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Working
Paper



The Center for
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Research



Public Perceptions of Gang Activity in Northern Virginia:

Results of a Pilot Study

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Laurie Dopkins, Ph.D.
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September, 2006

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is the first in a series of white papers and policy analyses prepared by the Center for Social Science Research (CSSR). The social science research arm of George Mason University, the Center was founded in 2004 in an effort to bring research expertise to bear on key social issues and concerns facing the Northern Virginia community. For more information about the Center and its most current research programs, visit the Center's website at www.cssr.gmu.edu or call the Center at (703) 993-2993.

This pilot project reflects the hard work and commitment of many individuals. Working under the direction of Drs. Gregory Guagnano and Emily Zimmerman, graduate students in advanced survey research designed and conducted the survey, including Robert Baker, Russell Carter, Joann Chae, Joanna Cornell, Candice Dorsey, James Elliot, John Entas, Joseph Garner, Rikki Grooms, Maureen Guillot, Zohra Jaleel, David Johnson, Randa Kayyali, Paul Kerlin, Daniel Madron, Stephen McClure, Rafael Sanchez, Brandon Smith, Marie Stewart, and Tiffany Yanosky. Stephen McClure was a graduate research assistant and Kandace Henry and Kristine Hermoso were interns. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of Devon Johnson and Ana C. Figueroa. Thanks are due to undergraduate students in research methods and social deviance classes who helped conduct telephone interviews.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, the Northern Virginia region has experienced growing public concern about the problem of gang violence. Such concern has been registered in local media coverage of juvenile gangs, and has rippled outward throughout schools, neighborhoods, and community organizations. Public officials and policy makers have worked hard to develop a variety of programs that address the issue of gang violence and the needs of youth more generally. Yet information about public perceptions of such efforts, and of the gang problem more generally, has not been widely available.

This pilot study represents an initial effort to fill this gap in our knowledge. Conducted by George Mason's Center for Social Science Research, the study used survey research methods to address a host of questions regarding public concern about gangs. Although the scale of the survey was limited (N =385 cases), it does provide representative data on the English-speaking population of residents within the Northern Virginia region.

A number of important findings emerge from the study. First, although respondents report a favorable view of Northern Virginia as a place to live, evidence suggests that many residents do perceive an erosion of public safety. Although actual victimization by gang violence is quite low, a sizeable proportion of respondents have felt personally affected by gang violence. Roughly one-third of the respondents suspect that gangs are in fact operating in their local public schools and an equal proportion is reportedly aware of gang-related activities in their local neighborhoods. Close to one-third of parents believe that their children have been exposed to gang activity within the school environment. Still, the great bulk of respondents express confidence in elected officials' responses to gang violence.

A second and equally important set of findings concerns apparent disparities in the experience and perception of gang violence. Not surprisingly perhaps, different groups

and strata in the community have been differentially impacted by gang violence. Most notable are significant disparities along the lines of ethnicity, income, and neighborhood ecology. Thus, although whites, affluent respondents, and those living in single-family housing express concern about gang violence, their fears are more generalized and their experiences less direct than those of nonwhites, less affluent households, and those living in multi-family housing, who live in much closer proximity to actual gang activity. This disparity is reflected in the concerns respondents share about youth, their attitudes toward policing and public policy, and in their reliance on different sources of information about youth, gangs, and gang violence. Ironically, fear about gangs may be most pronounced among that sector of the population that is least directly exposed to the problem. We interpret these data as calling for the development of a nuanced approach toward gangs, sensitivity to the existence of inter-group disparities in the experience of the problem, and a varied communication strategy that taps into the sources of information that are most trusted and appropriate to the particular communities involved.

I. INTRODUCTION

Increasing attention has been paid to the issue of gang activity in the diverse, largely affluent suburbs of Northern Virginia.¹ Members of Congress, along with Governors Mark Warner and Tim Kaine, have led a broad campaign to confront the problems posed by gangs in the region. These efforts have included the establishment of a regional gang task force, increased coordination of youth-related programs in the schools (“Youth are Targets,” 2005), and a growing emphasis on public awareness of the problem. Yet the precise scale of the problem has remained difficult to quantify. Estimates from law enforcement officials vary, but generally suggest that there are several hundred gangs in the region, with an estimated 4,300 gang members in Fairfax County in 2004 (Ward, 2004).² Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) is considered to be the largest gang, with an estimated 2,000 members in Northern Virginia in 2004 (“Virginia Sees Growing Problem,” 2004). Based on reported incidents of violence, MS-13 is also seen as the most dangerous group (Feuer Domash, 2005). The media has reported several incidents of gang-related violence in the last several years, including up to 11 gang-related murders since 2000 (Jackman, 2006), and other attacks that were especially brutal (Helderman, 2006). While the victims of gang crimes are usually rival gang members, other victims may include non-gang youth, citizens, local businesses, and law enforcement personnel (Fairfax County Department of Juvenile Justice, 2004).

¹ Nationally, Fairfax and Loudoun Counties have been ranked at or near the very top of all US counties as judged by median household income, with other localities such as Falls Church City, Prince William County, and Arlington County likewise among the more affluent jurisdictions. Within Virginia, Northern Virginia counties and cities account for 9 of the top 10 for highest for median household income (Northern Virginia Databook 2003, accessed online at <http://www.novaregion.org/Demographics/databook/index.html>).

² A 1999 survey of localities in Virginia found that an estimated 321 gangs existed in the state at that time, with about two-thirds of gangs engaged in violent crime, including assault, vandalism and intimidation. About half were found to be engaged in drug distribution (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, 1999).

It is safe to suggest that the region has witnessed a rising level of concern and even alarm about the problem of gang violence.

To address the issue of gang violence, policy makers, educators, community leaders, and elected officials have focused their efforts on programs to provide youth services, especially those that would prevent youth from joining gangs, and to mobilize community awareness and action. Yet the problems are complex, involving the need to integrate disparate communities, school systems, and political jurisdictions. Especially needed is careful, dispassionate analysis of the problems posed by gangs –and of the experiences and perceptions found among the public. To begin to address this need, the Center for Social Science Research (CSSR) at George Mason University undertook a pilot survey in the Fall of 2005, led by Center staff and supported by graduate students in the social sciences. Using limited resources to address an urgent issue, CSSR participants set out to address a number of questions about the gang problem in Northern Virginia. These included: How widespread are public concerns about the gang problem? In what ways do such concerns affect residents' everyday lives? Has the public perceived a declining level of safety in schools and neighborhood life? How much confidence does the public display in the policies that leaders have adopted? Which groups and communities seem to be most seriously affected by the gang problem? How might information about anti-gang policies most effectively be communicated to particular communities? The present report represents an effort to begin to address such questions as these.

The report should be read as a pilot study, in view of several limitations on the scale of the research. Limited to resources on hand, the sample of respondents was relatively small (N=385 cases), which limits the degree of elaboration and quantitative analysis our data can support. Resource limitations also limited our ability to include various ethnic groups. Most notably, our respondents have been limited to the English-speaking population, and thus provide a partial account of the groups at risk of exposure to gang violence. Despite these limitations, a relatively small scale pilot study such as this has

value, in that it begins to point toward issues warranting further study and debate. It should also be seen as part of a larger set of projects mounted by CSSR on problems facing youth and immigrant populations within the Northern Virginia region.³

II. THE SURVEY

This paper presents the results of a telephone survey of Northern Virginia residents about their perceptions of youth gang activity in their neighborhoods. Residents of Fairfax County, Fairfax City, Falls Church, Loudoun County, Arlington County, Prince William County, and the City of Alexandria were interviewed. Surveys were completed with respondents in 385 randomly selected households. The survey was conducted from October 22 to November 4, 2005. As noted, resource constraints limited our ability to represent non-English speaking respondents; the findings should therefore be read as representative of the English speaking population within the Northern Virginia region. Although the response rate was relatively low (21.4 per cent), we have confidence that the sample does indeed represent the larger population from which it was drawn. Those who declined to participate in the full survey were asked two questions (one asking whether they were home owners or tenants, and a second whether they were aware of any specific gang activity in their neighborhoods). Their responses indicated that non-respondents were quite similar to respondents who completed the full survey.⁴ Given a final sample of 385 respondents, our survey estimates have margins of error (“confidence intervals”) of plus or minus 5 percentage points.

³ In addition to the survey results reported here, CSSR members have been conducting intensive interviews with former gang members; conducting an evaluation study of county programs for youth counselors; and conducting a larger study of youth and community for the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors. For information and progress reports on these initiatives, see www.cssr.gmu.edu.

⁴ In terms of home ownership, 89 percent of non-respondents reported owning their own homes, compared to 82 percent of respondents. A total of 11 percent of non-respondents said they were aware of specific gang activity in their neighborhoods, compared to 13 percent of respondents.

III. GENERAL FINDINGS

a. Levels of concern about gang activity

The pilot survey conducted by the Center for Social Science Research found a generally positive view of Northern Virginia as a place to live. Satisfaction with the quality of life in Northern Virginia is high, yet residents are increasingly concerned with the spread of gang violence throughout the area's neighborhoods and schools.

When asked about their overall impression of Northern Virginia as a place to live, the majority of residents reported favorable impressions: 37 percent said it is an excellent place to live and 54 percent said it is a good place to live. Less than 10 percent rated it fair or poor. Overall, people feel that the quality of life in Northern Virginia has improved (17%) or stayed the same (68%) over the past two years. A larger proportion of area residents report that they "feel like part of their neighborhoods" (56%) than reported that their neighborhoods are "simply a place to live" (44%), though this difference indicates a relatively low level of community integration or solidarity.

Although few respondents report having themselves been victims of gang violence or knowing current or former gang members, there is a broad consensus that neighborhood safety has declined during the last two years, and that the problem of gang violence has grown increasingly pronounced.

Thus, the data indicate that a small but significant minority of respondents has been personally affected by gang violence. Roughly two percent (less than 1 in 50) report having been victims of gang activity, and about 13 percent report knowing someone else personally who has been victimized. Approximately, the same proportion of respondents (14%) reports that they have changed their normal routines because of fear about gangs. Some 18 percent feel less safe in their neighborhoods compared to two years ago, while 82 percent feel as safe, or safer, than they did two years ago. These findings focus on the overall survey responses; in the second part of this paper

we will explore how respondents' experiences and perceptions are related to characteristics such as race and home ownership.

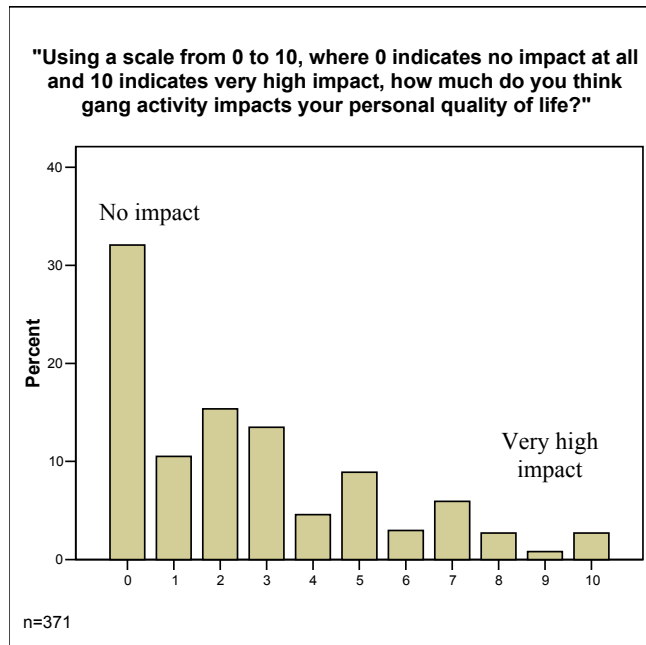
Figure 1 shows the impact of gang activity on personal life. When asked how much gang activity has impacted their personal quality of life, about one-third of respondents indicated that it has no impact at all (a score of 0 out of 10). About 44 per cent of respondents indicated a low-level of impact (a score of 1 to 4 out of 10). The impact was moderately to very high for 24 percent of respondents (a score of 5 to 10 out of 10). The mean score for all respondents was 2.6 out of 10, indicating that gang activity has a relatively low impact on individual quality of life.

Figure 2 shows results related to awareness of gang activity. Such awareness has risen to fairly high levels despite the finding that the direct impact of gang activity in the region seems to be limited. More than one-third of respondents (35%) believe that there are youth gangs operating in their own neighborhoods. Of those who perceive gang activity in their neighborhoods, 43 percent say they are aware of some specific gang activity (accounting for about 13% of all respondents).

While the direct impact of gangs appears to be limited, the great majority of residents do seem to feel that neighborhood safety has declined: 87 per cent of respondents believe that there is more gang activity in Northern Virginia now than five years previously, and the proportion of respondents who believe that their neighborhoods are "less safe now" is more than three times higher than those who feel that neighborhood safety has improved (18% vs. 5%).

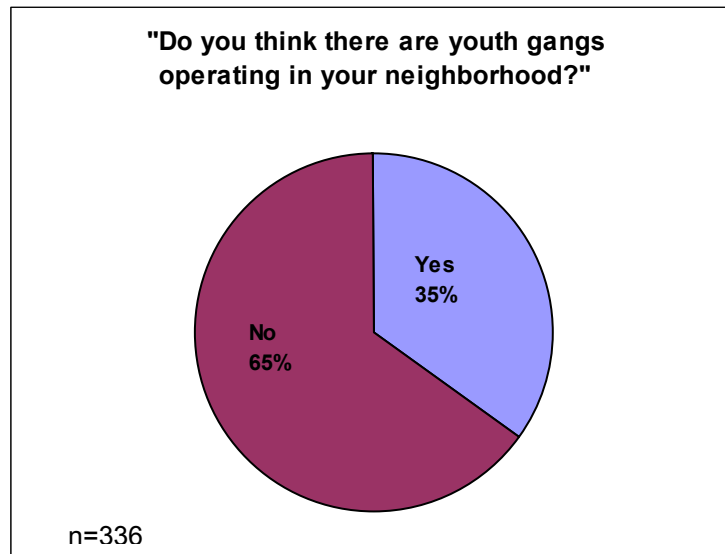
FIGURE 1.

IMPACT OF GANG ACTIVITY ON PERSONAL QUALITY OF LIFE.



Despite concern about gangs and neighborhood safety, most respondents reported that their chances of becoming victims of gang violence over the next year were relatively low. One-quarter of respondents said that there was “no chance at all” of becoming a victim in the next year (a score of 0 out of 10). The mean response to this item was 2.2, which again indicates

FIGURE 2.
RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF GANG ACTIVITY
IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD

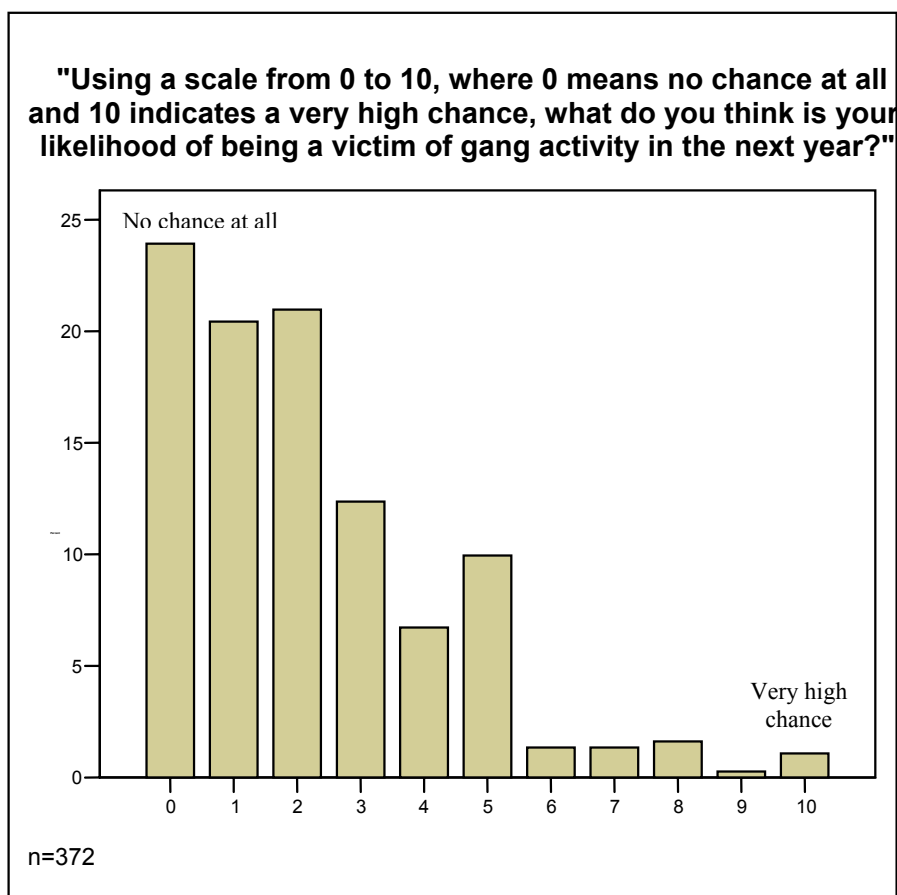


a relatively low level of such fear. There were, however, 15 percent of respondents who felt their chances of becoming a victim were fairly high, with scores of 5 or more out of 10 (see Figure 3).

Just as the concern about victimization was fairly low for the majority of respondents, most reported feeling safe walking alone in their neighborhoods at night. Asked how safe they felt, on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 representing “not safe at all” and 10 representing “extremely safe”, the most frequent response was 8, which could be interpreted as ‘very safe,’ and the mean was slightly lower at 7.15 (see Figure 4). Less than 3 percent said that they did not feel safe at all.

FIGURE 3:

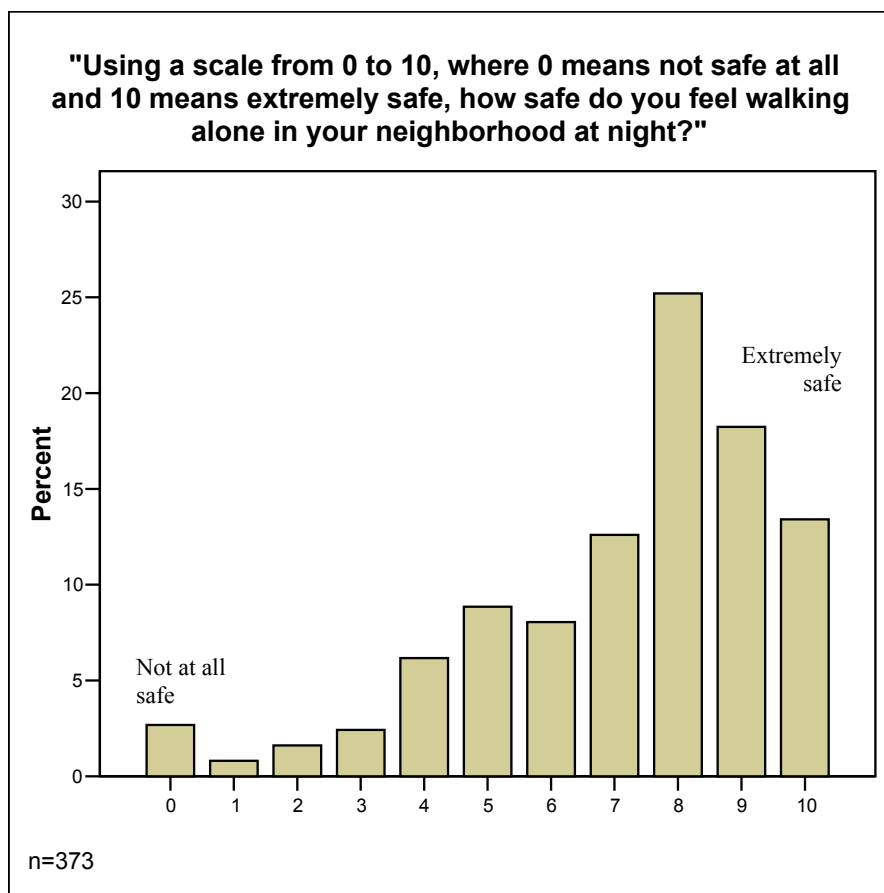
PERCEIVED LIKELIHOOD OF BEING VICTIMIZED BY GANG VIOLENCE



Gang activity is often a particular concern of parents, who may fear that their children will be the targets of gang activity or stand at risk of involvement in gang activity. Among parents (excluding parents of very young children), almost one-third (29%) thought that their children had been exposed to gangs. The percentage of parents who thought their children might be at risk of joining gangs was smaller, but still relatively high (18%). These findings will be considered in the context of race and household differences in the second part of this paper.

FIGURE 4.

PERCEIVED SAFETY WHEN WALKING ALONE IN NEIGHBORHOOD AT NIGHT

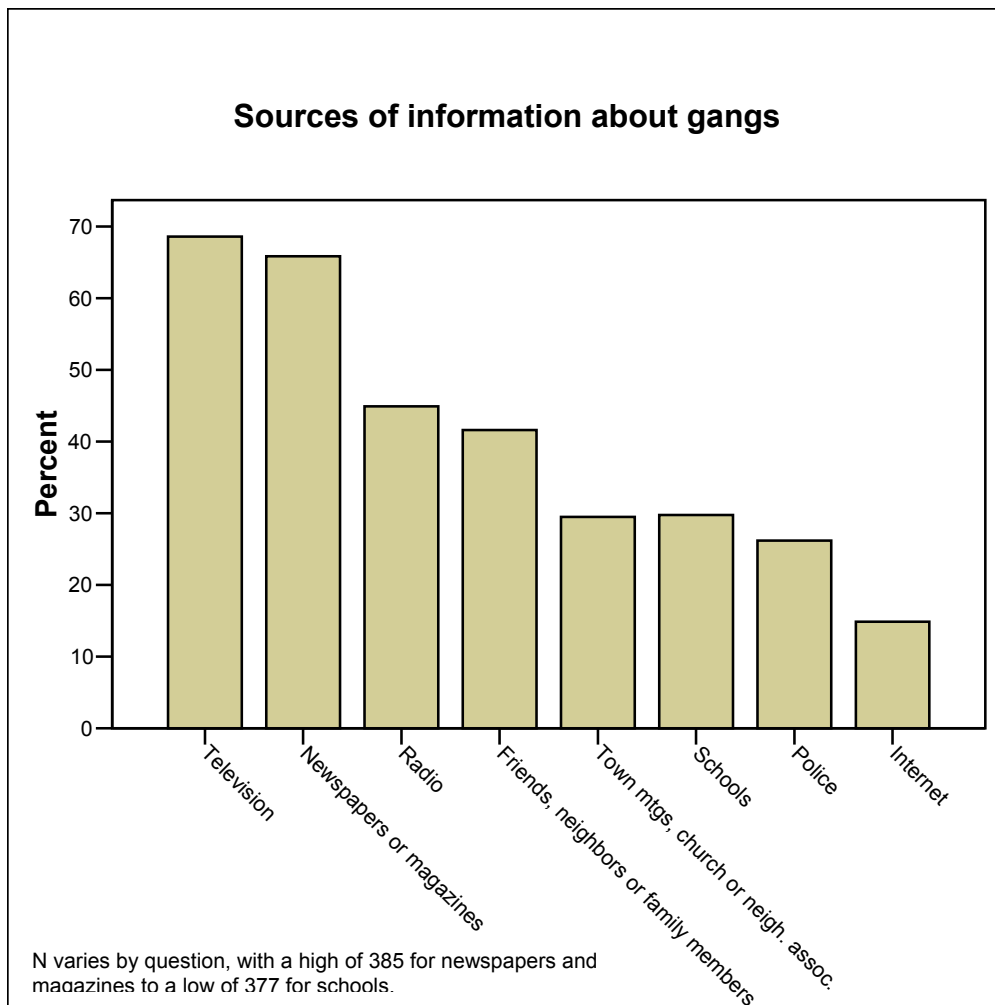


b. Sources of information about gang activity

To find out where Northern Virginia residents learn about gang activity, the survey questionnaire asked respondents to identify the sources of their information on gangs. Figure 5 reports the results. Television was the most widely reported source of information about gang activity (69%), closely followed by newspapers and magazines (66%). Other sources commonly used include radio (45%), friends, neighbors and family members (42%), town meetings, church or neighborhood associations (30%), schools (30%), and police (28%). Only 15 percent reported using the internet to find information about gangs.

To learn more about the media’s influence on perceptions of gang activity, the survey asked respondents, “Do you think the media have been paying too little, too much, or about the right amount of attention to gang activity in Northern Virginia?” About half (51%) said that the media pays about the right amount of attention to gang activity in Northern Virginia, while 42 percent said that the media pays too little attention. Only 7 per cent said that the media pays too much attention to gangs.

FIGURE 5.
SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT LOCAL GANG ACTIVITY



When asked whether they think “the media accurately portrays gang activity in Northern Virginia” respondents were more divided: 51 percent said that the media does accurately portray gang activity, and 49 percent said that it does not.

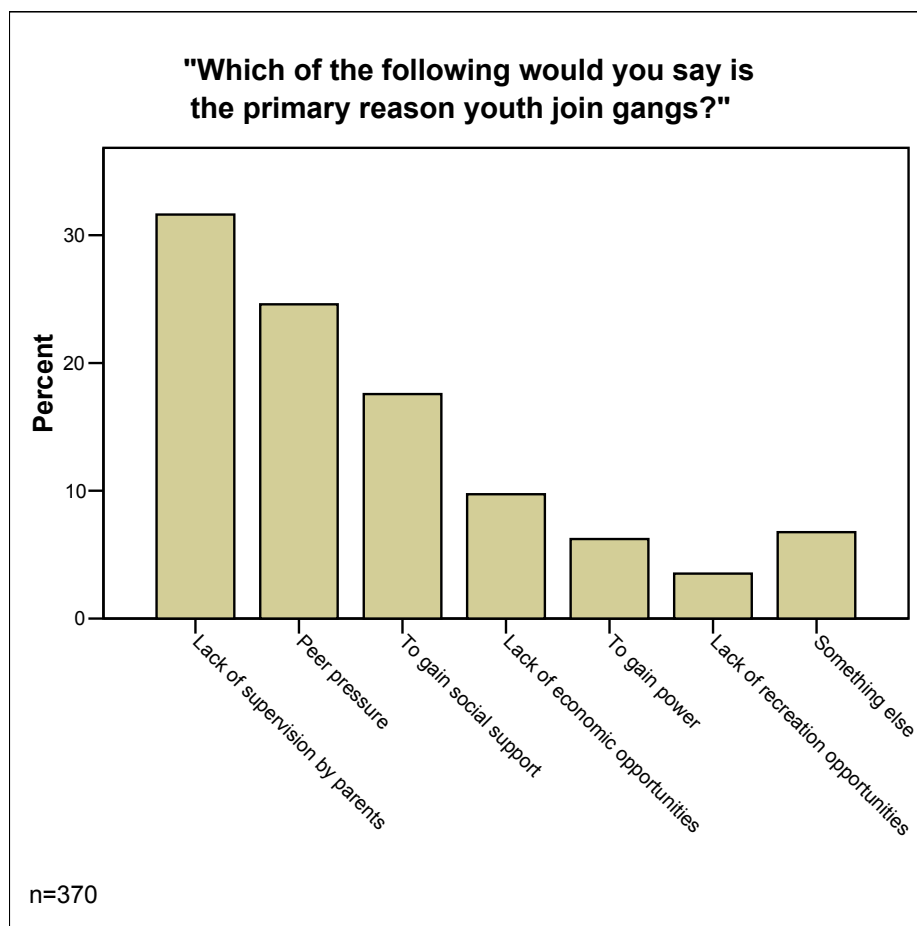
Recent media attention on gangs such as MS-13 has focused attention on the role of immigration and transnational gangs. Asked whether they see a link between immigration and gang activity in Northern Virginia, the large majority (83%) said that they did see a link.

c. Public conceptions of the causes of gang activity

Conceptions about the causes of gang activity can affect individual attitudes regarding appropriate prevention and intervention measures. We therefore asked respondents to identify the primary reason they believe youth join gangs (see Figure 6). The response chosen most frequently was ‘lack of supervision by parents’ (32%), followed by ‘peer pressure’ (25%), ‘to gain social support’ (18%) and ‘lack of economic opportunities’ (10%).

FIGURE 6.

PUBLIC CONCEPTIONS OF THE CAUSES OF GANG ACTIVITY

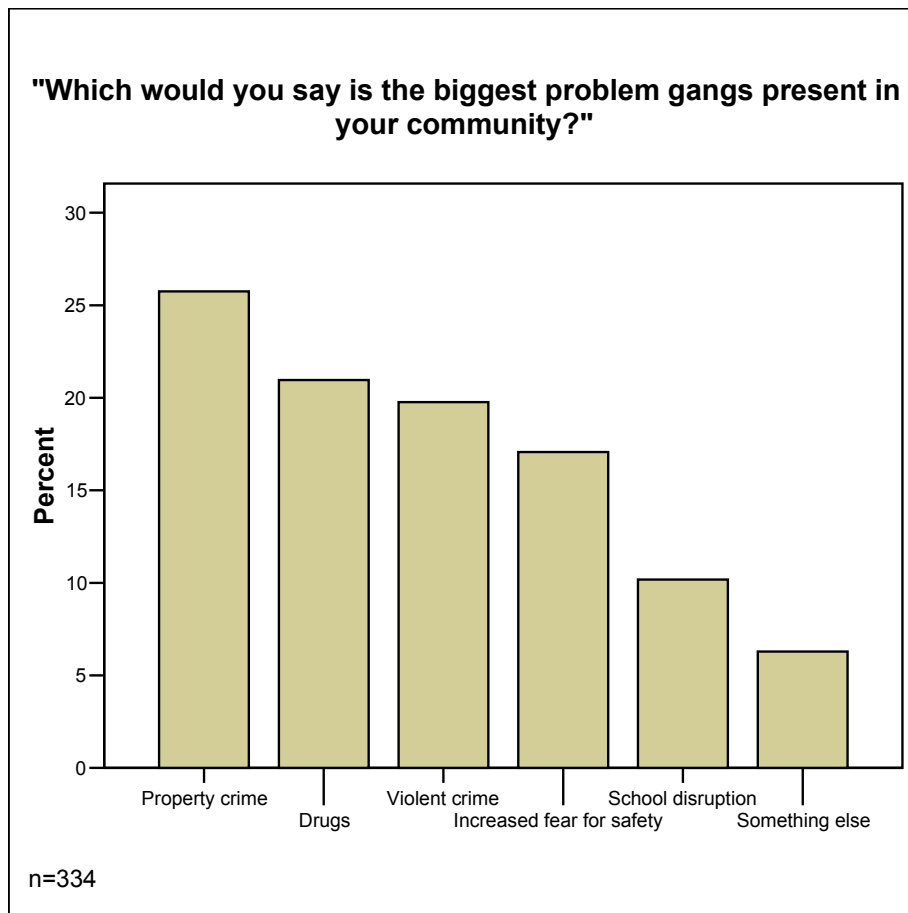


d. Public perceptions of the major problems associated with gang activity

Understanding the types of problems that residents associate with gangs can be an important way to understand levels of fear as well as helpful in developing interventions. Figure 7 identifies the problems respondents associated with gang activity. Asked about the biggest problem that gangs present in their communities, respondents focused on property crimes (26%), drugs (22%), violent crime (19%) and fear for safety (17%). School disruption and other problems were less salient in respondents' minds (10%).

FIGURE 7.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE MAJOR PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH GANG ACTIVITY



e. Public views of the societal response

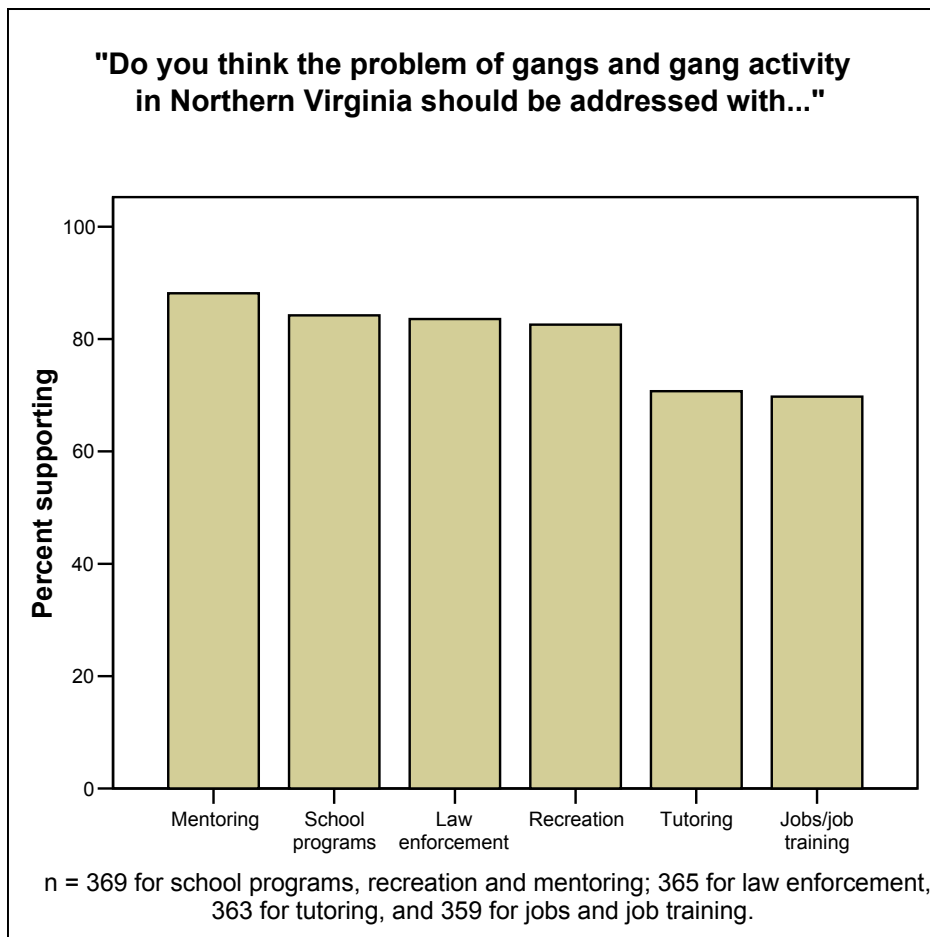
Northern Virginia residents appear optimistic about the use of various social supports and interventions to address gang activity in the region. Survey respondents were asked whether various approaches to reducing gang activity should be used in Northern Virginia. Respondents showed strong support for mentoring, school, law-enforcement, and recreation programs in addressing gang problems. To a lesser degree, they favored the use of jobs and job training, and tutoring programs (see Figure 8).

Respondents were asked their opinion of the overall response to gangs in Northern Virginia. Overall, they were optimistic about the response, with three-quarters of our respondents indicating their satisfaction. Only 7 percent responded that they were mostly dissatisfied, and another 19 percent reported being somewhat dissatisfied.

The majority of respondents trust police to deal with the gang problem: 30 percent said they trust the police a lot, and 53 percent trust the police somewhat. Fewer than one in five respondents reported low levels of trust, with 14 percent trust the police “only a little” and 3 percent “not at all.”

FIGURE 8.

SUPPORT FOR SPECIFIC RESPONSES TO GANG ACTIVITY



IV. DIFFERENTIAL PATTERNS IN THE EXPERIENCE OF GANGS

Thus far, we have summarized the broad sweep of the survey data as if the Northern Virginia region were a uniform, undifferentiated aggregate of citizens. Obviously the region is distinguished by its general affluence and high levels of education. Yet the region is also highly diverse, socially and demographically. In understanding public views of a phenomenon as complex as gang activity, it will be vital to explore possible sources of variation in public conceptions of gangs, disentangling levels of fear and concern, degrees of exposure to gang activity, and views of the societal response. When we do that, we find that significant differences and disparities begin to appear, with consistent patterns linked to social, demographic, and ecological influences.

Two distinctive patterns of experience and perception emerge from these data. On the one hand are the perceptions of relatively affluent whites living in single-family homes, who report rising levels of fear and concern that seem, however, to be somewhat disconnected from direct exposure to gang activities at the neighborhood level. Such an orientation seems at least partly bound up with greater exposure to newspapers and other media. On the other hand is the experience of other groups –minorities, groups reporting lower levels of household income, and respondents living in multi-unit housing— for whom gang violence represents a more direct reality, and whose perceptions of the problem seem in many respects distinct from their more affluent counterparts. This pattern of difference and disparity carries important policy implications that will be discussed in the conclusion of this report.

The survey instrument included a battery of items asking about the impact of gang activity on the quality of life and well being within Northern Virginia. The pattern of responses is instructive. White respondents perceive a somewhat sharper increase in gang activity during the last five years, as well as a closer link between gangs and immigration, than do their minority group counterparts. It was found that 90 per cent of whites think that gang activity in Northern Virginia has increased over the past five

years, compared to 74 percent of minority respondents.⁵ Further, 88 per cent of whites believe there may be a link between immigrant groups and gangs, compared to 63% of minorities.⁶ These responses are very likely a function of the expectations held by respondents living in affluent and primarily white neighborhoods. In contrast, minority respondents feel significantly more vulnerable to the possibility of becoming victims of gang violence in the next year (comparing means on a scale rated from 0 to 10),⁷ and are more likely to report knowing someone personally who has been victimized by gangs (11% of whites compared to 18% of minorities).⁸

Interestingly, when we asked parents questions about perceived gang activity within their children's schools, a significantly larger proportion of white than minority parents (32%, as opposed to 13%) reports that their children have been *exposed* to gangs (see Figure 9).⁹ Yet when a follow up question is asked about the nature of this potential risk, the findings are reversed (see Figure 10). Here, fear of gang *involvement* is significantly higher among minority than white parents (30% as against 14%, respectively).¹⁰ Minority group parents, it seems, have less confidence than do white parents that their children will emerge unscathed from the spread of gangs into area schools.

Other disparities also emerged as well. Residents of multi-unit housing (e.g., townhouses and apartment buildings) report feeling less safe walking alone in their neighborhoods than their counterparts who occupy single-family dwellings.¹¹ Likewise, a

⁵ $\chi^2 = .004$.

⁶ $\chi^2 = .000$.

⁷ $t = -2.117$, $P < .037$.

⁸ While this finding does not quite reach the level of significance ($\chi^2 = .084$), this is largely a function of the small sample size.

⁹ $\chi^2 = .03$.

¹⁰ $\chi^2 = .029$.

¹¹ $t = 4.158$, $p < .000$.

higher proportion of multi-unit residents report that they know of gang activity in their neighborhoods than is the case among residents of single-family homes (23% and 10% respectively).¹² Parallel findings exist by income as well, with poorer respondents generally reporting lower levels of safety and higher perceived risk of gang activity.

FIGURE 9.

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN'S EXPOSURE TO GANGS, BY RACE

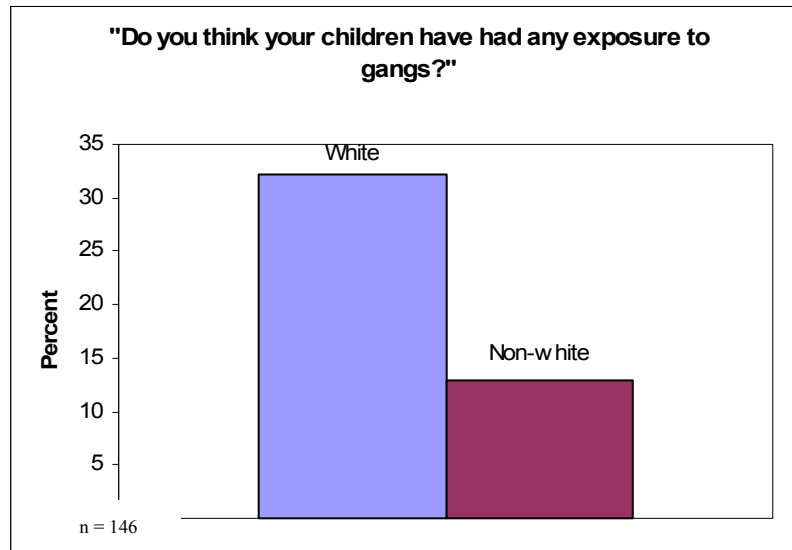
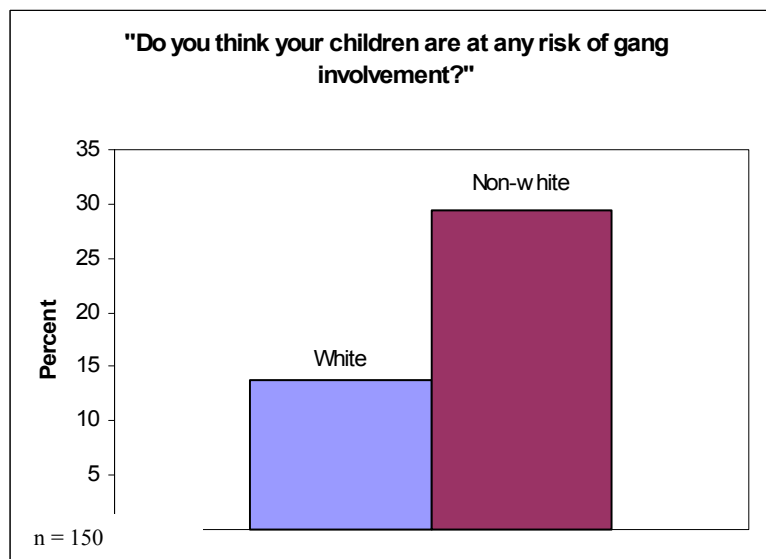


FIGURE 10.

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN'S RISK OF GANG INVOLVEMENT



¹² $\chi^2 = .002$.

We have already noted some possible causes of disparities of perceptions of gang activity in Northern Virginia related to race, including higher expectations for personal safety among white, single-family homeowners. Another possible explanation lies in differential use of various sources of information. Whites are significantly more likely to learn about gang activity through newspapers (70% among whites compared to 50% among minorities),¹³ while minority respondents are significantly more likely to learn about gang activity through friends, neighbors or family members (37% among whites compared to 58% among minorities),¹⁴ town meetings, church or neighborhood associations (27% as against 40%), or from the police (22% compared to 35%).¹⁵ Clearly, reliance on newspapers may expose some residents to the most graphic or sensational aspects of gang activity, fostering a greater level of overall anxiety than local conditions may warrant.

Katz, Webb, and Armstrong (2002) distinguish between those who may fear gangs in a manner described by the “victimization model” versus the “sub-cultural diversity” model. Individuals at greater risk because they are least able to defend themselves or because the ecological conditions of their neighborhoods carry greater risks of actual victimization fit the victimization model. The “sub-cultural diversity” model, on the other hand, provides a framework for understanding the reaction of more affluent and white respondents who are more likely to perceive a mounting threat from youth gangs, even when they feel relatively little fear for their personal safety. This theoretical model focuses on the impact of increasing cultural diversity on fear of crime, which may be particularly important when considering that Northern Virginia gangs have largely been portrayed as being composed of Hispanic and Asian youth. Indeed, 42 percent of all respondents indicated that their neighborhoods had become more racially and ethnically

¹³ $\chi^2 = .001$.

¹⁴ $\chi^2 = .001$.

¹⁵ $\chi^2 = .025$.

diverse in the past two years. Respondents who reported increased neighborhood diversity were more likely to report that the quality of life has decreased,¹⁶ that they felt less safe in their neighborhoods,¹⁷ that there are gangs operating in their neighborhoods.¹⁸ This pattern begins to suggest that the problem of gang violence, while a real and pressing concern for all demographic groups, may be bound up with more generalized anxieties concerning changing diversity patterns and the accommodations that immigration itself will require. Thus, our data indicate that respondents who noted that their neighborhoods had become more diverse were also more likely to indicate that they were aware of some specific gang activity in their neighborhoods,¹⁹ or to know a victim of gang violence.²⁰ Given these findings and the larger social climate, it is interesting but perhaps not surprising that whites vest greater trust in law enforcement to deal with issues of gang activity (33% of whites say they have a lot of trust in law enforcement to deal with gang-related problems, compared with 20% of minority respondents).²¹

¹⁶ 24% of those who said that diversity in their neighborhoods had increased felt that the quality of life in Northern Virginia had decreased compared to 9% who said that diversity had decreased or stayed the same. $\chi^2 = .001$.

¹⁷ 24% of those who said that diversity in their neighborhoods had increased felt less safe in their neighborhoods, compared to 13% who said that diversity had decreased or stayed the same. $\chi^2 = .037$.

¹⁸ 43% of those who said that diversity in their neighborhoods had increased said that there are gangs operating in their neighborhoods, compared to 29% who said that diversity had decreased or stayed the same. $\chi^2 = .012$.

¹⁹ 20% of respondents who said that their neighborhoods had become more diverse were aware of specific gang activity, compared to 12% of respondents who said that diversity had remained the same or decreased. $\chi^2 = .036$.

²⁰ 18% of respondents who said that their neighborhoods had become more diverse were aware of specific gang activity, compared to 10% of respondents who said that diversity had remained the same or decreased. $\chi^2 = .019$.

²¹ $\chi^2 = .045$.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study begins to provide a number of suggestive findings that may be of use to policy makers, planning agencies, and community organizations concerned over the apparent rise in gang violence throughout the Northern Virginia region. First, and in a positive vein, the great majority of our respondents held a highly favorable view of Northern Virginia as a place to live. They see the likelihood of gang victimization as highly remote. And they express confidence in the measures that public officials (including law enforcement agencies) have taken to address gang activity. At the same time, however, many residents have perceived an erosion of public safety, and a sizeable proportion of respondents have felt personally affected by gang violence. A third of our respondents believed that gang activity was taking place in their local public schools, and an equal proportion of respondents sensed that gang related activities were underway in their local neighborhoods. Parents were particularly concerned that their children have been exposed to gang activity within the school environment. There is a sense of heightened vulnerability that cuts widely into respondents throughout the Northern Virginia region.

Yet further analysis suggests that different groups and strata in the community have been differentially impacted by gang violence. Although whites, more affluent respondents, and those living in single-family housing were increasingly concerned about exposure to gang violence, their fears seemed to take a different form than those found among their counterparts who were members of minority groups, less affluent, and living in multi-family housing. This disparity is reflected in the level of vulnerability that respondents perceive with respect to their children, their attitudes toward policing and public policy, and in their reliance on different sources of information about youth, gangs, and gang violence.

These data should not be read as suggesting that the concerns of one group are less real or significant than those of another. To the contrary: Our respondents seem to provide broad support for the argument, adopted by a broad swath of government and community organizations, that no school or community can take for granted the safety and well-being of its young people. Rather, the disparities this report has found begin to suggest the need for a nuanced approach toward gangs, a sensitivity to the existence of inter-group differences in the experience of the problem, and a varied communication strategy that taps into the sources of information that are most trusted and appropriate to the particular communities involved. In the absence of such a nuanced understanding of the gang problem, the risk is that public measures developed in response may be driven by the mobilization of groups and strata whose concerns represent only one aspect of a broad and inherently complex phenomenon. The allocation of resources and the formulation of communication strategies might occur in a less effective manner than is needed. Worse: the public debate over gang violence might in part be driven by fears over demographic change within Northern Virginia communities rather than by levels of vulnerability to gang activity as such. Indeed, social scientists have sometimes used the term “moral panic” in cases where generalized public anxieties shape perceptions of phenomena such as gang violence (see Cohen, 1972; Zatz, 1987; Jackson and Rudman, 1993). Susceptibility to moral panic seems greatest when a particular group of individuals within a community is singled out (McCorkle and Miethe, 2004), such as recent immigrants or Hispanic youth. Although much more research is needed on this point, there is at least a potential link to the developments this paper reports, not least because perceptions of the gang problem seem at least partly bound up with demographic shifts that have may have little to do with gang violence as such.

This paper has provided a preliminary set of findings that have been constrained by resource limitations. Still, a number of findings have begun to emerge that warrant much closer analysis in future research. Thus, we find that public perceptions of gang violence seem to assume distinct types of concern; that these disparities are bound up with income, ethnicity, and neighborhood ecology; and that the problem may require

attentiveness to broader shifts and uncertainties that stem from demographic changes underway throughout the region as a whole. If these patterns are real and abiding facts on the ground, as we suspect, then both program design and the dissemination of information about such programs may well find that one size does not fit all.

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