Chattanooga Comprehensive Gang Assessment
Main Findings & Recommendations Across All Domains

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The Chattanooga Comprehensive Gang Assessment follows the methodology developed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention which includes data collection in the following five domains: Community Demographic Data, Law Enforcement Data, Student and School Data, Community Perceptions Data, Community Resources Data. The findings in this assessment are derived from analyses of demographic and crime data; surveys of public middle and high school students and surveys of Hamilton County Department of Education (HCDE) personnel; multiple community workshops, focus groups and individual interviews, all involving citizens with diverse backgrounds; and, a review of existing programs offered in Chattanooga.

The assessment reveals a metropolitan community that is at a crossroads in dealing with gang activity. In a handful of neighborhoods—Alton Park, East Chattanooga, Westside and Avondale—gangs are entrenched and have been for years. These gangs are multi-generational and gang affiliation is associated with certain neighborhoods. For example, the Bloods are entrenched in Alton Park and the Crip are entrenched in East Chattanooga. In the rest of the city, gangs are an emerging menace. There is evidence that gangs are spreading. For example, all of the Hamilton County Schools participating in the assessment reported some level of gang activity taking place inside and outside of their walls.

Most students in Hamilton County Schools are aware that gangs are present in their schools. They are knowledgeable of the gang "culture", its symbols, colors, norms, and activities. Students are not sure which classmates are gang involved, but individual students come in contact with gangs on a daily basis. Over 700 students self-identified themselves as gang members, some have been recruited, know of other students involved in gangs, or are present targets for recruitment. They reported extensively about active gangs in their schools. A number of students indicated fear and strong concerns about gangs and personal vulnerability. The majority of students—gang affiliated or not—indicated awareness of the danger and potential harm associated with gang affiliation. However, avoiding gangs was seen as difficult by many students.

Residents are frustrated because they believe the gang problem has until recently been ignored by city leaders— politicians, pastors, agency heads, law enforcement, non-profits, the school system and the business community. Many residents remain skeptical of promises of change and largely apathetic to calls to action because conditions within many of these neighborhoods have not improved over the last several decades. The prosperity and growth that is marketed in national publications has not significantly impacted these communities. The "Chattanooga Way" is renowned for generating results, but the model will be severely tested in transforming the quality of life in neighborhoods mired in multi-generational poverty and a host of social ills. Post-assessment programmatic efforts need to address the roots of the gang problem and tangibly demonstrate to frustrated residents that this time, the promises are more than rhetoric.

Main Findings

Domain I: Community Demographic Data

1. Neighborhoods with concentrated gang activity have high rates of unemployment, poverty, and female-headed households. Human capital is underdeveloped, and residents have low levels of educational attainment. However, poverty cannot be used to excuse gang activity.

2. For the most part, neighborhoods with concentrated gang activity have experienced decreases in the number of private sector jobs located in their zip codes.

Domain II. Law Enforcement Data

1. Gang-related crime is concentrated in the inner city in East Chattanooga, Avondale, Westside, and Alton Park.

2. Both gang members and their victims are predominately black. Violent crime and gun-play are associated with gang members in these neighborhoods. Drug offenses and assaults are the most prevalent gang-related crimes. Numerous gang members reported "jumping" or "smashing" rivals.

3. Law enforcement agencies are not accurately capturing the number of gang crimes committed in the city and county. The Chattanooga Police Department, the Hamilton County Sherriff's Office and agencies in smaller jurisdictions should implement best practices in gang data collection and reporting.

Domain III. Student and School Data

1. Teachers and staff indicated gang activity is present in their schools, although some schools were aware of having a greater problem than others. Some schools have been proactive on the gang issue, but for many others little training on how to identify and deal with gangs has taken place. To date, no system-wide initiative to address gang issues has been developed.

2. Gangs are a real presence in the lives of students and have become a "culture." Most students reported that gangs are active in their schools.

3. Bus stops were reported as a location of gang activity. Through social media connections, gang members have been able to communicate about students to be targeted on certain buses and at certain stops. Some bus drivers reported having difficulty getting a response to their reports of gang actions on their buses or at bus stops.

4. Students fear gangs and feel vulnerable to gang activities, behavior, and reprisals. Students indicated an awareness of the danger and potential harm that could result from gang affiliation.

5. School-based gang activity most often occurred in areas of school with limited adult supervision, such as restrooms, the cafeteria, sporting events, and hallways.

6. A small proportion of students (12.7%) were aware that weapons, specifically guns, had been brought to school. Students indicating gang affiliation were more aware of weapons being brought to school than other students.

7. There is a strong anti-snitch intimidation in place, such that students are very reluctant to report gang-related incidents, or gang-related behavior or actions, since this might result in being targeted for a gang reprisal. This extends to the sale of drugs in school. Over a quarter of the student respondents were aware of drug-selling taking place in school, but expressed frustration about how to deal with this activity, including the influence on other students who might be drawn into gangs.

8. Gang affiliation identification is problematic. According to both students and school employees, identifying who is involved in a gang and who isn't could not always be easily determined. Particular gang colors, symbols and signs were viewed as reliable indicators at times, but not always. Over two-thirds of respondents stated that gang members could not be easily identified just on the basis of certain colors, clothes or other visible paraphernalia.

9. Assuming individuals are part of gangs because they have on clothing or other physical items in certain colors, flash signs or engage in other "gang" behavior does not mean they are in fact part of a gang. Some individuals were reported as mimicking gang behavior for different reasons, but were not actually part of gangs.

10. Fights and other problem behavior cannot always be assumed to be gang-related, though there was a belief among both students and school personnel that fights are often a result of gang agitation.

11. Gang affiliation can be a point of pride for some individuals, with gang membership representing power, protection, and respect. Bravado is associated with being a gang member or leader, and this status is therefore not hidden.

12. Gang membership could not always be identified with poor academic performance, problem behavior or non-involvement in worthwhile activities. It was observed that in a few cases some of "brightest" and most mannerly students were gang affiliated, and even leaders.

13. Students cited many reasons exist for gang involvement, including (in rank order) money, having friends who are involved, protection, power, having family members who are in gangs, to gain respect, having family problems, and having no positive role models in the neighborhood. School personnel cited (in rank order) poverty, lack of parental involvement, lack of positive role models in the lives of youth, power needs, and the desire for respect.

14. Social media (such as Facebook, etc.) were noted as a major way gang activity and communication takes place, including for recruitment. Use of social media also helps those involved to hide their gang affiliation from adults.

15. Neighborhood gang issues and school gang problems are linked. The majority of student respondents were aware of gang activities in their neighborhoods, and nearly a fourth (22%) stated they had family members who were in gangs. Respondents who indicated they were currently, or in the past, part of a gang were more likely to have family members and friends in gangs, and reported higher levels of gang related activity in their neighborhoods.

16. Gang activity was considered greatest outside of school, with neighborhood locations being among the key sites, including bus stops, the vicinity of recreation centers, the general neighborhood, and on the streets.

17. Poverty plays a key role in gang proliferation. Gangs represent an opportunity for monetary gain even if activities are illegal. Poverty is a multidimensional issue that is strongly related to employment and household status. Gang affiliated respondents felt jobs for themselves and adults would make the greatest difference in thwarting gangs. Non-gang affiliated respondents placed a slightly greater emphasis on the role of parents and suggested more involved parents as the number one protective factor in reducing gangs in the community.

18. Gang involvement can begin as early as elementary school. Of interest, 20.6% of employee respondents who worked in elementary schools reported a gang presence in their schools, and 18.1% knew of self-identified gang members in their schools. These numbers increase for employees in middle and high schools. Of middle school employees, 48.9% reported a gang presence, and 47.2% knew of self-identified gang members. Among high school employees these numbers were highest, with 74.5% of employee respondents acknowledging a gang presence in the school, and 67.8% reporting knowing self-identified gang members.

19. Both students and school employees felt strongly that gang deterrence requires a proactive agenda that includes professionals in the schools (counselors, SRO officers, etc.) who are present and available to help students with personal, social, and academic problems.

20. Family and parental support are critical to solving the problem of gangs. The role of parents in providing guidance, monitoring activities and child whereabouts, and providing adequate care, support, and concern were repeatedly noted by student and employee respondents. Data suggests it may be more important to look at the quality of parenting children experience than family structure, since both gang-affiliated and non-gang affiliated respondents often came from similar home situations. Family structure varied widely among both gang-affiliated and non-gang affiliated respondents, with the greatest difference in gang participation seen in households with five or more siblings present.

Domain IV. Community Perceptions Data

Hispanic gangs are not yet a pressing problem in the community at the street level. Interviewed gang members were largely unaware of Hispanic gangs. Law enforcement agencies are aware of Hispanic gangs and regularly monitor activities in North Georgia and surrounding counties that have more active Hispanic gangs.

1. Residents reported that children join gangs as early as 9 and 10; gang members say that most kids join between the ages of 14 and16. Children join gangs for protection, belonging, status and money. Gang members often mentioned a lack of positive male role models as a reason for joining.

2. Residents reported increases in graffiti and crime and associate both with gang activity. Law enforcement officials claim that the majority of graffiti is tagging and not gang-related. In addition, all black on black crime is not gang-related.

3. Every gang member interviewed reported that guns are easy to obtain in Chattanooga and that most gang members have access to weapons.

4. Some recreation centers are considered safe by parents and children. However, some residents expressed concerns about the safety of recreation centers. Many said that gang members are recruited at recreation centers. Several gang members confirmed allegations that gang initiation rituals such as "beat ins" occur in recreation center restrooms and on recreation center property. Management and program audits are recommended to confirm or dispel the allegations that some recreation centers are not providing sufficient oversight to maintain gang-free zones.

5. The court system is perceived to be a revolving door by the community.

6. Some residents perceive faith-based institutions to be minimally engaged in serving at-risk youth.

7. A broad cross-section of inner city residents expressed strong negative reactions to the Chattanooga Police Department, describing CPD officers as heavy handed and uninterested in building relationships with the community. It is recommended that CPD and city leaders explore community policing options to build stronger ties and more trust in low-income communities.

1. Chattanooga has a strong network of service providers actively involved in providing needed services throughout low-income communities in Chattanooga. The database compiled in this project is not exhaustive and should be considered a starting point.

Recommendations

The comprehensive gang assessment uncovered issues where the status quo needs to be changed. In general, the recommendations call for leaders to examine best practices in areas where study participants complained about problems with gang members and gang intervention. Agencies mentioned in the recommendations have flexibility to design new programs or policies that best reflect their fiscal resources and organizational capacity. In some cases, community perceptions might be considered inaccurate reflections of reality. In those cases, leaders need to educate the public on successful programs and policies in place to address community concerns. The majority of the recommendations come from the school survey chapter of the report.

Community-Level:

A. Chattanooga Police Department and Hamilton County Sherriff's Office: Implement best practices in gang data collection and reporting. Encourage law enforcement agencies in other regional jurisdictions to partner with and help coordinate similar efforts and data sharing.

B. Chattanooga Police Department and city leaders: Explore community policing options to build stronger ties and more trust in low-income communities.

C. City Parks and Recreation Department: Conduct management and program audits to confirm or dispel the allegations that some recreation centers are not providing sufficient oversight to maintain gang-free zones. Recreation Centers are strategically located in gang entrenched neighborhoods and serve the needs of local residents. They are natural conduits for gang prevention and intervention programs.

D. Civic leaders: Explore options to expedite condemnation and redevelopment of abandoned buildings and structures that are conducive to criminal activity, and are otherwise community eyesores. Engage youth and gang members in one-on-one dialogue to discover context of the gang lifestyle. Rebuild community trust by gaining consensus on critical issues affecting neighborhood quality of life. If current methods are perceived to be failing, develop new methods of outreach to build mutual trust. Residents in gang-entrenched neighborhoods need to see tangible outcomes.

E. Faith-based Institutions and Leaders: Establish a central role in gaining community consensus and establishing mainstream links to gang members. Faith-based leaders should play enhanced roles in plugging gang members into larger community dialogues.

F. The University of Tennessee-Chattanooga and other area colleges and universities: Leverage highly trained professionals and students with skill sets and professional interests that are related to the educational, social, and economic conditions that contribute to gang activity. It is recommended that new partnerships be developed to promote service learning opportunities and engage faculty in applied research and service which is in keeping with the University's mission of metropolitan engagement.

G. Business community: Support at-risk youth, gang members and ex-offenders through innovative programming and funding initiatives. For example, expose at-risk youth to a wide variety of occupational options; provide internships and mentoring opportunities; provide vocational training; entrepreneurship training; and support reentry services for ex-offenders who must be reintegrated into mainstream society to reduce recidivism.

School-Level:

A. Build proactive programs in schools that enable communication and trust among students, teachers, staff, and administrators. Additionally, professional training for students and personnel regarding gang awareness, management of disruptive students, and mediation of conflict should be implemented.

B. Develop a system-wide programmatic initiatives for students that address the growing problem of gangs including information on gang culture, symbols and other forms of identification, gang recruitment, intimidation and reprisal methods, strategies for resisting and safely getting out of gangs, and methods of accessing help for themselves and others targeted by gangs. The critical ages are 10-12 years, and these youth should be engaged in positive programs that reduce their vulnerability as targets for gangs. Gang reduction strategies should take into account that gangs often fill a gap in a young person's life. These gaps need to be identified and the needs met in positive ways. Interventions cannot be "one size fits all" but rather a more personal, individually-based program is needed.

C. Develop alternative education modules that enable students to move toward career paths that include technical and craft occupations as well as college-based professional tracks. A multiple or dual diploma option is needed to meet the different needs of students. The new emphasis in the State of Tennessee on building the community college environment to meet both vocational and higher education goals can be a driver in this respect.

D. Beginning in middle schools, and enhanced in high school, students should have options for non-traditional and vocational paths as well as college-track paths based on their interests and personal goals. The education experience needs to be more individualized and geared toward a wider range of student capabilities and interests.

E. Develop non-academic and non-athletic opportunities that generate and establish attachment to school. Students who do not participate in band or athletics need ways to be involved in school outside of academics. A range and diversity of activities are needed and offered throughout all schools in the district. Programs should include a transportation component to enable students to participate who lack transportation home past the regular bus schedule.

F. Develop programs that have an entrepreneurial and jobs dimension that can teach youth about business, legitimate ways to earn money, how to get a job, and related subjects. Building a school-based jobs program could provide limited income to students. It could also serve to enhance students' self-respect, development of a positive work ethic, and useful experience for future jobs.

G. Target more programs for those students already involved in gangs or gang activities. Programs need to be "life-changing" and backed with the necessary resources to enable involved youth leave gangs safely and remain out of them.

H. Fill the void many youth experience during weekends, vacations, holiday and summer breaks. Providing positive options during these times is crucial to helping young people avoid more negative influences.

I. Review suspension and expulsion policies against other school policies for handling students with infractions. Develop a balance that includes removing students when needed, but which addresses deeper issues that may be part of the problem. Suspensions too often are ineffective because they can be seen as a reward rather than a punishment.

J. Recognize that suppression (law enforcement) is not the only answer. Students expressed a desire for effective police action against gangs, judiciously applied regarding the removal of gang members and leaders that too often leads to more recruitment or coercion of new members into gangs, the emergence of new leaders, development of splinter gangs, and additional violence in turf wars and power struggles.

K. Parental involvement is central to the solution to gangs and the protection of youth against considering gang membership. Such involvement includes better child supervision, child care, values training, effective parental

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monitoring of children, and the strengthening the family structure. Training for parents regarding gang awareness, as well as development of overall parenting skills, is recommended. Special attention is needed to address the problem of generational gang affiliation and/or parents who are gang members.

L. Incorporation of "individual responsibility" in programs for youth and adults is critical, including the consequences of gang involvement. Solutions need to be holistic in how responsibility is understood, as well as in how help and support are provided.