

CJ IN A BRIEF



Gang Association Among San Diego Arrestees

DECEMBER 2019



Research findings from the Criminal Justice Clearinghouse

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Introduction

Over the past several decades, research has shown that being recruited into a gang can be associated with where a youth lives, family issues, an under-resourced academic environment, and other individual-level risk factors.¹ Beginning in 2008, adult and juvenile arrestees interviewed as part of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program who reported any gang involvement (juveniles) or involvement in the past five years (adults) were asked an additional addendum of questions about gangs. While this instrument was not included in the 2015 survey, it was added back and revised in 2016 with input from local stakeholders.

While more attention than ever has been focused on rehabilitation and reentry, community relationships with law enforcement, and potential bias in policing, gang-related motives have consistently been among the top three homicide motives regionally, and the number of gang-related crimes in San Diego has increased in 2019.² Because gang-association is closely linked with justice-system involvement, this CJ in Brief highlights findings from interviews conducted in 2018 regarding how, why, and when individuals first became involved with gangs; the nature of their involvement; how they differ from other arrestees who do not report any involvement; and whether they see themselves ever disassociating from the gang.

Highlights

- Over 3 in 4 individuals who report a gang affiliation report they became involved because of their family or friends, emphasizing the importance of relationships and the need individuals have for personal connection. Involvement most often started in middle school or earlier.
- While almost 3 in 4 juveniles with a gang affiliation identified as Hispanic, the most common ethnic group for adult arrestees that were interviewed was White.
- Most (63%) of those who reported an affiliation said they were never actually a member, but just hung out with the gang. Males were more likely to report being a member than females.
- While few individuals said they joined the gang to make money, the majority reported committing property and drug-related crimes with the gang, and about 1 in 3 said they work with other gangs on profit-focused enterprises such as drug dealing, property crime, and prostitution/pimping.
- Most individuals who said they were still associated with a gang said they did not want to stop the association now, but that they thought they would at some point. Adults who had stopped association were most likely to say they had simply grown tired of the lifestyle.

¹ Howell, J. C. & Egley, A. Jr. (2005). Moving risk factors into developmental theories of gang membership. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 3 (4), 334-354.

² Moran, G. & Winkley, L. (September 3, 2019). *Gang crimes spike in San Diego*. San Diego Union Tribune. Available online at: sandiegouniontribune.com/news/public-safety/story/2019-09-02/gang-crimes-spike-in-san-diego

How many adult and juvenile arrestees report gang involvement?

Juveniles were more than 1.5 times more likely to report gang involvement, compared to adults (Figure 1). For the purpose of this report, gang involvement is defined as ever being in a gang or hanging out with one.

Figure 1

Frequency gang involvement was reported by adult and juvenile arrestees



24%

of 462 **adult arrestees** reported gang involvement



40%

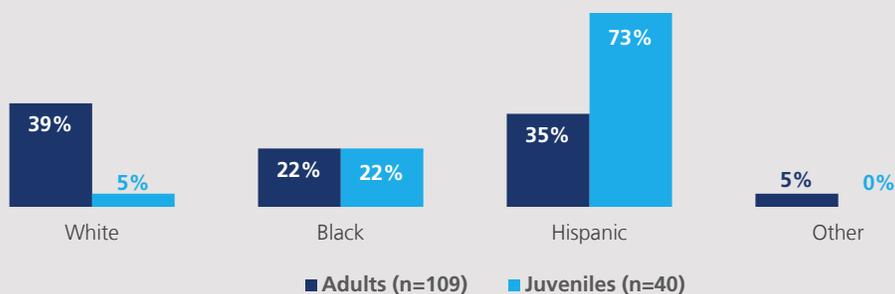
of 104 **juvenile arrestees** reported gang involvement

How did the race of adults and juveniles who reported gang involvement differ?

In terms of self-described race/ethnicity, there were some distinct differences between the adults and juveniles, with more than 1 in 3 (39%) adults with a gang association describing themselves as White, compared to 5% of the juveniles. In addition, while almost 3 in 4 (73%) of the juveniles described themselves as Hispanic, only around 1 in 3 (35%) of the adults did. Around 1 in 5 (22%) of both adults and juveniles described themselves as Black (Figure 2). When interpreting these statistics, it is important to consider the racial/ethnic distribution of the region.³

Figure 2

Racial composition of adult and juvenile arrestees with gang involvement varied



Note: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

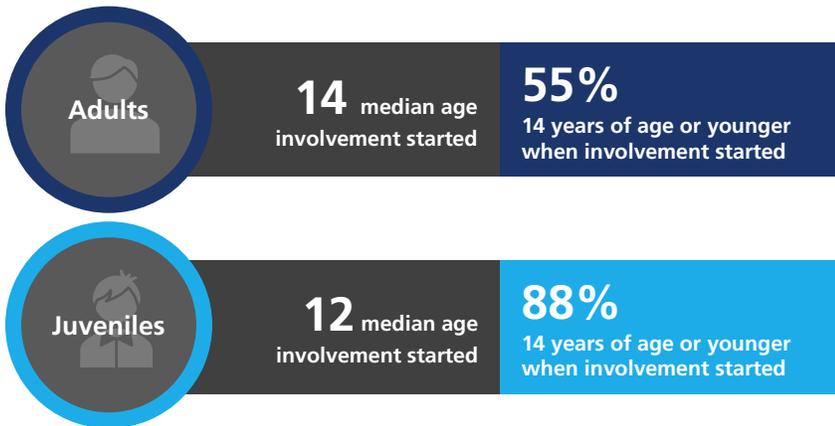
³ According to regional estimates, 46% of the region's population is White, 35% Hispanic, 4% Black, and 15% Other.

When did these individuals first start associating with the gang?

For both adults and juveniles, gang involvement started on average (median) before high school, at the age of 14 for the adults and 12 for the juveniles (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Age gang involvement started

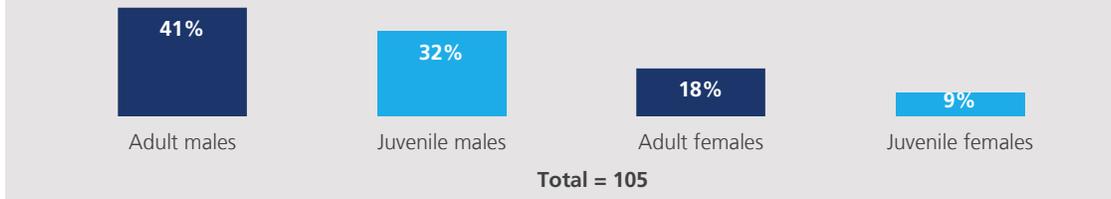


How did the gender of those who completed the gang addendum vary?

A total of 105 gang addenda were completed with juveniles who reported ever having a gang affiliation, as well as adults who reported any affiliation in the previous five years. Almost three in four of these individuals were male, with the remaining quarter female (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Gender of arrestees who completed a gang addendum



How many of these individuals reported gang membership?

Overall, only 37% of those interviewed said they were ever a member, with the rest saying they just hung out with the gang. Males were significantly more likely to report they had ever been a member (and not just an associate), compared to females (47% versus 11%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5

How many males and females with gang involvement reported ever being a member

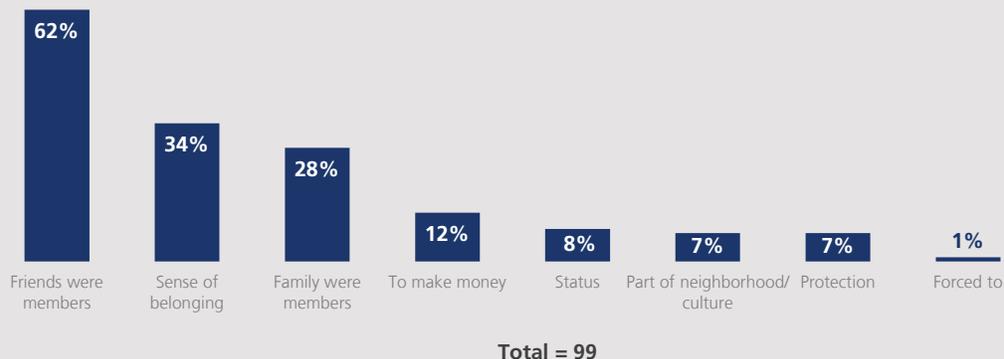


What reasons were given for why gang involvement started?

Adults and juveniles alike were most likely to say they became involved with a gang because their peers or family were already involved, or they were seeking a sense of belonging (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Reasons for gang involvement beginning



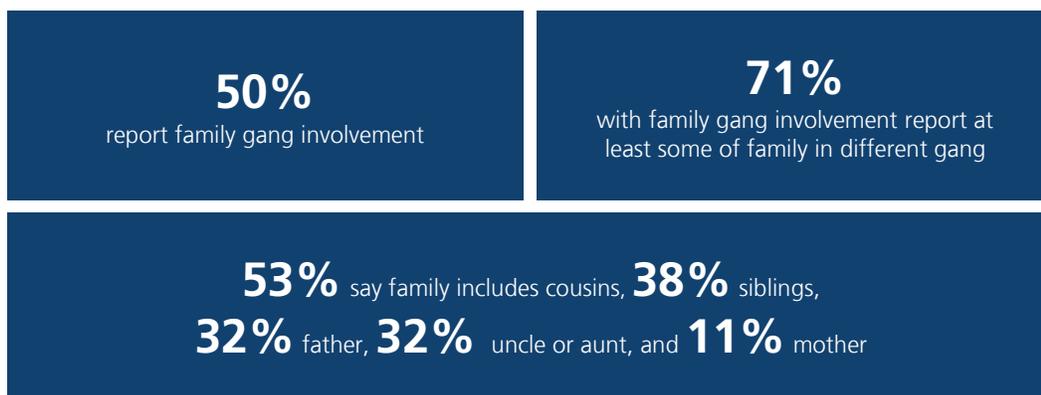
Note: Percentages based on multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.

What else do we know about family member gang involvement?

When asked if their family was also involved in a gang, there was an even split, with half saying they were, and half saying they were not. Of those who reported family involvement, almost three-quarters (71%) said that some or all of these family members were in different gangs. When asked to describe how they were related to these family members, the most common answers included cousins, siblings, their father, and an uncle or aunt.

Figure 7

Reported family involvement in gangs

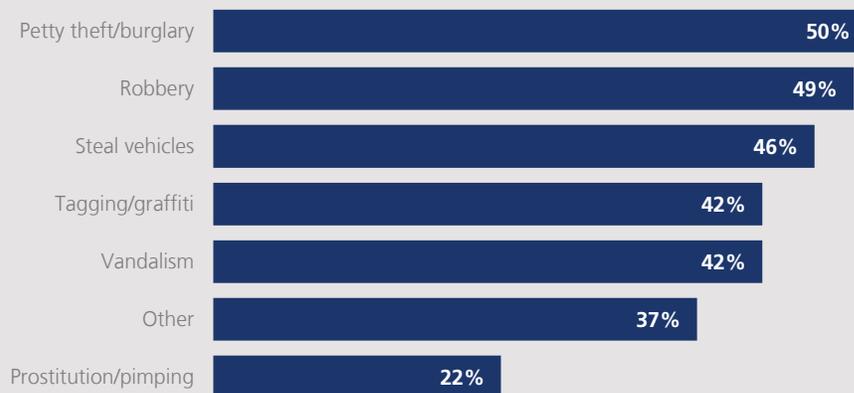


What do these individuals do with the gang?

Of the 90 individuals who answered a question regarding what the gang they are involved with does together, the majority reported engaging in some type of illegal activity, including petty theft/burglary, robbery, and stealing vehicles (Figure 8). Other activities noted by 37% of the arrestees included using drugs (14), just hanging out (11), dealing drugs (8), and fighting (3).

Figure 8

Arrestees with gang affiliations reported committing different types of illegal acts



Total = 90

Note: Percentages based on multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.

How often do different gangs work with one another to make money?

Overall, around 1 in 3 (35%) gang-affiliated arrestees reported working with other gangs to make money. As Figure 9 shows, the most common way involved the sale or distribution of drugs.

Figure 9

Most common gang partnerships to make money



What else did these individuals tell us about how their gang was organized?

- Most (80%) say they have never been taxed by a gang or taxed others.
- Around one-third (36%) report there are female leaders in their gang.
- Over half (56%) said they have official meetings.
- Almost one in five (16%) said they pay dues to the gang.
- One-fourth (25%) have been involved with gangs in jail or prison.

What else do we know about law enforcement interaction with these individuals?

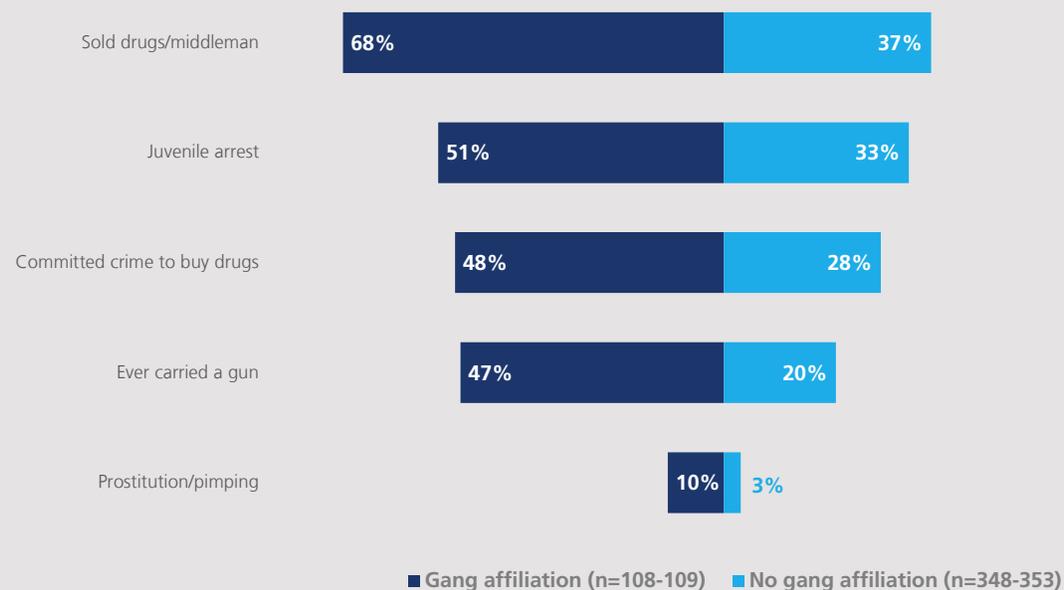
- One in ten (11%) have moved to different parts of San Diego County because of law enforcement activity related to their gang.
- Around one-third (36%) reported they had been documented as a gang member by law enforcement.

How do adult arrestees with a gang involvement differ from those who do not report one?

As Figure 10 shows, adults with gang involvement were significantly more likely to report involvement in drug distribution, a history of justice system contact as a juvenile, committing a crime to be able to buy drugs, a history with firearms, and involvement in prostitution/pimping.

Figure 10

Adult arrestees with gang involvement differ from other arrestees



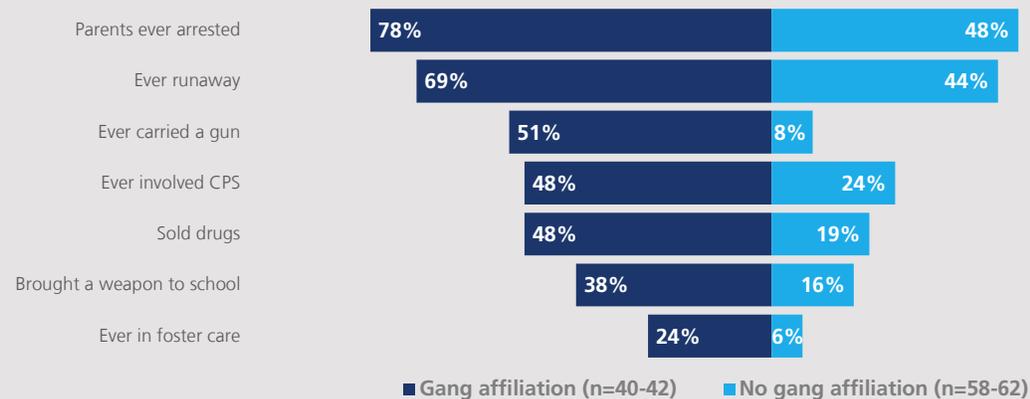
Note: Cases with missing information not included. Significant at $p < .05$ level.

How do juvenile arrestees with gang involvement differ from those who do not report one?

The juveniles who reported gang involvement also differed from the juvenile arrestees who did not report an affiliation, including having parents who had ever been arrested, ever running away from home, ever carrying a gun, prior family involvement with Child Protection Services (CPS), selling drugs, bringing a weapon to school, and having a prior foster care placement (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Juvenile arrestees with gang affiliation differ from other arrestees in certain ways



Note: Cases with missing information not included. Significant at $p < .05$ level.

How many of these individuals reported being approached and offered help to get out of a gang?

Only about one in five (21%) of the adults and juveniles who completed the gang addendum said they had ever been approached and offered help to get out of a gang (Figure 12). When asked who offered help, 8 said family, 5 said friends, 5 said church, 4 said an intervention group, 4 said law enforcement, and 1 said school.

Figure 12

One in five arrestees have been approached and offered help to get out of a gang

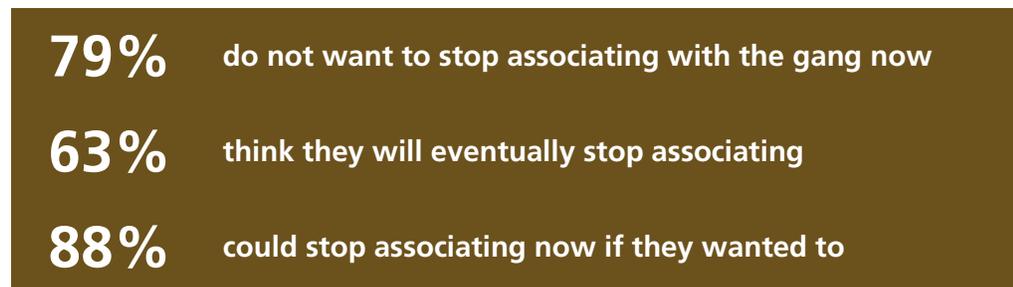


Of those who are still involved with a gang, how many think they will stop the association at some point?

As Figure 13 shows, while the majority (79%) of those arrestees who reported they were currently involved with the gang said they did not want to stop their association now, around two-thirds (63%) thought they eventually would and almost all (88%) said if they wanted to get out now they could.

Figure 13

Current gang-involved individuals views on disassociating

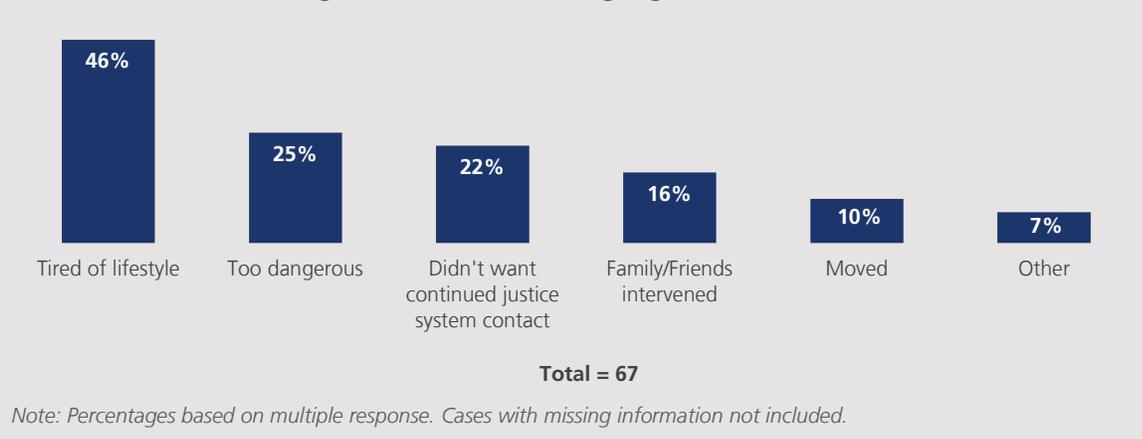


What reasons did adults who had stopped associating with a gang give?

As Figure 14 shows, the most common reason given by adults who had already stopped associating with a gang was that they had just grown tired of the lifestyle, reported by 46% of the respondents.

Figure 14

Reasons for discontinuing association with the gang



Takeaways

With most gang affiliation starting before high school, it is essential targeted prevention occurs for youth at highest-risk for gang associations earlier when possible. It is also important that family involvement and the importance of peer connections is understood and acknowledged.

Gangs commit many crimes for profit, including drug sales, property crime, and prostitution/pimping. While offering alternatives to a potentially lucrative criminal lifestyle is not easy, it is important our communities work collaboratively to offer alternatives to at-risk youth.

Even though gang association is related to the family and friends individuals have, most individuals who associate with gangs say they envision this association ending at some point. Continuing to offer opportunities for alternative choices and directions is important.