



# On Good Authority

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*On Good Authority* is a periodic briefing on trends and issues in criminal justice. This report was written by staff Research Supervisor Tracy Hahn. It is a summary of a program evaluation prepared by Irving A. Spergel, Ph.D., Susan F. Grossman, Ph.D., and Ming Kwai Wa, M.A., of the University of Chicago. Copies of the evaluation are available from the Authority's Research and Analysis Unit.

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## Reducing youth gang violence in urban areas: one community's effort

**T**he youth gang problem is increasingly widespread in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Present day youth gangs, particularly in Chicago and other major urban centers, appear to be larger, better organized, more violent, and more criminally oriented than in earlier decades.

While considerable research exists on the nature and scope of the youth gang problem, almost no recent evaluation research exists on programs that address youth gangs. Our knowledge of what programs exist and what approaches are effective is inhibited by the lack of adequate models to develop programs, the challenges of conducting programs that address the problem, and difficulties in conducting evaluation research on community-based programs.

The goal of the Little Village Gang Violence Reduction Project of the Chicago Police Department was to reduce serious gang violence of individual youth gang members, as well as gang violence at the community level. The project and evaluation were supported by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority through federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act funds. The project was funded from July 1992 through July 1998, but support for the evaluation component continued. This *On Good Authority* briefly summarizes the project and recent evaluation findings. The evaluation is scheduled for completion late this year.

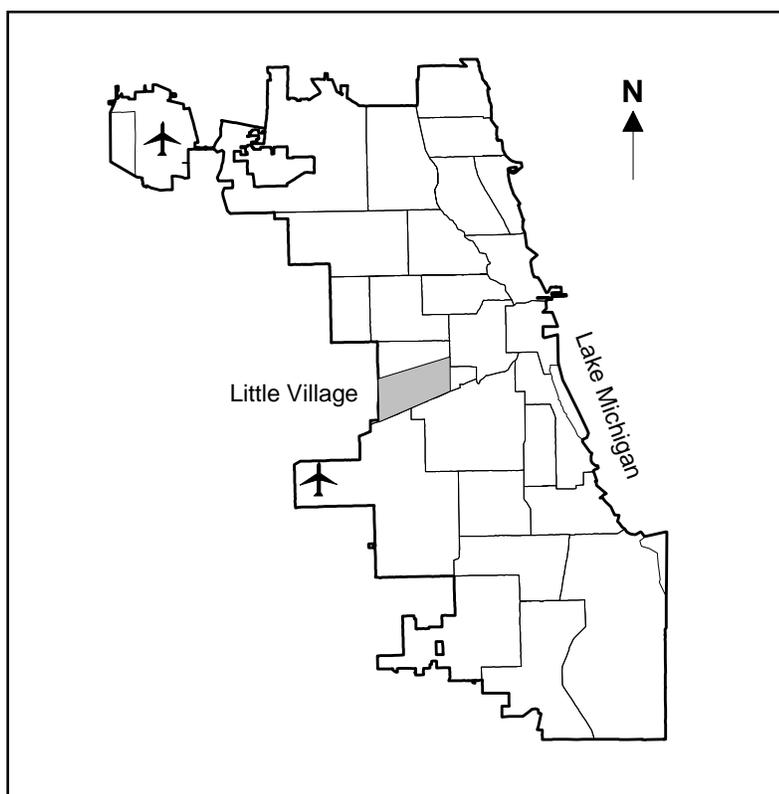
### Project background

The project was implemented in the Little Village community, which is southwest of Chicago's central business district (Figure 1). The area was selected because it was one of the most chronically gang violent in the city. Inter-gang fighting had persisted for more than two decades. The population is 90 percent Mexican or Mexican-American and primarily lower income and working class.

Two major gang constellations exist in the community: the Latin Kings and the Two-Six; each has about 15 factions. The Latin Kings are older and more established with an estimated 1,200 members. The Two-Six is a younger gang with about 800 members. The two gangs were responsible for 75 percent of gang-related homicides, aggravated batteries, and aggravated assaults in Little Village from 1989 to 1992, the three-year period studied before the project's implementation. Youths between the ages of 17 to 24 years accounted for 70 percent of serious gang violence.

The underlying assumption of the project model is that the gang problem is largely a response to community social disorganization, where key social institutions — such as family, schools, police, and businesses — are unable to collaboratively address the problem. The key idea of the model is to have organizations and representatives of the local community join forces to socially

Figure 1  
Little Village in Chicago



engage and control the behavior of young gang members, and encourage them to participate in legitimate activities in society.

The project focused on the integration of social intervention and suppression within a supportive framework of organizational change and development. It also involved community mobilization strategies at the grass roots level and the provision of increased social and economic opportunities for youth between the ages of 17 and 24.

A variety of agencies and individuals comprised the project, including two tactical officers, a neighborhood relations sergeant, and a clerical officer from the Chicago Police Department; three adult probation officers; a community organizer; and four community youth workers, including a field supervisor who worked under the direction of project coordinator and evaluator Irving Spergel. A community group, Neigh-

bors Against Gang Violence, also was formed. Many project members were or had been Little Village residents.

While project members were committed to their own organizational missions, they were able to strongly identify with the project. Team cohesion and morale were high. Police and probation administrators exerted limited control over assigned staff.

Tactical officers shared information with the rest of the team about gang incidents and referred gang members to community youth workers for jobs and school programs. In turn, youth workers, including some former gang members, provided information to police about youth involved in violent gang incidents. The youth workers also helped gang members meet probation appointments and requirements. Probation officers provided access to information about criminal activities. The community organizer shared what was known about local families and served as a liaison

between Little Village residents and the project team.

There was no formal referral process of gang members to the project. Instead, the youth workers were the key initial source of contact for inclusion in the project and referral to services. Police confirmed the appropriateness of particular gang members to be targeted. Initially, police and probation officers identified a small number of gang members, and the community youth workers quickly made efforts to establish a relationship with them. A variety of contacts and services were provided to gang members, including referral to and placement in jobs or job training, remedial education, recreational activities (such as softball games involving both gangs), counseling in homes and on the streets, crisis counseling, and referral to drug treatment and mental health services. In conjunction with social intervention, there was an effort to suppress violence through information gathering, monitoring of gang members, and arrests for criminal activity.

### Preliminary findings

The evaluation team collected information from several data sources, including interviews with individual gang members, police records for project and comparison youths, project staff contact and service records, surveys of community residents and local community organizations, aggregate-level police analysis and monthly project reports, and census data. Nearly all youths targeted for contact and services by the project agreed to participate in the research. More than 400 gang members received some level of service or contact during the project's six years. These include 192 targeted gang members that were intensively contacted and served, and over 200 gang youths, usually peers of the targeted participants, which comprise the comparison groups. The 192 targeted youths comprised three cohort groups. All were interviewed at least once during the evaluation. For the purposes of this summary, the following preliminary findings are based on 103 targeted youth

from the first two cohorts that were interviewed three times:

- Community youth workers provided services to 91 percent of the participants; tactical police had contact with 37 percent of the participants; project probation officers had contact with 10 percent; and Neighbors Against Gang Violence members assisted 16 percent.
- Forty-seven percent of the youths received only community youth worker contacts or services (social intervention); 40 percent were provided a combination of community youth worker and/or Neighbors Against Gang Violence services with police and/or probation contacts (social intervention and suppression). The remaining participants were contacted by only an officer, Neighbors Against Gang Violence worker, or another contact combination.
- Project workers reported providing the majority of the participants with counseling and/or crisis intervention

services, as well as school or job referral or assistance (Figure 2). Most also were given opportunities for athletic participation. Workers contacted most of the youths' families. A third were subject to suppression contacts, most often project police arrest.

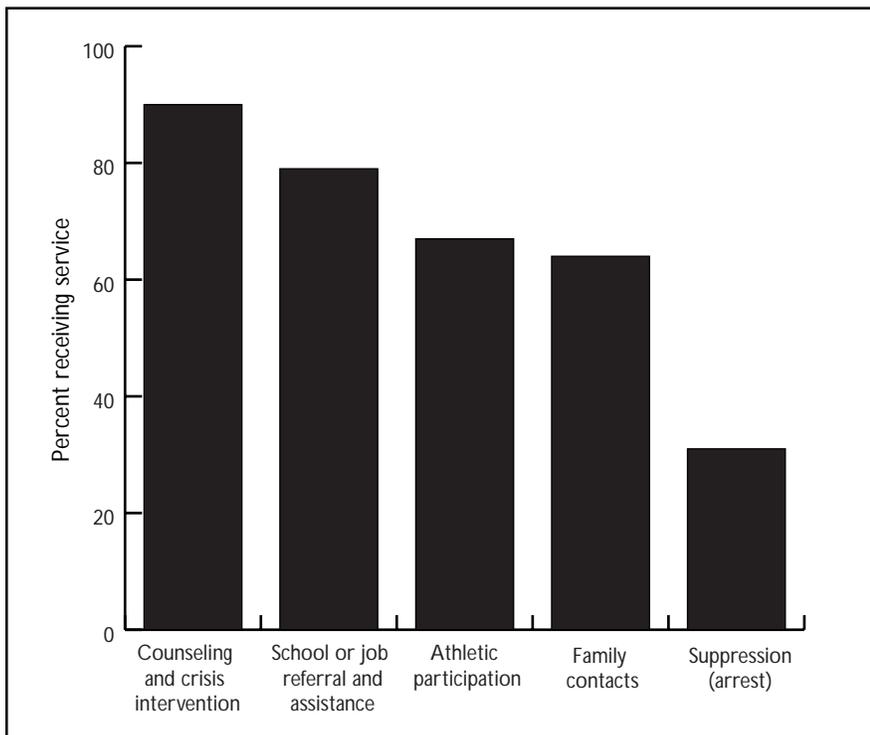
- At the start of the program 31 percent of the participants indicated they were employed. Three years later 47 percent indicated they were employed.
- In three years the average number of total crimes per project participant declined from 5.5 to 2.9, a reduction of 47 percent. The average number of violent crimes declined by 45 percent from 3.1 to 1.7, according to reports by the participants.
- For project participants provided with only community youth worker services, the average number of crimes reported decreased 44 percent within three years.
- Of the targeted gang members provided with services from community

youth workers and project police, the average number of crimes committed dropped 51 percent within three years.

The evaluation also compared 84 targeted gang members that had police records with 114 gang youths that were similar in gender and age at the time of project entry for the three years prior to the project (August 1989 to July 1992) and three project years (August 1992 to July 1995).

- Comparison youths were three times more likely to be arrested than project participants in the three-year project period.
- Project participants showed a decrease of 39 percent in arrests for crime in the project period when compared to the pre-project period. Arrests for comparison youths dropped 25 percent.
- Youths ages 19 years and older in both the project and comparison samples showed more reduction of total crime patterns than youths younger than 19.
- Comparisons of changes in gang violence in Little Village police beats with clusters of beats in six other high gang violence districts over a four year pre-project and four year project period indicated the lowest increase in violence occurred in Little Village. While there was a 37 percent increase in gang violence in the project area, Pilsen, the most comparable community, experienced a 51 percent increase.
- The rate of gang violence in Little Village rose from one incident per 56 males between ages 17 and 25 years in the pre-project period to one per 41 during the project period, a 27 percent increase. In Pilsen rates rose from one incident per 90 males to one per 55 males, an increase of 39 percent.
- Although gang crime continued to increase in the project area, surveys of Little Village residents revealed that they perceived a greater reduction in gang, non-gang, violent, and property crime between 1992 and 1994 than Pilsen residents perceived during that time.

**Figure 2**  
Services received by targeted youths



Based on analyzed data obtained primarily during the project's first three

years, the project appears to have been a success. The strategies of social intervention, provision of social opportunities, and especially the approach to suppression were well implemented. The cohesive team approach was probably at the heart of the project's success in reducing gang crime, particularly gang violence. Considerable weaknesses existed in the implementation of the community mobilization and organizational change and development strategies, however.

## Recommendations

Recommendations noted for the replication and adaptation of the Gang Violence Reduction Project include:

- Leadership and understanding by key organizations in the community, as well as a commitment to a collaborative approach toward controlling the youth gang problem.
- Law enforcement leadership committed to a balanced policy of prevention, intervention, and suppression

as key elements of a comprehensive community-based approach.

- An extended study period of six months to a year of the local gang problem, and data-based planning that involves key agencies and community groups.
- The development of both an operational street-level team and an interactive interagency and community-wide policy level approach to the problem.
- An adequate law enforcement data system to provide accurate, detailed information and analysis on the nature and scope of the gang problem over time.
- The use of indigenous staff, particularly community youth workers, to the greatest extent possible.
- Early development of careful evaluation procedures to document the successes and failures of the project in quantitative, policy-relevant terms.
- A close cooperative working relationship among police and probation

officers, outreach youth workers, community organizations, schools, and job training/placement organizations.

- Attention paid to the development of effective relationships at the street level of operations between youth outreach workers and police staff. This may involve extensive long-term collaboration and be based on administrative policy and appropriate training.

The Gang Violence Reduction Project is the first test of a national strategy to address the youth gang problem by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

The final evaluation report will attempt to address why the project was not continued beyond the federal funding term. The report also will provide additional data analysis on the project and comparison groups.



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