

# GANGS AMONG LATINOS IN THE U.S.

## The Issue

It is estimated that in 2011 there were about 1.4 million gang members in the United States, a 40% increase from 2009.<sup>1</sup> Gangs are primarily comprised of adolescents under 18 (41%) and Latinos (50%).<sup>2</sup> The high rates of Latinos involved in gang activity is a result of various contributing factors such as low attainment of education, the environment in which they live, poverty, and culture. Considering that Latinos are the largest minority group in the U.S., it is important to better address these risk factors in order to effectively reduce this disparity among the Latino population.

## Risk Factors

In the United States, more than 1 in 4 Latinos live in a household with an income below the federal poverty level.<sup>3</sup> In 2010, 6.1 million Latino children lived in poverty and 37.3% of all poor children were Latino.<sup>4</sup> In addition, only 51% of Latinos have a high school diploma compared to 86% of non-Latino Whites and 77% of African Americans.<sup>5</sup> In 2010, Latinos represented only 15% of overall enrollment in 2-4 year colleges (32% of college-aged Latinos were enrolled in college); while a lower rate than other racial or ethnic groups, this represents a dramatic increase from previous years.<sup>6</sup>

The at-risk neighborhoods in which many Latinos live play a pivotal role in gang activity. Violent neighborhood conditions create an environment conducive to engaging in this activity, particularly among youth, who may consider gang involvement as a viable option for protection.<sup>7</sup> This is especially of concern considering that due to lack of resources, recent migrants more commonly move into neighborhoods with prominent gang activity in both rural and urban areas. In both areas, population rates for Latinos and gang affiliations have been rising in the United States. The rate of incarceration of U.S.-born Latino males age 18-39 is seven times that of their foreign-born Latino counterparts.<sup>8</sup> Gang involvement often leads to other risky and illegal behavior. It has been shown that gang-involved Latino adolescents are at high risk for drug use and start using at a younger age than their non-Latino counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

## Definition of Street Gangs

Federal law defines the term gang as “an ongoing group, club, or organization, or association of five or more persons that has as one of its primary purposes the commission of one or more criminal offenses.”<sup>10</sup> Overall, street gangs are open about their activities, with two of their main aims being violence and defending their social spaces.<sup>10</sup> Even though gang affiliations range through social structures and races, minority gangs remain at the top of the list as the largest and the most active in the country, with notable examples being Latino gangs MS-13 and Latin Kings, and the African-American Crips.<sup>11</sup>

## Latino Gang Involvement

Research has shown that Latino gangs often supply emotional support and financial protection, characteristics that are lacking in many of their members’ households.<sup>9</sup> Even though Latino gangs began as small organizations that were highly disorganized, the 1980s saw the systemization of gang involvement in this population and an increase in members ages from 14-20 to 12-40 years old. The networks grew from a group of boys who shared a culture, customs, and language, to groups that have identifying symbols and colors, bestow monikers on their members, and practice initializing rituals for their members<sup>12</sup>; notably:

- Imprisonment and committing crimes gains intra-gang credibility and accounts for the spread of gang influence in the community.
- Being stabbed or shot in gang fights gives members “veteran” status, and these gang members begin to recruit new members and train them in gang-related criminal activities.

Gang fights are turf-oriented, and many times progress to gang wars. As the Latino population in the U.S. grows, there continues to be an expansion in their membership. The reach of gang activity also spreads to men and women who are migrating to both rural and urban areas in the United States. The deportation of individuals with gang ties in these communities have allowed the expansion and extension of these criminal enterprises into other countries such as in Central America.<sup>11</sup>

- MS-13, or Mara-Salvatrucha, has an estimated following of 30,000-50,000 worldwide and 8,000-10,000 in the U.S. alone.<sup>13</sup>
- The Latin Kings, whose origins are based in Chicago, is the second largest gang in the United States with an estimated following of 20,000 to 35,000.<sup>13</sup>

## Common Characteristics of Gang Involvement<sup>7</sup>:

- Early exposure to sexual activity/abuse, early drug use, and exposure to violence.
- Low income neighborhoods and families.
- Family dysfunction.
- Lack of involvement in positive activities in and out of school.

## Characteristics of Male Involvement<sup>7</sup>:

- Up to 78% of all male gang members that are incarcerated have emotional and learning disabilities.
- The majority of those involved are low income, have a history of failure in school and truant behavior, have friends who are also delinquent, and had early involvement in petty theft and behavioral disorder in grade school.

### Characteristics of Female Involvement:

- They often assist male gang members in the following ways<sup>13</sup>:
  - Carry drugs and weapons and provide safe houses for contraband;
  - Engage in prostitution;
  - Engage in drug sales, vandalism, and credit card and identity theft.
- Latina gangs are starting to evolve exclusive of the traditionally male-dominated Latino gangs. While the number of all-female gangs remains low, the role of women in gangs is evolving. Women are taking more active roles, assisting in the movement of drugs and weapons, and gathering intelligence from other gangs.<sup>12</sup>

### Addictions among Gang Members:

- Gang membership facilitates drug use in those individuals who were already abusing drugs before becoming a member, and the vast majority of gang members in general use drugs.<sup>9</sup>
- Drug use among high at-risk individuals is 15 years old for marijuana and 19 years old for cocaine, for alcohol the age is much younger at 12 years old—this substance is usually introduced by a family member.<sup>9</sup>
- Drug using behavior among Latino gangs has its origins in the 1980s cocaine and crack trade.<sup>9</sup> Gang members continue to have significant involvement in the production and distribution of illicit drugs.<sup>1</sup>

### Conclusion:

When analyzing the factors that contribute to gang activity, key points become prominent. First, these individuals have low educational achievement. Second, these individuals have traditionally come from poor, disenfranchised communities of color. While looking for a network of support and protection they join groups whose culture is one of violence. Gangs have provided support to youth in areas where they have found none. This support has extended both emotionally and economically. Involvement in gang activity leads to further at-risk situations and behavior. Taking all of this into consideration, it becomes important for us to look at what alternatives can be offered to youth—alternatives that will provide similar support networks and opportunities so they do not feel the need to join this dangerous way of life.

### Public Policy Recommendations

1. Invest resources in alternative rehabilitation programs for youth that focus beyond legal system punishment (e.g. jail time, probation).
2. Create programs for at-risk youth in low income communities to offer support networks not found through the traditional education system or outreach programs.
3. Fund collaborative research that includes law enforcement, community members, schools, and youth in order to offer comprehensive solutions for the youth.

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### Acknowledgments

This fact sheet was updated and reviewed with the support of Gabriela Alaniz and Heather Riden from the Migration and Health Research Center, UC Davis; Luis Javier Hernandez, William Spurgeon, and Caroline Dickinson from the Health Initiative of the Americas, School of Public Health, UC Berkeley.

### Suggested Citation

Garcia, V., Castaneda, X. *Gangs Among Latinos in the U.S.* (Fact Sheet) 2012. Health Initiative of the Americas. University of California Berkeley, School of Public Health.