



GANG PREVENTION LEGISLATIVE REPORT



Governor's Crime Commission
NC DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY

March 1, 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Pursuant to N.C. General Statute § 143B-1730, the State Highway Patrol, in conjunction with the State Bureau of Investigation and the Governor's Crime Commission, is required to develop recommendations concerning the establishment of priorities and needed improvements with respect to gang prevention. These recommendations shall be made to the chairs of the House of Representatives and Senate Appropriations Committees on Justice and Public Safety and to the chairs of the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Justice and Public Safety on or before March 1 of each year.

Key Points

There are three main categories of recommendations of priorities and needed improvements with respect to gang prevention. These are Education & Training, Coordination & Communication, and Leadership. Given the increase of youth involved in gangs, many of these recommendations address youth as a critical piece in gang prevention.

First, Education and Training recommendations include expansion of existing programs such as EKG2 (Educating Kids on Guns and Gang Violence). The committee also recommends providing education on gang information and identification as well as de-escalation skills be taught to specific groups. Lastly, the committee also recommends training at-risk students life skills that lead to economic productivity and youth leadership as an alternative to gang engagement.

Second, the committee recommends increased coordination and communication especially amongst law enforcement agencies. The committee recommends that the Office of Violence Prevention (OVP) help local law enforcement build relationships with community intervention organizations. We recommend the NC Information Sharing and Analysis Center's (ISAAC) statewide Field Liaison Officer (FLO) Program to be expanded to include FLO Coordinators within the North Carolina State Highway Patrol. This will allow for a focus on gang prevention coordination and communication within each region of the state.

Interagency collaboration and sharing of information are recommended, including sharing gang data. Additional examples of interagency collaboration include the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction Special Operations and Intelligence Unit should examine the gang tracking system for solutions that facilitate the automatic sharing of relevant data for all certified user agencies. This collaboration is essential for enhancing communication and ensuring the integrity of documented information. Also, within the SBI, the Center for Safer Schools (CFSS) will need to establish coordination amongst multiple SBI sections.

Third, we recommend that state and local leaders prioritize gang prevention and intervention. State agencies are recommended to support gang prevention activities especially youth gang intervention programs. These leaders can provide support through shared expertise, collaboration and grant funding. Local government leadership is encouraged to work with the Office of Violence Prevention to address gang violence with a public health approach. This approach includes coordination with stakeholders in the community to identify and address local prevention needs. Law enforcement leadership is encouraged to receive gang training to understand how prioritizing gang documentation is beneficial and to understand how specialized units can collaborate with stakeholders and build trust in the community to reduce and prevent gang violence.

TRENDS

National

Nationally there is a lot of concern about gangs in the United States. On January 20, 2025, President Trump signed the executive order "Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists." This executive order specifically references gang concerns about the Venezuelan based Tren de Aragua and the Salvadoran based La Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang, citing their "campaigns of violence and terror in the United States and internationally" as threats to "the stability of the international order in the Western Hemisphere."

The U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs (OJJDP), compiles research on gangs, why youth join gangs, the risk factors and attractions that increase youth's propensity to join gangs, and how gangs form. Below are three findings relevant to prevention:

- "Youth join gangs for protection, enjoyment, respect, money, or because a friend is in a gang.
- Youth are at higher risk of joining a gang if they engage in delinquent behaviors, are aggressive or violent, experience multiple caretaker transitions, have many problems at school, associate with other gang-involved youth, or live in communities where they feel unsafe and where many youth are in trouble.

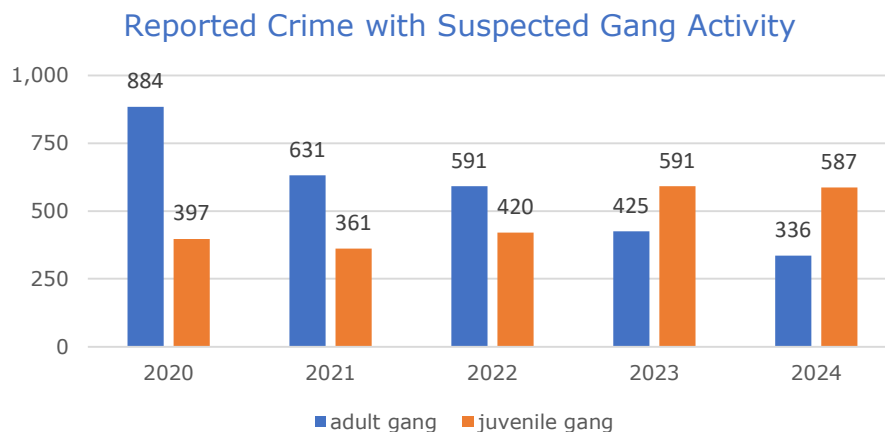
- To prevent youth from joining gangs, communities must strengthen families and schools, improve community supervision, train teachers and parents to manage disruptive youth, and teach students interpersonal skills.”¹

North Carolina

Recent law enforcement reports have paralleled national concerns about certain illegal gang activity in North Carolina. Specifically, Venezuelan Tren de Aragua (TdA) has a confirmed presence in neighboring states and at least one confirmed report of their presence in North Carolina. According to data from GangNET, there are approximately 4,000 validated gang members in North Carolina. The findings indicate that gang membership is predominantly male, with females representing only a small percentage. The majority of gang members tracked fall within the 25 to 34 age range, accounting for 50% of the total membership. Enhanced documentation by certified users regarding gang members improves information sharing among agencies, ultimately increasing officer safety and awareness.

Currently, approximately 1% of offenses reported in NC each year are related to gang activity.² In recent years, juvenile gang activity has overtaken adult gang crime activity. Data from the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) shows that in recent years, reported crime with suspected juvenile gang involvement has increased from 397 offenses in 2020 to 587 offenses in 2024. This is an increase of 47.9% in five years.

**Suspected juvenile
gang crime
has increased
47.9% in 5 years**



¹ Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs. NCJ Number. 231116. Author(s). James C. Howell. Date Published. December 2010.

² National Incident-Based Reporting System data, CJAC Data Warehouse, retrieved February 14, 2025.

North Carolina Division of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) uses a tool to assess the risk and needs of at-risk youth. According to the Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument (YASI), in 2023 in North Carolina 6.7% overall youth are gang-affiliated. Of the 12,533 North Carolina juveniles administered the YASI during 2024, 86% of these at-risk youths experienced trauma. Surry, Richmond, Watauga, Alexander, Rowan, and Rockingham counties averaged the highest trauma scores for justice involved youth in the State with three or more traumatic indicators per youth. Unfortunately, this number is higher for female youth with 94% of girls residing in a youth development center diagnosed with trauma and stress related disorders. From the YASI trauma index, the top 3 traumas were parental separation/divorce, family members with criminal records and emotional neglect. Frequent trauma rankings were physical neglect, household substance abuse, emotional abuse and household mental illness.

YASI Trauma Index Item	Juveniles	Percentage
Victim of Emotional Abuse	2,186	17.44
Victim of Physical Abuse	1,072	8.55
Victim of Sexual Abuse	1,060	8.46
Victim of Emotional Neglect	2,542	20.28
Victim of Physical Neglect	2,371	18.92
Parental Separation/Divorce	8,028	64.05
Mother Treated Violently	172	1.37
Household Substance Abuse	2,348	18.73
Household Mental Illness	2,053	16.38
Family Members with Criminal Records	4,040	32.23

The YASI report which shows that gang-involved at-risk youth have more mental health problems than other at-risk youth (44% to 33%). Yet very few at-risk youth were being diagnosed, receiving medicines or receiving treatment for their mental health. This underlines the need for the public health approach for gang prevention. JJDP points out that 29% of juvenile detention stays were for youth who are identified as gang involved. Their 2024 Point in Time Survey (PITS) report identified that 98.2% of all Youth Development Centers (YDC) youth have at least one mental health diagnosis the average is 3.8 mental health diagnoses per youth. Moreover, 71.5% of YDC youth have been diagnosed with at least three mental health conditions.

44% of gang-involved youth have mental health problems.

98.2% of YCD youth have at least 1 mental health diagnosis. The average is 3.8.

Mental Health	Gang affiliated	Not affiliated	Difference
<i>Mental Health Problems</i>	44%	33%	-11%
<i>Diagnosed</i>	2%	1%	-1%
<i>Past Meds</i>	1%	1%	0%
<i>Current Meds</i>	1%	1%	0%
<i>Past Treatment</i>	1%	1%	0%
<i>Current Treatment</i>	1%	1%	0%

Of the 1,054 gang involved youth, a large number have family and friend relationships that show traumatic factors according to the YASI report. Gang affiliated at-risk youth are twice as likely to have negative peer relationships than other at-risk youth and the majority of their friendships are associated with gangs. They are almost twice as likely to have a family with criminal behavior history (40% to 22%). Gang affiliated youth are also more likely to be in a family with a history of alcohol/drugs, mental health disorders, and violence.

Family History	Gang Affiliated	Not Affiliated	Difference
<i>Alcohol/Drugs</i>	18%	10%	-8%
<i>Mental Health</i>	15%	11%	-4%
<i>Criminal</i>	40%	22%	-18%
<i>Violent</i>	11%	5%	-6%
Community & Peers			
<i>No Friends</i>	4%	14%	10%
<i>Negative Peers</i>	71%	36%	-35%
<i>Gang Associated</i>	80%	0%	-80%
<i>Family Gang Associated</i>	8%	0.30%	-8%
<i>Gang Member</i>	20%	0%	-20%

Lastly, gang affiliated at-risk youth were more justice-involved and attended school less often (78% to 88%) than other at-risk youth. Eight percent were high school dropouts. The gang affiliated youth were three times as likely to have had a previous residential placement and over four times as likely to be placed in detention or a YDC. According to JJDP gang involved youth stay longer in YDCs than non-gang involved youth (394 compared to 378 days on average). Gang affiliated youth are more than twice as likely to have had previous delinquency and four times as likely to have a previous weapon offense (36% to 9%). Thus, showing a clear connection between gang affiliation and weapons.

Legal History	Gang Affiliated	Not Affiliated	Difference
Previously Delinquent	63%	30%	-33%
Previous Weapon Offense	36%	9%	-27%
Previous Residential Placement	24%	7%	-17%
Detention	43%	9%	-34%
YDC	7%	1%	-6%
School	Gang Affiliated	Not Affiliated	Difference
<i>Enrolled Full-time(2)</i>	78%	88%	10%
<i>Dropped Out(4)</i>	8%	3%	-5%
<i>Graduated(1)</i>	2%	2%	0%
<i>Suspended(5)</i>	3%	2%	-1%

According to NIBRS data, crimes that have seen the most reported increase in juvenile gang activity between 2020 – 2024 are:

Aggravated assault: increase of 14.0% (114 to 130 offenses reported)

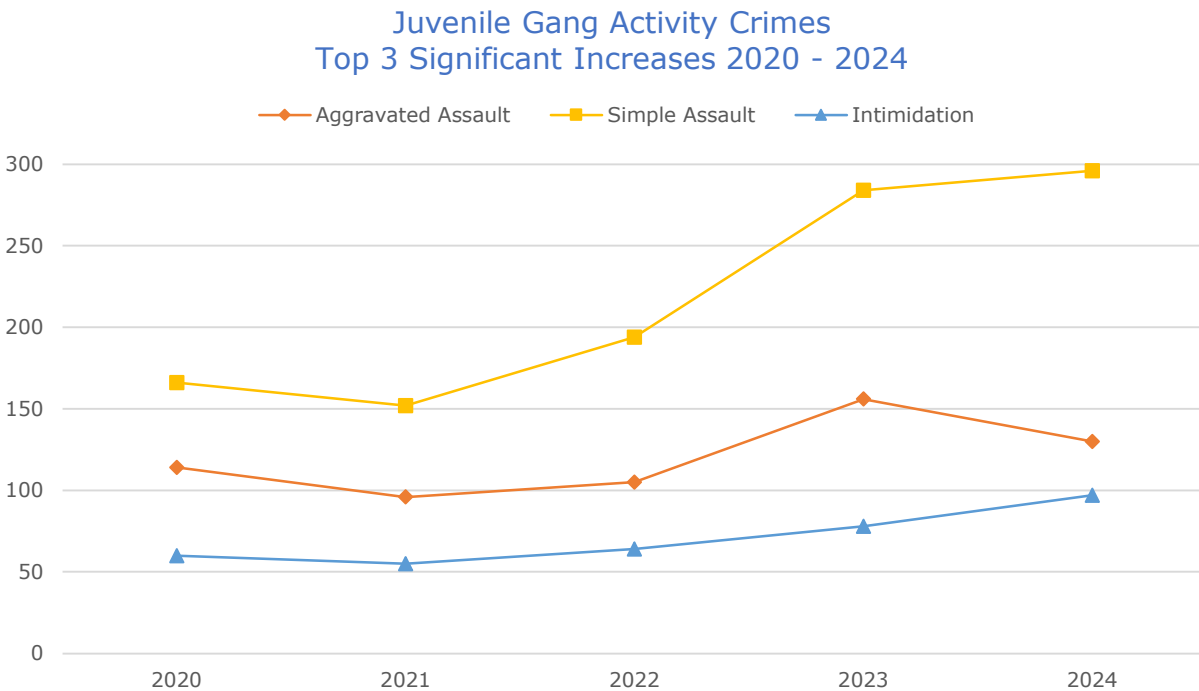
Defined as: an unlawful attack by one person upon another wherein the offender uses a weapon or displays it in a threatening manner, or the victim suffers obvious severe or aggravated bodily injury involving apparent broken bones, loss of teeth, possible internal injury, severe laceration, or loss of consciousness.

Simple assault: increase of 78.3% (166 to 296 offenses reported)

Defined as: an unlawful physical attack by one person upon another where neither the offender displays a weapon, nor the victim suffers obvious severe or aggravated bodily injury involving apparent broken bones, loss of teeth, possible internal injury, severe laceration, or loss of consciousness.

Intimidation: increase of 61.7% (60 to 97 offenses reported)

Defined as: to unlawfully place another person in reasonable fear of bodily harm through the use of threatening words and/or other conduct but without displaying a weapon or subjecting the victim to actual physical attack.



In 2023 of the top juvenile gang-affiliated charges possession of a handgun by a minor was third and robbery with a dangerous weapon was eighth. Three of the top 10 charges involved motor vehicles (breaking and entering, larceny and felony possession). Also resisting a public officer and simple assault were fourth and fifth. The possession of weapons, motor vehicle theft of weapons and resisting public officer data are factors that support the prevention recommendations below involving law enforcement. This trend of increased cases of gang intimidation confirms law enforcement reports of increased threat or intimidation against victims or witnesses. Feedback from law enforcement included the need for victim witness support. While not a gang prevention recommendation, it is an area of concern.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the North Carolina data above shows, for the last five years there are more cases of North Carolina youth involved in gang activity and ultimately violence. Although the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) and GangNet gang-affiliated data is inconsistently input across the state, the JJDP gang-affiliated YASI data shows similar trends and provides insight upon underlying trauma related causes and needs. This data reiterates the Chief Justice's Task Force on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) - Informed Courts recommendations to have a trauma-informed approach. As the ACES Task Force states, "today's victim is tomorrow's defendant, and high crime areas are high victim areas." Chief Justice's report recommends proactively confronting trauma rather than waiting for the "predictable disasters waiting downstream." Based upon this data, we make the following recommendations.

Education and Training

1. Expand EKG2 (Educating Kids on Guns and Gang Violence) training curriculum for students.

EKG2 teaches students about the legal, medical, and emotional consequences of youth gun possession, substance abuse and related gun violence. Students attend a two-hour/two-day interactive classroom presentation by a uniformed law enforcement officer. There is currently a 7th grade and 9th grade curriculum. An after-school curriculum is coming soon.

2. Extend gang information and identification training beyond law enforcement.

Those in contact with youth may benefit from recognizing the ever-changing signs of gang involvement and gang activity. School teachers, assistants, bus drivers, School Resource Officers (SROs), law enforcement leadership, community healthcare workers, and community intervention and prevention programs could all benefit from understanding more about gangs. This public version of the law enforcement gang training could be a redacted version of law enforcement training that exists now.

3. Training at-risk students, the skills for productive economic pathways and leadership.

Programs that address ACEs often include community initiatives, mentoring, and family-centered approaches. However, successful gang prevention programs that address alienated and disaffected at-risk youth often need activities designed to help youth acquire skills and gain work experience. This allows youth to see a productive path exists for their lives outside of gang involvement.

4. Nonviolent communication and de-escalation skill training.

Based upon the data provided to JJDP, at-risk youth experience negative and even violence both at home and amongst peers. Training on de-escalation, violence reduction skills, mediating conflict, alternate resolution techniques should be taught to youth, SROs, school counselors, school teachers, assistants, bus drivers, law enforcement, community health workers, community intervention and prevention programs as well as to the families of youth. This recommendation addresses the impact on youth from traumatic exposure to adverse experiences and also aligns with trauma informed care training that many school districts are receiving as part of school staff annual training.

Communication and Coordination

1. Increase collaboration between local law enforcement and community organizations

The committee recommends the OVP help local law enforcement build relationships with community intervention organizations. Local law enforcement and community intervention organizations must work together to build trust and address violence prevention in their community. OVP could be a resource and provide training and examples of how this works well in certain locations. Local leadership should identify and establish a list of community stakeholders that could be community partners. These partnerships will address gang violence and should include organizations, entities, and businesses from the affected community. Community partnerships should include:

- City, county, and state government officials
- Local law enforcement
- School system representatives
- Post-secondary education representatives
- Public health community
- Churches and faith-based organizations
- Local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) trusted and charged with doing this work in the community
- Community leaders and individuals from the most affected communities
- Private sector businesses and organizations
- Commerce workforce development could be a resource in certain communities
- Private donors who want to invest in the community

2. Reestablish a Gang Prevention Taskforce to address gang prevention

Gang activity landscape is changing quickly. In order to better prevent gang activity, we must have current knowledge of the trends of activity to make recommendations and plan for prevention. Thus, we recommend that a taskforce be appointed to continue to address gang prevention and also to track the implementation of the recommendations.

3. Enhance law enforcement collaboration

We recommend the NC Information Sharing and Analysis Center's (ISAAC) statewide Field Liaison Officer (FLO) Program to be expanded to include FLO Coordinators within the North Carolina State Highway Patrol in every region. This will allow for a focus on gang prevention coordination and communication with law enforcement within each region across the state. Expanding the FLO Program would include the following:

- Fuse and analyze information from multiple sources, jurisdictions, and disciplines into a regional and statewide picture.
- Support national information networks regarding gangs, cartels, and Transnational Crime Organizations (TCOs).
- Build relationships amongst local, state, federal, public safety, and private sector partners.
- Assist with collaboration and communication of information amongst agencies statewide such as ALE, DPS, DAC, SBI, North Carolina Gang Investigators Association as well as local law enforcement.

Sharing information in coordination with the ISAAC's annual Statewide Threat Assessment, gang intelligence could equip prevention, preparation, response, and recovery resources with intelligence that enhances effectiveness and proactive intervention, thereby reducing public harm and minimizing impact. Examining this information and intelligence to produce strategic and tactical intelligence products could provide opportunities for enhanced threat identification and indicators, leading to early observation and proactive intervention.

4. State Agencies should systematically communicate and share gang data.

Systematic information sharing and connection amongst state and local agencies on gang-affiliated information will improve coordination, help local law enforcement and schools make more informed decisions, identify broader trends, enhance efficiency, and ultimately make the public safer by removing the silos and showing information across departments and jurisdictions. This is especially needed when addressing gangs that cross jurisdictional boundaries. We recommend automation improvements to the state's gang-tracking software, currently GangNet. An example of such an improvement would be having OPUS automatically download relevant data into GangNet rather than being manually input into the system. The North Carolina Department of Adult Correction Special Operations and Intelligence Unit should develop an efficient system that facilitates the automatic sharing of relevant data with certified user agencies. This collaboration is essential for enhancing communication and ensuring the integrity of documented information.

Moreover, the state should encourage enhanced documentation of gang member data. Understanding the identities of gang members and associates will facilitate law enforcement's collaboration with community stakeholders in developing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Additional collaboration is needed. For example, the Center for Safer Schools (CFSS) was recently relocated to the NCSBI. Systematic coordination between CFSS with other SBI sections such as the Behavioral Threat Assessment Unit (BeTA) regarding at-risk youth should be implemented.

Leadership

1. Law enforcement leaders to create specialized gang units

To effectively address gang violence and prevention, leadership must prioritize the development of specialized units dedicated to gang identification, prevention, intervention and prosecution. These units should collaborate closely with other law enforcement, criminal justice professionals, and community stakeholders to enhance coordination and inform strategic interventions. Community based programs and the establishment of school behavioral threat teams are crucial for early intervention efforts.

2. Share data across law enforcement.

Additionally, leadership should encourage identification of gangs and members while promoting the sharing of data across law enforcement agencies and criminal justice professionals to improve coordination and enhance response effectiveness.

3. State leaders must support both gang prevention and intervention programs.

Encourage law enforcement leadership statewide to focus on identification of gang membership and trends. Prioritize grant funding that address factors that lead to gang membership. Highlight programs like Durham's Project BUILD throughout the state. Office of Violence Prevention can help local leaders coordinate communities to discuss and address the gang violence occurring locally. Leadership must support consistent and ongoing gang awareness training to strengthen the ability to address gang issues effectively, while empowering communities to engage in meaningful prevention efforts.

4. Expand the number of offenses for which gang activity elements are collected.

Currently, the FBI only collects reported gang activity for a limited number of offenses. These include murder, manslaughter, kidnapping, rape, sodomy, sexual assault with an object, fondling, aggravated assault, simple assault, intimidation and robbery. This means that there are many crimes for which gang activity simply is not recorded. Adding more offenses, such as drug offenses, which can be entered into the North Carolina's National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) at the state level would allow for a more comprehensive view of gang activity in reported crime.

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Michelle Guarino	NC Gang Investigators Association
Kevin Salguero	Durham County Sheriff’s Office
Kevin Webster	Durham County Sheriff’s Office
Jennifer Holste	NC Department of Adult Correction, GangNet

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs by James C. Howell December 2010, USDOJ, OJP, OJJDP
2. Gang Activity at The Durham County Detention Facility by Jim Stuit December 2021
3. Former Project Build Clients and Adult Convictions by Jim Stuit February 2023