NORTH AMERICAN TRANSNATIONAL YOUTH GANGS: 
BREAKING THE CHAIN OF VIOLENCE

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Youth gangs are nothing new. They appeared in New York City and Philadelphia at the end of the American Revolution. Their numbers and violence correspond to peak levels of immigration and population shifts that occurred in the early 1800s, 1920s, 1960s, and late 1990s. Entrenched in American culture, gangs are romanticized in movies while rap artists copy their dress and jargon. However, because of their growing membership and globalization, gangs have become a public security threat that must be addressed.

Gangs once provided outlets for marginalized youths to socialize, control territory, and release aggression. More recently, some have evolved into informally affiliated international criminal networks. Two predominantly Hispanic gangs—Calle 18 and Mara Salvatrucha—began to proliferate in Los Angeles during the 1960s and now have fraternal links to some 130,000 to 300,000 members in Mexico and Central America and have expanded across the United States to major cities and rural communities on the Eastern Seaboard.

Gang activities range from defending neighborhood turf to armed robbery, extortion, alien smuggling, and arms and drug trafficking. Gangs provide a handy supply of young collaborators for organized crime. Their transnational nature is facilitated by fluid migration across porous national borders, incarceration with experienced criminals in U.S. prisons, and the weak rule of law in Mexico and Central America. Although no hard evidence links them with terrorist networks, transnational gangs are a potential menace to the stability of North American neighbors of the United States.

In the past, piecemeal measures have targeted symptoms without resolving root causes. To reduce the domestic risk, policymakers at the national and local levels should work together to identify factors that destabilize neighborhoods, to deny time and space for gang activities, and to improve coordination among various law enforcement agencies. At the same time, the White House and Congress should
enact migrant labor reforms to reduce the chaos associated with undocumented transient populations.

Abroad, U.S. assistance programs should promote pro-family policies, the rule of law, and economic reforms to boost employment. The U.S. should also promote cooperative security links among countries and enhance border security.

Ubiquitous Phenomenon

Street gangs have been around since the dawn of civilization and affect nearly every country except countries with totalitarian regimes, where populations have been immobilized and freedom of assembly is constrained. Gangs were known in 14th century Europe, and Americans have complained about them since the early 18th century (Shelden et al. 2001:31). Today, they are a growing phenomenon, particularly in the United States.

The number of cities reporting gang problems went from 270 in 1970 to more than 2,500 in 1998—an increase of more than 800 percent (Howell 1998). In 2002, the National Youth Gang Survey estimated that there were 21,500 gangs and 731,500 active gang members in the United States, 85 percent of whom reside in large cities. All law enforcement agencies covering populations of 250,000 or more have gang problems; 87 percent of police departments serving populations of 100,000 to 249,999, and 68 percent of police departments serving populations of 50,000 to 99,999, have reported gang problems; and 27 percent of police departments in municipalities of between 2,500 and 49,999 people have had trouble with gangs (Egley et al. 2004:97).

Although sociologists have yet to agree on a definition, the term “gang” generally describes a group of adolescents or young adults who frequently gather, share an identity, use common symbols, claim control over neighborhood territory, and may sometimes engage in illegal activities. Members may number less than a dozen or in the thousands.

Gangs are less hierarchical than adult criminal groups and not exclusively dedicated to crime (Sheldon et al. 2001:19–20). Yet within gangs, delinquency far exceeds that of non-gang youth (Howell 1998; Huff n.d.; Thornberry 1998:147–166). A recent comparison between gang members and at-risk youths in Cleveland revealed that:

- 44.7 percent of members versus 4.1 percent of non-members reported committing auto theft;
- 40.4 percent of members said they participated in drive-by shootings compared to 2.0 percent of non-members;
- 34.0 percent of members versus zero percent of non-gang members reported intimidating or assaulting crime victims or witnesses;
- 72.3 percent of gang members versus 16.3 percent of non-members admitted assaulting rivals; and
- 17.0 percent of members versus 2.0 percent of non-members committed robbery (Huff n.d.:80 Exhibit 2).