs are expanding throughout the state

Purpose
This report assesses the local impact and response to criminal gangs by identifying the following:

- Estimated number of gangs by jurisdiction
- Number, location, and components of gang programs
- Program gaps and needs

Information was gathered primarily through interviews with local law enforcement agencies. Additional information on types of gangs and their activities were collected from recent federal reports.

Summary
Based on our survey of local law enforcement, the counties with the greatest gang activity were King, Pierce and Yakima counties, but gangs can be found in urban, suburban, and rural areas of the state.

Federal sources indicate that there are approximately 300 street gangs with over 1,500 members in Washington state. The number of jurisdictions with gang activity has increased and gangs are expanding from urban to suburban and rural communities.

Reasons for this migration include expanding drug distribution territories, increasing illicit revenue, recruiting new members, hiding from law enforcement, and escaping other gangs.

These national findings match the experience of local law enforcement agencies interviewed for this study. Key areas include:

- Concerns about gangs in more urbanized areas that still have rural-level law enforcement.
- Because gangs are moving as a means to avoid law enforcement, any jurisdiction could be vulnerable to gangs previously found in other areas.

This trend makes the need for law enforcement to communicate and collaborate across jurisdictions particularly critical. However, our study found that information sharing and inter-local collaboration are fragmented statewide.
Highlights

Address gaps through inter-local collaboration and information sharing

Information sharing
Jurisdictions commonly cited the need for better coordination. This includes coordination with other jurisdictions, tribes, and federal agencies. Some jurisdictions noted that current information sharing is ineffective.

According to an ongoing survey conducted by the Washington State Fusion Center, there is no single information-sharing system used by law enforcement statewide. This survey found that at least six information sharing systems are being used around the state. These include GangNet, the Law Enforcement Information Exchange (LiNEX) system, RISSGang, and others.

This lack of statewide information sharing could leave jurisdictions vulnerable as gangs move from one area to another.

Inter-local collaboration
In areas where law enforcement is increased, gangs appear likely to move to outlying areas beyond those jurisdictions’ enforcement boundaries. This can leave unincorporated urbanized areas with rural-level enforcement vulnerable to gang penetration. Jurisdictions that switched to multijurisdictional or expanded service-area coverage cited this as a major reason for doing so.

Of the 121 local law enforcement agencies surveyed, 44 provide gang response on a multijurisdictional basis, and three city police departments indicate that they also provide gang response within small areas outside their boundaries. Some respondents indicated that a coordinated effort was more effective in reducing overall gang activity rather than simply moving it outside of urban boundaries.
**Study Methodology**

**Methodology**
The Department of Commerce’s Research Services unit collected data from 83 respondents for 125 agencies via telephone interviews primarily in the summer of 2010 with additional collection from a handful of jurisdictions in early 2011. Respondents included (total collected in parentheses):

- 41 (82) city police departments
- 35 (39) county sheriff’s offices
- Seven nonprofits
- Three tribal law enforcement
- Two county taskforces
- One school district

**Definitions**
For this study, we defined gang as an ongoing organization of three or more persons with a pattern of criminal behavior.

**Limitations**
Although a small number of other organizations were interviewed, this study primarily captures the perspectives of local law enforcement agencies in Washington state. Not all law enforcement agencies were able to respond. In some cases respondents provided information for more than one jurisdiction. This is discussed in greater detail on pages 10 to 12 of this report. The following map shows the local jurisdictions that responded.
There is no system currently in place that collects uniform data statewide. Therefore, determining a total statewide gang count is problematic. The information collected in this study and by federal resources, however, indicates that gangs in the state are mobile and expanding. The Northwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) estimates in its *Washington State Gang Intelligence Bulletin 2010* that Washington state has approximately 300 street gangs with over 15,000 members. To determine the distribution of gangs statewide, we asked jurisdictions to estimate the number of gangs in their area. Individual responses ranged from none in the majority of rural areas to 211 in the City of Tacoma.

Counties with the greatest number of identified gangs were King, Pierce, and Yakima. Although gangs are commonly found in urban areas, they are also present in rural and unincorporated areas. The map on the Page 7 shows the number of gangs by area. Since jurisdictions reported on gangs or gang cliques (a subset of a gang usually with its own name) within their service areas and gang activity overlaps boundaries, the number of gangs reported by each jurisdiction should not be totaled.

Yakima County is a primary example of an area with higher than expected gang activity for its population. The county is the eighth most populated in the state with the third largest number of gangs. According to the sheriff’s office, there are 120 gang cliques with 2,100 members, with most being Norteños or Sureños. There were also 23 gang-related homicides in the county in 2010.

According to US Department of Justice’s National Gang Threat Assessment, gangs are expanding from urban to suburban and rural communities. Reasons for this migration include expanding drug distribution territories, increasing illicit revenue, recruiting new members, hiding from law enforcement, and escaping other gangs.

This national finding matches responses received during this study about gangs in more urbanized areas with rural-level law enforcement. Because gangs move as a means to avoid law enforcement or expand operations, any jurisdiction could be vulnerable.
Gangs in Washington

Gangs are mobile and expanding

Street gangs and Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs (OMG) have become established in the northwest region, according to HIDTA. One national OMG, the Banditos, has its second largest membership in Washington.

Street gangs are involved in a variety of crimes, including drug trafficking, fraud, prostitution, and money laundering. They often serve as distribution networks for Mexican National Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs).

OMGs are transporters of drugs, money, and other illegal products between jurisdictions. HIDTA identified more than 17 OMGs active in the state, particularly in Whatcom, Skagit, King, and Snohomish counties.

Many suburban and rural communities are experiencing increasing gang-related crime and violence because of expanding gang influence. According to the National Gang Threat Assessment 2009, 58 percent of state and local law enforcement agencies reported that criminal gangs were active in their jurisdictions in 2008 compared with 45 percent in 2004. The following chart taken from that report shows the growing influence gangs are having nationally in all population areas.

Percentage of students reporting gang activity at schools

Source: National Gang Threat Assessment 2009
Numbers represent gangs or gang cliques within each area.* National sources estimate 300 gangs statewide.

* Because gang activity overlaps boundaries, numbers should not be totaled to determine statewide total.
Jurisdictions with Gang Programs

Makeup of gang programs vary greatly by area

The makeup of gang programs vary greatly by jurisdiction. In more urban areas, programs may include multiple components and jurisdictions. In more rural areas, gang response may be a small portion of enforcement activities or not exist at all. In many cases, the prevalence of programs is based on the needs of the community, but lack of resources is also a factor for many jurisdictions.

For those jurisdictions where data were collected, 23 counties and 20 cities indicated that they did not have gang programs, and 15 counties and 60 cities did have gang programs (either independently or through partnership with other jurisdictions). Of the 57 cities, 35 were within the King County GETUM partnership, which includes all local police departments in that county. More information on this partnership and others can be found on pages 10 and 11.

All of these programs contained an enforcement component. By contrast, only 16 cities and seven counties had a prevention component. (Note: King County prevention was within three nonprofits.) The City of Wenatchee provided an example of a more complex and integrated program.

Wenatchee’s comprehensive gang strategy

In a comprehensive gang strategy report, the Wenatchee Police Department outlines the primary components of its gang program along with activities within these components:

- **Prevention**: School program, school resource officers, block watch, parental interaction, and information dissemination web, media and pamphlets
- **Intervention**: Identifying at-risk youth, parental contacts, public presentations, police training and graffiti cleanup
- **Enforcement**: Regular police presence in targeted areas, altering shifts so all gang officers can meet monthly, partnering with non-police agencies, and coordination with prosecuting attorneys
- **Laws**: Review of current laws and new proposals.
A gang program can include one or many components, such as prevention, intervention and enforcement.

What does it mean to have a gang program?

Map legend

- **Green**: Have gang program
- **Light green**: No gang program
- **Gray**: No response

Map 3: Local government gang programs in Washington state
In areas where law enforcement is increased, gangs appear likely to move to outlying areas beyond those enforcement boundaries. This can leave urbanized areas that still have rural-level enforcement vulnerable to gang penetration. Jurisdictions that switched to multi-jurisdictional or expanded service area coverage cited this as a major reason for doing so.

Among respondents, 44 jurisdictions partner with others and three cities provide gang response within limited areas outside their boundaries. These respondents indicated that a coordinated effort was more effective in reducing gang activity rather than simply moving it outside of urban boundaries. The following three examples from King, Spokane, and Yakima counties represent some of the largest multijurisdictional programs in the state.

**King County GETUM**
Partners include the county sheriff’s office, all city police departments in the county, the county prosecutor’s office, the federal prosecutor’s office, US immigration, FBI, Port of Seattle, and others. Coordination includes data collection (see next section), enforcement, and prevention. Enforcement includes multijurisdictional sweeps, often involving federal authorities. Multijurisdictional sweeps during large events such as Bite of Seattle are often coordinated with the Port of Seattle. Prevention includes a countywide prevention program, youth mentoring through civilian volunteers and school resource officers, and a Police Activities League (PALS).

**Spokane SVCGET**
This partnership includes the county sheriff’s office, Spokane and Spokane Valley police departments, and state (Corrections, State Patrol) and federal (FBI, Border Patrol, ATF) agencies. In 2008, the unit was designated a FBI Safe Streets Task Force, providing significant operations funding (salaries of assigned personnel come from host agencies). The FBI provides federal security clearance and credentials, allowing task force officers to access sophisticated investigative techniques otherwise unavailable. This is critical to targeting gang leadership through stiff federal sentences. The task force recently completed a comprehensive gang assessment.
Spokane SVCGET (cont.)
The sheriff’s office also partners with the Greater Spokane Substance Abuse Council (GSSAC) and the Educational Service District 101. GSSAC is the community organizer for gang issues. Through a grant, a task force was formed to reduce gang-related school violence, resulting in hundreds of educators and parents being trained in gang recognition.

Yakima County Gang Taskforce
In central Washington, Yakima County has what may be one of the most serious gang problems in the state. As a mid-sized county with a population of 243,231, the county recorded 23 gang-related murders last year. In response to this growing problem, Yakima County secured increased funding and worked more collaboratively to deal with the gang problem. With a Bryne JAG grant received through the Department of Commerce, Yakima County increased coordination by funding two 80-percent-time prosecutors to work on gang cases with federal and local partners.

This partnership includes the county sheriff’s and prosecutor’s offices, Office of the US Marshall, US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Washington State Department of Corrections, Educational Service District (ESD) 105 and Yakima, Toppenish, Grandview, Tieton, and other city police departments.

Their program includes three primary components: suppression, prevention, and intervention, but the taskforce primarily focuses on suppression. They work with ESD 105 on intervention. For example, if a child is identified as at risk of becoming a member, they will inform the ESD so that the ESD can make contact with that child.

Yakima’s ability to collaborate has substantially improved over the last year due to the start-up funds they received. The Commerce grant has allowed them to work together in ways they never could before. However, they have concerns about what will happen to their coordination once funding ends.

Inter-local collaboration common but not consistent among respondents
Almost half of respondents partner with other jurisdictions or provide gang response outside their boundaries.
Respondents were asked what data they collect and how it is available. Types of documentation include tattoo and graffiti design, criminal history, and other information necessary to determine gang affiliation.

Some respondents listed other jurisdictions they receive data from, and many discussed information systems.

No single gang information system is shared by all jurisdictions across the state. In 2009, per RCW 43.43.765, the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs in coordination with the Washington State Patrol recommended RISSGang as the primary statewide database for criminal street gang data. This database is available free to law enforcement in Washington through the Regional Information Sharing System/Western States Information Network (RISS/WISN).

Nevertheless, jurisdictions continue to use a number of approaches to store and share data. Jurisdictions within King County share information electronically and through monthly meetings as part of their multijurisdictional gang enforcement team, GETUM. Pierce County jurisdictions use the LISA and OSCAR systems. Jurisdictions in Spokane County use GangNet and have memorandums of understanding with nearby states. Jurisdictions within Benton and Franklin counties use a multijurisdictional report database via Intergraph as well as the US Navy LINKS system and RISSGang.

Some of these systems, such as GangNet, are quite sophisticated, providing the ability to conduct instant searches of gang members by various attributes from data collected by multiple state and local agencies. On the other extreme are jurisdictions that use simple databases or lists to keep track of local gang data.

Some jurisdictions responded that they use informal paper lists. Two jurisdictions had just developed their own systems, and one jurisdiction was exploring using GangNet. Barriers to use of shared systems include lack of funds. Systems like GangNet can cost tens of thousands of dollars annually.
Gaps and Future Needs

Need for Improved Funding and Coordination

Jurisdictions were asked to identify gaps and future needs. The most commonly cited need was funding, both to retain current resources and acquire new ones.

Jurisdictions with existing taskforces or units expressed concerns about being able to maintain capacity in the face of local budgetary pressures. King County stated that 28 department members would be laid off and 50 positions eliminated. One King County nonprofit, Southwest Youth and Family Services, noted that funding of good programs disappears just as they get traction, which leads to the community losing trust that a program will be there to help.

Yakima County raised concerns about what would happen once start-up funding ran out. In early 2011, the county eliminated three positions. Yakima specifically emphasized the importance of continuous funding for all of its program components (suppression/intervention/prevention) as critical.

Other jurisdictions were concerned about acquiring new tools because of uncertainty as to whether they could cover additional ongoing costs in the long term. One jurisdiction noted that its staff was hesitant to procure GangNet due to the fear that data would be unrecoverable if funding were lost.

After funding, the second most commonly cited need was better coordination. This included coordination with other local, state, and federal agencies.

As discussed earlier, some jurisdictions noted that current information sharing is ineffective.

Some jurisdictions identified needs related to combating gang and drug distribution together. Other needs identified include more youth and prevention programs and shared gang definition criteria.

Nonprofits specifically cited the need for improved services for youth trying to leave the gang lifestyle, including fewer barriers to housing and employment. One nonprofit suggested a gang court system similar to the drug court system.
Before developing our survey, we looked at previous and current work conducted on gangs nationally and within Washington.

**National Gang Center**
This website provides information on anti-gang programs, research and other resources. Prior to 2009, resources on this site were separated into two centers: the National Youth Gang Center, funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention since 1995; and the National Gang Center, funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance since 2003. The recent merger of these two groups allows the National Gang Center to provide a more coordinated federal response.

**OSPI School Safety Center**
The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Safety Center provides guidance, technical assistance, and resources on school safety — including helping schools develop comprehensive safety plans. In 2009 OSPI released an updated report, *Gangs in Schools Task Force: Report to the Legislature*. Seven recommendations were presented for addressing gang issues in schools, with priority given to three: establishing school safety zones, developing sample anti-gang school policies, and revising the definition of gang and gang activity in RCW 28A.600.455. Two models examined were the intervention program, Building the Bridges, in Lakewood and a gang information sharing system in Tacoma.

**Comprehensive Gang Model**
In the 1990s, the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) developed a comprehensive community-wide gang program model. In October 2010, the OJJDP produced its latest guide on implementing this model.

**National Gang Threat Assessment**
This assessment provides gang summary information by region for the U.S., a gang member per capita map, and a gang member per law enforcement map.


Acknowledgements

Washington State Department of Commerce
Public Safety Unit, Community Services & Housing Division
Richard Torrance, Managing Director
Harvey Queen, Project Manager

Report production by Commerce Research Services
Darleen Muhly, Lead Researcher and GIS
David Elliott, Researcher and Interviewer
Aaron Nickell, Researcher and Interviewer
Cezanne Murphy-Levesque, Interviewer and Design
Steve Salmi, Ph.D., Editor and Program Manager

We wish to thank the respondents that took the time to speak with us about their programs. This report would not have been possible without their cooperation and willingness to share information with us.

This project was supported by grant number 2009-SU-B9-0028 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the National Institute of Justice, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office of Victims of Crime. Points of view or opinions in this document do not represent the official position or the policies of the United States Department of Justice.